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# Invisibility and Presence in the *stećak* Stones of Medieval Bosnia: Sacred Meanings of Tombstone Carvings

## 1 Introduction: Situating the *stećak* Stones

‘Stećak’ (pronounced *steh-tchak*, meaning ‘standing stone’ in Bosnian) is the term most commonly used to designate a type or, more precisely, several morphologically distinct, but stylistically closely interrelated types of monumental, monolithic tombstones found on the territory of modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina and its adjacent regions in Croatia (Dalmatia), western Serbia and Montenegro. The roughly 70,000 surviving *stećak* stones appear in several basic forms: as horizontal slabs, pillars, rectangular blocks, house-shaped monoliths and monumental crosses.<sup>1</sup> Although there are some isolated, individual *stećak* stones, they usually appear in necropolises consisting of up to several hundred stones (Fig. 1). While two examples of the *stećak* stones have been dated to the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>2</sup> the overwhelming majority of the firmly dated stones were erected in the late 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>3</sup> Around 30% of the *stećak* stones are decorated with bas-reliefs of predominantly low technical sophistication, yet striking primordial beauty, ranging from single symbols such as crosses, crescents and rosettes, to relatively rich composi-

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1 To these we may add several examples of chairs hewn in living rock that did not serve as tombstones.

2 These are the tombs of *župan* (a Slavic political and military title roughly corresponding to prince) Grd (died around 1180) from Police near Trebinje and “servant of God Mary, called Divica” (raba božija Marija, a zovom Divica) from 1231, found in Vidoštak near Stolac. The most reliable anthology of *stećak* inscriptions remains Vego 1962–1964.

3 However, in the absence of large-scale systematic archeological excavations, the dating can only remain provisional, based as it is on nothing more but the indirect information provided on some of the rare inscriptions found on roughly 200 of the stones. For example, the inscription on the so-called Kočerín stone (found in the village of Kočerín close to the town of Široki Brijeg in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina) reads: +VA IME OCA I / SINA I SVET[a]GO / D[u]HA AMINъ. SE / LEŽI VIGANъ / MILOŠEVIĆъ. / SLUŽI BANU S / TIPANU, I KRALJU TV / [r]t]KU, I KRALJU DABI / ŠI, I KRALJICI GRUBI / I KRALJA OSTOJU. I U T / O VRIME DOJDE I / SVADI SE OSTOJA / KRALъ S HERCEGOMъ / I Z BOSN[o] Mъ I NA UGRE / POJE OSTOJA. TO V / RIME MENE VIGNA / DOJDE KONъČINA / I LEGOHъ NA SVO / Mъ PLEMENITOMъ / PODъ KOČERINOMъ, / I MOLJU VASъ, NE NAST / UPAJTE NA ME! JA S[a]Mъ / BILъ KAKO VI JESTE, / VI ČETE BITI KAKO / JESAMъ JA. (Transliteration by Vego, Vego I 1962, 13). As the inscription mentions the service Vigan provided to a series of Bosnian rulers (ban Stjepan, king Tvrtko, king Dabiša, queen Gruba, king Ostoja), it can be concluded that he lived at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

tions displaying jousting, hunting scenes and circle dances (Fig. 2). It is this imagery engraved on the *stećak* stones that forms the primary object of analysis of this paper.

The timeframe in which their production began and ended, their geographical distribution, as well as, in some cases, the content of their inscriptions—all point towards one primary geo-historical context in which the *stećak* stones and their imagery are to be interpreted: the medieval Bosnian state.<sup>4</sup> First mentioned in the 10<sup>th</sup> century as a small region of unclear political status centred north of modern-day Sarajevo, by the late 12<sup>th</sup> century Bosnia emerges as a relatively autonomous *banate* under the nominal suzerainty of the Hungarian kingdom, signing trade agreements with the city-state of Dubrovnik. After a turbulent 13<sup>th</sup> century marked by repeated Hungarian invasions and frequent changes of rulers, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Bosnia develops into an independent kingdom, incorporating modern-day Herzegovina, most of Dalmatia and parts of Serbia into its territories. Although surviving as a kingdom, over the following century Bosnia gradually loses its power, only to disappear with its conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The borders of the Bosnian kingdom in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of its greatest extent, almost perfectly align with the boundaries of the territories on which the *stećak* stones can be found, thus suggesting a close connection between its political formation and the appearance of an original sepulchral culture (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

The establishment of a general framework for the study of the *stećak* imagery is complicated by the complex religious make-up of the medieval Bosnian state. While Bosnia's neighbouring states, Croatia and Serbia, to both of which Bosnia's ethnic, cultural and political history is inextricably tied, were firmly incorporated into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy respectively, in the medieval period Bosnia produced its own distinct branch of Christianity known as the Bosnian Church, whose religious teaching remains heavily disputed among religious historians.<sup>6</sup> While numerous Western European heresiological sources, as well as some documents written by Serbian Orthodox Christians, classify the Bosnian Christians as dualists<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> For a reliable overview of the history of medieval Bosnia, see Malcolm 1994.

<sup>5</sup> The question of the links between the *stećak* culture and the medieval Bosnian state remains disputed. Thus, for example, the Nomination file for the inscription of the *stećak* stones on the UNESCO World Heritage List, jointly submitted by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, refers to the *stećak* stones as “a unique product of the historical context and events that characterized medieval South East Europe”, listing medieval Bosnia as only one of the regional political formations that contributed to their appearance and development (UNESCO 2016, 220). For a detailed discussion of the shortcomings of the UNESCO nomination file, see Dizdar 2017 (in Bosnian).

<sup>6</sup> Although I do not share all of its conclusions, the most important book written about the Bosnian Christians in non-local languages remains Fine 1975. For a classic ‘heretical’ interpretation of the Bosnian Church (in Croatian), see Mandić 1962. A very useful recent analysis of the political role of the Bosnian Church is provided in Čošković 2005 (in Croatian).

<sup>7</sup> Dualism is a term used to designate religious teachings according to which there is not one, but two gods, the second one usually being considered as the demiurge, i.e. creator of the material world.



Fig. 1: A typical *stećak* necropolis, Boljuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo by Sanja Vrzić

