

ABSTRACT

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE STEĆCI

Bosnian Stećci are some of the most popular and enigmatic tombs among the funerary artifacts of the medieval period. Their uniqueness has provoked significant debate regarding their origins among scholars from different disciplines in the last few centuries. This speculation is due to a lack of proper documentation and the absence of any historical or religious references. Today, scholars can develop their hypotheses from papal documentation, the correspondence of nobility and foreign rulers, and visual observation of the tombstones themselves. Scholarly theories range from occultist speculation connecting the Stećci to the heterodox movement of the Bogomils to suggestions that their style and iconography are linked to medieval Western European art traditions.

Stećci remain one of the most controversial subjects of debate, particularly in Bosnia, due to their mysterious origins and the politics still associated with them today. The interpretation of their identity continues in current cultural debates. When looking at history, it is important to remember that it is written by the dominant culture of the time. In that setting, Stećci, like many artifacts, became a powerful tool misused to enforce a biased identity.

The historiography of the Stećci represents a small nation's struggle against a biased interpretation of their origins influenced by outside forces. By connecting the carvings on the tombstones with Bosnian folklore, the careful reading of papal correspondence, and excavations on site, modern scholars can find answers to the origins of Stećci.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE STEĆCI

by

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When visiting Sarajevo, Dubravko Lovrenović and Gorčin Dizdar were a great help in understanding different perspectives of interpreting the identity of the tombstones. It was an eye-opening experience to see the polar opposite reasoning of Pr. Lovrenović, who interprets Stećci in the light of the sepulchral art development of Western Europe, while Gorčin Dizdar sees their origins through the heresies and visual connections to Khatchkars and Ororots.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I would [like to be] silent as [a]

stone

But I miserable [woman] am not [a] stone

Thus forgive a/the word

Which will turn to stone

Angrily from a/the lightning- struck oak

They have taken its/his green branches

They have snapped off its/his

Slender arms/hands

With which it/he rose to the hills

[...]

*M. Dizdar*¹

I remember my first encounter with a book about Stećci. It was a 16 x 6 inch book by Alojz Benac and Oto Bihalji-Merin published in 1964. It had yellowed pages and smelled like Nag Champa incense. I was charmed by the black and white photography of tombstones, the simplistic-looking warrior carvings adorning the house-shaped tombs,

¹Amila Buturovic, *Stone Speaker: Medieval Tombs, Landscape, and Bosnian Identity in the Poetry of Mak Dizdar*, 171.

waving at the spectator (Figure 1). I was even more attracted to the tombstones after I read Benac's reasoning, which stated that medieval Bulgarian heretics known as Bogomils might have created these tombstones. In the book, Benac speculated that these heretical beliefs originated with the Manicheans in the Middle East (modern-day Iran), migrated to modern day Bulgaria through the Byzantine Empire, and from that point spread inland into the Balkans.



Figure 1. Stećak, Radimilja, Stolac

I was immediately fascinated by the Bogomils' explanation of divinity. To me, religion has always seemed to cause too much bloodshed around the world. Their reasoning finally put everything in perspective. According to Benac, these heretics were Christian ascetics who believed that God had two sons. One was Christ and the other was the infamous Sataniel. They believed that Sataniel created the material world and the human body and God gave the human a soul, creating a duality between the sinful human body and the divine spirit. This concept of human psychology explained the complex and constant struggle of the soul vs. the body. Sadly, these sectarians were soon to be humiliated and persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church.

Later I read the theories of art historian Marian Wenzel on the origins of these tombstones. She cites local folklore without mentioning the Bogomils and speculates that the political rule of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire may have tried to change modern Bosnian identity by giving them a new infamous past, different from their Orthodox Serbian and Catholic Croatian neighbors. I then studied the writings of the religious historian Yuri Stoyanov, who claimed that heresies were indeed present in medieval Bosnia and possibly came from the Dalmatian coast. I also reviewed the theories of John Fine who suspected not only the absence of any heresies in Bosnia, but also a high rate of illiteracy among the clergy of the Bosnian Church. I spent a year studying the history of heterodox religions in medieval Eastern Europe and the writings on Stećci by modern western scholars. In the fall of 2014, linguist Dina Abazović, author of the book "Stećci," suggested I read books by Ivan Lovrenović and Dubravko Lovrenović. These two

Bosnian scholars view Stećci as a coherent local development of Western European sepulchral art, and present numerous arguments not only against the Bogomil theory, but also against the alleged illiteracy of the Bosnian clergy. Their most compelling argument is that most previous research was based on papal documents and correspondence of the Roman Catholic Church, which was the dominant religious and political force in most of medieval Europe with its own biases and agendas that distorted its perception of independent religious movements like the Bosnian Church.

At the end of December of 2014, I finally saw the tombstones with my own eyes. I flew into a snowy Sarajevo on Christmas Day to receive one of the warmest welcomes ever from my mentor Dina Abazović and her husband, writer Oevind Berg. They introduced me to Bosnian culture, showed me the city of Sarajevo, took me to the towns of Konjic and Mostar, and most importantly, organized trips to the cemeteries of Boljuni and Stolac.

The Stolac Stećci looked stunning in the bright sun on the picturesque hilly countryside. The rectangular, round-topped stones were a warm beige color with an exquisite collection of carvings depicting heraldic imagery and floral designs. They ranged in size, with some as tall as four feet. The Boljuni Stećci seemed more abandoned and forgotten; yet they also had an overwhelming amount of heraldic imagery and coats of arms. They were left in the quietude of nature and darkened by time and fungus.

In recent decades, Stećci have become a part of the Bosnian national identity and are now closely intertwined in its culture, myth,

and literature. The poetry of Mak Dizdar is an excellent example of literature saturated with Bogomil theory and culture, where vernacular language makes national sentiments sound patriotic. Dizdak recognizes that the geographical location of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a regional crossroads contributed to the shared identity of the nation. This realization of a shared primary cultural identity led to an ambivalent awakening of nationalism in his poetry.² His poetry enlivens tombstones and gives their identity a voice of estrangement and stillness. He seems to fully associate with the gravestones psychologically, as he was a frequent visitor to one of the better-preserved cemeteries, Radimilja. In an interview he states:

For hours I have stood among the Stećci of this land, in their cemeteries scattered at the feet of the ancient forests. Various symbols- the sun, twinning plants, outstretched human hand – have entered into me from the huge stone tombs. At night I have been assailed by notes scribbled in the margins of ancient books, whose lines scream question about the apocalypse, then the sleeper beneath the stone comes to me. His lips open, limestone-pale, and his dumb tongue speaks again. In him I recognize myself, but I still do not know if I am on the way to unveiling the secret.³

Contemporary points of view address the subject of Bosnian identity in relation to Stećci or whether Bosnian culture adequately explains the existence of the tombstones. Scholars have attempted to explain Stećci through different theories that vary from heretical and pagan to political and nationalistic. Some of the earlier methodologies theories from the early nineteenth century through the 1960s, attempted

² Ibid., 27.

³ Ibid., 90.

to identify Stećci as heretical artifacts. Some theorists, like Stoyanov, speculate based on collected evidence that Stećci were made for the members of all three of the churches: Catholic, Orthodox, and the Bosnian. Each theory offers the reader different possible versions of Bosnian history and identity.

French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre believed that acting a certain way establishes our identity. This opposes the concept that identity predisposes us to certain types of behavior. Papal correspondence that identified residents of medieval Bosnia as heretics shows that church leaders primarily drew their conclusions from what they were being told by their cardinal-legates, assuming that there were similarities with other heretical movements. Documentation shows that Bosnian nobles were accused of heresy; therefore it follows that any artifacts and the culture itself carried the stigma of heresy. Bosnian nobles denied the allegations, assuring the Roman Catholic Church that the Bosnians were devoted Catholics. Furthermore, many Stećci have carvings on them identifying the deceased as those who followed the Christian faith. No magical symbols, no enigmatic puzzles, or worship of heterodox gods is implied in the imagery.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit, summarize, and critique proposed heretical, occultist, cultural, political, and other interpretations of Stećci. I will also examine the contemporary interpretation of Stećci as a part of Bosnian and international societies and attempt to provide an analysis of the identity of these artifacts and their influence on contemporary culture.

Several hundred Stećci have inscriptions in Cyrillic addressing the honor of specific nobles and written casually in the south Slav Cyrillic language.⁴ The oldest tombs with inscriptions are dated from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They display abstract human and floral carvings shaped in the form of sarcophagi, stele, and cross shapes with floral and solar-like designs. These mysterious sepulchral relics of medieval history have led to spirited disagreement on the origins of Stećci.

Characteristics of Bosnian Stećci

Commemorating death with a tombstone is an old tradition with a heritage traceable to Archaic Greece. The late Roman-era tombstones were quarried and partially prepackaged in Asia Minor, the islands of Marmora, and the Aegean Sea. The gravestones were half-completed with custom artistic designs and then sent as slabs to their destinations for final placement. The tombstone tradition and its various forms have gone through many stages of modification and development throughout history. The spread of Christian beliefs and values left a lasting mark on the tombstone imaging tradition in Europe as the designs became simplistic and Christianized over time. From the second to fourth centuries, the tradition of burial of an individual with a gravestone instead of cremation was connected to the development of definable Christian beliefs, as well as other philosophical systems that supported the idea of the immortality of an individual's soul.

⁴ Sefik Bešliagić, *Stećci- kultura i umjetnost*, 582.

Beginning in the fourth century, necropoleis were moved outside the city line due to Roman laws about hygiene. After the Empire made Christianity legal, burial sites appeared within city limits because the desire to be buried in consecrated ground near churches had become inviolable. This helped to establish the tenets of Christian faith.⁵

The forms, inscriptions, and visual representations of some Central and Eastern European tombs dating from the tenth to fifteenth centuries tend to surprise contemporary scholars with the simplicity of their aesthetics and their unknown origins, generating many different theories. These carved stones have very few similarities with the visual styles common in Western Europe at that time. Up to 70,000 of these medieval tombstones are scattered across Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro.⁶ Also known as Greek graveyards or Bogomil sculptures, it is believed that these slabs appeared in Balkan countries somewhere between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ The size of Stećci (singular: stećak) varies, but some of the tombstones reach up to two meters in length and one meter wide. They are made with local stone (primarily limestone) and weigh up to 30,000 kilos. They are found in different shapes: sarcophagi, crosses, tomb dwellings, coffins, slabs, and chests. They were most often located near settlements on elevated surfaces. According to local beliefs this was done so the “dead could observe the living.” Bešlagić suggests that these shapes came into

⁵ L.A. Beliaev, *Medieval Russian Gravestones 13th-17thcenturies*, Volume 1, 9.

⁶ Bosnian Institute, (n.d.), *About Bosnia*, accessed June 18 2014, <http://bosnia.org.uk/bosnia>.

