The Last Hesychast Safe Havens
In Late Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century
Monasteries in the Northern Balkans*

At the end of the fourteenth century and through the first half of the fifteenth century, during the rule of Prince Lazar and his son Despot Stefan Lazarević, a great number of hesychasts found their last safe havens in Serbia. It is not widely known that many monasteries and anchoritic cells were founded in the northeastern region of Serbia, in the mountainous area of the Crnica River Gorge and further north in the Gornjak Ravine. The followers of Gregory of Sinai founded these cells; they came from both Bulgaria and Mount Athos and were known from written sources as Sinaites, albeit most had never visited Sinai. My paper will focus on hesychasts in these regions.

I must inform the readers that in early 80s the monastery of Lešje was still awaiting archaeological excavations. Since then, the complex has been thoroughly rebuilt by the monks who unfortunately devastated the existing medieval remnants. Therefore today the monastery’s architecture is not authentic.

Key words: monastery, cenobium-lavra, hesychasm, late medieval northern Balkans, kellia, triconch church.

In the turbulent times of the late fourteenth century, Ottoman attacks on the Balkans intensified, including attacks on Mount Athos, which suffered greatly. It was at this time that many respectable monks decided to leave the Holy Mountain in search of more secure abodes. A great number of them were hesychasts, follow-

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ers of monastic spiritual beliefs that included not only a specific method of prayer but also a life in deep isolation in a mountainous environment. Where did they go? According to written sources, about 1330 the celebrated Gregory of Sinai and his followers left Mount Athos for Bulgaria and there, in Paroria, they founded a significant monastic community.\footnote{1} Paroria, however, did not provide long lasting security. In the middle of the fourteenth century, Turkish attacks intensified and a great number of monks, among them the celebrated Saint Romylos, a disciple of Gregory of Sinai, left Paroria.\footnote{2} From the Life of Saint Romylos, we learn that he found his final anchoretic abode in the Serbian monastery at Ravanica, where he died after 1381.\footnote{3}

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  \bibitem{1} The Life of Gregory Sinaites was composed by patriarch Kallistos: ed. I. Pomjalovskij, Zapiski istoriko-filologiceskogo Fakulteta imperatorskogo Sanktpeterburskogo Universiteta 35 (1896) 1–64.
  \bibitem{3} F. Halkin, Un ermite des Balkans au XVe siècle: La vie grecque inédite de St. Romylos, Byzantion 31 (1961) 116–145; the Slavic version P. A. Syrku, Monaha Grigorija Žitije prepodobnago Romila, Pamjatniki drevnej pismennosti i iskusstva 136, St. Petersburg 1900.
\end{thebibliography}
the Sinaites were hesychasts imbued by the new impulse of contemplative monasticism clearly explained in the works of Gregory of Sinai. For example his Discourse on the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ compares the light perceived by a monk’s prayer with the splendor of the light on Mt. Tabor. In another fourteenth-century manual of the method and rule of hesychast prayer it is emphasized that this relates to “those who choose to live in stillness and in monastic solitude,” or in “deifying stillness,” or in “the unyoked and eremitic life of stillness.”

Saint Gregory of Sinai was both, a great mystic and teacher and his disciples include some of the most prominent monks and ecclesiasts of the fourteenth century: Romylos of Vidin, Theodosios of Turnovo and future patriarch Kallistos, the writer of his Life. One of his prominent disciples — Romylos — had been of some importance for the spread of the anchoretic life of the hesychast in the northern Balkans. From his Life one can learn that he reached the monastery of Ravanica in Serbia together with his disciples. The year of their arrival is not mentioned in the Vita. It is known that they left Mount Athos after the Serbian defeat at the Marica in 1371 and moved to Valona and from there arrived at the Monastery of the Ascension at Ravanica, most probably not before 1376/77 which is the date of Ravanica’s foundation charter. As the Life narrates, he settled down in the vicinity of the monastery, finding an appropriate abode where he lived until his death, sometime after 1381. The exact location of his dwelling remains unknown. However, there exists a cave, not far from the monastery believed to be Romylos’ cave. Although Romylos did not live long enough in his new environment to enlarge the hesychast community, his disciples and followers remained, spreading the deeds of their spiritual leader by founding new anchoretic communities in this region. The best known of his followers is one Gregory who wrote the Life of St. Romylos, and found his final abode in the Monastery of Ždrelo (later known as Gornjak), granted to him and his disciples by Prince Lazar c. 1379, as we shall see later. He became known in the Slavic written sources as Gregory of Gornjak.

12 P. A. Syrku, Žitie prepodobnago Romila, 33.
14 See note 11.
One may ask how a hesychast community was organized and what the abodes looked like in the fourteenth century? From both the Lives of Gregory Sinaiates and of St. Romylos one learns that Gregory founded four lavras in Paroria. Therefore lavra-type communities were the adopted models spread by hesychasts. Another question may be posed: what did a Byzantine lavra-settlement look like in the fourteenth century. It is a known fact that by the Late Byzantine period, the original lavra-type monastic community was significantly transformed from its fourth- and fifth-century prototypes in Egypt and Palestine. As I have recently argued elsewhere, the combined cenobium-lavra model was established about the tenth century and remained the actual model in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. More precisely, three types of lavrai may be recognized in the Byzantine Balkans. The first, organized as a cenobitic monastery that acted as the core of the lavra, with a controlled number of outside dependent cells (Great Lavra on Mount Athos, etc.). The second, established around the venerated spot of a prominent anchorite as the core of the lavra, with dependent cells located in the vicinity (St. Peter of Koriša complex, etc), and the third, founded as group of individual cenobitic monasteries, one of which acted as the lavra core, while the others were considered dependent kellia of the lavra (Meteora community in Thessaly). Architectural plans of these entities differ. In cases where a cenobitic monastery acted as the lavra core, a codified model was used — established as the walled enclosure with a free-standing, centrally located church and a refectory positioned to the west of the church. The plan of the lavra which emerged around a venerated anchoritic abode — as a core — was characterized by the successive addition of necessary buildings including the church, refectory, and living and storage buildings, without pronounced regularity in planning. All the lavrai that Gregory of Sinai established in Paroria, as well as lavrai later founded by his followers elsewhere in the Balkans, were of one of these types. As this was a time of insecurity, some of these monastic settlements were located in the vicinity of fortified cities that might provide additional security in case of Turkish attacks. The Byzantine governor of Skopelos, near Saranta Ekklesies in Thrace, advised the monks who lived in lavrai founded by Saint Gregory of Sinai to hide in nearby fortified places. According to his Life, in one of his lavrai a tall strong tower was built for the defense of the monks, donated by Bulgarian Tsar John Alexander (1331–1371).


18 Loc. cit.


20 D. Balfour, Saint Gregory the Sinaite, 86 and note 98.
Despite the security reasons, monastic colonies of hesychasts were located, as we shall see, in the remote mountainous environments recognized as “deserts,” albeit not far from fortified settlements and main routes of communication. Their ultimate goal — to achieve salvation in the heavenly sphere — included not only permanent prayers and rigorous self-denial and mortification of the body in their isolated anchoretic cells, but also they were able to tame the wilderness of the “desert” or even to convert it into a “spiritual workshop,” as Gregory Sinaiotes did.
Those inhospitable sites often crowded with wild animals and with demons too, were perfect ambiances for monks to fight and overcome the temptations of terrestrial life, and therefore their endeavors were sometimes granted divine approval. Some of these isolated monastic colonies were considered as *holy mountains* and received the greatest respect, being recognized as strongholds of Christianity.

However the monastic colony of hesychasts was physically organized, the individual monastic cell had great importance. It was the place of individual prayer and contemplation, the place of struggle and often of its beneficiary’s death. From the *Life* of Gregory of Sinai one may learn about his cell, in which he died, located in the *lavra* of Paroria:

> That man of God, being a true zealot for hesychia and because of his extreme love of the contemplative life and his desire to dwell in deserts, did not find it acceptable to be always coming to a monastery and in contact with a multitude of monks, for that was an obstacle to the hesychia which he so loved and to his ascent to God. But he therefore made a very solitary cell, suitable for hesychia, not far from his honorable Monastery of the Paroria, so that when he wanted to he would go forth from the monastery and withdraws there, practicing hesychia and communing with God.

The anchoretic cells might be located in the monastery or outside in the vicinity. Its architectural designs include a variety of forms: from solid masonry structures, usually located within a monastery enclosure to the wooden huts or a natural cave outside the monastery. These structural types have a very long history, from the early days of Christianity to fourteenth-century hesychasts’ abodes. Their interior settings were usually modest, providing a space for sleep and prayer. They were often single-spaced, although there were multi-roomed cells too. They might house one monk or sometimes they provided an abode for the spiritual fa-

21 Ibid., 87.
ther and his disciple. The cell was the place of spiritual training but also a tomb that would provide a transition to eternity. A tomb might be symbolic — an anticipation of Jesus’ tomb in Jerusalem — or a real tomb that the anchorite prepared for himself on his path to salvation (St. Neophytos; St. Peter of Koriša, etc.). Since the early days of Christianity some of the anchoretic cells were decorated with religious images, various graffiti and inscriptions. The imagery usually included inscribed or painted crosses, as universal symbols of salvation, but some of the cells were adorned with other religious repertoire related to the heavenly sphere. One inscription that reveals the meaning of the cell, although from an early Egyptian monastic cell, may be universally applied to the entire world of anchorites, including the hesychasts: “When he comes above this place, his face shines exceedingly […]. Their eyes opened: they saw Heaven.”

