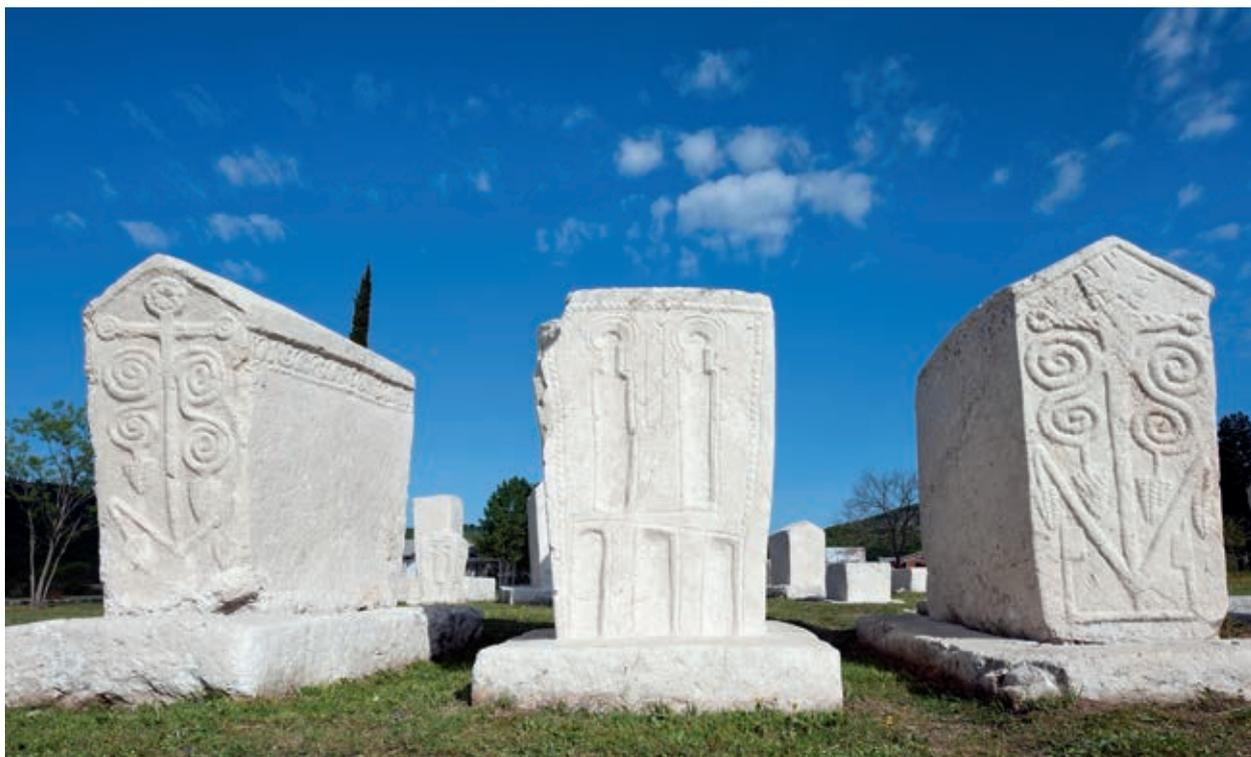


# STEĆCI

## BOSNIA'S MEDIAEVAL TOMBSTONES



by Rudolf Abraham

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The necropolis at Boljuni is a lush carpet of yellow, blue and mauve. The uncut grass and wildflowers are overhung in places with the low branches of trees laden with blossom. The air in this quiet valley in southern Herzegovina is filled with the soft hum of bees.

The village of Boljuni, and even more so Radimlja a few kilometres away to the north, are among the best sites in the Balkan region for learning about stećci. These are distinctive, mediaeval

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE:** Stećci are distinctive mediaeval tombstones found in Bosnia & Herzegovina. These examples are at Radimlja (both photos by Rudolf Abraham).

tombstones, mostly from the 14th or 15th centuries, though some may date back as far as the 12th century.

