

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY IN BYZANTINE CHURCHES - THE CASE OF REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

1. The Concept of authenticity in conservation theory and practice

The concept of authenticity is the key stone of the conservation movement, science and discipline. Ever since the XIX century two antagonists concepts dominate the field of conservation of the built environment – that is the English concept of keeping the authentic fabric as a prerequisite of any conservation endeavor versus the French¹ concept of unity of architectural form and style as a primordial goal when dealing with heritage. Yet even in the latter case, the authenticity is never ignored but subordinated to form, meaning and/or function.

The basic international standard for conservation practice, written in 1964 still in use today, is the well known Venice Charter for Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites². The two page document has an overall tendency, although not without contradictions, to give credit to the concept for authenticity as a primary goal of the conservation process. For example article 11 reads: *“The valid contribution of all periods to the building must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of restoration...”*. Which is to say that the aim of restoration is to keep the authentic fabric in place. Furthermore, the most controversial part from today’s perspective is the article 9:... *“It (restoration) must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case moreover any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp.”* Or, as previously stated in article 11, architectural unity in style or in composition can not be an aim per se in the conservation work, preserving the authentic form and fabric is what the conservation project should be about, at any cost.

¹ J. Jokilehto, “A History of Architectural Conservation”, Elsevier Butterworth-Hiemann, Burlington, 1999, pp. 110-113

² Gustavo Araoz et al, “International Charters for Conservation and Restoration”, ICOMOS, Paris, 2004, pp. 37



Fig 1. Saint Clement's Church in Plaoshnik, Ohrid

Сл 1. Црква Св. Климент на Плаошнику, Охрид

Never the less, the conservation practice has involved ever since and we understand the concept of authenticity differently today . Probably the simplest way to understand the challenges of conservation is to think of the fabric , form and function of a heritage object or a building as related parameters , which can not and should not be analyzed separately. Compromises will almost always be inevitable between form, fabric and function, but ignoring any of the three would result to an unsuccessful and unsustainable conservation project. Detailed study and analysis of the monument is needed in order to evaluate its historical, architectural , artistic and social significance, and this on local community level, but also on broader national and when needed on international scale. People , specialists who know the monument or the building the best, should be involved in the conservation project, and this would be the best guarantee to have the original authentic aspect of the heritage preserved in the most appropriate way.

2. Authenticity and Byzantine Churches and its Preservation

Contrary to Western churches and cathedrals which have been in most cases subjected to massive conservation and reconstruction projects mainly in the XIX century, Byzantine churches, especially those in the Balkans, have preserved a substantial amount of the original form and fabric , that is the original architecture and fresco painting. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, Byzantine churches in Eastern Europe started gaining their original function as holy shrines and places of warship.

Yet in recent years, that is to say in the XXI century, another trend started to take over the field of architectural conservation all around Europe and in particular in Eastern Europe. That is the phenomena of massive identical (or not) reconstruction of formerly destroyed historical buildings of cultural significance. In Christian orthodox countries in Eastern Europe, in particular, due to the revival of religious feelings, many historic churches have been rebuilt. And the attention of the society is being shifted from the original Byzantine and historical churches to the reconstructed ones. This is one of the reasons why Byzantine churches in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe in general in the XXI century are not considered as a cultural value of absolute priority which should be preserved and cherished. On the other hand, due to mainly technical and financial reason, keeping the authentic fabric in place for many Byzantine churches turns out to be a burden that the authorities are no longer capable or willing to bear.

The example of the city of Moscow with several recent reconstructions of churches like the Our Lady of Kazan from the XVII century within a world heritage site on the Red Square and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior³ originally built in Neo-Byzantine style by Constantine Thon in 1883, are just the most staggering examples. These experiences have shown that working on preserving following conservation standards based on the concept of authenticity, is not only a lengthy process but it is also a much more expensive way then reconstruction of buildings using new durable materials and techniques. This counts even more for the cases of churches with painted interiors such as the case with churches, especially with Byzantine and Neo-byzantine churches where the most important artistic and spiritual value of the church is the painted interior, in the case of Byzantine churches the fresco painting.