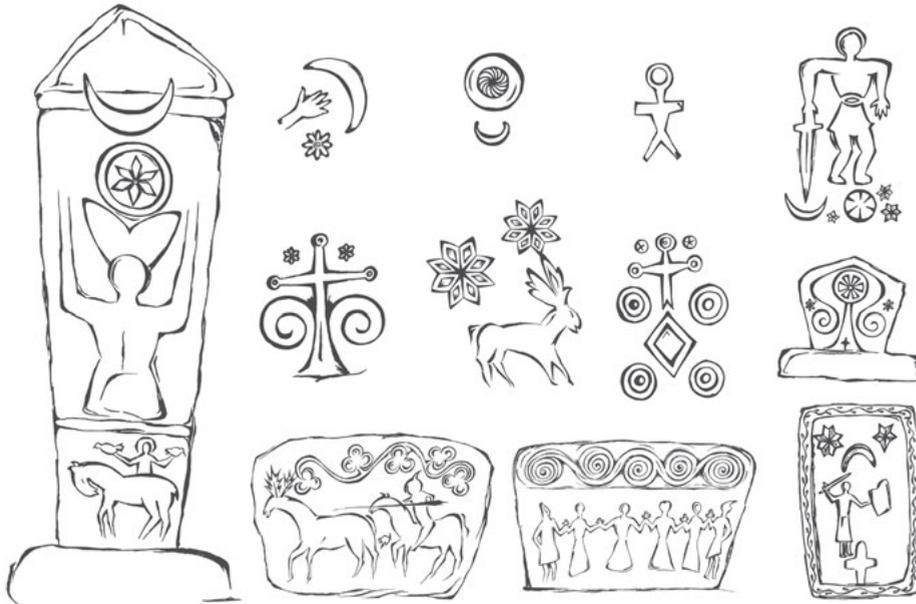
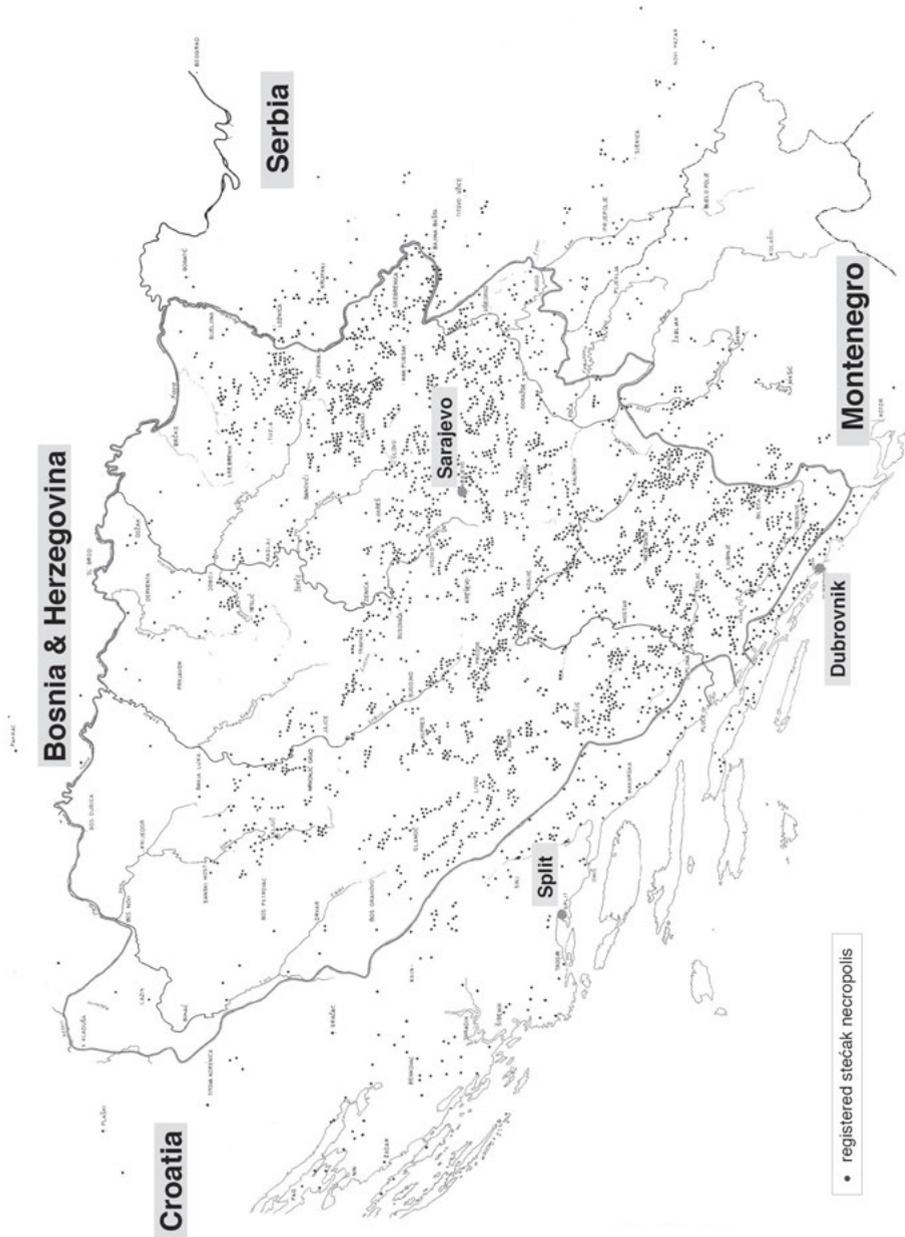


Fig. 2: Some motifs engraved on *stećak* stones, drawings by Rudolf Kutzli



**Fig. 3:** Distribution of *stećak* necropolises, with contemporary borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, source: Bešliagić 1982

describing them as *heretics*, *Patarens* or *Manichaeans*<sup>8</sup>, there is nothing in the documents written by Bosnian Christians themselves confirming these allegations, while some of their testimonies strongly suggest that they did not share at least some of the beliefs usually ascribed to medieval “dualist heretics”<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, despite the existence of the Bosnian Church, throughout the medieval period, and particularly from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the time in which the majority of the *stećak* stones were erected, there were significant numbers of Catholics and Orthodox Christians in medieval Bosnia.<sup>10</sup> Thus the culture of the *stećak*, and, by implication, the nature of its imagery, cannot be simply and uncritically ascribed to the allegedly ‘dualistic’ theology of the Bosnian Church, as it is still often done, particularly in popular literature on the topic.

The scholarship produced on the topic of the *stećak* and its imagery can be roughly divided into two opposed camps. On the one hand, there is a series of publications written in the 1950s and 1960s by scholars associated with official Yugoslav research institutes, most notably the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, such as Šefik Bešliagić, Marko Vego and Alojz Benac.<sup>11</sup> While a more detailed analysis of their work remains beyond the scope of this paper, it can be said that on the whole, they were strongly opposed to any association of the *stećak* and its imagery and the presumed theology of the Bosnian Church. Instead, these scholars insisted that the *stećak* stones were used by all three denominational groups existing in Bosnia at the time (Catholic, Orthodox and Bosnian Christians). Faced by the idiosyncratic nature of the art of the *stećak*, these scholars were prone to arguing in favour of an exclusively secular meaning of many motifs, ascribing some to unspecified ‘pagan survivals’ and viewing others as simple decorations whose symbolic significance has been ‘forgotten’.<sup>12</sup>

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**8** A direct link between the Manichaeans of late antiquity and medieval Christian dualist heretics is rejected by the majority of contemporary scholars. However, most medieval observers of dualist heretics considered their teachings to be of ultimately Manichaean origin, having been absorbed and transmitted to Europe by the Paulicians of eastern Anatolia. This association was so strong that, throughout Europe, the presumed dualists were routinely referred to as Manichaeans. For an extensive selection of Western medieval sources on heresy in English translation, see Wakefield/Evans 1951.

**9** The word ‘heretic’ is a derogatory term implying the existence of only one right or true form of religious belief from which the person to whom the term is ascribed allegedly deviates. I do not endorse this view and thus use the word ‘heretic’ only in a relative sense, i.e. in the sense of ‘those persons regarded heretical by the Catholic/Orthodox churches’. The term ‘dualist’ is equally problematic, and is used here only due to its continuing prevalence in the relevant scholarship.

**10** The controversial question of the relative size of the individual churches remains beyond the scope of this paper. The attested willingness of ‘dualist heretics’ to conceal their beliefs behind an orthodox facade further complicates this question.

**11** For a synthetic overview of the opinions of this ‘school’, see Bešliagić 1982. The most significant publications were monographs devoted to individual necropoles, such as Vego 1954 and Benac 1951.

**12** Thus, for example, in his discussion of the spiral motif in the Olovo area, Benac argues that “ako je taj motiv na stećcima olovskog kraja zbilja često upotrebljen, on ipak ovdje nema nekadašnje sim-

The second camp was established by the historian Aleksandar Solovjev, who produced a series of publications over the same time period, persuasively arguing in favour of the ‘heretical’, ultimately Manichaeic<sup>13</sup> origin of the *stećak* iconography.<sup>14</sup> While Solovjev’s work has not gained wide acceptance in former Yugoslav scholarly circles, a number of his publications written in French and German have been relatively influential in the (admittedly rather limited) international reception of the art of the *stećak* (and the Bosnian Church in general).<sup>15</sup> Solovjev’s approach was continued and expanded on by two scholars writing in German in the 1970s, the Swiss art historian Rudolf Kutzli and the German theologian Georg Wild.<sup>16</sup> The main tenet of this tradition of *stećak* scholarship is the claim that the iconography of the *stećak* stones is either esoteric or at least highly symbolic—certainly not secular and naturalistic—finding its origins primarily in the teachings of the Bosnian Church and its links with older heterodox Christian movements.