Stećci of various kinds are found throughout the lands of the former Kingdom of Bosnia, which reached its maximum extent under King Tvrtko I in the late 14th century. That kingdom extended south to the Bay of Kotor, west to the Adriatic coast at Šibenik and well east of the River Drina into modern-day Serbia. Stećci are thus a feature of the cultural landscapes of Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and — above all — Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*What I see in a stećak is not the same as others might see... The stećci are stones, but they are also words; they are worldly but also heavenly; matter but also spirit; a scream but also a song; death and yet also life; the past and also the future.*

*The Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar (1917–1971) on the mediaeval tombstones (stećci) of his homeland*

These enigmatic tombstones come in various shapes. There are horizontal monoliths, commonly shaped like chests, while others are gable-roofed sarcophagi. Yet others are more simple slabs or upright stelae or pillars, with the occasional massive cross or other form. Often carved in bas-relief with a plethora of decoration, and with epitaphs or gnomic inscriptions recorded in the Bosnian Cyrillic alphabet, they are one of the region's most distinctive art forms from the mediaeval or indeed *any* other historical period.

These ambassadors of history have powerfully influenced the Balkan imagination — most particularly in modern Bosnia and Herzegovina, where literature and art from recent decades have often been inspired by or alluded to these silent sleepers which grace the landscapes of the region (see box on page 35).

#### ENCOUNTERS WITH HISTORY

The stećci are a puzzle which invites us to rethink the relationship between history and the present. But it is in the nature of riddles that they do not admit of any easy solution — as the quote from Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar above shows. So these peculiar tombstones are a respite from the contested geographies of identity which are all too prevalent in modern Bosnia and which were rehearsed in issue 43 of *hidden europe* magazine.

The decoration on stećci is frequently astonishing — stylized floral motifs, spirals and crosses, fleurs-de-lis and bunches of grapes alternate with more ancient symbols including stars, suns and crescent moons. Look more closely and you'll find arcades, stylized anchors, swords, shields and bow-and-arrow motifs interspersed

with animals, battles, scenes of hunting and dancing. Especially distinctive are the large human figures, often described as 'ducal' — somewhat top-heavy, dressed in tunics, with (usually) one arm raised, palm open. Fascinating things.

The word stećci (the plural of stećak) probably derives from the old word *stojeći* from the verb to stand, *stajati* — meaning literally 'standing things'. In Boljuni and Radimlja, as more widely in that part of Herzegovina, the local villagers call



them Grčke ploče — ‘Greek stones’, though of course they’re not actually Greek.

There are some 60,000 or more of these monumental tombstones scattered across the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with several thousand more in neighbouring countries. They were known for many years as Bogomil tombstones, in the belief that they marked the graves of adherents of the Bogomil faith, to which the mediaeval Bosnian Church was thought to belong. This dissident strand of Christianity was dismissed as heretical by both the mainstream Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

The notion that the stećci can be universally linked to the Bogomil tradition in the Balkans has long since been picked apart: the foundations of churches have been found at many of the sites, and inscriptions and decoration on stećci often include the motif of a cross. The Bogomils eschewed the cross and did not build churches. Instead, stećci appear to have belonged to Catholic, Orthodox and Bosnian Church traditions alike.

Boljuni lies a few kilometres south-west of Stolac, in the rocky karst landscape of rural Herzegovina. There are two groups of stećci here — named, with archaeological precision, Boljuni I and Boljuni II. The stone surfaces are coated with a faint patina of lichen. At the top of the slope of the first, upper group stands a large, slightly lopsided stone cross with an inscription

on one face. This cross marks the grave of Vlatko Vuković, a leading duke during the reign of Tvrtko I, King of mediaeval Bosnia. Vuković was present at (and survived) the Battle of Kosovo on St Vitus’ Day in 1389 — a battle during which the combined forces of the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian

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nobility were decimated, and the victorious Ottoman sultan was slain by a prisoner, stabbed in the heart with his own dagger. St Vitus’ Day has since been elevated to the status of national myth.

