

HISTORY AND LEGEND IN STONE - TO KISS THE BABA

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The intention of this contribution is to find out what the amorphous stones called babas personify, why they are donated fruit and wheat, why a constant feature, found together with all "our" babas, is the element of humidity, the presence of water, and what the meaning of the legend about kissing the baba is. This is achieved first by the field work on the island of Krk and then by a unique Grobnik baba, a most precious clue to the questions put, a confirmation of the babas being part of the female-cult. The author presents arguments to support her thesis that the statue of Eve on the old town hall in Ljubljana is a christianized form of "our" baba. The article is brought to the conclusion-reached gradually by the field work on the island of Krk and then in Grobnik and by the research in the upper part of Croatian Mediterranean (Istra, Velebit) - that the features of archaic culture, suppressed and sublimated, live on through symbolical undertones of the mythological and legendary heritage in a kind of syncretistic reality of cults and legends, in Braudelian constant meeting of the past and present, in the unbroken pouring out of one into the other.

In Albert Camus' juvenile poem *Méditerranée* (Oran, 1933.) the author meditates on the persistence of the Mediterranean as a cultural and historical constant. As this poem is rather long I will only quote these parts that are in substance connected with the present topic partly including it geographically.

*Midi sur la mer immobile et chaleureuse:
M'accepte sans cris: un silence et un sourire.
Esprit latin, Antiquité, un voile de pudeur sur le cri
torturé!
Vie latine qui connaît ses limites,
Rassurant passé, oh! Méditerranée!
Encore sur tes bords des voix triomphent qui se sont
tues,
Mais qui affirment parce qu'elles t'ont nié!*

*Énorme et si légère,
Tu assures et satisfais et murmures l'éternité de tes
minutes,
Oh, Méditerranée! et le miracle de ton histoire,*

*Tu l'enfermes tout entier
De l'olivier au Mantouan, de la brebis à son berger,
rien que l'innommable communion de l'immobilité.
Virgile enlace l'arbre, Mélibée mène paître.
Méditerranée!
Blond berceau bleu où balance la certitude,
Si près, oh! si près de nos mains
Que nos yeux l'ont caressé et nos doigts l'ont délaissé.*

*Pressante antiquité
Méditerranée, oh! mer Méditerranée!*

Camus, the existentialist deeply concerned with the question of the ephemerality of man's existence, finds retained in the Mediterranean a *provoking antiquity* and a *miracle of history*.

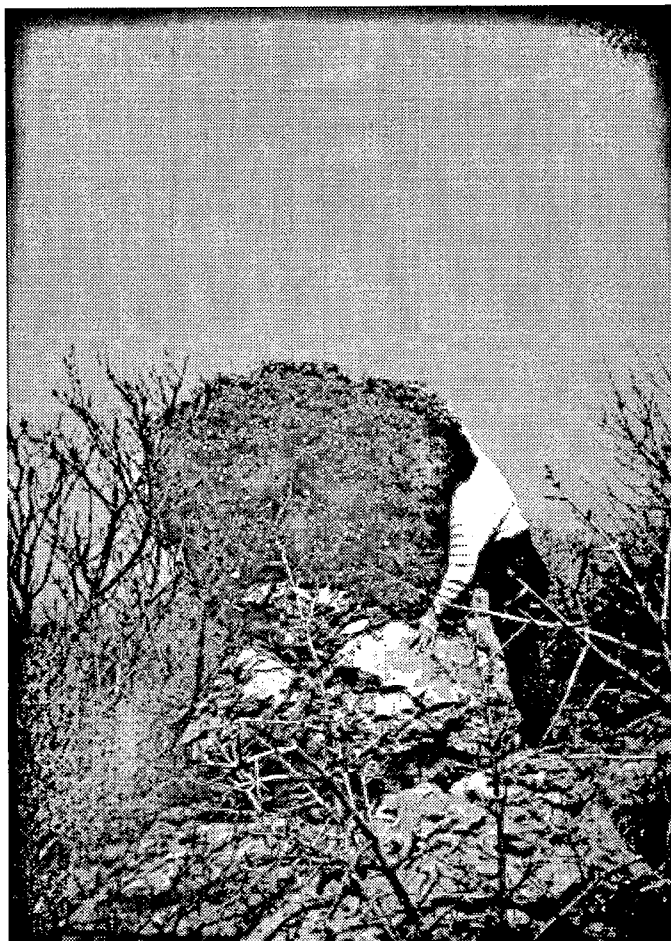
It was by chance that, during my fieldwork in April 1994, I came across another experience of the Mediterranean expressed in literary form, this time concerning a geographically specific part of it, i.e. the island of Krk: when I picked up a piece of folded paper from the ground in *Vela škulja*, a cave in *Vela draga* above Punat. The piece of paper was an invitation to Petar Trinajstić's art photography exhibition poetically and expertly written by Branko Fučić.¹

