

CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES – OBJECTS OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN THE DISTRICT OF VELIKO TARNOVO (BULGARIA)

Athanas DERMENDZHIEV

Department of Geography, Faculty of History, “St. Cyril and St. Methodius”
University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria
adermendjiev1960@abv.bg

Martin DOYKOV

Department of Geography, Faculty of History, “St. Cyril and St. Methodius”
University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria.
martin_doikov@abv.bg

Abstract

The need of focusing on the significance of religious tourist sites and objects in the region of Veliko Tarnovo is provoked by socio-economic necessities. The last presume activation of cultural-historical resources with a view to the interest to the available objects.

Religion, as spirit and interaction, presumes corresponding objectification. The last one is a segment in the formation of religious-tourist bank for its exploitation in spiritual-nationalistic direction.

Recognized by Bulgarians as an ozonizing areal, the region of Veliko Tarnovo presumes fixing on values of cultural-historical content. Their studying and the explanation of their existence is a direction to their defining as valuable tourist resource of national character.

Key Words: monasteries, religious tourism, Bulgaria

Resumo

A importância de nos concentrarmos nos locais e edifícios turísticos religiosos existentes na região de Veliko Tarnovo, decorre de necessidades socioeconómicas. Tal aposta pressupõe a ativação de recursos histórico-culturais com vista ao despertar do interesse pelos monumentos disponíveis, nomeadamente os religiosos. Uma das últimas vertentes surge associada à religião, como espírito e interação, o que subentende a objetivação correspondente. Este tipo de turismo corresponde a um segmento na formação religiosa-turística, segundo uma exploração espiritual-nacionalista. Reconhecida pelos búlgaros como uma área de ozonização, a região de Veliko Tarnovo pressupõe a fixação de valores histórico-culturais. O estudo e a explicação da sua existência é uma abordagem que possibilita a sua definição como recurso turístico valioso de carácter nacional.

Palavras-chave: mosteiros, turismo religioso, Bulgária

1- Introduction

Tourism is determined as contemporary phenomenon. Significant amount of capital is concentrated in it on one hand, and it is massified and democratized on the other, It actively influences the balance of payments, realizing currency income. According to a number of sources in 2020 the revenues from tourism are expected to be about 2 trillion US dollars. Significant share of them will be from cultural tourism. That gives us ground to focus our attention on opportunities that are provided by Bulgaria and by the Veliko Tarnovo areal in particular for development.

2 . Churches and monasteries in the district of Veliko Tarnovo

The majesty of catholic cathedrals in Europe is successfully compensated by sanctity and quietness of our orthodox churches and monasteries, by their unique icons and mural paintings, by the richness of medieval literature. The monasteries repositories have preserved incredible manuscripts from past times, woodcarvings, church plates, church music and many evidences of the uniqueness of Bulgarian arts and culture.

With the time passing, new places of pilgrimage are established: graves of saints (martyrs, hermits and others), temples and monasteries, as well as other places, connected with the manifestation of God's gracious power. Thus pilgrimages become an important and invariable part of the religious life of Christians, as they get some cultural forms during the different ages.

Among the numerous areals for religious tourism in the country special place has the Bulgarian "Sveta Gora" – the chaplet of monasteries in and around Veliko Tarnovo.

Preobrazhenski Monastery (The Transfiguration Monastery) is one of the biggest and most valuable Bulgarian monasteries. In its building participated some of the most prominent masters from the period of the Bulgarian National Revival – Zahariy Zograf and Usta Kolyo Ficheto. It is situated along the Yantra River, under the high rocks of the "Derwent" Gorge, 6 km away for the town of Veliko Tarnovo. It was established around 1360 by Queen Theodora-Sara and her son King Ivan Shishman, and because of that it is also called "Sarin" or "Shishmanov" monastery (meaning the monastery of Sara or Shishman). After the misadventures in the beginning of the Ottoman rule, the monastery was reconstructed during the Bulgarian national revival. The reconstruction started in 1825, when hieromonk Zosim from the Rila Monastery became its abbot. The main monastery church of "Holy Transfiguration" is low cruciform, with three sections and a dome. It was painted in 1849-1851 by Zahariy Zograf. Special interest arose the compositions "The Wheel of Life" and "The Judgment Day", the images of the saints Cyril and Methodius, of Teodosii Tarnovski, Patriarch Euthymius, Theophilactus Tarnovski, Ivan Rilski, Nikola Novi Sofiyski, the self-portrait of Zahariy Zograf. He also made the icons in the royal line in the iconostasis of the temple. Other valuable works in the monastery were made by the noted icon-painter from Tryavna Vitan Koyuv (Junior), as well as icons by Stanislav Dospevski, nephew of Zahariy Zograf. On the most prominent space, on the outer southern wall of the altar apse he painted the monumental frescoes "*The Judgment Day*" and "*The Wheel of Life*", in order to instill in visitors the transience of human existence. Valuable are also the paintings "Nativity of the Virgin", "Assumption", "The Last Supper". Today the whole magnificent exterior decoration is a valuable monument of the painting art form the Revival period. The gold-plated iconostasis with rich baroque forms is made by craftsmen from Tryavna, remarkable is the decoration of the king's gates. The Transfiguration Monastery and the monastic brotherhood are related to the national liberation struggle of the Bulgarian people during the Renaissance. Monks at the monastery were Matey Preobrazhensky and priest Hariton. Asylum in the monastery found Filip Totyu, Vasil Levski, Angel

