Special Nature Reserve Milesevka and the Mileseva Monastery

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Introduction and history of the legal protection of the site

In south-western Serbia, on the territory of the former state of Raska, on the banks of River Milesevka, lies a spiritually, culturally, historically and artistically very important monument of the country's past, the Mileseva Monastery. It became the most holy place of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and people after the relics of St Sava have been transferred there from Trnovo (Bulgaria) in 1236. From that time on the Mileseva Monastery became a place of pilgrimage of the Serbian people and other Orthodox nations from the Balkans. It was declared a 'Cultural property of exceptional national significance' in 1979 by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia.

The protected natural environment adds to the character and the beauty of the monastery. The surroundings of Mileseva are dominated by the canyon of River Milesevka, with a mediaeval fortification on the rocky top and monastic cells high above the river. The area of 290 ha is protected as a natural, cultural and historic complex. In 1990, the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia declared the surroundings of the monastery as a protected area of natural and cultural importance called the Protected Natural Surroundings of the Mileseva Monastery, managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

< The White Angel from the scene the Holy Women at the Sepulchre.

The Special Nature Reserve Milesevka and the Protected Natural Surroundings of the Mileseva Monastery.

The gorge of River Milesevka was designated as a Regional Nature Park in 1976. Now, the protected area is planned to be designated as a Special Nature Reserve of 1236 hectares in size. The State Enterprise for Forest Management `Srbijasume` is in charge of the management of Milesevka Regional Nature Park.

The Milesevka Gorge is proposed for designation as an IUCN Category IV. As a site of national and international importance, the Milesevka Gorge is included in the list of 'Important Birds Areas in Europe, BirdLife 2000' (YU 21 SE). It is also included in the ecological network 'Emerald', this being a preparatory step towards an inclusion in the Natura 2000 network. The Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning and the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia are responsible for monitoring and protection of the protected area.

Natural values

The Special Nature Reserve Milesevka is situated between the two mountains Zlatar (1627 m) and Jadovnik (1734 m). The canyon is characterised by unique wild and rough nature, picturesque landscapes, inaccessible paths and the steep rock formations that sometimes rise to a height of 300 m and descend almost vertically towards the riverbed. The gorge is 24 km long and it ends near the Mileseva Monastery. Walking through the gorge is possible only via a narrow path carved into the cliffs.

The flagship species of the protected area is the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus).* The bird is protected as a rare species as it had almost disappeared. Thanks to the efforts of experts and volunteers, the number of birds has multiplied, and currently, Serbia has the largest griffon vulture populations in the Balkan countries. The vulture is considered a holy bird among the

Serbs. From the eleventh century to the present times, it has been on the Serbian state coat of arms.

On the other hand, there are 30 endemic taxa in the gorge's flora (Matovic, 1992). Eight species are considered rare. The fauna is represented by 24 species of mammals, many of those considered rare (bear, otter, wild boar…). There are 73 species of birds, 38 of those rare and of international importance (such as *Gyps fulvus, Aquila chrysaetos, Falco tinnunculus, Crex crex, Falco peregrinus, Alectoris graeca, Bubo bubo, Alauda arvensis, Tichodroma muraria, Lanius collurio*…).

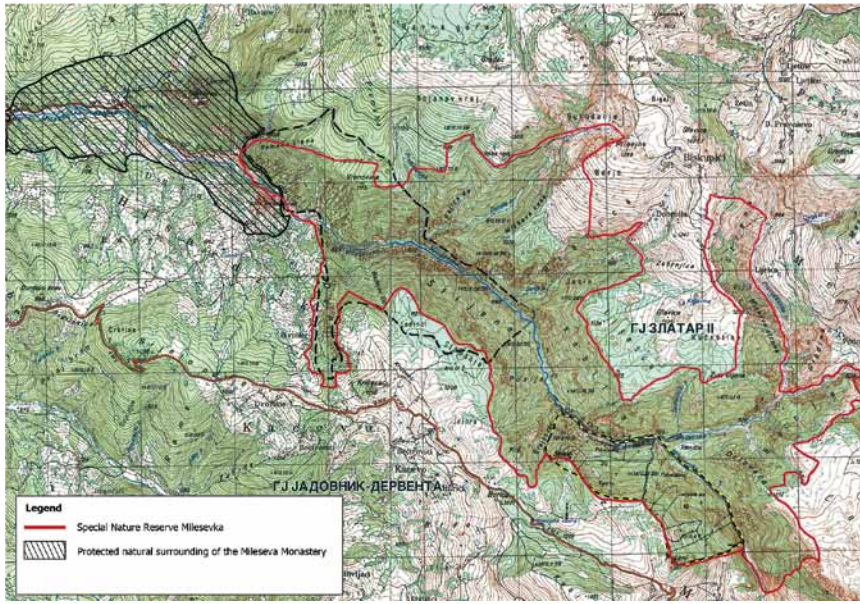
The activities in the Reserves are generally focused on supervising and maintaining the protected areas. Tourist activities include trekking, bird watching, adrenalin tours through Milesevka gorge, photo safaris, visits to spiritual, historic and cultural monuments, rural tourism etc. Visit to the Reserves is restricted to small groups. The local population does not endanger the griffon vultures with their everyday activities.

