

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

On Stećci

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The modern-day Horsemen of the Apocalypse—death, destruction, ethnic cleansing and lies—ride over Bosnia today. Everything that the human spirit and labor of our greatgrandfathers created over thousands of years is being destroyed. Day after day, month after month, year after year, they leave behind devastated towns, torched villages, and dead bodies, fated only to become statistics. Every new figure in those indecent worldwide statistics of infamy, proclaimed shamelessly over the radio and television, becomes a permanent monument to the inhumanity of those who wanted to be known as a righteous people, a nation, though, built only on death and force.

And the truth is: Here, in Bosnia, within a truly small geographical area, where over the centuries the egoistical intentions of different cultures and civilizations, the Greek-Hellenic and Roman-Etruscan have collided, where the boundary between the Eastern and Western Roman Empire was drawn, where Islam and Christianity have always remained in an entangled embrace, here, tens of thousands stećci lie scattered. These are the tombstones of those who lived between the 11th and 15th centuries and refused to swear allegiance to any kingdom or to be swayed by any influence. Instead they stayed true to themselves and to what they could find only within themselves and in Bosnia. At this geographical watershed of civilizations, cultures, cults, and religions, they found their own way of reconciling the irreconcilable, of intertwining and permeating and thus halting all that would abolish their differences. Time has shown that, in this land, human thought has always been weaker, but wiser, than the sword. One died by the sword and lived by thought, for the sword could not resolve opposites. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where every form of existence was preconditioned by coexistence, it was the human spirit and not the sword that inscribed a permanent understanding and philosophy of life. History, it is true, records those who destroy but remembers and values only those who rebuild.

Today, I am 46 years old; I was born less than three years after the end of the Second World War, the same year the transistor radio was invented and the state of Israel was created anew after 2000 years. This was only 13 years before man first went into space. I was a contemporary of those who, 25 years ago, first walked on the moon and whose first steps I followed closely on my TV screen. I studied a lot and learned much. I have worked in the same laboratories around the world where it was proven that antimatter exists and that what seems indivisible, such as the proton and neutron, can be divided in infinitely complex ways. I touched a rock from the Moon, from some

other world which seemed to me so foreign and far removed. I saw the October Revolution (a great source of hope at the beginning of the century) become its greatest delusion.

But privately, I never ceased believing that the real truth about life was contained in the inscriptions from the stećci and in what they inspired in me. The equations which I learned and which ruled over the world of electrons and microchips enchanted me, computers delighted me greatly, but I knew that the technological truth of today would become only a museum artifact tomorrow. But reading the inscription on a stećak, written with no capital letters, no division of words into sentences, no punctuation, an honest human cry, both tragic and touching, would reach me through the centuries. Those few lines contained the entire life of the deceased, complete with his devotions, history, family tree, land registry, love of wife and country, and awe at death. And the fear of humans faced with oblivion and the defiance of the few truly brave ones before God. The flawlessness of the pronouncements, the precise formulations, the lack of ornaments and redundancy, the concentration of meaning made up a language of images set in stone meant to last for all eternity and to be impressed upon the souls of generations to come. Before my eyes, I see knights in armor, hunters hunting, farmers in the fields, warriors competing in tournaments, rearing horses, dancers, ladies in dresses, flowers, wolves, bears, wild boars and dogs. Among favored ornaments were the cross, crescent moon, stars, and swastika. The images celebrate life, joy, physical strength, and merriment. Questioning of death and oblivion appears in some of the inscriptions but is absent in the carved images.

These stone slabs are sometimes as heavy as 30,000 kilograms and vary in shape. Sometimes they take the shape of a roofed sarcophagus, sometimes of a high pillar, an ordinary flat slab, a chest in the shape of a elongated cube with flat surfaces, or simply an irregular roughly hewn monolith. On average they are two meters long and one meter wide. The slates are between 30 and 50 centimeters high and the sarcophagi and tombs are approximately 1.5 meters in height. The height of the pillars ranges from two to three meters. Today in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are 1,300 graveyards with stećci (of which about 400 are located in Herzegovina), with a further 150 in Dalmatia.

The total number of preserved stećci is approximately 40,000. Almost all of the graveyards are located on hills overlooking the surrounding country-side where those who truly loved this country with their hearts and souls trace their roots.

Even now, after Bosnia's bloody experience of war, I believe more strongly and more honestly than ever before that those who had such faith, who carved, loved, wrote, and died as they did, need not tremble before an uncertain future; neither they nor the generations who have inherited them.

(1994)

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