

# The People's Monastery

**T**he Monastery of Lesok is one of the most popular religious sites in the country. It is easily accessible, always full of people and hosts different social and cultural activities. One of the reasons for its popularity is that it is just eight kilometres away from Tetovo and only 600 meters above sea level on the south eastern side of Sar Mountain. But the monastery has a long history of important religious and communal events, and the local population cares greatly for its sanctuary.





The oldest foundations belong to a church that is mentioned in the chrysobull of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II when he re-conquered Macedonia from Tzar Samuil in 1019 and created a new system of dioceses.

The present monastery complex consists of three churches of which only two, the Church of St. Athanasius and the Church the Holy Mother of God, are currently active, surrounded by many auxiliary buildings.

The first church, also called 'the Old Monastery', is dedicated to St. Athanasius of Alexandria and was built in 1321 as the endowment of the first bishop of Polog when the area became part of the Serbian state and formed a new diocese added to Pec Patriarchy. It was a small church with a small monastic complex, but it played an important role, and for its architectural and artistic value it was proclaimed a protected cultural heritage site. The

excavations revealed the shape of a free cross with a central dome and a portico on the western side. Fragments of a richly decorated marble iconostasis were found and are part of the permanent exhibit of the Museum in Tetovo. This church is now outside the confines of the monastic complex which, for security reasons, was formed around the Church of the Holy Mother of God around 1600 and included the Episcopal residence.

Historical records show that the oldest surviving church in the present complex dates back to at least 1326 when it was mentioned in a chrysobull of King Stefan of Decani who made it a dependant (*metoh*) of the Church Holy Mother of God of Ljeviska in Prizren. It is also a church dedicated to the Mother of God. This three-apse building is an excellent example of Byzantine art. The church has three layers of frescoes. The surviving parts of the lower segments of the lateral walls

and the apse built of stone combined with brick, as well as the fragments of figures of archpriests on interior surfaces of the apse that was once part of the composition 'Liturgy of the Holy Archpriests' also confirm that the church existed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The fragmented inscription on the north wall and some of the frescoes refer to the renewal of the church in 1646 by the Bishop Nicanorus. But most of these frescoes were painted over in 1879 by Mihail Gjurginov from Galicnik. He followed closely the iconographic concept of his predecessor as it can be seen from the illustrated cycle of the 'Hymn to the Holy Mother of God'. At this time a porch was added to the western side.

The central and the most monumental church in the monastery complex, the church of Saint Athanasius, was built in 1924 next to the Church of the Holy Mother of God. The monastery was built in the new medieval-like style with multiple domes and complex cross floor plans. The church suffered in the 2001 ethnic conflict but was soon restored and decorated with new wall paintings.

The monastery yard is the site of the grave of Hegumen Kiril Pejcinovic, a hieromonk originally from the nearby village of Tearce who revived the monastic life here after his return from Mt. Athos in 1818. He was one of the major figures of the Macedonian enlightenment in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He improved the literacy among the local population, enriched the monastery library and translated books into the local dialect. One of the rooms in the residential part of the complex has been turned into his memorial as a tribute to his accomplishments. Starting from 1972, the Association of Literary Translators holds its annual international meetings each August in the vicinity of the monastery thus honouring Kiril Pejcinovic.

It was not by accident that Kiril Pejcinovic revived this monastery and made it the base for his enlightenment

activity. Although the original monastery was small, it played an important educational and religious role in the whole Polog region. The monastery and the area were called the Jerusalem of Polog with 44 small and big churches in this relatively small area. There are ruins of five churches and chapels identified so far by the archaeologists.

The monastery also hosts the Festival of Macedonian Choirs. There is a very popular folk song about the siege of Lesok Monastery by the local Muslim militia after Orthodox Macedonian freedom fighters accidentally killed two of their men. The militia thought that the 'komiti' fighters hid in the monastery so they besieged it asking the hegumen to hand them over. The hegumen denied any presence of the fighters in the monastery. There followed several days of hostilities involving a large number of civilians on both sides. In the end, Ottoman authorities intervened and resolved the situation.

One of the characteristics of the monastery is the continued presence of monks since Kiril Pejcinovic revived it. One of the most interesting brotherhoods were the Russian monks, Valaams, who came from the Valaam Monastery in Finland in 1926. They refused to follow the new Gregorian calendar adopted by the Finnish Orthodox Church thus facing expulsion. They were welcomed by the Skopje Metropolitan Varnava and sent to Lesok as a group but were later dispersed to other monasteries of the Skopje Eparchy. They left significant traces in both religious life and in the life of local communities.

Today there is a traditional restaurant as part of the monastery, and the dormitories have been restored to accommodate tourists in the summer. This attracts even more visitors in the high season. It is also a destination of many school excursions and part of various educational programs.