The Milesevka Gorge is considered a sacred place by the Orthodox Christians, because St Sava's body rested there. His spirit has been protecting the gorge and all visitors with good intentions. The opposite is true as well: all actions that could impair the gorge bring misfortune.

Cultural heritage

The Raska region has been considered holy since the beginning of the

The Mileseva Monastery (1219-1235).



twelfth century, when the first Serbian state had been established by the sacrosanct Nemanjic dynasty. It had ruled over the Serbian lands continuously during the period of more than two centuries (1166–1371). Kings from the holy Nemanjic dynasty established the Serbian spirituality: the Serbian Orthodox church, Svetosavlje (Saintsavaism), literacy, literature, legislation and school system. Deeply religious and devoted to Orthodoxy, all the rulers of this family were generous donors who erected many magnificent monasteries and churches all over Serbia and even on Mount Athos (Hilandar). Until present times all of them are important spiritual places, with valuable monuments of medieval construction and architecture and galleries of the most beautiful fresco paintings.

The Mileseva Monastery was erected between 1219 and 1235 by King Vladislav Nemanjic. Although the monastery was already important and well-known as the burial place of its founder, it became the most holy place of Serbia after the transfer of the relics of St Sava. St Sava (1174–1235) is widely considered as the most important figure of Serbian history and is canonised and venerated by the Serbian Orthodox Church. St Sava was an Orthodox monk, the first Archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a diplomat, writer, legislator and founder of several important medieval monasteries.

Since that time the Mileseva Monastery has been the spiritual and cultural centre of this region and a place of pilgrimage for the Serbians and other Orthodox nations from the Balkans (Kandic, 1995). This tradition has never been interrupted throughout the centuries until present times, despite many different historical influences (the Turkish occupation, wars, communism…). Thus, Mileseva became a centre of hope, courage, and inspiration for the Serbian struggle against the Turkish occupation. Many miracles took place at the grave of St Sava in the Mileseva

The Mileseva Monastery, the Milesevac fortress, the River Milesevka Gorge and the village of Hisardzik make up a natural, cultural and historical complex.

monastery. The Venetian diplomat Ramberty, who visited Mileseva in 1534, wrote that not only Serbs, but also Muslims and Jews were visiting the monastery and asking for healing.

Mileseva was ranked second among all Serbian monasteries. In the golden age of Serbia, during the Nemanjic dynasty, the monastic community in the Mileseva Monastery counted around 300 monks. In 1377 the church saw the coronation of Stjepan Tvrtko Kotromanic as the king of Bosnia and Serbia, while in 1466 Stephan Vukcic Kosaca received the title the `Duke of St Sava'. The monastery, an artistic and ecclesiastical-political centre, situated at one of the chief stopping places on an important international trade route served as the intersection of influences from Eastern and Western Europe for centuries.

The church of Mileseva is dedicated to the Ascension of the Lord and is built in the traditional style of the Raska region. Mileseva's thirteenth century frescoes are considered to be one of the best samples of painting in Europe of that time (Cmiljanovic, 2009). One of the most famous Mileseva frescoes is the White Angel from the scene of the Holy Women at the Sepulchre, as well as a fresco with the portraits of family members of the Nemanjics. The Mileseva portraits of the first Nemanjic family members were made while they were still alive and therefore are of great historical value.

Since the time of its foundation, the Mileseva Monastery has been an important spiritual and cultural centre with a scriptorium and a library, where original works of Serbian literature were copied. Also, one of the oldest schools of Serbia existed in the monastery. In 1544, one of the first printing houses in Serbia was established in the monastery (Nemirovski, 1996). The monks printed two books: the Psalter in 1544 and the Prayer Book in 1546. A second edition of the Psalter was printed in 1557. The printing house was located and assembled in a secret hiding place in the sub-dome area of the outer narthex. Manuscripts and printed books were disseminated throughout Europe owing several destructions of the monastery, the migrations of the Serbian population during the rule of the Ottoman Turks, the riots against the Ottoman Turks, and wars. Today, only a few manuscripts and printed books are kept in the renewed treasury.

