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An Overview of the Byzantine Churches in North Macedonia

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Jasna Grujoska-Kuneska

International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macednia

https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7875-8136

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jasna Grujoska-Kuneska.

Email: jasna.kuneska@ibu.edu.mk

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Jasna Grujoska-Kuneska

Abstract

Byzantine architecture has created some of the most iconic historical buildings, which remain a significant part of our cultural heritage to this day. This style combines different aspects and creates spaces of great beauty and spirituality. The territory of North Macedonia has a rich history, with a vast cultural heritage that includes numerous historical buildings from different periods, representing the creative ideas and traditions of the past civilizations that lived there. This paper explores the examples of the Byzantine architecture preserved within the territory of North Macedonia. The research includes a total of 50 Byzantine churches, located in various regions of the country. It highlights the most significant architectural features of the churches and their classification in historical and typological context.

Keywords: tangible heritage, Byzantine churches, architectural features, classification, typology

Introduction

The Byzantine Empire, which existed from the 4th to the 15th century, is one of the longest-lived civilizations. As a continuation of the Roman Empire, centred in Constantinople, it represented a link between antiquity and the modern world. During this long period of the 11th century, the Empire spread over many territories, including Asia Minor, the Balkans, Greece, Italy, and North Africa. The new culture that evolved within its borders remains known for its architectural and artistic achievements (Gregory, 2005; Boshkovic, 1976).

Byzantine architecture is a blend of the Roman traditions and influences from the Near East. This style was used to shape many religious buildings in Europe and the Mediterranean, which remain relevant to this day, as part of the world's cultural heritage. The most distinctive characteristics of the style are the domes with pendentives, ornamental facades, and mosaics. The architectural achievements of the time and new design elements contributed to the transformation of the Byzantine churches, from monumental basilicas with a simple rectangular plan to the characteristic domed cross-plan churches (World History Encyclopedia, 2018; World History Encyclopedia, 2020).

Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is one of the masterpieces of Byzantine Architecture. It was built in the 6th century and was considered the biggest church in the world until the 16th century. Its huge dome with a span of nearly 32m rests on an innovative system of arches and pendentives, which was an achievement of the time. The interior of the church is one of the most decorated, with many wall paintings and mosaics. Today, the building reflects the religious changes that have happened over time, symbolized by the presence of minarets, Islamic inscriptions, and mosaics (World History Encyclopedia, 2018; World History Encyclopedia, 2020).

During the existence of the Byzantine Empire, the territory of today's North Macedonia was under different influences, including the Byzantine one (Boshkovic, 1976). There are many fine examples of the Byzantine churches preserved in the territory of North Macedonia. These medieval monuments have exceptional architectural and artistic values and represent a significant part of the country's tangible heritage. Until today, there are 154 registered medieval churches and monasteries that are put under legal protection, of which 54 are Byzantine churches (Directorate for protection of cultural heritage, 2024). Within the scope of this research, a total of 50 churches are included.

Location of the Byzantine Churches

Byzantine churches can be found in different places along the country with a tendency for a certain spatial clustering, fig. 1. Great part of the churches are located in a few regions - Ohrid (13 churches), Skopje (10 churches), Prilep (9 churches) and Shtip region (5 churches).

Figure 1

Location of Byzantine churches in North Macedonia



Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

Materials, Structure, and Building Techniques

Generally, the structural system of the Byzantine churches consists of peripheral walls, inner columns, and vaults; it can slightly vary depending on their typology. In addition to the main structural system, there is a wooden system of horizontal belts and ties, which improves the entire stability of the structure, especially during

seismic actions. Wooden belts are placed along the entire perimeter of the facade walls, and the wooden ties are placed in the upper area of the interior (Gavrilovic et al., 2004; Shendova, 1997).

The main building materials used in the construction of these churches were local stones, bricks, and lime mortar. The walls are multi-layered and consist of two outer layers of stone and brick masonry and a core of rubble masonry and lime mortar. Since the inner surfaces of the walls are usually plastered, they were done with an irregular opus. On the contrary, special attention was given to the finishing of the facade surfaces. Usually, columns were constructed as monolithic elements of granite or marble blocks, but sometimes they were built from the same materials as the walls. Limestone or bricks were often used for the construction of the vaulted elements (Gavrilovic et al., 2004).