Kanchev, Bacho Kiro Petrov and other participants in the liberation movement. The Transfiguration Monastery is a national monument of architecture and arts. It is an operating friary, having its temple celebration on 6th August.

The Patriarchal Monastery of the Holy Trinity is the first dwelling place for Hesychasts (from 1070), and there Theodosiy Tarnovski became hermit in 1368. Until nowadays high in the rocks can be seen the cave, in which lived the teacher of the young in that time Euthymius – the future Bulgarian patriarch. The Bulgarian kings visited the monastery to seek spiritual instructions. Here was kept the gold, that Ivan Shishman gave Euthymius to buy back the capital, while the ruler was fighting.

The Petropavlovski Monastery of “St. Peter and St. Paul” is situated in the Arbanasi Plateau, 6 km to the north-east of Veliko Tarnovo. The terrace offers spectacular view to the Danubian Plain and the Elena Balkan. The legend tells that it has been established in the times of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by the brothers Asen and Peter. On the hill with the impressive rock, once there was a fortress, which protected the lands of the Asenevtsy brothers. The riot in 1185 for liberation of Bulgaria from the Byzantine rule was prepared in it. During the years of the Ottoman rule the monastery was repeatedly burned and plundered, and after that rebuilt. In 1662 it was reconstructed again, but for a long time it was governed by a Greek bishop. Regardless of that, the monks in the monastery secretly copied “Istoriya Slavyanobalgarska” (The Slav-Bulgarian History). Archimandrite Maksim Raykovich (1835-1850) started the long tradition abbots of the monastery to be only Bulgarians. During the National Revival the monastery became place for organization of several revolutionary riots. In 1700 here was organized the riot of the widow from Tarnovo called Mara, headed by her son Stoyan and Mircho vojvoda. In 1856 from here captain Dyado Nikola lead 13 rebels to the Gabrovo Balkan. In April 1869 Vasil Levsky secretly arrived in the monastery and established a revolutionary committee in Lyaskovets. In 1874 bishop Ilarion Tarnovski (ex Makariopolski) organized in the monastery the first school of Theology in the Bulgarian lands, which was created to prepare educated clergy for the newly established (1870) autonomous Bulgarian Exarchate. First rector was Nedyu Zhekov and among the students were the future professor Vasil Zlatarski, the historian Nikola Stanev and others. The seminary continued working also after the Liberation until 1886. The great earthquake in 1913 and the fire ruined the monastery church and the historical buildings. Destroyed were spectacular works of art. Only the new buildings of the seminary remained (built by the master from Dryanovo Usta Manyo), which are preserved in their authentic appearance until nowadays. Today the monastery is an operational nunnery, having its temple celebration on 29 June.

The Arbanasi Monastery of “The Dormition of the Mother of God” in the beginning of the Ottoman rule was active and wealthy monastery, but after that it deteriorated and was abandoned. As late as 1680 was built the new monastery church which has been preserved until nowadays. It is low, with single nave and one apse, elongated building with two antechambers, and in its northern part is situated the vast chaplet “St. Trinity”. In 1716 the trojan monk Daniel constructed residential buildings and

restored the functioning of the monastery. In 1762 the church and the chapel were renovated again and decorated with mural paintings. One of the valuable relics is the miraculous icon of The Mother of God, which is in the narthex of the church. The monastery is an operating nunnery, with temple celebration on 15th August.

