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Rédacteur

LJUBINKO RADENKOVIĆ

Directeur de l'Institut des Etudes balkaniques

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Mirjana DETELIĆ
Institute for Balkan Studies,
Belgrade

THE PLACE OF THE SYMBOLIC CITY IN CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IMAGERY

(A CASE OF BALKAN FOLKLORE: TWO MODELS OF EPIC CITY)

Abstract: This article is based on folklore studies of oral epic tradition in the Serbo-Croat (or, depending on territory, Croat-Serbian) language which was common to the majority of former Yugoslavia population (in fact, all but Slovenes and Macedonians).¹ The corpus of 1200 oral epic songs² were chosen among other folklore genres because of their strong ideological position which made them the only form of oral literature where town appears as a human habitation clearly defined in time and space. In all other forms of traditional culture, the urban space is imagined and represented either as a miraculous or elfin place (as in fairy-tales, ritual poetry, short literary forms, *et al*), or as a notion with a name but without a content (as in etiological and other legends).³ In contrast, the epic poetry builds the image of urban space

¹ Today, this covers three independent countries: Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia and Hercegovina, and each of them claims to have a language of its own. Nevertheless, at the time these oral epic songs were collected (XVIII and XIX century), the language of the epics was considered one and the same, and even more so in the time when the songs were actually created.

² This corpus is formed of the best collections by the most renowned editors of XIX century, when oral tradition was still alive. These collections are: *Сабрана дела Вука Караџића, Српске народне пјесме*, II-IV, издање о стогодишњици смрти Вука Стефановића Караџића 1864-1964 и двестогодишњици његова рођења 1787-1987, Просвета, Београд 1986-1988; *Српске народне пјесме* 1-9, скупио их Вук Стеф. Караџић, државно издање, Београд 1899-1902; *Српске народне пјесме из необјављених рукописа Вука Стеф. Караџића*, II-IV, Српска академија наука и уметности, Одељење језика и књижевности, Београд 1974; Сима Милутиновић Сарајлија, *Пјеванија црногорска и херцеговачка, сабрана Чубром Чојковићем Црногорцем*. Па њим издана истим, у Лајпцигу, 1837; *Hrvatske narodne pjesme*, skupila i izdala Matica hrvatska. Odio prvi. Junačke pjesme, Zagreb 1890-1940.

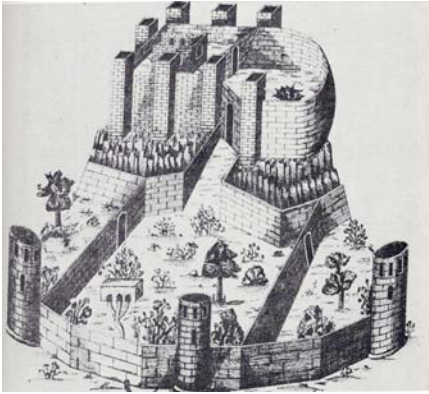
³ For example: *U Budimu gradu / čudno čudo kažu* (“In the city of Buda / a wonderful wonder is told” – initial formula of children’s poetry); *ni na nebu, ni na zemlji* (“Neither on earth, nor airborne” – formula for a fortified castle in fairy-tales); *grad gradila bela vila / ni na zemlji ni na nebu* (“A white fairy built a city / neither on earth nor in the air” – initial formula in ritual poetry) etc.

as a centre of power and earthly rule, equating the very concept of potency of 'state' with the number of a state's towns and cities. In the epic poetry only - because it deals with ethic, social, and political norms as they effect (and affect) the complex relationship between the state, its ruler, religion, and nation - urban spaces are modeled as places with structure, important enough to go to war for. This is always so in the South Slav material where politics and religion are intertwined more than they should be, causing and caused by permanent Christian-Muslim clashes and truces. As recent war experience in the Balkans shows, the latter sense of the term 'town' in particular persists, giving rise to circumstances of the greatest risk for the survival of culture - traditional or other.

