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## CULTURAL-HISTORICAL HERITAGE — A KEY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNTAIN AREAS

**Abstract:** A significant part of tangible heritage from Montenegro, *stećci*, medieval tombstones and graveyards, has recently been inscribed in the list of UNESCO World Cultural Heritage. Two of the three inscribed localities of *stećci* from Montenegro are situated on Durmitor, near Žabljak — Grčko groblje in Novakovići and Bare Žugića. In spite of their primary funerary function and name, these and many other similar priceless examples of cultural-historical heritage of mountain areas in Montenegro and across the region of the Balkans and southeastern Europe speak, in fact, more of a continuity of life and living, of indigenous and specific cultural practices, systems of beliefs, values and an incessantly living cultural tradition which is the true force behind the possibility of achieving sustainable development in any environment.

**Key words:** *Stećci, cultural-historical heritage, Balkans, mountain areas, sustainable development*

Until recently, discussions and actions in the field of preservation, conservation, study and presentation of cultural heritage in general, and in particular that of mountain areas, has been absent from the debate on sustainable development. In fact, the first international congress specifically focusing on the linkage between culture and sustainable development, and the first of its kind organized by UNESCO since the Stockholm Conference in 1998, was held in May 2013 in Hangzhou, China. In her opening address of the congress, Mrs. Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, underlined that there is no “one-size-fits-all” development model and that it is not enough to set global targets for all — we need to adapt to each individual context and went to point out that: “We have seen too many well-intended development programmes fail because they did not take into account cultural settings. A culture-informed approach is an essential enabler of sustainable development, and it must be an overarching principle for all development efforts. Another lesson is that development has not been people-centred enough. To

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mobilize people, we need to build on their culture. Because culture is what makes us who we are.”

In that sense, mountain areas are all the more specific and invaluable, treasure chests not only of pristine beauty of untouched nature and its multitude of resources, but also the safe-keepers of a living cultural-historical heritage, passed on for generations. Cultural heritage refers to both tangible and intangible forms of culture. The tangible forms of cultural heritage are the material results of human activities such as architecture, land alterations, and tools produced by past cultures and civilizations. The intangible forms of the cultural heritage include the practices, folklore, expressions, traditional knowledge, skills, as well as the instruments, artifacts and cultural spaces associated there within. Intangible cultural heritage, passed on from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Among traditional knowledge, practices of agriculture, forestry, fishing, popular medicine, common law, cultural values, and proverbs, many others can be included.

One significant part of tangible heritage from Montenegro has only very recently been inscribed in the list of UNESCO World Cultural Heritage. At its 40<sup>th</sup> session, held on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Istanbul, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee decided to add *stećci*, medieval tombstones and graveyards found on the territory of present day Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, on the World Heritage List. They were listed alongside such exceptional sites as Ani, eastern Turkey, the old medieval capital of the Armenian Bagratid dynasty and the ancient Hellenistic and later Roman city of Philippi in which the apostle Paul preached Christianity in the I century AD.

Two of the three inscribed localities of *stećci* from Montenegro are situated on Durmitor, near Žabljak — Grčko groblje in Novakovići and Bare Žugića. In spite of their primary funerary function and name, these and many other similar priceless examples of cultural-historical heritage of mountain areas in Montenegro and across the region of the Balkans and southeastern Europe speak, in fact, more of a continuity of life and living, of indigenous and specific cultural practices, systems of beliefs, values and an incessantly living cultural tradition which is the true force behind the possibility of achieving sustainable development in any environment.

For the reader, the term *stećak* may be confusing. On the one hand, until recently and in some cases still, in academic historiography as well as in broader public discourse, it is identified with a type of stone funerary monument, primarily in the form of a monolithic pseudosarcophagus with the top carved in the form of a two slope roof, from the territory of the Bosnian medieval state. What's more, within the said spatial and historical determinants, the term *stećak* is mostly associated with members of the so-called Bosnian church, i. e. with Bogumils and adherents of dualistic, heretical teachings.

However, in over a quarter of a century of my research dedicated to the different aspects of this element of tangible cultural heritage and in the studies published on the subject of what Aaron Gurevich has named the popular culture of

the Middle Ages, I have and still do stand by a broader outlook on and definition of these outstanding examples of a practically all but forgotten heritage of ancient tombstones and graveyards. Seen from that point, the word *stećak* is used to refer to all types of monolithic stone funerary monuments of various shapes (recumbent, vertical and composite ensembles made of several gravestones of both previously listed types) found throughout the Balkans and in the eastern Danube region and dating from the medieval and early modern period (they can be reliably dated to the period from the end of the XIII to the end of the XVII century). Monuments of the same type, made of the same material and sharing the same repertoire of motifs, were carved across this wide region through the centuries of changing states and empires and were used to mark the graves of members of the Christian communities, both Catholic and Orthodox, as well as those of the Bogumil heretics. What's more, throughout this region, gravestones of the same type were used also as funerary monuments for those of the Islamic and Jewish Sephardic communities, as exemplified by the old Jewish cemetery in Niš. *Stećci* were raised over the graves of members of all strata of society, from the nobility to the peasants. Some bear inscriptions although most are anepigraphic.

