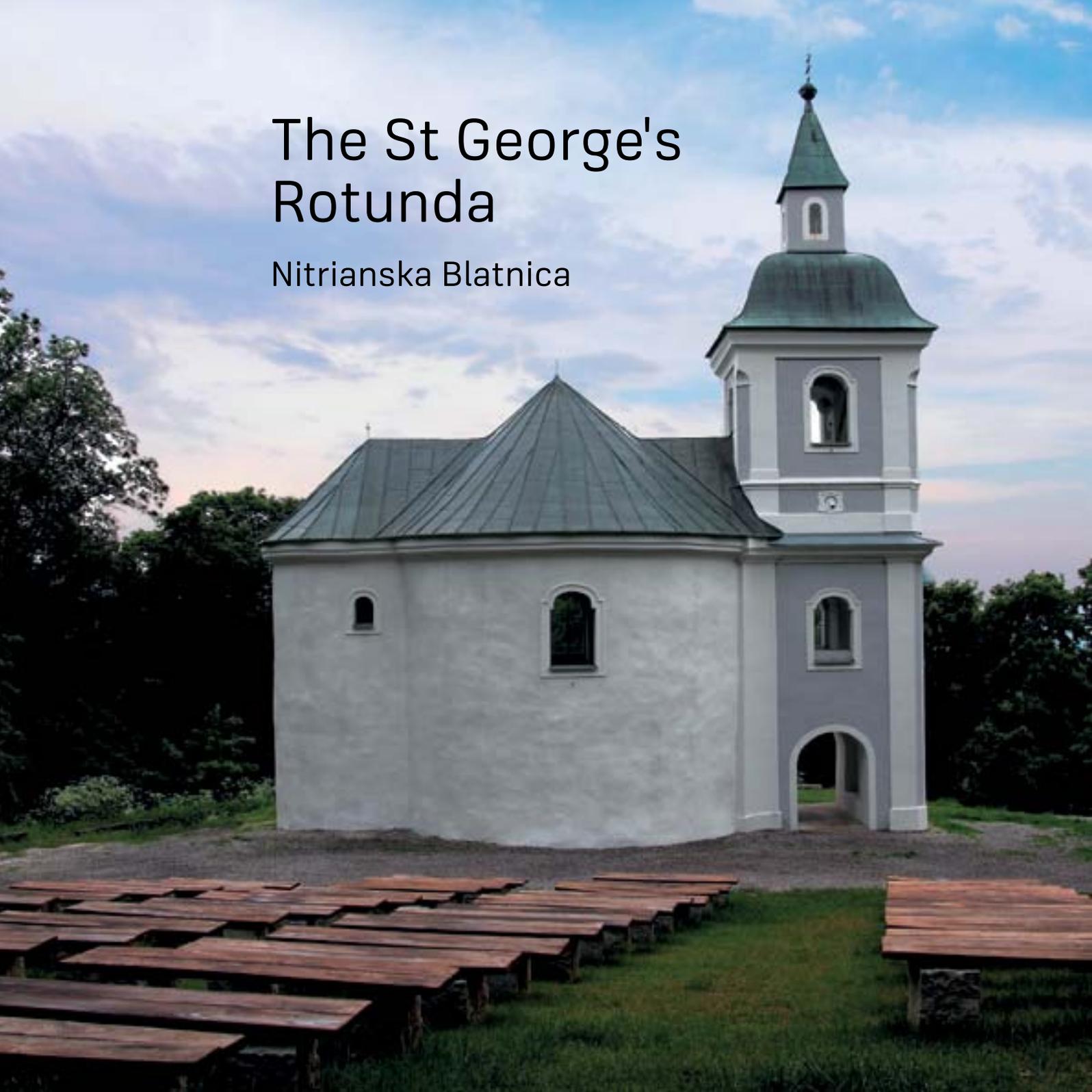


# The St George's Rotunda

Nitrianska Blatnica





## The St George's Rotunda

### The beginnings of the uncovering of the Rotunda's history

The small building hidden in the woods above the village Nitrianska Blatnica is actually a little church, for a long period of time bypassed by experts. The main known fact was that it was built in the years 1530 – 1540 by Maria Thurzo. There is even a record that it was built by a French hermit. More true was only the fact that already for centuries (presumably from the second half of the 16th century) until today the St George's pilgrimages still take place next to it in April and the people from Nitrianska Blatnica and wider surroundings call the church familiarly "Jurko", "Ďurko", or "Rotunda Jurko".