As a matter of fact the architecture and the fresco painting of a Byzantine church form a very subtle, and unfortunately a very fragile unity, which can be stable only if the original climatic conditions in the interior of the church are preserved. Any change of the roofing system, or use of new materials such as cement or concrete, will alter in a due time the balance of temperature and moisture and the climatic equilibrium that exists in the church and the frescoes will suffer. Further more the surrounding of the church has to be preserved intact as well. Changing the built environment of the church with new buildings or infrastructure can be very damaging for the foundation and the walls of the church and at the end the frescoes. Having this in mind, it turns out that preserving a Byzantine church requires not only time and money but also specific expertise and skills which can only be provided by a team of trained fresco conservators, architects and civil engineers. Government officials in smaller countries, like the countries in the Balkan, lack resources and experts in these fields to say the least. The international institutions in charge of heritage preservation, hit by the global crisis, are slow and reluctant to provide assistance and expertise in these cases. It is no wonder that government officials are tempted to built reconstructions of old churches which no longer exist, rather then engag-

³ N. Dushkina, "Historic Reconstruction: prospects for heritage preservation or metamorphosis of theory?", from *Conserving the Authentic, essays in the honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, ICCROM, Rome, 2009, pp.83-94



Fig 2. Church Holy Mother of God Peribleptos, Ohrid, Damaged Frescoes

Сл 2. Црква Св. Богородица Перивлепта , Охрид, Оштећене фреске

ing costly, lengthy conservation projects on existing churches. These projects are difficult to manage and may not have clear and measurable outcome on the short term. And there is always the risk that the intervention fails to preserve the frescoes and leads to more damage to the frescoes and even to the structure of the church.

3. The Case of Republic of Macedonia

Republic of Macedonia, due to mostly political reasons related to its international recognition, has not been spared from the reconstruction mania which started to take over the field of cultural heritage preservation in the very beginning of the XXI century.

For the purpose of our study we are going to take a closer look at the reconstruction of the antique and Early Christian site Plaoshnik located within a world heritage site, - the old town of Ohrid. The central building on the site is the reconstructed church dedicated to Saint Panteleimon, also known as Saint Clement by the name of the famous preacher and first Macedonian Bishop who built the church here in 893 on the foundations of an early Christian basilica. The Bishop Clement was buried in the church in the tomb which was built by his own hands. Saint Clement church was converted into a mosque in the XVI century by the Ottomans. Only a small enclosure form the mosque remains

today. The reconstructed Saint Panteleimon church was built on the foundations of the medieval church after an extensive excavations and reconstruction works on the site. The works were completed in 2002 and Saint Clement's relics were returned to the reconstructed church – figure 1.

The plan of the reconstructed church follows the plan of the IX century church. However, due to the fact that there was very little evidence about the architecture of the original church, the architects built the new church inspired by the existing Byzantine churches in Macedonia. This is to say, Saint Clement's church on Plaoshnik is not an identical reconstruction of the original church. However, there are authentic features in the new church. The visitors can see remains of the original foundations of the IX century church covered by glass windows on the floor of the new church, as well as fragments of fresco paintings from the XIV century found during the excavations and now on display at the interior of the church. But most importantly, the visitors and the believers can see and venerate the relics of Saint Clement in a new tomb built in the interior of the church.

The reconstruction of Saint Clement's church on Plaoshnik is a success. In spite of the fact that not much of the original fabric is there, and practically nothing of the original form, the original function as a sacred place of the church has been restored. Furthermore, the fact that the relics of Saint Clements were transferred to the church, adds a very important spiritual and social cultural value, which is now the key aspect of the site's cultural significance.

