

MAREK FLOREK

Institute of Archaeology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin
marek.florek@mail.umcs.pl
ORCID 0000-0002-9917-710X.

STEĆAK TOMBSTONES AS A SOURCE FOR RESEARCH ON MEDIAEVAL BOSNIAN ELITES

ABSTRACT

The term *stećak* (pl. *stećci*) is used in the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian languages to refer to mediaeval monolithic tombstones from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well from the nearby territories of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. Their number is estimated at between 50,000 and almost 70,000. The earliest preserved *stećci* come from the 12th century, whereas the latest date to the beginning of the 16th century. Their forms vary, but most often they have the shape of a slab, vertical or horizontal monolith, or stylized cross. Some of them have images – engraved or carved in low relief – representing, e.g., weaponry, people, animals, genre scenes (hunting, fighting, dancing), various symbols and ornaments, and – very seldom – short inscriptions. In the past, they were attributed to the followers of the Bogomil heresy or the

stock-breeding Vlachs, they were also regarded as original products of the mediaeval Bosnian population – created independently from external influences and models, as a sign of the revival of the traditional Slavic pagan beliefs dating back to the times of the Indo-European community. According to the currently prevalent assumption, *stećci* – with their forms and symbols – fit the broad trend of European sepulchral art referring to the ethos of chivalry and Christianity, but at the same time they were a means used to manifest the distinctive character of the local elites and groups aspiring to be included in them. The images present on *stećci* – especially genre scenes and heraldic motifs – are an invaluable source of information about the culture and life of local elites in mediaeval Bosnia.

Keywords: Bosnia, *stećak* tombstones, Middle Ages, elites

The term *stećak* (pl. *stećci*) is used in the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian languages to refer to mediaeval tombstones – dated from the 12th to the 16th century – known from Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as from the adjacent territories of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro (Fig. 1). In the folk tradition of the Southern Slavs and in earlier literature, they were called *grčki grobovi* ('Greek graves'), due to the fact that some of them resemble sarcophagi from Late Antiquity (preserved in considerable numbers across the Balkans), as well as *mramori* or *mašeti*.¹ Since some of the discussed tombstones are horizontal slabs, certain Croatian archaeologists postulate that the term *stećak* should be substituted with the word *kamik* ('stone'), which would denote all types of such monuments.²

The earliest preserved *stećci* have been dated to the 12th century, whereas the latest come from the beginning of the 16th century, that is from the time after the conquest of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Turks and the conversion of the local population to Islam.³

Stećci are a unique type of monument and generally have no direct analogues in European sepulchral art from the Middle Ages. Their exceptional character was due to several factors. The first one is their number. We know of over 3,100 necropolises with *stećci*, including almost 2,700 from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The estimated number of such tombstones ranges from 50,000 to 70,000.⁴ This wide range results from the fact that certain late mediaeval tombstones from Dalmatia – especially those from the vicinities of Šibenik and Trogir – are not included in

¹ Bešlić 2004, 13.

² Kužić 1999, 175–177; 2001, 259–265.

³ Andelić 1984, 490; Bešlić 2004, 175–176; Lovrenović 2009, 56–61.

⁴ Bešlić 1971, 43; 1982, 67; Dizdar 2018a, 139; Wenzel 1965, 13.

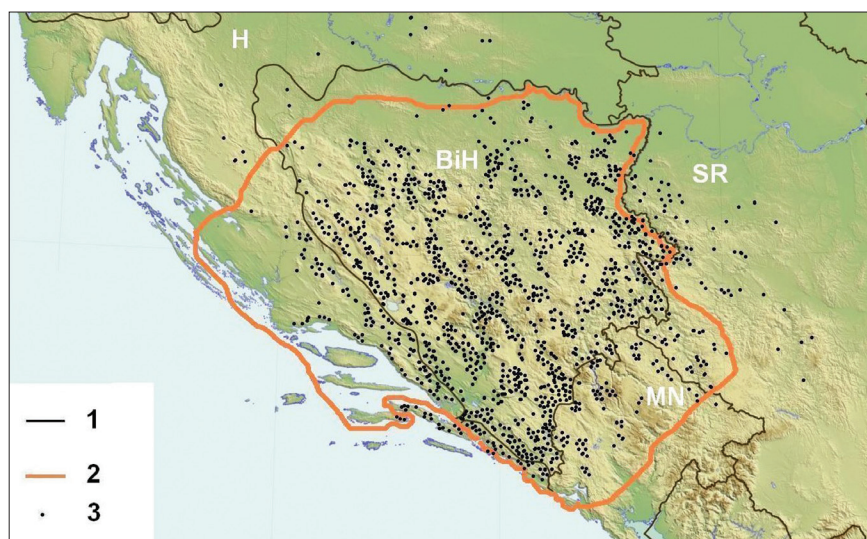


Fig. 1. Distribution of the most important cemeteries with *stećak* tombstones: 1 – modern country boundaries; 2 – boundaries of Bosnia at the end of the 14th century; 3 – cemeteries with *stećak* tombstones (image by M. Florek).

the discussed group by certain scholars, even though their forms and ornaments directly correspond to those of *stećci*. On the other hand, late *stećci* in the form of stelae – widespread in Bosnia – are often difficult to distinguish from Muslim tombstones called *nišan*, especially because sometimes both types can be found in the same cemetery. Nevertheless, even if we accept the lowest estimate – that is, 50,000 *stećci* – they remain without any doubt the most numerous group of preserved European tombstones from the Middle Ages, despite having been erected over a span of less than 400 years.