## 2 Towards a Definition of Artistic Sense in a Christian Context

What I want to argue in this paper is that the seemingly unsurmountable opposition between the two camps can be (at least partially) overcome by reformulating the question, or the basic terms of the problem. As a methodological starting point, I will adopt (and adapt) the principle formulated by Markus Hilgert in reference to texts: “Sinn ist keine ‘natürliche’ Eigenschaft des Geschriebenen wie etwa die physikalische Massendichte des Materials, durch das es artefaktisch gespeichert ist,” but rather, as he continues quoting the cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, “[sind] die

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boličko značenje, nego je samo mehanički prenos jednog prastarog ornamenta koji je već davno izgubio svoje prvobitno značenje” (“although this motif is frequently used in the *stećak* stones of the Olovo area, it nevertheless does not have its former symbolic meaning, but is just a mechanical transfer of an ancient motif that has lost its original meaning a long time ago”, translation mine) (Benac 1951, 53).

**13** In accordance with medieval sources, Solovjev assumed the existence of direct links between the Middle-Eastern Manichaeans of late Antiquity, the early medieval Paulicians of eastern Anatolia/historic Armenia, the medieval Byzantine and Balkan Bogomils and, from there, the Bosnian Church and, further, the Patarens of the Italian peninsula and the Cathars of the Languedoc. Opponents of this view argue that medieval heresiologists simply applied labels familiar from ancient Greek and Latin sources to religious movements whose teachings they either misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented.

**14** An association of the *stećak* stones and the Bogomils had originally been proposed by the famous British archeologist Arthur J. Evans, who had, as a young man, traversed Bosnia and Herzegovina on foot, just prior to its annexation by the Habsburg Empire (Evans 1877).

**15** See Solovjev 1948 and Solovjev 1959.

**16** See Kutzli 1977 and Wild 1970.

Bedeutungen von Texten Produkte von Sinnzuschreibungen ihrer Rezipienten [...], mithin ein Ergebnis sozialer Rezeptionspraktiken, einer Rezeption auf der Grundlage von routinisierten Sinnzuschreibungen und geteilten Sinnmustern – in deren Variabilität wurzelt die Variabilität des Textsinns”.<sup>17</sup> Applied to the problem of the iconography of the *stećak* stones, this principle leads to the first, foundational argument of this paper: the sense of the imagery is not to be conceived of as its unchanging physical property, but rather as a result of an interaction between the object and its observer. Thus, the imagery *does not necessarily have only one meaning or sense*. This conclusion allows for the formulation of the basic hypothesis of this paper: the different meanings ascribed to the *stećak* imagery by scholars of the previously discussed opposed camps do not necessarily exclude each other. On the contrary, they should be conceived of as complementary, reflecting the existence of different reception practices in medieval Bosnia.

Having established the existence of different reception practices as a methodological principle, however, we are faced by the fundamental problem of a complete lack of *meta-texts* that would reveal anything specific about the way the *stećak* stones and their imagery were perceived by their contemporary observers. In the absence of appropriate meta-texts, a relatively firm basis for further argumentation is provided by the material characteristics of the *stećak*: it is, first of all, a tombstone, and thus intimately related to its creators’ and observers’ perceptions of death and the afterlife. While anthropological studies have shown that emotions surrounding death and burial rituals cannot be assumed to be universal,<sup>18</sup> one characteristic encountered in virtually all cultures around the world is the existence of a *liminal* phase affecting wider society following the death of one of its members. In this phase, ritual acts and behaviours tend to gain additional and distinct levels of significance.<sup>19</sup> Following this insight, the symbols and compositions of the *stećak* stones should be seen in relation to complex liminal psycho-social processes, rather than simple illustrations of the deceased individual’s lifetime achievements or hopes for the afterlife.

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17 Hilgert 2010, 89-90. “Sense is no ‘natural’ property like, for example, the physical mass density of materials”; “the meanings of texts are products of sense ascriptions by their recipients (...), a result of social reception practices, a reception on the basis of routinized sense ascriptions and shared sense patterns - their variability forms the root of the variability of textual sense” (translation mine).

18 Metcalfe/Huntington 1991, 44.

19 Thus, for example, the funerals of the Nyakysa of eastern Africa are characterized by the performance of traditional war dances. What is particularly interesting is the explanation of this dance provided by its participants: “This war dance is mourning, we are mourning the dead man. We dance because there is a war in our hearts – a passion of grief and fear exasperates us... A kinsman when he dances he assuages his passionate grief; he goes into the house to weep and then he comes out and dances the war dance; his passionate grief is made tolerable in the dance [literally, ‘he is able to endure it there, in the dance’], it binds his heart and the dance assuages it” (Metcalfe/Huntington 1991, 56). Thus the meaning of the burial dance is much more complex than what a simple observation would reveal, involving a dynamic interaction between personal emotions and social customs.

Furthermore, based on our knowledge of medieval Bosnia and the wider region in general, the nature of the rare identified inscriptions, as well as the very frequent presence of the cross among the engravings, the art of the *stećak* can be ascribed to a broadly understood *Christian* context (which does not exclude the possibility of its ultimately pagan/pre-Christian origin), meaning that tombstones and burial sites were almost certainly associated with the sacred.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that prior to the development of church buildings, Christians celebrated their services in cemeteries.<sup>21</sup> In order to identify the medieval observers' possible reception practices of material artefacts that were likely to have been associated with the sacred, it is thus necessary to look into the ways in which 'art' or visual forms in general were perceived within the Christian *oikumene*.

The most obvious starting point is a series of theological justifications of art rooted in the long-standing dispute over the legitimacy of religious imagery in Christianity, ultimately reaching back to the period of Byzantine iconomachy. Western medieval theologians most frequently provided three basic arguments in favour of the existence of religious art, such as in this example by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan Bonaventura:

In fact [images] were introduced for a triple reason, namely, because of the ignorance of humble people, so that they who cannot read the scriptures can read the sacraments of our faith in sculptures and paintings just as one would more manifestly in writings. They are likewise introduced because of the sluggishness of feelings, namely so that men who are not stimulated to devotion by the things that Christ did for us when they hear about them are excited at once when they become aware of the same things in statues and pictures, as if present to the body's eyes. Our feeling is more excited by things it sees than by things it hears... because of the unreliability of memory, in that things that are only heard fade into oblivion more easily than those that are seen.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the three reasons for the existence of images Bonaventura lists are their ability to teach 'humble' (i.e. illiterate) people, their emotional effect and their role in aiding in the process of memorization.

However, even a basic familiarity with the iconography of the *stećak* stones reveals that either Bonaventura's theory of the religious function of art is not the appropriate theoretical framework for its understanding, or, alternatively, that it reflects a set of beliefs that is very different from those we usually associate with medieval European Christianity, either of the Catholic or of the Orthodox kind. Most importantly, there is

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<sup>20</sup> The historian Charles Freeman quotes the following words of the early Christian martyr Eusebius: "The bones of a martyr are more precious than stones of great price, more splendid than gold" (Freeman 2011, 214).

<sup>21</sup> Freeman notes that the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman Emperor Valerian "ordered that no Christian services be held and that Christian cemeteries where worship took place be seized" (Freeman 2011, 211).

<sup>22</sup> Hamburger 2006, 15.

virtually nothing in the carvings of the *stećak* that could be interpreted as an illustration of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, such as, for example, the Virgin Mary and Jesus, the Crucifixion, or any biblical events. Furthermore, the purpose of the carvings does not appear to be a direct arousal of pious emotions, and particularly not the representation of the deeds of Christ, as Christ (at least in his human, visible form) is completely absent from them.<sup>23</sup> Finally, it is rather difficult to judge whether one of the functions of the images was to aid believers in the process of memorization. In order to provide an answer to this question, it is necessary to know what they represented in the first place, and whether this subject matter was something deemed worthy of remembrance.

