

REVIEWS

DANICA POPOVIĆ, BRANISLAV TODIĆ AND DRAGAN VOJVODIĆ, *DEČANSKA PUSTINJA. SKITOV I KELIJE MANASTIRA DEČANA* [English summary: THE DEČANI DESERT. THE SKETAE AND KELLA OF THE MONASTERY OF DEČANI]. BELGRADE: INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES AND INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE OF THE SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS FOR THE STUDY OF KOSOVO AND METOHİJA, 2011, pp. 282, ills. 136.

Reviewed by Irena Špadijer*

The Dečani Desert is the name for dependencies of the monastery of Dečani that were established in a five-kilometre long belt west of the mother monastery and consisted of some ten ascetic communities whose cells were scattered in caves dotting the left wall of the canyon carved by the Dečanska Bistrica river. It was formed not later than the mid-fourteenth century and remained active until the end of the seventeenth century. There is absolutely no doubt that it is one of the most important phenomena in the history of Serbian eremitic monasticism; moreover, it is the only such whose history may be to an extent reconstructed from written sources. When, in the difficult times of Serbian exoduses from Kosovo and Metohija, the last kelliotic monks were forced to leave, their abodes became abandoned and were never inhabited again.

An occasional interest shown from the mid-nineteenth century by concerned or curious individuals — among whom were two distinguished archimandrites of Dečani, British lady travellers and few professionally equipped twentieth-centu-

ry researchers — and their now invaluable records, were what the historians of art Danica Popović, Branislav Todić and Dragan Vojvodić could count on in the volatile Balkans of the turn of the second millennium, when they embarked upon a rather unpredictable adventure to explore ascetic abodes in Metohija. After their preliminary field survey conducted under precarious circumstances in 1998, there was much work and many challenges ahead of them. Despite all difficulties, they found the courage and stamina to continue their fieldwork in 2006 and 2007. The obtained fieldwork findings, combined with the earlier records and the until recently unknown documentary material from the Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, resulted in a book, which, as the authors put it themselves, “was taking shape slowly, with interruptions and various obstacles along the way”.

* Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade

Apart from a brief introduction, the book contains seven chapters, two appendices, an extensive summary in English, a list of abbreviations and an index. Finally, it is richly illustrated: photographs of the sites taken over a long span of time from the 1930s to the early years of the twenty-first century add a particular value to it, as they document the situation in the field at different periods.

The first chapter (“Reviving the memory of the Dečani Desert and its ascetics”), by Branislav Todić, provides background information on the “rediscovery” of the Dečani Desert in the mid-nineteenth century — from the monastery’s learned archimandrite Seraphim (Ristić), the accounts of the British travellers Georgina Muir Mackenzie and Adelina Paulina Irby, and Miloš S. Milojević — to literary and scholarly pieces of another archimandrite of Dečani, Leontios (Ninković), written in the 1920s and 1930s.

The reader is then acquainted with the pioneering, but sporadic, scholarly interest in the site in the twentieth century (Sergei Smirnov and Djurdje Bošković in the 1930s; Janko Radovanović and Milan Ivanović in the 1960s), and the publication of the relevant source materials (most of all, the notes and inscriptions compiled and edited by Ljubomir Stojanović). It is in this chapter, which its author, Dragan Vojvodić, appositely titles “On the margin of scholarly attention, far from protected status”, that the reader becomes fully aware of the extent to which the hermitages of Dečani were uncared for throughout the past century.

The ascetic communities are then looked at in the light of the surviving written sources: B. Todić analyzes references to them in literary works, such as *The Life of Patriarch Ephrem* by Mark of Peć, and in the notes made in manuscripts transcribed in the Dečani Desert. We even learn the names of some scribes, such as Nikandar, active in 1493/4, and Nestor,

in the 1560s. All communities recorded in the sources — Belaja, the Holy Three Hierarchs, St Nicholas, St Neilos and St George — are looked at in detail.

After this historical and philological perspective on the whole of the complex, the authors shift their attention to the three most important and best preserved of the *sketae* and *kellia*: those of Belaja with the church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, of the Holy Three Hierarchs (also known as the Holy King), and of St George (also known as the Hermitage of St Helen). Given that the three sites — notwithstanding the identical function they used to fulfil and a measure of similarity when it comes to the current state of preservation of their architecture and wall paintings — show a number of differences, the authors (D. Popović and D. Vojvodić) necessarily adopt different approaches and methodologies. They maintain their individual research styles without eroding the overall structure of the book or disrupting the common thread running through their accounts, which results in remarkable observations concerning the antiquity and style of the layers of frescoes in Belaja, and a meticulous analysis of the structural remains of the Three Holy Hierarchs leading to some interesting suggestions about their former use.

