

# NOMEN EST OMEN OR A TESTIMONIAL POTENTIAL OF PLACE: THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY VIRGIN OF LJEVISA IN PRIZREN

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**Resumo:** O presente artigo aborda o fenómeno do património cultural através do reconhecimento das mudanças semânticas de um objeto patrimonial e dos seus usos ao longo do tempo. Esta questão é examinada através do estudo da igreja de Nossa Senhora de Ljevisa, em Prizren. Esta igreja é vista como um organismo vivo cujos significados se modificam de acordo com o contexto em que é comunicada, interpretada e utilizada. Este objeto funcionou como igreja, mesquita, novamente igreja, tendo presentemente o estatuto de monumento histórico e cultural. Foi inscrito em 2006 na lista de Património Mundial em Risco da UNESCO, como representante da Sérvia, devido aos seus valores de importância universal, assim como pela instrumentalização política pós-guerra. Para compreender as mudanças semânticas desta igreja e monumento ao longo do tempo, e para definir o seu *potencial de testemunho*, todos os nomes desta igreja serão analisados, seguindo a frase Latina *Nomen est omen*.

**Palavras-chave:** Igreja de Nossa Senhora de Ljevisa em Prizren; Continuum, Testemunho do passado; Heterotopia.

**Abstract:** The paper deals with the phenomenon of cultural heritage through recognizing the semantic changes of a heritage object and its uses over time. This is examined through the case of the Church of Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren. This church is seen as a living organism whose meanings are changing in accordance with the context in which it is communicated, interpreted and used. This object functioned as a church, mosque, church again, and nowadays it has the status of cultural and historical monument. In 2006 it was inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage in Danger List as the representative of Serbia, due to its values of universal significance, but also due to postwar political instrumentalization. To understand semantic changes of this church and monument through time, and to define its *testimonial potential*, all the names the church has had shall be analysed, following the Latin phrase *Nomen est omen*.

**Keywords:** The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren; continuum, testimony of the past; heterotopia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the issue of understanding heritage of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren, which consequently might affect its efficient protection. Although this church was declared a cultural monument in 1948 as a medieval heritage, and soon afterwards was scientifically examined, methods of valorization of its rich history influenced the selective understanding and acceptance of this sacred place in the corpus of the social awareness. This became the most apparent after the war in Kosovo and Metohija at the end of the last century, during and after which the church has been the target of numerous physical attacks and misinterpretations<sup>1</sup>. Current status of the monument highlights the discrepancy between protection institutions, scientific and local communities in their relation to the monument<sup>2</sup>. This paper aims to point out the possibility of understanding testimonial potential of this church, which needs to be preserved in its entirety if our aim is heritage protection, but also for the sake of reconciliation of different, conflicting, interpretations of this church. To understand the semantic changes this cultural and historical monument has experienced, in this paper, we are discussing all the names it has had over time.

## 2. HERITAGE – THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING

Cultural and historical monument that we observe in the paper has had its real place, i.e. it has existed in the real, physical space and time that can be described. But, seeing it as an object in the physical system of space-time does not produce a very clear idea of what the monument is. Such a structure would tell about his materiality, age, possibly a *historicity*, as defined by Alois Riegl, an Austrian art historian, in the early twentieth century. The *historicity* of a monument refers to a specific moment in the past, but the choice of this moment is left to our subjective preferences. Although recognizing the *historical value* of the monument enriches our experience of the past, interest of modern humans for the objects inherited from previous human generations is not satisfied. It is not exhausted by the *historical value* nor *age value* that offers almost religious feeling, because the object's appearance reveals that the monument has survived for a long period<sup>3</sup>. Identification of monument's age value and historical value, directs us to give the monument status of *document of the past*,

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<sup>1</sup> JOKIĆ, 2003; 2004.

<sup>2</sup> PAVLIČIĆ, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> RIEGL, 1903.

through which we may understand the nature and primarily social history<sup>4</sup>. Still, history is not only about the past, but also about the present, because it actively participates in creation of everyday reality, peoples' identities and our vision and comprehension of the world. As such, the past is often used as a 'wonder' able to explain contemporary events and solve current problems<sup>5</sup>. So, the monument is also a *document of present time*. This changed comprehension appeared in the second half of the XX century when the idea of heritage and its uses was challenged across academic disciplines. For example, new theories in museology challenged the idea that heritage value is self-evident and introduced new aspects of memory, identity of an object, local community and participants in exploring the value of an object<sup>6</sup>. The reception of the monument as a *document of the present*, necessarily leads to a more responsible approach to the heritage, on the one hand, and to the broader categories of the valorization of monuments, on the other hand.