Without explicitly addressing that question, Aleksandar Solovjev assumed that, in accordance with Bonaventura's theory, the *stećak* carvings do indeed represent the 'sacraments' of the Christian faith, but a Christian faith understood in a neo-Manichaean manner.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for example, he provided a credible explanation for the very frequent presence of the crescent,<sup>25</sup> whose number of occurrences on the *stećak* stones is second only to that of the cross: according to Manichaean cosmology, the moon acts as a celestial ship, transporting the souls of the deceased, conceived of as fragments of divine light, back to their heavenly abode. Its presence on a tombstone would thus represent both an illustration of a fundamental article of faith and the expression of hope that the person buried underneath would be rewarded by a heavenly afterlife. Following a similar logic, Kutzli<sup>26</sup> argued that the peculiar symbols described as anthropomorphic fleur-de-lys can be linked to the neo-Manichaean teaching about the status of the *true Christians*—described as *perfecti* in heresiological writings on the Cathars and Patarians of Western Europe—as the *God-bearers* or *theotokoi*, a title

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**23** In a recent article, however, the Bosnian scholar Ema Mazrak argues that Jesus is represented as the apocalyptic judge on one of the most richly decorated (but somewhat damaged) stones known as the *Zgošća stećak* (named after the village of Zgošća in central Bosnia where it was originally located, before its relocation to the National Museum in Sarajevo) (Mazrak 2012).

**24** Solovjev 1956.

**25** In medieval Western Christian art, the crescent frequently appears in depictions of the crucifixion, above the left arm of the cross, alongside the sun on the other side. The appearance of the sun and crescent/moon in this composition is interpreted in different ways: as an illustration of the two-fold nature of Christ, the two parts of the Bible (Speake 1994, 134), or the idea that nature in its entirety was dismayed by Christ's execution (Forstner 1977, 103). However, there is nothing in the iconography of the *stećak* stones that would suggest this particular meaning of the crescent. Of more relevance may be the association of the crescent with the Virgin Mary, based on the mysterious woman appearing in the sky in Apocalypse 12:1, although there are, again, no clear indications of this particular association in the iconography itself. The only direct parallel is found in some Eastern Orthodox Churches, as for example the 12<sup>th</sup> century Cathedral of St. Dimitri in Vladimir, Russia, where the cross on the roof of the church is contained within an upward pointing crescent. This motif is interpreted as a symbol of Byzantine royal power, an anchor in the sense of a sign of salvation, a blossomed cross, a chalice, or a trampled-upon snake (Alefejev 2001, 57).

**26** Kutzli 1977.

reserved for the Virgin Mary in orthodox Christianity (Fig 4). Bound by vows of purity and chastity, it is in fact the true Christians who continuously bring the divine being Christ into the material world, a teaching illustrated by the transformation of the human being into a *fleur-de-lys*, a symbol normally associated with the Virgin Mary.



Fig. 4: Anthropomorphic fleur-de-lys, Kupres, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo by Sanja Vrzić

### 3 Towards an Alternative Concept of Artistic Sense

The moot point of the debate between the ‘orthodox’ and the ‘neo-Manichaean’ camps is constituted by the interpretation of the cross, the fundamental symbol of Christianity and most frequently (though by no means universally) occurring motif on the *stećak*. On the one hand, the frequent presence of the cross has often been used as the decisive argument against the theory of the *stećak*’s neo-Manichaean nature, as one of the most commonly levelled heresiological charges against the medieval ‘heretics’ was their refusal to venerate the cross.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, as previously noted, there is not a single depiction of the crucifixion, while the crosses that can be found show

<sup>27</sup> The question of the Bosnian Christians’ attitude towards the cross is complex and cannot be adequately treated here. A possible explanation (based on a close reading of heresiological sources) of the frequent occurrence of the cross from a ‘neo-Manichaean’ perspective is the argument that the Bosnian Christians rejected the practice of *venerating* the cross, rather than the symbol as such.

a bewildering number of variations, ranging from conventional ones on the one end of the spectrum to so-called flourishing crosses whose upper arm has been replaced by solar symbols on the other (Fig 5). While a detailed discussion of the symbolism of the cross and its various forms goes beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that one of the few contexts in which comparable forms of the cross can be found are the *kchachkar* stones<sup>28</sup> of Armenian Christianity, a non-Chalcedonian church with a miaphysite Christology. Thus it seems certain that the symbol of the cross on the *stećak* stones does not allow for a simple, straight-forward interpretation. Rather than providing an illustration of a religious dogma for the illiterate, it appears to represent a complex symbol whose decipherment requires a certain degree of initiation or intellectual inquiry.



**Fig 5:** Flourishing crosses, Radimlja necropolis, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo by Sanja Vrzić

It is precisely this characteristic of the cross symbol, as well as numerous other motifs found on the *stećak* stones, that strongly suggests that an alternative to Bonaventura's theoretical framework should be sought. Such an alternative can in fact be derived from what is known about the early Christian attitude towards art. In one of the earliest surviving Christian reflections on visual culture, around the year 200 AD, Clement of Alexandria provided the following advice on pictorial devices that Christians should chose for the finger ring they wore as a signet:

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of medieval Armenian art, including the *kchachkar*, see Thierry 1989.

Our seals should be a dove or a fish or a ship running in a fair wind or a musical lyre such as the one Polycrates used or a ship's anchor such as the one Seleucus has engraved on his sealstone. And if someone is fishing he will call to mind the apostle [Peter] and the children [baptizands] drawn up out of the water.<sup>29</sup>

Commenting on this and similar examples of early Christian attitudes towards visual imagery, Finney concludes that “the creation of early Christian art seems to have taken place simultaneously and in various places. In every attested example, the scenario involved Christians turning to pagan workshops and exploring their already existing iconographic repertoires.”<sup>30</sup> The crucial element that enabled Christians to appropriate pagan imagery was the existence of a specific interpretative tradition that allowed the adopted symbols to be read in a particular way. Unlike Bonaventura’s approach, where ideas are translated into images, in this case the process is reversed, the interpretative process starting with existing images and finishing with their adjustment to religious concepts.

In this sense, the early Christian attitude can be identified with what the art historian Jas Elsner calls a ‘mystic’ mode of viewing, contrasting it with a mimetic-naturalistic conceptualization of visual art. This mode of viewing or, more precisely, principle of visual hermeneutics, can best be understood within the philosophical framework of neo-Platonic metaphysics, according to which ‘true’ reality lies beyond sense perception and can only be perceived by the mind’s ‘inner eye’. Thus the purpose of visual art is not to provide a reflection of material reality, but rather to act as a conduit for the perception of ‘higher’, spiritual truths. The final aim of mystic viewing is to overcome what is perceived as the limitations of material existence: “mystic viewing is predicated upon the assumption that in mystic experience the dualism of subject and object can be transcended into a unity that is neither subject nor object and yet is simultaneously both.”<sup>31</sup> In order to gain a more precise understanding of the mystic mode of viewing, it is necessary to take a closer look at the work of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, who carried out a profound influence upon the still developing metaphysics of early Christianity. In the process of elaborating his ideas, Plotinus develops a theory of art that is diametrically opposed to the principle of visual mimesis.

Building on the idea of the ‘nous’ as a higher reality superior to the realm of the material universe, Plotinus links depth, darkness and matter on the one hand and light, mind and single-plan perspective on the other:

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**29** Finney 1994, 111.

