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THE THOUSAND-YEAR SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF LESNOVO MONASTERY IN MACEDONIA

By Ilija Velev

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From the very beginning of the arrival of Christianity in the area of Macedonia, a tradition of equal and free religion, civilization and culture was established, which had originally impacted the continuity of spiritual and cultural development in this part of Southeast Europe. Persistence and defense of the Christian ideology as a form of religious or philosophical reasoning and perceiving in the living culture became the main factor for upgrading a new layer of civilization in the future periods. Starting from the affirmation of Christianity in the period of ideological legitimization under conditions of persecution, continuing through the formal established status in the early Christian and medieval period to modern spiritual and cultural-historical self-recognitions and self-identifications in Macedonia, religion and church maintained the ideal of interpersonal equality. It is important to point out that from the area of Macedonia, the development of the third Christian civilization and culture in Europe—the Slavic—began immediately after the Byzantine-Greek and Roman-Latin cultures. Consequently, the revival of a Slavic spiritual and cultural factor as a unique phenomenon was supported by the apostolic and pan-Slavic educational activity of the holy brothers, Constantine-Cyril and Methodius in the

second half of the ninth century.¹ The affirmation of the consciousness of Slavic civilization was accomplished by Cyril and Methodius's disciples, the holy Clement and Naum of Ohrid, through an established spiritual and literary school.²

Previous research modestly emphasizes the joint role of Ohrid and Kratovo (Bregalnica) spiritual and literary schools in the development of the Slavic spiritual and cultural tradition in Macedonia, and in a wider context, into the southeastern European cultural space, including Russia. In this context, we note that the Kratovo (Bregalnica) spiritual and literary schools began to function as a reflection of the established historical experiences of Byzantine Slavic *archontia*, i.e., principality of St. Methodius of Thessalonica in the region of Bregalnica and Strumica since the period between 845 and 855, as well as by the restoration of the Slavic Bregalnica Episcopate by St. Clement of Ohrid and the revival of the spiritual and literary processes in that region of Macedonia by Cyril and Methodius's classmate, Bishop Constantine the Presbyter.³

The reflection of these two spiritual and literary schools or centers in the Macedonian medieval Christian and Slavic cultural tradition has been already grounded in modernity by the continuity of the Macedonian culture and national identity. It is particularly important that the modern Christian life in Macedonia, personified through the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric, spiritually comes from St. Clement's Church. Subsequently, however, it left the apostolic church springheads of Christ's student, Apostle Paul, and the early Christian

¹ I. Velev, *Свети Кирил и Методиј, рамноапостоли и сесловенски просветители*. (Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Equal Apostles and All-Slavic Enlighteners). (Skopje: University "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 2016.)

² B. Koneski, 1975. *Ohridska kniževna škola*. (Ohrid Literary School). *Slovo*. Zagreb, 177-194; Velev, I. 2014. *Историја на македонската книжевност*. Том 1. *Средновековна книжевност*. (*History of Macedonian Literature*. Volume 1. *Medieval Literature*).. Skopje: Girlanda), 126-136.

³ Velev, 2000. *Проникнување на традицијата и континуитетот*. (*Penetration of the tradition and continuity*). Institute of Macedonian Literature. Skopje, pp. 44-64; Velev, I. 2014. *Историја на македонската книжевност*. Том 1. *Средновековна книжевност*. (*History of Macedonian Literature*. Volume 1. *Medieval Literature*). Girlanda. Skopje, pp. 176-184.

followers from the spiritual substrate of Justiniana Prima living in Macedonia continuously. It witnesses and legitimizes the historical guarantee of the survival of the autonomy of the Macedonian (St. Clement's) Orthodox Church, which in 2017, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the restoration of its autocephaly (1967 - 2017).

* * *

During the two millennia of the rich Christian tradition in Macedonia, numerous churches and monasteries were built in which various forms of spiritual and cultural life took place. One of the historically more striking is the Lesnovo Monastery, which has survived to our modern time for nearly one thousand years. The early history of the spiritual and cultural tradition of Lesnovo Monastery should be associated with the early Christian Bargala bishopric from the fifth through the sixth centuries, resulting from the impact of the renewed Bregalnica Slavic bishopric toward the end of the ninth century by St. Clement of Ohrid and Bishop Constantine the Presbyter. The oldest indirect and legendary sources lead to the conclusion that the original construction of the monastery in Lesnovo should have occurred in the eleventh century, when from 1018 onwards, after the fall of Samuil's Slavic rule in the area of Macedonia, the Byzantine state's political and ecclesiastical protectorate was restored. It is presumed that as a result of the resistance to the Byzantine reorganization of Bregalnica / Morozdvizdska Slavic Episcopate and of the suppression of the established Slavic church tradition in this northeastern part of Macedonia, anchorite monasticism had been revived, and as a reflection of the emerging cult toward the venerable hermit, St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, the