The cemeteries containing *stećci* are distinguished from other burial grounds of the mediaeval and early modern periods by their location. This fact was noticed already by travellers describing them at the end of the 16th century. In mediaeval Europe, it was customary to establish cemeteries near Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, within towns or villages (*apud ecclesiam, intra muros*). Meanwhile, almost all of the graveyards with *stećci* are situated at some distance from towns and villages (at least modern ones) and not linked with any religious buildings (Figs 2–4). Certain *stećci* from Dalmatia are the only exceptions in this regard.

We can distinguish six types of *stećci* with respect to their forms.⁵ The first is represented by slabs, usually rectangular. The largest reach dimensions of over 2.5 × 3 m and a thickness of up to 40 cm (Fig. 5). The second type are cuboidal monoliths – vertical or horizontal – known in the Bosnian language as *sanduk* (Fig. 6). The height of some of them exceeds 2 m. The third type is represented by so-called sarcophagus-like

tombstones, known in the Bosnian language as *sljemensjaci* or *sarkofazi*. Nevertheless, contrary to the actual ancient sarcophagi, such monuments are monolithic blocks that do not have space for the body (Fig. 7). Their length usually varies from 1.5 to 2 m, whereas their width ranges between 70 and 100 cm. Their height is diverse – the lowest monoliths measure less than 40 cm, whereas the highest exceed 80 cm. Another type is represented by tombstones referred to as ‘crosses’ (*krstače*). This term denotes tombstones in the shape of Latin crosses – whose arms have flat, semi-circular or triangular ends – as well as crosses in the shape of the letter Tau (T), those resembling schematic human figures with arms spread to the sides, and forms with reduced lateral arms and the upper part of a semi-circular or circular shape (Figs 8–10). The fifth type are stelae (*stubovi*) (Fig. 11). One form the stelae take is that of vertical, flat and relatively narrow slabs – having the shape of a rectangle or, less frequently, trapezoid or long hexagon whose upper edge can be flat, but sometimes has a semi-circular shape (convex or concave). The other form are slender cuboids, sometimes topped with a pyramidal roof. It is the stelae included in the last-mentioned type which are very similar to Muslim tombstones known as *nišan*. Thus, as was said before, it is difficult to tell the difference between the monuments representing these two groups. The last type are so-called amorphous tombstones, unworked or only slightly worked stones, vertical or horizontal and having different sizes. It should be mentioned that tombstones representing various types sometimes occur in the same cemetery.

⁵ Bešliagić 1982, 84–115; 2004, 75–113.



Fig. 2. Cemetery in Slivno Ravno – Prović, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 3. Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 4. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 5. Slab-shaped *stećak* tombstone. Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 6. *Stećak* tombstone of the *sanduk* type. Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 7. Sarcophagus-like *stećci*. Cemetery in Perucac, Serbia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 8. Cross-shaped *stećak* tombstone. National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 9. Cross-shaped *stećak*. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 10. Cross-shaped *stećak*. Cemetery in Bistro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 11. Stela-shaped *stećak*. National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).

The most numerous are the *sanduk*-type tombstones. They constitute ca. 62% of all the known monuments of this type. The second most popular gravestones are those in the form of slabs (over 23% of the total number). The sarcophagus-like tombstones (*sljemenjaci*) represent almost 9% of the total number; stelae – ca. 4%; crosses – ca. 0.5%. All the amorphous tombstones constitute less than 1.5%.

It is usually believed that the earliest – basic, so to speak – type are the slab-shaped *stećci* that appeared in Croatia and Bosnia as early as in the 12th century. The *sanduk*-type tombstones became popular in the 14th century, whereas the sarcophagus-like gravestones (*sljemenjaci*) started being common in the 15th century. The *stećci* in the form of crosses and stelae are believed to have become widespread in the middle of the 15th century, whereas the stelae having the shape of narrow, slender cuboids gained popularity at the end of the 15th and during the 16th century, which is associated with the conquest of the Balkans by the Ottoman Turks and the appearance of Muslim tombstones (*nišan*), to which the narrow stelae appear to refer. At the same time, the earlier tombstone types continued being used.⁶

Graves marked with *stećak* tombstones have various forms. They can be simple burials with bodies deposited in small rectangular pits – directly in the ground or in coffins – or large rectangular pits containing wooden sarcophagi – sometimes double, where the larger contains the smaller – topped with gable roofs. Some graves have the form of stone linings or chests made of stone slabs. There are no correlations between the grave forms and the tombstone types.

It is estimated that only ca. 8–9% of the whole group of tombstones referred to as *stećci* are decorated with different motifs – engraved or carved in low relief.⁷ The cross-shaped gravestones are the most commonly ornamented (ca. 65% of their total number). The remaining types were decorated much less often. About 18.5% of the sarcophagus-like stones (*sljemenjaci*), 14.5% of the stelae, 7.5% of the *sanduk*-type tombstones and less than 6% of the slab tombstones are ornamented. It bears noting, however, that there are considerable differences in the percentages of decorated tombstones from particular necropolises. There are cemeteries where not a single tombstone is ornamented, whereas others have most of such monuments adorned this way. Only on single tombstones – less than 0.5% of their total number – are there inscriptions in a variant of the Cyrillic script called the Bosnian Cyrillic (*Bosančica*), informing about who



Fig. 12. *Stećak* tombstones ornamented with decorative bands. Cemetery in Smokovljani – Sv. Vid, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).

the buried persons were or having a devotional character. We also know of several slabs from Croatia whose forms strictly correspond to *stećci*, but which have inscriptions in the Latin or Glagolitic alphabet. Nevertheless, Bosnian archaeologists do not associate them with the discussed group of tombstones.

