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CULT SITES OF LOPARDINCE MONASTERY (BUJANOVAC)*

INTRODUCTION

Cult sites, as holy places where communication with otherworldly takes place, are related to official and popular religion and beliefs (churches and monasteries, mosques, tekkes, vestiges of old temples, holy trees, holy wells, cult stones, stone and wooden crosses, and the like). In popular religion they are defined as places with a special power of influence since they are regarded as able to affect, in a variety of ways, human life; for this reason, they are shown special respect expressed in prescribed forms of conduct (Bandić 1980, 7-22). On the one hand, they represent archaic remains surviving from the deep past but, on the other hand, they are a contemporary phenomenon with an important role to play in the lives of present population. Whether in the form of a natural phenomenon or expressed in architecture, whether active or extinct, cult sites are insufficiently known places of identity and tradition of the people from the region.¹

In the border area of East and Southeast Serbia cult sites represent important artifacts of *material cultural inheritance* and testimonies of intensity and quality of *the religious life* of majority and minority peoples. By exploring cult sites, both those that are still functioning as well as extinct ones, we can obtain a quantity of information about confessional and religious identity of the ethnicities that visit them besides taking care about their maintenance. Sociologists of religion find of special interest *common* cult sites as a specific form of encounter of the two most spread religions in our country – Christianity and Islam.

The exploration of special places, those defined as cults, represents the topic of this paper. The decision to visit and explore the space around the Monastery Complex of Lopardince with the Church of Saint. Archangels Gabriel and Michael, in the north of the Municipality of Bujanovac, close to four-kilometers away Serbian village of Lopardince² is an out-of-the-ordinary challenge, even more so since the given objects are of special importance, in terms of religion and mores, for a local and wider community.

The name of the monastery is, as a rule, associated with the place closest to it, whether it is a village, town or region. In our case, it is the village of Lopardince that the whole complex (with its temple and other objects) is, in domestic referential literature, named after, namely, the *Monastery of Lopardince*. In accordance with the Serbian Orthodox tradition which states that the churches should be named after two saints as well as the fact that above the entrance door to the temple under study there is indeed confirmation that it is consecrated to Saint Michael, the monastery church is dedicated to the great martyrs, Gabriel and Michael, though the local people, in their

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¹ More about Roma cult sites, see in Đorđević 2010, 281-329.

² Village of Lopardince is described in detail in: Živković i Kostić 2012, 395-416.

everyday speech, refer to it only as the Church of Saint Archangel Gabriel.³ The edifice has not been explored in a more systematic way though it is a) evident that the Church is built on the foundations of some previous architectural structure (Rakocija 2013, 50), b) very interesting in terms of its style and structural size, c) interesting in terms of the themes it represents on its multi-layered frescoes,⁴ and d) of indubitable value not only in the context of ecclesiastical art and historiographic art legacy but also of that of early Byzantine spiritual basis as a matrix of Medieval Serbian state on the territory of present South Serbia (if we accept the lore about the way and time of its building as we were told about by local people).

Around the very monastic complex there are following objects with cult meaning: 1) near the *Church*, whose history and survival as a special sacral edifice is a matter of several traditional tales, 2) there is a *hollow stone* through which infertile women and those with spine disorders wriggle through, 3) and a *water spring* used for washing in order to heal eye diseases, and 4) as well as, some fifty meters from it, *Maiden Rock* or a rock that people used to choose to fall down from rather than to live without the rules, moral and customs of the community that they originate from and unquestioningly belong to. All the given objects are significant in terms of people's occasional visits to them as well as the fact that, with their ancestral messages, they seem to be reviving a mythical base of the order observed not only by the majority Christian Orthodox population in the north of the Municipality of Bujanovac but also some members of other nations and religious confessions.