The monastery was torn down many times in its history, as also other Serbian holy places. The first time the monastery was ruined in 1459 by the Ottoman Turks. It was renewed and reconstructed with the help of the Grand Vizier Mehmed Pasha and his close relative Patriarch Makarije Sokolovic. In 1624 the raging stream took a part of the yard away together with some objects. The monks completely reconstructed the church and other buildings with the help of the Russian emperors. During the Austrian-Turkish War of 1689–90, the Mileseva Monastery, like other Serbian churches and monasteries, was plundered and devastated. A large number of monks, to-

gether with thousands of Serbian families, moved to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The monastery was left in ruins and without monks. In 1863 some prominent local families were allowed by the Turkish Vizier to restore the monastery and the work was completed in six years time by local builders (who used traditional building techniques?). There was a great flood at the end of the nineteen century, which once more caused major damage to the monastery. After World War II, the Serbian communist government confiscated all monastery property, and only one monk stayed there for more than 20 years without any financial support from the authorities.

In 1974, the Serbian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments started excavations and conservation works. The church was repaired, the frescoes cleaned and conserved. Detailed activities were initiated in 1980 (Lukic, 2004) with regard to the church, monastery premises and monastery surroundings.

In 1992 the Mileseva Eparchy was established; monks and a Bishop settled again the monastery. In 2002 Mileseva became a female monastery. At present, the monastic community consists of seven nuns, one monk and four novices.

On the steep cliff over the depths of the Milesevka Gorge there are the remnants of twelfth century town Milesevac, which has been declared a Cultural Monument. Below the town, on the north side of the cliff, there are three

A plethora of monastic hermitages in the cliffs of the River Milesevka Gorge.

hermitages founded in natural caves. They are called 'fasting cells' and are located in natural spots thought to be God's creation. The first written reference to these 'fasting cells' is a manuscript from 1508 (Spasic, 1996). Fasting cells are significant elements of the medieval spiritual heritage and invaluable monuments of the period. In the largest hermitage named after St Sava there is a spring of holy water. There are no written records about when exactly the hermits stopped living in the Mileseva fasting cells. Today, they are considered as a cult place, but monks do not use them any longer.

The Mileseva Monastery, the Milesevac fortress, the St Sava hermitage and the village Hisardzik constitute a natural, cultural and historical complex, appreciated alike by the Christian and the

Muslim populations of the region, who are living together harmoniously?

Visitors and pilgrims who come to the monastery attend religious services. Some of them walk through the canyon, and climb a path up to the hermitage of St Sava, where they wash their face and drink the holy water.

Spiritual values

The ethnical and cultural identity of the population of the local communities in the Raska region is marked by Svetosavlje (Saintsavaism). Svetosavlje's ethic implies a historical normative pattern of social behaviour and collective effort of the Serbs as Orthodox Christians that imbues all areas of human practice (Mitrovic, 1995).

St Sava spiritually united the Serbs and that feeling still persists despite a number of different influences they received. St Sava became a myth and a constant inspiration for the Serbian people. The veneration of St Sava was supported by a whole dynasty, a powerful church organisation and the people of Serbia, and that strengthened his cult back in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. During the period of the Ottoman domination, St Sava was a central figure in both the formal religious and traditional cultures, which were responsible for keeping the national spirit of the Serbs alive. His miracle-working body in the monastery of Mileseva was venerated by pilgrims who came from near and far destinations to implore his intercession. The monks from the Mileseva Monastery had always emphasised their role as guardians of the tomb of St Sava and his cult, even after Sinan Pasha took St Sava's relics to Belgrade (in 1594 or 1595), and burned them in order to break the Serbian rebellion against the Turks. For the Serbian Church and St Sava cult promoters on the other hand, the burning of the St Sava relics became of utmost importance, through which the Saint gained a posthumous martyrdom status. His cult was strengthened and his burial place in the Mileseva Monastery augmented its value as a pilgrimage site, which survives until today.

In Serbian oral tradition during the Medieval and the Ottoman periods, St Sava's role was to watch always over the Serbian people. In many popular legends and folk tales he is the creator of miraculous springs, a master of the forces of nature. Numerous sites have been named after St Sava and considered holy places (water springs, rocks, mountain peaks etc.) and they are always marked with a cross. This links folk spirituality with nature, and nature conservation.

St Sava's Day (27 January) is the *'slava'* (the patron saint's day) for the Mileseva Monastery and is celebrated with holy liturgy, the operation of a spiritual academy in the monastery and a large gathering of people.