The genesis of this theoretical 'extensions' came from the Central European approach that takes *museality* as the primary subject of museological research<sup>7</sup>. In 1970, Czech museologist Zbinek Stransky brought in the concept of museality<sup>8</sup> as a characteristic of an object from the material world, which in the museological reality documents the reality of primary or archaeological context from which it was collected. When applied to heritage that is immovable property in space, this means that buildings and their complexes can document the physical and spiritual context in which they originated and existed, with all the values and meanings they had acquired during the course of their existence<sup>9</sup>. The capacity of museality and qualities of a *testimony*, are attributes of the entire heritage. This theoretical approach had an important impact on the holistic understanding of the idea of heritage in the Balkans and beyond<sup>10</sup>. A unique scientific discipline, named *Heritology* and based on the phenomenon of heritage itself, was proposed in 1982. This discipline broadens the definition of museology in such a way that it consolidates new museological manifestations and has a holistic approach to the problems of protection and treatment of heritage. In the last two decades, heritology has become a scientific discipline that not only corresponds to the traditional aims of museology, but also aims at understanding the origin and nature of heritage, the

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<sup>4</sup> TOMIĆ, 1983: 31–32.

<sup>5</sup> KULJIĆ, 2006: 214.

<sup>6</sup> VERGO, 1989: 3; MENSCH, 1992: 32.

<sup>7</sup> MENSCH, 1992: 41–46; POPADIĆ, 2015: 154–155.

<sup>8</sup> STRANSKY, 1970: 35.

<sup>9</sup> MAROEVIĆ, 1993: 96.

<sup>10</sup> ŠOLA, 1997.

purpose of inheritance as well as the forms and potentials of the *uses of heritage* in the contemporary world.

Still, when it comes to contemporary recognition, evaluation and protection of heritage through heritage organizations, it is usually done by promoting profane values such as the exclusivity, uniqueness, originality, universality of an object, which means its primary context usually<sup>11</sup>. The synergy of theory and practice does not exist yet, and this synergy alone may bring the effective protection of heritage.

The values of a monument are in its potential to have an active role in today's life. That potential is immaterial part of an object that can 'awake' silent (material) witnesses. Identifying potential and its use in the present provides (and determines) the future of this heritage and protection of its possible meanings. In this paper we use all the names related to a particular monument, evoking the meaning of the Latin phrase saying «Nomen est omen»<sup>12</sup>, within previously defined theoretical framework in order to show the possibilities of understanding the heritage of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa and the testimonial potential of this monument.

### 3. *NOMEN EST OMEN* – THROUGH THE NAMES OF THE MONUMENT

The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa (Fig. 1) is one of those cultural monuments whose material remains from the (different) past are visible and clearly combined into a harmonious whole. The number of these structures is in proportion to historical moments that are important for changing the monument and the town of Prizren. Centuries of experience, the effects of various ethnic and religious groups have defined the monument as we see it today. The church has also become a document for reading the history of the town of Prizren.

In the material and functional sense, the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren underwent numerous transformations, and therefore changes of meaning, too. These changes are present in chronological layers and appear to be the logical consequence of social events of certain periods. In future periods they should never cease to exist at the level of memory. The meaning and significance of any cultural monument in the modern age is built through activation, actualization and interpretation of these fields of meaning. Glimpse into the past, expected or

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<sup>11</sup> For example Criteria for the selection of sites to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage list <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/02/05/2016>

<sup>12</sup> «The name is the sign»; See: [http://www.latin-dictionary.org/latin/english/meaning/Nomen\\_est\\_omen](http://www.latin-dictionary.org/latin/english/meaning/Nomen_est_omen) (accessed on 11/05/2016)



**Fig. 1.**  
*Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren, Photo taken after 1953.*  
Source: Institut for protection of monument Prizren

undesirable one, creates a more complete image of heritage and above all shows the living history of monument through identities of others.

