Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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

Inscriptions On Bosnian Medieval Tombstones (Stecaks)

Mak Dizdar

In their conciseness and formal characteristics, marginal records are comparable to inscriptions, which appear on stecaks but also church buildings, judicial chairs, mausoleums, and chastisement inscriptions. Just as authors of marginal records, whether with their own or others' works, had to follow, to some extent, certain rules regarding composition, proportion, and content, authors of epigraphs had to consider a set of strongly determined formulas. This especially applied to the epitaph, that is, the text inscribed on tombstones. This is easy to understand keeping in mind that a eulogy must maintain a dignified style and a measured language because of the grief it is required to convey. In certain Bosnian texts and epitaphs from the Hum region, there are reminiscences of old Greek and Latin inscriptions as well as their contemporary Italian epitaphs, although the case is not one of direct influence, but rather the result of the same effort and intention to search for a text that would indeed be adequate to the motive that inspires it.

According to the same logic of the creative and artistic act, one finds that the ornamental realizations of certain decorative motifs on stecaks are comparable to those on the lapidary monuments in Mexico. It is thus necessary to reject the approach of those pedants who always, at any cost, and on any occasion search for models from which local creativity originated, which then maintains an inferior status and condition in relationship to anything foreign, even when the foreign is less interesting and even considerably less original. Lapidary inscriptions usually begin with the phrase: Here let it be known … or Here lies . . .depending on the purpose of the inscription. In most cases, the epitaph informs the passer-by, the reader, that the deceased is buried in thenoble land and is of noble heritage. In some cases, the name of the location is inscribed and often the name of the person, usually by the deceased's family, who laid the monument. While most inscriptions do not mention the inscriber, some diaks (scribes)held that their work should not be left anonymous.

Most epitaphs on Bosnian stecaks do not depart from the frame and mold that came to impose itself as a general pattern. There is, though, a significant number of inscriptions that came to reflect personal emotions and deep thoughts from their authors, provoked by the intensity of tragic events that needed to be recorded as testimony for posterity. There are epigraphs that, with their conciseness and depth, can fascinate even the cynical reader of our times. There are also texts whose poetic nature can charm a literary connoisseur, even someone with a fashionable taste for

recent and contemporary poetic forms.

In the epitaph of Bogčin, son of Stipko Ugrinović, engraved on a stećak in Kotorac near Sarajevo, the horrible destiny of the youthful deceased is described with wonderful simplicity:

> Young I departed from this world
> And I hath been my mother's only

Immeasurable is the sorrow ofa prisoner rotting in the mold and darkness of the Blagay prison, built under the walls of the court of the princes of Hum, on top of the hill of Hum, under which is the source of the wild, dark, blue river Buna. On one of its stones, the captive engraved, perhaps with his own nails, his sorrowful and silenced scream:

> And this wrote Vrsan Kosarić
> A slave who has no joy

Life is a miracle, and death is a puzzle that should be encountered as a mystery that clutches us inescapably. That is why the motif of death, as inevitability, is eternalized most frequently in stone. Worldly life has a gloom and a darkness; it becomes an absurdity to be escaped as soon as possible because it is the product of the principle of evil.

An anonymous inscription from Gorica marked his grave in hope of a new, more shining life.

> The burial scaffold I marked in darkness
> And left it wisely
> For the new times

Ivan Maršić from western Hum, in simple words and without irony, records a bitter truth about human fate that he arrived at the end of his life, seeing it as a most precious experience and passing it on to posterity:

> Long I lived on earth
> Eighty and eight years
> And I hath not taken anything with me!

One inhabitant of Lašva, in the vicinity of Travnik, said the same, only in an even quieter and deeper style:

> And here lies Dragaj
> At the end –
> Nothing…

Radojica Bilić from the village of Staro, near Jajce, not without vanity, erected his grave stone in his lifetime, but his words about death carry a sincere suffering for the transient world and the sorrow others should be made aware of.

> I beg
> Brothers
> And aunts
> And sisters-in-law
> Come forward
> And mourn me…
> For you will be
> As I am
> And I shall not be
> As you are!

An unidentified sufferer from Goražde on the Drina river mourns the wonders of this world, where man is only a temporary resident, foreigner, and traveler who learned that he traveled the roads under mysterious skies so that he could only, at the end of that short and dreamlike journey, grieve sincerely:

> It is strange –
> To long for this world…

The remote and deep––almost outside of time and space––sigh of Stipko Radosalić, who lived at the end of the fourteenth century in Premilovo Polje, reaches us from the darkness of the centuries and on through into future that is dug out for us as well hereafter, shaking all our senses and digging through all speculations of our mind:

> God, so long ago I lay down
> And I am to lie for mighty long…

No one is spared the experience and the bitterness of the death hour, neither poor nor mighty. On the gravestone of Prince Tvrdisav Brsnić from Bujakovina stand engraved the words of simple truth and inevitable justice:

> Honorable knight
> Arrived here destitute…

A mild sorrow pervades an inscription from Svitava:

> I was born
> Into great joy,
> And I departed
> Into great sorrow.

