

Communication Between the Dead and the Living on Medieval Balkan Monumental Tombstones

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Stećci (sing. stećak) is the general term used for the medieval tombstones in Western Balkan area (former Yugoslavia) in the modern states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia with the biggest concentration in the areas of Bosnia and Hum (Herzegovina). Estimates suggest that there are between 60.000 and 70.000 tombstones of this type currently in existence and around the same amount was destroyed during the later ages (Gavrilović, Fekeža, Sijarić 2008:59 [6]).

Among names given to stećci by the local populations and tradition are: džinovska (giant), Greek graves, kaurinska graves (foreign, non-Muslim) among Muslim populations or Bogomil gravestones (Purgarić-Kužić 1995:243 [10] ; Buturović 2016:114 [3]).

According to one of local traditions tombstones were created by giants who were playing fetch with monoliths on open fields, throwing them around to each other forming clusters in some places (necropoleis). Some of them were already tombs back then so the curses and warnings on the stećci are directed to "negligence of giant ancestors" (Buturović 2016:114-115 [3]). Other most widespread legend about stećci say that ancient Greeks moved from this places after very long winter leaving behind their tombstones with variation of this story spoken in some Muslim villages in Bosnia where Lutherans are set as the protagonists (Beslagić 1982:33-34 [2]).

Those folk names are also mentioned in some early works of travelers encountering stećci. In 1774 Alberto Fortis in his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* describe them as graves of giants" (Milosević 1991:39 [9]). Travelling around Balkans in the years 1882-1885 Hungarian historian János Asbóth / Johann von Asbóth also wrote: "They might be the graves of giants, so overpowering are they in their colossal size and simplicity" (Asbóth 1890:28-29 [1]). "Popularly they are generally called "Mramor," a designation which has its origin in the Roman marble tombstones. [...] Popular tradition ascribes these tombs to the Greeks" (Asbóth 1890:102 [1]). The term "Mramor" also appear in the work of Polish traveler Aleksander Antoni Sapieha where he wrote: "The tomb of enormous size, is called by the local dwellers Mramor, which in contemporary contaminated language means marble" and further he wondered why it is used thinking that perhaps it derives from the name of local hero who is buried there (Sapieha 1856:149 [11]). Another etymology is explored in 1875 by Sir Arthur Evans who pointed out that attested in Bosnia "strange Manichean sect" of Bogomiles were afraid of cross as the symbol of death and thus might be attributed as creators of "mysterious sepulchres" because those bear no Christian symbols (Evans 1876:175-177 [5]).

Less than 1% have some visible epitaphs. As the oldest inscribed stećak usually is mentioned the slab of Grd from Trebinja (e.g. Marko Vego) but Alojz Benac considered tombstone of Marija, wife of pop Dabiživ from Vidostak near Stolac as such one (Trako 2011:74 [13]). The exact number of inscribed stećci was estimated in 1970 by M. Vego for 277 and for 384 in 1982 by S. Beslagić (Trako 2011:74 [13]). Inscriptions are written in bosančica (Bosnian Epigraphic Cyrillic) in Shtokavian-Ikavian dialect with few examples on the edges and in the end of this cultural phenomenon in Shtokavian-Ijekavian (Purgarić-Kužić 1995:248 [10]). In Montenegro

for 3500 tombstones recorded only 12 bear any visible inscriptions (M. Cerović, A. Berkuljan 2012:13, 24 [4]).

Inscriptions on stećci can be divided into few categories: 1) Epitaphs containing religious formulae (“Va ime Otca i Sina i Svetago Duha”/’In the name of Father and Son and the Holy Ghost’); 2) Epitaphs with motif of heroic death and faithful service (usually starting with formulae: “Ase [sije] leži”/’Here lies’); 3) Epitaphs being biographies (životopise) telling about noble heritage, circumstances of death and familial ties; 4) Short epitaphs giving the name of the deceased and/or craftsman cutting the tombstone and writing the inscription (Lovrenović 2010:119-142 [7]). Another division can include category of inscriptions with moral/religious message and it will be of particular interest in this study (Lovrenović 2016:11 [8]). I have separated them into one of three categories based on the content: curses, appeals to the living and “stone sleepers”, how I call texts in which the dead is contemplating his fate. I have translated from original sources examples as a sample for each of group which are given below:

- “TAKO DA NIJE SO PROKLET, NE TIKAJ U ME” (‘If you don’t want to be cursed, don’t touch me!’) (Purgarić-Kužić 1995:249 [10]).

- “I MOLJU VAS, NE NASTUPAJTE NA ME. JA SAM BIL KAKO VI JESTE, VI ĆETE BITI KAKO JESAM JA” (‘And I beg you, do not trample me. I was like you are, you will be like me’) (Purgarić-Kužić 1995:249 [10]; Lovrenović 2010:132, 134, 140 [7]; Suvajdžić 1998:61 [12]).

- “BOŽE, DAVNO TI SAM LEGAO I VELE TI MI JE LEŽATI” (‘God, I lied down so long ago and so much [longer] I am to lie [here]!’) (Purgarić-Kužić 1995:250 [10]; Lovrenović 2010:133 [7]; Suvajdžić 1998:58 [12]).

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Illustrations



Рис. 1. Stećak with inscription in National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo (photo by: Łukasz Byrski)