⁷ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5617/>

existence by imitating the shapes of the churches. Shapes and forms of the stones seemed to carry a certain symbolism depending on their place in historical development, social status of the deceased, and geographical location. The sarcophagus shape is considered the most elegant shape, most often are found in Herzegovina. The chest-shaped Stećci were made for the wealthy later in their evolution. Peak-shaped Stećci represent imitations of houses, cross-shaped Stećci have an unknown heritage, and the erect-standing shapes were adopted after the Turkish invasion. The sarcophagus and chest-shaped stones are the most ornate, with a wide variety of decorations. The most common themes include decorative borders and astral motifs, while designs depicting symbolism and occupation are less frequent.⁸ Some decorations appear strictly in certain geographical territories. For example, arches and rectangular shapes can only be found in Herzegovina, while spirals, spears, and floral motifs can be found everywhere.

Stećci have a wide variety of minimalistic decorations, carved in both shallow and deep relief. These consist of ornamental symbols such as rosettes, crescents, sun wheels, coronets, and circle dance motifs known as *kolo* (see Figure 2). In these tombstones there is also wide use of registers and hierarchical scale. There are frequently repeated themes such as dancing, hunting, and nobility carved in an extremely minimalistic style. Bešlagić states that much of the ornamentation seems to be drawn from pagan motifs, while the Christian influence is the

⁸ Bešlagić, *Stećci- kultura i umjetnost*, 580-581

strongest and linked to the cult of after-death beliefs.⁹ Wenzel states that certain martyrs' graves near Split show evidence of concavities, left from the tradition of having funeral feasts graveside. She connects these hollows with the rings on tombstones in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

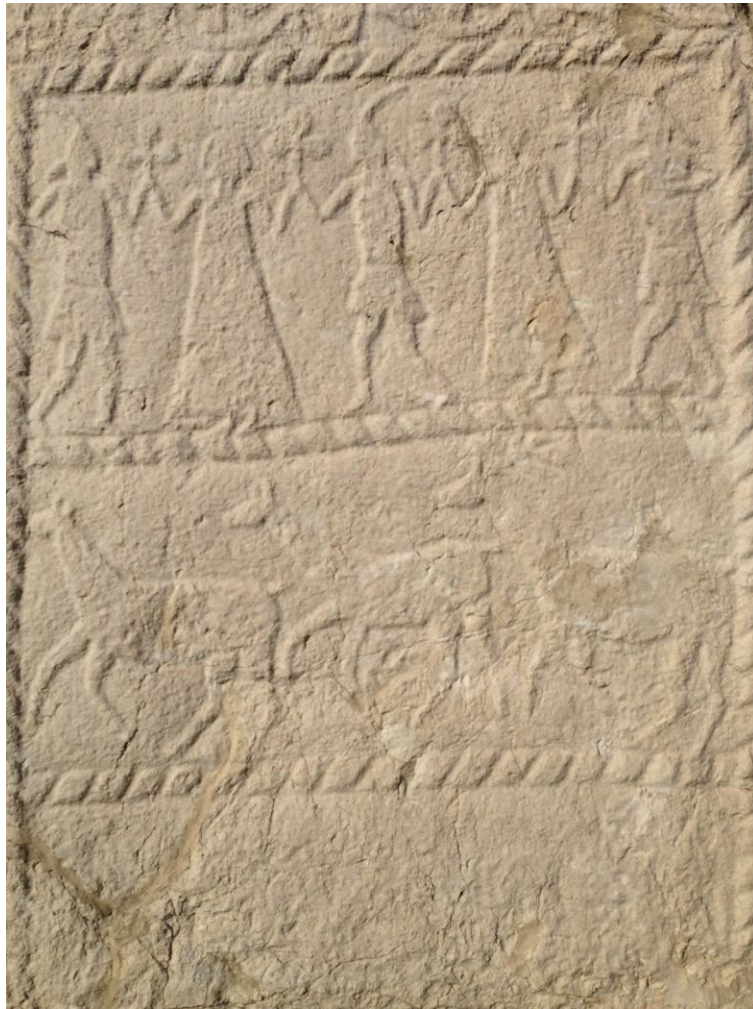


Figure 2. Decorative kolo motifs. Radimilja, Stolac

“There is no attempt at sculpture in the round. Faces, emblems, heraldic signs and ornament are merely drawn with shallowly incised

⁹ Ibid., 581-582.

lines.”¹⁰ In his essay on *Medieval Tombs of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Alojz Benac describes his impressions of the style as “crudely realistic... this impression is conferred by the scene as a whole...certain figures are awkward and ill-proportioned, their poses unnatural. The hunters are sometimes mounted on horses so small that their feet hang down to the ground, the dogs are the same size as the stags, the trees are smaller than the animals”¹¹ (see Figure 3). Some stones suggest colonnades decorated by floral motifs, which came before the influence of tenth century Romanesque art (1000 A.D.) and Gothic architecture (in the west, spanning the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries).



Figure 3. Heraldic and animal imagery, Radimilja, Stolac

¹⁰ Oto Behalji Merin and Alojz Benac, *Bogomil Sculpture*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Scholars of the past and present offer contrasting theories about the origin of Stećci. They base their hypotheses about Stećci not only on scriptures, but also on the carved symbols of the stones. In his studies, Bosnian scholar Benac calls attention to the shapes of the tombs, which according to him owe nothing to Romanesque or Gothic influences. He states that these forms of tombstones are purely indigenous to Slavic folk art traditions and show some parallels to tombs that were found in Bulgaria. Benac observed that the depiction of flowers in the art of Stećci also exists on the Byzantine tombstones, bordering modern day Bulgaria.¹²

There is a suggestion of some pagan rituals coexisting with Christianity in burial practices. In many situations, the dead were found with jewelry, ceramics, and other personal items. Bešlagić also suggests that the burial itself was arranged with the feast and burial dances. The concavities found in the tombs today may have served as vessels for liquid offerings. Bešlagić also mentions “repeated burials,” where every three or seven years after the initial burial, the tomb was opened and the bones of the deceased were washed with water and wine, then buried again with the priest and relatives in attendance.¹³

The reason for locating Stećci close to and above settlements was twofold. It allowed the dead to oversee the living and concurrently caused the living to be reminded of the dead.¹⁴ The graves were oriented east to

¹² Behalji Merin and Benac, *Bogomil Sculpture*, 16.

¹³ Bešlagić, *Stećci- kultura i umjetnost*, 578.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

west to follow the path of the sun and organized in rows following the Slavic tradition, even graves without tombstones. The lack of tombstones in some locations suggests that earlier grave markers may have been wooden. There were also different forms of burial, with the dead either placed inside wooden coffins or buried directly in the ground. Arms were extended or crossed on the chest, which could suggest Christianity.

Stećci and the images carved on them seem to possess a mystical power, carrying stories and myths with them through the ages. The most widespread legends about Stećci are about the Greeks leaving the tombstones behind due to the long-lasting winters. To this day, people believe that Stećci possess healing powers, as indicated in Bešliagić's "Stećci – Culture and Art." He cites the belief that the sick can become well if one drinks water mixed with diluted dust from the stones. Another belief is that the whitewashed stones can protect the harvest from thunderstorms and other natural disasters.¹⁵

The appearance of Stećci shows their uniqueness and contribution to the individuality of Bosnian cultural heritage. The stylization of these tombstones could have been due to their isolation in the mountains or the cultural predisposition of the region's previous pagan beliefs. Stećci are steeped in burial and fertility traditions that are symbolically connected, through odd numbers like three and seven for example, to Christian beliefs. The earliest explanation of their origin references heretical beliefs and is still widely referenced today to attract tourists. More recent research and excavations show that Christian theories are

¹⁵ Ibid.

more likely. Whatever their origins, the importance of these 70,000 tombstones may hold the answers to understanding the historical and cultural identity of Bosnia.

CHAPTER 2: THEORIES OF ORIGIN

It is believed by many scholars that the appearance of these sculptures can be connected to the heretical dualistic beliefs that flourished in the Balkan area during the medieval period. Yugoslavian scholars of the 1960s like Benac tended to connect the meaning of these sculptures to the heretical beliefs of the Christian sect of the Bogomils.

The earliest interpretation of Stećci was offered through multiple writings of various scholars including Benedikt Kupresic, Arthur Evans, and Soloviev. Janos Asboth interpreted the Stećci decorations through the theological beliefs of so-called Bosnian heretics.¹⁶ These heretics were connected to the Bosnian Church by most of the previously mentioned authors. Other authors, like Bozidar Petranovic, claimed a modified version of that theory and stated that the Bosnian Church belonged to the Eastern Orthodox in exile, which also adopted heretical beliefs.¹⁷

The heretical interpretation warrants extensive consideration, as it is the longest-standing explanation for Bosnian Stećci. Although contemporary scholars now favor other theories, heresy remains so closely tied to Stećci it is still occasionally suggested as the basis for their origin.

¹⁶ Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

The Development of Christian Heresies in the Byzantine East

Heretical beliefs trace their roots to the time before Christ. Beginning in the second through fourth centuries with Gnosticism, a set of beliefs based on knowledge and enlightenment (gnosis) where adherents followed the idea that earthly life is filled with suffering and enlightenment, heretical belief systems have existed side by side with Christianity throughout history.

Manichaeism

One of the first major documented heretical beliefs was Manichaeism, a religion that was practiced as far away as China and considered a heresy by the Christian church. Mani, its founder, established an extreme example of dualism where, at the roots of the world, creation was rooted in two eternal principles, God and Matter. As a result of conflict between these two opposite principles, the world became a mixture of both. Therefore it became God's work to separate the opposite particles from each other. The particles of God became the souls of men.¹⁸ Gnostic Christianity spread to Babylonia, Asia Minor, Syria, and Persia where it helped shape Mani's vision of the world and existence in the third century A.D. It is believed that Mani borrowed from Christianity, using the idea of Jesus, its spiritual leader.¹⁹ Mani believed man was born out of darkness and Jesus was a divine being who revealed the duality of human nature to man and taught him the way to

¹⁸ Dmitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

salvation. Mani died in prison as a result of his teachings and the heretics were expelled to Syria and Armenia.

From its earliest development, Manichaeism was also clearly influenced by Zoroastrianism, which taught the coexistence of light and darkness. It held that man was a product of the Divine and possessed his own free will, giving him the right to choose between good and evil. The lifestyle of Manicheans was considered monastic, as it was only the Elect or Perfect who was bound to chastity and asceticism. The ordinary believers, or Hearers, were not bound by such restrictions.