This part of the book, which may be defined as concrete examination of written and physical sources — reporting on the explored sites and analyzing the evidence thus obtained, which is in fact the basis of a book thus conceived — is followed by a chapter that provides both a historical synthesis and a theoretical background for the entire study: “The Dečani Desert within the framework of Byzantine and Serbian eremitism”. In her approach to the subject, Danica Popović clearly separates the diachronic and synchronic perspectives, which, as she points out herself, required that her account be structured

“in decreasing order of generality”: the type of monasticism under study is first looked at “within the Byzantine world at large”, then within the Serbian environment, and finally, in the case of the hermitages of Dečani. This is the reason why this part of the book begins with analyzing the very concept of the *monastic desert*, drawing attention to *terminological* problems encountered by modern researchers concerned with the past practices of *solitary monasticism*, offering a categorization of the terms occurring in the sources, and providing justification for the adopted terminology. Eremitism in the Byzantine world is looked at in its full temporal and spatial extent, which inevitably involves the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria or Asia Minor. Special attention is paid to Mount Athos which, with its distinctive types and forms of monasticism, served as the fundamental model for the practice of eremitism in medieval Serbia. The situation in medieval Serbia is looked at primarily in terms of its connection with the monastery of Hilandar and its dependency, the Kellion of St Sabas at Karyes, and, of course, with special reference to the role of St Sava (Sabas) of Serbia and the prototypical example of Studenica. Naturally, the brightest beam of the searchlight illuminates the anchoritic communities of the Dečani Desert. Their relationship with the mother monastery, including the issue of ownership, organization, structure, day-to-day life with its liturgical practices, ascetic labour and monastic duties, all of that is looked at in its chronological continuity. The essay concludes with an analysis of the natural setting and the man-made “physical structures” that provided shelter for the Dečani ascetics and, with them, grew into a symbol of a distinctive form of Orthodox spirituality.

Two appendices at the end of the book constitute a particularly valuable supplement: the memorial books of two anchoritic communities of Dečani: Belaja and the

Holy Three Hierarchs. The original books were kept in the manuscript collection of the National Library in Belgrade, which burned to the ground in Germany’s air attack on Belgrade on 6 April 1941. So, both are lost forever. But large excerpts from these books and almost all personal and place names had been copied out by the librarian Svetozar Matić. After 1957, his transcripts and notes found their way into the Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Through the effort of Branislav Todić, these hitherto unknown sixteenth-century sources, of interest not only for the history of the monastery of Dečani and its *desert*, but also for many other fields of research, are now accessible to a broader public.

A book conceived in such a way as to integrate several important forms of scholarly work — from field surveys to critical analysis of sources to theoretically well-grounded examination of the perceived phenomena — inevitably produces new and fresh insights; moreover, it brings back to life an entire existence in all its fullness. This vibrant portrayal of the anchoritic communities of Dečani challenges the widespread stereotype of hermits as persons withdrawn from life and strangers in this world, confirming the claim that their solitude was not a mere flight. As D. Chitty observed as early as the 1960s, it was rooted in the profound faith in God and acceptance of a struggle which was not the struggle against the material world but against the powers of darkness and evil in this world. If it was not so, Chitty asked, how is it that hermits tended to choose the natural setting for their withdrawal with such a sense of beauty, and showed such love for all God’s creatures.

The Dečani Desert is a book that comes as a result of years-long research of three scholars. They found themselves facing an impossible mission. In a situation in which Serbian scholars are practically

barred from access to the sites, they struggled to rescue from oblivion, if they could not from decay, an important testimony to an authentic monastic spirituality and presence in Metohija. Unreservedly dedicated to their work, which involved field research in a less than friendly environment, they were given a generous reward: in company with Dečani monks, they lived to “hear, after more than three centuries, the gorge of the Bistrica reverberate with the sound of *troparia*, which, at least for a brief moment, restored to the

Dečani Desert some of its original spirituality and blissful peace”. D. Popović, B. Todić and D. Vojvodić have given future generations of scholars, as well as interested readers, a remarkable book which will be a must-read for a comprehensive understanding of the Serbian past of Kosovo and Metohija. At the same time, it will be a comprehensive and exceptionally well-documented case study for comparative research into Eastern Christian anachoritic monasticism.

NICOLAS VATIN, GILLES VEINSTEIN AND ELIZABETH ZACHARIADOU, *CATALOGUE DU FONDS OTTOMAN DES ARCHIVES DU MONASTÈRE DE SAINT-JEAN À PATMOS. LES VINGT-DEUX PREMIERS DOSSIERS*. ATHENS: FONDATION NATIONALE DE LA RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE, INSTITUT DE RECHERCHES BYZANTINES, 2011, pp. 673.

*Reviewed by Ognjen Krešić**

In 1997, the Institute for Byzantine Studies (*Institut de recherches byzantines*) of the National Foundation for Scientific Research (*Fondation nationale de la recherche scientifique*) and the Centre for Turkish, Ottoman, Balkan and Central-Asian Studies (*Centre d'études turque, ottomans, balkaniques et centrasiatiques*) of the National Centre for Scientific Research (*Centre national de la recherche scientifique/CNRS*) started collaboration on an archival research project concerning the Ottoman documents preserved in the monastery of Saint John the Theologian on Patmos. The actual archival work began four years later, when the first research team arrived in the monastery. It was made up of Elizabeth Zahariadou, retired professor of Turkish studies at the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Crete, Nicolas Vatin, director of research at the CNRS, and Gilles Veinstein, professor at the Collège de France and director of studies at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (*École des hautes études en sciences sociales*).

The result of their work is the first volume of a catalogue of Ottoman documents published in 2011. The volume offers the summaries of 823 documents divided into folders (Z, 1b, and from 1 to 20), which span the period from the fifteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, including several documents dating from later centuries. The remaining part of the archival material, consisting of 522 mostly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents, is in the process of being prepared by Michael Ursinus, and should also appear in the form of a catalogue.

The book consists of an introduction to the Catalogue and Appendix (pp. 9–28), the Catalogue with summaries of every document (pp. 29–566), the indexes of personal names, most important functionaries and place names, a topical index, a chronological list of the monastery's

* Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia doctoral scholarship holder