**30** Finney 1994, 52.

**31** Elsner 1995, 90.

Τὸ δὲ βάθος ἐκάστου ἢ ὕλη· λυδὸ καὶ σκοτεινὴ πᾶσα, ὅτι τὸ φῶς ὁ λόγος. Καὶ ὁ νοῦς λόγος. Διὸ τὸν ἔφ' ἐκάστου λόγον ὁρῶν τὸ κάτω ὡς ὑπὸ τὸ φῶς σκοτεινὸν ἦγεται, ὡσπερ ὀφθαλμὸς φωτοειδῆς ὢν πρὸς τὸ φῶς βαλὼν καὶ χρώας φῶτα ὄντα τὰ ὑπὸ τὰ χρώματα σκοτεινὰ καὶ ὕλικά εἶναι λέγει κεκρυμμένα τοῖς χρώμασι.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, the most accurate method of displaying higher reality is through images devoid of depth and gradations of light. Besides the training/tradition required to decipher the meaning of such works of art, another significant factor is the internal purification of the observer:

Ἐὰν δὲ ἦ ἐπὶ τὴν θέαν λημῶν κακίαις καὶ οὐ κεκαθαρμένος ἢ ἀσθενής, ἀνανδρία οὐ δυνάμενος τὰ πάνυ λαμπρὰ βλέπειν, οὐδὲν βλέπει, κἂν ἄλλος δεικνύη παρὸν τὸ ὄραθῆναι δυνάμενον. Τὸ γὰρ ὁρῶν πρὸς τὸ ὀρώμενον συγγενὲς καὶ ὅμοιον ποιησάμενον δεῖ ἐπιβάλλειν τῇ θεᾷ. Οὐ γὰρ ἂν πώποτε εἶδεν ὀφθαλμὸς ἥλιον ἡλιοειδῆς μὴ γεγενημένος, οὐδὲ τὸ καλὸν ἂν ἴδοι ψυχὴ μὴ καλῇ γενομένη. Γενέσθω δὴ πρῶτον θεοειδῆς πᾶς καὶ καλὸς πᾶς, εἰ μέλλει θεάσασθαι θεὸν τε καὶ καλόν.<sup>33</sup>

We are thus confronted by a conceptualization of art that is very different from Bonaventura's: rather than serving as a means of transmitting complex concepts and ideas to the illiterate, it becomes an elitist medium (in an intellectual and/or moral sense) whose sense can only be grasped by those whose inner being is sufficiently elevated and thus capable of grasping the most profound spiritual truths.

The relevance of the Plotinian conceptualization of visual art for the carvings of the *stećak* is suggested by one of their most characteristic features: their pronounced flatness. While the origin of the *stećak* reliefs is often summarily ascribed to Western European Romanesque and Gothic influences, in a formal sense they appear to be more closely related to an older tradition of flat carving found particularly in the art of pre-Romanesque Europe and the early medieval Caucasus, most notably the 10<sup>th</sup> century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on the island of Aghtamar in Lake Van (Fig 6). The most striking characteristic of this and similar carvings is their strict and consistent limitation to planarity (with only slight suggestions of depth in the drapery folds or the overlapping arms of the three youths in the fiery furnaces), despite the apparent technical capabilities of the artist, as evidenced by the more plastic figures and grape clusters in the upper frame of the composition. Although the carvings on the *stećak* stones never reach the technical virtuosity of the Church of the Holy Cross,

**32** Plotinus 1857, IV:5; “The depth (of beings and things) is matter, and that is why matter is dark. The light illuminating it is form; the mind perceives the form and, seeing the form of a being, assumes that the depth of this being is a darkness placed below the light.” Translation by Grabar (Grabar 1969, 289).

**33** Plotinus 1857, VI:9; “The eye must be adapted and assimilated to what it sees. Never could an eye see the sun unless it had become like the sun, or the soul see the beautiful without itself being beautiful. Therefore let each man who wishes to contemplate God and beauty, begin by becoming godlike and beautiful himself.” Translation by Grabar (Grabar 1969, 289).

they nevertheless display an equal reluctance to display plastic figures. While a traditional, teleologically conceived art history would see this ‘flat style’ as nothing but a first step towards the ultimate ‘liberation’ of sculpture (or, in the case of the *stećak*, a backward, primitive form of art), an awareness of the Plotinian theory of art suggests that the reasons for its ‘limitations’ may be much more profound than mere aesthetics. The aim of this type of sculpture may rather be to draw attention to the non-material nature of the motifs it is depicting. In a formal sense, the art of the *stećak* can be seen as a heir to this tradition, remaining immune to the Western European/Catholic proliferation of sculpture in the round in this period.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 6: Church of the Holy Cross, Lake Van, Turkey, photo by Gorčin Dizdar

## 4 The three Modes of Seeing

Despite such circumstantial indications, however, the suggestion that a late antique neo-Platonic theory of art has any direct relevance for understanding the carvings of the *stećak* stones admittedly remains a somewhat far-fetched hypothesis. A more immediate significance can, however, be ascribed to a specifically Christian reception and redaction of the Plotinian theory whose roots reach back to the earliest Chris-

<sup>34</sup> This is not to deny that there may have been significant influences of Romanesque and Gothic art on the iconography of the *stećak* stones.

tians. In his *Literary Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine wrote of three kinds of vision that are associated with different senses or faculties of the mind: the eyes are used to see corporeal objects, the imagination perceives likenesses of objects, while the intellect is where “the soul understands those realities that are neither bodies nor the likenesses of bodies.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the 8<sup>th</sup> century English cleric Alcuin of York, who was active at the court of Charlemagne, distinguished between corporeal, symbolic and mental ways of seeing, paying particular attention to distinguishing the latter two, noting that “the third is unknown to most because they do not know how to differentiate what is symbolic and what is mental.”<sup>36</sup> The different modes of seeing are treated more extensively in the 12<sup>th</sup> century French theologian Richard of St. Victor’s commentaries on the Apocalypse of St. John and linked explicitly to the interpretation of scripture. Thus he distinguished between seeing of the exterior or visible world, which is equated to the historical level of scripture; the outward appearance or physical action with mystical significance corresponding to allegorical interpretation of scripture; seeing with the ‘eyes of the heart’, corresponding to eschatological truths, and finally the fourth level which is entirely spiritual or visionary, representing the “ascent of the spirit to celestial contemplation without the intermediary of visible forms.”<sup>37</sup>

What the theory of the three modes of seeing provides is a specifically Christian tradition that succeeds in synthesizing Bonaventura’s didactic and ultimately mimetic conception of art with the ‘mystical’, neo-Platonic idea of using images as conduits to a higher, spiritual reality. Although the three mentioned theories do not use the same terminology, it is clear that the different modes of seeing they discuss reflect more or less equivalent ideas. Thus, the first mode refers to a perception of corporeal objects or the visible world, corresponding to a purely mimetic conception of art. The second mode encompasses the perception of likenesses of objects or the mystical significance of outward appearances or physical actions, an idea most closely related to the concept of allegory. Finally, the third mode, incorporating the perception of non-corporeal objects and celestial realities, can be seen as a direct appropriation of the neo-Platonic mystical mode of viewing into a Christian framework.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly for the further usage of this conceptualization of religious imagery, Caviness concludes that “the modes of seeing elucidated by Richard of St. Victor are in fact seldom isolated in art; the richest works, like the richest passages of scripture, might allow exegesis on all four levels.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Miller 1995, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Noble 2005, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Caviness 2001, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Richard of St Victor’s idea of “seeing with the ‘eyes of the heart’” is somewhat problematic for this threefold division, as it seems to stand somewhere between the allegorical and the mystical mode of viewing.

<sup>39</sup> Caviness 2001, 21.