The arrival of Ottoman Turks in the Balkans by the end of XV century was an event of greatest consequences for the people it affected. First, it cut them off the European history whose part they had originally been. The fall of Constantinople (1453), Smederevo in Serbia (1459), Jajce in Bosnia (1463), and Bihać in Croatia (1592) moved the borders between Europe and Orient far to the West. The border zone, which stretched out from Pecs in Hungary to Zadar and Šibenik on the Dalmatian coast, was a huge battlefield, a zone of permanent clashes, that even bore an adequate name: The Military Frontier (Vojna Krajina). Whatever was left East from that frontier, had to submit to the prevailing oriental influence. The cultural interchanging in progress had to be aborted, redefined and eventually either rejected or redirected. The concept of city was one to survive with the burden of many changes.

Under the influence of Byzantium, the successor of towns and fortifications along the Roman (Danubian) Limes, the medieval Christian states on the territory of former Yugoslavia built their own network of towns with fortresses for their protection. There cannot be traced even one feature in them different from a possible European standard of the time. Pre-Ottoman cities in the Balkans were classical *urbs-plus-suburbium* structures: on top of a hill stood the fortified town with simple settings (barracks, church, palace, and place for food and water storage); under it there were market-places, craftsmen' shops, and dwelling lodges, out of which sooner or later would develop a completely new settlement, usually with its own protective walls. The term for such a place in all parts of the Balkans was the Hungarian word *varoš*, and the Slavonic word *podgradje* (literally: suburbium).

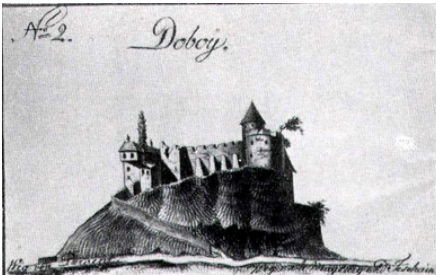
Naturally, the visualisation of these urban spaces did not differ much from the way monastic complexes were depicted in the period, because they shared the same symbolic features of great simplicity: a circle of protective walls, and the dome of church with the cross on top of it, in a way, that was a universal icon of later Middle Ages in Europe.



Zvečan in Serbia (Kosovo) XII c.



Užice in Serbia XIV c.



Doboš in Bosnia XIII c.

In oral epic poetry, which is – by definition – singing in praise of heroic ancestors, all pre-Ottoman towns and cities are strongly connected with the names of their holders, often in contradiction with historical facts.⁴ More important yet, they are used as a poetical tool for symbolizing the moral value of the protagonists of an epic sujet. For example: when the Jakšić brothers decide to divide their wealth,⁵ the “good” brother takes *Beograd* (*beo* = white, *grad* = town) and the Rosary church in it, while the

⁴ For example, the famous town of Pirlitor (often mistakenly identified as Periteorion in Greece) was in fact in Montenegro, and it belonged to count Sandalj Hranić (XIV c.) instead of duke Momčilo, as songs would have it. The town of Stalać in Serbia was built in XIV century by duke Lazar Hrebeljanović as the first line of defense of his capital city Kruševac; in songs, though, it is connected with two heroic personages – count Todor, during the last days of Serbian Despotry, and duke Prijezda, in the first days of Turkish rule, both in XV century. Mistakes of this kind (and they are not rare) are usually made in songs about medieval, i.e. pre-Ottoman times. When they sing about less distant or even contemporary times, the probability of mistake is practically null.

⁵ This is poem nr. 98 in Vuk Karadžić's collection vol. II (*Пјесме јуначке најстарије*, књига друга 1845, Београд 1988).



Serbian royal monastery Hilandar, Mount Atos (Greece), XII c.



Studenica monastery, Serbia, XIII c.



St Blasius, Dubrovnik (Croatia),
XVII c.