The Arbanasi Monastery of “St. Nicholas” was established in the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, under the rule of the Assenevtsi kings. In 1393 it was demolished by the Ottoman conquerors when they conquered Tarnovo. Almost three centuries later the monastery was rebuilt. From that time is the monastery church, which was almost burnt in a fire. According to a marginal note in an old gospel, the church was renovated in 1735 with the help of the arbanasi boyar Atanasiy, who was later killed by the Ottomans for taking part in a conspiracy against the empire. At the end of the XVIII century the monastery was broken by the invasions of the kurdjali, but was restored again in 1833 on the initiative of the abbot of the Transfiguration Monastery. The monastery is operating, nunnery, with temple celebration on 6th December.

The Kilifarevo Monastery of “The Nativity of Virgin Mary” is situated on the left bank of the Belitsa River, southern from the town of Veliko Tarnovo. It was established during the time of King Ivan Alexander, around 1348-1350. Seeking for an isolated place, suitable for prayer and contemplation, Teodosiy Tarnovski found this place and established the monastery on a place a little bit higher than the contemporary monastery. Because of the special attention of the tsar, the monastery became an important Center of scholarship in the Tarnovo Kingdom. Thus was created the famous Bulgarian Kilifarevo School for literature, whose books and translations which reached Russia and Serbia brought the monastery and St. Theodosiy great fame. In 1360 the number of monks and bookmen was more than 460 people. Among them was the future Bulgarian patriarch Euthymius, who after the death of St. Theodosiy on 27 November 1363 continued his cause. After the Ottoman conquest the monastery was demolished and burnt in 1393 and for a long time it remained uninhabited. In 1718 at the foot of the old monastery was built the contemporary Kilifarevo Monastery. Then was built and painted the church “Nativity of the Virgin”. Again a part of the monastery was demolished during the kurdjali disorders at the end of XVIII century, but soon after that it was restored. In 1840 master Kolyo Ficheto built a third church – the present church “St. Demetrius”. Most interesting today are the preserved mural paintings from 1718. The western and the northern walls of the old church “Nativity of the Virgin” were demolished and it was adapted to a chapel, dedicated to St. Theodosiy Tarnovski. Until today is preserved the old wood-carved iconostasis from 1843, made by masters icon-painters from Tryavna. Later a second chapel was built, which was dedicated to St. Ivan Rilski. The beautiful two-storey residential buildings were constructed in 1849. A hundred years later the monastery gave shelter to nun Justiniana (of Russian origin) and it was transformed into a nunnery. The monastery is functioning, nunnery, with temple celebration on 8th September.

The Kapinovo Monastery of “St. Nikola Miracle Worker” is situated 18 km away from Veliko Tarnovo, at the foot of the Elena Balkan. From an inscription in the monastery church is known that in 1272, during the rule of King Konstantin Tih (1257-1277), a temple was built on its place, dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Probably the monastery was established by his predecessor – King Ivan Asen (1218-1241). In 1830 a literary school was established here. The monastery was restored and reorganized in 1835. Two self-educated masters from Dryanovo built the present monastery church “St. Nikola”. In 1845 in the church was also painted a big mural composition, reproducing scenes of the Judgment day, and in 1856 were also constructed massive two-storey residential buildings, surrounding the monastery today. In 1864 was constructed and painted the chapel “Presentation of the Blessed Virgin”. It is supposed that the icons on the wooden iconostasis were painted by the tryavna icon-painter Papa Vitan and other tryavna icon-painters. The monastery is operational, friary, with temple celebration on 6th December.

The Plakovo Monastery of “The Holy Prophet Elijah” is situated near the villages of Plakovo and Velchevo, 2 km away from the Kapinovo Monastery. It was established during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, probably in 1280, but with the fall of Bulgaria under Ottoman rule it was demolished, and around 1450 it was reconstructed. In 1835 in the monastery was organized the Velchova Zavera (plot), and after its suppression the monastery was demolished. Its reconstruction began in 1845 when the monastery church “St. Elijah” was built. It is a rare phenomenon of Bulgarian architecture from the so called Athos type, peculiar to the period of the Second Bulgarian State. In 1845 Zahariy Zograf painted the image of Christ the Great Hierarch with the Twelve Apostles. Except this icon in the monastery are preserved old manuscripts and incunabular books. In 1865 Usta Kolyu Ficheto build the impressive 26-meter bell tower with beautiful decorative masonry, stone fountain and two-storey P-shaped residential wings, but in 1949 in a new fire large part of the residential buildings burned again. The monastery is operational, friary, with temple celebration on 20th July.