According to Steven Runciman, “The thirteenth-century Syriac writer Barhebraeus mentions the arrival in Armenia and Syria in the reign of Justinian the Second (685-95) of heretics whom he calls ‘Barburiani,’ who in Syriac are termed ‘Maliunie’ and are an offshoot of the Manicheans; these heretics, expelled from Persia, came to Armenia and thence to Syria, where they invaded and started to inhabit those monasteries in which they were found.”²⁰

Paulicianism

At approximately the same time, another heretical sect called Paulicians spread over the territory of Armenia. A military and religious heretical community, they believed themselves to be followers of the teachings of the Apostle Paul and saw their salvation only through his scriptures. One of the biggest differences between Manichaeism and the Paulicians is that Paulicians did not live the life of ascetics. They drank

²⁰ Gregorius Barhebraeus, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum* (ed. J.B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy; Lovanii, 1872), t. 1, cols.219-22, as quoted in Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy*.

wine, ate meat, and did not abstain from sex.²¹ Peter of Sicily, the imperial Byzantine ambassador, referred to the Paulicians as direct descendants of Mani's teachings.²² But, for medieval Christian theologians, all heretics were the descendants of Manichaeism, whether they had any direct historical connection to Mani's beliefs or not. He summarized the main idea of Paulicianism in his correspondence as a dualistic doctrine, where the first principle was good and the second one was evil. The evil principle was the creator of the material world, the creator of the "good was still to come." Paulicians did not recognize the Incarnation, since if Christ's body was truly material, he would have been part of the evil world. Furthermore, they rejected the Old Testament. They equated the wrathful God of the Old Testament with the Devil, the evil creator of matter. The good God, the loving father of Jesus, created spirit. The Paulician canon consisted of the four Gospels, the fourteen Epistles of St. Paul, the Epistle of St. James, the Three Epistles of St. John, the Epistle of St. Jude, and the Acts of the Apostles.²³ Paulicians separated themselves from the Byzantine teachings by calling themselves *Christians*, and referred to the Orthodox Church as *Romans*.

Anna Comnena, the Greek princess and scholar, wrote in her treatise *The Alexiad* that the Paulicians were likely linked to the Messalians, another dualistic Syrian sect that rejected the Old Testament and had their own interpretation of the Bible. Messalians is translated as

²¹ Obolensky, *The Bogomils*, 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

“those who pray.” They believed that only excessive prayer could expel the devil, not Baptism. Scholars also find information about Messalians from Armenian sources, mentioned specifically in the writings of St. John Damascene.

Bogomilism

In the correspondence of Theophylact, patriarch of Constantinople, and Peter, Tsar of Bulgaria, he writes about “the new heresy” in Bulgaria, which is defined as “Manichaeism mixed with Paulicianism.”²⁴ Though there is no proven historical connection between Bulgarian heresies and Manichaeism, as Runciman notes, “Christian Dualism and Manichaeism were two completely different religions. But to the medieval churchman, in the East as in the West, all Dualists were Manicheans.”²⁵ In his description of the new heresy, Theophylact states there is a dual doctrine of divinity and other basic principles of Paulicianism, like the rejection of bodily pleasures and marriage in favor of monasticism. This new heresy, which Theophylact described in correspondence to his overhead priest in Constantinople, would later be known as Bogomilism, in honor of the first heresiarch, the priest Bogomil, whose name was probably a Slavic pseudonym referencing God (“Bog”) and favor (“mil”). This heretical iconoclastic movement originated at a politically convenient time, since the Byzantine Empire was weakened from the Arab invasions. The first specific advances of Bogomilism remain untraceable and speculative, as

²⁴ Ibid., 112.

²⁵ Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy*, Foreword.

they were not documented. It was still likely to be practiced by Christian monks, who preferred ascetic lives. Bogomil asceticism is different from Orthodox asceticism in its practices and attitudes, and observed for very different political reasons. For example, Orthodox Christianity does not practice chastity, because all things created were done in the name of God. Bogomilism rejected marriage, the consumption of items like meat and wine, and they confessed absolution to God.

An important historical piece of evidence regarding the spread of Bogomilism in Bulgaria is found in the writings of the medieval scholar and priest Cosmas, who identifies the heresiarch Bogomil and the core of his teachings in his chronicles. According to Cosmas, Bogomils opposed icons and crosses. They believed that the cross was evil, since it was central to the execution of Jesus Christ, and rejected it as being “the instrument of the Savior’s murder” and therefore “loved by demons.” They also believed that icons simply diluted the purity of Christianity. These monks, under the supervision of Bogomil, rejected the complex hierarchy of Byzantine Orthodoxy and denounced the veneration of the saints, tracing their beliefs to the early Christians and claiming they were passed down from the Apostles. They condemned the Old Testament because they equated the God of the Old Testament with Satan who trapped human spirits in the material world. Bogomils claimed that Orthodox priests were possessed and didn’t believe in the miracles of Christ, since they saw him only as a spirit without the ability to manipulate matter.

To the Bogomils, the Bible seemed to fail in its explanation of why there is evil and left a great deal of room for interpretation. They

recognized the devil as a fallen angel and the older son of God, which rendered their dualistic doctrine conditional, rather than absolute. This was in contrast to the Manicheans, who believed evil was eternally coexistent with good. In Bogomil teachings, Sataniel (el – representing the sign of divinity) revolted against his father, which caused his expulsion from Paradise. The creation of Adam also had a different interpretation: the Bogomils claimed Adam was made from earth and water by Satan, whom they equated with the wrathful Yahweh of the Old Testament, but that a soul was given to Adam by God. Both divine sources would therefore have joint power over the created human. This concept would be the foundation for the duality of good and bad in people: the body was sinful, while the spirit was divine. This interpretation of Christian faith goes in the opposite direction of what is considered to be an orthodox theological interpretation of the Bible. In Genesis, a key fundamental concept is that God is good and that he created the world. “Appearance of the Evil one is explained through man’s disobedience to his God, but gives us no philosophical theory as to the relationship between the creature and his Creator.”²⁶ So, orthodox Christian theologians suggested that “everything that has being is good; and since everything that is derives its substance from God, it follows that Evil, as the opposite of God, has neither substance nor being...it is, strictly speaking, non-being.” It must be theorized that the origin of God exists outside of God’s realm and therefore lies in the Matter itself.

26 Ibid., 2.

Bosnian Church Theory

Christian beliefs spread from the Byzantine Orthodox Church to Bosnia. Without proper institutions in the area, or ecclesiastical control, there was space for heretical beliefs and heterodoxy to grow.²⁷ This growth was caused by the politics of the Bulgarian Kingdom and the Byzantine Empire, both of which sent persecuted heretics and Jews to colonies in the north. These colonies were used as garrisons during the Bulgaro-Byzantine wars. A specific example of this was a Paulician colony sent away to Thrace in 757 AD by Constantine V to the north of the Balkans. Stoyanov believes that Bogomilism was brought to the Balkans during the reign of King Peter of Bulgaria (927-969 AD).²⁸ In addition to Paulician settlements in the Balkans, nomad pagans such as the Pechenegs, located in southern Ukraine, who are also believed to be observers of Manichaean beliefs, made excursions to the Balkans.²⁹

The geographical location of Bosnia, at the heart of the crossroads of central Europe, became the perfect environment for the increase in speculation about heresy in Bosnia in the Middle Ages. Malcom Lambert states that “Bosnia was a frontier land between the spheres of the Greek and Latin Churches. To the north, the kingdom of Hungary was an outpost of Latins; farther south, Serbia represented Orthodox tradition; and along the coast Trogir, Split and Dubrovnik were Catholic. The interior of Bosnia, with its forests and mountains, was an ecclesiastical

²⁷ Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy*, 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

no man's land in which neither of the churches had effective jurisdiction." He further asserts that "Bosnia was unlikely to produce heresies; it rather attracted refugees from the Dalmatian coastlands and Serbia."³⁰ Being the source of conflict between two major religious institutions, the Balkan ethnic population became receptive to heterodox religions that are believed by some to have arrived from Bulgaria.

Bosnians living in this mountainous environment were isolated from official Byzantine and Catholic doctrines. This separation allowed a somewhat relaxed version of traditional teachings, resulting in Bosnian clergy being less strict in their interpretation of church doctrine. For local Bosnians, however, it was still a form of Christianity. Their practical traditions, closely aligned with Christianity, seemed to be far more important than any theological explanation of divinity.

It is documented that Pope Innocent III was alarmed by heresy spreading throughout Bosnia, which during the late eleventh century was under the jurisdiction of Catholic Rome and the Hungarian Empire. According to the inquisitor Anselm of Alexandria, the heretical Church of Bosnia or Slavonia had been established at the same time after the 2nd Crusade during 1147. One of the most prominent nobles, Ban Kulin, was accused of being a heretic along with his 10,000 servants, even though he claimed to be a Catholic. Ban Kulin was a Bosnian ruler from 1180 to 1204. One of the most popular rulers, today his reign is viewed as a "golden age."³¹ Evidence suggests that he expanded the economy by

³⁰ Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars*, 298.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

signing a treaty with Dubrovnik and established good relations with the ruler of Hum, who would marry Kulin's sister. Eventually, Catholic Church politics would set the stage for the conflict that led to the accusation against Kulin, when Rome transferred jurisdiction from Dubrovnik to Split.

In 1200, Pope Innocent III authorized a cardinal-legate to take measures against Kulin and the Bogomils.³² Innocent III may have been the instigator of anti-Bogomil sanctions, but the crusade was conducted along "standard Orthodox lines" and was carried out by Orthodox Tsar Boril. As a result, it is documented that Bogomils were punished and anathematized in 1235.³³ In 1238, the war in Bosnia turned into a Catholic conquest executed by the Hungarian Kingdom. By 1241, Hungary suffered Tatar invasions and as a result withdrew from the occupied Bosnian lands.³⁴ The accusations of heresy by Bosnians coincided with the suppression of Catharism in Languedoc and Lombardy from 1220-30.³⁵

Balkan heretical movements were documented in papal documents during the tenth century. Similarly, there was an official Bosnian Church, or the Crkva Bosanska, which the Roman Catholic Church claimed had heretical traits mixed with composite Orthodox influences in its teachings that were upheld by the Bosnian aristocracy and

³² Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 215.

³³ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

peasantry.³⁶ The majority of the documents that describe the Bosnian Church are mainly drawn from papal correspondence.

John Fine

In his book, *The Bosnian Church*, John Fine attempts to deconstruct the concept of the equation of the Bosnian Church and heretics. He proposes the concept that there was more than one religious movement in medieval Bosnia and that most of the population was illiterate. Fine points to the generalized statements of medieval writers associated with the Roman Catholic Church and Byzantium Orthodoxy, identifying other Christian movements in Bosnia as heretical, whether these groups had signs of heresy or not.

Fine's main point was that the religious traditions of the Bosnian Church were associated with practical aspects of Christianity. These practical aspects seemed to be far more important than any theological explanation of divinity, meaning that rituals were more important than doctrines. He demonstrates the illiteracy of the church clergy by examining documents from 1233, when several monks were expelled because of their ignorance and incompetence.

So, according to Fine, rituals were more important than doctrine. One of the most vivid examples was documented in 1233, when several monks were expelled because of their ignorance and incompetence: "the bishop did not know the baptismal formula, lived with a heretical brother, and did not seem to realize that his brother was heretical."³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 116.

³⁷ JR Fine, *The Medieval Bosnian Church: A New Interpretation*, 11.