Not only irony, but also sarcasm can be found on the stećak of Juraj Ivanović from the middle course of the Neretva:

> Herein is written, on the cross of Juraj:
> For all men to know
> How I gained wealth
> And how I died
> For it.

The thought recorded on the stećak of Radosav Mrkšić is so severe that no gravestone can carry it without some blasphemy. It is the condemnation of death sent by somebody who embodies injustice, from a power that could only be an evil, dark, merciless god, and because of whom the following words may be sarcastically uttered:

> I stood
> Praying to God,
> With no evil thought-
> And the thunder killed me!

Sometimes, death also comes at the right time, as a consequence or reward, as redemption for somebody's unjust act. Murder does not suit a just man; one is allowed to fight only in a just war, that is, the war against war, against evil. In self-defense, Dabiživ Drašković was punished at the moment he decided to participate in the spilling of blood, in which he should not have found himself.

> When I wanted to kill
> That is when I died…

Life is entangled with thousands of traps and mysteries, and it is not easy to distinguish right from wrong. This makes the responsibility of judgment even greater and more difficult. If God, the highest judge, can err in judging the sins committed by human souls, then humans, worldly judges, are even more inclined to err when judging the gravity of an offence and determining crime and punishment. Therefore the role of worldly judges is more delicate. The mundane power is short-lived and temporary, and we shall all settle our accounts at the great court after our death. On

the judicial stone chair in Hodovo, the ancient wisdom about this theme, that is, courts and judges, is expressed:

> Look
> At this stone –
> To whom it belonged?
> To whom it now belongs?
> To whomever will it ever belong?

The oldest stronghold of lapidary literacy was located in ancient Hum and in central Bosnia under Župan (Governor)Krsmir Bretović. One inscription endowed in Humac on the Trebižat river dates from as early as the late tenth or early eleventh century. There are also several inscriptions in the vicinity of Trebinje dating from the middle and from the late twelfth century. The inscriptions of Ban Kulin, judge Gradiša and kaznac (treasurer) Nespina from the vicinity of Visoko and Zenica (the central region of the kingdom of medieval Bosnia) are also preserved. The third center of this kind of literacy can be located in the vicinity of Vidoška (today's Stolac), where the earliest epitaph is dated only to the beginning of the thirteenth century; however, lapidary epigraphic literacy had been developing in this region throughout the medieval period, to culminate in the fifteenth century. The largest number of inscriptions in this region near Stolac was discovered in Boljuni, southwest of Radimlja and Stolac. This necropolis, with some twenty inscriptions, is the largest in the whole region of Bosnia and Hum. There are also interesting oases of texts engraved in stone around Blagaj, which was the seat of the feudal lords of Hum. The earliest inscription there, referring to a ktitor, dates from the late twelfth century, and also in the Lašva valley, then under tepčija Batalo and in the basin of the Drina river from Foča and Goražde to Vlasenica and Srebrenica, the latter being the main mining center of the country. Recently, a fairly large number of epitaphs were identified in the territories of the medieval župas (provinces) of Usora and Soli as well as in Posavina around Koraj and Bijeljina, all testifying to the great cultural influence spreading from the center toward the remote regions of the country, even those often dominated by hostile and aggressive Hungarians. The best known authors, that is, diaks and kovačs (engravers/stonesmiths) are Prodan and Miogost in central Bosnia; Veseoko Kukulamović and Vukašin in the region of Lašva and Jajce; Bratjen in Travunia (Trebinje); Semorad, Miogost, Grubač and Krilić in the vicinity of Stolac; Nikola Dragoljević and Dragoje, a diak in the basin of the Drina river; Ugarak in Vrhbosna, and others more or less known today.

The laying of stecaks continued for some time in the period of Turkish occupation; nevertheless, with the breakdown and disappearance of the Bosnian Church, this interesting custom and cult in the sepulchral culture of Bosnia gradually disappeared. Certain iconographic motifs and symbols from stecaks remained in use for some time on the tombstones of Catholics and Orthodox Christians that once belonged to the Bosnian Church followers, only to be replaced by the orthodox forms of marking graves. Especially enduring, though, was the strong influence of the stecak tradition on the Muslim nišans (grave markings), evident both in the architectural structure and in some relief symbols. On some nišans, inscriptions follow the tradition completely,

both in style, language, and bosančica (old Bosnian script). Therefore it is not at all paradoxical if some examples of stecaks can be found in the cemeteries of not only the orthodox followers of Christ, but also the followers of Muhammad, who, at the time of propaganda for conversion to Islam, was declared to be the one whose coming the Gospel of John (Injil for Muslims) foretold––the Paraclete (Comforter) of the Patharenes

Translated by Snježana Buzov – © 2007 Snježana Buzov

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.