Lesnovo Monastery was also confirmed, whether as an already existing dwelling erected by a hermit, or as newly erected in honor and memory of the venerable saint.⁴

Lesnovo Monastery is located at the front of the village, Lesnovo, near Zletovo, Probistip and Kratovo, in the northern part of present-day Macedonia. The monastery is dedicated to the Holy Archangels, Michael and Gabriel, and also to the memory and honor of the local saint and venerable hermit, Gabriel of Lesnovo. Lesnovo Monastery is a significant spiritual and literary center in Macedonia with an almost ten-centuries-long established and developed tradition. Being an extremely prominent spiritual center, important events of church history in Macedonia had taken place there and typical features of the monastic life, liturgy, church administrative organization, literary activities, and cultural and educational activities in general were evident therein.

Up until now, I specifically directed most of my research to Lesnovo Monastery as a literary and scriptural center, which was active from the second half of the eleventh century through its most intensive development in the fourteenth century, until the revival period to the end of the nineteenth century.⁵ In fact, the author's master's thesis defended in 1988 was also dedicated to the *Lesnovo Literary Center*, which was published as a special monograph.⁶ It is important to point out that in its centuries-long active operation, the Lesnovo Literary Center

⁴ I. Velev, 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар. (Lesnovo Literary Center)*. Misa. Skopje, p. 11-40; Pop-Atanasov, Gj.; Velev, I.; Jakimovska-Tosic, M. 1997. *Скрипторски центри во средновековна Македонија. (Scriptural Center in Medieval Macedonia)*. Faculty of Philology "Blaze Koneski". Skopje, pp. 145-170.

⁵ In our previous research on the Lesnovo literary center we published several monographs and scientific articles, including: Velev, I. 1996. *Св. Гаврил Лесновски во книжевната традиција. (St. Gabriel of Lesnovo in the Literary Tradition)*. Menora. Skopje; Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар. (Lesnovo Literary Center)*. Misa. Skopje; Pop-Atanasov, Gj.; Velev, I.; Jakimovska-Tosic, M. 1997. *Скрипторски центри во средновековна Македонија. (Scriptural Centres in Medieval Macedonia)*. Faculty of Philology "Blaze Koneski". Skopje, pp. 145-170; Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар. (Records and Inscriptions from the Lesnovo Literary Center)*. Institute for Macedonian Literature. Skopje; Velev, I. 2004. *Лесновски ковачевиќев пролог. (Lesnovian Kovacevican Prolog)*. Menora. Skopje; Velev, I. 2008. *Ракописното наследство од Лесновскиот книжевен центар. (The Handwritten Legacy of the Lesnovo Literary Center)*. *Slovo: Towards a Digital Library of South Slavic manuscripts*. Sofia, pp. 81-98; Velev, I. 2008. *The Scripture Heritage from the Lesnovo Monastery in Macedonia. Slovo: Towards a Digital Library of South Slavic manuscripts*. Sofia: 81-98; etc.

⁶ Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар. (Lesnovo Literary Center)*. Misa. Skopje.

played a significant role in the development of the medieval and post-Byzantine Enlightenment literary processes in Macedonia, and at the same time, it also contributed to the establishment of the Macedonian literary and historical links with Byzantine, Serbian, Bulgarian, Mt. Athos, and Russian literature. However, in research, when I referred to Lesnovo Literary Center or to the establishment and spread of the cult of the venerable hermit, St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, we could not distance ourselves from the fact that above all, Lesnovo Monastery was an important and influential spiritual center. Unfortunately, I, along with other researchers, did not devote appropriate attention to this fact. Therefore, on this occasion, I am going to emphasize the main points that mark Lesnovo Monastery as an important spiritual center in Macedonian, as well as in the wider Pan-Orthodox Christian environment in the Balkans, and as far as Russia. In this context, I also have in mind its modern spiritual significance in the Christian tradition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric, in which the year, 2017 marks its fiftieth anniversary of the restoration of its autocephaly.