Later documents record a direct account of Bosnian rulers complaining that their Dominican superiors were now moving beyond their control. King Stepan Tomas complained in 1459 that “he was unable to fight the Turks because most of his people were Manicheans, who felt friendlier to the Turks than to the Catholic.”³⁸

According to Fine, the historical background of the Balkans prior to the arrival of dualistic teachings also benefitted the development of Gnostic views. In the fourth to fifth centuries, the Christianization of the Balkans was interrupted by several barbarian invasions including the Visigoths, Huns, Avars, and others. This was eventually followed by Slav colonization of the area from the north in the sixth and seventh centuries. In 681 A.D., the Byzantine Emperor Constantine the Fourth was defeated by the Balkan king Asparukh. As a result, he signed a treaty with the Slav tribes recognizing their right to become the first Eastern European state, the Bulgarian Empire. This later contributed to the migration of nomadic people from the Eurasian steppes to the Balkans. The eighth and ninth centuries are significant for the arrival of the Serbs and Croatians, who were of Iranian origin, but later Slavicized.³⁹ At the same time, the Byzantine Empire was weakened by militant Arab assaults, and as a result could not sustain its grip on these Balkan provinces.

Besides the illiteracy of the population, Fine asserts that the majority of the peasantry was practicing pagan rituals. These examples

³⁸ Behalji Merin and Alojz, *Bogomil Sculpture*, 11.

³⁹ Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 130-139.

of paganism were hiring a “witch” for saving a person from a serious illness, jumping over fires on a certain saint’s day, or rituals performed by young maidens when rain was needed.⁴⁰ Fine reinforces this point by pointing out that some of these rituals are still practiced as part of the Bosnian culture today.

Fine also asserts that the geographical placement of Bosnia and its isolation possibly contributed to paganism and illiteracy among the masses. Another important aspect is cultural context. Local mythology and folklore, developed from Balkan antiquity, had a dualistic interpretation reinforced by a heretical explanation of God and Evil. The existence of this type of mythology can be traced through the migration of the Slavic tribes. Local folklore was based on belief in the two primordial figures of God and Satan.

Satan, the source of darkness and evil, was believed to have dived into the primordial sea, after which followed an antagonism with God, the source of divinity and good. Earth diver stories are part of pre-Christian folklore, which later were fully Christianized.⁴¹

Balkan heretical movements were documented in papal documents during the tenth century. Similarly, there was an official Bosnian Church, or the *Crkva Bosanska*, which the Roman Catholic Church claimed had heretical traits mixed with composite Orthodox influences in its teachings that were upheld by the Bosnian aristocracy and

⁴⁰ Ivan Lovrenović, *Bosnia: A Cultural History*, 16.

⁴¹ Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 132.

peasantry.⁴² The majority of the documents that describe the Bosnian Church are mainly drawn from papal correspondence.

Fine agrees with other scholars like Stoyanov that the heretical movement infiltrated Bosnia with the Orthodoxy. While examining the history of heretical developments in the Eastern and Western worlds, he found that “Paulicians were transferred to the Balkans and settled in Thrace and Bulgaria. He then acknowledges the rise of the Bogomils in Bulgaria, which had “the character of a social movement. Adherents believed they should not obey masters, pay taxes or fight wars.”⁴³ Later, he states, Bogomilism spread to “intellectual and pseudo-intellectual levels” in Constantinople, which could have included not only monks, but also wealthy merchants in power. Then it spread to Southern France and Northern Italy. These followers were called Cathars and Patarins. Fine analyzed inquisition documents dating from the twelfth century, but most of those sources speak of “Sclavania” with no references to Bosnia.

Fine also discusses the noble Ban Kulin in relation to heresy and Catholicism. He speculates that the redistribution of political power could have been a decisive moment during which charges of heresy could be leveled if someone chose not to obey the papacy. Papal sources describe Ban Kulin, a Bosnian noble in 1180, as a devout Catholic. The charges of heresy against him are mentioned in documents dating from 1192 when Papal jurisdiction had transferred Bosnia from the Archbishop of Dubrovnik to the Archbishop of Split.⁴⁴ Fine states that

⁴² Ibid., 116.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

there is no evidence that Ban Kulin protested against that political change and therefore was assumed to be a heretic. In 1199 the ruler of “Dalamatia and Diocea” contacted the Pope about the rise of heresy in Bosnia. In October 1200 Pope Innocent contacted the Hungarian King to take actions against heresies.⁴⁵

Thus Fine suggests that the charges of heresies may have been caused by different reasons: political, illiteracy of the masses, preexisting culture and folklore, and ongoing practices of paganism.

Yuri Stoyanov

Bulgarian author and scholar Yuri Stoyanov published “The Other God” in 2000. His book focuses on the formation, development, and spread of heretical notions in Orthodox and Catholic medieval Europe. He presents evidence that there were people who had adopted heretical beliefs in the Balkans. He discusses the Bosnian Church and its possible ties to heretical beliefs, and discusses the relationship of the Bosnian Church to Stećci.

He speculates that the Bulgarian Empire’s heretical beliefs had a significant influence on the religious history of cultures located in present day Balkan countries. Stoyanov also suggests that traces of ancient pagan occult traditions, like the Thracian cults, were more prevalent in the Balkans than in the rest of medieval Europe.

He asserts that dualism and its heretical nature owe much to the illiteracy and incorrect translations from Slavic languages to the Bosnian

⁴⁵ Ibid., 124.

language.⁴⁶ The origins of the Bosnian Church remain speculative, though it is accepted that the Church was established between Catholic and Orthodox influences and had its own hierarchy. There is no strong evidence that heresy was at the core of the Bosnian Church's beliefs, but he asserts that heretical beliefs were brought from the Dalmatian coast – “the most probable location of the Bogomil Ecclesia Sclavonie.”⁴⁷ While it is debated whether or not Bosnia was heretical in comparison to generalized “Sclavonie,” Stoyanov points to the writings of the Inquisitor Anselm of Alessandria, who describes the election of a Dualist bishop in his writings. The nature of the Bosnian Church cannot be considered fully heretical or an offshoot of the Catholic Church. Stoyanov states that “the evidence indicates that members of the Bosnian Church could adhere to Orthodox Christian beliefs and practices, but could at times, also follow dualist or pagan traditions, surviving pagan elements remaining particularly active in the diverse religions world of medieval Bosnia.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, Stoyanov suggests, there is reason to believe that Bosnia may have been a safe place for Patarenes (Italian heretics) to escape the persecution during the crusades in the west.

⁴⁶ Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 162

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

Heretical Interpretation

“Bogomil Tombstones”

To this day, Stećci are often referred to as Bogomil tombstones. This charming theory was put forth by Sir Arthur Evans in the nineteenth century, and later supported by others including Janos von Asboth, Soloviev, Alojz Benac, and even partially by Yuri Stoyanov in his book *The Other God*. All of these authors state, to one degree or another, that Stećci could have been made by heretical followers of the schismatic Bosnian Church.

Sir Arthur Evans was one of the first travelers to cross Bosnia in the nineteenth century by foot and make detailed references and descriptions in his diary. He described tombstones in his writings and clearly stated his assumptions about their heretical origins. Janos von Asboth would be the first to publish material in a foreign language about Bosnian culture in general and tombstones in particular in 1887, 1888, and 1890. According to him, Bosnia wasn't connected to Serbia historically and was dominated by Rome. He stated that the country was already heretical in the Middle Ages, and that the tombstones served as proof with their “crudish, amateurish and childish” design.⁴⁹ Stoyanov states in *The Other God* that both Evans and von Asboth used many generalizations, though Evans was using the Bogomil theory as propaganda to support the Bosnians rebelling against the Turks in the late nineteenth century. By making them descendants of Bogomils,

⁴⁹ Marian Wenzel, “Bosnian History and Austro-Hungarian Policy: The Zemaljski Muzej, Sarajevo, and the Bogomil Romance,” *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 171-172.

whom Evans presented as early Protestants before the Reformation, he was hoping to get British support for the Bosnian cause. In contrast, von Asboth conveyed a rather negative interpretation of the same history, expressing his political bias against King Tvsko, who up until that point had successfully defended his nation against repeated Turkish invasion.⁵⁰ Asboth suggested the Bogomils let the Muslim Turks invade in the fifteenth century in because they shared a common enemy in Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity.

Soloviev explains Stećci carvings as secular art motifs with elements of borrowed pagan imagery like the sun and moon, which he also connects to Manichean art.⁵¹ Alojz Benac, the Bosnian art historian who published a book on Stećci in 1964, states in the introduction “that creators of the tombs were the Manichaeen Bogomils, the most revolutionary community of religious innovators before the Reformation.”⁵² Stoyanov supports the Bogomilism theory that heresy was brought up from the Dalmatian coast.⁵³ In his discussion of Stećci, Stoyanov acknowledges the problems of linking Stećci carvings to Bogomil teachings and notes that even those who claim there is a relationship admit the connection is speculative.⁵⁴ Yet, he states, some of the carvings have ancient symbols reflecting occultist or pagan practices, like jousting and hunting scenes. He claims that there could

⁵⁰ Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 18-20.

⁵¹ Jordan, *The Question of Dualist Heretical Art In Medieval Bosnia*, 16.

⁵² Behalji Merin and Benac, *Bogomil Sculpture*, vii.

⁵³ Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 223.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 257

have been “patterns of symbiosis between dualist and traditional pagan beliefs” and gives a specific example of a dualism-pagan synthesis motif on Stećci -two horsemen opposing each other.⁵⁵

Apart from any differences in artistic interpretation that may be raised, one of the first problems of the Bogomil interpretation of Bosnian culture and Stećci in particular, is that Bosnia was viewed as heretical by the powerful foreign nations who seemed to want to initiate wars on Bosnian territory. Aesthetically, Stećci truly possess some Romanesque and Gothic art elements, even though they visually misled the earlier-mentioned scholars in this chapter into thinking they were heretical, they had a mysterious air with representations of fanciful animals, hunting scenes and kolos. Roman burial chapels were filled with mosaics, three-dimensional portraits of the wealthy deceased commissioners personally meeting the saints and even God himself. In that way, the art of Stećci remain very minimal and symbolic.

Additionally, it is hard to imagine heretical brothers, who denied the material world and marriage, showing their devotion in hunting scenes or dancing in kolos, celebrating life circles. The other problem is that Bogomils, as well as Cathars, rejected the crucifixion, as they didn't believe Christ had a human form and believed the crucifixion was merely an illusion. For both heretical movements, the cross was a symbol of murder. Finally, the problem with heretical explanations of a Bogomil past is that they contain epitaphs clearly stating their connection to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 257.

other religious faiths – Catholic and Orthodox in addition to Bosnian Church connections.

Cultural and Political Theories

Fine asserts that Stećci carvings are secular artifacts due to their subject matter, arguing that they cannot be heretical tombstones due to the crucifix shapes that embellish many of them. Papal correspondence indicates that Bogomils or heretics did not accept crosses, because Christ was killed on the cross. His second point is that some Stećci in the Radimilja graveyard have carvings indicating the deceased were members of Catholic, Orthodox, and Bosnian Churches. It seems that Fine connects Stećci with the funeral tradition of people from the Balkan region since they are found outside the borders of Bosnia, in present day Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. He links Stećci to a period of economic prosperity of the region, when Vlachs were trading with Western Europe by utilizing a route through Bosnia. He states that Stećci, dated from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, were found in an area that has no documented historical proof of heretical movements.