My ethnological Krk field-work adventure thus began significantly with this loose page from Trinajstić's catalogue where he, through the lens of his camera, eternalizes the geometrical networks of dry stone walls in their labyrinths, with the *stone poem* that I have experienced similarly. What is more, stone was also in my focus, not any stone but one known as a *BABA* (old woman).

To find the Punat *baba* is not as easy as one might expect. My informant, an eighty five year old man from Punat, Valentin Karabaić, knew the landscape of Punat and its surrounding well because, as he said, all his life he had been a shepherd. But, things get more complicated after you discover that there are few people who really know this rocky and craggy ground and that even a shepherd cannot take you to the desired place because of his health problems.

The confusion in search of the *baba*, as it turned out later, was caused by the same name for two different places above Punat. The first, *Vela baba (the Great baba)* in *Vela draga*, was easy to find since it is a large rock that looks like a woman in profile, jutting out from a cliff above a chasm. During the time of heavy rains *Vela draga* becomes a canyon through which torrents of water wash away the red soil carrying it to the sea. The whole landscape, mentioned in 1713 in the inventory of the Brzac estate as *Babin drmun (Baba's fold)*, was named after this *Vela baba* (Bonifačić Rožin 1976:152).

¹Petar Trinajstić: An invitation (partly written by Branko Fučić) to Trinajstić's exhibition "Krkke gromače" (26. 8-15. 9 1989.) in Galerija Toš, Punat on Krk.



The Pucunel Baba (photo: April, 1994)

The second *baba* is situated on the other side of Vela draga, in the region of Pucunel, and is more difficult to find. The second *baba* was shown to me by Dario Mrakovčić, a young man dressed in a black leather jacket who has two jobs - one, roughly speaking, being from the third millenium B.C., and the other for the third millenium A. D., namely with sheep breeding and with nautical turism in the modern Punat Marina.

This second *baba* on *Pucunel* (picture 1) also mentioned by my informant as a watering place (!)² is not so big as the first one and it is difficult to single it out among the multitude of rocks, dry stone walls and deserted sheepsteads.

² Furter in the text the element of water, moisture, humidity will be often emphasised. At the end of this contribution its meaning will be explained in the context of "our" *babas*.

So much for the two *babas* in Punat on Krk - *Vela baba* and *Baba*. My informants told me about one more *baba* on Krk sited half way between Treskavac and Baščanska draga, on Podupčiči, just at the place where, according to my informants, the water flows over the stones the whole year through. It must be noted that the element of water is not accidental and that the presence of water connected with the *babas* will be discussed later.

