OVCAR-KABLAR
MONASTERIES AND CHURCHES
OF CACAK REGION
Medieval churches and monasteries built under the Turkish rule make the most important part of memorial heritage of Cacak region. The church of Gradac Virgin Mary and monastery Nikolje belong to the earliest period of Serbian state existence. Duke Stefan Stracimir built monastery church devoted to the Virgin in Morava Gradac at the end of the 12th century. Looking for the place where he would build his foundation he used the building experience of the previous centuries. In that way, one of the most famous and still most secretive monastery wholes was constructed on the classical period locality from the 3rd – 4th century. The church of Holy Virgin Mary was built between 1172 and 1190. It was first mentioned in

![Church of Christ Ascension, Cacak](image)

**Church of Christ Ascension, Cacak**

The bell with a loop for hanging and the cross above the rim was gifted by Gradac metropolitan Nikifor. It was cast in the foundry of Radoje Milisic in Dubrovnik in 1454.

**CHURCH BELL**

![CHURCH BELL](image)

**Rosette of the church in Cacak, second half of the 14th century**

![St. Warrior Nestor, fresco, monastery Nikolje, 1587](image)
-written sources between 1207-1215. According to Studenica Typicon of St. Sava, out of six abbots who chose prior of Studenica, the abbot of Gradac Virgin Mary was on the second place. Kinsmen ship of the founder with the founder of Serbian rulers’ dynasty provided it the status of king’s monastery. By Zica’s Charter Stefan Prvovencani (first married) excluded it from Episcopal power together with Studenica, Djurdjevi Stupovi and Chilandar. In medieval genealogies and chronicles there are records of its appearance: ‘Stracimir built church of Holy Virgin Mary out of two parts on the bank of the river Morava.’ St. Stefan official document with a gold seal mentions its abbot Jefrem on the sixth place among fourteen abbots, members of synod who took part in electing Nikodim for Archie episcop in 1317.

During the reorganization of Serbian church between 1319 and 1321 it lost its status of king’s monastery and became the base of Gradac episcopacy. Establishing of a new clerical-administrative centre changed the life of once landowner’s property and created conditions for building groups of monasteries in Ovcar-Kablar gorge and at the foot of mountain Jelica. In the second half of the 14th century the church of Virgin Mary underwent a great renewal and for its rich stone decorations was one of the most beautiful buildings of the time. At the dawn of Turkish invasion of these regions it is mentioned as a seating of Gradac metropolitan Nikofor in 1454.

Next to the episcopacy, on the caravan road towards Rudnik, at the beginning of the 15th century a

JEZEVICA
FOUR GOSPEL BOOK

Manuscript of four gospel book was written on parchment and it consists of two paleographic units, it was rewritten between 1337 and the end of the 14th century. A modest decoration includes flags, marginal decorations and geometric initials. Covers made of leather from the middle of the 19th century have imprinted images of crucifixion and symbols of evangelists.
town’s settlement Cacak was developed. The town and medieval church were badly damaged during the Turkish invasion of Serbia. In the first Turkish census from 1876 it was described as a village with 10 houses. As the church was deserted, only the monastery estate was recorded. At the beginning of the 16th century there was a market and the fair was held in it. Monastery estate was cultivated by

CACAK FOUR GOSPEL BOOK

Cacak Four Gospel Book was rewritten by ‘great Vuk from the place Nikolipazar’ in 1554 with ‘effort and blessing of the priest Mijo from Samaila near the river Morava at the foot of mountain Jelica’. The manuscript is decorated with flags, interlaced and

Cacak Four Gospel Book, 1554

with initials. Gospel by Marko begins with a big flag with rich geometric interlace of white ribbons, on blue, red and terracotta background, which is transformed into a stylized leafy vine at the ends.
the Vlahos. Around 1535 Cacak became the centre of qadi area. Remains of the church were used by Hairudin emin to build an ‘honorable mosque’ on them before 1560. In the following decade Turali-beg completed building of the object and built minaret as well as mekbet (elementary Islamic school) near by. His estate was registered in 1572 and a part of his income was given to support donation in the little town of Cacak.