The spiritual tradition of Lesnovo Monastery is continuously present during its ten centuries of existence. The sources of spiritual introspections focused on the actual church historical conditions when the monastery was formed, and was furthermore reflected in the saints' cult, monastic life, and in the functioning of the church organization. In historiography, it has not yet been established precisely when the church of Lesnovo Monastery was originally built. In the cultic legendary and literary sources, its foundation is associated with the period in which the ascetic hermit, St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, lived. According to the preserved contents of both the short and long biography of St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, we are facing two different data on the foundation of the monastery temple. The preserved copies of the older short biography communicate that the hermit himself erected the Lesnovo Monastery, and accordingly, he was

also its first *ktetor*.⁷ The contents of the copies of the later more extensive biography testify that the monastery already existed and that when St. Gabriel became a monk, he received the blessing of his abbot to live an ascetic life in the woods of Zletovo.⁸ In my research, I give preference to data represented in the older short biography of the venerable hermit, because the text editing of the subsequent extensive biography exhibit influences from the folk legends and traditions, as well as from a number of additional historical circumstances and ecclesiastical interests. Consequently, my conclusion is that the Lesnovo Monastery was originally built around the time when the hermit, Gabriel of Lesnovo, became a monk in the first half of the eleventh century, or around some time after his death or during the transfer of the relics and the establishment of the cult in the second half of the same century.

The cult of St. Gabriel of Lesnovo was revived immediately after his death, but it existed even when he was alive due to beliefs in his healing power. Thirty years after the death of the hermit, his relics were discovered and in his honor, Lesnovo sanctuary was built (or expanded). Anchorite monastic asceticism of St. Gabriel gained wide popularity and influence in that region of Macedonia and led to the development of monastic life, both anchorite (eremitic) and coenobitic monasticism. His example was followed by many monks from Lesnovo Monastery and from the surrounding monasteries in Macedonia. Some chose the ascetic life and the monks in the monasteries followed the example of discipline and equanimity of this venerable saint. The established and already expanded cult toward St. Gabriel of Lesnovo also exerted an influence on the internal monastic discipline of the brotherhood, due to the belief in

⁷ Ивановъ, Й. 1906. *Съверна Македонија*. София, стр. 100-101; Veleв, И. 1996. *Св. Гаврил Лесновски во книжевната традиција*. (St. Gabriel of Lesnovo in the Literary Tradition). Menora. Skopje, pp. 73-78.

⁸ Antic, V. 1977. *Локални хагиографии во Македонија*. (Local Hagiographs in Macedonia). Prosvetno delo. Skopje, p. 42; Milovska, D. and Takovski, J. 1996. *Македонската житијна литература IX-XVIII век*. (Macedonian Hagiographic Literature IX-XVIII century). Menora. Skopje, p. 110; Veleв, I. 1996. *Св. Гаврил Лесновски во книжевната традиција*. (St. Gabriel of Lesnovo in the Literary Tradition), pp. 79-80.

the effects of the miraculous power of the saint. Church dignitaries cherished the cult of this local saint, because the popularity and affinities towards him simultaneously represented the honor and glory of the monastic cult. At many occasions, various miracles by the venerable hermit during his lifetime were narrated. The miracles that the saint enacted after the believers prayed were increasingly emphasized. The venerable St. Gabriel of Lesnovo had to provide assistance to disabled people and the sick, organized consolation to sinners, and he appeared in dreams, revealing secrets and dealing with the uncertainties. His healing power came to the fore when "grief converted into joy."

The saint's cult of the venerable St. Gabriel of Lesnovo is a prototype of the cult of his other anchorite associates, St. Yoan Rilski, St. Prohor Pchinski, and St. Joachim Osogovski. Together, they are the organizers of the anchorite (eremitic) way of the Christian faith among the South Slavs. Of course, the development of this monastic asceticism has its own historical-political background. We identify it with the events in Macedonia in the first half of the eleventh century, during the increased Byzantine influence in the spiritual life after the fall of Samuil's Empire. Especially decisive was the period after the suppression of the uprising of Peter Deljan in 1041, when the jurisdiction over the autocephaly of Ohrid Archbishopric gradually fell under Byzantine ecclesiastical and political protectorate, and the first appointed Byzantine dignitary, Archbishop Leo (1037-1056),⁹ began to operate it. Consequently, as a result of the resistance to the spiritual pressure from Byzantium in the northern regions of Macedonia, the cult of the hermits, St. Yoan Rilski, St. Prohor Pchinski, St. Joachim Osogovski and St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, appeared. In spreading their cult, the theological principle was not the primary strategy, but a