On Pentecost and on Assumption people used to go from Punat to the church of *Majka Božja Gorička* above Baščanska draga. On this occasion they used to frighten the children that they would have to kiss *baba* when they pass near it on their way to Baška. My informants reported this with reluctance and explained that this was an old-fashioned custom and that they only make fun of it. They, too, were always frightened as children with a threat *Ki još ni bil u Baški će morat babu pojubit* (*Who has not yet been to Baška will have to kiss baba*) and that I would have to do it as well. A fourth *baba* on Krk is situated under *Veli vrh* in the mountain range *Treskavac*. The inhabitants of Punat still say: *Ki će va Dragu baščansku mora mej babami burtižat* (*Who wants to go to Draga baščanska has to deal with the babas*). It is possible that on the island of Krk there are some more such personified stones but these are the four known to me.

In *Senjski zbornik* (Glavičić 1981/2:101), I found a photograph of a big monolith-*baba* (4m x 3m x 2,5m) in another region - on the coastal slope of south Velebit (to the East of the Illyrian citadel near the village Prodanovo on Malo Rujno). Ante Glavičić (1981-2:101), who took the photograph, cites Mirko Marković concerning the shepherdesses who used to leave fruit or some gift for the *baba* on this stone on a certain day to propitiate some good spirit for abundant pasture and the health and fertility of the livestock. B. Gušić (1973:14) also mentions the same stone connected with the custom of scattering wheat and oil on it for good pasture and fertility of the stock.

In this context it should be added that, while looking for this Malo Rujno *baba* on the map of southern Velebit, I came across eight toponyms in a very small area including the name *baba* - four in the very neighbourhood of Malo Rujno: *Babovački kukovi*, *Babac*, *Babica*, *Babika vrelo* and four toponymes 10 kilometres to the East being a part of the highest mountain massif of the whole Velebit (between *Vaganski vrh* and *Babin vrh* above *Sveto brdo*) *Babin vrh* above *Vaganski vrh* and another *Babin vrh* above *Sveto brdo*, *Babino jezero* (*Baba's lake*) and *Babin kuk* (*Baba's hip*).

Professor of history of art in Ljubljana, Emilijan Cevc, kindly informed me about another *baba*, the so called *šmrkava baba* (*slimy baba*). This is a stone head on a well (!) beside the road leading across *Openski vrh* to *Škorklja* (*Scorcola*) and Trieste. Here, too, children are frightened by being told that they will have to kiss the slimy (!) old woman when they come to Trieste for the first time. The name "slimy", of course, refers to the water, the humidity near the well. I have no data whether this *baba* was always presented in a reduced form - only by her head on a well, a possible substitute for her body. As will be shown later *baba* was always, which is very important, very close to water, here - near a well.

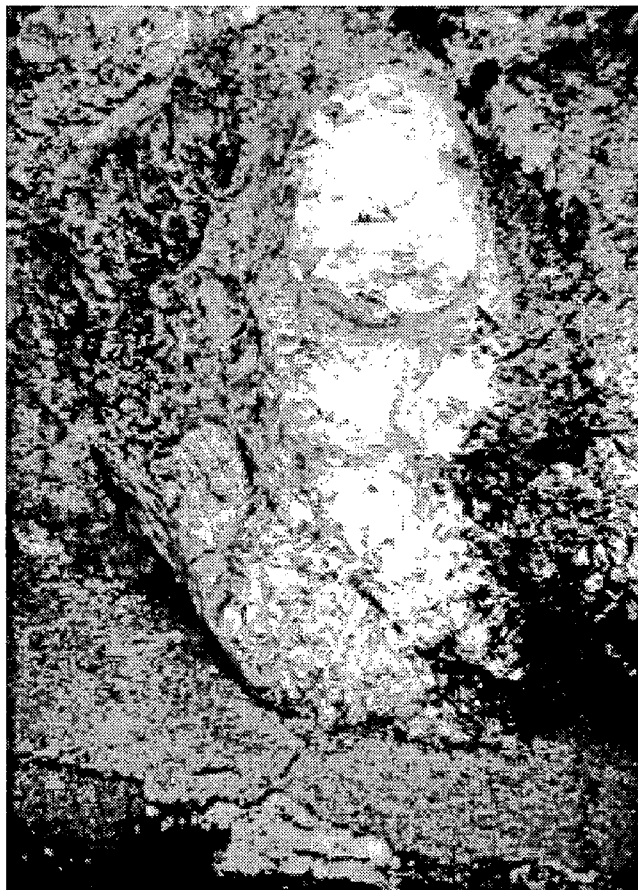


The Grobnik Baba (photo: April, 1994)