Architectural Features - Interior and Facade Finishing

Interior surfaces of the churches are flat, with small perforations for windows and blind niches. These surfaces were originally covered with frescoes, depicting different Biblical scenes (Gavrilovic et al., 2004). The frescoes are still partially preserved in some of the churches, which adds to their artistic value. One of the most exceptional artistic achievements from the 12th century can be found in the church of St. George in Kurbinovo (Dimitrova, 2016). In some churches, in addition to the original frescoes, there are frescoes from later periods, such in the case of St. Nikita church in Banjani, where the frescoes belong to three different periods: 14th century (original), 15th and 19th century (Markovic, 2015), but they are done in a similar manner so it's difficult to make a difference.

The facades of the churches are playful with arches, pilasters, niches, and cornices. Bricks were often used to create decorative patterns in the form of herringbone motifs, zigzag stripes, rhombuses, letter shapes, etc. (fig. 2). Specific decorative elements for some of the churches are the horizontal friezes of "opus reticulatum", i.e., two-color square tiles usually made of ceramic and stone. This type of decoration is particularly characteristic of the Ohrid region – churches St. Sophia, St. John the Theologian, St. Clement, etc. (Gavrilovic et al., 2004; Korunovski, 2000).

Figure 2

Ornamental facades of the Byzantine churches: St. Nicholas in Varosh (left), St. John the Theologian in Ohrid (middle), St. Archangel Michael in Shtip (right)



Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

Window openings have their own distinct stylistic feature. They are performed with one, two, or three openings within arched niches. A round window – oculus can be observed in a few churches - St. Demetrius in Marco Monastery, St. George in Goren Kozjak, and St. Nicholas in Ljuboten.

Domes are one of the most symbolic features in the Byzantine churches, and the drum plays a significant role in their appearance. The most common shape is the octagonal drum, which proved to be suitable for the dome's span that ranges between 3-3,5m. The only example of a twelve-sided drum can be found in the church of St. Demetrius in Prilep, from the 13th century (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024).

The apses are another specific element in the facade design of the churches. They appear as three-sided, polygonal, or semi-circular. The most numerous are the churches with three-sided apse, such as St. John the Theologian and St. Clement in Ohrid, St. Archangel Michael and St. Nicholas in Prilep, St. Demetrius in Veles, etc. (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024).

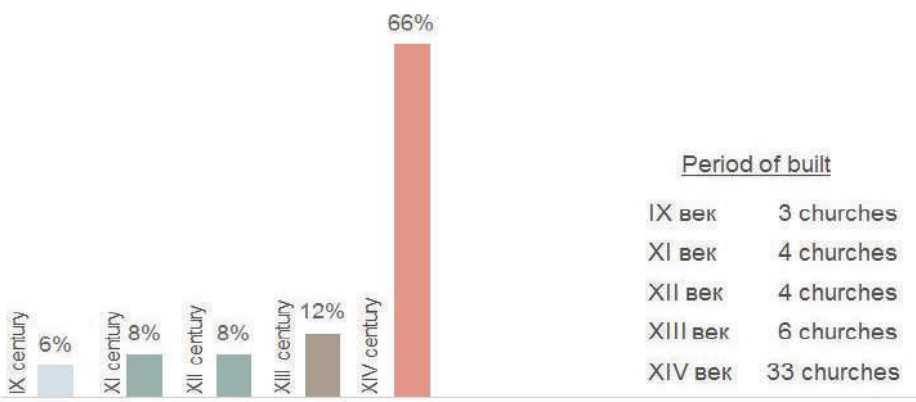
Classification of the Churches - Period of Construction