From the general information about hesychastic monasticism mentioned thus far, one may turn to the more specific region of the Northern Balkans and the monastic agglomeration of St. Romylos’ followers that flourished in the Crnica River Gorge and in the Gornjak ravine at the end of the fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries. Recent site surveys revealed about forty-seven monastic abodes, small monasteries and hermitages in the Crnica region. Although archaeological excavations are just beginning, it is possible to draw general observations relating to specific planning objectives, the landscape and monastic organization.

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The Crnica River flows through the medieval region of Petrus, not far from the Ravanica Monastery, that spread from the Kučaj-mountains on the east to the River Morava on the west in the northern Balkans. The earliest mention of the Petrus region dates from the charter of Tsar Stefan Dušan (1345–1355) in which he granted the land to his nobleman Vukoslav, probably between 1346 and 1355. Most of the granted land remained in the domain of the Vukoslavić family and their heirs until Ottoman conquest in the middle of the fifteenth century. On this territory, along the Crnica River Gorge, several monasteries and numerous anchoretic abodes were founded at the end of the fourteenth and in the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. A majority of the sites are located on the narrow plateau cut into the steep slopes of the mountainous landscape. Most of the monasteries have a small triconch church with a narthex positioned towards the steep side of the site. The church was usually accompanied by few secular buildings and several an-
Petrus Region, Northern Balkans (Austrian map from 1718)
choretic caves located either above the site or in the immediate vicinity. Only three monasteries, one of the Virgin Mary at Lešje, St. Nicholas at Zabrega and the Monastery of Transfiguration at Sisojevac, revealed traditional cenobitic planning with the church in a central position enclosed by secular buildings. It is interesting to note that two monasteries, that of the Virgin Mary and of the Transfiguration were located one (the Virgin Mary) outside but in the vicinity of the exit from the Crnica Gorge, and the other (the Transfiguration) at the entrance into the gorge, while the Monastery of St. Nicholas was positioned in the middle, deep in the river gorge. As we shall see, most of the founders of these monasteries and hermitages remained unknown. For only two monastic foundations, one in Lešje and the other at Sisojevac, are ktetores known.

As mentioned above, the majority of the land in the Petrus region, albeit not all, belonged to the Vukoslavić family. From the written sources it is known that the nobleman Vukoslav founded the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje and his sons Držman and Crep before 1360, as their private foundation (pridvorica). They later donated the Virgin Mary at Lešje to the Monastery of Chilandar at Mount Athos, as confirmed in the charter of Tsar Uroš (1355–1371), issued in 1360.\(^{30}\) Several years later, one of Vukoslav’s sons — Držman — became a monk, Dionysios, although it is not known in which monastery he settled down.\(^{31}\) As the Chilandar monastic community neglected the granted metochion at Lešje, it was returned to Vukoslav’s sons — the monk Dionysios and the nobleman Crep — as confirmed in the charter of Tsar Uroš issued before or in 1371. The monastery owned the land and villages and had a significant estate in the Petrus region.\(^{32}\) The monk Dionysios, most probably the hegoumenos of the Virgin Mary Monastery, and his brother Crep also had good relations with the Great Lavra Monastery on Mount Athos. They donated the villages and land to the Great Lavra, not far from their own foundation, for the sake of their spiritual commemoration on the anniversaries of their deaths. Their donation was confirmed to the Great Lavra in the charter of Prince Lazar issued c.1375.\(^{33}\) Therefore one of the most important monasteries on Mount Athos had estates in the Petrus region and their monks must have been present there. Later, after the death of Dionysios, a nobleman Crep remained the owner of the family foundation, also confirmed by the charters of Patriarchs Ephrem and Spiridon and finally in one of Prince Lazar issued c.1379–1380.\(^{34}\) The complicated history of the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at

\(^{30}\) Zakonski spomenici srpskih država srednjega veka, ed. S. Novaković, Belgrade 1912, 437–39; Mihaljević, Prilog srpskom diplomaturu, 103–105.

\(^{31}\) Whether he became a monk in Vukoslavić’s foundation at Lešje donated to the monastery Chilandar remains unconfirmed possibility.

\(^{32}\) About the monastery estate see M. Blagojević Manastirski posedi kruševačkog kraja, in Kruševac kroz vekove, Kruševac 1972, 25–48, esp. 29–45.

\(^{33}\) For the date of Prince Lazar’s charter see D. N. Anastasijević, Srpski arhiv Lavre atonske, Spomenik SKA 56/48 (Belgrade, 1922) 8–9.

\(^{34}\) The charter of Tsar Uroš is lost. However, the document is known from the later charter of Prince Lazar issued c. 1379–1380, after a dispute and trial between Chilandar monks and Vukoslavlićs family related to their monastery at Lešje. The Chilandar brotherhood wanted their monastery back,
Lešje continued after the death of Crep and of Prince Lazar (after 1389). It is not clear from the written sources, whether in the beginning of the fifteenth century the Monastery of Chilandar, for a short time gained back its possessions in the Petrus, including the Monastery at Lešje. In his charter, issued in 1411, Despot Stefan Lazarević established *adelphata* in the Monastery of Chilandar by granting the estates and villages to Chilandar in the region of Novo Brdo in Serbia. In the last paragraph of the document he declares that some estates are granted as the replacement for Lešje that was given back to its ktetor a priest Benedict (*Venedikt*) Crepović. Therefore, according to the document, a son of nobleman Crep — a priest and monk Benedict — regained the ownership of the family foundation the Monas-
tery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje before 1411.36 Be that as it may, the monastery was one of the prominent monastic centers in the region. It survived the Ottoman conquest in the fifteenth century, and remained active through the sixteenth century.37

The Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje, founded before 1360, was a family foundation of the Vukslija family, as elaborated above. It was located on the spacious plateau outside the Crnica River Gorge, albeit in its vicinity. Although its location does not follow the river gorge and group of monasteries situated there, the significance of the site and its role as an important monastic centre in the region does not exclude it from the monastic colony that flourished there at the end of the fourteenth and in the fifteenth century. The monastery was situated on an elevated plateau sheltered by the mountain peak Baba on the eastern side, while to the west the location opened towards the plains. Above the monastery on the mount Baba a castle — most probably of Vukoslav family — was located.38 The spatial relationship of the family foundation located at the foot of the mount and the castle above on its highest peak, follows the established practice elsewhere in late medieval Serbia.39 The monastery and castle are both in ruins to-

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36 It seems to me that the last paragraph of the charter, related to Benedict Crepović, might be understood as the statement which reflects one previous charter (probably lost) in which Despot Stefan confirmed the document issued by his father Prince Lazar according to which the monastery at Lešje was taken from Chilandar and given back to their founders the Vukoslavić family. As the only heir of the family, Benedict became the new ktetor. Therefore Chilandar was not in the possession of the monastery at Lešje in the beginning of the fifteenth century but only received in 1411 the new estates as the substitute for those lost earlier in the region of Petrus.

37 Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 253.


day and still await archaeological excavations. However, a limited archaeological investigation of the monastery church revealed, at least two building phases. In addition to church, at its southern side, a massive stone tower survived in ruins. No other remnants of medieval monastery buildings are visible. The church was, in its final phase, of a triconch plan, oriented east — west. To the south and north of the central bay, lateral semicircular apses were designed, framed by two pilasters engaged with the lateral walls to the west and by two freestanding piers on the east. To the west and east of the central bay short rectangular bays were added forming the sanctuary on its eastern side with an apse, semicircular on the interior and five-sided on the exterior. The central bay was originally surmounted by a dome on pendentives that did not survive. The church was built of tuff stone ashlars and its western- bay facades were enlivened by pilasters. No other architectural decoration survived, except a fragment of a brick dog-tooth frieze that

probably belonged to the main façade cornice. The older church has been revealed below this church. Its walls do not follow the triconch plan above. The planning objectives of the older church are not clear, as archaeological excavation did not reveal its plan in entirety: therefore all recent speculations in the scholarship about its plan must remain inconclusive. At the floor foundation of the triconch church, fresco remnants, most probably from the older church, and pebbles mixed with mortar have been revealed.

The dating of the complex of churches also remains unsolved question. Three possibilities have been suggested: (1) a triconch was erected between 1360 and 1371 over the older church (Dj. Stričević); (2) a triconch was erected in 1411 over the older church (B. Vulović); and over two older churches — the first from the twelfth and the second from the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth centuries — the triconch was built between 1355 and 1360 (R. Prokić).