The images present on the discussed type of tombstones were classified in various ways by scholars dealing with *stećci*.⁸ Without going into details of particular classifications, we can distinguish several groups: geometric motifs and decorative bands (borderlines) (Fig. 12); architectonic motifs, including images of buildings (Fig. 13); crosses (Fig. 14); astral motifs, crescents, rosettes, rings, circles, spirals (Figs 15–17); vegetal motifs, including grape bunches and lilies (Figs 18–19); weaponry, especially swords and shields (Fig. 20) and, less frequently, tools; birds and such animals as deer, horse, dog, snake, viper and – seldom – others (Figs 21–23); images of people – presented individually or in pairs – including people in a worshipping pose or holding different items (Figs 24–25) and depiction of heads, torsos or hands only; genre scenes, including images of riders, sometimes referred to as cavalcades (Fig. 26), hunting scenes (Fig. 27), tournaments and fights (Fig. 28) and people dancing the *kolo* ('circle') dance (Fig. 29). It should be stressed that a single tombstone is usually covered not with a single motif or ornament type, but with their different combinations and variations (Fig. 30).

Stećci, because of their number, as well as due to the fact that their great majority occur – at least today –

⁶ Andelić 1984, 490; Bešliagić 2004, 175–176; Lovrenović 2009, 56–61.

⁷ Bešliagić 1971, 50; 1982, 130.

⁸ Andelić 1984, 488; Bešliagić 1982, 131–139; Lovrenović 2009, 62–67; Wenzel 1965, 11–15.



Fig. 13. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with architectural motifs (arcades). Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 14. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with a cross motif. Cemetery in Topolo, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 15. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with astral motifs. Town Museum in Makarska, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 16. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with spiral motifs. National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 17. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with a rosette motif. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 18. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with a motif of a stylized lily. Cemetery in Provec – Cista Provo, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 19. *Stećak* tombstone decorated with a grape bunch motif. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).

in necropolises removed from Orthodox churches and inhabited places, and especially on account of their forms and visibly symbolic ornamental motifs – attracted the attention of Western European travellers visiting the Balkans already in the 16th century. In later times they became the subject of interest of voyagers from other countries, as well. One of the early voyagers interested in *stećak* tombstones was the Polish nobleman Aleksander Sapieha. In the years 1802–1803, he travelled across

Dalmatia and the Balkans. During the trip, he visited, among other places, several necropolises near Stolac in Herzegovina – including probably the largest of them, located in a village called Radimlja. According to Sapieha, the majority of these cemeteries were from pre-Roman times. He suspected that the tombstones were the result of Celtic, Egyptian and Parthian influences, although he also saw in them elements linked with European chivalric culture.⁹



Fig. 20. *Stećak* tombstone with an image of a shield and sword. Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).

⁹ Sapieha 1811, 188–195.



Fig. 21. *Stećak* tombstone with an image of snakes (vipers). Cemetery in Bistrina, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 23. *Stećak* tombstone with images of animals. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 24. *Stećak* tombstone with images of human figures (buried person with the family?). Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 22. *Stećak* tombstone with images of animals (bottom) and dancing scenes (top). Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 25. *Stećak* tombstone with an image of a human figure. National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 26. *Stećak* tombstone with an image of riders (so-called cavalcade). Cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 27. *Stećak* tombstone with an image of bear hunting. Cemetery in Dubravka, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).

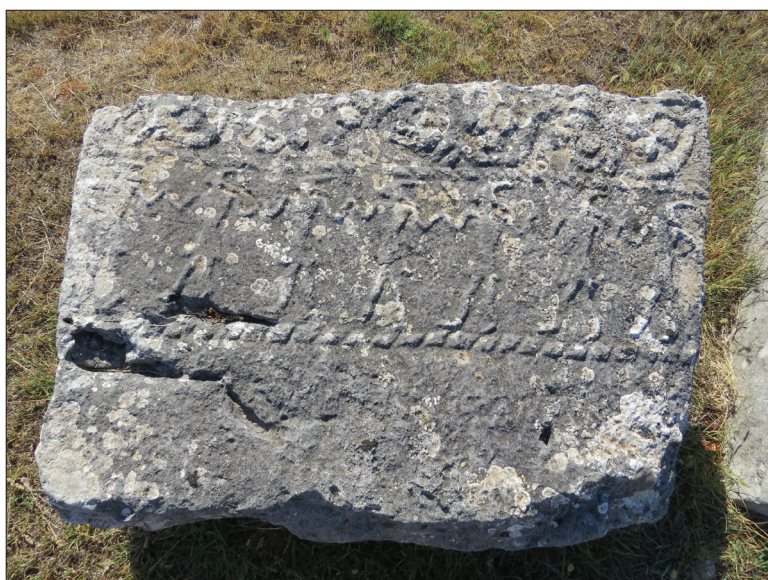


Fig. 28. *Stećak* tombstone with a tournament scene. National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 29. *Stećak* tombstone with an image representing the *kolo* dance. Cemetery in Topolo, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 30. *Stećak* tombstone at the cemetery in Smokovljani – Vlaske Grobi (Croatia) (photo by M. Florek).

Attempts to explain the meaning of *stećci* – made over the last 200 years – have led to formulating several hypotheses concerning their origin and character and attempting to explain the symbolism of the ornaments and images covering them. All these assumptions refer – to a greater or lesser extent – to different aspects of the complicated history, as well as to the ethnic and religious diversity, of the Balkans during the Middle Ages. Their starting point was the analysis and interpretation of the ornamental motifs and images present on the tombstones.