The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa in Prizren is considered the oldest in Prizren, but the start of its formation is not precisely known. In fact, if we talk about the building which now exists in this city, following the label in relief strip of bricks on the outside of the altar apse, we could date it in 1306/1307<sup>13</sup>. It is recorded that the church was renewed «from the base» by King Stefan Uros II Milutin Nemanjić, i.e. rebuilt from the ground upon the previous one. The older one is thought to be from the XI century, since it was first mentioned at the time. The record, which dates from 1019, from the charter of Emperor Basil II which regulates the status of the Ohrid Archbishopric after the fall of Samuil empire, among other things, mentions that **bishop's residence** is located in Prizren. Although the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa is not explicitly said to be the seat of a diocese, it is widely accepted among researchers that it had to be the **basilica** which existed at the present site of the church of the Virgin of Ljevisa<sup>14</sup>. So the “awakening” of these holy place can be put in this time frame. Meanwhile, the discovery of material remains, e.g. spolia from the VI century built into the monument itself and coins of Byzantine Emperor Roman I Lekapenos from the X century discovered during archaeological excavations, relativizes the date frame of the founding of the first church<sup>15</sup>. These data not only give us information about the (in)accurate dating, but, more importantly

<sup>13</sup> PANIĆ & BABIĆ, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 11.

<sup>15</sup> NENADOVIĆ, 1963: 23–24.

raise the question of the identity of the place through the process of inheritance. The sanctity of the original church has been a heritage potential that the next generation inherited, preserved and upgraded. For raising the church on the foundations of an older one, it is necessary and sufficient to have the memory of the sanctity of the place<sup>16</sup>. Remembering the sanctity of the place made it possible to recall and challenge the potential of the past. What we remember and what we would like to keep causes the creation of *hierotopy*. Thus, the creation and preservation of the holy place by people's conscious decision creates *hierotopy*, as Russian art historian and byzantinist Alexei Lidov offered and explained this term<sup>17</sup>. King Milutin used sanctity of the place and parts of healthy construction of old building to construct the Church of the Holy Virgin. It is written that he «built it from its foundation», because the remains were not well preserved and a new building project was devised in the XIV century<sup>18</sup>. In his *reconstruction* we recognize not only the continuum of the holy place, but the continuum of the Nemanjić dynasty. Connection between the founder of the dynasty and the founder of the church is also expressed through new relatives – King Milutin's father in law was the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, and that is stressed in the inscription near the painted king in the narthex of the church<sup>19</sup>. In this manner King Milutin emphasized his legitimacy: his right to the throne and the continuation of the building tradition. This is also reflected through the spatial composition and decorative program of the church. Paintings in the inner narthex established King Milutin's direct link with the founder of the dynasty Simeon Nemanja and his other ancestors. Characters shown on the east and west side of the narthex are linked conceptually and formally. They represent the basis of a genealogical lineage of Nemanjić dynasty painted couple of years later in the King Milutin's church of Gračanica monastery<sup>20</sup>. During the reign of King Milutin, the process of experience exchange between Serbian and Byzantine centers was accelerated due to the newly conquered areas. Thus, a new wave of Byzantinization, in painting already influenced by Byzantine formulas, involved the appropriation of new stylistic and thematic ideas. In architecture this meant abandoning the forms of Raska school and turning to the models characteristic for the monuments from East<sup>21</sup>.

In this chain of inheriting, Milutin's church has been connected to the basilica from the XI century, but through a later one from the time of Sava Nemanjić. During

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<sup>16</sup> JOKILETO, 2002: 15.

<sup>17</sup> LIDOV, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> NENADOVIĆ, 1963.

<sup>19</sup> PANIĆ & BABIĆ, 1975: 19.

<sup>20</sup> VOJVODIĆ, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> PANIĆ & BABIĆ, 1975: 17.

the second decade of the XIII century Prizren belonged to the country of King Stefan the First Crowned, where, after the political, the ecclesiastical independence was gained in 1219. Basilica of the period was modified in the architectural and painterly sense, as evidenced by remains of highly preserved walls and three frescoes.

When the mid-XIV century Prizren became one of the imperial capitals there was another semantic change related to the church. During Emperor Dušan Nemanjić, after declaration of the Patriarchate in 1346, the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa became the seat of **Prizren archbishopric**. This name was retained later, after the conquest of the Turks then many papers and religious books from this period marked church as stated<sup>22</sup>.