I have evidence about threatening children with having to kiss a *baba* on the way to Trieste from Vodice on *Ćićarija* in Istria. Here, however, the folk legend about kissing the old woman is somewhat different. Namely, when people used to go from Vodice to Trieste by cart loaded with their products (cheese, coal etc.) they took children with them sometimes here too scaring them that they would have to *kiss an old woman's arse (staru babu v rit cekit)* before getting to town. In this case first the tradition and then the legend about kissing a stone *baba* was transferred to an imagined old woman with the obligatory lascivious folk addition. Here, too, kissing the *baba* is only retained in legend and reduced to threatening children. Might we state or hypothesize that this legend was preserved in the form of threatening children as part of the process of dying or transformation of a certain tradition that is preserved in the form of legend at the moment when its meaning and its purpose is lost? Thus, a living tradition is transformed into a legend incorporated into children's folklore. It is well known that in ethnology children's folklore often has this function.

We could ask ourselves what the stone *babas* personify, why they are donated fruit and wheat and what the meaning of the legend about kissing the old woman is.

A most valuable contribution and a clue to these questions I found in the form of a most vivid answer, both in the strict and metaphorical sense. I discovered a very



The Grobnik Baba (photo: April, 1994)

unique *baba*, the only such example preserved, in Grobnički zbornik (1988: 101). I was struck by the photograph of *Grobnička baba* (*baba* in Grobnik near Rijeka) which was the reason for the further field-work there.

We are dealing, as it was said already, with the unique *baba* whose shape confirms that the amorphous *babas* on Krk and Vele-bit really do represent the female figure. The Grobnik *baba* (picture 2, and 3) is a grotesque female figure carved out of live rock, just over life size, on which a large head and emphasized feminine attributes (wide hips and gigantic breasts) are immediately noticeable, no doubt symbolizing fertility and fecundity. That this is really the same thing is confirmed by the fact that here, too, that same legend about kissing the *baba* exists. The Grobnik *baba* also must be kissed when one comes to the town of Grobnik for the first time, and she, too, is snotty and muddy, again linked with the ever-present water. Two of my informants who moved to Grobnik by marriage but were born in nearby villages remember being

frightened by their parents with having to kiss Grobnik *baba* on their way to church feast (*samanj*): *Be good and we'll go to the church feast in town, but you'll have to kiss baba being all slimy and muddy.*

Grobnik *baba* is situated at the bottom of the steep road to Grobnik *Kaštel*, on the left side of the old tower where once the entrance gate to the town of Grobnik stood. It is situated just by the house of one of my informants, Blanka Valjan, in the rock with the wall five meters high above it. This wall is a southern part of the water reservoir (*šterna*). My informants emphasize that the image of *baba* has faded a bit and has been worn away by children's games of flinging stones at her, by the rain and north-eastern wind. Dripping of water (!) has left a black trace still clearly visible.

Grobnik, where we found our Grobnik *baba*, is situated in a part that from the very beginning was exposed to an exceptionally complex process of historical and geographic development. It is an area where two cultural complexes intertwine: Central European and Mediterranean.

The first known ethnicum in this region were the Liburnians. The findings in Grobnik (from IV-I century B.C.) according to Šime Batović's classification, belong to the fifth phase in the development of Liburnian culture. It is well known that the Croats took many attributes of this culture after settling in these regions in the seventh century. *Features of this culture*, as Batović points out, *are firmly incorporated into our national culture: the position of settlements, the same way of constructing houses, especially in stone, ... many features of cattle-breeding and agriculture, national costume, jewelry, ornament samples, various tools: grindstones, sickles, axes, knives, razors, pottery products etc.* (Batović 1982:36).