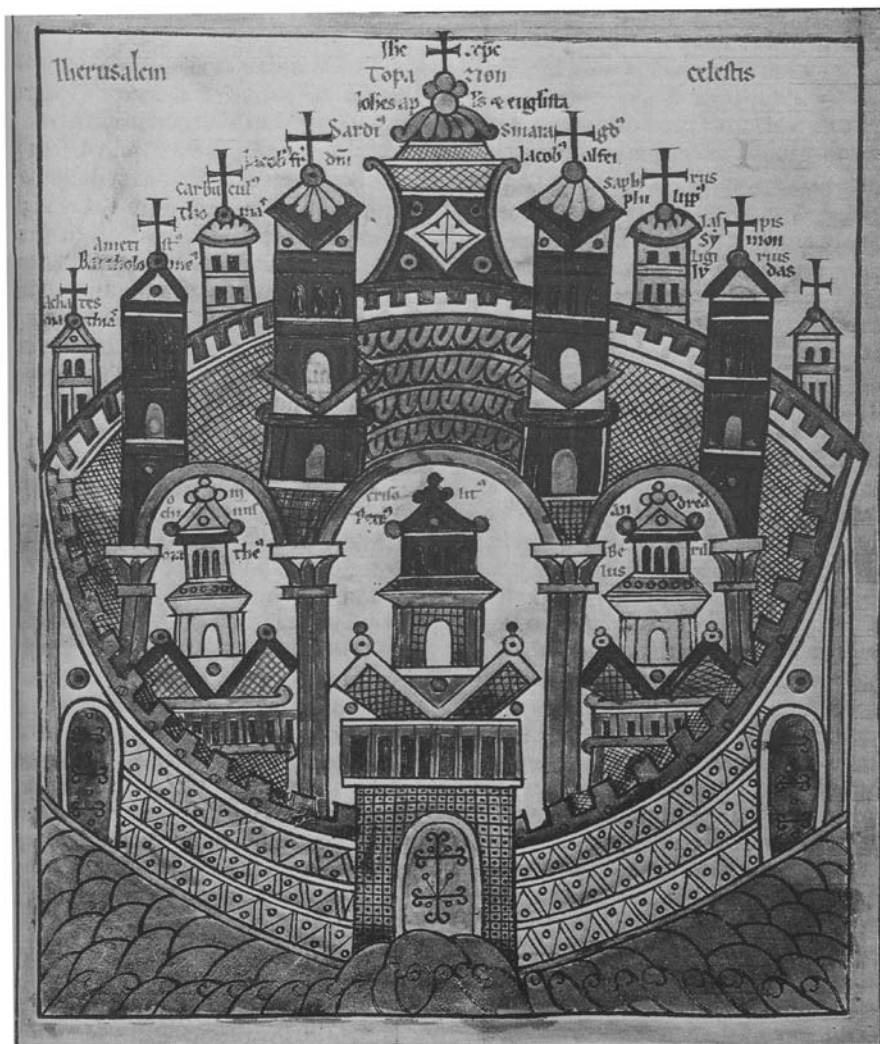
St Gemignano (Italy), XIV c.

“bad” brother chooses *Karavlaška* and *Karabogdanska*⁶ lands (*kara* meaning *black*).⁷ Elaborating it one step further, use of the motive of connection between the place and its owner leads to a very interesting feature of literary chronotop, namely repeating the same space-and-time model whenever, at the beginning of a poem, some fatal developing has to be announced: Milić the ban-stander⁸, for example, gets the most important information about his future fiancé in front of the church, on Sunday, after the liturgy, and he immediately starts to fetch her. Within the common ritual practice of traditional culture, this is fatally wrong because some of the most important fazes of the wedding proceedings are deliberately omitted. In fact, the sujet actually is about the tragic destiny of Milić and his bride to be, and its starting point at the public square → in front of the church → in the middle of the town – on Sunday → after the liturgy is one of the most potent epic chronotopes. It is usually used to mark the ominous or a symbolic intervention of

⁶ *Karavlaška* and *Karabogdanska* are, in fact, counties, parts of today's Romania: Valachia and Transylvania.

⁷ The best analysis of this motive in Krnjević 1989.

⁸ Poem nr. 78 in Vuk Karadžić's collection vol. III (*Пјесме јуначке средњијех времена*, књига трећа 1846, Београд 1988).



Celestial Jerusalem (Germany), XII c.

either God or, older still, nameless *vis maior*.⁹ The same goes for the duke Prijezda¹⁰ who gets his important information in the same way (in the public square in front of the church, on Sunday after the liturgy): his town Stalać was being “taken by enemies through the underground tunnels” and he immediately, then and there, decided to lead his knights to the last charge. The

⁹ For the elaborate analysis of this poem see Дегелић 1996.