Let us have a closer look now at the existing Byzantine churches in the country. Write next to Saint Clement's church on Plaoshnik in Ohrid is the well known church of Mather of God Peribleptos with its marvelous frescoes painted by Michael Astrapas and Eutychios in 1295. Many of the famous medieval icons, now in the gallery of icons located next door to the church, had been painted and preserved in the church of Peribleptos for centuries. The Church also treasured the remains of Saint Clement for almost five centuries until it was transferred to the reconstructed church on Plaoshnik in 2002. Due to the bad, or better to say, alarming condition of the frescoes (figure 2), the Cultural Heritage Protection Office of Republic of Macedonia (official translation of the National Preservation Agency) which is in charge of the conservation directly or indirectly of all the Byzantine churches in the country and of all of the other monuments of importance, started a massive conservation project on the church in 2009. The project, financed by the U.S. embassy in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, was supposed to "restore" the church (expression used in the official site of the U.S. Embassy, often used as well in English by Macedonian officials). The documents available on the web site of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office⁴, available in Macedonian only, are unfortunately not quite clear about the goals and the methodology to be implemented in the project. For example the web site gives only one sentence in order to explain the goal of the project: *"The aim of the project is to undertake interventions for conservation and restoration on the monument, taking into account the alarming*

⁴ Web site of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office of Republic of Macedonia - www.uzkn.gov.mk



Fig 3. Peribleptos Church, Conservation

Сл 3. Црква Св. Богородица Перивлепта, Конзервација

condition of the frescoes “. The web site gives however the information, that the same U.S. grant will be used to make conservation works on the northern monastery inn, built in early XX century, to be used later as part of the tourist infrastructure accompanying the church. There is however no information about the cultural significance of the monastery inn.

Without entering in details of the conservation project , (inadequate and insufficient description of the damage patterns, lack of diagnosis of the damage cause and alike), it is important to notice that the project on paper and in reality, does not take the preservation of the authentic aspects of the church as a priority. The first and the second year of the project were spent on extensive geotechnical investigations as well as on archeological excavations , outside and inside the church . Only last year (2011) the roof containing cement was removed and replaced by a temporary roof made of wood (figure -3) . There was practically no work done on the site in 2012. In November 2012 , rain was pouring into the church on front of the altar, an obvious sign that the temporary roof is no longer protecting the church. And most importantly, in three years (2009 - 2012), practically no conservation works per se was done to protect the frescoes, apart from cleaning of the frescoes on a surface of only two square meters on the northwestern wall, where white salts had been eating out the frescoes very rapidly.

The conservation project rightly takes into account a new enlarged function of the site which would function not only as a sacred place but also as a tourist site. It is therefore necessary to provide an adequate tourist infrastructure, using in this case the existing monastery inn. What is troubling however is the



Fig 4. Church Saint George , Staro Nagorichane, Central Dome

Сл 4. Црква Св. Ђорђе, Старо Нагоричане, Централна купола

fact that the tourist infrastructure is considered as an asset in need of conservation, with the same level of priority and importance as the fresco painting. And indeed, it is evident that the authentic qualities of the church, that is its unique authentic architecture form the XIII, with additions from the XIV century, and first of all the sublime almost completely preserved fresco painting from the same period, have not been treated as a priority in the conservation project.

One can only wish that the church of Peribleptos could get the attention and care it deserves, at least as much as the Saint Clement's church in Plaosnik did. It seems that foreign aid, when it is only in cash, does not really help much, even when it comes from the U.S.

The church Peribleptos in Ohrid is not an isolated case. The second master piece of Michael Astrapas and Eytichios, the church Saint George in Staro Negorichane painted in the second decade in the XIV century is also in a bad condition. Due to lack of maintenance and bad conservation, the frescoes in the church are in a very bad state⁵. In the upper parts of the church, in the domes in particular there can be noticed a significant loss of fresco pigments – figure 4. In some cases, like in the northwestern dome, there is a total irreversible loss of fresco pigments and painting as well – figure 5. In the Fall 2011 important level of moisture in the central dome was noticed. The moisture eats out the fresco decoration and destroys the fresco layers⁶.