I would like to stress that the amorphous stone *babas* of the Primorje (islands, Istria, Velebit area) and the legends linked with them, and the especially important Grobnik *baba* with the emphatically female form, show that traces we encounter today, especially if a living tradition is still spun around them, are not only remains of the material culture, but reveal some features from the, roughly speaking, spiritual or sometimes social life of earlier periods. For, as Robin Fox, the American theoretician of holistic anthropology has stated and stressed -*We are interested less in what they were doing than in what they were thinking they were doing*, in other words what meaning they gave to it. Fox (1993:10) considers ethnology especially suitable to provide such interdisciplinary help.

This is not the place to discuss the details of Liburnian society. It is well known that the process of indoeuropeization in some parts of the Adriatic was less intensive and so the Liburnians, in its northern part, manifested some specific characteristics. It must be noted in passing that many scholars (J. Wilkes, M. Suić, G. Alföldy, A. Stipčević, etc.) have dealt with gynococracy among the Liburnians. They have, on the basis of the testimony of Greek and Roman historians, stated an explicitly conservative trait in the Liburnian ethnos by which it was possible to preserve the better and privileged position of the woman from indoeuropean times when, according to Suić (1966:54), matriarchy was a reality in the greater part of the Mediterranean. We cannot

here enter into consideration and discussion of the appropriateness of certain terms and notions and their historical validity, especially the term *matriarchy*³. Suić considers that one of the enduring elements of the old matriarchy was the free position of women who took an important part in earning. In addition, the Liburnian pirates were often away from home for long expeditions and women were the keepers of the hearth and the head of the family.

The position of Liburnian women, as these authors stress, was completely different from the position of women in the patriarchal society. I tried to show the visible trace of this difference in the archival material from the 18th and the 19th centuries in my article *Pardon, that's my wife! A contribution to knowledge about the position of the woman from the second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century in Dalmatia and its hinterland* (Vince-Pallua 1990:77-96).

Roman and Greek historians noticed the unusually independent and privileged position of women in Liburnian society: their free behaviour, joint dining of men and women, hierodulia, kinship and descent from a common female ancestor, matrilocality, total independence from men with no trace of the later Roman husband's potestas not only over women, but also over children. These and many other traits were, according to Suić, closely connected with the religious conception of the Liburnians, various features of their cults speak for themselves. Thus he affirms that it is not by chance that in this society, where the traits of matriarchy were so long lived, female-cults were almost a regular feature.

A relatively great number of epyhoric female deities come from the Liburnian area - Anzotica, Ica, Iria, Latra, Sentona - are well known. These are local female deities who represent a sublimation and a cult of the female principle as the main principle in certain communities. Suić (1966:55) points out that each of these female deities is a kind of *Magna mater* of a certain community with the cosmic and terrestrial principle of life and fecundity. They are the goddesses who originate from the neolithic agricultural matriarchal society, as do female deities of the ancient Istri among whom this substratum is also present being pretty allied to the Liburnians, something that can be seen in the *babas* of Istria.

The problem of fertility and fecundity found an adequate expression in the cult that in previous times was by form and by content akin to the well known cults of Mediterranean. I think that all evidence points to the *babas* being part of this female-cult. Giving fruit and other gifts to the *babas* and sprinkling them with wheat and oil could be explained and interpreted in the context where they are viewed as cult stones, the incarnation of the female spirit of fertility.

Confirmation of the fact that fertility and fecundity are essential properties of the *babas* can be found in the fact that a constant feature of all "our" *babas* is the element of humidity, moisture, the presence of water that is connected with all of them.

³ M. Suić in his contribution to the symposium *Hrvatska etnologija u europskome kontekstu (Kroatische Ethnologie im eruopäischen Kontext, Zagreb, 28-29. IX 1995)* refuted his thesis about the once existing matriarchy.