Walking back uphill alongside Boljuni II, we pass a stećak with the relief of a lion battling a dragon — defaced, unfortunately, by someone having filled the cavities of its inscription in black

— and the fat, serpentine body of a glass lizard slithers across our path, before burying itself in the nearby grass verge.

### THE STEĆCI COMPLEX AT RADIMLJA

I arrive at Radimlja under a clear blue sky, its 133 stećci surprisingly bright and white-looking in the early morning sun — they were cleaned only

a couple of years ago, I later learn. A shepherd leaves his flock temporarily to offer to sell me a souvenir, a small carved stone replica of one of the most famous stećci here, that of a man with his right arm raised. Times are hard, he says; he has not been paid for several months.

A road now divides Radimlja in two, routed unforgivingly through the necropolis in the 19th century by the region’s then Austrian rulers. Over the following years, some of the older villagers were recorded as saying they remember there being stećci where the road is now. Whether these now lie



LEFT: Stećci complex at the necropolis in Boljuni near Stolac (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

RIGHT: Our map shows the principal places mentioned in the text. Some major towns have been included for reference.

under the road, or were carted off to be used in the foundations of some building or another, no one knows — that has certainly been the fate of some stećci, which like any ancient monuments provided excellent building material ripe for plunder over the centuries — several were discovered in foundations of a mosque in Bijeljina, for example.

Ante Vujnović, a young Bosnian Croat from Stolac, gestures towards a low hill on the opposite side of the road. Epitaphs show that Radimlja was the graveyard of powerful local rulers, the Orthodox Miloradović family, and that, he explains, is where they lived. Ante works with a local agency formed recently to better protect and promote these monuments. They plan to put a new fence up around the necropolis, to protect the stećci and to ensure a small entry fee is paid. The number of visitors coming to see Radimlja and Boljuni has increased over the past couple of years, he tells me positively.

As might be expected, the more elaborately decorated the stećci, the wealthier and more powerful the people whose graves they mark — and the decoration at Radimlja is indeed elaborate. It is also widespread — almost half of



the tombstones here are decorated — including several ‘ducal’ figures, one of them with both arms raised, and flanked by two children. At Radimlja as at Boljuni, the names of scribes and stonemasons are sometimes included on the stones.

While Radimlja and Boljuni might be two of the richest, most extensive and best-known stećak sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the tombs are scattered across much of the country, with different areas being marked by their own characteristic styles of stone and decoration. Other prominent sites include Kalufi (the largest stećak necropolis in Bosnia and Herzegovina with some 462 tombstones, near Nevesinje), Biskup (near Konjic), and Donja Zgošća (near Kakanj).

## STONE SLEEPER: THE POETRY OF MAK DIZDAR

The poetry of Mehmedalija Dizdar (1917–1971) is one of the cornerstones of modern Bosnian literature. The poet is also known simply as Mak Dizdar. In the closing years of his life, Dizdar emerged as one of the most successful Yugoslav poets of his generation. Over the last decade, his poetry has become a unifying force in a still-divided country.

Dizdar was born in Stolac in southern Herzegovina, a region which has a very fine array of stećci.

The distinctive tombstones inflect much of Dizdar’s verse, which often appeals to Bosnians to set aside their differences and embrace cultural diversity, finding unity in the pluralistic sacred landscapes of their homeland. Dizdar’s most celebrated work is his collection *Kameni spavač* (Stone Sleeper), written in the last decade of his life. There is an excellent English translation by Francis Jones. It was published as *Stone Sleeper* by Anvil Press in 2009.

## WORLD HERITAGE BID

Four countries from former Yugoslavia have been cooperating in a joint bid to UNESCO to have stećak sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. A provisional list of 30 sites is included in the draft application, of which the majority (22) are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including Radimlja and Boljuni. Twelve of these proposed Bosnia & Herzegovina sites are in the Bosniak-Croat Federation and ten in the Republika Srpska. The process of developing the application has thus itself been a good example of communities bridging traditional divides. This applies within Bosnia itself, but also in the collaboration between Bosnia and its neighbours. If accepted, it would be the first instance of any of the four applicant nations being party to a successful World Heritage bid that transcends their national borders.