Reconsidering all the available artifacts — written sources and archaeology — it is not possible without additional excavation to reveal the planning objectives and building phases that preceded the triconch. However, the dating of the triconch may be reconsidered in the wider architectural context of the fourteenth century. It is well known that the triconch-type was introduced in the central and northern Balkans from Mount Athos in the last three decades of the fourteenth century, the foundation of Prince Lazar — Ravanica, built in 1376/77 — being probably the first triconch in the region. Therefore, the older church in the Monastery at Lešje, founded sometime before 1360, was of another plan and its planning objectives, either single-aisled or cross-inscribed, remain to be archaeologically defined. As for the new triconch church that replaced the old one, the dating remains dubious. However, one may assume that the building occurred well after the Monastery of

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41 According to Vulović, Crkva Sv. Bogorodice u srednjovekovnoj Kulajni, 393, older church was probably single-aisled. Opposite opinion has Prokić, Arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 64–67, who recognizes two older churches that preceded the triconch: one single-aisled and the other cruciform.


44 In scholarship it is still known as “Morava School” architecture, according to G. Millet’s typology from the beginning of the twentieth century. Although my paper does not comment on this matter, I would like to remind the readers that numerous scholars, including myself, have recently seriously questioned this old, out-of-date, typology. The literature is enormous. Recent publications include: Stričević, op. cit.; V. J. Djurić, Nastanak graditeljskog stila moravske škole, ZLUMS 1 (1965) 33–66; B. Vulović, The role of Chilandar and of the Serbian tradition in the formation of the Morava style, in Moravska škola i njeno doba, Belgrade, 1972, 169–80.; V. Korać, Les origines de l’architecture de l’école de la Morava, in Moravska škola i njeno doba, Belgrade, 1972, 157–68; S. Popović, The Byzantine Architectural Tradition in the Serbian State Between 1355 and 1459, Serbian Studies 9/1–2 (1995) 59–79, esp. 62–65; V. Ristić, Moravska arhitektura, Kruševac, 1996; J. Trkulja, Aesthetics and Symbolism of Late Byzantine Church Facades, Ph. D dissertation, Princeton University 2002; I. Stevović, Serbian Architecture of the Morava Period: A Local School or an Epilogue to the Leading trends in Late Byzantine Architecture. A Study in Methodology, ZRVI 43 (2006) 231–241.

45 According to the surviving monuments, it seems that there were no triconch churches before 1375 in the northern Balkans; see V. J. Djurić, Srpski državni sabori u Peči i crkveno graditeljstvo, in Le Prince Lazar, Belgrade, 1975, 105–21 and esp. 110.
Ravanica was erected in 1376/77. The charter of Prince Lazar issued 1379/80, confirmed that after Dionysios’ death, his brother Crep enlarged the monastery estates granting additional villages and land to the monastic community; however, there is no mention of any building activity in the monastery. It is not known when his son — monk Benedict, considered as the second ktetor — entered the monastery. He was definitely there before 1411 when Despot Stefan Lazarević issued a document to the Monastery of Chilandar in which he confirmed that the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje was previously given back to its ktetor monk Benedict Crepović. Therefore Benedict, like his father Crep who received a charter from Prince Lazar, must had received a charter — now lost — from Stefan Lazarević that confirmed his founder’s rights over the monastery, most probably after 1402 when Stefan was granted the title of despot by the Byzantine emperor. Therefore it seems that construction of the triconch-church may have occurred after 1402 and only in 1411 confirmed as a foundation of Benedict. The proposed dating is in keeping with the proliferation of triconch-churches built in the last decade of the fourteenth and the first decade of the fifteenth century in the Crnica River Gorge and elsewhere in the central and northern Balkans.

As mentioned above, the monastery was located at the foot of mount Baba upon which the castle of the nobleman Vukoslav was situated. Archaeological excavations were never undertaken there and only remnants of fortification walls testify to its former existence. Most probably the castle bore the name of the region — Petrus, since in both charters, one of Tsar Uroš (1360) and the other of Prince Lazar (1379–80), it is explicitly mentioned that the Monastery of the Virgin Mary (also known as the Virgin Mary of Lešje) was founded below the Petrus on Vukoslav’s estate at Lešje. However, the fortification may be much older and only partially reused later in the fourteenth century by the family Vukosavljević. In the foothills of Baba mount, in the wider area of the monastery complex at Lešje, a necropolis dating from the twelfth century was found. As mentioned before,

46 Mihaljić, Prilog srpskom diplomataru, 105.
47 Actes de Chilandar II, 560.
48 Prokić, Arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 49–50.
49 Identification of the fortified city of Petrus is still debated in scholarship, because two fortifications exist in the region. One above the monastery at Lešje, and the other in the river Crnica gorge. R. Mihaljić identifies the fortified city of Petrus close to the monastery at Lešje, in fact he confused the monastery walled enclosure with the city, because he did not know for the ruins of the city on top of mount Baba; R. Mihaljić, Gde se nalazio grad Petrus? Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor 34/1–2 (1968) 264–267; while R. Novaković, Burg und Bezirk Petrus, Balcanoslavica 8 (1979) 23–36, identifies the city of Petrus with the fortification located in the river Crnica gorge. I think that the Castle of Petrus was a family lodging of the Vukosavljević, located above their monastery, while the other fortress in the Crnica gorge may be fortification known also as Petrus, however of much wider strategic significance for the defense of the entire region; see M. Madas, Trial Researches at the Medieval Town of Petrus, Balcanoslavica 8 (1979) 37–45. The Vukosavljević’s “castle” was probably organized as a court with wooden architecture, and did not leave any traces.
50 The fortification may originate from late antiquity as suggested by fragmentary revealed artifacts, Vulović, Crkva Sv. Bogorodice u srednjovekovnoj Kulajni, 396 and fig. 5.
only the ruins of the triconch-church and of the massive stone tower survived of the monastery buildings. However, the position of the church at the centre of the spacious plateau with the tower situated at its southern side, indicates that the monastery once had enclosure walls and all necessary buildings as it is known from the written sources that it was a significant cenobitic community. While the church plan reveals the variant of the Athonite- triconch, the monastery tower does not follow the Mount Athos type of towers with buttresses (Vatopedi, Chilandar etc.). It was a square–in-plan stone structure, most probably located not far from the original monastery entrance, which did not survive. The monastery tower, as elsewhere, was multifunctional. It served as a secure abode in case of danger, but also as an anchoretic abode that included a cell and a chapel in its top level. This opens another question of the monastic community organization at Lešje — whether they were hesychasts who lived in lavra and did they have monastic cells outside the monastery? Bearing in mind the relationship of the Vukoslavić family with the Mount Athos monasteries of Chilandar and the Great Lavra of St. Athanasios and also the presence of the celebrated Romylos of Vidin and his disciples in Ravanica Monastery, it seems possible that a majority of the monks in the community of the Virgin Mary at Lešje were followers of the well established hesychast movement that spread from Mount Athos and Paroria into the northern Balkans. That the monastic community at Lešje functioned as the combined cenobium—lavra type remains a possibility, albeit yet to be explored. The written sources confirm that a great number of monastic and anchoretic establishments were associated with manuscript copying in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the central and northern Balkans. It is also known that prominent monks — hesychasts — from Mount Athos were invited to come into Serbian lands for manuscript production. Manuscript copying was one of the activities practiced in the community at Lešje. It is noted in written sources that in 1412 a monk Jovan copied a book in the “desert of Lešje”. The term “desert” is used as a topos to designate a monastic desert — an isolated and remote environment. Where the book was copied — in the isolated cell outside the monastery or probably in the cell located in the monastery tower — remains unknown. Whether or not the monastery had dependent cells in the vicinity on its estates we do not know. However, according to the practice elsewhere regarding monastery estates, including the Mount Athos monasteries, that had isolated cells and even small monasteries on their land, it is likely that the monastic community at Lešje had dependent monastic cells on their estate in the Petrus. From written sources we are familiar with the names of the villages that belonged to the monastery estate of the

52 The cenobitic community is mentioned in the charter of Patriarch Ephrem, see Mihaljić, Prilog srpskom diplomaturu, 104 (text of the charter).
53 About monastery planning in medieval Serbia see Popović, The Cross in the Circle, passim.
Virgin Mary at Lešje. Most of the villages survived and still exist in the region. A recent site survey identified several locations as possible archaeological sites with remnants of late medieval pottery or even isolated walls of most probably medieval chapels that need to be archaeologically investigated. All of the sites were either on the borders or within the estates of the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje. Therefore, the monastic community had their dependent chapels and cells outside the monastery. As the Virgin Mary Monastery had a close relationship with Chilandar to which it was donated before becoming an independent foundation after a dispute with the community of Chilandar, some of the monks were probably recruited from Mount Athos; others were locals, some of them possibly the followers of St. Romylos who spent his last days in the remote hesychasterion of the Monastery of Ravanica. Yet, another source of influence might prove relevant for the community at Lešje — the Great Lavra of St. Athanasios of Athos that had estates in the region of Petrus, bordering with land of the Virgin Mary. Several charters were issued between 1375 and 1452 donating villages and land to the Great Lavra Monastery, either by the Vukoslavić family or by Prince Lazar and later by his son Despot Stefan Lazarević. However, only from the charter of Despot Djuradj Branković (1452) one may learn the entire list of eleven villages that Great Lavra owned in the Petrus region. Some of these villages survived and a recent site survey revealed several locations that may have remnants of medieval chapels and churches and need further archaeological investigation. If this proves correct, the Great Lavra must have had significant monastic establishments on their estates in the Petrus region. Since the Vukoslavić family had donated the land and villages, one may assume that the monastic population at Great Lavra estates in Petrus was on friendly terms with the monastic

57 Villages are: Lešje, Mutnica Donja, Brestnica, Zubarje and Nevidovo (Zakonski spomenici, 438); to the monastery was later donated villages: Golubovce, Vidovo and Sinji Vir (Mihaljević, Prilog srpskom diplomaturu, 105.)


