ONCE TOGETHER, NOW SEPARATE STATES SHARING
THE CULTURAL TREASURE

Antes unidos, ahora estados separados compartiendo un tesoro cultural

Authors: Nadja Kurtovic Folic (1), Natasa Zivaljevic Luxor (2)

(1) Prof Dr Nadja Kurtović Folić, Full Professor, University of Novi Sad, nfolic@gmail.com
(2) Dr Nataša Živaljević Luxor, Director, National Heritage Foundation, Belgrade, Serbia, nhf2018bhm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With the example of the stećci, a specific kind of tombstones, that now belong to the whole mankind as the World Heritage, we would like to point out the importance of heritage as outstanding instrument for bridging the great political and religious gap between the countries in which the common cultural treasure is located.

Stećci, medieval tombstones, have been included in the World Heritage List since 2016. This serial cultural good consists of 28 sites, twenty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, two in Croatia, and three in Montenegro and Serbia. Stećci (plural) are a unique phenomenon in medieval European art and among the archaeological heritage. A stečak (singular) is a specific monument set as a mark of a tomb in the period from the second half of the 12th and beginning of 16th century. Stećci spread between the River Sava in the north, Adriatic coast in the south, the region Lika in Croatia in the west, and in the East they extend deeply into Western Serbia. Nevertheless, the awareness of their common value started developing since the creation of a unified state, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918. The registration of all tombstones in the form of stećci was carried out in the period after the Second World War, when institutions for the protection of cultural monuments worked under the uniform legislation, using very similar methodology: 70,000 of stećci were counted at about 3,300 sites in the whole territory, within which the concentration and value of the monuments varied.

With the collapse of the Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and establishment of six independent states, all official cultural ties between the institutions of cultural protection and between experts were interrupted. It took almost fifteen years to reconnect again, based on individual friendships between the cultural experts, which were slowly renewed. Some experts, acting similarly as civil activists, have made great personal efforts to establish again official relations between institutions in the field of culture. The project "Joint Nomination of Medieval Tombstones – stećci for the World Heritage List" was launched in November 2009, within the framework of the project "Cultural heritage - a bridge to the common future". In Sarajevo, in April 2010, the project participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia announced nomination together with an action plan. That was the beginning of the first major interstate project in the field of culture in the Balkans in the 21st century without external incentives or a pressure and it was finalized successfully in 2016.

Apart from the success in recording of stećci as serial cultural good in the World Heritage List, it matters the most that experts from West Balkan states proved they could work and take care of the monuments together again. This is valuable lesson and message for the people who live in different counties but have the same cultural treasure.

KEY WORDS: Stećci, Medieval tombstones, Serial cultural good, Political influence, Experts cooperation
RESUMEN

Con el ejemplo de las stećci, un tipo específico de tumbas que ahora pertenecen a la humanidad como Herencia Mundial, quisiéramos hacer hincapié en la importancia de la herencia cultural como un medio de enlace entre las grandes diferencias políticas e religiosas de países que poseen tesoros culturales idénticos.

Stećci, tumbas medievales han sido enlistadas en la lista de herencia cultural de la humanidad en 2016. Consisten en 28 sitios culturales, 20 en Bosnia y Herzegovina, 2 en Croacia, 3 en Montenegro y 3 en Serbia. Stećci (plural) son un fenómeno único en la herencia medieval del arte y arqueología en Europa. Stećak (singular) es un monumento específico que en el periodo comprendido de la segunda mitad del siglo 12 y 16, ha sido definido como la marca de un cementerio. El área de extensión de las stećci está limitada en el norte por el rio Sava, en el sur por la costa del Adriático, en el oeste la región del Lika en Croacia, mientras que en el este se extiende dentro de la región oeste de Serbia. Sin embargo, la consciencia de su valor comunitario se desarrolla extensivamente desde la creación de un estado unificado, el reino de Yugoslavia, en 1918. El registro de todas las tumbas del tipo de stećci se llevó a cabo después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, cuando se crearon instituciones para la protección de monumentos culturales que empezaron a trabajar bajo una legislación unificada y con metodologías muy similares. El recuento sistemático de estos monumentos, en la segunda mitad del siglo XX, dio como resultado la cantidad de aproximadamente 70,000 lápidas sepulcrales registradas en alrededor de 3,300 sitios en todo el territorio, mientras que la concentración y el valor de los monumentos es diferente.