The churches belong to different periods, starting from the 9th until the end of the 14th century (fig. 3). Among the oldest are the first phase of St. Leontius in Vodo-

cha (7th-9th century) and St. George in Goren Kozjak (9th century). Several churches date back to the 11th century: St. Sophia in Ohrid, St. Nicholas Wonderworker in Ohrid, St. Holy Mother Eleusa in Veljusa, and St. George in Staro Nagorichane. Few churches were built during the 12th century: St. Archangel Michael in Varosh, St. George in Kurbinovo, St. Panteleimon in Nerezi, and St. Holy Mother in Sushica; and in the 13th century: St. John the Theologian and St. Holy Mother Perivlepta in Ohrid, St. Nicholas and St. Demetrius in Varos, St. Nicholas in Mariovo, and St. Holy Mother in Treskavec. Over 60% of the churches were built in the 14th century, among them: St. Nikita in Banjani, St. Andrea in Matka, St. Archangel Michael in Shtip, St. Archangel Michael in Lesnovo, St. Holy Mother Chelnicka in Ohrid, St. Holy Mother Zahumska in Trpecja, etc. (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024; Gavrilovic et al., 2004).

Figure3

Classification of the churches - period of construction



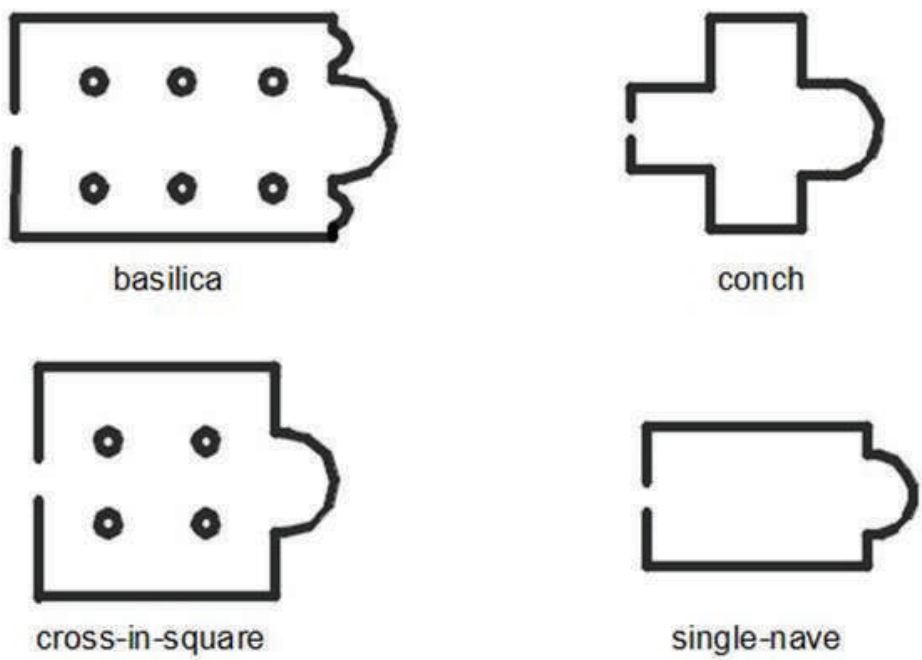
Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

Classification of the Churches - Typology

In relation to the typology, Byzantine churches appear in a few characteristic concepts: basilica, conch, cross-in-square, and smaller single-nave buildings (Fig. 4).

Figure 4

The main concepts of Byzantine churches

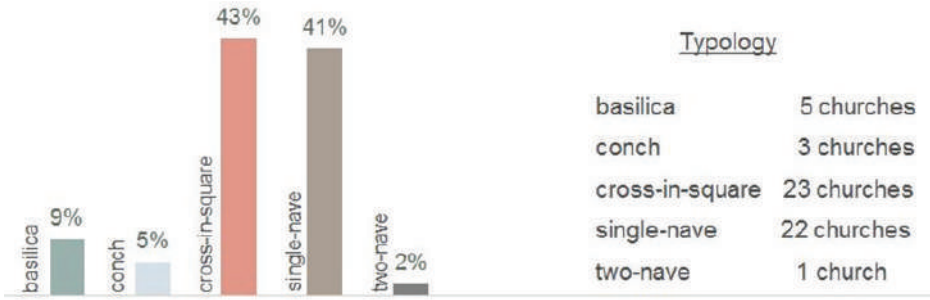


Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

The most numerous are the domed cross-in-square and the small single-nave buildings, fig. 5. On the territory of North Macedonia, there are many preserved examples of cross-in-square churches with one dome. Most of them were built in the 14th century: St. Nikita in Banjani, St. Archangel Michael in Shtip, St. Nicholas in Ljuboten, St. Archangel Michael in Lesnovo, etc. The churches St. Panteleimon in Gorno Nerezi and St. George in Staro Nagoričani - both from the 11th century are rare examples of the five-domed churches.