Fine elaborates on the motifs carved on the Stećci. He singles out the “pastoral” motif by mentioning slabs found in Kreselvjani in Nevesenje that display the “patron kneeling before the Virgin.” He suggests that the patron most likely was an Orthodox bishop. He also gives an example of the gravestones in Boljuni, which display repetitive images of snakes. He speculates that maybe snakes had some symbolic meaning to the local community at that time, but he also finds it ironic

that the local area is infested with poisonous snakes.⁵⁶ Finally, he states, some grave markers have carvings that indicate that the deceased belonged to the Bosnian Church. Stećci, according to Fine, were just an example of Bosnian cultural uniqueness.

Geographically, Bosnia was located within the spiritual territory of two ruling churches: the Roman Catholic and the Byzantine Orthodox. The influence of Rome on Bosnian lands is undeniable. The Byzantine Orthodox Church did not exert the same influence on the Balkans during the Middle Ages except in the area that is now Serbia. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Serbian rulers under Byzantine control briefly governed Bosnia until it gained independence in 1180.⁵⁷

Local Slavic tribes were gradually conquered during the ninth century by the Roman Empire and roads were built from Rome to the Bosnian settlement Salona.⁵⁸ Franciscan missionaries may be responsible for the extension of the Roman Catholic Church in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the fifteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church waged war against the “Bosnian heretics” by giving orders to the Hungarian Kingdom to initiate the crusade. However, the Byzantine church may have influenced the cultural beliefs in Bosnia through marriages between Bosnian and Serbian royalty in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Bosnian nobles seemed to most often marry foreign queens of the Catholic faith, but there may have been

⁵⁶ Fine, *The Medieval Bosnian Church*, 115.

⁵⁷ Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

some aristocracy that married women from the Serbian families in the Vrbosna region during the fifteenth century. These marriages between different faiths, Catholic and Orthodox, may have had an influence on Bosnian culture.

Vlachs were a documented nomadic community, possibly originating in Bulgaria, and residing in Bosnia in the fifteenth century. There is evidence of their settlements in north central Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their main occupation was breeding, shepherding, and trading horses and they were proficient with military strategy. The Vlachs could be responsible for commissioning Stećci decorated with carvings of horsemen. Additionally, Fine supports the idea that the most elaborate Stećci belonged to the Vlach families, who were not residents of Bosnia and “known to be Orthodox in faith.”⁵⁹ In 1463, the Turkish Ottoman Empire conquered the Bosnian territories. The Ottomans may have utilized the Vlachs as a military power. These warriors were hired to serve Ottoman rulers in return for receiving lands and tax reductions. They were a distinctive cultural ethnic group allowed to carry weaponry, rob enemy territory and could afford sepulchral monuments.

Another group of Vlachs was functioning under the Hungarian Habsburg rule. Today, the remains of Vlachs are found scattered over Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, and Northern Greece. In Byzantine documentation they are referred to as Serbo-Bulgaro-Albano-Vlachs. A scholar on Bosnian history, Noel Malcolm, offers a fascinating visual on the crossroad life of Bosnia during the Middle Ages and proposes an

⁵⁹ Fine, *The Medieval Bosnian Church*, 89.

explanation on the political and social environment of the period. He cites Habsburg official Benedict Kuripesic, who travelled through Bosnia and states that the area “was inhabited by three peoples. One was the Turks, who rule ‘with great tyranny’ over the Christians. Another was ‘the old Bosnians, who are of the Roman Catholic Faith.’ And the third were “Serbs, who called themselves Vlachs...They came from Smederevo and Belgrade.”⁶⁰

On one side, some scholars perceive Stećci as Orthodox because of some visual resemblance to other eastern European tombstones (i.e. Moscovian white tombstones, Armenian tombstones such as Khatchkars or Ororots). They could be related to the Vlachs due to the large amount of heraldic imagery and the coats of arms, which makes sense if the Vlachs were a military nation. The cemeteries of Radimilja and Boljuni in Bosnia have a considerable amount of tombstones with the coat of arms and heraldic imagery (see Figure 4). On the other side, Malcolm suggests that Stećci could be a visual recording of the pagan Slav myths. The visual carvings of heraldry or horsemen can refer to any nobility. Finally, his third suggestion is that the decoration may just be pure decoration.⁶¹

Marian Wenzel

Wenzel shares a number of folk narratives, which she believes are survivals from the times before the Turkish conquest, but even after that were adopted by the Balkan Muslims. According to her, myths and legends could be one of the best explanations to the mysterious

⁶⁰ Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31.



Figure 4. Boljuni, Herzegovina

iconography of the tombstones. Some of Wenzel's speculations can be confirmed by other scholars. Fine writes that prior to the Avars' and Slavs' arrival, Bosnia was a Roman territory and its capital was Salona, which fell to proto Serbo-Croatian tribes. Constantine the 7th Porphyrogenitus is the best source for understanding the geopolitical situation of the Balkan state in that period. Dalmatia, an old Roman province, occupied the territory that is present day Bosnia.⁶² The people that lived in that region most likely assimilated with their Slavic conquerors. Influenced by the Romans, their funerary traditions flourished, as seen in the carved Stećci. Additionally, according to Fine, Constantine identified the local population as "Pagani," or "unbaptized."

⁶² John Fine, *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans*, 23.

As Fine states, the Bulgarian prince went to war with the Croats in the mid-ninth century and was defeated, so there was a chance for possible migration of religious beliefs and teachings.⁶³

There are two late works by Wenzel presenting her last scholarly research on Stećci. In her articles, *Bosnian History and Austro-Hungarian Policy* (1993) and *Professional Notes Conservation* (2001), she completely rethinks the heretical past of Stećci along with Bogomilism in Bosnia. In these articles she states that during Hungarian rule, specific propaganda was developed to rewrite the history of Bosnia in order to establish a new power and create a new culture. Janos von Asboth was in charge of widely accepted heretical theories of the Stećci phenomenon:

...the creation of the false history as the result of a realization by the Austro-Hungarian authorities, looking back on the first years of occupation, that some kind of ideological support was needed for what they saw as the necessary separation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Serbia.⁶⁴

This heretical past, established during the Medieval period, would give no reason for modern Bosnians to be attached either to Croatia or Orthodox Serbia. Hungarian propaganda suggested looking to Byzantine Bulgaria, rather than its neighbors. It is for this reason that Bosnians chose Turkish Muslim rule. The unique aesthetics of the tombstones would serve as proof. Wenzel also suggests the reasons why Bosnians were associated by medieval Catholic writers with the schismatic religions, what Catholics would call *patarins*, over all other Christians who were associated with Orthodoxy or non-Catholic groups. She

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ M. Wenzel, *Bosnian History and Austro-Hungarian Policy*, 128.

continues that the Bosnian Church was most likely a composite between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, combining elements of both as a result of clerical ignorance. Her evidence consists of a few arguments in addition to the political doctrine of Austro-Hungarian rule. First, from hundreds of Stećci, only eight tombstones have a direct link to the Bosnian Church. Second, Bogomil heresy was applicable only to Byzantine Bulgaria, and existed before the Bosnian Church. Third, she mentions that some Stećci have a cross shape, and the cross was known to be rejected by dualists. Finally, her most compelling argument: the grave of the first King of Bosnia, King Tvrtko I, was discovered in 1909 during *the illegal annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina*.⁶⁵ It was an accidental discovery, as the intent of the excavation was to find the remains of the political heretical renegade Ban Kulin, who joined the Bogomil faith with his family and ten thousand subjects. Ban Kulin remains somewhat controversial and some scholars still do consider him a heretic. Others, like Yuri Stoyanov, quote historical resources that indicate Kulin claimed to be a devout Catholic.⁶⁶ The finds from Kulin's grave were notarized with inventory number G-1-14-8-1909, then put aside in the museum basement storage among the medieval collections, as they did not seem to fit pro-heretical political propaganda. The tomb appeared to be a family mausoleum with eight skeletons. Only one skeleton was in the coffin that had once been draped with King Tvrtko's coat of arms. The family vault also included valuables including silver and gold rings.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁶ Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 203.

⁶⁷ Wenzel, *Bosnian History and Austro-Hungarian Policy*, 177.

The discovery suggests a royal family grave, not that of heretical rebels going against the Catholic Church.

In 1932 another scholar, Vladislav Skaric, was the only one to challenge and criticize Austro-Hungarian rule for the widespread heretical propaganda. After World War II, the Bogomilian heretical idea was supported for tourism reasons. In defense of her own point about the propaganda lie, Wenzel states in *Professional Notes Conservation* that Bosnians had a more noble origin. As nobles, the likelihood of them being heretics was highly doubtful.

Members of the Bosnian royal family of the 14th and 15th centuries were catholicized descendants of the Serbian King Dragutin, and his wife who was daughter of the last Arpad King of Hungary. The daughter of this princess and Dragutin (by then ousted from the Serbian throne by his brother, Milutin) married a northern Bosnian noble, Kotroman, and from this marriage derived the Bosnian royal family, the "Kotromanici."⁶⁸

If Wenzel's speculations proved to be true, then the identity of the nation would be significantly altered. Her theory is not impossible, as very few records have been preserved from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

Ivan Lovrenović

Ivan Lovrenović is a Bosnian scholar, writer, and poet, who has dedicated his studies to the cultural heritage of Bosnia. In his book, "Bosnia: A Cultural Heritage" he details his country's history from the Paleolithic period to the twentieth century. He specifically states that the

⁶⁸ M. Wenzel, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Danger, Through Social Readjustment, to Cultural Property which had Survived War." *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 318.

charges of heresy were strictly a political move by foreign powers such as Catholic Rome, Hungary, and the Byzantine Empire. Discussion of these charges can only be found in foreign references. In fact, the Bosnians were Christianized Slavs with a diverse belief system and high level of literacy.