Con el colapso de la República de Yugoslavia en los años noventa y con el establecimiento de seis estados independientes, todos los lazos culturales entre las instituciones de protección cultural y los expertos culturales, fueron interrumpidos. Tuvieron que pasar casi 15 años para que los lazos individuales de cordialidad entre los expertos culturales fueran lenta y lentamente renovados. Varios expertos, como activistas civiles, han hecho esfuerzos significativos para establecer relaciones oficiales entre instituciones en el campo cultural. El proyecto “Nominación conjunta de lápidas medievales - Stećci para la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial” se lanzó en noviembre de 2009. En Sarajevo, en abril de 2010, se anunciaron participantes de proyectos de Bosnia y Herzegovina, Croacia, Montenegro y Serbia, así como un plan de acción. Este fue el comienzo del primer gran proyecto interestatal en el campo de la cultura en los Balcanes en el siglo XXI sin incentivos de ninguna fuerza extranjera o presión, y el proyecto de nominación se llevó a cabo hasta el final en 2016.

Además del éxito de grabar stećci como bien cultural en serie en la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial, lo más importante es el hecho de que los expertos de los estados de los Balcanes Occidentales podrían trabajar juntos de nuevo y cuidar juntos los monumentos. Esta es la lección y el mensaje más importante para las personas que viven en diferentes condados pero con el mismo tesoro cultural.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Stećci, lápidas medievales, bien cultural en serie, influencia política, cooperación de expertos

1 INTRODUCTION

Stećci – the medieval tombstones, located in West Balkans, have been included in the World Heritage List since 2016. This serial cultural good consists of 28 sites, twenty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, two in Croatia, and three in Montenegro and Serbia. Stećci (plural) are a unique phenomenon in medieval European art and archaeological heritage. A stećak (singular) is a specific monument, set as mark above a tomb in almost all of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the western parts of Serbia and Montenegro (Fig. 1), as well as in the central and southern parts of Croatia, in the period between the second half of the 12th century and the 16th century, but most frequently appeared in 14th and 15th century. The area where stećci exist is limited to the north by the River Sava, in the south of the Adriatic coast, in the west by the region Lika in Croatia, and in the east, they spread deeply into western part of Serbia.

The four countries decided to produce a nomination document in 2009, regarding
monuments which form joint common tradition and culture of the people living there, to become part of the World Heritage. It was a project for which the four countries cooperated, without incentives from any foreign state or a pressure, for the first time since the conflicts in the Balkans, in 1990s. After this solemn act, two years of work on the harmonization of documentation followed, with sometimes contradicting expert opinions or opinions of states officials and politicians; there were occasional obstructions, simply because some disliked the idea that cultural experts, from the once-hostile sides, worked together; despite that, the nomination project was carried out to the end.

Figure 1 Site „Greek graveyard“, Žabljak, Montenegro. (Ministry of culture of Montenegro 2013)

Apart from the success in having stećci registered as serial cultural good on the World Heritage List, it matters the most that experts from West Balkan states proved they could work together again and take care of the monuments jointly. This is the most important lesson and message for the people who live in different, and sometimes even hostile, countries but have the same cultural treasure. In this paper we describe characteristics of listed subject and the process which revealed that sometimes experts act both formally and informally to achieve goals which make difference, in the best interest of common cultural heritage.

2 STEĆCI – ORIGIN AND CHARACTERISTICS

Stećak is officially accepted name with many synonyms: bilig, kâm, mramor, zlamen, kuća, mramorje, mašeti, Greek graveyard, kaursko (meaning non-islamic, foreign) graveyard, wedding guest’s graveyard, giant stones etc. The name stećci originates from word „stojećak“, or “stojeći” (Trapara 2016) meaning „standing“, with possible connotations: vertical, steady, firm, monolithic, with integrity, with strength, defiant.

Steći emerge in Middle Age in the territory of pre-Ottoman and pre-Islamic Bosnian state and they are proven to be used for tombs of Christians. There are records of presence of three churches: Bosnian, Catholic and Orthodox, as well as secretive heretic Christian community, called “Bogumili” (after their priest Bogumil). Bosnian church noticeably differed from the other two, however its history leaves many unanswered questions; the matter is not properly researched, partly because of subsequent massive Islamization of the population.