⁹ Novaković, St. 1893. *Први основи словенске књижевности међу балканским Словенима*. (*The Foundations of Slavic Literature among the Balkan Slavs*). Belgrade, p. 165; Prokić, B. 1912. *Постанак Охридског патријархата*. (Formation of Ohrid Patriarchate). *Glas SAN*, vol. 90. Belgrade, pp. 175-267; Marković, V. 1920, *Православно монаштво и манастири у средњовековној Србији*. (*Orthodox Monastics and Monasteries in Medieval Serbia*). Sremski Karlovci, p. 15.

part of the political, social, ethical and psychological strategy. Thus, the Slavic consciousness was developed among the local Slavic population as a resistance to the Byzantine spiritual influences that restricted their wider freedom.¹⁰ In this historical context, we should not neglect the fact that their cult was affirmed and served in opposition to the Bogomil movement and teaching, which during the Slavic reign of Samuil in the area of Macedonia, had gained remarkable influence.¹¹ In short, those were the historical preconditions for the spiritual revival of Lesnovo Monastery as well.

The establishment of a cult for this hermit, who was born in the region of Palanka, in the village of Osiche, is not only connected with the revival of the spiritual and literary life, but also with the nearly ten-century history of Lesnovo Monastery. In its early existence, the monastery was independent and not subordinated to another monastery. Soon, it became a rich spiritual center with a large monastic membership. Until the end of the twelfth century, the region of Kratovo and other areas of Macedonia were under Byzantine governance. Throughout the following thirteenth century, the conquerors of the Macedonian territory continuously changed and the functioning of Lesnovo Monastery as a spiritual center in the northern part of Macedonia was forced to adapt to each of the newly created church-political state of affairs. In the preserved record of the 1330 Lesnovo prologue, written by Stanislav Lesnovski (Belgrade, SANU no. 53), it is shown that the monastery dedicated to the archangels is mentioned and that it is considered a location of the tomb of the venerable hermit, Gabriel. There was a monastic brotherhood led by the abbot, Theodosius, upon whose request, Stanislav had re-written the

¹⁰ Velev, I. 1996. *Св. Гаврил Лесновски во книжевната традиција.*, (*St. Gabriel of Lesnovo in the Literary Tradition*), pp. 24-25.

¹¹ Pavlović, L. 1965. *Култови лица код Срба и Македонаца.* (*Cults of persons in Serbs and Macedonians*). Smederevo, p. 253.

prologue with the short biography of St. Gabriel of Lesnovo.¹² This preserved written source testifies that in 1330, Lesnovo Monastery existed in its original construction and was considered a developed spiritual and literary center. During that period, two factors caused the monastery to find itself in a difficult situation, and to even suffer destruction. First, by 1331, the development of the monastic land property was very poor, whereby Lesnovo Monastery found itself in a situation facing disintegration.¹³ On the other hand, the well-known military disasters in Macedonia became a political and military center for settling accounts by military forces of several countries (particularly between Byzantium, Serbia and Bulgaria). This was the reason why in the fourteenth century, Lesnovo Monastery became desolate, and according to the claim of Efrem Karanov, it was around that time it was destroyed.¹⁴ In order to fortify his reign in this part of Macedonia, in 1341, John Oliver as commander of the Serbian ruler, Tsar Dušan, rebuilt the Lesnovo Monastery from the ground up and became its *ktetor* (founder). This important foundational endeavor was also witnessed by an original inscription, located above the door in the narthex of the church.¹⁵ This inscription was transferred to the southern gateway and represents the shortened version of the first Lesnovo charter of Duke Oliver of 1341. According to it, Lesnovo Monastery acquired its own land with vast assets which were a requirement to become a powerful spiritual and literary center. Its economic prosperity attracted many members of the monastic brotherhood, which developed an intense spiritual and literary life. In 1342, the

¹² Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*. (*Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary Center*). Institute for Macedonian Literature. Skopje, no. 4, pp. 13-15; Velev, I. 2008. *Македонска книжевност IX-XVIII век*. (*Macedonian Literature IX-XVIII century*). Macedonian Literature in 135 volumes. Government of the Republic of Macedonia. Bitola, pp. 236-237.

¹³ Angelov, D. 1956. Рост и структура крупного монастырского землевладения в Северной и Средней Македонии в XIV в. *Византийский временник*, volume IX. Moscow, p. 141.

¹⁴ Карановъ, Е. 1891. Материали по етнографията на некои местности въ Северна Македония, които съ смежни съ България и Сърбия. *СбНУНК*, кн. IV. София, p. 310.