Connected with the Grobnik *baba* we have heard the epithets *slimy* and *muddy* (*šmrkava i blatna*). Let us remember that we met the same expression *slimy baba* when we were considering the stone *baba* on the road over Openski vrh towards Škorklja at the entrance to Trieste. Also, in Istria and Primorje there is an expression *slobbery baba, slinava baba*. However, whether the stone *baba* is characterized by such explicit epithets (*slimy, muddy, slobbery*) expressing humidity and wetness or not, our *babas* are, as I discovered, always accompanied by reference to humidity, wetness, the presence of water in various aspects of its physical appearance. First, they are always situated in the immediate vicinity of water: near wells, cisterns, waterholes, streams etc. On Krk this is confirmed by the toponyms *Pucunel* and *Potočina* - the first from the Italian *pozzo*, well, and the second named after the big stream (*veliki potok - potočina*) that runs there.

Besides these elements that conclusively confirm one of the essential features of the stone *baba*, i.e. fertility, fecundity, I want to stress that Grobnik *baba* with her emphasized female attributes is a crown confirmation for this thesis. She, as all our *babas*, is situated by the water, water container. Every stranger, coming to town for the first time, was supposed to kiss *baba*, situated at the entrance gate of the town Grobnik, in order to be happy. In folk tradition such female figures bring luck and overall prosperity both to individuals and to the town.

It is possible that the Grobnik *baba* represented an incarnation of a local deity, the protector of the city, the *genius loci*. Thus this local Liburnian deity, although with the Slavic substitute "*baba*", has remained the same in its shape, on the same spot in the rock as the sign of the continuous and lasting identity of the town.

Valvasor in his book *Die Ehre des Herzogtums Krain* (1689.) refers to the statue of Eve on the old town hall in Ljubljana. It was made by Janez Lipec, a 15th century sculptor. In the 18th century the town hall was destroyed and the statue, although somewhat ruined, was put in the museum. From another source we get to know that Eve was a popular national symbol, the hall-mark of Ljubljana. It is interesting that this Eve carried the same legend about the obligation to kiss her when one comes to town for the first time. Eve, being situated high above on the old town hall, was not possible to kiss so it is obvious that this was only a legend. Thus, we could consider the Eve, situated on the town hall which is a symbol of town administration, the *genius loci* (of Ljubljana) as it was the case with the Grobnik *baba*. In both cases their duty is to bring a welfare and overall prosperity to the town. Besides, having in mind that Eve also has to be kissed when the town is visited for the first time, I think we could consider Eve on the town hall the christianized form of that same first mother, great-grandmother, which really is the main attribute of Eve in Christianity.

At the end we may state that the stone *baba*, the female figure and the legend accompanying her, fits well into the phenomenon of female cults which in this region was almost regular. In folk tradition such female figures bring luck both to individuals and to their town, so gifts must be made to them and they must be kissed when they are

seen for the first time. One could apply Braudel's statement - that a paysage is a sedimentation of long history - to our *babas* since they really are the fossils of the paysage.

We may conclude that the features of archaic culture, suppressed and sublimated, live on through symbolical undertones of the mythological and legendary heritage in a kind of syncretistic reality of cults and legends. History thus becomes a legend, a legend becomes history, the past turns into the present, the present into the past in the Mediterranean *stone poem* we began with, in *the constant meeting of the past and present*, as Fernand Braudel expressed himself about the Mediterranean, in *the unbroken pouring out of one into the other, in the concert without ending freely performed in two voices*.⁴

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⁴ ...un incontro costante di passato e presente, l'interotto trascorrere dall'uno all'altro, un concertato senza fine liberamente eseguito a due voci (Braudel, F.: *Il Mediterraneo - Lo spazio, la storia, gli uomini, le tradizioni*: 1992:7).