¹⁰ Poem nr. 84 in Vuk Karadžić’s collection vol. II.

poem ends with the death of all the defenders, and with the suicide of both Prijezda and his wife. Examples of the kind are numerous.

It goes without saying that towns are subject of epic singing even when they do not perform such a demanding role. They are a standard stage for cavalcades of Christian kings, princes, and knights, quite a scene for showing off the glamorous outfit and weaponry, of good and mighty horses, and fair maidens. All these had to stop the very moment Ottomans came to limelight.

It is common knowledge that Balkan Turks were mainly urban population. Spreading from the big cities of Levant, especially at the beginning of their rule, they did not even intend to change anything of the indigenous and Byzantine codices referring to the rural way of life and agraria. Contrary to this, the towns themselves were divided in *mahalas* (quarters) - Jewish, Christian, and Moslem, for they were repopulated not according to race or wealth, but according to religion. As merchants with international connections, Jews were the privileged nation in the Ottoman Empire, and therefore made a pretty dense population in the Turkish cities, especially after they were cruelly banished from Spain and al-Andalus. Christians were treated differently, depending on their geographical and political position in respect to the centre of Turkish rule, which at the beginning was Bursa, then Edirne, and finally Istanbul (former Constantinople). Generally speaking, the position of *raya* (non-Moslem population in the Ottoman Empire) was the best in Istanbul itself, getting worse towards the borderline zone. Before the battle of Mohacz (1526), when the best parts of Hungary were conquered and the capital city transferred from Buda to Poszony (present Bratislava), that borderline zone ended first at Smederevo (1459), and then at Beograd (1521).

Under the new circumstances, less than 10% of the Christian population on the territory of former Yugoslavia was left to live in towns, with restrictions in every aspect of urban life: dressing code (only three colours were allowed for non-Moslems), sacral and secular building (no church was allowed to be equal or higher than any mosque, nor any Christian house to have more than one floor¹¹), profession (no official could be anything but Moslem), lodging location etc. The majority of population, living in villages and farmsteads, gradually identified urban people with Turks, transferred their hatred for oppressors to the place of their dwelling, and made one long lasting synonym: Turks = citizens (*Turci gradjani*, especially in connection

¹¹ For that reason, churches were built relatively deep into the ground, so the entrance was usually few (5-6) steps lower than the street level. They were also forbidden the use of bells. Secular buildings were not allowed stone masonry, glass windows, any windows opening on the street, and bright colours for facades.

with the inhabitants of Nikšić in Montenegro). This means that they literally made no difference between their own people living in the cities and Turks whom they hated, and that in due time they were all seen as equal enemies. In addition, poverty, famine, and the brutality of the administration caused - even in relatively early days of the Turkish rule - a specific kind of resistance, wholeheartedly supported by the rural population. The members of this movement were peasants organized in military guerilla groups known as *hajduci* (brigands), treated by authorities as outlaws.

The making of epic poetry, or “singing of the tales” - as Albert Lord first put it¹², has always been a privilege of rural people. This total change of official ideology and - more than anything else - massive loss of local gentry in the battle of Kosovo (1389) and during the Turkish campaigns in XV century, made *hajduci* the true epic successors of the old regime, no matter how big a paradox this might seem. That was also a basis for dividing the history of towns into *old* and *new*, former “ours” and contemporary “theirs”, affecting their epic models in the same way. But, while the old model was - as we have already seen - circular walls and the church with a cross on it, the new one was not a simple “translation” into Turkish, with the mosque and a crescent to fit the new rulers’ religion. The new towns had completely new settings too, more diversified than the old ones (of which almost none was left unchanged by that time). They had coffee houses (which was quite a new thing in that period)¹³, bazaars (or *pazari* in local use), public lounges (epic *londža*, coming from the Italian *loggia*), taverns (epic *krčma*), slave markets, and dungeons, all surrounded by protective walls with several gates. This obviously incomplete urban structure was depicted by people who did not live inside it, but came in contact with its parts only as either customers or merchandise.¹⁴ Within a wider historical frame, this was going on in the region from the beginning of XVII century onwards, during the same period that ideas of civic Europe began to develop (as opposed to ideas of the medieval city-state). The best and most condensed expression of what a *rayetin*

¹² Lord 1960. the Oral epic poetry in the Serbo-Croat language was subject of long and fruitful studies of both Albert Lord and Milman Parry.