Today, contemporary research finds diversity in the remaining multiple forms of faith as practiced in the Orthodox, Catholic, and Bosnian Churches. Lovrenović asserts that there was a high level of literacy, as scholars have several documents written in Cyrillic, Greek, Latin, and Glagolitic, which is a modified version of the Greek alphabet known as *Bosanica*.⁶⁹ The use of these alphabets can be seen on Stećci, which were mostly used to describe the deceased in the atypical secular ways of the medieval period. These epitaphs normally do not describe the specific class of person to whom Stećci were dedicated. According to Lovrenović, the first accusations of heresy began during the twelfth century when trading routes helped to develop economic ties with Dubrovnik, which in turn increased the economic growth of the Bosnian nation. Additionally, Lovrenović mentions the foundation of the Bosnian Franciscan Vicariate during the thirteenth century, which helped to establish Franciscan monasteries throughout Bosnia.⁷⁰

His writings on medieval Bosnia begin with the description of the Christianization of the South Slavs. After the break between the Orthodox and Catholic empires in the eleventh century, Bosnians found

⁶⁹ Lovrenović, *Bosnia: A Cultural History*, 45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

themselves in between the influence of two great forms of Christianity, Catholic Rome and Orthodox Byzantium. These two spheres of religious influence had a great impact on the development of people living in that area. In addition to Catholic and Orthodox churches, there was local development of Christianity, the Bosnian Church. Lovrenović claims that there are two theories that explain the origin of the Bosnian Church. The first theory states that the Bosnian Church was heretical, a claim made by the Roman Catholic Church from the very beginning. The second theory is that the belief system of the Church was based on ideas of orthodoxy and postulates written by Cyril and Methodius. Lovrenović points to the texts of *Bilino Pole Abjuration* In 1203 and *The Will of Gost Radin* in 1466, which document Christian beliefs with no elements of heresy.⁷¹ These two theories are subject to ongoing discussion.

Lovrenović provides multiple examples of towns with a developed feudal system that were built during the medieval period. The three largest cultural centers were Borac, Sutejska, and Visoko, which had developed industries such as blacksmith workshops, glass and metal ware, granaries, and water cisterns.⁷² Other evidence of significant development included sophisticated architecture like castles, objects of art made of bronze and other metals, books, miniatures, mortuary chapels, and funerary art like Stećci.

Stećci are an artistic and unique folk expression of the Bosnian culture independent of any theory set forth to describe them. Lovrenović

⁷¹ Ibid., 53.

⁷² Ibid., 61.

points out that only a small number of Stećci have ornamental carvings and even fewer of them have inscriptions. He suggests two possible sources of origin. Stećci were funerary artifacts developed for Bosnian Kings and as proposed by Marian Wenzel, the tombstones belonged to the Hrvatic family.⁷³ He also suggests that Stećci were placed next to settlements and roads. The fifteenth century signified the collapse of the Bosnian Empire and Ottoman rule, but Stećci carried on as a funerary tradition even with the change in religious beliefs. He suggests that some of the features seem to have been borrowed from the Romanesque and Gothic periods.⁷⁴ He further asserts that Stećci do not convey a strong separation between “high art and the folk traditions.”⁷⁵ There are neither canonical artistic standards nor symbols of the cult of death in the Stećci that seem to suggest the lifestyle of the deceased – showing people hunting and dancing in *kolos*.

Dubravko Lovrenović

A prominent Bosnian scholar who specializes in Southeastern medieval Europe, Dubravko Lovrenović is also the Deputy Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a visiting scholar at Yale University. He completely disagrees with early 20th century western scholars. He deconstructs their assertions about the heretical identity of Stećci in connection with his nation’s alleged heretical past. He asserts that this history was written by the dominant

⁷³ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 76.

culture of the time. As justification, Lovrenović provides multiple forms of proof that medieval Bosnians were educated. He discussed Stećci as an example of cultural uniqueness that flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries during economic expansion. In his research, he states that members of the Bosnian nobility were educated and provides examples of writings in three languages: Glagolitic, Latin, and Greek, and in Cyrillic script, which implies that Bosnian society was Christian and educated. Inscriptions on Stećci such as “eternal home” are a clear indication of the attitude of medieval Bosnians toward the afterlife and its sepulchral art representation.⁷⁶ He acknowledges that the isolated geographical location and absence of Catholic institutions may have contributed to the assumption that the Bosnian Church was heretical. According to Lovrenović, Stećci represented the uniqueness of Bosnian sepulchral culture. According to him, if art historians follow western sources exclusively, they risk accepting Bosnia’s heretical past and allegations of illiteracy. He completely disagrees with the arguments of early twentieth century western European scholars. He deconstructs their proposals, asserting the heretical identity of Stećci and his nation’s past. He alleges that this is a biased history written by the dominant culture of the time.

Lovrenović asserts that tombstone tradition existed in Western and Eastern Europe beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries. It was not an isolated Christian sepulchral art form, but rather a part of the European world. It can be said that Stećci mirrored religious culture, traditions,

⁷⁶ Dubravko Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones and Graveyards of Bosnia and Hum*, 90.

beliefs, and the philosophy of the existence of life after death in medieval Bosnia. Stećci designs can be interpreted by comparing the reliefs to mythology, scriptures, or papal correspondence. Lovrenović also suggests that fusion of the Illirian and Slavic tribe traditions may have resulted in the creation of the Stećci.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Ibid., 74.

CHAPTER 3: ICONOGRAPHY

Of 70,000 Stećci, only 5,000 of them have decorations, and a mere 300 have epitaphs or inscriptions. Aesthetically, they depict a combination of Romanesque and Gothic influences. Lovrenović identifies several distinctive groups of art motifs, including “social and religious symbols, representations of funeral dances, figural representations, and the so-called pure ornaments”⁷⁸ (see Figure 5). However, there is also a sixth group of unclassified ornaments that have carvings with geometric and symbolic forms or damaged motifs, which are difficult to identify.



Figure 5. Decorative motifs, Stećci in front of Zemalski Museum, Sarajevo

⁷⁸ Dubravko Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones and Graveyards of Bosnia and Hum*, 90.

As with any other art style, Stećci underwent certain phases in their visual development. From the tenth through the twelfth century, the carvings seem more spiritually oriented and simplified, compared to the ones that were done later. After the twelfth century, certain elements started to evolve as symbols of power and wealth, such as knights wielding swords.⁷⁹

Malcolm Lambert discusses how religious views of society prove their existence through the carvings of the Stećci. He states that epitaphs on the tombs signify their connection to the Bosnian Church, Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church equally. Such an example of religious faith can be seen on the tomb of Gost Milutin, which contains words addressing the Holy Trinity and mentioning his noble origins. Additionally the title “Gost” was used by the Bosnian Church, further evidence of religious faith.⁸⁰ Malcolm connects the meanings of the symbols to the local mythology that is seen in the symbolic carvings of animal hunts and patterns. Some stones depict magical animals, which appear to be composites of several animal species and human imagination.

It is tempting to argue that the Bogomil theory explains the choice of the simplistic and symbolic style of funerary decorations. Their religious beliefs rejected and even condemned Christian institutions for their materialistic and overly complicated hierarchical structures, symbolic objects, and elaborate ornamentation that ‘cluttered’ the

⁷⁹ Behalji Merin and Benac, *Bogomil Sculpture*, 15.

⁸⁰ Jordan, *The Question of Dualist Heretical Art in Medieval Bosnia*, 1.

message of pure Christianity. Heretical funerary art is plain and could be considered “pure” due to the simplistic lilies and heraldic crosses developed originally as Christian symbols that represent purity and devotion to the Christian faith.

There are other stones which fall into this extraordinary funerary art category based on both style and iconography. One of the examples would be the alleged Catharist sarcophagus found in the south of France at Domazan. The carved figure on this monument looks very simplistic, has disproportionately large upraised hands, and a stylized cross and flowers. This stone could be considered an exception in that area, since there are no other funeral artifacts like it. It is possible that it was crafted by Bosnian stonecutters, but this has not yet been proven.

Catharism was a heretical movement first recorded in 1163 by St. Hilbergard of Bingen, abbess and visionary. Ekbert, a Christian monk, specifically writes about Cathars, identifying the whole movement with Manichaeism. Catharism required a lifetime of celibacy and ascetic practices, and Cathars claimed no property, as Christ had no property of his own.⁸¹ Ekbert stated that Catharism was an “ideology with a body of belief and practice, potentially supra-national, impersonal, exceeding in durability the individual, idiosyncratic teachings of this or that charismatic personalities.” As an example, baptism was conducted by fire, whereas traditional Christian baptism is by water, and the sacrament of consolamentum was available only to a small elite group. There were similarities between the Bogomil movement in the Orthodox

⁸¹ Lambert, *The Cathars*, 19-22.

east and Catharism in the west, such as ritual practices like monasticism and some explanations of divinity. Both Cathars and Bogomils claimed that Catholic and Orthodox Churches were unholy and rejected idolatry and both regarded large churches as places possessed by demons. Both heretical movements also rejected the cross as the place where Christ was crucified. They also rejected icons, but most importantly both movements shared narratives explaining creation. Lambert also states that Southern Italy remained a Byzantine colony that was hypothetically a place for the Byzantine monks to visit. Anselm of Alessandria, the inquisitor in Lombardy, France wrote about heresies in 1266-67 and traces Catharism back to Mani “who taught in the regions of Drugunthia, Bulgaria and Philadelphia.”⁸²

Religious Symbols

The representation of heavenly bodies, like the sun and moon, are the most common images found on Stećci. They are represented in the form of swastikas, circles, and rosettes. Benac cites Alexander Soloviev, who noted that one of the tomb symbols of the cross resembled rosettes and arms holding each other in circles. Soloviev’s main thesis was to prove the connection between Stećci art and Bogomilism. He points out that several tombs belonged to wealthy members of the Bosnian Church, like the example of Gost Milutin’s tomb.⁸³ He agrees with Runciman and Obolensky on the ties of the Bogomils and the Bosnian Church to Manichean historic origins. Though he describes the moon and sun from

⁸² Ibid., 30-35.

⁸³ Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones and Graveyards of Bosnia*, 85.

Manichean texts “as ‘ships of light’ bearing the souls of the elect to the realms of the Good God,” there is no evidence that any of those texts were known to the Bogomils.⁸⁴

The same could be true of the Slavic *kolo* symbol, in which people are shown to be dancing while holding hands. *Kolo*, according to Soloviev, could also have a double meaning and represent fertility and cycles of life, where birth and death change into each other in circular patterns. There is potentially a problem with this interpretation, as it is difficult to reconcile dualists celebrating fertility of nature when according to historical sources, dualists disregarded nature and the body. These carvings may also represent the unity and collectivity of the group, but this interpretation goes in the opposite direction of the hypothesis of the Bosnian nobles commissioning the stones. There are examples in history as far back as Minoan Crete where nobles have commissioned works where peasants were shown having led a happy existence, implying that life is great for the poor, encouraging them to enjoy themselves and keep serving the rich.