Church organization of Gradac diocese of a metropolitan, established in the time of despotism was left without a cathedral when Turks entered Cacak in the spring of 1455. Census recorders notified only the monastery of Nikolje in its vicinity in 1476. Far away from emperor’s roads in ‘the valley of Kablar near the Morava’ in 1489 a little icon was painted. There is no other data,
although the gorge of Ovcar- Kablar was an ideal refuge for monks - hesychasts who had a special way of organization of monks’ communities and building of monasteries. Distance from the regions with Moslem inhabitants and slow Islamization of Cacak enabled building of the group of monasteries: Vaznesenje, Preobrazenje

*Candlestick, monastery Trnava, 17th century*
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(first mentioned in 1525), Vavedenje, Sretenje (1528) and Jovanje (1536). After reconstruction of Pec patriarchy the churches of the monasteries St. Trojica (1572) and Blagovestenje (1602) were built. At this time monasteries Vrelo (Trnava), Jezevica and Stjenik were built at the foot of mountain Jelica.

After reconstruction of Pec patriarchy, when old Serbian art in medieval traditions experienced its last renaissance, in the time of patriarch Pajsije (1614-1648), its impulses had great influence on the monasteries in Ovcar-Kablar gorge. Then the churches of monasteries Blagovestenje, Nikolje and Jezevice near Cacak were painted with frescoes. In the wall painting of the 30s of the 17th century it can be noticed the influence of graphics, above all, illustrations of the books from the printing workshop of Bozidar Vukovic.

The former monastery complex of Gradac Virgin Mary, and above all its huge walls Turks did not estimate as fortification and they left them without military post throughout the whole 16th century. Eski Hisarlik (Old Gradac) had the obligation to send food for the emperor’s troops in Belgrade in 1566. Old fortification by the name Cacak was first mentioned in 1626 in the travel description.
down Dubrovnik road of Luis de E, baron de Kormanen.

When describing the town in 1663 Turkish travel writer Evlia Chelebi says: ‘In the old times it was a village and then due to a good climate the number of inhabitants increased, so the place became inhabited like an Eden garden […] in a spacious and wide area on the banks of the river Morava […]'. It only has six city quarters and 6000 houses covered with tiles and planks, ground floor ones and one floor houses. There are seven mosques and three Moslem schools […] There are three Moslem religious places, four primary schools, two taverns, one Turkish bath and twenty shops.’ The lack of more precise data does not give the possibility of identifying Turali-beg estate. His destiny in Austro-Turkish war 1683-1699, when Cacak was devastated is not known. In these years the chronicler was watching ‘Islamic forces like snakes with wings which attack the famous city of Vienna.’

Crafty products for everyday use were made under the strong Islamic influence. People were using dishes made of copper decorated with oriental ornaments in the technique of forging. Ceramics was glazed, decorated with wide stripes and often has the shape of metal dishes. In the 16th and 17th centuries jewelry became heavier and bigger,
especially earrings in the shape of locks, while ornaments on rings had Turkish elements. Urban image of Cacak formed during the first two centuries of Turkish rule disappeared during the Great Vienna War (1683-1699). Oriental town was first destroyed by the rebellions in 1688 and it has never been renovated again. At the dawn of the following Austro-Turkish war 1716-1718 it had about 150 houses but at the time of liberation it was a ‘deserted place’. After the Pozarevac peace treaty and the fall of north Serbia under Austrian rule, Turali-beg’s mosque will be returned into church with some modest building interventions. Dositej Nikolic, Valjevo episcopate dedicated reconstructed temple of Dormition of Mother of God in 1723. The church had iconostasis, made of painted holy doors, a cross with crucifixion and some icons. In
modest collection intended for religious service a bell stands out, antimins of Arsenije Carnojevic, Gospel Manuscript and Octoechos. The oldest book preserved from the monasteries’ libraries in Cacak region is Jezevica Four Gospel Book, written on parchment in the middle of the 14th century. Period of Turkish rule is presented with books printed in first Serbian printing workshops: in Venice, the one belonged to Bozidar Vukovic (1538) and in Mrksa’s church (1562). Leather covers were decorated with medallions with iconographic compositions at the end of the 16th and the 17th century. Bronze mould from the monastery Nikolje has on one side crucifixion and on the other Abraham’s Hospitality made according to the Russian pattern. Ornamental bordering lines were formed using a mould of a small format which was imprinted in series. Old tradition of making wood carved clichés for illustrating Serbian printed books ended by the end of the 18th century with a matrix for graphic page from Vujan monastery. Wood carved plate with the image of Whole Trinity and Mother of God together with Saints, framed with stylized ribbon of wavy vine presents an example of the best Serbian graphic tradition. Rich church prelates accepted copper engraving technique, to the difference from poor monasteries and people, so antimins of Patriarch Arsenije III Carnojevic (1692) and of Arsenije IV Jovanovic – Sakabenta (1743) were engraved in the new technique.