The Prisovo Monastery “St. Panteleimon” is situated in the village of Prisovo, 5 km to the south of Veliko Tarnovo. It was established in 1870 as a “family” monastery by the married couple Mincho and Drazha Raychevi. After Mincho passed away, the management of the monastery was taken by his wife – the nun Evtimia and their son deacon Roman. The monastery church was built in 1881, and during the following year it was sanctified. After that Roman left for Bucharest and took over the management of the Bulgarian Bishopric there, and the monastery was managed by his mother and his sisters Efrosina, Tatyana, Sofia and Zinovia. The last abbess of the monastery is Ksenya. In the courtyard of the Prisovo Monastery there is an octahedral belfry and a fountain with a carved inscription in one of the rocks from 1910. In front of the monastery there is a stone slab, brought from Nikopolis ad Istrum, which represents an ancient pagan altar, on which today are carried out blessings. The monastery is an operating nunnery. Its temple celebration is on 27th July.

The Merdanski Monastery of “St. 40 Martyrs” is situated about 14 km south-eastern from Veliko Tarnovo, in the western part of the village of Merdanya. It was built in XIII century. It represents a complex

of church, residential and farm buildings. The church was built in 1876 with the help of hadji Kesriy Horozov from Elena, who became an abbot of the monastery. According to the legend the monastery was established on the place, where the tarnovo patriarch Yoanikiy II welcomed officially Tsar Ivan Asen II after his victory at Klokotnitsa, which took place on the day of the feast of St. 40 Martyrs Sevastiyski. The monastery is an operating nunnery. Its temple feast is on 9th March. The development of religious tourism in the region of Veliko Tarnovo is also connected with the visiting of the numerous churches.

The Church of “The Nativity of Christ” in Arbanasi today is the oldest, the most interesting and largest by floorage. It was built probably in XV century. In its oldest appearance it was small with one room and outer apse. In the first half of XVII century it was expanded to the west with an independent female section and indoor narthex. To the north it has an open arcade, ending to the east with the chapel “John the Baptist”. In 1632 the northern side of the arcade was filled in and adapted for a dining loft. All the interior space of the church is painted by unknown Bulgarian icon-painters. In the paintings there are three fresco layers. The oldest paintings are from XV-XVI century. A preserved part of them is the composition “Judgment Day”. Parts of this oldest artistic layer were found also on the walls of the nave and the altar of the male section. The narthex, the dining loft and the chapel were completely painted in 1632-1649. The last mural painting in the female section is from the second half of XVII century. The church “Nativity” was built, expanded and decorated with the resources of the rich traders from Arbanasi. On different parts of the mural paintings can be seen the names of the contributors. The paintings in the dining loft and the female compartment of the chapel represent a detailed calendar with scenes and saints by days and months. Near the entrance of the chapel, in the left is represented “The Wheel of Life”. The mural paintings in the nave of the chapel represent the life and suffering of John the Baptist. The iconostasis there is made by tryavna masters woodcarvers.

The Church of “St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel” is situated in the south-eastern part of the village of Arbanasi and is built on the foundations of an old medieval church. Three building stages can be distinguished in its construction – the middle of XVI century (its eastern part and the present nave), 1760 (the narthex from the west), and the end of XVIII century (the gallery from the north). In the decoration of the walls outside with shallow arched niches is sought the connection with the building traditions of the Second Bulgarian State (tarnovo churches). In its eastern part the gallery ends with the chapel “St. Paraskeva”. The mural paintings are exceptionally interesting. They reveal the connections with the traditions of the Tarnovo School of Painting and the common trends in painting from XVII-XVIII century. The remains from the earliest fresco layer are preserved on the northern wall of the altar apse. The second painting from the middle of XVII century (the altar and the nave) was probably made by two icon-painters. The main master painter made all the figured scenes in the nave, the images on the zenith of the arch and the transverse arches, and all the pictures in the altar. The mural paintings impress with their grandeur and confident line. Some scenes are made by the other icon-painter according to preliminarily made by the master linear drawings (the scene “St. Elijah the Prophet in front of the Cave” on the

southern wall). The paintings on the arch and the walls of the narthex were made in 1760 by the masters Mihail from Thessaloniki and Georgi from Bucharest, according to the inscription above the northern door. The gallery and the chapel “St. Paraskeva” were not painted. The new iconostasis in the church from 1813 is preserved. It was made by woodcarvers from the Tryavna School. It burned and was restored in its right part in 1834. The icons on it are from XVII-XVIII century.