Still, this church is mainly known as the **Virgin of Ljevisa** [Serbian: Bogorodica Ljeviška]. It was mentioned as such by travelers who visited the town in the late XIX century, and were the first to write about its monumental values. This name was known in the Middle Ages - it was mentioned as such in the brick relief strip on the outer side of the altar apse of the church - and so it is known today. But what is indicated by the words of its name? Can we analyze them separately?

In fact, at first glance, we see that these two words cannot go together, i.e. they do not point to the same characteristics. *Ljevisa* word, we would say, defines the topos of the church, its placement in the Levis field. While there is no precise answer to the question how this word settled in and got annexed to the name, there is a famous memo by Petar Kostic, who wrote about many legends from the history of Prizren in the XIX century. According to one of the records, church was once on the left bank (in Serbian: leva, levi, levo) of the river Bistrica, hence the formation of words or geographic notion *Levisa* which marks the part of the town where the church has been. It has been assumed that the subsequent outpouring relocated river's flow, so the church is no longer on the left bank of the Bistrica but on her right bank, burrowed into the city and surrounded by many small houses<sup>23</sup>. This presumption has not been proven.

However, a paper found among less known literature, confronts us with the thesis that the name *Ljevisa* indicates the hagiotopeponim. If so, it testifies in favor of continuity and the importance of this sacred place for Prizren area since before Nemanjić age. Bearing in mind that the Virgin of Ljevisa was the Episcopal Church and the administrative seat of the wider area, the author assumes that the name of *Levisa* marks church property, and not just part of the town, as evidenced by the

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<sup>22</sup> PANIĆ & BABIĆ, 1975: 19.

<sup>23</sup> KOSTIĆ, 1928; JASTREBOV, 1995: 29–36.

titles of villages that were given to the church<sup>24</sup>. *Levisa* as a descriptive adjective in this context, much later, was added to the name of King Milutin's restored church much later, in the XIV century. The older churches were probably dedicated to the Virgin Eleusa, from whose name Loma performed possessive adjective and builds hagiotoponim<sup>25</sup>.

Dedication to the Virgin Eleusa did not last for centuries. From the XIV century biographer of King Milutin Nemanjić archbishop Danilo II we know that the church is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, but it seems that this dedication did not survive as part of its name<sup>26</sup>. The **Virgin** in the context of changing the name of the place shows the other semantic changes that were followed by later functional transformation.

In June 1455, the army of Mehmed II the Conqueror occupied Prizren as part of the newly conquered territories<sup>27</sup>. In the following period<sup>28</sup> the church was turned into a mosque. The wood, and later on brick minaret was added, the mihrab was raised, vaults and walls of the old building got a new look in line with the new function. The semantic meaning of this temple passed through even greater changes. In fact, this was an integral part of the material transformations that we have listed, but in meaning alterations we can identify changes of testimonial potential of the monument. These changes are deeper than the physical.

Due to the size of the temple, and a good position and status in town, the church was converted into a mosque named **Atik** (Cami-i Atik)<sup>29</sup>. In a way, this has given a certain significance to a church. *Atik* in Arabic means old, antique, important<sup>30</sup>.

It seems that even then it was recognized as monument. At the same time, it was called **Juma Mosque** (Cuma camisa), i.e. Friday Mosque, because that was the day of praying. This name raised the church's importance, but also endowed it with a new name – **The Church of St. Petka**, because of the day on which it was the most-visited during religious ceremony (Friday – Serb. petak). This is actually the result of changes in the social structure of the town and users of the temple. After a long period of Turkish rule in Prizren the dedication and first name of the church was forgotten. Changing the function of the church implies changing of

<sup>24</sup> Some of the villages whose names were analyzed by Loma, were mentioned in the charter of King Stefan Uros III of Decani in 1326, confirming the property of the church of the Virgin Ljevisa.

<sup>25</sup> LOMA, 1989, 91–100.

<sup>26</sup> DANILO, 1935: 104.

<sup>27</sup> PANIĆ & BABIĆ, 1975: 13.

<sup>28</sup> About the time when church was converted see: KALEŠI, 1962.

<sup>29</sup> In the Ottoman sources appears another name for the converted church – Fethiye Mosque, the mosque invaders. This implies that the first converted church in Prizren after the Ottoman conquest was Holy Virgin of Ljevisa.