In 1735 Cacak had 17 houses and a trench with permanent crew of 150 soldiers (outlaws) who carried out border service as well. When a new war between Austria and Turkey broke out a new warehouse and main headquarters were built in
1737 and in September field marshal Seckendorf came. After one month’s stay Austrian army retreated to Srem to spend a winter there. At the end of February of 1738 Turks occupied Cacak and burnt it down and the trench was destroyed. The inhabitants were looking for refuge across the Sava and Danube in Austria and new inhabitants were coming from Old Serbia, Herzegovina and Montenegro.

Austrian intelligence officers Josif Miteser and Jovan Anton Peretic visited Cacak in 1784. The town had ‘35 Turkish and 18 Christian small houses with one tall and well built, spacious mosque which used to be a Christian church. The settlement is situated on a big open space […] Three streams run through this terrain; you can
cross them by four wooden and two stone bridges. During Koca’s krajina in 1788 the town was burnt down by rebellions of Aleksa Nenadovic. Sergeant Tadija Dragas kept the town at the beginning of February in 1790 with 80 soldiers but Turks came back in March.

During the battles for Cacak liberation in the First Serbian Uprising the trench was bombed from cannons and the mosque was demolished. It was turned into the church but only few services were held until 1813. After the Uprising failed the mosque was reconstructed again, this time without minaret.

Urban development of Cacak in Turkish and Serbian parts of the town lasted this time longer.

**ICON LAMP**

A silver icon lamp with a peak made in two level convex belts. The middle part is covered with neo baroque medallions with stylized floral motifs. Three heads of angels with wings are applied and there is a vegetable decoration on the edges.

Inscription: ‘Presented by Master Vasilije Popovic to Cacak church. This icon lamp was gifted in the memory of my late son Jovo in the summer of 1831.’

It belonged to the treasury of the church St. George in Cacak.

*Icon lamp, gift of Duke Vasilije Popovic to church of St. George, 1831*

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than a decade and it was soon abandoned. In that period Serbian part of the town finally got its image by building church of St. George in 1820. Foundation of Master Jovan Obrenovic was ‘beautifully decorated with a new temple and there was a new choir equipped with necessary books’. Iconostasis was painted by Aleksije Lazovic. One silver icon lamp was dedicated to Cacak church by Duke Nikola Kostic and the other one was gifted by Duke Vasilije Popovic in 1831. After moving
of Uzice eparchy to Cacak the temple got the role of Cathedral. This was one of the motifs why inhabitants ordered the bell with inscription in one of the most famous foundry in Pest.
The need for more representative cathedral church after Cacak became the base of Uzice eparchy in October, 1831 and the presence of ambitious bishop Nikifor Maksimovic speeded up making decision of removing Islamic features from the stone mosque. Support of state government, above all the ruling Duke and his brother as a chief of Rudnik and Pozega districts helped solving material problems. Works on renovating the church started with 30 bricklayers ‘Dibran’
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BISHOP KONAK

In the thirties of the 19th century one of the most important building projects was realized within Cacak church complex. In 1837 after persistent efforts of the bishop Nikifor Maksimovic, bishop konak was built right opposite the altar, the most beautiful object of the old Balkan architecture in the town. The project obtained by Duke Milos Obrenovic, is probably the work of Hadzi-Nikola Zivkovic. Building works were carried out by ‘skilled craftsmen Dibrani’. ‘What ever there is out of Istanbul skill and fantasy in architecture, it is here presented and drawn. Almost the whole konak ‘glitters’. The outlets in the attic, doors, windows, verandas and corners are vivid pictures of the most beautiful summer rose gardens. Konak had the cellar, ground floor and first floor. ‘There are 5 rooms on the ground floor, one chamber and a spacious corridor where there are chimneys for heating, while on the first floor there were 4 rooms, two chambers and a spacious corridor with three corners.’ There was a