¹⁵ Tomović, G. 1974. *Морфологија ћирилских натписа на Балкану*. (*Morphology of Cyrillic Inscriptions in the Balkans*). History Institute, Special editions, 16. Belgrade, p. 57; Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary Center*), no. 196-197, pp. 89-91.

monastery was connected directly with Mt. Athos, when the founder, John Oliver, contributed it as a *metoh* to the Hilendar Monastery.¹⁶

The highest administrative ecclesiastical promotion of Lesnovo Monastery happened at the famous State Council in Skopje in 1347, organized by the Serbian conqueror, King Stefan Dušan. Lesnovo Monastery had grown from abbey as the seat of the newly formed Zletovo Bishopric, which was to continue the traditional function of the former Morodvizd and Maleshevo bishoprics, which in turn had spiritual roots in the history of St. Clement's Bregalnica Slavic bishopric (and even further from the early Christian Bargala Bishopric). Then, Lesnovo Monastery was released from the Hilendar land property, and Emperor Dušan committed himself to compensate the property of the monastery of Mount Athos with some other places of his domain. He gave the Lesnovo Monastery a new charter, adding to the properties of the newly established bishopric the old and neglected areas of the former Morodvizd bishopric. The founder, Joan Oliver, earned the privilege to participate in the election of the bishop of Zletovo and the ability to appoint the abbot of Lesnovo Monastery.¹⁷ In its capacity as the new bishop's seat in 1349, Lesnovo Monastery experienced an expansion of its main architectural structures. A narthex was built on the west side, and a new fresco was painted.

After the death of King Stefan Dušan in 1355, political and military erosion of the powerful medieval Serbian state occurred, whereby the heirs of the founder, Joan Oliver, were powerless to protect Lesnovo Monastery. There are presumptions that the Zletovo bishopric no longer functioned within the church's organization. It can be assumed that there were no longer elections of bishops of Zletovo. In fact, in recent historiographical sources, we can find records

¹⁶ Tomović, G. 1977. Повеља манастира Леснова. (Charter of Lesnovo Monastery). *Historical Journal*, vol. XXIV, Belgrade, pp. 85-95; Velez, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (Lesnovo Literary Center), pp. 18-19.

¹⁷ Janković, M. 1985. *Епископије и митрополије српске цркве у средњем веку*. (Bishoprics and Metropolitanates of the Serbian Church in the Middle Ages). History Institute. Narodna knjiga. Belgrade, p. 64.

of only two elections of bishops. The first is Ioan, who served a very short time on the episcopal throne and was quickly succeeded by Bishop Arseny, who is mentioned in the record of Parenesis of 1353 by the writer, Tahota. Portraits of the both bishops had been painted in the narthex of the monastery's temple.¹⁸ The newly created political and military circumstances forced Lesnovo to be returned again to Hilendar property. Hilendar Monastery and its abbot, Sava, officially asked Lesnovo to return as its *metoh*. Based on legal regulations laid down in the previous charter of Stefan Dušan, the new ruler of the Kratovo region, Konstantin Dejanović, issued another charter on August 15, 1381, by which Lesnovo was returned to the Hilendar property.¹⁹ That charter probably also constituted an official act by which the inactive bishopric of Zletovo was abolished. The jurisdiction over its dioceses was submitted to the Velbuzhd Bishopric.

During the first ruthless Turkish military conquest in Macedonia in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, Lesnovo Monastery was spared because the roads that led to it were impassable, and the Turks later immigrated to that area. In addition, of key importance was the fact that the Kratovo area was rich in ore, which was contributed to the fact this area was not exposed to massive vandalism. However, during the fifteenth century, the property of the monastery was plundered and the monks were expelled in many directions. In the same century, Lesnovo Monastery continued to be considered an active literary and scriptural center, evidenced in portions of the preserved manuscripts. Its popularity contributed to the writer, Draško, moving

¹⁸ Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Lesnovo Literary Centre*), p.25; Velev, I. 2001. *Заниси и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary center*), no. 18-19, pp. 231-231.

¹⁹ Novaković, St. 1912. *Законски споменици српских држава средњег века*. (*Legal Monuments of the Serbian state of the Middle Ages*). Belgrade, p. 453-456.

from the city of Bdin in 1428 to the monastery and to his copying the Gospels.²⁰ In 1429, the writer, Radonja, copied the handwritten festive *Menaion* for the months of February to August in the nearby town of Kratovo, and this manuscript was found in the library of the Lesnovo Monastery.²¹ The contents of the record of 1488, sheet 1 in Zagreb paranesis (HAZU IIIb 12 Mihanović 14), originating from the Lesnovo Monastery, recorded that the abbot of the monastery brotherhood was Ioan.²²