¹³ Vide Елезовић 1938; Hatox 1985.

¹⁴ Of all non-Atlantic slave trade centres active in the area, epic poetry directly mentions Azov (in Turkish variant *Azak/Hazak*) now in Russia, Sarajevo in Bosnia, Dubrovnik in Croatia, Herceg Novi in Montenegro, and Venice. Often posing as a chronicle of their time, songs immortalized - more successfully than history - duke Ivo of Semberia who spent his very substantial wealth buying Christian slaves from Turks and setting them free. The Catholic Church established a regular office for the same purpose, which was active along the Dalmatian coast. The Orthodox Church, though, for the lack of free cities and religious centres under its influence, did not have such an opportunity. The Orthodox population in hinterland depended on the good will of noble individuals.

(singular of *raya*) had to say about cities in that time is remembered in the form of a proverb: *U grad kad možeš, iz grada kad te puste* (“To the city when you can, from the city when they let you”).

So, the new model of epic town had to express all the dramatic tension that political and social changes brought to the people in the region. It chose to fix the brutal force of the newcomers and put it into powerful but rude verses:

<p>Koliko je od Morave grada Od Morave pa do Bajne Luke, A odovud do ravna Kosova, Na svakom sam zatvorio vrata I pobio, što j' u gradu bilo. Pobio sam mlade gospodare I odnio blago nebrojeno. Potuko sam slugu i sluškinje, Da ne osta ni žijeve /sic!/ glave. Glave sam im na kolje natico, Nuz kapije na bedeme meto. Na kapiji glava gospodarska, Da se znade, tko j' u gradu bio.¹⁵</p>	<p>As far as from Morava town, From Morava to Bajna Luka, And from there to Kosovo plain, I shut the gates of each town And killed, whoever lived in the city. I killed young lords And took their uncountable treasure. I slaughtered maids and servants too, And left no soul alive. Their heads I put on poles¹⁶, The poles on gates in city walls. On the main gate the owner's head, For everyone to know who once in town was.</p>
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This, of course, is a Turk's monologue which, according to chronicles and other historical sources, is neither fantastic nor exaggerated. It was only to be expected that the opposite, Christian side would share the same savage attitude, and it was exactly what really happened, for the answer of a *hajduk* (sing. of *hajduci*), threatened with impaling and having his head drying on a pole over the city gate, is this:

<p>Prod' se jadan, Verizović-Mujo! Za to se je bedem napravljao da se kiti junačkim glavama: no da ti je na Stubicu doći da ti vidiš, Mujo pobratime, po glavicam' na srčevo kolje đe su turske okapale glave.¹⁷</p>	<p>Leave me alone, Verizović-Mujo! The very reason walls were built is to be ornate by heroes' heads: but if you could only come to Stubica to see, my blood-brother Mujo, the hills around it full of poles on which the Turkish heads are left to dry.</p>
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¹⁵ Song nr. 67 in the Matica hrvatska (Home of Croatia) collection (vol. II), titled *Sin Matijaš ide na mejdan mjesto Marka Kraljevića* (“Mathew, son of the Young King Marko, goes for a duel instead of him”), verses 9-20; similar in the collection *Erlangenski rukopis* (The Manuscript from Erlangen) nr. 114. “Young King” is a Serbian medieval royal title, with no reference to the age of its owner (in the poem, Marko cannot go to the duel himself because of his **old** age).

¹⁶ Which also means sticks, or stakes, whatever might be a word for the tool of impaling. The verse cannot run as: “I impaled their heads” – which is a literal translation - because impaled could be only a living person.

¹⁷ Song nr. 139 in Sima Milutinović's collection, verses 72-78.

So, that was the making of the new model of epic town, which in its finishing faze was reduced to only two symbolic elements: city walls and the enemy's decapitated heads on poles high above the city gates.