Bishop konak in Cacak, built in 1837

on 11th April, 1834. Minaret was completely pulled down and when they came to the foundations of the first church they also found the old painting. During reconstruction works the windows which were sealed up, mihrab and minber were removed, but decorative elements in the ‘shape of honeycomb and stalactite decorations in the corners as well as marble stone on the floor decorated with geometric arabesques’ remained. Walls of naos, altar space and foundations of narthex and bell tower remained from the medieval church. Reconstructed temple was dedicated by Nikifor Maksimovic on 18th September, 1834. At the wish of Prince Milos Obrenovic, the church was dedicated to Ascension of Christ in the token of gratitude to the Savior for the great victory in the battle against Turks for Cacak in 1815. There was an intention for the temple to be painted, so the Duke recommended painters Janjo, Jovan Stergevic. Zivko Pavlovic, painter from Pozarevac painted the big iconostasis in Cacak church in 1845.
Reconstruction of Stracimir’s foundation was a great event for the young of the town at the moment when Cacak got the image of administrative and religious centre. Its most significant representatives would take turns in positions of ktitors and donators in the century to come. On the day of dedication of Cacak church there was one golden cross and maybe Cacak Four Gospel Book in older treasury from the 18th century. Its reconstruction started on the day of dedication when Ante Koljevic presented ‘Book of Prayers’. General Jovan Obrenovic donated Gospel Book and icon ‘Taking down from the Cross’ in 1835. Bishop Nikifor Maksimovic was in several occasions giving service books to the church. He donated 50 ducats for making holy doors on February, 1846. Marija Cipor donated a silver icon lamp to the ‘temple of Cacak church’ in 1847 which was later transferred to church of St. George. Bishop Joanikije Neskovic donated a silver cross in 1869, while Staka Pantelic donated a silver icon lamp in 1880/81.

Cacak church was two times donated with precious gifts from the fraternity of the monastery Holy Trinity near Pljevlja. On March, 1838, Jovan Obrenovic was donated ‘5 books of abbot Prokopije from the monastery Whole Trinity in Herzegovina’. In January of the following year this hieromonk brought as a present a manuscript of Four Gospel Book, written in the 16th century.

Guilds of Cacak craftsmen were donating precious service religious objects several times, out of which the most important is the bell with the inscription: ‘Guilds of tailors of Cacak municipality donated this bell cordially to Cacak temple of St. Ascension in 1854’ which was cast in Vrsac and a silver censer is a gift of bakers’ guilds and Association of inns court chapel in one of the rooms on the first floor. Above the entrance door on the east side there was the inscription about the building which existed until 1912.

Konak was furnished stylishly. Besides Turkish elements of the furniture there were also German pieces as well as luxurious household furnishings. On the walls besides icons there were paintings, still life, bishop’s portraits and other clerical dignitaries and monasteries’ vedutte. There was a bishop’s library in the konak which had not only theological and ministering literature, but some books which point at new cultural trends in just renewed Serbia.
owners from 1868, a work of famous Belgrade goldsmith Nikola Stojic.
Thanks to the discovery of medieval hidden place in 1875, ‘at 10 feet of the nowadays church’, one bell from the 15\textsuperscript{th} century was brought back to the

church of Christ Ascension and the following year it was erected up to the tower. In the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, in 1877 at the latest, the biggest part of inventory of St. George Church became a part of treasury, as service was not held there any more. Those objects were iconostasis and bells from 1832, chalice of Ljubica Rogic from 1833 and censers of Vasa Simonovic from 1834 were also included.

Silver censer, work of Nikola Stojic, Belgrade, 1868
In the mid of the 19th century the church was in a bad condition. In 1853 Municipality decided to cover with copper the dome and altar and to add up the tower. During the reconstruction 1856-1858, builder Naum Jankovic decided to rebuild narthex and build baroque bell towers next to it, covered with plates the lower parts of the walls and made an elaborated architectural decoration.