The two names which are commonly in use - Greek graveyard and wedding guests graveyard, are associated with two sad legends, with ethological and literary value but hardly any historical; the first is telling that stećci originate from Greeks who had to leave the area because of freezing cold and snowy weather which lasted for seven years, all except one princess who did not want to
live her treasure and for it she was cursed to keep it forever as a dragon in a cave, coming out every spring (tombstones are covered by snow in winters); the second one is telling that two parties of wedding guests had dispute, blood was spread, and all ended together buried on site. There are many other stories related to particular sites. Nevertheless, the origin and chronology of stećci is considered not scientifically fully explained. There are many hypotheses, that they are influenced by form of sarcophagi from Antiquity, by Romanic architecture of Adriatic coast, confession of Bogumili, Near/Middle Eastern influence, Old Slavic pagan tradition etc. Some researchers also claim stećci emerged not before 13th or 14th century, and not after 15th century. However, the experts agree that stećci spread within borders of Bosnian state in the Middle Ages, when it was ruled by Tvrtko I Kotromanić, (Fig. 2), as well as that they are typical for Bosnians regardless of confession.

Figure 2 Map of registered necropolis with stećci (Bešlagić 1982)

Stećci were created by local craftsmen from local stone - usually limestone which is frequent and easy to cut and carve. Craftsmen were not anonymous and they mostly considered themselves being blacksmiths, which is not explained yet – if the word had different meaning at that time, or if it was really their basic craft. Quarries were often next to the graveyards, and transporting stone to e.g. 10 km was considered very long distance.

Stećci are typically positioned East-West, but sometimes also North-South (Fig. 2) and they come in different shape and size (Fig. 3)

Figure 3 An airplane photography of necropolis “Gvozno”, near Kalinovik (Bešlagić 1982)
Figure 4 Necropolis with variety of shapes and sizes (Dizdar 2013)

Figure 5 Overview of shapes of stećci (Bešlagić 1982)
Figure 6 Stećci on site Radimlje near town Stolac (Trapara 2016)

Less than 10% are decorated and many do not have epitaphs. Those who are decorated, have variety of motives which are not to be discussed in details in this paper, but they are evidently rich (Figure 7 and 8). Figure 3 shows one of the best known examples, figure with an open hand, and it is frequently used nowadays in a popular culture. Another motive which is present in contemporary culture is stećak, which is believed to belong to King Tvrtko I Kotromanic (Figure 8). Its replicas can be seen in front of the public buildings of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Figure 7 Deer hunting as a motive on stećci

Figure 8 Stećak in National museum in Sarajevo
Epitaphs in stone of steeči are written sometimes, also in letters with is commonly known as bosančica - authentic kind of Bosnian, epigraph Cyrillic letters which emerged in 9th century or later, based on old Slavic letters, similar but not identical with other Cyrillic letters in the region. Epitaphs are written without small and big letters, without space between words or signs of punctuation. It is the most valuable testimony of the beginning of literature, historical facts and sometimes revealing inspiring thoughts of life and death (translated by the author of this text):

- Hard is this stone, and even harder to be turned over. My bones it rubbed by its weight. If you want to go further into my bones, do it and I forgive you and so does God (Epitaph on tomb of Berko Miotas in 1317)
- When spring comes, who knows which time also my frantic bones would walk somewhere following some scent of old, secretive and peregrine loves...Do not turn over my stone, because you may see how you will look like... (Tomb of Milco Povrzen 12.2.1165)
- Do not turn over this stone, do not interrupt this dream. Perhaps just now happens to me what I wished it happened in my life... (Tomb of Toloje in 1066) (Malbaša i Samardžić 2009) etc.

The previous examples prove why they are considered very valuable among historians.

3 RERSEARCH AND THE PROCESS OF THE NOMINATION FOR WHL

Sтеčci early draw attention of scholars and public. The pioneering research included:

- The earliest records of steeči are believed to be those by Slovenian scrivener and translator who was part of Austrian deputation of the Emperor in 1530. Benedikt Kuprešić, and the other mission two years later.
- Stеčci were described in literary work “Travels into Dalmatia” (in Italian, Viaggio in Dalmazia) by Alberto Fortis in 1774 which draw attention all over Europe at the time.
- Austria-Hungarian administrators registered stеčci in 1888-1898 and announced results in 1908. The establishing of National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo in 1888, and scientific journal Glasnik (Courier) contributed attention of public to stеčci at the end of 19th century, due to work of Vid Vuletić-Vukasović, Kosta Hörmann, Petar Kaer, Ćiro Truhelka i Vejsil Čurčić. That was the first generation of scientists who researched stеčci.