59 I would like to point out the following sites, from the recent survey — R. Prokić as in note above — that I have recognized as possible chapels and cells of the monastery at Lešje: Ponjekavička crkva on the western slopes of mount Baba (p.117); site known as SS. Anargyroi in medieval Brestnica — modern Plana, (p.118); possible remnants of two churches near village Mirilovce (p. 119); possible remnants of one church at the site in Donja Mutnica on the eastern foothills of the mount Baba (p.120).

60 About the dispute between the monasteries of the Virgin Mary at Lešje and Chilandar see: A. Solovjev, Jedno sudjenje iz doba knesa Lazara, Arhiv za pravne i društvene nauke 35/3 (Belgrade, 1929) 188–97; Mihaljević, Prilog srpskom diplomaturu, 99–105.

61 D. N. Anastasijević, Srpski arhiv Lavre atonske, Spomenik SKA 56/48 (Belgrade, 1922) 8–9; Zakonski spomenici, 495–501.

62 The villages are: Vrankovo, Božkovo, Kurilova, Mutnica Gornja, Šaludovce, Buljani, Izvor, Brnica, Petruša and Plana; see Zakonski spomenici, 502–504.

63 The following list includes the villages and remnants of medieval structures that recent site survey notified (Prokić, Arhitektura Petruške oblasti, passim), and I have recognized as possible monastic establishments on the Great Lavra estates: the triconch church of St. Nicholas at Izvor (p.110); a single-isled church in Gornja Mutnica (p.113); a church in the village Plana, located on the southwestern side of the mount Baba (p.114); and remnants of two churches in the area of the village Buljane (p.115–16).
community at Lešje. However, this does not help us to conclude who had the greater significance and influence in the region. According to all the available data discussed thus far, it seems obvious that the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje was a cenobium-lavra type. It is also clear that the cenobitic monastery acted as the core of the lavra while individual cells existed outside the core, on the estate. What is not clear is the size of this monastic agglomeration and whether some of these anchoritic abodes were dependent small monasteries, also known as sketai, within the jurisdiction of the Virgin Mary Monastery. Another fact also remains uncertain — the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of these monasteries and their bishopric see. However, this question needs to be reconsidered in the wider network of the monastic establishments within the Crnica Gorge.

To the north of the Virgin Mary Monastery at Lešje, deep into the Crnica Gorge in the mountainous and dramatic landscape high above the river on Mount Čokoće a large medieval fortress was located. The origin of the fortress and its name (Petrus?) is still debated. As mentioned before, it was confused with the castle of the Vukosavljić family (which probably bears the same name — Petrus), located above the Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje. Below the fortress on mount Čokoće, and above the right bank of the Crnica, on the narrow plateau a monastery was located, known today as the Virgin Mary of Petruša. Although the written sources do not mention the fortress on mount Čokoće, recent archaeological excavations revealed a large fortress with a citadel on its highest peak. According to the archaeological artifacts, the original fortress is older than the Middle Ages; however, it was reused later and was active during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its significant size and strategic position also confirm its importance in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in the region; however, it is not known who was in command there and whether it belonged to the family Vukoslavić. Although one old Serbian chronicle mentions that in the year 1413 the Ottomans defeated Despot Stefan Lazarević, and devastated Kruševac, Petrus, Stalač, Koprijan and other “cities” it is not clear which of these two forts in the Petrus region the source referred to. As we have learned that the residence above the Virgin Mary Monastery at Lešje was the family castle of the Vukoslavić’s, it seems more probable that the chronicle refers to another fort in the Petrus region, one on mount Čokoće. It is also interesting that below this fortress and above the Crnica River, several small monasteries were founded in the late medieval period.

As mentioned above, one of the monasteries is known as the Virgin Mary of Petruša. The church is located on the small flat plateau on the top of a steep cliff above the river. In a dramatic environment surrounded by the mountainous peaks

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64 As for the term skete referring to the small monastery, it seems that the term became popular on Mount Athos in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; see under “Skete” in ODB 3, 1909.
65 As in note 48 above.
66 Madas, Trial Researches at the Medieval Town of Petrus, 37–45; D. Madas and M. Brmbolić, Petruš — srednjovekovno utvrđenje, Arheološki pregled 23 (Belgrade, 1982) 144–46.
67 Lj. Stojanović, Stari srpski rodoslovi i letopisi, Sremski Karlovci 1927, 223.
of the gorge, a small monastic complex was organized. The church plan is a triconch with a tripartite altar space on the East, preceded by a narthex on the West. The planning objectives reveal the Athonite influences (Great Lavra, Vatopedi, Iveron, Chilandar, etc.), present elsewhere in late medieval Serbia. It was built in a combination of limestone and tuff ashlers. The planning peculiarity of the tripartite altar space is the position of its lateral north and south walls that emerge from the north and south conches, revealing certain planning similarities with some older Byzantine examples beyond Mount Athos. The church is in ruins today and its fresco decoration did not survive. However, during the site survey in the 1950s, the fresco composition was still visible in the lunette above the main church portal representing the Presentation of the Virgin into the Temple, probably the original dedication of the church. Two monastery buildings survived in ruins. They were located, on the lower level, to the West and South of the

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70 Bošković, Srednjovekovni spomenici severoistočne Srbije, 211.
church, creating a narrow monastery enclosure. The buildings were of stone, planned as an elongated rectangle and were multi-storied. Their parallel disposition on the site allowed the formation of the narrow corridor between the buildings where the main monastery entrance was located and lead to the church platform above. The south-western building, located closer to the church had probably storage rooms at the ground floor level, while the upper storey served as the refectory, the entrance of which faced the main church portal. The southern building had an additional entrance on the ground floor positioned towards the plateau outside the monastery; therefore it probably served as the stable, while upper stories, facing the southern church façade, were designed for monastic cells.

The monastery had a hesychasterion in the nearby cave located below the fortress on mount Ćokoće. A masonry wall was built at the cave entrance, forming the façade of a monastic isolated abode. According to recent archaeological survey, fragments of late medieval pottery were identified there, suggesting that the hesychasterion was active at the end of the fourteenth and in the beginning of the fifteenth century.

71 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 78–79.
73 Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 106.
The foundation date of the monastery complex is not known. According to the planning objectives and surviving architecture, including the archaeological artifacts, the monastery was founded at the end of the fourteenth century. Who was the founder of this monastery and whether it had estates in the region remain unknown. If the dedication of the church is rightly identified as the Presentation of the Virgin into the Temple, it coincides with the same one to whom Chilandar is dedicated. Therefore, one may speculate on possible connections. However, it is also known that the Great Lavra monastery estate boundaries where nearby the Virgin Mary of Petruša Monastery on the southwestern side of the region. Although there are no written sources that mention the Great Lavra monks in this complex, one may not exclude possible relations between these two monastic communities. The later history of the monastery also remains concealed in darkness. As it is not mentioned in the sixteenth-century Turkish inventory lists for this region, it seems that the monastery was deserted by the end of the fifteenth century.

Further to the north on the left bank of the river gorge, not far from the Virgin Mary of Petruša, lies the ruins of another small monastery dedicated to St. John the Baptist. A single-aisled monastery church built of semi-finished stone blocks was located on the artificially flattened rocky plateau. Attached to the steep cliff with its northern wall the church was enlarged by the addition of narthex on its western side, and one porch was added before the narthex’s western facade. The naos was originally covered by a barrel vault, as testified by the tuff ashlars found during archaeological excavations. Remnants of frescoes found in the debris confirmed the supposition that the church had wall paintings, and fragments of a brick dog-tooth frieze indicated that the church had a decorative cornice. No other fragments of architectural decoration were revealed except for one small stone rosette that belonged either to the façade decoration or to some church furniture. It was carved in low relief and was not perforated. Its decorative pattern included a circular frame executed as a twisted rope band and centrally positioned were floral decorations intertwined with interlace patterns executed in low relief. This type of architectural decoration is in keeping with late fourteenth-century architectural design typical for the northern Balkans, displaying a blend of the Byzantine tradition with a new, indigenous manner of building. The only written artifact revealed in the monastery is a stone block dated to 1507, with a damaged inscription about the renovation of the church and the name of its second ktetor that is unfortunately unreadable.