Probably by the end of the fifteenth century, the monastery began again to be neglected, and during the sixteenth century, local *ktetors* and donors appeared in order to save this spiritual monument from decay. The most distinguished *ktetors* were Duke Stephen Balentic, Brothers Nicholas and George Pepić, Nikola Boichik, etc. New additions, repairs, and roofing of the monastery complex and the church building were made. New estates, inventory, books, and other gifts were also contributed to the monastery. In this period, a significant role in the spiritual existence of Lesnovo Monastery had its abbot, Dionysius, and hieromonks, Neophyte, Paul and Spiridon. In the seventeenth century, the abbot, Maxim, hieromonks, Cyril, Gabriel, Nektarios, and others governed the Lesnovo Monastery. With their commitment and the contributions made by many Christian pilgrims and donors, several reconstructions of the monastery complex and temple were performed. However, the impact of the Austro-Turkish War badly affected the economic situation of the population in Macedonia and the spiritual life in Lesnovo Monastery. These unpleasant military circumstances were also complemented by the consequences of the Karposh Uprising that occurred in mid-1689. The suppression of the uprising began exactly in

²⁰ Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Lesnovo Literary Center*), p.113; Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary Center*), no. 20, p. 20.

²¹ Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary Center*), no. 21, p. 20.

²² Ibid. no. 44-45, p. 32.

this part of Macedonia and it is presumed that during those turbulent revengeful events by the Turks, Lesnovo Monastery was also destroyed. Many of its monks fled because of the threat of the Turkish soldiers, and the monastery was looted.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Lesnovo Monastery began to recover with the outstanding efforts of the abbots, the hieromonk, Isaiah, and the hieromonk, Theodosius. Due to their commitment, significant repairs in the monastery complex were made. We should also mention the efforts of other abbots of that period like, Nektarios and Theodosius, whose management of Lesnovo Monastery increased its spiritual deeds. Evidence from records and inscriptions testify that in the eighteenth century, the monastery became one of the more popular spiritual centers in Macedonia, which attracted many pilgrims and ascetics. At the end of the previous century, Macarius and Euthymius became monks, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the same held true for the priests, Cyprian (monastic name Kalistij) and Gore (monastic name Gerasim), who became abbot of the Karpinski Monastery, the monk, Cyril, and others. Also among the written sources is the record indicating that the priest, Cyprian, from Lesnovo, became a monk in Rila Monastery.²³ Likewise, in the first half of the eighteenth century, from Lesnovo Monastery, the deacon, Gabriel, Theodosius, Stanko, Stoe Cikov, and others stand out as representatives of the local spiritual school and monastic practice of obedience to God.²⁴ Huge is the list of registered pilgrims and visitors of Lesnovo Monastery during this period. Just to illustrate, I will mention a few whose names are recorded: Jakim from Rila, hieromonk, Sophrony, Moses and Erotej from the Rila Monastery, the priest, Ivan, the priest, Joanikij, the priest, Ivan, from Tikveš Nahiya, the priest, Leontij, the hieromonk from Studenichani, Stefan, Sophronij from Peč, the priest, Lazar, from Kovachevtsi, the monk, Smile,

²³ Ibid, no. 96, 97, 107, 132, 140, 237 and 238.

²⁴ Ibid, no. 106, 112, 114 and 115.

from Rokerci, etc. Twice (in 1726 and 1728), Lesnovo Monastery was also visited by the Peč Patriarch Arseny, who left a handwritten entry in the Lesnovo handwritten Bible in the middle of the sixteenth century.²⁵

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Lesnovo Monastery was in very poor condition, and in the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was completely devastated. The hieromonk, Theodosius, of Dečani found the monastery in such condition when in 1805 he came as a monk to this Macedonian spiritual center. According to the inscription he wrote, he initiated the revival of the monastery with the assistance of the charitable Christians who repaired and roofed the church, restored the monastery kitchen and built new lodgings with 12 rooms.²⁶ According to another preserved record of 1813-1814 in the handwritten Gospel,²⁷ it is confirmed that the former hieromonk of Dečani, Theodosij, was already abbot of Lesnovo Monastery. During the period of his spiritual leadership, monastic life was revived, and started increasing its assets. It was witnessed later in the preserved description of the monastery estate of 1846, signed by the senior abbot, Arseny, and the new abbot, Nathaniel. All movable and immovable property was precisely listed therein, such as tools, supplies of food and drinks, fields, vineyards, orchards, livestock, mills, etc.²⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century, Lesnovo Monastery developed active spiritual, literary and educational activities with varying degrees of intensity, depending on economic and military occasions in this region. It was managed by several abbots, among whom I will mention Theodosij of Dečani, Arseny, Nathaniel, Archimandrite Dionysios, Cyril, Archimandrite Haji

²⁵ Ibid. (Zagreb, HAZU IIIc 17, l. 3356). For more information see most of the records and inscriptions which we have published as written sources in this monograph.