The territory on which the monuments of outstanding value are located is large and some of its parts have historically belonged to various countries and administrations. Nevertheless, the awareness of their common value has been developing extensively since the creation of a unified state, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, after the First World War. Documentation was done uniformly for every stеčak, with following data: name of the place, name of the municipality, name of the archaeological site, town, cadaster unit, ownership data, latitude, longitude and altitude, position in the map and regional plan; and then: bibliography, earlier research, local tradition, toponym, number of stеčci, relative position and orientation, state od preservation, dimensions, decorations, ornaments and their state of preservation, photographs, and all the remarks which are potential relevant for preservation and research of necropolis (Malbaša i Samardžić 2009). Exhibition in Paris in 1950 draw a lot of attention, and afterwords Federal institute for protection of cultural monuments conducted research, based on Action plan and methodology adopted on Conference in Sarajevo 28. December 1950. The outcome was the first complete list of necropolis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro, which were researched in details by new generation of scientists, almost entirely from Balkans (Alojz Benac, Šefik Bešlagić, Đuro Basler, Dimitrije Sergejevski, Marko Vego, Marian Wenzel i Nada Miletic, (from Bosnia and Herzegovina), Anđela Horvat, Cvito Fisković, Ljubo Karaman (from Croatia) and Mirjana Čorović-Ljubinković from Serbia) (Malbaša i Samardžić 2009)). In this period, many monographs were done (Malbaša and Samardžić 2009). The great contribution to research of epitaphs gave archaeologist, historian, epigraphic and former director of National museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Registration of all graves in the form of stеčci was carried out in the period after the Second World War, when institutions for the protection of cultural monuments worked under the uniform legislation, using similar methodology. Systematic counting of these monuments, in the second half of the 20th century, enabled recording of 70,000 stеčak, tomb stones, at about 3,300
sites in the whole territory within which the concentration and value of the monuments varies. According to systematic research and registration of stećci in the 20th century on 3,162 sites in the four states there are 69,356 of stećci (mostly in Bosnia i Herzegovina - 2,687 sites with 59,593 stećci, Croatia - 247 sites and 4,447 stećci, Montenegro 107 sites with 3,049 stećci and Serbia 121 site with 2,267 stećci (Malbaša i Samardžić 2009). With the collapse of the Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and establishment of six independent states, all official cultural ties between the institutions of protection and experts were interrupted. It took them almost fifteen years to pass through again, due to the individual, friendly ties between the experts which were slowly renewing. Individuals have made great efforts to establish official relations between institutions in the field of culture. The third generation of scientist emerged at the end of the 20th century and in 21st century. It was them who initiated the nomination.

Figure 9 Meeting of coordinators (Ministry of culture of Montenegro 2013)

The project "Joint Nomination of Medieval Tombstones - Stećci for the World Heritage List" was launched in November 2009 within the framework of the project "Cultural heritage - a bridge to the common future" conducted by the Regional Office of UNESCO for Science and Culture in Europe, located in Venice. The formal expression of interest was signed by Commission for preservation of national monuments and Ministry of civil affairs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of culture of Republic of Serbia, Ministry of culture, sport and media of Montenegro and Ministry of culture of Croatia, and then they established interstate group of conservators, for coordination of the nomination document and for coordination of the management plan. In the period between 2010 and 2012, the working group defined methodology, harmonized documents created for tentative list of each country regarding stećci and they were submitted in 2011, with clear goal of winning the nomination. They continued working on management plan in spite of differences in administrative, social, financial and other issues at national levels. Every state accepted obligation of preservation of stećci within its own territory and from its own funds, in long term.

According to the agreement between all parties, 30 sites were nominated for WHL. As stated by UNESCO: "The stećci are exceptional testimony to the spiritual, artistic and historical aspects of the medieval cultures of southeastern Europe, an area where traditions and influences of the European west, east and south entwined with earlier traditions", and therefore they deserved to be listed in WHL based on criteria (iii) and (iv):