The authors of the paper were welcome in the village center by a team of local people ready to share with them the knowledge acquired so far about the lore, construction and function of the Church of Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael and the monastic cult sites. An active participation in the conversations was taken by Mile Milanović-Džema (1949), former president of the Local Community of the village of Lopardince, Goran Janjić (1973), former president of the Local Community and member of the village Church Board, Blagoje Janjić (1940), present tutor of the Monastery of Lopardince, Stanko Veličković (1943), inhabitant of the village of Lopardince, Sonja Veličković (1964)⁵, teacher and inhabitant of Bujanovac and Dragan Veličković (1960)⁶, born in Lopardince while now a lawyer and inhabitant of Bujanovac (Fig.1).

Before making a round of the cult sites, we paid a visit, in the center of the village, to a newly-built Church of St. Great Martyr George that testifies about particular commitment of the villagers to elevation of their religious life to a higher level.⁷ In three years of investment, the ecclesiastical edifice has obtained its outside

³ The given explanation of the name of the Monastery of Lopardince and its church is accepted as suggested by Dr Miša Rakocija, expert adviser of the Institute for Protection of Cultural Monuments in Niš, even more so since Dr Rakocija, as archeologist and art historian, had visited the same object before doing an expert study of it in a separate monograph (Rakocija 2013).

⁴ As for this issue, Miša Rakocija also clearly states that „the art of painting of the Church of the Monastery of Lopardince is unexplored and unknown“, that is, that it represents „an important representative of the post-Byzantine art of Serbian people“ (Rakocija 2013, 51).

⁵ Sonja Veličković is co-author of the paper about customs in Bujanovac – an account of the rites for celebration the holiday of Karaveštice (White Sunday), see Živković and Veličković 2012, 193-200.

⁶ Lawyer Dragan Veličković was a special participants in the talks about life and work in the border area, that is, in Bujanovac. More about it in Živković and Tasić 2014, 35-52.

⁷ The outlook of the Church of Saint Great Martyr George from the times when its foundations were laid out was written about and documented in Živković and Kostić 2012, 395-416. In the mentioned paper as well as in a recent text (Todorović and Živković 2014), it is emphasized that the local people do not show the same commitment and responsibility in the restoration of the dilapidated Cultural Center in which, up to the seventies of the last century, all kinds of village manifestations had taken place. Likewise, the village authorities are said to permit teachers to take care about the old elementary school building (comprising a kindergarten) and its equipment and to obtain modern technical equipment from

outlook of an Orthodox temple; the next step to take is interior decoration: setting up an iconostasis, diakonikon and altar as well as a cathedra for address and a gallery for choir. Also, the next thing to do is to arrange for the access as well as auxiliary objects (for selling candles and other relics), that is, of the whole churchyard in which there is a memorial plaque with a carved bidding by Saint George to build a church in the village.

MONASTERY COMPLEX OF LOPARDINCE

A winding road, with frequent acclivities, from the village of Lopardince⁸ to the monastery, follows the Skok River⁹ for two kilometers; the whole monastic complex is located on the slope of Kozarnik Hill, beneath the rock known as the Big Rock. Since at least twice a year, the villagers visit, in an organized way, the monastery and other places in its surroundings – on St. George's Day, on May 6, and on the day of the Church's Patron Saint Day, St. Archangel Gabriel, June 26 – they themselves, with their own means and voluntary work, broke through the rocks and thus expanded a former goat path to its present form of a wide and passable road. Firstly around 1985 and once again after 1990, joining forces with the Yugoslav Army, they made the road took on its present outlook.

Despite a difficult access to it, the Monastery of Lopardince lies on an artificially made plain and represents a pleasant oasis for rest.¹⁰ Between the road and the temple the riverbed of the Skok River is knowingly set in order and bridged by two accessible small bridges while the space in front of the ecclesiastical edifice itself is entirely paved with natural stone (Fig. 2). Along the border of the forest, as befits the whole ambience, there are some ten tables with benches; a fountain with potable water is also set up. West of the Church of Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael there is an old mansion dating 19th century while a new one is built on the eastern side. In the northeast direction beyond the Church, some twenty meters away, there is so-called *Hollow Stone* while diagonally from the Church, close to the steep mountain slope, there is a cult healing water spring.