The discovery of the actually much older history of the St George's Rotunda begun to be recognised in the year 1973. In that time the priest in Nitrianska Blatnica, Redemptorist František Jurík wrote a letter to the Slovak Institute for Care for Monuments and Protection of Nature in Bratislava with the request for instructions and guidance how to repair the Rotunda which he intended to do.

His request was the first impulse which gradually caused specialist interest in this monument. Still in the same year, the employees of the Monuments Institute Ing. arch. Rudolf Rejthár and PhDr. Jana Šulcová performed the first investigative building - historical survey on the walls in the rotunda's interior.

They were very surprised to find that their discoveries proved much earlier establishment of the Rotunda than the previously stated first half of the 16th century.

*St George's Rotunda - north-western view*

*On the front cover:*

*St George's Rotunda - northern view*

*On the back cover:*

*3-dimensional survey of the St George's Rotunda's floor plan*



*Archaeological survey  
in the interior  
and next to the Rotunda  
exterior in the year 1974*

## The St George's Rotunda

### Archaeological survey

1974 – 1980

In the year 1974 during the realisation of the repairs, while digging the hole for the lightning rod the workers found humane skeleton remains. During the securing archaeological survey next to the skeletons, items were found belonging to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the systematic archaeological survey started in the Rotunda and its closer and later also wider surroundings. The research under the leadership of prof. PhDr. Alexander Ruttkey lasted till the year 1980. It brought important discoveries about approximately 5 centuries lasting inhabitation of this locality from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The primary inhabitation in form of two magnate's courts fortified with palisades timely following one another, which were located not far from the Rotunda in the area of the meadow "Púst", was transformed by further development into the shape of a spread settlement. The first phase of the inhabitation during the 9<sup>th</sup> century was connected to the existence of the Great Moravia and this find was highly appreciated by specialists.

Both mentioned surveys in that time placed the creation of the Rotunda into the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, while not excluding the possibility of its earlier establishment. Alexander Ruttkey also pointed out the compliance of the size of St George's Rotunda with the size of the base of the rotunda in the Great-Moravian fort Ducové - Kostolec, which is only 7 km far from the Rotunda in Nitrianska Blatnica. He also pointed out the compliance with the size of the two-apse rotunda in the Great-Moravian archaeological site in Mikulčice in Moravia. Despite of these important discoveries the attempts for deepening the knowledge of the locality's history and of the establishment of the Rotunda stayed without further public interest and support and gradually stopped.

## The St George's Rotunda

### The complex restoration of the Rotunda in the years 2009 – 2016 and the important discoveries

In 2001 based on the impulse from the inhabitants of Nitrianska Blatnica the civil association Rotunda Jurko was established, which started to care for the Rotunda and support the interest in its protection and maintenance. The year 2008 was an important breakpoint. The ownership of the Rotunda was transferred from the Štátne lesy SR (State Forests of the SR) to the municipality of Nitrianska Blatnica. Since then both subjects systematically and according to their competences take care for the Rotunda and mutually cooperate.

The municipality of Nitrianska Blatnica in cooperation with the civil association (OZ) Rotunda Jurko in the years 2009 - 2016 provided for the conservation-restoration of the whole interior and exterior of the Rotunda including the additional building – the small hermitage.

During the restoration of the Rotunda led by the restorer Acad. painter Jozef Dorica, new important discoveries were made. Their character and historical placement unambiguously moved its creation into the pre-Romanesque era meaning before the year 1000.

Among the most important finds belongs the discovery of the way of building the stone walls of the Rotunda which illustrated and proved the originality and unity of until today preserved walls standing circa 6,5 m tall.

Based on the possibility of the dating the Rotunda's creation depending on the typology of the found details of the oldest building construction in the year 2010 the bricked in original window opening was uncovered in the south western part of the stonework of the Rotunda's nave.



