

SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

The risks facing the cultural and natural heritage of Serbia and Montenegro are still marked by the delayed societal transitions. Economic crises and political instability exert a great influence on the working conditions in which the heritage conservation service operates. Significant efforts have been made during the past three years towards improving the organisation of this service, linking with international institutions, improving knowledge, upgrading methodologies, supporting strategic planning, and determining the priority of involvement on the basis of the type and degree of threat to heritage. Despite this, insufficient financial resources still cripple or hinder the realisation of most of the planned conservation projects. These circumstances greatly impede professional activities, as well as prompt expert, preventive and operational involvement in tasks to protect and conserve cultural heritage. This is the reason why annual programs and urgent interventions still take precedence over long-term programs, which strive for a more complex understanding of cultural properties and are the only ones which can guarantee any continuity for conservation.

Case Study 1 – Protection of archaeological excavation along the route of the future Niš – Macedonia highway

Systematic expert surveys, carried out during 2002 along the route of the future highway between Niš and the Macedonian border, have recorded 22 archaeological sites which would be destroyed by this road construction. Salvage archaeological excavations were carried out for the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia on nine of these archaeological sites between February and September 2003.

Archaeological site Crkvište, remains of sacred building (14th – 15th century)



The excavation results indicate long periods of occupation in the Vranje and Preševo basins, from prehistoric (settlements from 5000 BC up to the 10th century BC) and Classical times (necropolis, *thermae*, *villa rustica*, *vicus* 4th–5th century), to the medieval (*necropolis*, sacral buildings 14th–16th centuries). Until now, these sites were unknown to experts, and they indicate intensive settlement in the Vranje and Preševo basins, primarily thanks to their natural resources and strategic location. This area was also part of the natural communication route connecting the southern Balkan Peninsula with Central Europe.

The newly discovered archaeological sites are located directly on the route of the new highway, or in its immediate vicinity. Subsequent research indicated that only some of these sites will be endangered by construction work. The risk of damage to the partly excavated sites is multiplied by illicit excavations and treasure hunters. There is also an extremely negative attitude to medieval Orthodox sacred buildings and *necropoli* on the part of the local community in this part of southern Serbia. The risks of further damage to these heritage sites could perhaps be reduced if the archaeological sites were fully investigated, not only the area threatened by the highway construction, and if surviving architectural remains were appropriately displayed to the public.

Case Study 2 – Smederevo fortress

The medieval fortress on the right bank of the Danube, situated on today's pan-European corridor, 45 km from Belgrade, was built in the Byzantine tradition of fortifications. It has its original architectural body of a fortification complex dating from late medieval

Old cemetery, Grave no. 1, necropolis (14th – 16th century)





Smederevo fortress, fortification complex

times. During the period of its most intensive occupation, in the first half of the 15th century, the city of Smederevo was the main political, religious, economic and trade centre in this part of Europe, and a link between the Balkans and Central Europe. The fortress surrounds an inner area of 11 hectares, while its outer area extends to the surrounding urban structures. The grandeur of this fortress is manifested by 25 massive towers about 25 m high, connected by ramparts over 2 m thick. The total length of the ramparts amounts to 1.5 km. The city park is located inside the fortress, and is used occasionally for cultural gatherings, concerts, and fairs. The immediate surroundings of the fortress are used as a boat marina, the area along the river-bank as a river port, and the fort is also partly encircled by railway tracks.



Smederevo fortress, detail

Different natural and unnatural factors currently affect the general state of this monument complex. The fortress suffered considerable damage during both World Wars. It was bombed several times. During World War II, the explosion of a munitions dump located inside the fort demolished a large section of the ramparts facing the city, while certain parts of the walls were loosened and dislodged. This situation remains unchanged up to the present day. During construction of the Danube hydro-electric plant in the Đerdap Gorge in the 1970s, a high water level defence system was erected. Before this, the fortress was flooded several times. Nevertheless, after the construction of the hydro-electric plant, problems appeared with high levels of ground water and ground instability on the plateau between the two rivers where the fortress stands. They caused a permanent risk of the walls and towers subsiding, and resulted in a serious disturbance to the stability of the entire complex. The railway station with its associated buildings is a particular problem, endangering the fortress and its satisfactory use given its location and function. There is also the ever-present danger of inappropriate structures being built around the complex, in the fort's immediate surroundings.

On the whole, all these factors have worked together over time to cause the slow deterioration of the Smederevo Fortress, primarily due to current existing renovation plans not being carried out.

Smederevo fortress, detail



Case Study 3 – Old cemeteries in Niš

Jagodín-mala, a late Classical and early Christian *necropolis*, extends to the north-east of the fortress, the area on which ancient and medieval Niš was located. It represents an extremely significant archaeological site because it was used for burial from the 4th up to the 12th century. Beside individual graves, there are built and group crypts. The most significant is an early Christian crypt decorated with frescoes (from the end of the 4th century), while the foundations of a *basilica* with *martirium* are located on the very edge of the *necropolis*.