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74 Ibid., 110.
75 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 99–104; Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 105.
76 B. Cvetković, Stone Rosette from the Monastery of St. John the Baptist (in Serbian w/English resume), Saopštenja 34 (Belgrade, 2002) 193–98. Similar rosettes were used on Byzantine sarcophagi; see N.K. Moutsopoulos, Η βυζαντινή σαρκοφάγος της Ρεντίνης, Βυζαντινάκα 4 (1984) 157.
77 This period of architectural development is known in scholarship as “Morava School”, and includes some of the most important monuments of medieval Serbia.
78 Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 241–43 (including the text of the inscription).
Along the southern and western borders of the plateau were placed monastery buildings forming a small enclosure. A narrow entrance to the monastery was located between the buildings at the southwestern corner of the complex. Monastery buildings located along the southern side were rectangular in plan, built of semi-finished stone and had two stories that followed the slope of the terrain. Therefore the ground-floor level was one storey lower than the church plateau, had an additional entrance outside the monastery enclosure and probably served as a stable. The second floor provided the spaces for the monastic cells facing the southern church façade — a similar design to that executed in the Virgin of Petruša monastery. The buildings along the western enclosure were also rectangular in plan. However, they have not been entirely excavated and remain architecturally undefined. On the basis of limited archaeological excavations and revealed artifacts, the complex was dated to the late fourteenth century. It was renewed in the beginning of the sixteenth century as testified by the inscription from 1507. Who were the first and second founders remained unknown. Although the history of the monastery is obscure, some general observations about its function and place among the monastic agglomeration in the Crnica Gorge may be made.

The only written document found in this small complex reveals, at least, two building phases — before and after 1507. The church itself includes three building

79 Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 110.
phases: a naos, added narthex and porch in front of it. Whether or not the narthex was added to the main church body in a short time period or much later is difficult to determine judging by the applied building techniques. Although they appear very similar on both naos and narthex — indicating a narrow time gap — one must be aware that simple building techniques of semi-finished stone — without any particular stylistic features — have a very long tradition from medieval times to the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and are therefore very difficult to date.80 However, the planning characteristics and disposition of the buildings within the entirety imply successive building phases, relevant for both the function and dating of this complex.

I propose that the first building phase included a small single-aisled church built below the hanging rocks above — a kind of a rock shelter, on a small plateau representing an isolated anchoretic cell, for a distinguished monk who originally came from the Monastery of the Virgin Mary of Petruša, located in the immediate vicinity on the right bank of the Crnica. This abode, similar to many built within the Mount Athos monastic colony, but also elsewhere in Byzantium and in medieval Serbia, was at first a dependent cell of the Virgin Petruša Monastery. It must have been contemporary with its mother-monastery therefore the cell was founded at the end of the fourteenth century. In the second phase the cell was transformed

80 According to Prokić, Srednjevekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti. 102, three building phases may be identified: naos (before the fourteenth century); narthex (fourteenth century); and additional porch in front of the narthex (post-medieval). According to B. Cvetković, Stone Rosette from the Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 195–6, similar building method of naos and narthex imply same time period (fourteenth century).
into a small monastery — skete — also a dependent foundation to the Virgin of Petruša Monastery. At that time the church was enlarged and the narthex and monastery buildings were erected. Most probably this occurred at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when some other small monastic complexes also emerged in this region. The third building phase, mentioned in the inscription of 1507, included the addition of the western porch and probably some renovation work on the church and monastery buildings. By the early sixteenth century, the monastery probably became an independent foundation, similar to many other small complexes in the Balkans that struggled for survival within the Ottoman Empire. According to Turkish inventory lists for this region from 1536, the monastery was still active, most probably until the end of the sixteenth century.81

Another, more complex question is the relationship of the Virgin Mary of Petruša monastery and the fortress above. As we have seen the late fourteenth century was time of insecurity in the Balkans and in the Byzantine Empire. From the beginning of the fourteenth century Byzantine emperors and military leaders warned monks to leave insecure monastery settlements or even to find security within the walls of cities and nearby fortifications.82 In these turbulent times monks and celebrated hermits received yet additional importance: they were also the spiritual defenders of the endangered Empire.83 It is well known fact that Alexius III of Trebizond in his chrysobull of 1346 contested that the defense of the Empire should rely even more on faith and monasteries than on fortresses.84 Although the statement may be an exaggeration, it clearly mirrors the desperate situation that the Byzantine world was facing. During the fourteenth century a great number of Mount Athos monasteries received additional defensive walls and towers, and some monastic settlements were even build as true fortresses: for example, Ravanica and Resava in the central Balkans.85 Therefore location of the Monastery of the Virgin of Petruša in the immediate vicinity of the fortified castle fulfilled both objectives: the physical security of the monks and the spiritual protection of the fortress and its inhabitants. Other examples from the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Balkans testify that the case is not unique — the cave Monastery of the Archangel Michael and the fortress of Ras, the Monastery of Holy Archangels near Prizren and the fortress above, the Monastery of Transfiguration at Lipovac and the nearby fortress and many others.86

81 Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 250–51.
83 M. Popović, Duhovno vojinstvo, in Privatni život u srpskim zemljama srednjeg veka, 240–41.
84 P. Charanis, The Monk as an Element of Byzantine Society, DOP 25 (1971) 84, esp. note 162.
To the north of the St. John the Baptist Monastery, on the left bank of the Crnica, archaeology revealed another spacious monastic complex dedicated to St. Nicholas. There is no mention of the monastery in medieval written sources. However, the monastic settlement was included in the sixteenth-century Turkish inventory lists for this region as the Monastery of St. Nicholas.\textsuperscript{87} According to archaeological investigations the foundation of the monastery may be dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{88} The complex is situated on the spacious plateau created by a huge bend of the Crnica that surrounded the monastery and only its southern side was attached to the rocky slopes of the Kučaj Mountains. The monastery plan reveals a trapezoidal disposition following the natural terrain with the main monastery church located centrally.\textsuperscript{89} Along the enclosure

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\textsuperscript{87} Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 250–252.
\textsuperscript{88} Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 110.
\textsuperscript{89} Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 86–95.
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wall built of stone, various monastery buildings were attached including two entrances located on the western and eastern sides of the complex. The planning objectives of the settlement represent a typical late Byzantine monastic complex. The main monastery church, now in ruins, is of a triconch plan with all three apses that project outside in three sides of a polygon. Originally it was a domed building with a narthex. The rising walls of the naos and the narthex were built of semi-finished stone blocks. The church interior was originally decorated with frescoes. Fragments of wall paintings were found in the debris. Although they were very small, it was possible to date the fresco paintings to the late fourteenth century.90 A small single-aisled chapel was added to the southern church wall, but the simple masonry without any stylistic designation does not allow secure dating. However, the interior of the chapel was decorated with frescoes — remnants of which survived on its walls — and were attributed to sixteenth- or even seventeenth-century workshops.91

The monastery buildings located along the entire northern enclosure wall were various workshops that included a vast blacksmith’s shop with two furnaces and a spacious chamber for ceramic production equipped with a massive masonry stove, located at the northwestern side.92 The size of this part of the complex and its functional objectives imply significant productive activity. That a local ceramic production flourished there has been confirmed through archaeological excavations and revealed artifacts (pottery and a variety of agricultural tools) dated to the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Along the southern and partially western enclosure, only lower portions of the elongated rectangular in plan buildings survived — most probably the monastic cells. A vast rectangular two-storey building with a porch was located to the west of the church and its second storey served as the monastery refectory, according to its plan and typical position revealed in a majority of fourteenth-century monasteries.93 As the building was two-storied and had main access to the first storey only through the door located within the main monastery entrance chamber, it probably served either as storage or as a stable at the ground-floor level. All secular buildings were built of semi-finished stone blocks while the entire courtyard was covered with pebbles. Both monastery entrances were located along the same longitudinal axis oriented east — west dividing the courtyard into two parts unequal in size and function. The smaller northern part was a busy productive center while the southern larger and calmer housed the church and other buildings necessary to a monastic environment. The main monastery gate was positioned to the west of the church therefore the main church portal was immediately visible upon the entrance into the courtyard. The eastern, smaller gate served as an additional approach to the main communication route running along the left bank of the Crnica and to the monastery estates in the

90 Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 238.
91 Ibid., 239.
92 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petroške oblasti, 90; Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 102.
93 Popović, The Cross in the Circle, 242–76.
vicinity. According to its size and disposition this was the largest monastic settlement within the Crnica Gorge.

The history and the founder of the monastery remain unknown. The monastery must have had an estate, however, its size and borders towards neighboring foundations in the gorge are unknown. The planning objectives of the monastery settlement and its architecture clearly imply a cenobitic community. The lack of any other historical sources that may identify the monastery possessions outside its enclosure, including anchoretic cells, do not allow secure conclusions whether it is an example of Late Byzantine lavra-type community the core of which was a cenobitic monastery.

