



THE CHURCH OF ARILJE

BLAGO Fund continues with the preservation of Serbian culture and heritage

MAKING OF BLAGO COLLECTION: THE CHURCH OF SAINT ACHILLIUS OF LARISSA IN ARILJE

The church of St. Achillius, Bishop of Larissa, Greece, a staunch opponent of the Arian heresy and a participant of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, located in a small city of Arilje, western Serbia, was the destination of BLAGO expedition in June of 2018. It is a foundation of the king Dragutin Nemanjic, built in the Raska style, and a masterpiece of the Serbian medieval fresco painting.

There are many things done in advance of every BLAGO expedition, including obtaining appropriate permits, blessings from the local church and the Bishop, lodging reservations, secure transportation, etc. BLAGO's Serbian coordinator, Gordana Kelic (art historian), started working on them many months in advance and completed all the prerequisites for the trip.

Our trip from Belgrade starts at dawn on June 7th, driving to the town of Jagodina which was the main starting point of every BLAGO expedition. All the equipment in the storage (scaffolding, tools, photo equipment, lights, etc.) is cleaned up and loaded on the trailer. The morning breakfast and coffee goes fast with the stories and jokes, after which we are on the way to Arilje.



The trip itself through the heart of Serbia is uneventful. However, everyone is excited upon our arrival, as the town of Arilje, the surrounding landscape, the church, are beaming of tranquility and peacefulness. The church, located on the hill in the center of Arilje, dominates the view and it is obvious that its attraction created the city and surrounding villages, farms, and orchards. The holy place is surrounded by the deep green lawn and final resting places of many known individuals from the Serbian history.

We started working immediately upon arrival, all the equipment is offloaded from the trailer, photo equipment is being checked and adjusted for the needed precision of the virtual reality recordings of the church, both inside and outside. Our surrounding, untouched by the centuries, is the constant reminder and incentive that our work has a meaning, record and promote the most precious treasures of the Serbian culture and heritage. Coming here we brought in all our previous experience and knowledge, but we are aware that coming out of this trip we will be enriched with the new ones.



After the work, the evening goes well too, we spent most of the time chatting with the clergy that is taking care of the church and people of Arilje. As a rule, every day of our trip had a morning coffee break with Father Dragan, the main priest of the church in Arilje, and his colleagues. We are grateful for all the time and support that they have given us during our trip and will be in our prayers for many years to come.

The second-day work starts with mounting scaffolding in the church altar area for the purpose of taking high-resolution pictures of the fresco paintings. As many times before, everybody is involved, and each piece of the equipment passes through many hands before reaches Meda, our technical lead, for its final place in the tall, six levels scaffolding. We are joined by a friend living in Germany, Mihajlo, that was staying in the same house we rented during the stay in Arilje. His physical constitution helped us in building up and tearing down the scaffolding, carrying equipment, and supporting the photo shooting on the high levels.



After our work is done in the altar area, scaffolding is brought down, and piece by piece taken to the nave under the main dome of the church. This time, the scaffolding is extended to the full height (45 feet) as we need to reach the dome of the church. Photography is an art, but photography at the top of the shaking and moving scaffolding is almost acrobatic.

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The proximity of frescoes does not allow for the protective fence at the top, every move is calculated and slow, it takes time for scaffolding to settle down before taking a single picture. But, for those taking pictures, all the danger and tiredness is easily overcome with the feeling of being exceptional and privileged for being in the place where only original builders and fresco painters spent time almost eight hundred years ago.

At the end of the day, scaffolding is torn down again and church prepared for the morning service. Or dinner time in the nearby restaurant is the time for relaxing conversation, review of the day behind, and preparation for the next day.

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The third day is easier as we are already accustomed of putting up the scaffolding and moving it around by directions of the photographer. Little by little, all the pieces of the puzzle are falling in their right places, each photograph taken is bringing us closer to our goal, complete collection of the Arilje church. At noon we are joined by the professor of photography, Vladimir Peric, and his wife Milica. Extra help is always welcome, especially the one from which you can learn and be better at the end.