Urban development and the construction of new residences threaten all these items, as well as the *necropolis* as a whole. Indeed, a settlement was first established here towards the end of the 19th century, and subsequent urban development has led to intense construction which continues unabated, although without city planning or control of what is happening at the site. Many crypts have been demolished as a result or used as foundations, cellars, or even septic tanks.

Panteleimon Cemetery was formed at the end of the 19th century, next to the Church of St Panteleimon on the north-eastern outskirts of the city, as an extension to an existing medieval and early Christian *necropolis*. Burials took place until the end of the 1940s. For many years since then, the cemetery was used as a children's playground, for grazing cattle, and for rubble and rubbish disposal. This resulted in most of the gravestones being pulled down, taken away, or covered over, while a number of graves were moved to other cemeteries. Today, only two family chapels and several gravestones remain visible. Part of the cemetery has been usurped by the construction of houses, while the remaining area is being considered as a possible city park.

Old Cemetery (cemetery below the *Gorica*): the Old Cemetery of Niš is stretched out in the southern part of the city, on the edges of the old city nucleus. Although it is impossible to confidently determine this cemetery's date of origin, it is certain that it was used as a burial ground as far back as the 18th century. The oldest preserved graves date back to the beginning of the 19th century. Burials were ended in 1971, and thanks to this, many heritage sites from different periods of the last two centuries are still preserved in this cemetery.

Today, it is completely surrounded by the city. It contains several thousand graves, crypts, and family chapels. Its artistic and historic value can be attributed to some 200 heritage sites, eight of which are heritage listed. The entire cemetery was registered in 1991 as a cultural and historic complex.

The problem with this graveyard, as with most old graveyards in Serbia, basically stems from general negligence by the community as well as the cemetery services responsible for their care and maintenance. This is why the graveyard is quite neglected, covered with weeds, hounded by bands of stray dogs, and turned into a dump. The council's care amounts to trimming the bushes each spring. As always, an excuse for such neglect is found in the lack of permanent funding for maintenance. The graveyard is still disorganised in the urban sense, with no structured paths (except for the main one), and with no lighting or guards; some areas present a very ugly picture.

In the past, this state of affairs led to occasional vandalism of individual sites, even to looting chapels and breaking into crypts. Many graves have been desecrated. Nevertheless, there was hardly any concern for this state of affairs. During the 1970s and early 1980s, there was even a proposal to move this cemetery and build an apartment complex in its place.

The situation became alarming when, towards the end of 2003, a large number of tombs were damaged during a very short period



Niš, Basilica with martirium



Niš, St. Panteleimon Cemetery

Niš, Old Cemetery



of time (maybe even during one single night). On this occasion of extreme vandalism, some 200 tombstones were damaged - pulled down, broken, or covered in graffiti. This event further violated the already quite degraded heritage values of the Old Cemetery.

In order to protect and preserve this cultural and historical complex, two models have been proposed. One is to turn the cemetery into a memorial park, and place it under permanent city care, the other to reactivate certain parts of the cemetery for burials, in which case the cemetery could rely on its own sources of funding. If the latter solution is adopted, strict criteria for burials, grave memorials, usage and maintenance must be adopted, because old cemeteries are quite often damaged by new burials and tombstones, that are incompatible with existing aesthetic and landscape values.

The Jewish Cemetery is located on the north-western city outskirts, near the former Cattle Market. According to the stories of Jews living in Niš, there are some 1000 Jews buried here, mainly Sephardim from Niš and Prokuplje. The tombstones are mostly in the form of stone sarcophagi (mainly monolithic), or horizontal plates with different stylised decorations of a symbolic character, connected to the Kabala. These tombstones are unique in appearance and artistic treatment. The oldest ones probably date to the 18th century. Besides its artistic and memorial value, this complex also represents an important record of several centuries of Jewish presence in Niš. This cemetery is currently under interim heritage protection.

Many years of general indifference brought this cemetery to a very bad state; it is neglected and has deteriorated, but it has also been overtaken by illegal construction. In fact, a dense illegal Rom [Gypsy] settlement has appeared and grown in the northern part of the cemetery, with house foundations often being built into grave-stones, which are used to pave passages and yards, or even as furniture inside the houses. On the opposite side of the graveyard, an



Niš, Jewish Cemetery

illegally erected four-metre-high wall took over part of the cemetery and destroyed a large number of tombstones. A few months ago, someone dumped a large quantity of rubble and covered part of the cemetery. On this occasion, both the public and the responsible institutions showed some interest in the condition of this graveyard.

Because there are hardly any Jews living in Niš today, the impossibility of quickly and easily removing the illegally constructed buildings, and the lack of necessary financial resources, it is currently difficult to see a solution to save, restore and interpret this important cultural property.