Christianity was introduced in Serbia in the ninth century, but the Serbs maintained a lot of pre-Christian rituals. St Sava Christianised those customs and linked them to Christian saints. Many

pre-Christian Serbian tribal customs, cults and myths are preserved in Svetosavlje, not only as secondary relicts of the old spirituality, but also as fundamental pillars of Svetosavlje. The Church of Svetosavlje originated from the people and it is expressed in people's language. Religious service is performed not only in churches and monasteries, but also at the sacred sites in nature, near *zapis* (holy trees) at the fields where some big battles were fought and the Serbian people suffered their own calvary. Some other pre-Christian rituals and customs incorporated in Svetosavlje are:

Krsna Slava: the celebration of the Patron Saint of the home is most typical of the national and religious life of the Serbian people, and is an exclusively Serbian custom. During its construction, every house is sanctified with a religious ritual, and a sanctuary lamp and an icon are brought into the house. On the day of the Patron each family celebrates, and neighbours and friends gather. After the religious service, which is performed by the local priest, bread made especially for this occasion is parted and everybody celebrates with food, drinks and toasts for the well-being of the family.

Sabor: the gathering of people and priests during religious celebrations are often placed in beautiful natural settings near holy places. They have been held since the sixteenth century and have a vast social significance. During the *Sabor*, a religious service is performed and is followed by a popular feast.

Zavetina: a holiday devoted to the patron of each village. It is an important social event during which a religious procession takes place. The litany comprises of cross bearers and their co-villagers who visit the village's sacred sites (usually beautiful natural sites). The litany arrives at the holy site (holy spring, holy hill or holy tree [*zapis*]) and pray. After traditional food has been served, the ritual continues.

Zapis: (Inscription) – sacred trees, have been important long-lasting natural elements and respected through the centuries until the present day. The selected tree becomes a *zapis* through the rite of consecration performed by a Serbian Orthodox priest in which a cross is inscribed into its bark. The Zapis is inviolable: it is believed that great misfortune will befall anyone who dares to cut it down. If the tree fell naturally, the tree had to remain at the spot and that place was marked with a wooden cross. People gathered in prayer and sought prevention from misfortune. In Serbian popular religion these rituals have an important role, binding and strengthening the local communities and evoking the respect of nature. It is important to preserve the beauty and original character of the Raska district customs as a part of a centuries-old tradition and a special way of life.

Conservation perspectives and sustainability

Today, the spiritual heritage in this region is very well preserved and it is fostered in the families and the local

community. Thanks to the enormous efforts of the monastic community, the clergy of the Mileseva Eparchy and Bishop Filaret, the spiritual, cultural and economic life of the whole eparchy has been improved. There is a good cooperation among Bishop Filaret, sisterhood of the Mileseva monastery and the clergy of Mileseva Eparchy, on the one hand, and the management authorities of the natural reserve, on the other.

Bishop Filaret is very active in renovation and strengthening of the economy of the monasteries, and the erection of new churches. He also enhances spiritual activities and promotes the increase of the numbers of monks and nuns. In the monastery complex, on the foundations of the old building, a library and treasury have been constructed. A new building for the accommodation of pilgrims and religious visitors was built, as well as a new dormitory for nuns. Also, since the bishop plans to develop tourist activities in all protected areas in his eparchy, a tourist facility was built on Zlatar Mountain, some 14 km away from the monastery in order to reduce the pressure of tourists on the monastery complex and its surroundings. There is a café near the gate of the monastery complex. A radio station called 'Mileseva' has also been established. Bishop Filaret's enthusiasm for building constructions, and his management capacities caused conflicts in the cultural and religious fields; and a question was raised, when the building of new facilities in the monastic complex should stop?

There are no official records of the number of pilgrims, religious visitors and tourists who are currently visiting the monastery. According to a rough estimation of Mother Ana, the prioress of the monastery, approximately 70 000 persons visit the complex annually. Several thousand people are attending the religious celebrations - and around 1500 people arrive there each weekend.

At the moment, archaeological research and pre-conservation works are conducted on several locations under the supervision of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia.

Despite its successive destructions and deterioration caused in the course of time, the Mileseva Monastery preserved a fair part of the original frescoes, which today stand out characterised by great beauty and original expression. After conservation works were completed, the frescoes were again in good condition. In 1996, an eminent professional jury consisting of over one hundred academics, painters, art critics and art historians, with a majority of votes announced the White Angel from Mileseva as the most important painting of the millennium in the area of former Yugoslavia (Cmiljanovic, 2009). The art of the Mileseva frescoes influenced artistic ideas, which flow there more impulsively and strongly than in other regions.

The Mileseva artistic colony was set up in 1974 in the monastery. It has established spiritual continuity, finding key

inspiration in Mileseva fresco painting, in the monastery's architecture and in nature that surrounds the monastery.