Not far to the north of the Monastery of St. Nicholas, on the left bank of the river on an elevated plateau the ruins of a triconch church preceded by a narthex (in scholarly literature named the church I) were recently excavated. Built of semi-finished stones the church had two lateral apses — southern and northern — and one on the east side in front of the sanctuary. All three apses were semicircular. Neither its dedication nor the founder is known. Only half a mile to the north of this church on the same left bank of the river another church building was identified (named in scholarship as the church II). The plan is also a triconch with three semicircular apses and narthex. The peculiarity of the plan includes the apse on the east that has the same width as the central bay. The building is ruined, however the remnants of the frescoes are still visible on its interior walls. The last of these small triconch churches, revealed at the entrance into the gorge, was located on the right bank of the river (named in scholarship as the church III). Although in ruins, its walls preserved frescoes. A fresco representation of a large three

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94 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 104–105; Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 234; Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 102.
95 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 106–107; Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 234; Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 101.
96 Prokić, Srednjovekovna arhitektura Petruške oblasti, 107–109; Knežević, Srednjovekovne crkve i manastiri u dolini Crnice, 234; Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 101.
armed cross with the inscription IC XC NIKA, an apotropaic symbol frequently used in fourteenth-century wall paintings, survived in the prothesis niche.

Limited archaeological excavations undertaken on all three sites, established the early fifteenth century as the possible date of their foundation. It is not yet known whether additional buildings existed around the churches, although it looks very possible, according to some wall remnants visible on the locations. Therefore it may be that on all three locations small dependent cells of the larger monastic foundation — sketai — were established. The vicinity of the Monastery of St. Nicholas does not exclude a possibility that the churches are related to this community.

However, another large monastic complex known as the Monastery of Sisоjevac, founded at the end of the fourteenth or beginning of the fifteenth century and located in the vicinity of the entrance into the gorge cannot be ruled out as the core of the lavra that included all three churches as dependent cells. As mentioned before, the monastery church was dedicated to the Transfiguration and the vast monastery settlement was established most probably after 1398 on the right bank of the Crnica on the spacious plateau not far from the entrance into the gorge. According to tradition, the founder of the monastery is considered a monk Sisoje. He is mentioned as the spiritual father and owner of some property in the Petrus region (Parakinov Brod) in the charter issued in 1398 by Princess Milica, wife of Prince Lazar. As the charter reads, the property inadvertently granted to Sisoje was given back to the previous owner — the Great Lavra of St. Athanasios from Mount Athos. The first written record that mentioned Sisoje as the former hegoumenos of the Monastery of the Transfiguration is from 1509. In that year an envoy was sent to the court in Moscow and was granted financial help for the Monastery of the Transfiguration, where “the pious abbot Sisoje rests in peace”. However, both documents do not reveal whether Sisoje was a founder of the monastery. From the first document one may learn that he owned some land that was not related to the monastery and may imply that the monastery was not yet founded in 1398, while the other revealed that the monastery became his resting place and centre of his veneration. The role of Sisoje as the founder is questioned in recent scholarship on the evidence that he is also mentioned as the hegoumenos of the monastery and that a ktetor’s right includes the right to appoint the hegoumenos, therefore excluding the possibility that a founder may, at the same time, be abbot of his foundation. However, this supposition is not correct because the ktetor’s right in Byzantium does not exclude the possibility that the founder, the ecclesias, be simultaneously the hegoumenos of his foundation.

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97 Brmbolić, Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice, 110.
99 I. Ruvarac, O kućajinskim manastirima po zapisima, Starinar VI/2 (1889) 35.
100 B. Cvetković, Manastir Sisоjevac i monah Sisoje, Istorija umetnosti 26/1–2, (Belgrade, 2002) 55–76, esp. 65.
101 For example: Paul and Timothy the first and second founder of the monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis in Constantinople were both the hegoumenoi of their foundation. St. Sava of Ser-
Unfortunately, the most important visual source — the donor’s fresco-portrait — is badly damaged and does not provide secure information. Although its position is known — the north side of the west wall of the naos — only a few faded fresco-remnants survived. The evidence of the former composition is preserved in one drawing and in old photographs from the first half of the twentieth century.  

According to these sources, although faded, it is possible to identify that two standing figures holding a model of the church were painted. One figure has been recognized as Despot Stefan Lazarević while the other figure’s identity remains unknown as only the lower portion of the body survived. The second figure was certainly a high ecclesiast because one part of his vestment survived, decorated with crosses inscribed in circles. Therefore this person might have been either a bishop or possibly the patriarch.  

If the identification of the figure as the patriarch proves correct, this would eliminate Sisoje as one of the founders. However, if the person was a bishop it introduces the possibility that Sisoje was granted the

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102 The author of a drawing is B. Vulović, Konzervatorske beleške sa terena, Zbornik Arhitektonskog fakulteta, IV/3 (Belgrade, 1957–58) 3–7 esp. 7. The photographs are kept in the archives of the National Museum in Belgrade.

103 Cvetković, Manastir Sisojevac i monah Sisoje, 67; T. Starodubcev, Monastery Sisojevac, Belgrade 2008, 8–12; T. Starodubcev, Drugi sloj živopisa crkve manastira Sisojevca i pitanje njegovog ktiitora, (I am in debt to my colleague T. Starodubcev for giving me this article to read while still in print).
title of bishop and therefore was one of the founders. Although both suppositions must remain open, it seems more probable that the figure represented the patriarch and that Despot Stefan founded, with the patriarch’s endorsement, a monastery for the distinguished hesychast Sisoje and his followers. An analogy may be drawn with the foundation of the Monastery of Ždrelo (Gornjak), which was founded by Prince Lazar, with the patriarch’s approval, for the celebrated Gregory of Gornjak and his disciples.\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, the church was founded by Despot Stefan in about 1402 and dedicated to the Transfiguration which reflects a new impulse of contemplative monasticism of the hesychasts. Two layers of frescoes were identified in the church. The older was painted in the altar space representing five large three armed crosses with apotropaic symbolism, and most probably was not intended to remain visible.\textsuperscript{105} As these frescoes represent a unique instance in medieval Serbia it may indicate that the \textit{hegoumenos} was a foreigner — hesychast Sisoje.\textsuperscript{106} The second layer of frescoes was executed much later. If the patriarch is depicted in the donors’ composition it may be Kiril, who sat on the patriarchal throne from 1407 to 1419, as the second layer of frescoes is dated within this time period. Be that as it may, we have firm support that in 1507 the monk Sisoje was venerated as the pious \textit{hegoumenos} of the monastery. In this light all three churches: II, III, and I may be cells belonging to Sisojevac, which was a \textit{lavra} type monastic settlement with a cenobitic core.

The plan of the cenobitic \textit{lavra} core included an encircling wall with a centrally located triconch type church and an entrance into the complex positioned on the southwest wall with a protruding rectangular tower attached to the east side of the monastery gate. South of the monastery archaeological excavations have revealed remnants of an outer encircling wall as additional defense. Towards the interior of the complex another rectangular building was found, similar in plan to the entrance tower with the porch at its eastern side, and dated slightly later than the outer tower. The function of this building remains unknown. It may have provided access to the tower; however, according to its plan and position it did not serve as a monastery hospice, as has been recently proposed.\textsuperscript{107} An even older structure has been revealed to exist below this building on its eastern side. According to its location and plan it was probably a building that provided rooms for the gatekeeper, and represents the oldest object in the complex.\textsuperscript{108} Further to the

\textsuperscript{104} A. Mladenović, Povelje kneza Lazara, Belgrade 2003, 23–48.
\textsuperscript{106} S. Gabelić, Linearno slikarstvo Sisojevca, 437, proposed that monk Sisoje was the \textit{Ktetor} of the monastery.
\textsuperscript{107} Popović, The Cross in the Circle, 217–219 (proposed that it probably provided access to the tower). D. Madas, Manastir Sisojevac. Arheološko iskopavanje i konzervacija zidova manastirske trezarije, Glasnik Društva konzervatora Srbije 19 (Belgrade, 1995) 100–103 (esp. 102, identified this building as monastery hospice). For monastery hospice planning see Popović, The Cross in the Circle, 117–118.
\textsuperscript{108} For more information about monastery entrances and function of the gatekeeper see S. Mojsilović-Popović, Monastery Entrances Around the Year 1200, in Studenica i vizantijska umetnost oko 1200 godine, Belgrade 1988, 153–170.
east, on the remnants of the gate house a spacious elongated rectangular building — refectory — was excavated and dated to the same period as the building with a porch — the beginning of the fifteenth century. Along the northern wall, facing the church, the refectory had a porch and on the eastern side it terminated in an apse in a horseshoe form. The apse was elevated and separated from the main body of the building with a stepped entrance located on its eastern wall located to the north with a low parapet. A large stone stove was built later in the northwest corner of the refectory. Archaeology revealed that this refectory suffered in a great fire, although not precisely dated but close to the beginning of the fifteenth century, renovation of the refectory and the building of the stove might have occurred during this time period. The separation and elevation of the apsidal space from the main body of the refectory may indicate a monastic hierarchy according to which the seat of the hegoumenos, as the seats of honor, and other high ecclesiast were separated.109