Figure 5

Classification of the churches – typology



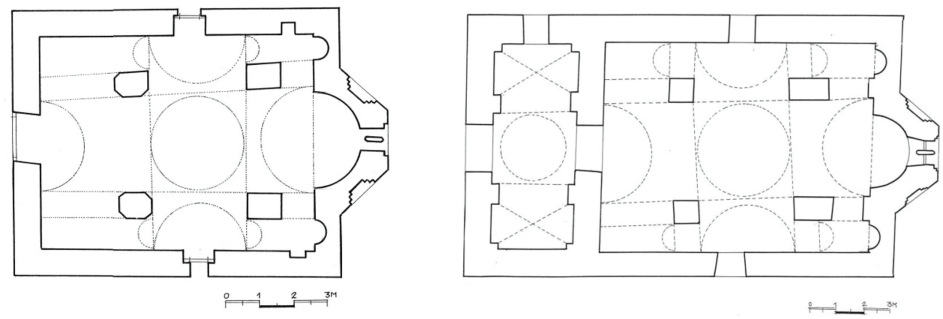
Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

The churches of St. John the Theologian and St. Clement in Ohrid, from the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, have the main features of the domed cross-in-square churches. However, there are certain conceptual differences between the two churches. The main difference is the presence/absence of a narthex (fig. 6). The church of St. John the Theologian does not have a classical narthex, but a characteristic elongated bay on the west side. This is characteristic of several churches, including St. Nikita in Banjani, St. Nicholas in Ljuboten, St. Archangel Michael in Shtip, etc. On the other hand, in the church of St. Clement, there is a separate narthex on the west side (Korunovski, 2000).

Single-nave churches are also numerous and characteristic of the late Byzantine period. These churches have simple, rectangular floor plans and modest dimensions. Many fine examples of this typology could be found in the Ohrid region – small St. Vraci, St. Demetrius, small St. Clement, St. Nicholas Wonderworker, etc.

Figure 6

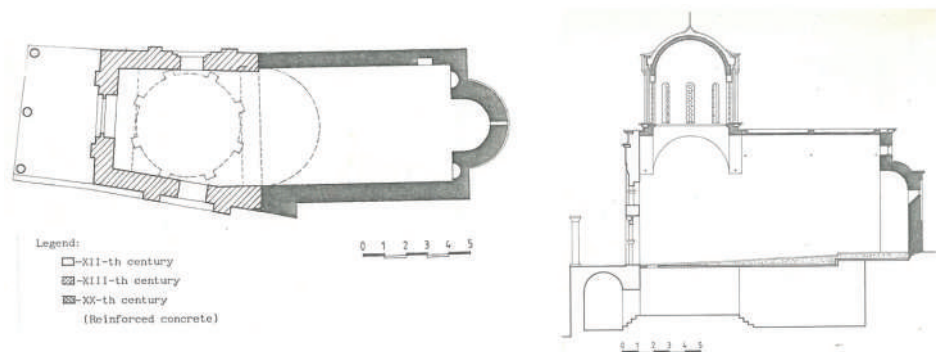
Floor plans of the churches St. John the Theologian (left) and St. Clement (right)



Source: (Korunovski, 2000)

Figure 7

Church St. Archangel Michael in Varosh, floor plan and section with structural phases