The first hypothesis, proposed by Arthur Evans (later known mainly for his research at Knossos on Crete), was formulated after his stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1875, and then developed by other scholars. It links *stećci* with the Bogomil/Patarene heresy, which is believed to have been favoured by the Bosnian rulers.¹⁰ The Bogomils were a sect with Manichean roots created in the 10th century and operating in Bulgaria and Macedonia. According to Church sources, it was created by the monk Bogomil, but he was probably a fictitious person, and

¹⁰ Evans 1876; Truhelka 1892; Soloviev 1956; 1959; Challet 1965; Mandić 1966; Benac 1967.

the name of the sect derives from the designation 'dear to God', as the members of the sect called themselves. The doctrine of the Bogomils, which stemmed from Manichean dualism, remains poorly known. Supposedly, its followers believed that God had had two sons: Satanael and Logos. Satanael, having revolted against his father, created the world. In order to liberate people, God sent Logos, that is Jesus, who is currently substituted by the Holy Spirit. It is alleged that the Bogomils recognized only the New Testament, but they did not believe in the role of the Sacraments and rejected the cult of the saints, Virgin Mary and holy images, performing liturgy in churches, Church holidays and the Ecclesiastical hierarchy. Neither did the Bogomils recognize the Cross as the symbol of Christ's passion. It is assumed that they also questioned the contemporary social relations. In the 11th century, they reached Bosnia. Western sources refer to this Bosnian faction of the sect as the 'Patarenes'. They became particularly popular in towns on the Adriatic, which – via Venice – were influenced at that time by the Cathar heresy. It appears that the Bogomils considerably affected the local Church. Some scholars even state that a heretic Bogomil/Patареne church of a national character was created in Bosnia.¹¹ After the Ottoman conquest almost the entire population of Bosnia converted to Islam, which led to lack of resistance against the Turkish rule, contrary to what happened in Bulgaria, Greece and especially Serbia. A small group of the sect's followers probably remained in hiding until the 19th century, officially declaring their adherence to Islam.

The supposed association of *stećci* with the Bogomils was indicated by the facts that cemeteries with such tombstones are usually located far from religious facilities and that the stones themselves lack the motif of the cross interpreted as the symbol of Christ's passion. If such elements occur, they are in a deformed shape. The 'Bogomil hypothesis' became highly popular – possibly owing to Evans's prestige – and it still has its followers.¹² Nevertheless, as early as in the 1930s, it was discovered that not all *stećci* can be linked with the Bogomils, whereas in the territory of the main activity of the sect – in Bulgaria – there no such tombstones at all.¹³ Yet one can still come across the statement – especially in popular publications – that *stećci* are Bogomil tombstones.

The second hypothesis associates *stećci* with the Vlachs – referred to in mediaeval and modern sources from the Balkans as the *Vlasi*, *Morlaci* or *Mavrovlasii* – who were the descendants of the partly Romanized indig-

enous populations of Dalmatia and the Balkans (Illyrians and Thracians).¹⁴ This ethnos is believed to have survived until the Middle Ages in the borderlands between Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria, from where – in the 12th century – its representatives began to migrate in different directions, reaching such areas as Bosnia and Croatia, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, as well as the Polish and Ruthenian Carpathians. Arguments supporting this assumption include the fact that the majority of cemeteries with *stećak* tombstones are located in mountainous areas, the simultaneous appearance of *stećci* and the Vlachs in Bosnia, the *stećci* images being linked with pastoral lifestyle – cavalcades, riders, hunting scenes – and the identity of motifs known from *stećci* and ethnographic materials associated with the Vlachs, like the rosette, crescent, lily.

According to the third hypothesis – which is supported today by the majority of scholars from Bosnia and Herzegovina researching this problem, including the most famous one, Štefik Bešlić – the forms of *stećci*, as well as the symbols of the images and ornamental motifs covering them, indicate that these tombstones should be considered original products of the Slavic population inhabiting the territory of Bosnia in the Middle Ages, created without the influence of external models.¹⁵

A somewhat different version of this hypothesis stipulates that *stećci* – with their forms and decorations – indicate the continued existence of traditional Slavic pagan beliefs, whose roots can be traced to the times of the Indo-European community, among Croats and Serbs inhabiting the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Turkish conquest.¹⁶ The symbols and genre scenes present on the surfaces of such stones are interpreted similarly in both cases. The spiral and wavy line are considered to represent living water. Stars, circles, rosettes, crescents might have been lunar and astral symbols. Dancing scenes and parades of the dead walking to the afterlife or dancing demons, as well as images of hunting and duels, possibly symbolize mythological scenes. Representations of fantastic animals might be interpreted as images of demons or deities. Trees might symbolise the World Axis (*axis mundi*) or the tree of life. Images of humans might represent gods. For example, the scene of an archer shooting at a deer present on the famous tombstone from Donje Zgošće, which is displayed in the National Museum in Sarajevo (Fig. 31), is supposed to represent not an ordinary hunting scene, but the celestial archer – Svetovit – chasing a deer – a symbol of the Orion constel-

¹¹ Dragojlović 1987; Spyra 1987; Petrović 1995; Imamović 1997; Fine 2007; Mužić 2008.

¹² Cf. Kutzli 1977; 2019.

¹³ Molé 1961a, 136.

¹⁴ Wenzel 1962; Mandić 1966; Milošević 1991; Mužić 2009; Vemić 2011.

¹⁵ Bešlić 1982; Zorić 1984.

¹⁶ Kužić 2002; Mužić 2009; Viduša 2014.