Monastery Church of Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael. The cult characters of the Monastery Church, as emphasized by the local people, is pointed out by the details concerning a) its way of coming into being, b) time of building and c) later maintenance. Along with an account of its history and lore, there are also written d) accounts of congregational customs on the day of the village patron holiday as well as e) experts' accounts of the importance of the given religious complex.

(a) The original location of the Church is believed to have been planned at the place called Vrđovla, at the bottom of Konjarnik Hill, but the masons' intentions were opposed by the supernatural powers that kept on devastating the erected stone walls. The agreement was reached by choosing a new, that is, present location of the Church. A centuries-long existence of the temple has supported people's belief about its special place on the basis of the previously established agreement with the otherworldly divine authority. It might as well be possible that the given object, at some historical moment, faced its destruction since the present edifice lies on the foundations of an ancient one.

humanitarian organizations; likewise, they point out that the school has a separate and distant privy instead of sanitary and water supply facilities inside the house.

⁸ Local people insisted that they knew for sure that their village had been mentioned for the first time in the eighth century; yet, no written evidence did they point out.

⁹ Skok River is formed beyond the monastery by two tributaries – streams, Šišmanac and Papret. It, for a large part, passes through the village and it is usually of a smaller flow; it can considerably swell in the springtime while, in the summer heats, it, as a rule, goes dry.

¹⁰ Monastery Lopardince has at its disposal, in toto, 1,5 hectare of land including monastery forest.

(b) Of considerable importance is a narrative about *the time of the Church erection*. It is a firm belief of all we have talked to is that it dates from the 11th century despite the official church explanations about its 13th century origin. They repeat almost like a choir: “They don’t want to admit it dates from the 11th century since it would not be agreeable to them to admit that it is even older than the church in the Monastery of Venerable Prohor of Pčinja.”¹¹ Though the outlook, the building style and the existing frescoes on the Church walls suggest a more profound historical continuity, the rhetoric of the ecclesiastical authorities does not jeopardize the compromise-established priority of one over the other sacral object.

(c) The cult lore of the Church of Saint Archangels of Gabriel and Michael is also related to the tales about deaths of some people who wanted to *maintain the Church*, that is, to somewhat change its original outlook.

In the early nineties of the last century it was evident that the Church edifice was in the need of restoration. For this purpose the master builders led by an Arsen (most probable, migrant workers from Bosilegrad or Vlasotince) removed the roof and put a concrete bloc underneath it. The work lasted for two or three days; once it was completed the above mentioned Arsen died. The same fate was, only a few years later, experienced by the local man named Buda who fell off from the church roof while replacing the old stone blocs in order to fix the leaks in the roof. These and a few other similar examples – with no tragic outcome only by pure chance – namely, all these unfortunate happenings were sufficient enough for local people to conclude that the otherworld powers, related to the church, do not allow for any change of its original outlook. The lore is also at our disposal in order to testify that no estrangement of any part of the monastery complex is good: an Albanian stole some wood from the nearby forest but then he rushed, the faster the better, because of pangs of conscience and fear of punishment, the very next day, to bring all of it back. The people also stress that the Albanian neighbors from the neighboring village, Veliko Trnovce, have never desecrated any single part of the Monastery property.