Monument of this sort were primarily created for the needs patriarchal, rural environments and under the influence of an archaic spirituality in which millennia old ancient beliefs and elements of ancestor cult rituals became entwined with the later adopted monotheistic, in this region predominantly Christian beliefs and rituals. The archetypal and allegorical nature of their forms and of the iconography of the motifs they bear opens a variety of different interpretations, both at the level of learned as well as at the level of instinctual reception. In countless variations, on *stećci* we find an inexorable wealth of motifs — geometric, solar, astral, vegetative, animal and anthropomorphic — which essentially function as metaphorical portraits of the deceased in their posthumous, otherworldly existence and express the hope of their still living relations, one who actually raised these monuments, in salvation and peace of the soul in the eternal peace of the eschatological kingdom.

The timeless and unchanging, archaic concepts of death and popular beliefs concerning the destiny of the soul upon its departure from this world which lie at the source of popular funerary art are reflected already in the choice of material for the production of the monuments in question. Considering the animistic qualities ascribed to it, stone is the true final domicile of the soul. Seen as a virtual substitute of the deceased among the living, funerary monuments made of stone served as a medium in the process of constant communication with the souls of the deceased ancestors and the demons of the netherworld. Still, no matter how deeply grounded in timeless, archaic concepts, the sculpted shapes and repertoire of motifs represented on *stećci* communicate closely and reflect, in the sphere of popular culture and artistic production of the predominantly rural milieu of their making and employ, the models found in their immediate surroundings and in more-less contemporary times.

As holy and tabooed places, graveyards and funerary monuments held a special place and played an exceptionally important role in the life of the patriarchal rural community of the medieval and early modern period. Certain rituals pertaining

to agrarian magic were performed there, primarily those related to preventing drought. The grave, the funerary monument and often the entire graveyard, as a substitute of the ancient pre-Christian idol, played the role of border marker or milestone which marked and protected the limits of the rural community. Graveyards were places where the community congregated, where judging was done in the presence of the stones as final domiciles of the souls of the ancestors. Games and competitions were held there — first as part of the funerary rituals and later, as they had lost their cultic meaning, as part of the popular folk tradition.

By their characteristics, old graveyards and graveyard churches which were often constructed out of ancient tombstones imbued, according to popular belief and tradition, with protective and healing power, played a unique role in the life of patriarchal rural communities, one of cultic place of incomparable significance for securing both the material prosperity and the spiritual identity of the people. As the ultimate resting places of the souls of the ancestors, in the eyes of the common folk, they vouched for their physical and spiritual survival. The custom of lighting candles on days commemorating the dead and other Christian holidays at these places has survived to this day. The rustic mass of these ancient tombstones emanates even now a robust strength and vitality. The “fierce stone” holds the spark and the essence of popular religious spirit, grounded on the ancestor cult which has, in time, been integrated into Christian ethical norms and beliefs, and a traditional way of life in which man is one with his environment. This was the foundation of spiritual and material perseverance in times past and still is the true basis of sustainable development of any and in particular rural mountain areas.

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KULTURNO-ISTORIJSKO NASLJEĐE — KLJUČ ZA ODRŽIVI  
RAZVOJ PLANINSKIH PODRUČJA

*Rezime*

Značajan dio kulturnog nasljeđa iz Crne Gore, stećaka, srednjovjekovnih nadgrobnih spomenika i groblja nedavno je upisan u listu svjetske kulturne baštine UNESCO-a. Dva od tri upisana lokaliteta stećaka iz Crne Gore nalaze se na Durmitoru, kod Žabljaka — Grčko groblje u Novakovićima i Bare Žugića. Uprkos njihovoj primarni pogrebnoj funkciji i imenu, ovi i mnogi drugi slični neprocjenjivi primjeri kulturno-istorijskog nasljeđa planinskih područja u Crnoj Gori i regionu Balkana i jugoistočne Evrope govorili su, zapravo, više o kontinuitetu života i življenju, o autohtonim i specifičnim kulturnim praksama, sistemu vjerovanja, vrijednostima i neprestano živom kulturnoj tradiciji, što je pravi pokretač koji stoji iza mogućnosti postizanja održivog razvoja u bilo kojoj sredini.

Ključne reči: *Stećci, kulturno-istorijsko nasleđe, Balkan, planinska područja, održivi razvoj*