In the early afternoon, our aerial photography team started flying the drone around the church. The weather is great and we used this opportunity to also visit the nearby White church of Karan and complete video aerial photography for its collection that was published a few months ago.

Sunday started with the Holy Liturgy and continued with a small reception and conversation with priests and the leadership of the Arilje community. It is time to leave and we said goodbye to our hosts after the exchange of customary presents.

We use the rest of the day in the White church of Karan where we are continued taking pictures of the higher levels as we have the scaffolding with us this time.

In the evening we return to Jagodina, offload equipment until the next trip, and continue to Belgrade. Monday is a boring day, we have to go back to work, but somehow it is easier as our life energy is stronger. Soon we'll start going over the material we collected and prepare it for the public.



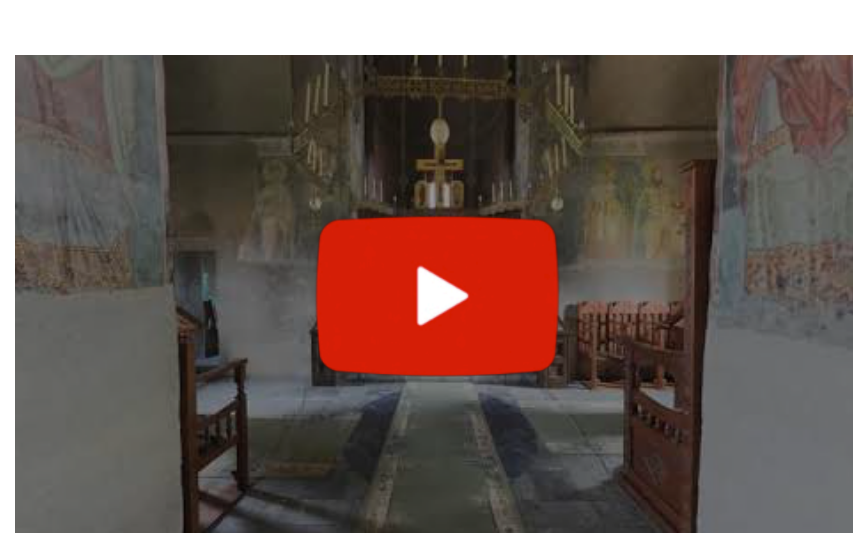
BLAGO 'Arilje 2018' team members (left to right): Milica, Ivana, Mihailo, Meda, Nenad, Fr Dragan, Bogdan, Gordana, Vladimir, Gordana, Zoran, and Vladimir (on the ground)

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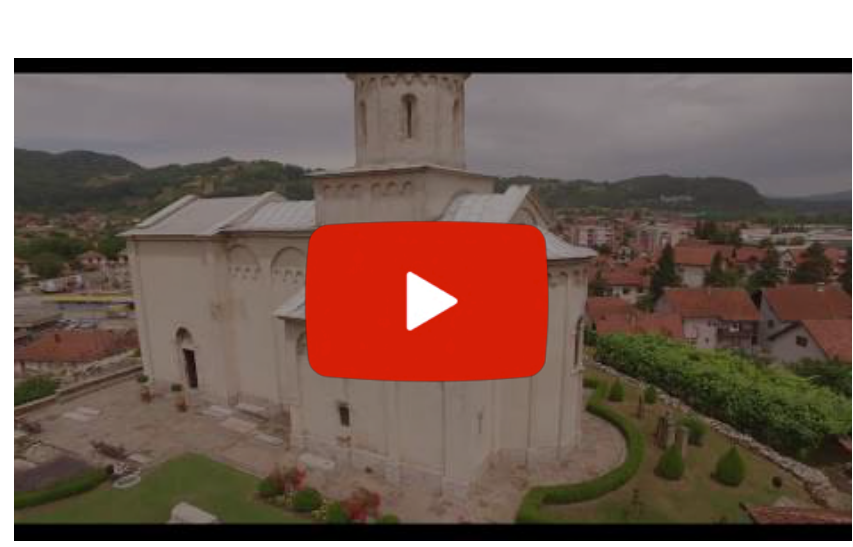
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See sample of the virtual reality tour of the Arilje church. [VR preview](#) is also available.



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