The Church of “St. Athanasius” is the smallest by size Arbanasi church. It was built during the second half of XVII century in the north-eastern part of the village. In its southern part was built the chapel “St. Haralambi”. The whole church is painted. Several artistic layers from XVII and XVIII century have been discovered. The paintings of the narthex, the nave and the altar are from 1667. The chapel was painted by schoolmaster Tsonyu and Nedyu in 1726, evidence of which is an inscription on its southern wall. Interesting compositions are “Judgment Day” with untraditional arrangements of the scenes and the rare “Trinity of the Old Testament”. In the churchyard there are many tombstones with inscriptions in Greek from XVII and XVIII century.

The Church of “St. George” was built in the second half of XVII century – the year 1661 is in an inscription on the altar and on the upper threshold of the stone frame of one of the northern windows. The paintings in the nave of the church were made in 1710 by schoolmaster Hristo and Stoyo. There is an interesting iconostasis in the church, parts of which are from XVI century.

The Church of “St. Dimitrius” is one of the oldest churches on Arbanasi. It is situated in the old center of the settlement, near the church of “Saints Archangels”. After the Liberation until the earthquake in 1913 it was central parish church. It was painted in 1612 and 1794. On the eastern wall high above the apse of the church is represented the rare scene – “The Tree of Jesse”. In the chapel “St. George” are preserved fragments of older paintings, which experts refer to XIII-XIV century. The church iconostasis is with gold-plated carving. In the northern part of the churchyard there are stone-carved tombstones and inscriptions in Greek from XVII-XVIII century.

3. Final Considerations

The contemporary “exploitation” of religious heritage presumes adaptation to the social and spiritual interests of society and to undertaking actions aiming “exploitation” of the historical facts. They are connected with the development of a long-term program, based on several principles:

1. Sustainable development
2. Effective advertising
3. Overall quality
4. Economic return

Tourism can secure the commercialization of natural and cultural heritage and can create not only means of living and income, but also new sources of money.

There are conditions for creation of a product, exploited as religious one, within the region of Veliko Tarnovo. Its manifestation is connected with activities in the following directions:

- Attracting of a team of specialists in branding, that will impose the brand on the tourist market.
- Making up of an expert team for preparation of professional analysis of the market segments, determination of target groups, towards which should be directed the specific advertising campaigns (targeting of the market).
- Developing of advertising strategy for inclusion of the product in the national advertising strategy for development of religious tourism. Regarding this, special attention should be paid to new technologies such as the Internet, e-mails, and modern means of transportation.

In the development of this specific tourist product should participate PR specialists. With their help should be marked measures for improvement of the infrastructure in the district of Veliko Tarnovo. Of special importance is the reconstruction and building of good and convenient roads, which should facilitate the access to the objects, as well as the maintaining of communications, in order the requirements of fastidious clients to be satisfied. All other elements of the infrastructure should not be underestimated too.

As far as religious tourism is a specific activity, there is urgent need of training of highly qualified specialists for it. On the territory of Veliko Tarnovo exists a university with specialties in the sphere of theology and cultural tourism, as well as professional secondary school in tourism. In educational plans should be taken into consideration the studying of this specific subject. The training of specialists with higher education is a concern of higher schools on the territory of the region and near it.

Special attention should be paid to the exploration of internal and external markets. Here could be used the existing researches, especially those, made on the territory of states traditionally orthodoxal like Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Greece.

Orthodoxal diasporas on the territory of USA, Canada and the European countries should not be neglected.

It is necessary to be established contacts with the organizations of orthodoxal communities, and the possibilities for pilgrimage tourism to be popularized among them. The focus should be on the large Bulgarian communities around the world. It is necessary specialized tour operators to be prepared, who will include opportunities for pilgrim tourism in their offer lists.

- Another possibility is the increased presence of the sacred Tarnovo places in the Internet.
- Strong believers and believers are the two groups which should be well informed about the existence of places, interesting for them. Brochures, leaflets and other printed materials, publications in specialized issues – all these are activities which should be directed to those two groups of people. And mostly to make direct contacts with their communities. In the same time pilgrims of those two groups could be valuable potential, which will facilitate the

maintenance and restoration of the objects, when this is needed, as far as the last could be part of their obligations as believers.

- Different should be the approach to the so called interested in religion. Except information about the sacred places, they should get information about the opportunities that are provided in the region for travelling and rest. To this and to the other group – those who are not interested in religion, should be directed the work of the activities going along with tourism.
- Pupils and students as a group require special attention. They could be offered destinations with informative character, excursions in monasteries, scientific expeditions and training for the future specialists.

The realization of the offered activities will turn religious tourism into priority for the region. Thus its role in the process of building of nationally responsible personalities will make sense of its existence.

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