<sup>30</sup> KOSTIĆ, 1928: 115.





**Fig. 2.**  
*The church of Holy Virgin of Ljevisa from the time when it was mosque. Photo taken before 1923.*  
Source: Regional Institut for protection of monument Priština

the meaning, and automatically invokes the memory selection. New facilities and myths are the subject of remembering<sup>31</sup>. Thus, after the liberation of Prizren from the Ottomans in 1912 the Virgin of Ljevisa was called – Church of St. Petka, and we would say not “for no reason”, but precisely, as a result of the duration of the sanctity of the place, continuing religious rites but of another religion.

After the liberation of Prizren in 1912, the mosque has again become an Orthodox place of worship. Ten years later, in 1923, the minaret was removed. In 1948, the Virgin Ljeviška was placed under state protection as a cultural and historical monument, and in 1990 it has been categorized as a *cultural monument of exceptional importance*. Comprehensive conservation and restoration works in the period 1950–53 restored the church to its earlier appearance preserved today, with some minor changes<sup>32</sup>. Thus, the XX century renews the function and meaning of Milutin’s church with elements of museological interpretation in interior which aim to present and preserve in memory all the historical levels of the church.

The end of the XX century brings new changes. Although after the official end of the Kosovo war Kumanovo Agreement (9 June 1999) brings Security Council

<sup>31</sup> JASTREBOV, 1995; NENADOVIĆ, 1963.

<sup>32</sup> NENADOVIĆ, 1963.

Resolution (1244) on the situation in Kosovo and Metohija (10 June 1999) which, as well as the subsequent legal acts, encourages the presence of the Serbian Orthodox Church “Serbian cultural heritage sites”, Virgin of Ljevisa has experienced significant damage and remained without active users, believers and guardians of heritage. The church was damaged in the attacks of Albanians in 1999 and 2004<sup>33</sup>.

Perception of this cultural and historical monument shows that there are large differences in values receptions in various communities mostly among local, ethnic groups, all of which are, to a degree, beneficiaries of this legacy. Long after the war in Kosovo and Metohija in 1999 the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa was surrounded by barbed wire, which all of her vital functions blocked, in fact losing the main one – to be a house of prayer. It is isolated from the active life of the town, but it still is a document which talks about the history of Prizren. Now, it testifies about contemporary history, about turmoil, and the formation of a new history. Conflicting interpretations of this heritage as well as the revival of Ottoman history of this temple have suppressed its full meaning. This caused semantic, in addition to the physical vulnerability of the monument<sup>34</sup>.

In the new political context, it was the subject of conflicting interpretations, which were used as instigators of a distorted interpretation of the history of the town. Since the Church of Ljevisa is witness of historical, cultural and artistic events, as well as to be located on the territory of the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo, and that its preservation is part of a broader post-conflict process, in 2006 was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger<sup>35</sup>. This fact has not affected the former approach to the protection of the monument, which was primarily materialistic, only included technical protection, although the type of threat was of a different nature.

That is why this temple in Prizren was an incentive to think about the new visions of the past and what rethink notion of heritage. Virgin of Ljevisa functioned as a church, a mosque, a church again, and then with the status of cultural and historical monuments, is defined as a public value, the value of universal importance. As the value arising both from a multitude of human needs and from various types of assessment, it is questionable what kind of values are now displayed on the society and which values are accepted in society.

So Virgin of Ljevisa is kind of heterotopia. It's real place in the town of Prizren, now on the right side of the river Bistrica, while the spaciousness of this church can be defined in terms of the town, past and present Serbia, the Byzantine Empire,

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<sup>33</sup> JOKIĆ, 2004: 34.

<sup>34</sup> More about this in: PAVLIČIĆ, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> UNESCO, 2006.

the Ottoman Empire – whole world since it was recognized as a World Heritage Site. Of course, these spaces are as real as utopian (the names also do not indicate a clear geographical boundary of space).

The monument enters into a complex relationship, with spatial and social environment, one that is preceded or followed. It is created by the existence of social structures and their needs and preferences, and survives by any further act of remembering it. Therefore, we see Virgin of Ljevisa as a living organism whose values change depending on the context in which it is communicated, interpreted and used. All that levels interpreted in a meaningful whole makes heritage testimonial potential.

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