According to Lovrenović, Christian and pagan belief systems of other Western European societies likely influenced the placement of celestial symbols like the moons and crescents depicted on the Stećci (see Figure 6). Solar symbols are mentioned in the Book of Genesis, where the sun and the moon were created on the fourth day. On Stećci, the sun is represented in the form of rosettes, swastikas, spirals, and ovals, usually shown on the upper portion of the Stećci. He connects

⁸⁴ Jordan, *The Question of Dualist Heretical Art In Medieval Bosnia*, 16.

these solar motifs to the art of the Etruscans, Assyrians, Illirians, and the Greeks. He also researches pagan Slavic beliefs, where the main god was directly connected to the sun. He examines lunar signs in the art of the ancient Middle Eastern city Babylon, as well as Greek and Celtic cultures.⁸⁵ According to pagan beliefs, the moon symbolized the renewal of life. He also cites widespread usage of sun and moon symbolism in other European countries' coats of arms including Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, England, and numerous others.⁸⁶ Lovrenović also cites examples of European heraldry including arrows, crosses, crescent moons, lilies, angons, and harpoons.⁸⁷



Figure 6. Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina

⁸⁵ Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones*, 87.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

Other commonly used symbols on Stećci are the crucifix and crescent moon with a star. Crucifixes are portrayed differently depending on the faith of the deceased. Some are plain with basic decorations in the shape of Greek and Latin crosses and others suggest the existence and practice of two religious faiths.⁸⁸ Some of the crucifix depictions on Stećci also include images of grapes, the ancient Christian metaphor for the blood of Christ. Some crosses that appear in the southern part of Bosnia, called Ankh, also show imagery of grapes and wine that also suggests the Eucharist. Other crosses show the crucifix with a bird, which was widely used in Christian iconography as a symbol of the divine spirit. Lilies are another representation that suggests the Christian faith and reinforces religious symbolism.⁸⁹

Social and Figural Representations

The representations of human figures on Stećci show people symbolically, instead of through specific portraiture. These human figures usually depict the occupation of the deceased rather than a physical likeness. The exception to this would be Stećci with epitaphs, specifically stating the identity of the deceased. Male figures show the deceased involved in physical activities like hunting. Some representations of men show them with one or both hands up, sometimes brandishing a weapon. Others show a male figure with arms crossed on his chest. This type of carving acknowledges both a

⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

connection to the Christian faith and the state of being of the deceased.⁹⁰

The representation of women on Stećci is incidental. The carvings do not show the woman's occupation during life in most cases, though a very few show a female figure between two horsemen. Most often women are shown mourning the corpse of a deceased male warrior. There is no representation of children on Stećci.

Another interesting case is dancing with swords, a surviving tradition from the thirteenth century that takes place on the second Monday after Easter in Macedonia. This observance derived from the Roman celebration for ancestral souls, the "dies rosae," and later entered Greece, where it was adopted by the Old Slavonic Church. The dance is performed by Vlachs of that town with swords and knives at the churchyard. From that point on, the dance is carried on to the village, where eventually one of the dancers falls into a trance and becomes a prophet.⁹¹ This tradition is reflected on many Stećci where people are depicted holding hands. According to Wenzel, "there is some evidence in Bosnia and Herzegovina that dances were more generally performed at the side of the grave, and on the fourteenth and fifteenth century tombstones in Herzegovina dances are frequently depicted."⁹² She finds many more examples of similarities among the folk traditions of the people of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and what she believes she

⁹⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁹¹ Marian Wenzel, "Graveside Feasts and Dances in Yugoslavia," *Folklore*, 6.

⁹² Ibid., 7.

sees in the aesthetic carvings of Stećci. Also she attempts to explain singular aesthetic features on the tombstones, where the dancers are given the rosettes, not heads or the element of Christmas dances, when the horns are attached to the dancer's head in order to represent him as a deer, as deer hunting scenes are very common carvings on Stećci.⁹³

According to D. Lovrenović three types of dancing are depicted on Stećci; male, female, and mixed, with males shown most frequently. He primarily attributes the representation of dancing to the pagan sepulchral practices of Slavs and Illirians.⁹⁴ Dubravko also suggests that the dancing is connected to Christianity as dancing during Easter was a form of resurrection.⁹⁵

Wenzel calls the Stećci iconography secular and attributes its meaning to local myths, which are her primary source of inspiration and knowledge about Stećci. She in fact seems to test scholarly theories against these legends. In her article *Graveside Feasts and Dances in Yugoslavia*, she connects the knowledge she gained studying imagery at former Yugoslavian gravesides. She explains the importance of many pagan funerary traditions, for example leaving food at graves. She connects this tradition to early Christian Rome, *when in the early centuries after the birth of Christ, funeral banquets were carried on at the grave.*⁹⁶ This tradition actually goes back much earlier to Greek and

⁹³ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁴ Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones*, 96.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁹⁶ Wenzel, *Graveside Feasts and Dances in Yugoslavia*, 4.

Etruscan times, originating in Egypt and the Near East. She states that certain martyrs' graves near Split show concavity left from that tradition of having funeral feasts at the gravesite. She connects these hollows with the rings on tombstones in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹⁷

Wenzel shares many folk narratives, which she believes originated before the Turkish conquest and were then adopted by Balkan Muslims. Some of Wenzel's speculation can be confirmed in *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans* by John Fine. The author writes that his work is based only on printed sources, analyzing documents from each region and century. He states that prior to the Avars and Slavs' arrival, Bosnia was a Roman territory with its capital in Salona, which fell to proto Serbo-Croatian tribes. Constantine 7th Porphyrogenitus is the best source about the geopolitical situation of the Balkan state at that time. Dalmatia, an old Roman province, occupied the territory that is present-day Bosnia.⁹⁸ The population that lived in those lands most likely assimilated with their Slavic conquerors and their Roman funerary traditions flourished, as we see in the carved Stećci. Additionally, according to Fine, Constantine identified the local population as *Pagani*, meaning "unbaptized." Although Wenzel's speculation about the spread of heretical beliefs may not be quite accurate, according to Fine the Bulgarian prince went to war with the Croats in the mid ninth century and was defeated, so it is possible there was a migration of religious beliefs and teachings.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁸ Fine, *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans*, 23.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 30.

Epitaphs

Inscriptions on sepulchral artifacts have been in use for thousands of years, originating with the Egyptians and Mycenaeans and dating back to 3000 B.C.

Rome used epitaphs extensively in its burial practices and today approximately 35,000 inscriptions have been documented. The influence of the medieval church cannot be overstated with its emphasis on saving souls after death. Inscriptions on grave markers were equally important in both Roman Catholic and Orthodox Byzantine churches, where the written carvings were meant to address the viewer not only from an informative point of view, but also from a spiritual and religious standpoint.

As a part of the medieval world, Bosnia contributed to this burial tradition with the carvings on Stećci. Bosnian tombstones are best studied in the context of Indo-European culture rather than in isolation. Focusing solely on western interpretation does not afford a full and complete understanding of Stećci. Dubravko Lovrenović identifies five types of inscriptions on the tombstones: religious formulations, those detailing a heroic death, ones describing the circumstances of death and familial ties, those with only the name of the deceased, and ones that convey moral messages or invocations.¹⁰⁰ It seems that epitaphs were not a static art form and evolved with the times (see Figure 7).

¹⁰⁰ Lovrenović, *Medieval Tombstones*, 127.



Figure 7. Stećci with heraldic imagery, Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Stećci inscriptions consisted of two parts up until the fifteenth century; identification and occupation, and the date of the death. After that time a new type of epitaph appeared– a prayer to God. Epitaphs were also used on Muslim sepulchral monuments, called Nišani, which also seemed to be influenced by Stećci.¹⁰¹

This example of a religious epitaph shows adherence to a Christian faith by mentioning the Holy Trinity and illustrates the literacy of the family of the deceased:

Va ime otca i sina I svetogo duha. A se dvor vojevode masna I njegoviju sinova Radoslava I Miroslava. Se pisa rab bozi I svetogo

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Dimitrija u dni gospodina kralja ugarskoga lojsa I gospodina bana bosanskoga Tvrtka. Tko bi to portal, da je proklet otcem I sinom I svetim duhom.¹⁰²

The prayer starts with “in the name of the holy father and the son and the holy trinity.” This shows understanding of the baptismal formula of Christianity, as it mentions the Holy Father, the Son, and the Holy Trinity. It also implies that the deceased had an elevated social status and served under Hungarian rule. In some other cases, epitaphs directly reference the deceased’s connection to the Bosnian Church.

Other Medieval Tombstones

Other examples of medieval sepulchral art that have potential heretical origin are the Armenian tombstones called Khachkars. Khachkars are found in present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. They are upright stones used as burial markers and reflect spiritual beliefs of the ninth through the fifteenth centuries. They are made from local stone in different shapes, but most often include free-standing carved steles, memorial structures or columns, and standing crosses. The crosses are highly decorative and have wing-shaped carvings, rosettes, solar shapes, gardens with vineyards, and representations of human forms, all similar to the Bosnian Stećci. Their decorations are varied. There are illuminated symbols like crosses, birds, and cornices. Some Khachkars from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries have folk motifs and narratives that depict women, children, nobles, peasants, and warriors. The narrative scenes have a secular theme and represent ritual feasts, military power, mourning, wedding celebrations, and hunting. A

¹⁰² Ibid., 130.

Khachkar from the Noratus cemetery depicting a wedding ceremony is one of the best examples. The human forms are minimalistic with no regard for proportion. Carved rosettes might reference one of Armenia's most ancient and sacred symbols of eternity, but here likely refer to the Holy Spirit, as was common to the medieval Christian period. According to UNESCO, the Khachkars "act as a focal point of worship, as memorial stones and as relics facilitating communication between the secular and divine."¹⁰³ The tradition of erecting Khachkars in memory of the deceased started in the tenth century among nobles who buried their ancestors in the western part of the church. This period was also documented in papal correspondence during this time by the Paulicianists and Messalians. As noted earlier, Paulicians were a religious Christian group who disagreed on some theologian doctrines. One of the earlier references is the *Letter of Patriarch Theophylactus*, which acknowledges the existence of the Paulician sect in Armenia.

According to historical medieval documents and correspondence, Bogomilism also spread up north to Russia. Russian monastic documents record a few examples of registered cases of heresy between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰⁴ One of the earlier examples in 1004 is described in the *Nikon's Chronicle*, when Russian priests arrested a heretic named Adrian for his noncompliance with the Russian patriarchal structure. He is described as later revealing his 'errors' in prison and was referred to as a Bogomil from Bulgaria. Another historical

¹⁰³ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00434>

¹⁰⁴ Obolensky, *The Bogomils*, 277.

source, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, reflects on two priests or ‘magus’ in Northern Russia who were murdering women. When questioned in court they confessed to a different understanding of the Christian faith, where Satan created man out of dirt and water, but that God has enlivened people with the soul. There are other examples of biographies of different monks who chose not to obey the New Testament in favor of “study and teaching.” *The Kiev Paterik* revealed that that monk Adrian was later saved by the prayers of his fellow monks. The biggest enemies of the Russian orthodoxy seemed to be *Judaizers*, whose movement stirred up controversy among leaders of the Russian patriarchal church. It arose around Novgorod and Moscow, where it became popular in ecclesiastical circles. This name borrows its etymological roots from “Judaism,” as its followers refused the Trinity and the Divinity of the Christ, preferred the Old Testament to the New, rejected the saints and icons, and preferred their own understanding of the scriptures. This movement inspired different interpretations: some scholars connect it to Judaism, others tend to question their religious Christian liberalism and connect it to the philosophical interpretation of Bogomil heresy, as some influences were considered to come from Western Europe.¹⁰⁵ In the letters of the archbishop of Rostov and Yaroslavl, he writes to Ioasaf “that doctrines of the Novgorod sect are Judaism, mixed with the Messalian heresy” and then identified them with the Messalian heretical group five more times in his correspondence.¹⁰⁶ There were other monks, like St.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 280.