(d) Older people mention three or four baptisms but the main *customs and rites* in the Monastery of Lopardince are related to the congregational gatherings on the Day of Saint Archangel Gabriel on June, 26. The lore about the Maiden Rock, that will be discussed in more details later, excludes music; that’s why no single wedding has ever taken at this very spot.¹²

The day before the main village celebration a blood sacrifice is given; if the patron saint holiday is fat-wise, an infertile cow is sacrificed at a special spot behind the new mansion while in the fasting days a fat-free bean is cooked. On the main day more than 300 hundred people swarm in at the monastery plateau, including not only the local people from Lopardince and their guests, but also visitors from the neighboring villages and cities. The guests bring gifts with them¹³ in return for which

¹¹ Monastery of Venerable Prohor of Pčinja is located on the slopes of Kozjak Mountain, on the left bank of Pčinja River, in the neighborhood of Klenika Village, at 30 kilometers south of Vranje. According to the lore, it was built in the 11th century by the Byzantine Emperor Romanos Diogenes as a sign of his gratitude to the Venerable Prohor of Pčinja who had prophesied to him that he would become Emperor.

¹² Baptisms and weddings of the villagers from Lopardince used to be carried out in a nearby village of Rakovac while today they are done in Bujanovac. People expect this to change, namely, that weddings, baptisms, cutting up of the celebration cakes, obsequies and other religious rites will be carried out in a newly-built village church once its interior decoration is completed.

¹³ As for the character of the gifts, it is not defined beforehand; gifts are given as befits personal choice and feeling. Most often these are towels, bed sheets, provisions for domestic use (oil, sugar, beans), drinks (fruit juices, wine, brandy) as well as clothes or parts of furniture (tables, chairs, beds, mattresses and blankets). The surplus of the gifts, namely, those not needed for daily functioning of the Monastery, is sold at auctions in the church shop in the village. The buyers are people from Lopardince themselves and other

they participate in serving drinks and food (Kurban Chorba, meat and beans) prepared by, for this occasion, a specially selected host with the help of the whole village. The celebration rites also require the host to prepare and has the *Slava* (celebration) cake blessed. The boiled wheat is not served since Saint Archangel (Arhanĝel or Randel in Serbian) is regarded as a living saint as it was explained to the authors by the people they had talked to. As for religious ceremonies, the responsible ones for it are priests from the Diocese of Vranje: in 2012, the Bishop of Vranje Pahomije himself led a liturgy, blessing and cutting up of the celebration cake, monastery procession (*litije*) and did the naming of a new host for the following year.¹⁴

Along with the yielding to secular delights such as socializing, telling jokes and exchanges of news about relatives and other information, all along with eating and drinking, the congregation visitors do not miss to make a round of the Church praying and lighting candles for the dead and the living (Figs. 3 and 4) and then of the other above-mentioned places in close environment. The congregational gathering, taken as a whole, is a ritual of the highest cult importance since it promotes the role and importance of congregationalism, both for the community as a whole and for the individuals who believe they are taking over a small part of the otherworldly power by their co-participation in the religious rites and by paying visits to the above-listed cult sites.¹⁵ Not so often the monastery Church is also visited by members of other nations and religions (Orthodox Macedonians, Albanians and Roma of Islam faith) observing all the prescribed rites (candle-lighting in the Church, prayers, gift-giving in things and money). The most frequent motive is placing their hopes in its healing powers.

The Church in the Monastery of Lopardince, its accompanying objects (two mansions not inhabited over the year) and other parts of the complex (fountains, water supply, road, forest, etc.) are taken care of by the chosen tutor,¹⁶ members of the village Church Board and the Local Community of Lopardince. The restoration and other works in the Monastery are covered by the money collected from the visitors on the congregation day and by individual visits,¹⁷ auction sales of the surplus of the donated goods (see reference 13) and donations.¹⁸

(e) *Referential expert literature* tells that the Church of Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael was “built on the old cult site in the 16th century (before 1570 since, in this context, it was mentioned for the first time in the historical sources) when it was also painted; it was restored in the second half of the 17th century and

interested parties; the practice is that the real value of the offered goods is overpriced. It is a very specific form of solidary aid to the Monastery; the money collected in this way is used for paying for other Monastery needs, including a modest monthly compensation to the tutor.