Pressures and impacts

The Raska region is one of the most undeveloped parts of Serbia. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, the sanctions, the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and NATO strikes caused economic stagnation. The poor economy and bad infrastructure cause permanent migrations of local population to the more developed parts of Serbia.

Agriculture is extensive and it is practised in a traditional way. Food is of very good quality, produced mainly to fulfil personal needs and feed local markets. The population in the villages generally is aging. The local authorities are not capable of supporting rural development and the Serbian government has not taken any systematic measures in that direction so far. The Serbian government is very interested in exploiting the natural resources, as it desperately needs economic development and investments. For that reason, the Government neglects the protection of these natural resources.

Spatial planning of the region has not been carried out so far, which creates management problems in the protected areas.

Poverty, institutional and personal irresponsibility, as well as incompetence, lead in some cases to illegal behaviour. For instance, a large number of licenses for wood exploitation and new buildings have been issued, and waste disposal sites on the edge of the protected zone have been tolerated. Recently, the Serbian government approved research for the reopening of the copper, lead and zinc mine 'Cadinja' that is only 7 km away from the Mileseva Monastery. Furthermore there are pressures to increase the industrial exploitation of a decorative stone within the protected area. Moreover, the amounts of wild berries and herbs picked exceed set limits.

Currently, the main threat to the monastery and the monastic landscape is the illegal building of private houses in its surroundings.

Growing pressure is put on the hydropower potential of River Lim Basin, which River Milesevka is part of, where many important cultural and historical sites are located, although the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia and the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments have prepared projects for the preservation and protection of those sites.

On the other hand, many cultural events are being organised, which fulfil the spiritual needs of the pilgrims. After consultation with the main stakeholders, a number of recommendations have been made, covering a wide range of issues from planning to specific management aspects, that can affront the main challenges and pressures the site is receiving.

Recommendations

The preservation of any protected value is, to some extent, dependent on the

different needs of the stakeholders. A vital and prospering local community, aware of the value and significance of its heritage, is the best guardian of the natural values, and it is of great importance to offer to it an alternative to the present socio-economic development. There are possibilities for development in several traditional areas, such as traditional agricultural practices (production of organic food), old crafts and in a few new ones (such as tourism), but taking always under consideration the free spirit and pride of local people. Patience and careful dialogue among all local stakeholders are necessary.

In light of the above analysis and diagnosis we suggest the following actions:

- The preparation of a spatial plan for the region should be the top priority. This plan should aim to conserve this precious heritage as a whole, including all the religious, spiritual, cultural and natural values.
- The management of the protected area in cooperation with local authorities should seek markets in Serbia and abroad for high-quality organic food and promote in that way sales of local products, which will increase the income of the villagers. With the support of the authorities, projects should be launched and encourage young people from urban centres to return to their homeland and renew the production of local organic food.
- It is of the great importance to promote waste reduction and to construct a regional waste disposal and recycling plant.
- Ecotourism is the way forward, as it would contribute to the economic independence of the local population. It should be based on promoting the natural beauty and the preservation of the traditional spiritual and ethical values, associated to skills and knowledge about life in nature, organic products and traditional handicrafts. The following actions are recommended:

  1) The establishment of a network of walking trails and cycling tracks connecting the natural protected sites with the places of spiritual, cultural and historical importance of the area. This action should follow the identification of viewpoints (lookouts) and resting places. One or several tourist information booths should be placed on strategic points along the trails.

  2) The reconstruction of the walking trail which leads to Saint Sava's hermitage.

  3) The reconstruction of the walking trail through the Milesevka Gorge.

  4) The restoration interventions needed to prevent the collapse of some portions of the walls of the fortified town of Milesevac, which is in a bad condition.

  5) The conservation and revitalisation of cultural heritage and its natural surroundings, either *in situ* (in existing ethnological complexes with traditional rural architecture) or in designed ethno parks, such as open-air museums are needed. The

building of the new houses and tourist facilities should be done respecting the principles and styles of traditional architecture.

6) The capacity building of the local human resources for training in organic food production, ecotourism, traditional crafts and skills (carpentry, weaving, beekeeping, wool processing) and the nurturing of cultural and spiritual identity.

7) The set up of a unique website that should promote the whole region and facilitate access to information about the area.

- Raise the awareness of the local inhabitants and entrepreneurs about the great value of nature and culture they inherited and the necessity for conservation, protection and restoration of these values.
- Establishment of cooperation with other protected areas with significant spiritual and cultural values at the international level.

To accomplish all of the above-mentioned goals, help and support by the international community is needed.

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