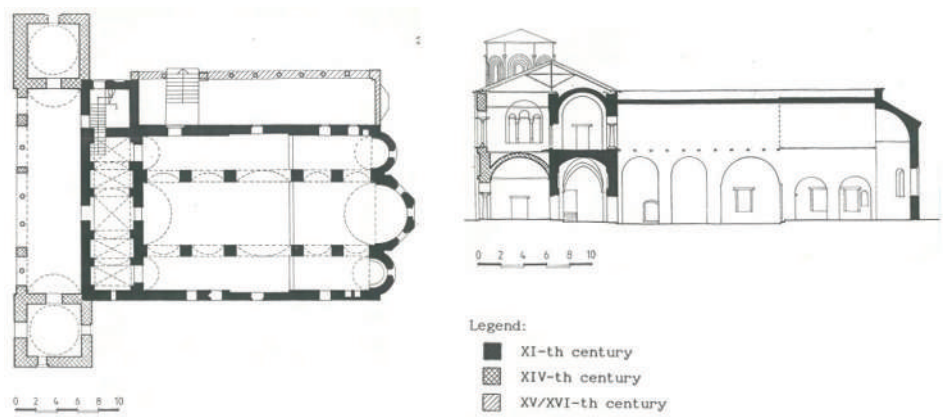
Source: (Gavrilovic et al., 2004)

The church of St. Archangel Michael in Varosh, Prilep (12th century) has a distinguished conceptual structure compared to the other single-nave churches. The floor plan of the church has an irregular rectangular shape with an average interior length of 15.5m and a width of 4.9m. Originally, the church had two domes, but only one of them has been reconstructed. A significant feature of the church is its two-story conception (fig. 7), which is a rarity in Byzantine architecture. This concept is generally associated with the tendency to create a church-mausoleum, but in this case, it is also associated with the conditions of the location (Gavrilovic et al., 2004; Korunovski, 2000).

There are just two examples of basilica-type churches preserved in the country. The concept of middle Byzantine basilicas is related to the church of St. Sophia in Ohrid (11th century). It was originally built as a three-nave structure, with a transept and a dome. Throughout history, the church has undergone many changes and adaptations, fig. 8 (Gavrilovic et al., 2004).

Figure 8

Church St. Sophia in Ohrid, floor plan and section with structural phases



Source: (Gavrilovic et al., 2004)

The church of St. Nicholas in Mariovo (13th century) is a basilica from the late Byzantine period. The central nave of the church is covered with a semi-cylindrical vault, while the side naves are lower and covered with a wooden structure. Another specificity of the church is the absence of a narthex, which rarely happens in this typology (Korunovski, 2000).

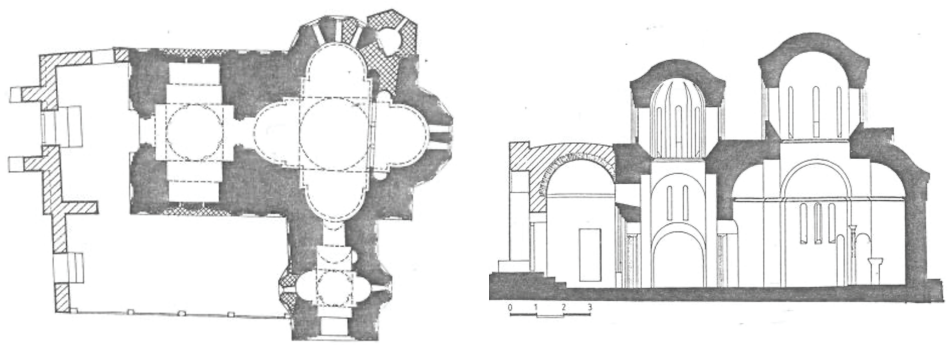
Some churches are a combination of two concepts - inscribed cross and basilica, like St. George in Staro Nagorichane, St. Holy Mother in Drenovo, and St. Leontius in Vodocha (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024).

There are just a few examples of the conch typology churches. These are smaller buildings that are usually an integral part of a monastery complex. They appear as three-conch (St. Andrea in Matka and St. Holy Mother in Leshok) and four-conch (St. Holy Mother Eleusa in Veljusa). In three-conch buildings, the conches appear on the north, east, and south sides, and they are polygonal on the outside and semicircular on the inside. The only example of the four-conch typology is the church in Veljusa, which was built in the 11th century. The central plan of the church has

a four-conch concept from the inside, but only three conches are visible from the outside, fig. 9.