¹⁴ See official site of the Serbian Orthodox Church: www.spc.rs/sr/proslavljen_sabor_svetog_arhangel_gavrila_u_lopardincu

¹⁵ More about importance of cult sites in Pavićević 1980, 191-192

¹⁶ Present tutor of the Monastery of Lopardince is Blagoje Janjić (1940), by the resolution brought about by the village Church Board. This practice was set up as early as 19th century – as far as people remember. There was a practice that the Monastery administrating was inherited by descendents of one single family: as far as historic memory reaches, the people we talked to mentioned, with no precise sequence, descendents from the Mladenović family line (Janja, Jovan, Dobri and their son who died too prematurely, the parish priest of Vrtoĝoš, Mladen). Afterwards, the tradition was taken up by a pensioner, Blagoje Janjić.

¹⁷ The people we talked to confirmed that the help in the building of a new mansion on the northern side was given by an Albanian family which had donated building material.

¹⁸ Regarding the importance of the donations, a special place is taken by the public company „Airport 'Nikola Tesla“ that, in 2011, helped with paving the plateau in front of the Church, with regularizing the riverbed of the Skok River as it passes through the monastic complex as well as small stone bridges connecting the Church with the mansion and the fountain. More details in Public Company „Airport 'Nikola Tesla“ site: www.beg.aero/mediji/saopstenja_aero-droma.223.html?newsId=188

again painted. It was added paintings and painted over also during the 19th and 20th centuries. It was made of broken stone with sometimes plastered facades” (Rakocija 2013, 50-51).

It is a rather modest single-nave edifice with a narthex of 10 times 5 meters in size. Its interior is composed of three niches with the northern semicircular one is for Prothesis (table of oblation) while the southern one is square for Diaconicon. The middle part is taken by “alter apse designed as a bigger extended niche with a semi-spherical vault and raised from the church floor” while on the outside it is “marked with a shallow, rough arched recess clumsily drawn from the wall mass” (Rakocija 2013, 50).

The Church entrance is on the south side. Taking into account the size of the object that, on the village celebration day cannot take a great number of believers, there is an exit later broken through on the north side but, in this way, “the oldest fresco decoration of the narthex was damaged” as reported on by Miša Rakocija in his monograph. The villagers related the above described building intervention to the troubles from the Ottoman times when it was necessary for the believers to quickly flee from the Church, especially women, in the cases of unexpected Ottoman intrusion.

Without going deeper into the disputes about the age of the art legacy of the Church complex, we cannot skip over the expert’s opinion that “on the inner side of the west wall, the naos over the entrance, there is a marble plaque with a relief-sculpted vine with grape clusters, in way it was done in early Byzantine period” (Rakocija 2013, 50).

That is why are stressing that more detailed archeological studies should be done of it in order to establish its right age as well as to date the beginnings of the religious worship and Serbian. Orthodox Church in the regions of South Serbia.

Mansions of the Monastery of Lopardince. As for the mansions of the Monastery of Lopradince, they can be said to perform the basic function of the mansion, namely to serve as a dwelling-place for monks and other clergy. No one dwells there for good since it is without a congregation of monks in permanent residence. As we have already stated, the tasks of the Monastery administration as well as care about its maintenance were taken over by the tutor, the Church Board and the village local community.

The older mansion was built on the west side and it dates 19th century as local people say. It was renovated prior to 1990 and it now performs the function of a big dining room in the days of the village celebration (Fig. 5). The mansion on the east side used to be only a tile-covered summer house before, between 2000 and 2002, having a one-storey house built in the same spot (Fig.6). On the ground floor there is a somewhat small dining room in addition to the office premises and a kitchen with three built in cauldrons for food preparation and a cupboard with dishes and other provisions. On the floor there are sleeping rooms with bunk beds for guests and two more separate rooms for a clergyman and celebration host.¹⁹

THE HOLLOW STONE

The worship of the *Hollow Stone*, some twenty meters above the Monastery of Lopardince is not new in the popular tradition.²⁰ A natural complex consists of

¹⁹ All the things therein, namely, beds, mattresses, bed sheets, blankets, furniture in the room designed for the celebration host, in addition to tables, benches, kitchenware, including the cauldrons for cooking food, are donated to the Monastery by better-off donors, mostly from abroad.