Joseph, who *mention* Novgorod heretics in secret relations with Messalians. Some of the Russian apocryphal literature examples describe the Bulgarian pope Jeremiah, who states that the “tree that was used to build a cross was planted by Sataniel, who existed along with God”.¹⁰⁷ There are other early Jewish and Christian texts that were translated and survive in Slavonic manuscripts like *The Vision of Isaiah*, *The Second Book of Enoch*, and *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, passages of which are similar to the *Bogomil Secret Book*, and are now kept in the Solovki Monastery. These scriptures were in Kiev in 900 A.D. Finally, some of the cosmogonic tales of Ukrainian folklore had a dualistic concept of divinity.

Even though historical contemporaries noted these heretical errors, Bogomilism did not develop in Russia into a mass movement like in Bosnia. Like in Western Europe, where heretics were prosecuted by the Catholic papacy, the Orthodox patriarchy would not allow the liberal interpretation of the Bible and as a result prosecuted all “Manichees.” Also, it should be noted that even though the Late Roman sarcophagi greatly influenced the development of the Russian gravestones, the Orthodox funerary esthetics had modified and developed its own unique representation of the gravestones.¹⁰⁸ Beginning in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, a unique style of tomb aesthetics developed. These stones have low-relief floral designs similar to those that are found in the necropoleis’ designs of Bosnia- Herzegovina, Serbia, Armenia and Byzantine.¹⁰⁹ Some of the carvings have stylized expressions of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 282.

¹⁰⁸ L.A. Beliaev, *Medieval Russian Gravestones*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 85.

colonnades and a design of a braided snake, some of which create six-pointed rosettes. Only two of the stones have the shape of a cross, epitaphs of which indicate tragic deaths. All of them have a half-axis with two symmetrical circles on each side of the axis, which have patterns of triangles. The gravestones are also rich in carved patterns, including multiple representations of rosettes. Other monastic Slavic gravestones, which were found in the territory of the Ukraine, show their own unique style and almost always display the elements of text, as was used on the gravestones of Central Europe.¹¹⁰

Of course, my thesis is just one writer's perspective. There are additional numerous historical references that expose the heretical conundrum in the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena, although she covers Bulgarian heretics, and not Bosnian or Armenian. The lack of written documents, which could explain the symbolism of the carved designs or the specific beliefs of their creators, leaves room for new interpretations. Fine points to the lack of excavations, but in the places where excavations were done, like in the Belica region, corpses have been found without tombs, which might signify that those bodies belonged to poor peasants. The lack of written sources explaining the Christian heretical monks' style and the evolution of their beliefs makes it difficult to fully understand their particular worldview. The Christian Orthodox tradition of using gravestones could be the only explanation for these funerary artifacts. They might not be of purely heretical origin, but the visual inconsistencies with other necropoleis of those times are visually

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

striking. For example, when one compares the Bosnian necropoleis, supposedly built by nobles, to the Royal Necropolis of Basilique Saint-Denis, which has medieval royal tombs, one will see overwhelming differences in execution and placement of the tombs according to the Church. The noble French tombs have sculptural representational execution, which also show very specific portraiture of the deceased in comparison. The proportions of the human figure are correct and have incredible detail in the drapery of their garments. The noble figures' hand gestures indicate a state of deep worship and full compliance with the Christian faith. The tombs themselves are placed inside the church, which is different when compared to Bosnian or Armenian Stećci, which were always outdoors.

CHAPTER 4: CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

Stećci remain the most celebrated symbol in Bosnia today, as demonstrated by the 70,000 that exist throughout this small nation. Though they mark the graves of the deceased, Stećci celebrate life. Their carvings capture celebrations like dancing and hunting, and the piety of the epitaphs reinforces the deceased's belief in the afterlife. The tombstones do not depict sadness, fear, or regret, but instead portray significant events in the lives of those they memorialize. The epitaphs often ask for protection from the Holy Trinity or shelter from the disruptions of the living. Examples in the cemeteries of Boljuni and Stolac include the sword and shield, embellished with crescents and rosettes in bas-relief and carved epitaphs in Bosančica¹¹¹ (see Figure 8).

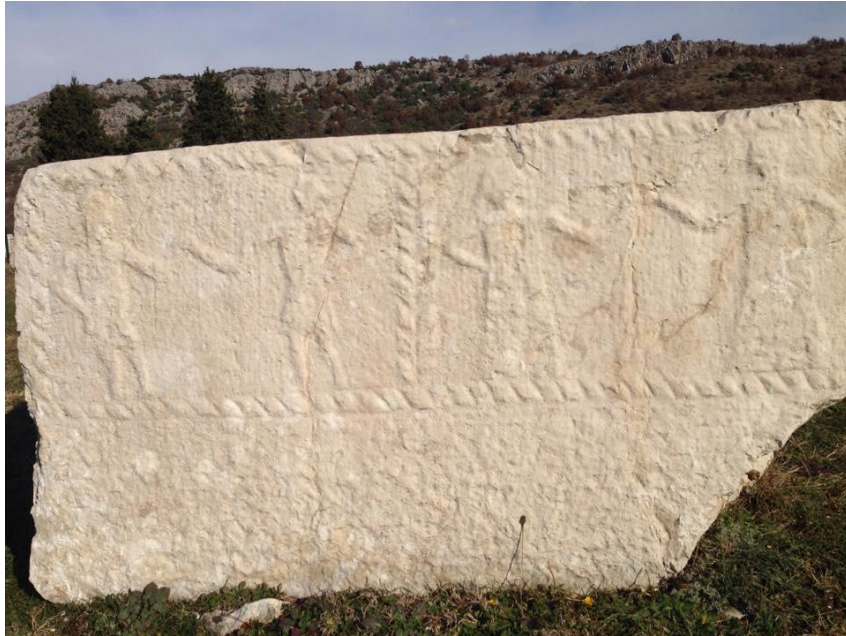


Figure 8. Radimilja, Stolac

¹¹¹ M. Palameta, M. Raguž, M. šutalo, *The Mystery of Boljuni*, 3.

Some images suggest narratives weaved into local folklore. The tombstone on the northern side of the Boljuni cemetery shows a hunting scene, with a deer facing a horse, “whilst an archer standing before him is letting fly an arrow towards the deer. Below this macabre scene, a round dance with four men fills out the lower space of the surface.”¹¹² This description eloquently captures the lifestyle of the deceased.

Through the present day, Stećci are closely connected with Bosnian culture. They are celebrated not only as artifacts among scholars, but also intertwined with the local beliefs of common people. Multiple folk traditions survive and seem to be borrowed from pagan beliefs about fertility and healing in women and animals. For example, according to legend, women who have difficulty getting pregnant can scrape the dust from a stećak, dissolve it in a glass of water and after drinking it, will soon conceive. Stećci are also believed to have the power to repair eyesight. By soaking a bandage in water mixed with dust from the tombstone, then applying it over the eyes, it is said that vision can be restored. Similar beliefs are held for livestock and animals. Leading a cow around a stećak three times is thought to assist with fertility, while horses that have trouble urinating are offered the same remedy. Stećci are also thought to have influence over agriculture and crops. In times of drought, an unmarried maiden paints the stećak white, bringing rain and a bountiful harvest. It is important to point out that these beliefs are not common among the people today; these are the stories and

¹¹² Ibid., 21.

explanations that Bešliagić was told by the peasants while he was researching.

Other traditions show an interesting connection to Christianity and the ritual use of the numbers three and seven that have survived through the present day. For example, God created the earth in seven days and three is borrowed from the Holy Trinity. Bosnian rituals reflect these beliefs. People wash their faces, arms, and legs three times before prayer, a ritual connected to Islam, and they take their livestock three times around a stećak to increase fertility. In a legend connected to Greece, those who erected the Stećci experienced a seven-year winter snow, causing them to leave their homeland for Greece. Because of this, sometimes Stećci are referred to as “Greek tombstones.”

Stećci seem to unite people regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or religious beliefs. Their unknown origin and the unique symbolism contained in the tombstones continue to inspire poets and scholars throughout the Balkans. UNESCO started protecting the tombstones in November 2009 and states on its website that the tombstones can be compared to Khatchkars and other examples of sepulchral art. In a way, they have become a key to understanding the identity of the Bosnian nation and its cultural heritage in Western and Eastern Europe. Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar has written about his concerns regarding *internal nationalism*. He recognizes that the geographical location of Bosnia-Herzegovina contributes to the awareness of the shared identity of a nation caught in a regional crossroad. His realization of a shared primary cultural identity led to an ambivalent awakening of nationalism in his

poetry.¹¹³ Dizdar, who considers himself a Yugoslav, disregards national boundaries and connects with the heretical religious beliefs of Medieval Manichaeism as a core of Bosnian cultural identity.

When visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the most profound experiences was meeting with scholars and locals to discuss the significance of Stećci to their culture. Everyone wants to believe that the carvings and epitaphs on Stećci are more than just decoration. In recent studies it has become more common to see pagan rituals, Roman politics, and the unique tastes of Bosnian nobility as explanations for the origins of Stećci. Stećci remain one of the most politically charged subjects in the Balkans. Vastly different opinions exist regarding their origins and it can be stated that ethnicity is the most significant driver of the debate. Regardless of their origin, the relevance of the tombstones to one's particular ethnicity contributes to a sense of national pride. All three ethnicities in the Balkans claim that Stećci belong to their cultural heritage. These claims demonstrate the importance of identity and connection to cultural artifacts.

Heretical affiliations are still mentioned in relation to Stećci for two reasons, even though today the heretical approach is generally rejected by academics. First, the mystery and rebellion associated with heresy is intriguing, appealing to both amateur historians and tourists alike. The heretic theory is also widely used for nationalistic awareness of self-identification and separation from the Serbo-Croatian influence. This theory is supported by the Muslim population of the Balkans and used to

¹¹³ Butrovic, *Stone Speaker*, 27.

explain how Islam survived in the center of Christianized Europe between two religious giants like the Byzantine Orthodox and Catholic Church. This theory claims that locals were so tired of their persecution by Christians that they gladly chose Islam, brought to Bosnia by the Ottoman Turks, as their new faith. The pro-Orthodox and ultimately, pro-Serbian theory of Božidar Petranović claims that the Bosnian Church was part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which therefore influenced the existence of the Bosnian tombstones. A different explanation, popular among pro-Croat scholars, claims that the Bosnian Church was part of the Roman Catholic Church, which may have had some schismatic traditions borrowed from folklore. Not only do many locals feel spiritual inspiration when visiting the necropoleis, Stećci are such a central part of the culture they are even printed on Bosnian currency. One walks a fine line when interpreting the Stećci, as the slightest difference in interpretation can alter one's understanding of history and create a new understanding of an entire nation.

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