Fig. 31. *Stećak* tombstone from Donje Zgošće (Replica in front of the National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) with images of a cavalcade (top) and hunting (bottom) (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 32. *Stećak* tombstone representing the 'tree of life' and deities or demons in the guise of animals. Cemetery in Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).

lation. Similarly, the image of a man hunting a bear present on a tombstone from Hutovo in Bosnia is not that of a common person, but of Perun killing Veles in the guise of a bear. Also certain human figures with circular heads – for example those from Radimlja in Herzegovina – are sometimes interpreted as images of Svetovit – with the head standing for the all-seeing Sun – or Orion, the divine archer. A *sanduk*-type tombstone from Boljuni in Herzegovina (Fig. 32) is believed to be ornamented with the image of the tree of life, the symbol of the World Axis (*axis mundi*). On its one side, there is a representation of a winged snake which possibly stands for Zmaj, a Slavic chthonic and celestial deity. On the other side of the tree, one can see an unspecified animal, perhaps a symbol of Veles (Volos). According to other interpretations, the winged snake is the demon Aždaha, whereas the other creature is Belbog (Bielbog – 'white god') fighting the serpent and presented in the guise of a lion. Images from a tombstone from Brotice in Dalmatia, where imaginary animals were presented next to dancing and hunting scenes (Fig. 33), are sometimes similarly interpreted as representing the fight between Zmaj and Aždaha in the guise of an eagle. The latter is supposed to be depicted as a snake in another scene, whereas other animals represent minor demons or mythical characters.¹⁷

Scholars interpreting *stećci* as reflecting Proto-Slavic and Indo-European beliefs sometimes refer to so-called

Old Prussian 'baba' stones from northeastern Poland, similar sculptures from Ukraine and images present on the so-called Zbruch Svetovid.¹⁸ Whereas the analogies to the Old Prussian and steppe 'baba' stones are at least disputable, the way of presenting human figures, dancing scenes, weaponry and animals on the Zbruch idol are indeed similar to those present on *stećci*.

Still, it appears that the origins of *stećci* and the images covering them are much more complicated and should be investigated in the broad context of European history as a unique manner in which the culture of mediaeval Bosnia was manifested. Thus, we can consider it a result of merging different local post-Antique, Slavic and Wallachian traditions with the Bogomil/Patarene ideas, Christian symbolism, and especially with European chivalric culture.¹⁹

The slab-shaped tombstones, which are considered the original form of *stećci*, were popular throughout mediaeval Europe. On the other hand, the equally early amorphous forms of *stećci* find their closest analogues in the tombstones (ornamented with the images of bows and arrows) from the cemetery in Radomyšl near Strakonice (southern Bohemia), which is dated to the 12th–13th centuries.²⁰ Late Antique sarcophagi – which can still be found in many places across the whole Balkans – were probably the model for the sarcophagus-like *stećci*. Still, we need to bear in mind that the former were used as containers

¹⁷ Viduša 2014, 143–263.

¹⁸ Bešliagić 1982, 284.

¹⁹ Miletić 1982; Lovrenović 2009; Uglešić, Vučić 2014; Dizdar 2018a, 2018b.

²⁰ Nechvátal 1999; 2019, 21–35.



Fig. 33. *Stećak* tombstone with images of mythical animals (demons), dancing and animals. Cemetery in Brotice, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).

for bodies, whereas *stećci* were monolithic tombstones. What is more, there are 12th and 13th century tombstones from Western Europe – e.g. Sweden and England – that resemble to a great degree the sarcophagus-like *stećci* in their form and the way they are ornamented (e.g. arcades carved in low relief).²¹

It is more difficult to find analogies for the tombstones in the form of great cuboids and for the majority of the so-called crosses, especially those resembling stylized human figures and those with reduced lateral arms and round end of the vertical beam. On the other hand, the *stećci* in the form of stelae, which were the latest type, might have been in fact modelled on Muslim *nišan* tombstones.

The images of dead people, heraldic representations, weaponry and hunting scenes, fights, tournaments, groups of riders etc., as well as the majority of animal and vegetal motifs (e.g. lilies) occurring on *stećci* find their analogues in works of mediaeval art from Western and Central Europe, although not necessarily in images present on tombstones.²² Yet they do not occur anywhere else in such numbers and compositions. Even the lack or only occasional occurrence of the cross does not appear to be unusual, as this motif is rarely present on mediaeval tombstones from the rest of Europe, as well.

What distinguishes the majority of the images present on *stećci* from those occurring on Western and Central European tombstones is above all their characteristic style. We can debate whether it is an expression of their provincialism in relation to Western European

art, resulting from isolation and conservatism, combined with primitivism, which in turn reflected the skill level of the tombstone makers, as certain scholars believe.²³ There is also the possibility – a hypothesis popular especially among the younger generation of Croatian researchers – that this style was consciously adopted and developed, syncretically merging the local Roman provincial, Byzantine, Slavic and Wallachian traditions with Western European Romanesque and Gothic art.²⁴

The prime of the ‘*stećci* art’ – appearance of their most characteristic forms along with a whole set of decorative motifs and images – occurred during the 14th and in the first half of the 15th centuries. This was also the time when Bosnia, ruled by the Kotromanić dynasty, gained full independence after a period of nominal rule of Hungary. In 1377 Tvrtko I, previously holding the title of ban, was crowned king. Later he struggled to maintain his rule in the face of the Turkish expansion. The distribution of *stećci* significantly overlaps with the greatest territorial extent of the state ruled by Tvrtko I and his successors. Besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, it included certain parts of Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro – together with the Dalmatian shore from Kotor in the south to Zadar in the north.²⁵ On the one hand, *stećci* – with their forms and symbols – correspond to the general trend of Western European sepulchral art linked with the chivalric ethos and Christianity. On the other, they could have been a manifestation of the local distinctiveness, originally associated with attempts to emancipate the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Byzantium,

²¹ Palameta 2004; 2020.