Figure 9

Church St. Holy Mother Eleusa in Veljusa, floor plan and section



Source: (Gavrilovic et al., 2004)

Table 1 presents the results for all 50 churches in relation to their period of construction and typology.

Table 1

Byzantine churches – Summary

General information			Typology				
Region	Name	date of built (century)	basilica	conch	cross-in-square	single nave	two nave
Shtip region	St. Archangel Michael, Shtip	XIV			✓		
	St. Archangel Glavatov, Shtip	XIV				✓	
	St. Spas Novo Selo	XIV				✓	
	St. Josh the Baptist, Shtip	XIV				✓	
	St. George, Goren Kozjak	IX			✓		
	St. Archangel Michael, Lesnovo	XIV			✓		
	St. Stefan, Konche	XIV			✓		

Ohrid region	St. Holy Mother Chelnicka, Ohrid	XIV					✓
	Small St. Vraci, Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Demetrius, Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Holy Mother Bolnichka,Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Nicholas Bolnichki, Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Sophia, Ohrid	XI	✓				
	St. John the Theologian, Ohrid	XIII			✓		
	St. Holy Mother Peryvlep. Ohrid	XIII			✓		
	Small St. Clement, Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Constantine & Helen, Ohrid	XIV				✓	
	St. Nicholas wonderwork.Ohrid	XI				✓	
	St. Panteleimon, Ohrid	IX			✓		
	St. Holy Mother Zahumska,Trpeca	XIV			✓		
Osogovo region	St. Nicholas, Psacha	XIV			✓		
	St. Holy Mother, Monast. Osogovo	XIV			✓		
	St. George, Staro Nagoricane	XI	✓		✓		
Tetovo region	St. Nicholas, Chelopek	XIV				✓	
	St. Holy Mother Leshok	XIV		✓			

General information		Typology				
Region	Name	date of built (century)	basilica	conch	cross-in-square	single nave
Prespa-pelagonia region	St. Athanasius, Varosh	XIV			✓	
	St. Peter, Varosh	XIV				✓
	St. Nicholas, Varosh	XIII				✓
	St. Demetrius, Varosh	XIII			✓	
	St. Holy Mother, Varosh	XIV				✓
	St. Archangel Michael, Varosh	XII				✓
	St. Nicholas, Mariovo	XIII	✓			
	St. Holy Mother, Treskavec Mona.	XIII			✓	
	St. Transfiguration Zrze	XIV				✓
	St. George, Kurbinovo	XII				✓

Skopje region	St. Nikita, Banjani	XIV			✓	
	St. Ilija Banjani	XIV				✓
	St. Panteleimon, Gorno nerezi	XII			✓	
	St. Nicholas, Ljuboten	XIV			✓	
	St. Nicholas, Shishevo	XIV				✓
	St. Andrea, Matka	XIV		✓	✓	
	St. Demetrius, Marko Monaster.	XIV			✓	
	St. Savior Kuchevishte	XIV			✓	
	St. Holy Mother, Sushica	XII				✓
	St. Holy Mother, Matka	XIV			✓	
Strumica region	St. Holy Mother Eleusa, Veljusa	XI		✓		
	St. Leontius, Vodocha	IX	✓		✓	
Alongside Vardar river	St. Nicholas, Veles	XIV				✓
	St. George, Polog monastery	XIV				✓
	St. Holy Mother Drenovo	XIV	✓		✓	

Source: (Grujoska-Kuneska, 2024)

Conclusion

Historical buildings are an important segment of the cultural heritage that provide a tangible connection to our past and symbolize our rich history and traditions; therefore, they need to be carefully considered.

The territory of today's North Macedonia has always been a place where different civilizations crossed and left traces in the form of cultural-historical monuments. Byzantine churches, which date from 9th -14th century, are one of the most numerous and well-preserved medieval monuments in the country. In addition to their cultural and historic value, these buildings have exceptional architectural and artistic value. They appear as four main concepts: basilica, conch, cross-in-square, and smaller single-nave buildings, with some further variations.

This paper provides an overview of the Byzantine churches in the country (50 churches in total), focusing on their main characteristics from an architectural point of view. It provides accessibility to the information for the churches in one place and may contribute to raising the visibility of the Byzantine heritage in the country.

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