To the west of the church, along the encircling wall, two residential buildings were located. They probably had storage facilities on the ground floor and either administrative or residential spaces on the upper story. On the eastern side of the complex the remnants of a small rectangular tower-like structure survive. The function of this building remains unknown, although according to its size and plan it may serve as a monastery latrine.110 South of the monastery traces have been found of additional encircling walls which indicate the existence of an outer defense of the monastic settlement.111

Centrally located was the triconch church dedicated to the Transfiguration with a narthex that had an upper storey, shown in the donor’s portrait. It is interesting that the church did not have the architectural decoration known in scholarship as the “Morava School” which included decorative rosettes, carved ornaments and facades in alternating brick and stone courses, or plastered in imitation of alternate courses of stone and brick.112 It is supposed that the facades at Sisojevac were also plastered and painted. However, no traces of color or relevant decorative patterns were found on the external walls of the church. The church of Sisojevac survived no higher than the dado zone which contained pilasters that may end as blind semicircular arcades or blind pointed-arch arcades like in Despot Stefan’s Resava — combining the actual Gothic style and older Nemanjić tradition in church planning. As it is known that the present façade, with blind semicircular arcades, is a construct of the twentieth century, it seems that the originally church may have had pointed-arch arcades as in Resava’s windows.113 It is interesting to observe that the Holy Trinity

110 Popović, The Cross in the Circle, 234; 242; 295; 302; esp. 219.
111 T. Starodubcev, Monastery Sisojevac, 19. The Ravanica and Resava monasteries had a line of outer defenses.
112 See note 44 above.
113 B. Vulović did the reconstruction of Sisojevac. B. Vulović, Konzervacija ruševina Sisojevca, Saopštenja 1 (Belgrade 1956) 59–60. Sisojevac originally may have had Gothic arcade, espe-
church at Resava was built between 1407 and 1418. The building of the church coincided with the same time period as the second layer of frescoes in the Transfiguration church at Sisojevac. There are numerous iconographic and stylistic similarities between the Despot’s foundations at Resava and at Sisojevac. Therefore, as mentioned before, the second layer of frescoes was probably executed during Patriarch Kiril reign, who sat on patriarchal throne from 1407–1419.

Not far from the monastery is a cave known as ‘Sisoje’s cave’ with a similar tradition as Romylo’s cave not far from Ravanica. However, we do not know whether Sisoje used this cave as his hesychasterion. It is believed that his tomb is located in the southwest corner of the nave. It was archaeologically examined during the first conservation works in 1931, which concluded that the tomb had been plundered. Therefore, the exact resting place of Sisoje remained concealed in darkness.

Little is known about church organization in the region of Petrus, as relevant historical sources are lacking. It is believed that the entire region was under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Braničevo, who had a see in the city of Braničevo with a cathedral dedicated to St. Nicholas. Unfortunately it is not known where the cathedral was located within the city proper. The first Serbian bishop of Braničevo known from historical sources, Majsije, was from the fourteenth century, and in 1416 the archbishop of Braničevo was Venjamin. In 1428 the building of the new Serbian capital, Smederevo, began. Unfortunately in 1439 the city fell into Turkish hands, and remained so until 1444 when it was liberated by the Serbs. It is not known where the metropolitan’s see was located during the Turkish occupation. Some scholars believed that the monastery complex located in the Gornjak Ravine known according to local tradition as the Metropolitanate was the temporary see of the metropolitan of Braničevo. In 1444 the metropolitan see was moved to Smederevo where Despot Djuradj Branković built the church, dedicated to the Annunciation, as the cathedral and see of the Metropolitan of Smederevo.

114 Starodubcev, Monastery Sisojevac, 15.
115 M. Dinić, Braničevo u srednjem veku, Srpske zemlje u srednjem veku, Belgrade 1978, 84–188.
116 M. Janković, Episkopije i mitropolije srpske crkve u srednjem veku, Belgrade 1985, 187–188.
117 Dinić, Braničevo u srednjem veku, 103 and esp. note 55.
118 Despot Stefan Lazarević and Djuradj Branković took care of the church organization in the fifteenth century. It was during their rules that new metropolitanates were established. Some were moved to new cathedral centers. M. Janković Episkopije i mitropolije srpske crkve u srednjem veku, 202.
120 Janković, Episkopije i mitropolije srpske crkve u srednjem veku, 188; Dinić, Braničevo u srednjem veku, 103; M. Popović, Ka problemu srednjovekovnih crkvi smederevskog grada, Starinar 50 (2001) 201–219.
Written sources, which mention the Petrus Bishopric, to which the monasteries of the Petrus region belonged, in the fifteenth century, seem to be incorrect. However, recent investigations prove that the Petrus Bishopric was founded later in the sixteenth century and was mentioned in historical sources from that period. Therefore, the entire colony of lavra from the Crnica River Gorge was subordinated first to the Bishopric of Braničevo and after 1444 to the Metropolitanate of Smederevo.

In the late fourteenth — and fifteenth — century the Crnica River Gorge provided a suitable environment for a colony of hesychasts who lived in lavra that combined cenobitic and lavriotic practices. The core of the lavra was a cenobitic monastery, while isolated cells and hesychasteria were located in the vicinity. However, it seems that some communities were more important than others. The Monastery of the Virgin Mary at Lešje, is a family foundation of the Vukoslavić’s who owned most of the properties in the region and therefore had specific significance. In the other monastic settlement — St. Nicholas archaeology revealed an extraordinary building that served for ceramic production. Therefore both monasteries had a specific function within the entire monastic agglomeration. The Monastery at Lešje was an administrative center — a combined coenobium-lavra with isolated cells that surrounded a cenobitic core. For example as is mentioned above, in 1412 the monk Jovan copied a book in the “desert of Lešje” most probably in his isolated hesychasterion which belonged to the lavra of Lešje. In contrast, the Monastery of St. Nicholas represented a productive center. In both monastic settlements the population was hesychast. Located in a dramatic landscape, this specific model of lavra represents the final stage of the evolution of the type, both in terms of architectural planning and administrative organization.

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Further to the north in the Mlava River Ravine another colony of hesychasts established their lavriotic abodes. Along the Mlava in a dramatic environment several anchoretic abodes were established. The most well known is the Monastery dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple known as Ždrelo and from the eighteenth century known as Gornjak. Historical sources mentioned that Prince Lazar built the monastery and issued a charter in 1378 which was approved by the Patriarch Spiridon in 1379 for one Gregory, later known as Gregory of Gornjak and his anchorites. Gregory is known as the writer of St. Romylos’ Life. He was also wrongly called Gregory Sinaite in seventeenth century written documents, being confused with his celebrated forerunner. According to the

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122 See note 56 above.
123 M. Cunjak, Svetinje Gornjačke klisure, Smederevo 2000.
125 Ibid., 105.
charter, the monastery was exempted from authority of the Metropolitan of Braničevo. The Metropolitan was only granted the right to be mentioned during the liturgy. The monks were allowed to choose the *hegoumenos* and therefore the monastery was *stauropegion*.\(^{126}\) The complex had a main triconch church (later restored) and above the church located within a cave, is the hesychasterion of Gregory with chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas.\(^{127}\) As archaeological excavations were never undertaken in the monastic complex, one can judge only according to scattered artifacts revealed during the recent restoration work which confirmed its foundation to the end of the fourteenth century. The monastery church had an enclosure wall on the western, southern, and eastern sides; while to the north was a steep rock and cave cut into the rock. Additionally the monastery was granted the estates of thirty villages.\(^{128}\)

The chapel of St. Nicholas had frescoes, remnants of which survived dated to the end of the fourteenth century.\(^{129}\) It is not known whether additional cells existed outside the monastic complex. According to the spatial and planning similarity to the monastic colony in the Crnica Gorge a coenobium-*lavra* type of settlement existed. Be that as it may, the complex was established for the prominent

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\(^{126}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{127}\) *Cunjak*, Svetinje Gornjačke klisure, 61; 67.

\(^{128}\) M. Nikolić, Vlastelinstvo manastira Ždrela (Gornjak), Istoriski časopis 20 (1973) 149–155.