²⁶ Ibid, no. 208.

²⁷ Zagreb, HAZU IIIc 11 Mošin description no. 82.

²⁸ Ивановъ, Й. 1931. *Български старини изъ Македония*. София, стр. 171-172; Velez, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (*Lesnovo Literary Center*), p. 31.

Pavel of Jerusalem, the hieromonk, Cosma, from the village, Krchovo (Demir Hisar), etc. This spiritual center served as consolation to laymen and clergymen who came for homage to the venerable Father Gabriel of Lesnovo. Among them are the names of: Artemius of Kustendil, the priest, Stojan, of Kustendil, Hilendar, the hieromonk, Dionysius (born in Veliko Trnovo), and others. Lesnovo Monastery was actively involved in educational and rebirth movements of that time in Macedonia. The centuries-long handwriting tradition in its scriptorium still functioned although the monastery library had rich printed liturgical and preaching literature. We will mention only the manuscripts of the priest, Nichola, teacher, Hristo, priest, Ioan Hristev, monk, Makarios and others. There are assumptions that the famous reformer Joachim Krchovski had developed himself spiritually and literarily in Lesnovo Monastery.²⁹ Another important Macedonian worker, Archimandrite Pavel Bozhigropski, from the village, Konikovo (near Enidzhe Vardar), also resided there, spreading folk ideas for revival. In the period between 1867 and 1870, he stayed in Lesnovo Monastery as an abbot during his own intensive period of educational and revival activities.³⁰

Lesnovo Monastery influenced the building of numerous sacred sites, such as smaller monasteries, prayer cells, chapels, churches, and hermitages. It is no coincidence that the service for the venerable hermit, Gabriel, is called "Great Lavra of Lesnovo." That is why, in historiographical contributions of a number of researchers, Lesnovo and its surroundings are called "the little Mount Athos." The identification and registration of these holy places were made in the preserved historical-literary composition entitled *Description of Holy Places near Lesnovo Monastery*, which was written by an anonymous monk of Lesnovo. We can find the content of this *Description* in more transcripts from the nineteenth century, inspired by the text

²⁹ Tushevski, V. 1985. *Јоаким Крчовски. (Joachim Krchovski)*. Studentski zbor. Skopje, p. 31-32; Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар, (Lesnovo Literary Center)*, p. 120.

³⁰ Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар, (Lesnovo Literary Center)*, pp. 120-122.

of the comprehensive biography of St. Gabriel of Lesnovo. Our research points to the creation of the original text in the period of the sixteenth century, when the so-called textological editing of the folk extensive biography of the hermit took place.³¹ This composition was copied until the end of the nineteenth century, without any changes of its contents. All temples, prayer cells, chapels, and hermitages still existed in the nineteenth century, but they were in ruins. It is assumed that most of them were destroyed during military campaigns toward the second half of the seventeenth century, when Osogovo and Lesnovo Monasteries were destroyed. Patristic dedications to each of the sacred place are listed in this composition; especially impressive is the precise indication of the number of monks, from two up to 55 monks. Also listed were four hermitages—the first is located on the south side intended for healing, the second in the locality of Gradiste, in which the hermit himself painted the scene of the Assumption of St. Mary, the third is dedicated to St. Elijah, and the fourth is a large cave in Oblovo.

During the periods when Lesnovo Monastery was desolated, there was no monastic life therein, and its temple was managed by village priests and by surrounding wealthy inhabitants. In such circumstances, rural houses began to build on the monastery estate, so that during the nineteenth century, the monastery was already located in the middle of the village of Lesnovo. There were even attempts to subordinate the temple of this centuries-long spiritual center to a status of a village church, but the significant spiritual tradition of Lesnovo Monastery prevented it.³² The return to its former spiritual position of Lesnovo Monastery was due to the Metropolitan of Skopje, Sinesij, who also took care of preservation of the handwritten literary heritage. After his death in 1896, to Lesnovo Monastery came ten monks from Mt. Athos in order to revive the monastic life. Hieromonk Kozma became the new abbot of the monastery. While this cleric

³¹ Ibid., p. 31-32 and footnote no. 80; Veleв, I. 1997. *Кирилومتодиевската традиција и континуитет*. (Cyril and Methodius's Tradition and Continuity). Kultura, Institute for Macedonian Literature. Skopje, pp. 285-293.