²² Basler 1972; Mazrak 2012; Vučić 2013; Palameta 1995; 2004; 2020.

²³ Molé 1961b, 154.

²⁴ Anđelić 1984, 487–491.

²⁵ Anđelić 1984, Ančić 1997; 2005; Imamović 1997.

and later Serbia, Croatia and finally Hungary, and then with maintaining independence by the successors of King Tvrtko I. This is possibly the reason of the popularity enjoyed by the Bogomil/Patarene heresy, which gained new listeners and promoters not only from the lowest social classes but also from among the aristocracy and representatives of the Bosnian Church attempting to preserve their distinctiveness against the contradictory influences of the Papacy and Byzantium, Hungary, Venice, Serbia and Bulgaria. The fact that virtually the whole population of Bosnia and Herzegovina converted to Islam without resistance in a very short time after the Turkish conquest, between 1463 and 1481 – contrary to what can be said about such lands as Greece, Serbia or Bulgaria – indicates that Christianity was shallowly rooted in the local society, also among the elites.

Stećci, together with their decorations – images of weaponry, human figures and genre scenes (hunting, fighting, tournaments, dancing, horse cavalcades) – are an invaluable source of information on life in mediaeval Bosnia and especially on its elites: the knightly class and groups aspiring to join it. The number of preserved tombstones indicated that the knightly class and groups emulating its lifestyle – including burial customs – must have been considerably large. What is more, it appears that the material statuses of both social strata were similar. This statement seems to be confirmed by the fact that after the Turkish conquest, the Bosnian population – similarly to that of the nearby Albania – became a peasant society based on a clan system. As was mentioned above, the fast conversion of nearly the entire Bosnian population to Islam also indicates the infirmity of the local Church structures and only superficial reception of Christianity by the Slavs inhabiting this territory.

One of the most frequent motifs present on *stećci*, which can be associated with the knightly class, are the sword and shield.²⁶ They occur in various arrangements – individually, in pairs (sword + shield, although there is one tombstone with a whole set composed of a sword, shield and knight's belt) and together with other motifs, as well as in genre scenes. Shields may be presented as elements of defensive weaponry or simply as heraldic coats of arms that indicate the family and lineage to which the buried person belonged. There are different types of such artefacts depicted on the discussed tombstones, from almond-shaped ones, resembling the so-called Norman shields, to triangular *Manesse*-type shields, oval, rectangular, rectangular with a semicircular cutout for a lance – pavises used by heavy cavalry, although some images on such tombstones present them as used also by infan-



Fig. 34. Scene of deer hunting. Tombstone at the cemetery in Provec – Cista Provo, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).

trymen – to trapezoid shields with a notch, so-called Hungarian or hussar shields, which became popular in the 16th century.

Except various swords and shields, there are also other types of cold weapons: daggers, poniards, sabres – sometimes together with shields – and less frequently: spears, battle-axes, bludgeons, maces and bows. These images indicate that weaponry – at least personal – used across the Balkans in the Middle Ages did not differ from that used in other parts of Europe.²⁷

The genre scenes on *stećci* are interesting for scholars researching the chivalric culture of Bosnia. Such images do not have any analogues in the mediaeval sepulchral art from other parts of Europe, but they can be easily found on frescos and tapestries decorating the walls of castles and manors. The majority of genre scenes present hunting. Judging from the number of such images, the most popular type was deer hunting. Scenes showing this activity appear on over 160 tombstones. Hunting boars – the second most numerous representation of this type – can be found on only 11 stones, whereas bear hunting appears on only four. Deer were usually hunted on horseback, with a spear or some other type of pole weapon, but sometimes the portrayed hunters use swords (Fig. 34). Much less numerous are images of a walking

²⁶ Florek 2016, 146–163.

²⁷ Čurčić 1944; Škrivanič 1957; Sijarić 2004; 2012; 2014; Florek 2016.



Fig. 35. Scene of deer hunting. Tombstone at the cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 36. Scene of hunting with a falcon. Tombstone at the cemetery in Gabrili, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 37. Combat scene. Tombstone at the cemetery in Radimlja, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo by M. Florek).



Fig. 38. Image representing the *kolo* dance. Tombstone displayed at the Town Museum in Makarska, Croatia (photo by M. Florek).

hunter with a bow. Furthermore, there are scenes of a hunting rider with a spear accompanied by a walking bowman. Falcons and dogs were also employed in chasing deer by mounted men using spears and swords as well as by walking archers (Figs 35–36). When hunting a boar or bear, mounted or walking hunters used spears, and were sometimes accompanied by dogs.

Less numerous are the images of fighting and tournaments (Fig. 37). The schematic character of many battle scenes makes it impossible to state whether they represent real combat or its re-enactment during a chivalry tournament. There are almost 60 tombstones with such images – mainly from Herzegovina. In the background of the tournament scenes there are often architectural elements (arcades), which suggests that they were organized in cloistered castle courtyards. The most frequent are the images of two fighting mounted knights, where both are using lances, spears or swords. Between them there is often a standing human figure (sometimes there are two), which directly indicates that these are tournament scenes. There are also images of men fighting on horseback and observed by people standing on the walls of some structure – most probably a castle. There are scenes of combat between two foot warriors, where both use swords or one fights with a sword and the other uses a bow. One can also find images of a duel between a mounted man with a spear or lance and a foot warrior using a bow or sword. On the other hand, images presenting more than two fighting persons are relatively rare.