\(^{129}\) *Cunjak*, Svetinje Gornjačke klisure, 67.
hesychast Gregory and his anchorites. He lived and died in the Monastery of Ždrelo (Gornjak) in his hesychasterion where he was buried. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries his body was transferred to the Monastery Oreškovica, and from the eighteenth century it was brought back to Gornjak.¹³⁰

Another monastic complex situated on the narrow plateau on the right bank of the Mlava River was dedicated to the Annunciation. It had a triconch church, and additional buildings including a stove for ceramic production and above the complex a three-storey hesychasterion that was located in the cave.¹³¹ This church, dedicated to the Annunciation, was built at the end of the fourteenth century. The group of anchorites — hesychasts lived in their cells inside the spacious cave whose mouth was closed with a massive wall. One book was written for the monastery, 1428–1429, by one hieromonk Teodor known locally as Inok (monk) of Dalša (name of the river). He was a distinguished hesychast invited by Despot Stefan for book production and resided in the monastery dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin into the Temple not far from the Golubac fortress, where he copied the books. However, it seems that he also copied a book for monastic community in the Annunciation monastery for hesychasts colony in the Mlava ravine.¹³² He was a Chilandar scribe from the first half of the fifteenth century who came to Serbia for book production.¹³³

Not far from the Annunciation complex another monastery can be found, known in recent scholarship as Metropolitanate.¹³⁴ Some scholars believed that

¹³⁰ Radojić, Grigorije iz Gornjaka, 105. Today Gregory’s relics are in the Cathedral of Požarevac (loc. cit.).
¹³¹ Bošković, Srednjovekovni spomenici severoistočne Srbije, 188–189; Popović, Krst u krugu, 102; Cunjak, Svetinje Gornjačke klisure, 69–86.
the Metropolitan see of Braničevo were located here temporarily during turbulent times at the end of the fourteenth-and at the beginning of the fifteenth — century. However, there are written records that the original name of the site was different and that the name “Metropolitanate” dates from the seventeenth century.

On the abovementioned spacious plateau a monastery settlement was located with a ruined triconch church surrounded with enclosure wall. To the north of the church the ruins of a vast stone building of unknown function survive,

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135 Dinić, Braničevo u srednjem veku, 103 n. 55.
136 Cunjak, Svetinje Gornjačke klisure, 87–90.
while remnants of frescoes survived in the interior, their date remains unidentified. It is not known who was the *ktetor* and to whom the church was dedicated. However, it was believed that the complex belonged to the colony of hesychasts established there. Whether it served as a see of the Metropolitan of Braničevo or not is difficult to know without further archaeological excavations. It is not known whether individual cells existed outside the complex or probably *sketai* forming the cenobium-*lavra* model. If this type of settlement was established here; it represented a cenobitic core of *lavra* while individual cells were located in the vicinity. It is difficult to conclude, without further investigation, what particular planning model was applied. Unfortunately, several caves located in the vicinity with their mouths closed with solid rock have not yet been examined, although they may have been used for private hesychasterions.

The most significant complex in the Mlava Ravine is the Monastery of Ždrelo (Gornjak). It was also the most important monastic settlement in this region founded by Prince Lazar and approved by Patriarch *Spiridon* for one Gregory and group of hesychasts who came with him from Mount Athos. Gregory’s cave and chapel are known. However, other anchoretic cells located in the vicinity still remain unexplored. According to the celebrity of Gregory of Gornjak, the entire monastic complex shared the importance of its leader. Therefore, it must have been the most important monastic establishment in the region. The relationship between the Monastery of Gornjak and other anchoretic abodes in the Mlava River Ravine still needs to be explored. It may prove to be an administrative center, similar to the Monastery of the Virgin at Lešje in the Crnica River Gorge. Another similarity in organization could be drawn with the monastic establishment in the Crnica Gorge — the Monastery of St. Nicholas which was a center for the production for pottery. As we have seen, pottery production was also organized in the complex of the Annunciation Monastery in the Mlava Ravine. Therefore it served as a production center for this entire region.

In conclusion: one may say that a monastic agglomeration in the Crnica River Gorge and in the Mlava River Ravine model of cenobium-*lavra* existed. The monastic population in both regions was hesychasts. They came to the Northern Balkans from Paroria in Bulgaria (Romylos) and from Mount Athos (Gregory of Gornjak; *Sisoje; Teodor (Inok of Dalša*), to mention the only known names. A great number of hesychasts who remain anonymous, appeared after their leaders. Most of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century monasteries in the Northern Balkans, beyond the region discussed in this paper, had hesychastic monastic populations. For example cells known as *scriptoria* existed around Ljubostinja, Resava, Jošanica, and Ravanica monasteries, to mention only the best known.

As mentioned above, this specific model of *lavra* represents the final stage of the evolution of the type, both in terms of architectural planning and administrative organization. Simultaneously, the colony of anchorites in this region was

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137 *Popović*, The Cross in the Circle, 102.
138 *Bošković*, Srednjovekovni spomenici severoistočne Srbije, 189.
one of the last hesychasts’ safe havens before the final Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the middle of the fifteenth century.\footnote{S. Popović, Shaping a Monastery Settlement, 129–139.} It is not known whether the administrative organization in this region went one echelon further, mirroring the ultimate model applied in the celebrated fourteenth century Meteora monasteries in Thessaly. In Meteora, a *lavra* community was formed as a group of individual cenobia located on the tops of solitary rocks, each of which was considered as a *kellion* of the *lavra* of Stagoi, the core of which was at the monastery of Doupi-\footnote{S. Popović, as in note 18 above.}ani.\footnote{S. Popović, as in note 18 above.} However, we are unable to conclude, at this level of investigation, whether this type of *lavra* was established in the fifteenth century in Serbia.

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Светлана Пойовић

ПОСЛЕДЊА ИСИХАСТИЧКА ПРЕБИВАЛИШТА У КАСНОМ 14. И 15. ВЕКУ У МАНАСТИРИМА СЕВЕРНОГ БАЛКАНА

У смутист временем касног четврта века отомански напади на Балкане су постигли интензивни, укључујући и нападе на Свету Гору Атоску, због чега су многи поштовани монаси, тражећи сигурније уточиште, напустили Свету Гору. Већина их је пропадала исихастичком покрету, следбеницима монашке доктрине која је подразумевала специфичан метод молитве, као и живот у дубокој изолацији у врлетним пределима. Куда су се они упутили? На основу писаних извора знато да су око 1330. чувени Григорије Синаит и његови следбеници напустили Свету Гору и пошли у Бугарску, где су у Парорији основали значајну монашку колонију. Међутим, ни Парорија није обезбедила дуготрајну сигурност. Средином 14. века турске нападе су се појачали и велики број монаха, међу њима и чувени Ромил, ученик Григорија Синајског, напустио је Парорију. Из Живота Светог Ромила, сазнајемо да је за своје последње исходиште изабрао српски манастир Раваницу, где је пре минуо после 1381.
Крајем 14. и почетком 15. века, за време владавине кнеза Лазара и његовог сина деспота Стефана Лазаревића, велики број исихаста је пронашао уточиште у Србији. У науци је мало познато да су у планинским пределима североисточног региона Балкана, у кањону реке Црнице, као и на североистоку, у клисури реке Млаве, биле основе многе испоснице и манастири. Били су то следбеници Григорија Синајског, пристигли из Бугарске и названи Синаити иако никада нису били на Синају.

Недавно започета теренска истраживања у тим пределима показала су велики број археолошких локалитета, испоснице и мањих манастира, које тек треба испитати. Иако су истраживања на самом почетку, могуће је на основу првих резултата направити прелиминарна разматрања у вези са монашком организацијом и планирањем заједнице. Већина локалитета је организована на узаним платоима усећеним у стрме падине, а већина манастира и испосница има малу триконхалну цркву са нартексом. Црква је обично као допутов била неколико секуларних зграда, али и неколико пећинских келија у околним узаним платоима. У региону Црнице су за сада откривена само три манастира са традиционалном киновијском диспозицијом — Свете Богородице у Леши, на излазу из кањона, Светог Николе код села Збређе, узред кањона, и Сисојевац на улазу у кањон. Манастир Лешије је по својој позицији и значају у региону вероватно био административни центар, док је Свети Никола био продуктиван центар за производњу керамике. Обе целине су планиране као лавре, чији је центар био киновијски манастир, а индивидуалне келије су биле организоване у непосредној близини. Слична ситуација је била и северније, у клисури реке Млаве. Административни центар је била лавра у манастиру Ждрело (Горњак), а продуктивни центар за керамiku била је испосница са црковом посвећеном Благовештењу, сместена у драматичном амбијенту. Такав модел лавре представља завршницу развоја у погледу архитектонског планирања, као и административне организације. Истовремено, то су била и последња исихастичка пребивалишта пре коначног турског освајања Балкана средином 15. века.
Fig. 1. Great Lavra, Athos (P. Mylonas)

Fig. 2. Cave cell below the fortress Ćokoće (M. Brmbolić)
Fig. 3. St. John the Baptist (M. Brmbolić)

Fig. 4. St. Nicholas Monastery — Namasija (M. Brmbolić)
Fig. 5. Monastery of Sisojevac (M. Brajković)

Fig. 6. Monastery of Ždrelo — Gornjak (J. Bogdanović)
Fig. 7. Cave in the vicinity of Ždrelo Monastery (J. Bogdanović)
Fig. 8. Monastery of the Annunciation (D. Popović)