*Lit interior of the nave's southern wall with the original pre-Romanesque window opening after the restoration*

The discovery of this window also from the pre-Romanesque era, together with the above mentioned and also other discoveries they became important pieces of evidence and enabled to date the establishment of the Rotunda into the Great-Moravian era.

Among other discoveries, which are now visible on the interior walls in the Rotunda's nave are fragments of the first, oldest original plaster layer and the second, in development younger plaster layer also originating from the oldest era of existence of the Rotunda. Two painted consecration crosses were discovered on the second layer of the plaster. One was preserved more complexly, the other only fragmentary. The find of the painted consecration crosses supports an important fact, that the act of the Rotunda's sanctification was performed in the presence of the bishop.

The acceptance of the Rotunda's location into the Great-Moravian era was strongly supported by establishing the cooperation with prof. RNDr. Pavol Povinec from the Comenius University in Bratislava in 2016. An international consortium was established under his leadership with the aim to determine the Rotunda's age using the radiocarbon dating by independent world-renowned laboratories. In the consortium laboratories from Tucson, Vienna, Zürich, Debrecen, Prague and Bratislava cooperated on the research. They all analysed the organic samples (pieces of wood, coal) as well as inorganic samples (building mortars and plasters) found during the restoration in the oldest stonework and plasters of the walls. The measurements results have shown compliance among the laboratories based on which the establishing of the Rotunda was dated between the years 790 to 870 (until 830±40 years).

The exactly defined time of establishing of the Rotunda proves with high probability that it could have been built already before the arrival of the Cyril and Methodius mission in the year 863. It could have been built also during the rule of Prince Pribina of Nitra who in the year 828 had built the church on the Nitra Castle.

The St George's Rotunda near Nitrianska Blatnica as far as the current level of knowledge proves is the oldest standing sacral building with original walls in the area of Slovakia and in the wider space of Central Europe. The chosen character of its presentation and enabling the accessibility of its historical values and finds offers evidence on the uncovered extent of the oldest stonework as it was preserved in combination with the baroque adjustment of the Rotunda in the year 1777.



Detail of the original pre - Romanesque window opening,  
1st half of the 9th century  
Detail of the consecration cross, 2nd half of the 9th century (?)  
Key from the Rotunda (?), 9th - 10th century,  
find from the archaeological survey in the year 1974  
Piece of wood found in the original plaster layer



Northern view onto the restored baroque tower and the uncovered stonework of the Rotunda before the restoration of its façade

# The St George's Rotunda

## The development stages of the St George's Rotunda

The history of the St George's Rotunda can be split into three development stages. The oldest, first stage lasted continuously about 5 centuries – from the half of the 9th century to the half of the 13th century. After the cessation of the settlement in the Rotunda's surroundings it started to decay and turned into a ruin. After about 300 years lasting period of unknown fate the second stage is recorded between 1530 – 1540 when the repair and revitalisation of the Rotunda was realised for the purpose of the religious cult. In this Renaissance period the building was repaired without remarkable interventions – without damaging its original architectonic setup. Maria Thurzo is mentioned in two written records incorrectly as the builder (erecta) of the Rotunda. However, the archival survey performed during the course of the restoration did not prove her existence in the Thurzo family during that period. It is more likely, that it was Magdalena Thurzo, who did not have the Rotunda built, but repaired it in memory of her husband who died in the Battle of Mohács in the year 1526. The small object of hermitage was added to the Rotunda presumably at the end of the 16th century. It is the only preserved hermitage of its kind in Slovakia. In the Baroque period it was rebuilt. The activity of hermits in the Rotunda is documented by the death record of the one before last hermit in the parsonage register in the year 1804. Until today not further researched information from the Nitra county registry from the year 1903 states, that in the building near the Rotunda the so-called hermitage school was active and used to be attended also by the later Hungarian Primas Cardinal Ján Scitovský. After the school's demise the building was used as a gamekeeper's lodge. It was demolished in the year 1962. In the third, Baroque stage in the year 1777 the look of the building changed radically. The tower was built at the entrance of the Rotunda, over the interiors of the nave and apse brick vaults were built and over the entrance into the nave the empora was built. With small alterations after later repairs this state preserved until today.