While there is no direct evidence that Bosnian Christians (or, for that matter, Catholics and Orthodox Christians in medieval Bosnia) were familiar with this theory of religious art, there are at least some circumstantial indications that it may have corresponded with their general religious outlook. First of all, the few surviving biblical manuscripts of the Bosnian Christians display certain archaic features, most notably the division of chapters into the so-called Ammonian Sections, a system that was generally abandoned by the time of the High Middle Ages. Thus, the conservatism of the Bosnian Christians displayed in relation to biblical manuscripts may well have extended to their understanding of visual arts. Secondly, and more importantly, two of the biblical manuscripts of the Bosnian Christians contain a series of glosses that provide commentaries on the gospel lines they accompany. While these glosses have been subject to varied interpretations, here it will suffice to establish that they represent highly allegorical interpretations of biblical events, occasionally utterly removed from their original context.<sup>40</sup> Thus, we can be certain that Bosnian Christians were familiar with allegorical methods of textual hermeneutics, suggesting that a similar approach could have been used in relation to visual imagery. Confronted by the failure of Bonaventura's conceptualization of art to adequately explain the imagery of the *stećak*, the 'mystical' hermeneutical strategy thus provides a credible alternative that can account for the very different interpretations that have hitherto been suggested.

To a greater extent than any textual indications, however, the existence of distinct levels of interpretations among the Bosnian Christians is suggested by their organizational structure. While there is no scholarly consensus on the question of the Bosnian Christians' metaphysical beliefs, one thing that seems beyond doubt is their division into two classes, a small minority of ascetic men and women who were simply referred to as *Christians or true Christians* and literally constituted the Bosnian Church, and a much wider class of adherents whose precise status and obligations are not entirely clear. Additionally, medieval Bosnia must have contained a significant number of people who were either adherents of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, or perhaps did not belong to any church. Thus, the social structure of medieval Bosnia corresponds to the three levels of visual meaning encountered above, the mimetic level being available to every observer regardless of his or her background, an allegorical meaning known by the wider circle of adherents of the Bosnian Church and/or regular members of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and finally a mystical sense revealed only to the *true Christians*.

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<sup>40</sup> For example, in a gloss found in the so-called Vrutok gospel (private property of Popović/Popovski family from the town of Vrutok near Gostivar in Macedonia, transliteration published in Kuna 2008), commenting on Matthew 8:28-33, we are told that "the demons are satanic spirits, while the swine - all who do not believe in Christ; so is the sea. The herders - Peter and Paul and Mary, from whom seven demons left, all who have abandoned the Old Testament. The town - Christ and the New Testament - as it says in the Apocalypse - and Jerusalem saw how he came down from the heavens from God." (Nakaš 2012, 133).

Two remarks must be made before this scheme is applied to the imagery found on the *stećak*. Firstly, a similar threefold conceptualization of art may have been available to Orthodox monks or Catholic friars as well as Bosnian Christians. The likelihood of this possibility cannot be assessed *a priori*, however, but must be established for each image or symbol separately. Secondly, the ‘allegorical’ meaning cannot be reduced to the religious dimension alone, as there may well have existed other associations such as political or cultural ones. In the rest of this paper, however, I will mainly focus on the religious dimension of the imagery from the perspective of Bosnian Christianity.

## 5 The Stag Hunt: a Mimetic Understanding

The particular motif I want to discuss here is the stag hunt. This motif occurs on roughly 100 *stećak* stones<sup>41</sup>, the majority of them in the southern part of modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina (the region of Herzegovina). While many other of the frequently occurring motifs, such as the cross, the grapevine, or the circle dance, appear in a large number of variations, the depiction of the stag hunt is surprisingly constant. It usually consists of one or two hunters, on foot or mounted, aided by a dog, thrusting their spear or releasing their arrow towards the pursued animal (Fig 7).<sup>42</sup> Although there is at least one notable exception to this rule<sup>43</sup>, the reliefs regularly show one particular moment of the stag hunt, the point at which the hunter is about to thrust his weapon towards the animal. In a formal sense, the hunter and the stag take up a nearly equal amount of space, thus directing the viewer’s attention towards their interaction as the focal point of the composition. Commenting on the crucifixion and the tauroctony as the central images of Christianity and Mithraism respectively, Jas Elsner writes that “the god is transformed from a static cult image to a god performing ritual action (whether as sacrificer or as a victim). It is the action that deifies, the performance is the deity.”<sup>44</sup> If the depiction of the stag hunt on the *stećak* can be ascribed any religious significance, it would seem that we are dealing with an equally ‘dynamic’ conception of divinity.

For the majority of scholars following the school of thought established by the National Museum of Sarajevo, however, the stag hunt does not have any religious significance, representing nothing but the naturalistic depiction of the leisurely pursuits of the medieval Bosnian aristocracy. Along with images of the circle dance and jousting, the stag hunt is usually classified into the wider category of ‘secular motifs’ and thus removed from the further discussion of the *stećak*’s religious sense. Following

<sup>41</sup> For the most comprehensible list of *stećak* decorations, see Wenzel 1965.

<sup>42</sup> There are, however, several examples of depictions of bear and boar hunts.

<sup>43</sup> On the previously discussed *Zgošća stećak*, see note 13 above.

<sup>44</sup> Elsner 1995, 217.



Fig. 7: Stag hunt, Blidinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo by Sanja Vrzić

the principles of visual hermeneutics established above, however, it is not necessary to exclude either possibility. On one, the most basic level, it is clear that the image does indeed represent a stag hunt. Despite the lack of details, it may indeed even depict, or more precisely suggest, the person buried underneath the stone engaged in one of his favourite lifetime pastimes. The reason for its appearance on a tombstone would thus be a simple desire to remember the person in a particular way, determined either by himself or his descendants. This level of meaning could be perceived by any observer, regardless of his or her religious, cultural or political background. Despite the initial attractiveness of this simple response to the question of the motif's meaning, however, it must be pointed out that a purely secular tombstone decoration of this kind would be highly anomalous in the context of the sepulchral arts of Christian medieval Europe.

Following the 'secular' interpretation, but crossing somewhat into the territory of allegorical meanings, the stag hunt can be further read as a marker of class identity, subtly reaffirming the dominant social structure. The 'ritual action' of the stag hunt could thus be seen as socially transformative rather than religious: by carrying it out, the portrayed hunter 'performs' his privileged social status. In this context, it is worth mentioning the oft-repeated argument that the erection and decoration of a *stećak*

stone must have been very costly and thus only available to the social elites.<sup>45</sup> However, even if the erection of the *stećak* was an exclusively or predominantly elitist affair, it does not mean that its *sense* and *reception* should be restricted to these classes alone. In his analysis of burial customs, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch notes that “the death of the individual is the source of rebirth of the group”<sup>46</sup>, offering as a general hypothesis the claim that “the world religions bury the individual and send him to God and out of the social world. At the same time this expulsion purifies that part of the person which continues on earth and which will be re-used and reincarnated in other members of the corporate group to which the dead belonged”<sup>47</sup>. Thus, the sense of the depiction of the stag hunt would not be exhausted in the remembrance of the deceased, but rather in the survival of this custom, along with the corresponding ‘corporate group’ or culture among the hunter’s descendants.<sup>48</sup>

But there are several indications suggesting that the meaning of the stag hunt motif should not be reduced to a quasi-naturalistic representation. First of all, the manner in which it is usually depicted appears schematic and formulaic rather than mimetic. While this fact could be caused by nothing more but than the artist’s low level of technical skill, a more probable explanation is that the purpose of the image is to call to mind an idea rather than to depict an actual event.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, if the only purpose of the motif was the glorification of the hunter, one would (at least in some instances) expect a different kind of composition, one putting more emphasis on his power over the stag—for example, the hunter triumphantly dealing the death blow to a stag lying below his horse’s feet. Most importantly, however, a religious level of meaning of the motif is suggested by the transcultural significance of the stag symbol on the one hand, and its treatment in other *stećak* compositions on the other. Whereas a focus on the hunter as the dominant figure of the composition implies a more secular understanding of the motif, a greater emphasis on the stag leads towards a more religious and specifically Christian interpretation, turning the viewer’s attention towards the idea of *victimhood*.

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<sup>45</sup> For illustrative purposes, it is worth noting that in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, a *stećak*-sized block of stone costs approximately € 5000.

<sup>46</sup> Bloch 1988, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Bloch 1988, 20.