### STEĆCI IN NORTHERN BOSNIA

Driving south from Banja Luka, the main road takes a spectacular route through the gorge of the River Vrbas, the strip of asphalt following the course of an earlier packhorse track, hacked through the rock during the late 19th century at the order of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I — at the price of one kilo of gold for every kilo of rock cleared, it is said. Veils of thin early morning mist lift from the water, and a series of spotlights are bolted to the steep rock faces above the river's edge, marking the course of a popular night river-rafting route.

We turn left several kilometres north of the former royal Bosnian town of Jajce, winding up the side of the valley to reach the two halves of the village of Baljvine. Baljvine has a nice historical twist to it: during the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, and in previous conflicts, the villagers of two differing faiths protected each other by preventing troops from their own respective groups from

We descend into cool deciduous woodland to find a group of three large stećci standing among the trees, with more, smaller tombstones scattered down the hillside, their forms soft and indistinct among the fallen leaves and creepers.

entering the village. As good a testament as any to the continued survival of this spirit, the two parts of the village still have a single, shared school.

We are met in the Serbian half of the village by Radoslav Vučenović, who leads us further along the dirt road in his faded blue car, before parking at the unmarked entrance to a slightly overgrown path. We follow this, then descend into cool deciduous woodland to find a group of three large, prominent stećci standing among

the trees, with more, smaller tombstones scattered down the hillside, their forms soft and indistinct among the fallen leaves and creepers. Unusually, and quite inexplicably, one of the three large stećci is decorated on one side with the faint, weatherworn outline of an elephant. No one has yet been able to explain its presence on the side of a mediaeval tombstone in northern Bosnia. Perhaps these stećci belonged to a family of merchants — but as with so many things about these stones, no one really knows.

Down in the Muslim half of the village we park in an open, gently sloping field, where a single lone stećak stands surrounded by a low, rusting blue fence. One of its sides is decorated with a large crescent moon. A villager in overalls

LEFT: A stećak in the village of Baljvine, between Banja Luka and Jajce, Bosnia & Herzegovina (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



RIGHT: A stećak in the Muslim half of the village of Baljvine showing a large crescent moon (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



and an old baseball cap walks slowly down through the field towards me, curious to see what I'm up to, and to ask whether I've seen the others up in the forest yet. "One of those has an elephant carved on it," he comments, raising his eyebrows for emphasis. Then, turning away and walking uphill he waves and adds, with a good-humoured shrug, "Samo Bog zna odakle je ovaj" — God only knows where that one came from. ■

London-based travel writer and photographer Rudolf Abraham is a regular contributor to *hidden europe*. Rudolf's many travel books include 'The Mountains of Montenegro' (Cicerone), 'Istria' (Bradt) and 'Croatia' (National Geographic). Find out more about his work at [www.rudolfabraham.co.uk](http://www.rudolfabraham.co.uk).

## STEĆCI EXPLORATIONS

Readers interested in visiting the sites mentioned in this article could do so relatively easily in a two or three-day drive through Bosnia and Herzegovina, starting at Banja Luka and ending in Mostar or Dubrovnik. Banja Luka and Mostar are both accessible by train and each city has an airport with a handful of scheduled flights. Dubrovnik (across Bosnia's southern border in Croatia) has a much wider choice of flights.

You may want to seek the help of local agencies to visit some of the stećci complexes. Zepter Passport ([www.zepterpassportflyfishing.com](http://www.zepterpassportflyfishing.com)), based in Banja Luka, is an extremely helpful tour operator. The company will gladly escort readers to stećci sites in and around the Vrbas Valley and more widely across Bosnia. Ante Vujnović in Stolac is happy to assist in visits to Boljuni and Radimlja (for details see [www.agencija-radimlja.com](http://www.agencija-radimlja.com)).

Boljuni I is on public land, but Boljuni II is on private land and is fenced off, though the stećci are still clearly visible from outside the fence — you are advised not to enter the cemetery itself, since the owner doesn't allow visitors.