*St George's Rotunda and the building of the so-called Hermits' school, photograph from the beginning of the 20th century*

*Drawing reconstructions of the original look of the Rotunda with the presumed location of the original window openings  
akad. mal. Jozef Dorica*



*Detail of the fragments of the interior wall painting of an unknown saint, 1st half of the 17th century (?)  
Entrance into the Rotunda with the baroque empora from the year 1777*

*Interior of the nave's northern wall with the staircase to the baroque empora and with the consecration cross after the restoration*





*Rotunda's presbyterium  
after the restoration  
in night lighting*

The inexact information in the preserved written records from the canonical visitations and the baroque building look which it achieved for a long period of time added weight to the impression that the St George's Rotunda was built in the years 1530 to 1540.

The knowledge about the demised inhabitation which in the past together with the Rotunda created a territorially important unit, is still not fully outsourced. The settlement, which started at some point in the beginning of the 9th century used to be located in the area of the meadow "Púst", western direction from the rock salient of the lower part of the foot of the hill Marhát, where the Rotunda is built (etymological base of the name Púst could be found in the words: spustnutý, opustený (forlorn, abandoned)).

The original name of this place, for the oldest history of Slovakia of such importance, is still unknown and hidden in the depth of the time. The whole wide locality offers further possibilities for archaeological survey and searching for archival sources. In future they can bring new discoveries, widen and refine the knowledge not only about the oldest but also its younger history, including the new knowledge about the St George's Rotunda. The preserved standing Rotunda at the same time proves already high level and extent of Christianisation of the inhabitants in the time of its creation in this region. It happened due to the activity of the ruling and proprietary elite, which aimed Christianity to the lower-ranking broad sections of the population. The quite exact knowledge of the preserved architectural essence of the sacral building and its placement within the frame of the settlement partially changes until now conventional view schemes and enriches them with new knowledge. All of this gives us the right to state the opinion, that the St George's Rotunda has a unique place not only in the domestic context. It has gained a unique value of historical and cultural-historical importance that places it among our most precious sacral national cultural monuments.

Jozef Dorica



*The Hermitage's interior with the museal exposition of the furnishings  
Bell after the restoration,  
1st half of the 20th century  
Baroque stone stoup, 1777*

## The activities of the civil association (OZ) Rotunda Jurko in Nitrianska Blatnica

The care for the St George's Rotunda from the side of volunteers from the OZ began in the year 2001 with the dehumidification of its northern wall and the renovation of the facade. In the following years it continued with building of the historical educational trail, which leads from the village to the church, by building a replica of a single-space early-medieval dwelling near the Rotunda and establishing a museum exhibition in the cultural house in Nitrianska Blatnica under the name „People under Marhát in the Early Past“, where the most important archaeological finds from the 9th to 13th centuries are stored.

In the year 2008 the association initiated complex restoration of the Rotunda through preparation of the requests for grants from the resources of the Ministry of Culture of the SR, financed the lighting of the churches interior and exterior, security equipment, windows insulation, building of anti-snow protections on the Rotunda's roof and cooperated in the building of the exposition in the hermitage. The Old Slavonic party (Staroslovienska družina) in period clothing composed of members of OZ participated in many events in Slovakia and represented our culture also abroad. For visitors and pilgrims, members of the association built an amphitheater with benches (in collaboration with the municipal office) and adjusted the slope by planting Cotoneaster, initiated the installation of the stations of the Way of the Cross (Calvary) leading to the statues of the Crucifixion and renovated them. Besides, the members of the OZ systematically care for the advertising of the whole locality, maintenance of the Rotunda and its surroundings, provide guidance for visitors and participate in the organisation of St. George pilgrimages.

Dagmar Ševčíková

*Sculpture of Golgotha with the Way  
of the Cross in the slope above the Rotunda  
Service during the pilgrimage  
to the St George's Rotunda 28. 4. 2019*

*Next pages:*

*Photographic views from a drone onto the St George's Rotunda*







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Nitrianska Blatnica

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