<sup>48</sup> This argument is supported by the fact that the stag hunt is often accompanied by another frequently occurring motif, the circle dance. While the motif of the circle dance requires a separate treatment, here it will suffice to note that it usually involves a larger number of men and women, suggesting the symbolic inclusion of wider circles of society.

<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the motif can be compared to the illustrations on the catacombs of early Christians, which Grabar calls “image-signs”, noting that “image-signs, as found in the catacombs, fulfill their purpose successfully only in so far as they are clear, but the concept of clarity is a function of the training of the viewer” (Grabar 1968, 10).

## 6 The Shamanic Stag

Although one must be careful when analyzing the appearance of similar symbols or motifs in different cultures and time periods, a comparative perspective can at least offer a clue for its appropriate understanding. In the case of the stag, we are faced by a tradition of its representation reaching back to the very beginnings of artistic creation: it is a frequently occurring motif on petroglyphs around the world whose age is estimated at about 10.000 years or more.<sup>50</sup> Much later, around the year 1000 BC, megalithic monuments known as *deer stones* appear in Mongolia, representing the stag in various shapes, sometimes flying or holding a sun-disc in its antlers, thus strongly suggesting its spiritual significance. Related types of megaliths can be found all over central Asia, and even as far west as the region of Dobruja on the Black Sea coast of modern day Romania and Bulgaria. The shamanistic character of the stag is more clearly expressed in the Gundestrup cauldron, an Iron Age silver vessel found in Denmark, showing a seated man with antlers surrounded by different animals (including a stag) looking towards him.<sup>51</sup> While far from exhaustive, these three examples illustrate the frequent appearance of the stag in the arts of very different cultures and time periods, as well its common association with the divine or supernatural.

The stag also plays a significant role in the history of Christian art, where it usually appears as an illustration of the words of Psalm 42:1: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God”, provided with an additional dimension by Jesus’s references to the ‘living water’ (e.g. in John 4:10). A notable example of this motif carved in stone can be found on the portal of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Ateni Sioni Church in Georgia.<sup>52</sup> This level of the stag’s symbolism appears to have been familiar in medieval Bosnia, as one *stećak* stone can be read as its direct illustration: on a horizontal slab, an engraved stag is running towards a hollowed out indentation that can serve as a container for rain water or another liquid (Fig 8). Another level of the stag’s usual symbolism is provided by various medieval bestiaries which tend to reproduce the remarks made by Isidore in his *Etymologies*: “Cervi [...] serpentium inimici cum se gravatos infirmitate persenserint, spiritu narium eos extrahunt de cavernis, et superata pernicie veneni eorum pabulo reparantur”.<sup>53</sup> This characteristic of the stag is also frequently illustrated in Christian art. Despite the frequent appearance of the snake on the *stećak*, however, it is never shown in combination with the stag.

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Jacobson 1992.

<sup>51</sup> For an illustration, brief discussion and further literature on the Gundestrup cauldron, see Koch 2006, 854–857.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion and illustration, see Mepisashvili/Tsintsadze, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Isidore 1911, 1:18 (“Deer [...] are the enemy of snakes. When deer are ill or weak they draw snakes out of their holes with the breath of their nostrils and eat them, overcoming their poison and thus renewing themselves,” translation mine).



**Fig. 8:** A (barely visible) stag panting for water, Bitunja, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo by Sanja Vrzić

These insights enable us to postulate a first possible (religious) allegorical level of the stag's significance: it represents a virtuous Christian soul yearning for proximity to God. Following the logic of this interpretation, the hunters and dogs would stand for the dark forces of this world aiming to divert the righteous soul from its virtuous path. Despite its strong allusions to the evils of this world, this idea could be classified as *Christian* in the broadest sense, not allowing for a closer denominational determination. This interpretation also provides a convincing explanation for the way the hunt is depicted: despite its precarious situation, the stag has not been hurt or caught, thus creating an ultimately optimistic message. The person buried underneath the stone may have led a particularly virtuous life, or, alternatively, the image may be an expression of the desire for a heavenly afterlife, analogous to depictions of the deceased kneeling before the Virgin Mary on Western European tombstones of this period. The idea that the image may possess several layers of meaning thus leads to the intriguing possibility that, depending on the way it is observed, both the hunter and the stag may in some way represent the deceased person. Taking this interpretation a step further, the stag hunt can actually be read as an allegorical representation of the internal battle between the body and the soul.

A closer analysis of some of the other appearances of the stag on the *stećak* stones, however, suggests that on one level, its significance may be closer to the more archaic, shamanistic context. In numerous instances, the stag's antlers are decorated by rosettes of various forms, a very frequently occurring symbol on the *stećak* stones

that almost certainly possesses a symbolic, religious meaning. This intuition is given additional weight by a *stećak* from Hutovo, where a circle dance is led by a man riding on a stag. The identification of the stag with a kind of spiritual guide is further suggested by a *stećak* stone from Čengiĉ bara, depicting a man with antlers holding the reins of two mounted men's horses in an apparent gesture of reconciliation (Fig 9). If this interpretation is correct, it leads to the conclusion that the stag should be read as a specifically Bosnian Christian, rather than general, non-denominational symbol. In one of the very few indications of the possible relationship between the Bosnian *true Christians* and the wider circle of their adherents, heresiological sources report they were regarded as carriers of the Holy Spirit and were honoured by a ritual greeting known as *adoratio*. While this argument remains conjectural, it appears more likely that the *true Christians*, conceived as carriers of the Holy Spirit, rather than Orthodox or Catholic priests were pictured as spiritual guides symbolically transformed into stags.

Heresiological sources in fact provide another significant clue for the decipherment of the stag hunt's possible meaning in a Bosnian Christian context. In a document entitled "Discussion between a Roman Catholic and Bosnian Pataren", believed to have been written in the 1230s by the Dominican inquisitor Paul the Dalmatian<sup>54</sup>, we are told of the Bosnian Christians' belief that a mark of the true Christian is that (s)he is subject to persecution in this world. Now, regardless of whether the Bosnian Christians truly were heterodox or not, we can be certain that they were periodically subject to persecution by domestic or foreign religious and secular authorities.<sup>55</sup> This insight allows for a reconciliation of the 'shamanistic' interpretation of the stag with the role it is assigned in the hunt composition: the stag hunt would thus be an allegorical representation of the persecution of the Bosnian Christians in general, or the person buried underneath the stone in particular. This interpretation would also provide a possible explanation for the predominance of the stag hunt motif in the region of Herzegovina: according to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Ragusan chronicler Mauro Orbini, in 1459 the Bosnian king Stjepan Tomaš forced 2,000 Bosnian Christians to convert to Catholicism, expelling another 40—or, in an alternative translation, 40 thousand—who refused to convert to the region of Herzegovina.<sup>56</sup> Thus, regardless of the actual number, Herzegovina remained the last stronghold of the Bosnian Christians after they had become subject to persecution in the Bosnian kingdom.

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<sup>54</sup> This dating is suggested by Šanjek, who adds that the document's "author is very familiar with the social and religious conditions of the time in Bosnia" (Šanjek 2003, 162, translation mine).

<sup>55</sup> During the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Hungarian kingdom had carried out a crusade against Bosnia, with one source mentioning that "many of those who did not want to convert were burnt on the pyre by officials of the vice-regent Koloman" (Šanjek 2003, 135, translation mine).

<sup>56</sup> Malcolm 1996, 41.