The so-called cavalcades, representations of riders – usually carrying weapons and sometimes accompanied by foot soldiers and dogs – are in some way associated with the scenes of tournaments and fights (and possibly with hunting scenes).

A particularly interesting category of genre scenes are those interpreted as depicting dancing (Fig. 38). Some scholars assume that they may represent a traditional Slavic dance called the *kolo*, which is still performed in the Balkans. According to other interpretations, they are images of a courtly group dance similar to the Western European *carole* or *Kronentanz*. It is difficult to decide which of the two theories is correct, as the folk *kolo* dance and the medieval courtly *carole* derive from the same root – a ritual circle dance. There are also attempts to interpret these scenes as symbols/representations of the ‘Dance of Death’, which was popular in late mediaeval iconography, or as rather pagan images of souls travelling to the afterlife.

Although in the scenes of dancing, as well in several tournament scenes, women were presented next to men, the knightly world of mediaeval Bosnia was notably masculine. There are no tombstones with images representing a woman only. Still, it should be stressed that generally, there are only a few human figures that can be interpreted as the images of the individuals buried under the stones. When a man and a woman are presented on the same tombstone – with the exception of the above-mentioned dancing scenes – the woman is much smaller (the same applies to children). Contrary to those from Western Europe, there are no tombstones of married couples where both buried individuals are presented in a similar way.

Interestingly enough, the genre scenes occurring on *stećci* do not include representations of a religious or devotional character. There are no images indicating that members of a clergy were buried under some of the tombstones. We can only guess to what extent this fact resulted from the popularity of the Bogomil/Patarene

heresy and to what degree it was caused by the more modest role of the Church in mediaeval Bosnia in comparison with other parts of Europe.

Stećci continued to be erected in cemeteries located throughout the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina some time after the Turkish conquest. This applies not only to the stelae, imitating Muslim *nišan* tombstones, but also to slabs and cubical monoliths. On the other hand, ornamental motifs typical of earlier *stećci* and un-

known to Ottoman art appeared on Muslim *nišan* stones. The custom of ornamenting tombstones, which by that time had only the form of slabs, with motifs typical of *stećci*, including images of weaponry (especially swords and shields), survived for the longest time (at least until the end of the 17th century) in the coastal towns of Dalmatia that had been part of the Bosnian Kingdom during the Middle Ages and were not subjected to the Ottoman rule.

Bibliography:

- Ančić M. 1997 *Putanja klatna. Ugarsko-hrvatsko kraljevstvo i Bosna u XIV. stoljeću*, Zadar–Mostar.
- Ančić M. 2005 Bosanska banovina i njezino okruženje u prvoj polovici 13. stoljeća, (in:) F. Šanjek (ed.), *Fenomen „krstjani“ u srednjovjekovnoj Bosni i Humu. Zbornik radova*, Sarajevo–Zagreb, 11–25.
- Andelić P. 1984 Doba srednjovjekovne bosanske države, (in:) A. Benac, D. Basler, B. Čović, E. Pašalić, N. Miletić, P. Andelić (eds), *Kulturna istorija Bosne i Hercegovine od najstarijih vremena do pada ovih zemelja pod osmansku vlast*, Sarajevo, 435–587
- Basler Đ. 1972 Neke likovne paralele na stećcima, *Naše Starine* 12, 123–133.
- Benac A. 1967 *Stećci. Mala istorija umetnosti. Jugoslavija*, Beograd.
- Bešliagić Š. 1971 *Stećci. Kataloško-topografski pregled*, Sarajevo.
- Bešliagić Š. 1982 *Štećci – kultura i umjetnost*, Sarajevo.
- Bešliagić Š. 2004 *Leksikon stećaka*, Sarajevo.
- Challet J. 1965 Bogumili i simbolika stećaka, *Naše starine. Godišnjak Zavoda za zaštitu spomenika kulture S. R. Bosne i Hercegovine* 10, 19–38.
- Ćurčić V. 1944 Starinsko oružje u Bosni i Hercegovini, *Glasnik Hrvatskog državnog muzeja u Sarajevu* 55 (1943), 21–226.
- Dizdar G. 2018a Invisibility and Presence in the *stećak* Stones of Medieval Bosnia. Sacred Meanings of Tombstone Carvings, (in:) W.E. Keil, S. Kianrad, Ch. Theis, L. Willer (eds), *Zeichentragende Artefakte im sakralen Raum. Zwischen Präsenz und Unsichtbarkeit*, Berlin, 139–166.
- Dizdar G. 2018b *The Standing Stone of Medieval Bosnia*, Zenica.
- Dragojlović D. 1987 *Krstjani i jeretička crkva bosanska*, Beograd.
- Evans A. 1876 *Through Bosnia and Herzegovina on Foot During the Insurrection, August and September 1875. With an Historical Review of Bosnia and a Glimpse at the Croats, Slavonians, and the Ancient Republic of Ragusa*, London.
- Florek M. 2016 Broń na średniowiecznych nagrobkach, tzw. „stećci” z Bałkanów. Wstęp do problematyki, *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia* 12, 135–174.
- Fine J. 2007 *The Bosnian Church. Its Place in State and Society from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century*, London.
- Imamović M. 1997 *Historija Bošnjaka*, Sarajevo.
- Kutzli R. 1977 *Die Bogumilen. Geschichte, Kunst, Kultur*, Stuttgart.
- Kutzli R. 2019 *Bogumili. Historija, umjetnost, kultura*, Sarajevo.
- Kužić K. 1999 Prilog poznavanju srednjovjekovnih poljodjelskih ratila i drugog seljačkog aleta prema njikovim prikazima za zagorskim kamicima, *Ethnologica Dalmatica* 8, 175–186.
- Kužić K. 2001 Zašto bi trebalo terminom „kamik” zamijeniti termin „stećak”?, *Povijesni prilozi* 20, 252–267.
- Lovrenović D. 2009 *Stećci bosansko i humsko mramorje srednjeg vijeka*, Sarajevo.
- Mandić D. 1966 Vlaška teza o B.-H. stećcima, *Hrvatska revija* 16 (62–64), 237–246.
- Mazrak E. 2012 Stećak sljemenjak iz Donje Zgošće kod Kaknja – novo ikonografsko tumačenje, *Bosna franciscana. Časopis Franjevačke teologije* 36, 99–132.