³² *Религиозни раскази*. (Religious Stories). 1896, book 5 and 6, t.1. Софија, pp. 179-180.

performed a number of renewals in the monastery and organized its spiritual life, he also distinguished himself with high revolutionary zeal. He opened the monastery gates to hide Macedonian revolutionaries, and after he was betrayed to the Turkish gendarme authorities, together with the monastic brotherhood, he was convicted and all of them were sent to exile in Asia.³³

In the period before the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, Stevan Simić visited the monastery, testifying that monastic life existed there.³⁴ During the two Balkan Wars and World War I, Lesnovo Monastery was destroyed. In a record in a Russian-printed *minei*, which is still kept in the monastery treasury, it was recorded that on June 17, 1913, there was a fierce military clash between the Serbian and Bulgarian army and four grenades fell on Lesnovo Monastery.³⁵

Since the establishment of the modern Macedonian state within the federal Yugoslavia (from 1945 to 1990), the spiritual life in Lesnovo Monastery has shared the destiny of most medieval churches and monasteries in Macedonia mostly due to the atheistic attitude in the society. Lesnovo monastic life had its ups and downs. However, the care of the monastery was supported by the Macedonian government cultural institutions as a significant national spiritual and cultural monument. The spiritual tradition of Lesnovo Monastery recovered its historical and modern sheen by the mid-1970s. Namely, in December 1975, a monk from Mt. Athos, Father Gabriel (civil name Mijalce Parnadziev, born in 1926 in Stip), became the abbot of Lesnovo Monastery, who had returned to Macedonia after the restoration of the autocephaly of the Ohrid Archbishopric in 1967. He continued his monastic asceticism staying in monasteries in the Skopje region "St. Mary" in the village of Pobozhje, "St. Mary" in Matka, and the Markov

³³ Трайчевъ, Г. 1933. *Манастиритѣ въ Македония*. София, р. 99; Velev, I. 1997. *Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (Lesnovo Literary Center), p. 33.

³⁴ Simić, St. 1913. *Лесновски манастир св. оца Гаврила*. (Lesnovo Monastery of Holy Father Gabriel). Belgrade.

³⁵ Velev, I. 2001. *Записи и натписи од Лесновскиот книжевен центар*, (Records and Inscriptions from Lesnovo Literary Center), no. 194, p. 85. (Velev 2001: бр. 194, 85).

monastery, "St. Demetrius." After six years of being abbot and ascetic in Lesnovo Monastery, by a special decision of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church on June 30, 1981, Father Gabriel was awarded the rank of Archimandrite. He spent the rest of his life in Lesnovo Monastery as a rare hermit and ascetic, and a prolific author of numerous theological prose and poetry. But above all, even when he was alive, he spontaneously manifested blessed miracles through prayers and healings. Shortly before his death on August 28, 1989, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church consecrated him to the position of Bishop of Velika. Unfortunately, his consecration was unfairly affected by internal confrontations in the Macedonian Orthodox Church. He died on January 12, 1990. His grave behind the temple of Lesnovo Monastery became a new sanctuary for prayers and healing of pilgrims. His merit with the pious act of saint became official with canonization on May 28, 2017, in the cathedral "St. Nicholas" in Shtip in the Bregalnica Diocese of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric. This solemn liturgical event was headed by His Excellency Hilarion, Metropolitan of Bregalnica along with His Beatitude Stefan, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and other priests of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric. His canonization was formally linked to the fiftieth anniversary of the restoration of the Ohrid Archbishopric (1967-2017) as the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric.

Such pious Christian acts enriched the ten-centuries-old spiritual tradition of Lesnovo Monastery honoring the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, with sainthood festivities of venerable hermit, Gabriel of Lesnovo, and the holy Bishop of Velika, the venerable Gabriel of Mt. Athos (Lesnovo).

Attachment:



Lesnovo Monastery with a temple dedicated to the Holy Archangel Michael and Gabriel and the venerable Father St. Gabriel of Lesnovo



Fresco-portrait with the inscription of Duke Joan Oliver, who renewed Lesnovo Monastery from its grounds in 1341.



One of the caves of ascetic venerable Father Gabriel of Lesnovo where he lived as ascetic in the eleventh century near Lesnovo Monastery.



Holy Father Gabriel, Bishop of Velika (Mt. Athos).



The solemn portage of the holy relics of Bishop of Velika, venerable Gabriel of St. Athos at canonization as a saint on May 28, 2017, conducted by Metropolitan of Bregalnica, His Eminence Hilarion



Part of the official religious service of the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, His Beatitude Stefan