²⁰ As for man’s attitude to stone as a cult object in the animistic sense, S. Petrović states its various modalities: „Between the soul and the stone there is a close relationship (...). A rough stone is taken down from heavens (...). The stone is living and life-giving (...). In a pierced stone a coin is thrown in or a hand, head

two big unpolished stones: one is, in all its length, laying on the ground while the other is, with one of its ends, leaning against it thus making a circular orifice sufficient enough for the human body to pass through it (Fig.7). This action is undertaken by infertile women and people with spine troubles. The size and strength of these two stones do not allow for any other people's intervention which only confirms the belief that this is an instance of the "standing stone"²¹ whose variety of beneficial effects on man are told and retold in numerous popular legends. They are, in their turn, based on "an assumption or belief that the stone is powerful if a soul or spirit resides in it" (Bandić 1991, 67). The otherworldly aspect is related to the transfer of its life power to man since it is considered „alive“, as stated by Bandić, i.e., some higher and more powerful being having the ability to revive and regenerate sick organs resides in it. Adding to it is another cult element which refers to the very passage through a hole or circle, as a symbol of the sun, which fosters up the belief in the power of „regeneration by means of a female cosmic principle“ (S. Petrović). The people we talked to have not confirmed that, after the passage through is completed, the stone is given gifts in the form of money or some other material things (bandanas, handkerchiefs, towels, stockings, diapers, children's blouses, etc.).

THE HEALING WATER SPRING

In all popular religions, including the Serbian one, water has always had a supernatural power ascribed to it. The power of the otherworldly or miraculous in water comes from its depths so that the caves and surface sources that water is springing from have always had a special importance. The base of the meaning as existing in the lore implies that water "possesses a living principle that can be conditionally regarded as equal to the concept of the soul. Therefore, it was imagined as some sort of a creature so that people behaved towards it in that way" (Bandić 1991, 62).

Since water can also be "living"²² or "healthy", then it can have a healing power. That is exactly how the people from Lopardince see their water spring some ten meters away from the new mansion and on a gentle but easy accessible slope thanks to an improvised wicker staircase (Fig. 8). Even at times other than one-day gatherings, people having problems with sight do come and wash over the spring. It is very shallow of not more than half a meter in diameter; until recently it has never gone dry. There are no special washing rituals; no towels or handkerchiefs are left near it²³; water is three times taken by hand and used for dabbling the eyes before waiting to get dry naturally on the face. This ritual gesture (three-times washing as part of a magic act) by a visitor from this world establishes a link with the otherworldly good power thus trying to change the most immediate reality.

or the whole body is drawn into it; they are considered as protective from curses and possessing the capacity of fertilizer. Some ethnologists think that a ritual act of passing through a hole in the stone assumes the belief in regeneration through the mediation of a female cosmic principle" (Gebrant-Chevalier) (www.svevlad.org.rs/knjige_files/petrovic_mitologija.html, Chapter „Impersonal Demons of Divinity“)

²¹ For this approach Bandić finds support in Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's *Dictionary* saying that „in Vuk's *Dictionary*, a stranger is mentioned as a stone „that grew out of the ground so that he cannot move.' In other words, this is a stone that is firmly, steadily standing“ (Bandić 1991, 67).

²² Water can also be „dead“ but it is, due to its death-relatedness, impure and it is not used.