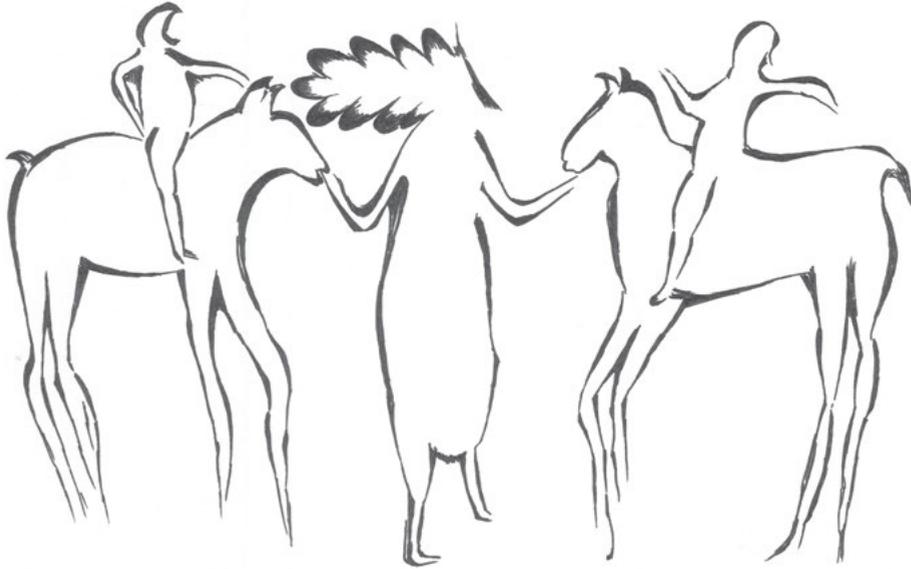


Fig. 9: A shamanic stag, Čengić bara, drawing by Rudolf Kutzli

## 7 Towards a symbolic meaning

Having explored some of the possible allegorical meanings of the stag hunt, it remains to be seen whether an additional, symbolical level of the motif can be identified. In that respect, we are faced by a fundamental methodological dilemma: if we are to take account what those who viewed images in a symbolical or ‘mystical’ sense themselves thought about the matter, this level of meaning is, as noted above, only perceivable by those who are sufficiently purified and spiritually elevated. Furthermore, what we are talking about is the perception of ‘non-corporeal’, ‘mental’ or even ‘celestial’ realities, which, granted that we do not dismiss these concepts as obscurantist mystifications, may be impossible to capture in conventional words and grammatical forms. In a sort of adaptation of the theological *via negativa*, it is possible to say what the symbolical sense is not: a meaning that is directly or even allegorically related to the actual subjects or objects displayed in the image. Nevertheless, it is not a completely arbitrary meaning either, taking the image as a starting point and leading to an utterly unrelated, subjective conclusion. If the concept of the mystical or symbolical sense is to preserve any degree of objectivity, it can only be based on one feature of the image: the abstract forms or relations created by its visible elements.

A possible way to conceptualize mystical or symbolic viewing is given in Rudolf Steiner's *Outline of Occult Science*.<sup>57</sup> Using the example of the rosy cross symbol, Steiner notes:

Now we gaze in spirit on the rose and say to ourselves: 'In the red sap of the rose is the erstwhile green sap of the plant—now changed to crimson—and the red rose follows the same pure, passionless laws of growth as does the green leaf.' Thus the red of the rose may offer us a symbol of a kind of blood which is the expression of cleansed impulses and passions, purged of all lower elements, and resembling in their purity the forces working in the red rose. Let us now try not only to assimilate such thoughts within our reason, but also let them come to life within our feelings. We can experience a blissful sensation when contemplating the purity and passionless nature of the growing plant. We can awaken the feeling within us how certain higher perfections must be paid for through the acquisition of passions and desires. This, then, can change the blissful sensation previously experienced into a serious mood: and then only can it stir within us the feeling of liberating happiness, if we abandon ourselves to the thought of the red blood that can become the carrier of inner pure experiences, like the red sap of the rose. The important point is that we should not look coldly and without feeling upon these thoughts which serve to build up such a symbolical concept.<sup>58</sup>

The last paragraph represents only a fragment of a much longer 'initiation' into a 'mystical' viewing of the rosy cross. But it suffices to demonstrate the basic elements of this hermeneutical strategy: a concentration on the transformation of objects and their characteristics, an emotional experience of abstract insights, an attempt to 'enliven' thoughts through the infusion of new emotions, and the derivation of new intellectual insights from such emotional states. Without doubt, an equally complex 'mystical' insight can be derived from the stag hunt motif: starting from the emotional state of the hunter, his control of the horse below him on the one hand and his impending attack on the fleeing stag on the other, the transformation of his emotion into the firm grasp of the weapon with which he is about to take a life, on to the innocent stag running for his survival, perhaps causing a feeling of compassion, thus bringing to mind man's internal conflict between a desire to possess and control and his awareness of the suffering of others... And, further, taking into account the possible association of the pursued stag and a spiritual guide, a contemplation of the image may lead to a reflection upon the fate of the true Christian in this world, the necessity of following the path set by Jesus Christ and facing persecution and martyrdom.

Rather than dwelling upon the possible symbolic associations, my aim here is only to show one of the directions in which they could be taken. As Steiner sufficiently stressed, however, this type of visual hermeneutics only makes full sense if it is accompanied by an emotional involvement. The ultimate aim of this combined

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<sup>57</sup> I would like to stress that I do not endorse or imply an acceptance of any aspect of Rudolf Steiner's philosophy, but simply use his conceptualization of symbolic viewing as a suitable illustration.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner 1922, 225.

intellectual and emotional experience is an overcoming of the duality of subject and object, the observer and the observed, as it was shown in the previously quoted statement of Plotinus. The thoughts and feelings associated with the stag hunt should become so deep and profound that nothing else exists outside of them, neither an 'I' experiencing these thoughts and feelings, nor an image or concept causing them. It must be remembered that all theoreticians of the concept of 'mystical' viewing insisted that it is carried out with something referred to as an 'inner eye', rather than with eyesight. Thus 'mystical' viewing becomes completely detached from the physical object and, as such, unavailable to objective, scientific insight or evaluation. All that can be done is to provide some insights into the ways in which this type of viewing is carried out, while its actual experience remains on a subjective level.

The reliefs of the *stećak* stones thus represent a very fitting illustration of Hilgert's previously quoted claim according to which sense is no physical property, but rather a product of sense ascriptions by its recipients. On a most basic and universal level, accessible both to the untrained medieval and contemporary observer, the reliefs can be understood as a mimetic representation of actual physical objects and events such as, in the case discussed here in detail, a stag hunt. Thus, what is present and visible is a series of naturalistic images carved in stone. The images' allegorical level of significance, however, is not immediately visible, emerging only through a process of sense ascription that may have been, as Hilgert suggests, routinized and socially determined in its original context, but has to be carefully reconstructed by the contemporary observer. However, as I suggested in this paper, there is an additional presence in these reliefs that transcends the allegorical level of significance. This presence is the symbolic or sacred meaning which is available only to those observers who were, firstly, initiated into or trained to perceive it and secondly, according to those writing in a neo-Platonic tradition, sufficiently "purified" or mentally prepared to absorb it.

The hypothesis proposed in this paper, according to which the ancient threefold, 'mystical' conceptualization of art should be preferred to Bonaventura's more conventional mimetic and didactic understanding, has yielded a rich, multi-layered analysis of the stag hunt motif. While in the absence of sources directly describing the reception of *stećak* images among its medieval observers it will never be possible to give a fully satisfactory response to the question of the appropriate framework for its understanding, I have analyzed a whole range of factors that strongly suggest the existence of allegorical and mystical level of its interpretation. What seems beyond doubt, not only as a methodological principle, but as an empirical fact, is that the stag hunt, as well as other motifs on the *stećak* stones, can have different *senses* depending on the observer. Finally, I have suggested a range of factors speaking in favour of the argument that the stag (and stag hunt) is to be read as a symbol associated primarily with Bosnian Christianity, rather than as a generally Christian, non-denominational motif. In this context, Bosnian Christianity was not treated as a "dualist" heresy, but rather, as it is attested in relevant sources, a Christian religious movement with a specific organizational structure and a belief in the inevitable persecution of true Christians.

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