This drastic change of symbolic urban imagery was of consequence not only for the oral epic tradition, but for the traditional culture and policy of the region in general. When, at the beginning of XIX century (1804-1813), the time had come for Christian insurrection on the borders of the Ottoman Empire, what actually happened was the arisal of Serbian peasants, the only successful rebellion of the kind in the history of New Age.¹⁸ The main goal of those rebels was to conquer as many Turkish cities as possible, and it finally really ended like this in 1876, by the symbolic surrender of keys to all the cities under Turkish rule (although they were recaptured by the Serbian forces long time before).¹⁹ While the battles were still going on, the rebels would never stay in the cities they took from the enemy. They did make them administrative centres of the new rule (Beograd and Kragujevac), but they themselves always returned to the villages where their families were. For the epic generation who fought those battles, cities and towns were too compromised to be easily trusted again. It was obvious from the beginning that the return of the old cities will not mean the return of the old gentry who once owned them; and the very cities were for too long a part of somebody else's history to be simply transformed and adapted as to fill the gap of four lost centuries. Thus the epic history of towns ended half way between the urbanity and rurality.

The generations to come adopted a more European and more dynamic life style, but even then they were not left alone to develop gradually and peacefully: they were interrupted by too many wars – two Balkan wars (1912, 1913), WW I and II (1914-1918, 1941-1945), and – most recently – civil wars on the former Yugoslavia territory (1991-1995) and in Kosovo. The latter were also urbicidal in the long run, although – metaphorically speaking – no stone was left unturned, as usually happens during civil enmities. As the spirit and Weltanschauung of epic tradition had become a

¹⁸ There was no insurrection in Bosnia for it was annexed by Austria in 1878. In Hercegovina, though, especially on the border with today's Montenegro, there was a rebellion paralel to the First Serbian insurrection (1804-1812) and with – unfortunately – the same ending. Macedonian rebellion of Ilinden (1903) did not succeed, so they had to be liberated together with all other parts of the Balkans during the first and second Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. This only applies for the South Slav territories. Romania and Greece had different and separate histories.

¹⁹ More about it in: *Ослобођење градова у Србији* 1970. More about the subject (towns and cities in epic tradition and traditional culture of South Slavs) in Децелић 1992 and on the CD Rom *Gradovi u hrišćanskoj i muslimanskoj usmenoj epici* (Towns in Christian and Moslem Oral Epic Poetry Belgrade 2004) by the same author.

history almost two centuries ago, the roots of urbicidal intentions of today must be sought for elsewhere, may be in this mistrust and hatred that have not yet had time and opportunity to heal properly.

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УЛОГА СИМБОЛИЧКОГ ГРАДА
У СТВАРАЊУ ПРЕДСТАВА О НАЦИЈИ
(ЈЕДАН СЛУЧАЈ БАЛКАНСКОГ ФОЛКЛОРА: ДВА МОДЕЛА ЕПСКОГ ГРАДА)

Резиме

Овај текст је заснован на проучавању усмене епске традиције на српскохрватском (или, зависно од територије, хрватскосрпском) језику, а географски покрива територију бивших југословенских република Србије, Црне Горе, Хрватске и Босне и Херцеговине (данас три посебне државе од којих свака сматра да има свој посебан језик). Корпус је састављен од 1200 епских песама сакупљених током XIX и у самом почетку XX века, објављених у збиркама које се данас сматрају класичним.

Избор епике као једине врсте текстова који могу послужити као грађа за ову тему није случајан. Само у епици, која је изразито идеолошка поезија, град је конципиран и представљен као у времену и простору дефинисано људско насеље. У свим другим текстовима народне културе (књижевним и некњижевним) град се јавља или као вилинско и чудесно место (лирика, бајке, кратке форме), или као појава са именом али без садржине (етиолошка предања и легенде). У епици, међутим, град је представљен као центар власти и моћи, па се и држава изједначава са бројем и снагом градова који је чине. Само у епским песмама, зато што се оне баве постављањем етичке, социјалне

и политичке нормe – дакле односом између државе, владара, вере и народа, градови су моделовани као локуси са структуром, довољно важни да се за њих воде ратови и гину читаве војске. Како најновији тужни догађаји са нашег простора показују, ова компонента сложеног појма град жилаво се и добро чува и под данашњим, за традицијску – и сваку другу – културу тешким и неповољним условима.