- Stećci “bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared”, which means in particular case: “A remarkable number..., of diversified form, are found in this part of southeast Europe, conveying an exceptional testimony to medieval European artistic and archaeological heritage, with traces of earlier influences (prehistoric, roman and early medieval)... Their reliefs, including decorative, symbolic, and religious motives as well as scenes from everyday life, are an extraordinary testimony of medieval culture. Inscriptions in the selected graveyards offer an exceptional historical resource, and are associated with the cultures and histories of the medieval states in this region.”
Furthermore, it means “to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history”. In this case, it means the following:” The stećci have been deeply embedded in historical and continual cultural traditions and beliefs and toponym demonstrate the historical meanings and significance of the stećci. The stećci are associated with local folk and fairy tales, superstitions and customs; and their epigraphy and reliefs have significantly influenced the contemporary literature and other forms of art in all four countries, but also wider in the region.”... “The integrity of the serial property is based on the ability of the selected 28 components to represent the widespread phenomena, importance and diversity of the stećci in southeast Europe. Each of the components has been conserved in situ...The tombstones are not currently affected by development pressures... Some of the buffer zones were revised during the evaluation process to better incorporate and preserve the important characteristics of the settings in which the burial grounds are located”(see Fig. ). (UNESCO 2016)

Figure 10 Necropolis with stećci known as “Greek graveyard” in Montenegro with designated buffer zone. (Ministry of culture of Montenegro 2013)

The authenticity of the serial property is established through the graveyards, tombstones (stećci) and associated sepulchral art of the medieval period. The stećci demonstrate the merging of religions, chivalry and folk cultures of this period...” Although the legal and administrative systems for the protection and management of cultural heritage differ, the highest level of protection in each of the States Parties has been provided for the graveyards and tombstones" etc. Considering that the required criteria were fulfilled, the World Heritage Committee agreed to inscribe a transboundary property which is located in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, on the World Heritage List on in Istanbul, Turkey, on July 15th in 2016. (UNESCO 2016)

In 21st century, researchers started publishing again extensively their work in all four parties, so we have not only that research was done with high standard but, it is also well publicized and available for public.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS: IMPORTANCE AND FUTURE OF STEĆCI

Similar to Parisian exhibition in 1950 in 20th century, another exhibition played important role regarding stećci in 21st century. The second time, the exhibition was organized by Jasmina Poklečki-Stošić (and photographed by Damir Fabijanić) in 2008 in the most important Croatian gallery, Kloveri dvori (Fig. 11). During preparation, the curator included experts from other three countries - Dubravko Lovrenović from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Emina Zečević from Serbia and Željko Kalezić from Montenegro. If she did not gather all sides, the exhibition would not be complete. However, it did and it was successful, and afterwards the contributors suggested their respective Ministries of culture the cooperation. Stećci in all four countries belong to the same cultural heritage, therefore it was not correct to treat it separately, within four different nominations. The Ministries of each culture responded well and the process started.
After this solemn act, two years of work on the harmonization of documentation followed, with sometimes contradicting expert opinions or opinions of states officials and politicians. There were occasional obstructions, simply because some disliked that the cultural experts from the four former Yugoslav republics of culture worked together. In this period there were many concerns, e.g. if the nomination is a threat to national identities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was torn apart by armed conflicts in 1990s, this had to be taken into consideration, having in mind that majority of stećci is located there and that stećci matter very much for their cultural identity. The conclusion was that stećci are the part of history of all parties, and therefore it is just that they are considered as their heritage as well, although not always with the same meaning. Bogumili were not welcomed in Serbia, and they were prosecuted in Serbia and Croatia, as heresy, so the tombs of members of their community are associated with different kind of history, but associated undoubtedly (Dizdar 2013). On the other hand, the experts involved in the process were convinced they will succeed. Professor Dr. Lovrenović, chairman of
Commission for preservation of national monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, had precise prediction when the process will be completed, several years in before it happened (DW 2016).

The nomination Project was carried to the end. The act of devotion to common goals demonstrated by experts of all parties, beyond daily politics was treasure itself. They acted as civil activist, beyond their common duties, and proved that “those who like peace can organize as well as those who like war”, to paraphrase the famous quote.

Inscription in the WHL is huge step, but not the end of the process of conservation. Stećci on 30 locations are listed and preserved in situ. However, the total number of stećci for conservation is significantly higher. According to documentation, the huge number of stećci is in poor condition and requires urgent protection. The situation is similar in other countries. Mirko Babić, director of Museum of Semberia (Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina) stands at the point that stećci in mountain Majevica need to be included in WHL. It may happen that further research shows that it is necessary to increase number of stećci in the WHL (DW 2016).

Publishing activities continues successfully, as well.

As previously described the inclusion of stećci as serial cultural good on the World Heritage List (WHL), proved that experts from West Balkan states can work together once again and take care of the monuments together. This is the most valuable lesson and message for the people who live in different countries regarding the cultural treasure which spreads beyond state borders.

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