²³ The cases of wiping away water from eyes or faces – for the purpose of which there are towels and similar cloths hanging near the spring, are related to „the belief that by some magic their 'sickness' is transmitted to them and as such it is left near the spring where it now gets into contact with benevolent demons of Vid. Such towels, handkerchiefs are to be seen everywhere near 'healing water springs.' They are a taboo, not to be touched – since they are considered as religiously 'impure' since, according to the contagious magic (magic by touch), they are sickness-infected“ (according to www.svevlad.org.rs/knjige_files/petrovic_mitologija.html, Chapter „Impersonal Demons of Divinity“)

THE MAIDEN ROCK

The popular lore about the tragedy of an abducted Serbian maiden has given shape to a cult nature of the rock at the very entrance to the Monastery of Lopardince (Fig. 9). A story has remained about the intruding Turkish company that, on the occasion of a congregational gathering under the Ottoman rule, broke into the feast and, before the eyes of all the people, abducted the most beautiful girl. After putting her on the horse before him, the satisfied Turk, with his attendants, start galloping along a goat pathway back to the village. Aware of the misfortune that befell her and wishing to spare herself and the village of a great shame, the courageous girl, making the most of the riders' carelessness, spurred a horse in the vicinity of a hill slope. The horse, unable to stop on a rough terrain, went down the slope, taking both the girl and the rider to death. The ethos of a sacrifice on the part of an individual or a wider community is deeply rooted in the Serbian people; it testifies about a continuous resistance to the invader. About a highly moral and honorable conduct of men and women as well as their refusal to take up a way of life that is not in accordance with the rules and customs of their affiliated community, there are numerous examples in the Serbian folk poetry and prose.²⁴ With lot of confidence did Mile Milanović show us alleged traces of the horse's hoofs (Fig. 10) while it had pranced before going down to the abyss as well as an imprint of a Turkish sword (Fig. 11), captured in stone for good. Since that day, as a remembrance of the girl's tragic fate, neither music nor gaiety are there in the Monastery; no weddings are taking place, either.

The present outlook of the *Maiden Rock*, as the popular name persevered, does not correspond to its original appearance from the above-mentioned legend nor to its state from two decades ago. Originally this was a massive rock that extended on both the sides of the present road with a small winding pathway close to it which was wide enough for the passage of a beast of burden and man. In the nineties of the last century, during war campaigns around the Kosovo border, the former Yugoslav Army took steps to make an easier access for people and mechanization to strategic positions by building a new road network. The miners, careful in their work, had the massive rock divided in such a way as to preserve, in total, the part with the alleged traces of the events kept in people's memory. Now it is a wide earthen road by which, in half an hour, one can get from the village to the Monastery along with indispensable stopping at the Maiden Rock which is usually endowed with coins (Fig. 12).

CONCLUSION

Thanks to many decades of the local people's commitment, the Monastery complex of Lopardince, with its cult sites discussed in this paper, is in a perfect state. With the announcement and approval of the Church Municipality, it is all the time open to benevolent visitors. The Serbian community in the village cherishes religious rites, especially those at the time of St. George's Day and the patron saint holiday of Saint Archangel Gabriel. It should not be forgotten that its everyday life is taking place in the immediate vicinity of Albanian majority: Albanian extremists were, till recently, a disturbing factor in the area but the situation calmed down once the war developments had come to an end. At only a kilometer and a half in air distance there is an Albanian village of Veliki Trnovac which is publicly known as the main distribution center in the Balkan drug trafficking. All this does not disturb the industri-

²⁴ Milojković (1985, 384) retells a legend about beautiful Rumenka from Suvi Do near Žagubica who obeyed her mother's advice to kill herself rather than to fall into the hands of a Turkish knave: „Rumenka, my sorrow, jump rather than let them catch you alive.' The daughter took her advice: she jumped down from the rocks and hitting one stone after another she finally ended up in the abyss.“

ous villagers in their care about their own ethnic and religious identity and many centuries of cherishing the Orthodox temple close to the village. Regardless of the disagreements about the date of the Monastery Church construction with the experts' interpretations, people from Lopardince are eager to show their destined alliance with this locality.²⁵