- Miletić N. 1982 *Stećci*, Beograd–Zagreb–Mostar.
- Milošević A. 1991 *Stećci i Vlasi. Stećci i vlaške migracije 14. i 15. stoljeća u Dalmaciji i Jugozapadnoj Bosni*, Split.
- Molé W. 1961a Bogomilcy, (in:) W. Kowalenko, G. Labuda, T. Lehr-Splawiński (eds), *Słownik Starożytności Słowiańskich. Encyklopedyczny zarys kultury ludowej Słowian od czasów najdawniejszych 1: A–E*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków, 136–138.
- Molé W. 1961b Bosna, (in:) W. Kowalenko, G. Labuda, T. Lehr-Splawiński (eds), *Słownik Starożytności Słowiańskich. Encyklopedyczny zarys kultury ludowej Słowian od czasów najdawniejszych 1. A–E*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków, 153–155.
- Mužić I. 2008 *Vjera Crkve Bosanske*, Split.
- Mužić I. 2009 Vlasi i starobalkanska pretrkršćanska simbolika jelena na stećcima, *Starohrvatska prosvjeta* 36 (2010), 315–347.
- Nechvátal B. 1999 *Radomyšl. Raně středověké pohřebiště*, Praha
- Nechvátal B. 2019 *Z dějin Radomyšle*, Radomyšl.
- Palameta M. 1995 Kršćanska simbolika na stećcima neumskoga zaleđa, (in:) *Neum – zavičaj i zemlja Hrvata*. Humski zbornik 1, Neum, 141–149.
- Palameta M. 2004 Odjoci gotike na stećcima, *Status. Magazin za političku kulturu i drušvena pitanja* 2, 130–145.
- Palameta M. 2020 Štećci i srednjovjekovni kulturoški kontekst, *Hercegovina* 6, 99–122.
- Petrović M. 1995 Pomen bogomila-babuna u zakonopravilu Svetog Save i „Crkva bosanska“, (in:) S. Terzić (ed.), *Bosna i Hercegovina od srednjeg veka do novijeg vremena*, Beograd, 263–284.
- Sapieha A.A. 1811 *Podróże w Kraiach Sławiańskich odbywane w Latach 1802, 1803, 1804 przez X***S***, Członka kilku Akademii i Towarzystw Uczonych*, Wrocław.
- Sijarić M. 2004 *Mačevi 10. – 15. stoljeća iz Bosne i Hercegovine*, Sarajevo.
- Sijarić M. 2012 Albaneški, albansko-dalmatinski, bosanski ili srpski mačevi? – mali prilog rješavanju jedne dileme, (in:) T. Šeparović (ed.), *Dani Stjepana Gunjače. Zbornik radova* 2, Split, 395–409.
- Sijarić M. 2014 *Hladno oružje iz Bosne i Hercegovine u archeologiji razvijenog i kasnog srednjeg vijeka*, Sarajevo.
- Škrivanić G. 1957 *Oružje u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji, Bosni i Dubrovniku*, Beograd.
- Soloviev A. 1956 Simbolika srednjovekovityh spomenika u Bosni i Hercegovini, *Godišnjak istoriskog društva Bosne i Hercegovine* 8, 5–67.
- Soloviev A. 1959 Bogomilismus und Bogomilengräber in den südslawischen Ländern, (in:) S. Balduin (ed.), *Völker und Kulturen Südosteuropas. Kulturhistorische Beiträge*, München, 173–189.
- Spyra J. 1987 Wspólnoty bogomilskie jako próba powrotu do form życia gmin wczesnochrześcijańskich, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne* 84, 7–21.
- Truhelka Ć. 1892 *Starobosanski mramorovi*, Sarajevo.
- Uglešić A., Vučić E. 2014 Ikonografija stećaka – revizija terena područja zapadne Hercegovine, *Suvremena pitanja. Časopis za prosvjetu i kulturu* 18, 69–80.
- Vemić D. 2011 *Late Medieval Tombstones (stećci) in the Area of Žabljak, Montenegro*, MA Thesis in Medieval Studies, CEU eTD Collection, Budapest.
- Viduša P. N. 2014 *Stećci, Laž i Bogumili*, Beograd.
- Vučić E. 2013 Stećci in Hercegovina, *Suvremena pitanja. Časopis za prosvjetu i kulturu* 15, 111–120.
- Wenzel M. 1962 Bosnian and Herzegovinian Tomstones: Who Made Them and Why, *Südost-Forschungen* 31, 102–143.
- Wenzel M. 1965 *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima / Ornamental Motifs on Tombstones from Medieval Bosnia and Surrounding Regions*, Sarajevo.
- Zorić D. 1984 Prinos problematiki stećaka. U povodu knjige Šefik Bešliagić: „Štećci – kultura i umjetnost“, Sarajevo 1982, *Radovi* 17, 207–211.