⁵ P. Velkov, "Preserving Historic Churches and Monasteries in Republic of Macedonia", *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, Volume 13, Number 3, Downhead Publishing, Shaftesbury, 2007, pp. 73-87

⁶ O. Brankovich and P. Velkov, "Preserving the Sacred Cultural Heritage of the Re-



Fig 5. Church Saint George , Staro Nagorichane,
North-Western Dome

Сл 5. Црква Св. Ђорђе, Старо Нагоричане,
Северозападна купола

What is interesting to note, that since 2008 the site has been on the list of the Council of Europe for endangered heritage sites, candidates for funding of integrated conservation projects under the frame for regional cooperation for South-East Europe of the Council's Directorate for Culture, Cultural Heritage and Nature. Actually, the Council of Europe has been involved in inspection and monitoring of the church since 2003. The project, as described on the official web site of the Council of Europe⁷, includes also refurbishment of an abandoned (to say the truth also ruined) building next to the church which had been used as school before World War II. The building should host a tourist information center for visitors. As in the case with the Peribleptos church, it is unclear what is the cultural value of this building and why is it necessary to preserve it. On the other hand, little attention is paid to the actual conserva-

tion of the authentic aspects of the church, that is to say, the fresco painting.

The most disturbing fact is however is the fact that the church has seen nothing of this conservation plan . The church is locked and is not easy to get inside. Regular services are no longer held there and there is very little light inside. It would not be an overstatement to say, that now, for the first time in its long history the church is practically abandoned.

In the Summer 2011, the conservation project finally started funded by the European Union, for the moment only on paper. And the first phase of the project is cleaning and embellishment of the site and reconstruction of the building next to the church. The church and the marvelous frescoes will have to wait for better days...

public of Macedonia", Documentary film , Makedonida , Skopje, 2011, available in Macedonian and in Serbian, archives of the National Museum of Serbia, Belgrade, 2012

⁷ Web site of the Council of Europe - www.coe.int

5. Conclusion

Republic of Macedonia treasures some of the important and best preserved Byzantine churches and fresco painting in the world. The authenticity of the frescoes and of the architecture is the main asset of the rich cultural heritage of the country that needs to be cherished and preserved. Yet it seems that, due to various reasons, this heritage fails to receive the attention that it deserves.

Conservation of Byzantine churches is a complex task, especially when you have so much to preserve, like in the case of Republic of Macedonia. The conservation projects have to be conducted using international standards and practices. Before any intervention, the cultural significance of the site has to be established. And in the case of Byzantine churches in Republic of Macedonia, the main aspect of the cultural significance of the site that needs to be preserved is the fresco painting. However, the fresco painting can not be considered alone. The conservation project should always treat the church as a whole, providing integral solutions for the architecture and the fresco painting.

This may turn out to be difficult task, knowing that the country is confronted with lack of resources and expertise. Professional international bodies can be helpful to provide the needed technical assistance, like ICOMOS – the International Committee for Monuments and Sites in Paris, and ICCROM – the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome, both under the auspices of UNESCO. This seems to us a better solution than engaging political bodies like foreign governments, the Council of Europe or the European Union itself.

Conservation of Byzantine projects may be considered as a political project. What we need is the right cultural policy in order to implement the right conservation projects. And the best policy is the one that puts the preservation of the authentic aspects of the Byzantine churches as a top priority, in Republic of Macedonia, and elsewhere.

Панче Велков

КОНЦЕПТ АУТЕНТИЧНОСТИ У ЗАШТИТИ ВИЗАНТИЈСКИХ ЦРКАВА У РЕПУБЛИЦИ МАКЕДОНИЈИ

За разлику од цркава и катедрала на западу, које су најчешће претрпеле значајне реставраторске интервенције и реконструкције током XIX века, византиските цркве на Балкану су аутентичније јер су успеле да сачувају своје оригиналне атрибуте – на првом месту у однос на архитектуру, али и у односу на фреско сликарство. Византијским црквама у периоду после поново је враћена њихова аутентична функција. На жалост, због техничких, финансијских и идеолошких разлога, Византијске цркве у Источној Европи често се не третирају као културно добро од посебног значаја, која треба да се заштите и презентују. На основу анализе најзначајнијих цркава у земљи, у раду се обрађују два кључна аспекта аутентичности византијских цркава – архитектура и фреско сликарство. Разматрају се и проблеми повезани са презентацијом и интерпретацијом, са циљем да се дође до јасног разграничења између аутентичне и реконструисане цркве.