By celebrating St. George's Day and St. Archangel Gabriel the local people are keeping up the centuries-old connections with the pagan faith, later incorporated in the Orthodox-Christian matrix. They respect church authorities but, conscious of the specific circumstances in which they live and act, acknowledge only the autonomy of the local Church Board which consists of faith-devoted individuals from their own ranks. They have never abandoned rituals related to the village's patron saint celebration; neither have they neglected the maintenance of their ancient church which they experience – and refer to in casual talks – as their monastery. By choosing the Church tutor and the celebration host at the annual level, by offering an animal-blood sacrifice as well as by the common organization of the village congregation, they confirm how much they care to cherish, as they do in their own families, a domestic management of the village's sacred object. Even more so knowing that: what the vigil lamp and the icon of the celebrated patron saint posited at a special place in the house are for a family, so is the Monastery for the village community of Lopardince. By paying respect to their ancestors and preserving the memory of the tragic fate of one of their own, the maiden from the old times, they believe they will be able to, in the years to come, count on unbroken ties with the otherworldly powers that are benevolent to the village as a collective, that have protected it magically and saved it from misfortunes in the turbulent historical periods. This feeling is even stronger than any uncritical subjection to the authority of the official hierarchical Serbian Orthodox Church.

²⁵ In the late nineties of the past century, the Diocese of Vranje intended to include the restored Monastery of Lopardince in an active religious-monastic life by sending a certain number of monks to serve and live under the present circumstances. This proposal, however, was not approved by the village Church Board; for this reason, five of its members were excommunicated from religious life by the Diocese Church Court of the Orthodox Diocese of Vranje in the city of Vranje. After the sentence had been issued, the village got very upset; on November 10, 1998, the meeting took place of the Local Community members and those of the local Church Board at which the church actions were condemned since – as it says in their exposition (the authors of this paper were enabled to see the meeting minutiae) – the village knew nothing about „that the monks should come to the Monastery“, „that the local people take sides with the five excommunicated men“, so that their dissatisfaction is not „for personal interests but we are leading (the whole procedure) in the interests of our village and our Church of Saint Archangel Gabriel that Pahomije wants to take away from us.“ The villagers understood the suggested coming of the monks as a sort of abduction of their Church which they had taken care of as best as they knew and could a long time before it had „caught the eye of“ the Bishop of Vranje. The village representatives including a member of the Assembly of the Municipality of Bujanovac considered „this (excommunication sentence) is an act of suppressing the religious rights so that we ask Pahomije to withdraw the sentence and that the appeals should be sent to Vranje and Belgrade...since we think it is not the time to divide Serbian people under the circumstances...“. That the reaction of the local population was justified can be clearly seen on the basis of two facts: first of all, the Church and the mansion were built by the local people of Lopardince, and that the money was not given by the big companies such as „Simpo“, „Heba“ or Orthodox clergy of the Diocese of Vranje that was asked for it but they were straightforward in rejecting it saying „build what you want, we don't have the money for it“. Also, later on, „Mr. Pahomije offended the village calling the Church of Saint Archangel a 'den'“ for which he should have been charged. In addition to a few more reports about the themes discussed at the meeting regarding the clergymen's discriminatory attitude towards the villagers, the meeting ended with all the conclusions adopted unanimously.

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PHOTOGRAPHY



Fig. 1. Authors Talking to the People from Lopardince



Fig. 2. A View of the Monastery Complex of Lopardince



Fig. 3. Exterior of the Church of the Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael



Fig. 4. Interior of the Church of the Saint Archangels Gabriel and Michael



Fig. 5. Old Mansion (now serving as a dining room for the guests on the day of the village patron saints' holiday)



Fig. 6 New Mansion



Fig. 7 Hollow Stone



Fig. 8 Healing Water Spring



Fig. 9 Maiden Rock



Fig. 10 Alleged Trace of the Horse's Hoof on the Maiden Rock



Fig. 11 Alleged Imprint of the Sword on the Maiden Rock



Fig. 12 Gift-giving in Coins to the Maiden Rock