*St. Nicolas, work of Janko Mihailovic Moler, first half of the 19th century*

*Spear, a gift from goldsmith Mihailo Jovanovic to Cacak church, 1839*

*Lid of censer, gift of Vaso Simonovic to church of St. George, 1834*
mad out of two-level lezens and two circles of arches below the eaves.

Until the end of the 19th century great works on Cacak church were carried out twice: in 1882 it was covered with copper and in 1895-1896 it was thoroughly reconstructed ‘because of which all the traces of the old iconography’ were destroyed. Nastas Tomic and Djordje Berbovic at the request of the noblest Cacak families painted some of the individual frescoes in the church. There is the inscription on choir about the history and reconstruction of the temple. After this reconstruction a great number of gifts came to the treasury of the St. Ascension Church. The best examples of parishioners’ generosity are filigree crosses gifted by Ilija Krivacic and Emilija Racic. During the occupation in the First World War church treasury was also damaged. Austro-Hungarian soldiers on August 1916 put down and took away the bell from the south tower bell of Tailors’ Association from 1854 and the bell from St. George church from 1832. Apart from that, enemy soldiers took away ‘one golden cross with a foot which was given by the municipality to the church in 1795’, one silver cross, two silver censers and ten different paintings.

After the First World War it was necessary to carry out some building works on Cacak church to repair damages made during the occupation. In the spring of 1926 after the roof and mortar was pulled down from the façade, it was decided that ‘Cacak church as a historical monument of our old state and architectural monument of outstanding value, is to be reconstructed’ under the guidance of architect Petar Popovic. Building contractor Nikola Nastasijevic upgraded the tower bells, lowered the dome and gave the windows today’s appearance.
He also introduced blind arches. Some smaller archeological excavations were carried out in the church yard. Bishop Jefrem Bojovic dedicated the church on 19th August, 1929.

In the room which used to be ‘a dining room for 12 persons’ of Master Jovan Konak, a treasury of Cacak church was exhibited. Only the bells from the 15th century belong to the primary fund. ‘Cacak Four Gospel Book’ of a famous rewriter priest Vuk from 1554 is the most valuable manuscript among the manuscripts of church library. Other objects, icons, portraits of church dignitaries, censers, icon lamps, and crosses belong to the time of the final renovation in the 19th century. One part of this used to belong to the church of St. George.

Deist plate of zoograph Mitrofan from the 17th century, copies of frescoes from Nikolje and Blagovestenje are exhibited from the monasteries of Ovcar Kablar Gorge. A copy of the fresco ‘Archdeacon Srefan’ is exhibited from Jezevica church as well as manuscript of ‘Four Gospel’ from the 14th century.

The appearance of monastery Sretenje after the renovation is preserved in the one year younger copper engraving. In 1844 bishop Nikifor Maksimovic ordered from iconographer Zivko Pavlovic a drawing of the monastery Sretenje which shows the appearance of the church after tower bell reconstruction in 1842 and building interventions on the renovation of monastery complex from 1818 to the mid 19th century. A solemn procession which is waiting and accompanies High Priest to the main entrance of the church on ‘St. Jakov Persjanin’ holiday when there was dedication of the church is presented. Painter Uros Knezevic was taking care about the copper engraving in Vienna and he built it in 1845 in the medallions with coat of arms of Serbia Principality and picture of Sretenje.
‘In the room with a fireplace for young lads’ one of the oldest private libraries in Serbia which belonged to the priest Vicentije Popovic and sons is exhibited. There are examples of enamel from the 16th and 17th centuries and they are one cross and metal buckle found in one priest’s grave near the church in Jezevica. Holy doors from the mid 18th century are from the monastery Stjenik. After a long time after the liberation from the Turks, a cooper engraving of the monastery Sretenje was made in 1845. Graphic pages with monastery drawings were soon substituted with drawings of the monasteries Preobrazenje and Jovanje made by first researchers of Serbian antiquities, Felix Kanitz, Mihailo Valtrovic and Dragutin Milutinovic.