



**The Eight Centuries**  
*of the History of the Zica Monastery*



8 КСКОКА ЖИЧЕ



# The Eight Centuries

## *of the History of the Zica Monastery*

It is difficult even to imagine a historical period lasting eight centuries, let alone to fully review the existence of a monastery in the course of this period. And yet, eight centuries have passed since the building of the Žiča monastery, a period of time filled with unparalleled enthusiasm, the beginning of which was marked by the establishment of the Serbian Kingdom and the Serbian Church, a period of time imbued with the power and the spiritual force of the most prominent and the wisest people of that era, but also marked by untold destruction and endless rebuilding. That is why Žiča has become, perhaps more than any

other of our monasteries, a symbol of the Serbian people, of its greatest ups and downs, its persistent endurance between the East and the West, and of its perpetual striving for the perfect and the lasting. There is also symbolism in the fact that the monastery church is dedicated to the Ascen-

sion of Christ, on account of which it is called not only the Great Church and the Mother of All Churches, but also the Home of Salvation, thus marking it as the place of salvation of all those who built it and have maintained it, of all those who have lived in it and have come to it with a pure heart.

Žiča was conceived and built eight centuries ago, during the exciting historical period when the Serbian people entered the world stage, delimited by the increasingly weary Byzantium and the rising Europe, and when it was ranked – in accordance with the criteria of the time – among the chosen peoples, a New Israel, able





to set out on the road of salvation and to endure on it. The monastery's beginnings are an expression of the brotherly love of Stefan Nemanjić, the Great Župan [Serb medieval ruler], and his brother St Sava, then the archimandrite and prior of Studenica, who had just arrived from Chilandar, bringing with him the relics of St Simeon, and laid them in the grave prepared for them inside the temple of Studenica. It was right there, standing next to their father's grave, that the two brothers agreed to build a new monastery, that of Žiča, and soon afterwards they set to the task. It was sometime between 1206 and 1216. And just as Stefan, in the role of a statesman, continued the great achievements of his father and added to them, in his role of the monastery endower he wished to build a new church, similar to that of the Studenica monastery; it was Sava, however, who, as a Holy Mount monk, left the recognisable imprint of Mt Athos catholicons, reflected first of all in the spatial structure and the purple facades. They dedicated it to Christ, and the small paracles harmoniously fitted inside the great church they dedicated

to their holy protectors and namesakes, St Stefan the First-Martyred and St Sava of Jerusalem. However, his longing for the Holy Mount soon led Sava back to Chilandar again, while Stefan, preoccupied with other concerns, was crowned King in 1217. Žiča had been built until then, but not quite completed.

The most solemn moment in its history occurred around the year 1220. It was then that St Sava returned to Žiča, having been made the first Serbian Archbishop at Nicea. He brought with him from Constantinople excellent craftsmen, marble craftsmen and painters, and had them complete the temple at Žiča and adorn it wondrously. In agreement with King Stefan the First-Crowned, it was decided that Žiča would be the seat of the archbishopric, where kings would be crowned, archbishops consecrated and the priors of the most important monasteries appointed. Together with his son Radoslav, Stefan richly endowed Žiča, giving it a number of villages, metohs [*metoh* = a plot of land owned by a monastery], mountains and pastures, and adorning it with an exceptional relic made up of fragments





of the Holy Cross, a belt belonging to the Mother of God, the right hand of St John the Precursor and relics of holy apostles and martyrs. On Ascension Day in 1221, a great church/popular assembly was held, in the course of which St Sava delivered his famous speech about real faith and read the Synodic of Orthodoxy. Stefan the First-Crowned – as writers of the time testify – was overjoyed to see his beautiful church, whose endower he was, completed, repeating, after the Psalmist David: “Lord, I adore the beauty of your home”, and to everybody who saw it, the church of Žiča seemed like heaven on earth. Living in Žiča almost till the end of his life, St Sava, together with his nephew King Radoslav, enlarged the Žiča temple and made it even more beautiful: on the western side he built a large exonarthex, and in front of it a high tower, inside which he built a paraclis. From there and from the catechumenium before it he saw the young monk Arsenije while the latter was officiating, and decided to leave him his throne. Before that, St Sava managed to move the relics of his brother Stefan the First-Crowned (upon whom he con-





ferred the tonsure shortly before his death) from Studenica and to bury them at Žiča.

But the time of peace and quiet did not last for long. Žiča sustained heavy damage in the course of an attack by two Bulgarian lords towards the end of the 13th century, and the seat of the archbishopric was moved to Peć. The renovation of the monastery was a long process lasting over twenty years, and several archbishops attended to it. At the time of King Milutin, around 1310, the Žiča church was repainted. The painters, probably from Salonica, left the better preserved older frescoes in place, and elsewhere they painted their own frescoes, repeating some of the earlier themes inspired by St Sava's theological teachings. At the church entrance, they presented the figures of the first endowers, Stefan the First-Crowned and Radoslav, as well as their charters, whereas they included the figures of the then King Milutin and Archbishop Sava the Third in a poetic presentation of the Christmas hymn. Thus Žiča shone anew in its full glory, perhaps more splendid than ever. From the few sources available, we find out that from time to time





Serbian archbishops and patriarchs held court at Žiča, and that it was visited by Serbian kings, emperors and despots during the period before Serbia lost its independence.

Concerning the eight-century history of Žiča, we know least about the fate it suffered during the Turkish rule. From the darkness of the 16th and the 17th centuries, we get only occasional bits of information, from which we find out that the monastery sustained heavy damage on a number of occasions and was renovated afterwards. At one time (in 1520), the monks had to leave Žiča and find shelter at the Mt Fruška monastery of Šišatovac for a while; several of them returned soon afterwards, however, and religious service was renewed at the Žiča church. It is known that in 1562 the Smederevo Metropolitan Zaharije helped renew the monastery cells, and perhaps a part of the temple. But in the first decades of the 17th century, Žiča was left without its monks. The then Patriarch Pajsije came to the monastery, collected all the holy vessels and books, and took them to Peć. He re-bound the books carefully and wrote heart-



rending notes in them, telling of his endless sorrow over the deserted monastery and asking those who would come after him to return them to Žiča after it was renovated.

However, a lot of time was to pass before that happened. The monastic life at Žiča was renewed by Karađorđe as early as the first year of the Serbian Uprising (1804). It is ample testimony to how important Žiča was in the minds of the Serbian people, to the fact that people were aware of its being the cornerstone of the Serbian state and church. Non-Christians were certainly also aware of this, so that after the failure of the Uprising Žiča was burnt down and destroyed. It was renewed only in 1855 by Bishop

Joanikije Nešković, and many succeeding generations contributed to the renewal of its former splendour. Their noble efforts were hampered, but not prevented altogether, by new hardships and ordeals, either inflicted by people (for example, the bombing in the course of the Second World War) or due to natural disasters (the earthquake of 1987). New strength, resources and knowledge were continually supplied to renew Žiča and help it regain the place in the life of the people and within the Church that its original founders, St Sava and Stefan the First-Crowned, intended for it.

Upon its 800th anniversary, life at Žiča is characterised by exemplary sisterhood, daily religious service and prayers; its church has been renovated and the monastery has been impeccably re-decorated. In keeping with its significance, the anniversary celebration will last for several years. Its content will vary, with a view to commemorating the historic anniversary of our monastery in a solemn and befitting manner.

*Professor Branislav Todić*

