

MEMORIALS AT PLACES OF DEATH: EXAMPLES FROM ORAL TRADITION

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Marking the place where someone unexpectedly, away from home, died in tragic circumstances is a well known custom in Croatia in past and present, and often legends* go with such memorials. Maja Bošković-Stulli has written on this subject and it was she who drew the author's attention to it. These legends confirm the phenomenon of marking the place of sudden death is widespread and can serve as ethnographic data. The relationship between memorial and legend is, however, complex.

Death as an ethnologically relevant cultural phenomenon can be seen in the large amount of writing concerned with death and funerals, and by grave memorials and inscriptions. The placing of memorials, or in some way marking the place where a person may not be buried but died as a result of some natural catastrophe, by the hand of another or as a result of some tragic circumstance, even suicide, has not been systematically studied in ethnology. Moreover it is largely unrecognized as an ethnologically relevant subject.

While carrying out fieldwork in the contemporary development of memorials to the victims of traffic accidents, an unavoidable feature of our roadsides in the seventies and eighties, and still present today, I came across memorials to victims of other unfortunate circumstances: drowning,

* To translate the Croatian word *predaja* we have opted for *legend*. It is not, however, a true translation for, to quote the *Longmans Dictionary of Contemporary English*, legends only have a "slight possible base in truth" while as this article shows *predaja* may have a considerable amount of truth behind it.

freezing, lightning or electric shock, a fall, murder, even suicide or as a result of various kinds of fights with weapons. Inscriptions found at the scene of the misfortune, people's accounts, confirmation in literature relate both to the immediate event and to the recent or more distant past. They show that people seem always to have felt the need to mark the place where someone died in a tragic manner, whatever the cause of that death was. The number and continuity of these memorials dating from far in the past, suggest that they are a cultural constant, at least as far as our cultural sphere is concerned. In recent years in Croatia many memorials were placed beside our roads to mark places where fatal traffic accidents had happened, then the most common cause of sudden death. Today's most present cause is the result of the war in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991/1992) and such deaths are commemorated by temporary, improvised or more permanent memorials, marking the places where soldiers and civilians were killed. There are a particularly large number of these tragic memorials in the streets of Sarajevo where flowers, candles and verbal messages are placed. Unfortunately we are witnesses of the appearance of many such memorial places in Croatia too, and one permanent memorial, marking where a Croatian soldier was killed, has found a place in ethnological literature (Roćenović 1992, 22).

When gathering material relating to the placing of memorials to victims of traffic and related accidents I recorded oral accounts of the events and details of the memorials placed to recall them. Such accounts relate to the immediate and more distant past and some can be recognized as legends. Sometimes they are connected to an existing memorial and sometimes relate to memorials that no longer exist or cannot be found. In the first case (where memorials exist) there is not always an incontrovertible connection between the fatality and the memorial, i.e. we cannot always be sure that the memorial really relates to the event referred to in the oral account, or is connected with some other event or even that the memorial was placed with some other end in mind. In the second case, when the memorial no longer exists, and all we have is an account of a sudden tragic death and mention of a memorial connected with it, the memorial ceases to be most important and the datum about marking the place of unexpected death is no more materially illustrated but becomes a part of oral tradition, that is, a legend.

I will illustrate this by examples from the island of Lošinj recorded in 1979 by Richard March.¹

¹ My American colleague Richard March, whose parents come from Nerezine on the island of Lošinj became interested in my research about memorials at places of sudden death.

1. On the basis of accounts of an unfortunate accident in which a woman was drowned March found a wooden cross beside Čurlovica pond. Three informants from Nerezine agreed over the basic outline of the story: a woman had gone to the pond to rinse wool, she fell into the water and called for help. A man heard her who was lying sick with a fever. He ran to the pond, jumped into the water, and pulled out the woman but she was already dead. After his dive into the cold water the man got better and his fever left him.

March's three informants were of varying ages, but all three said that the drowned woman had been a distant relation. M. S. P. born in 1894 said that the woman was her great great-grandmother and that she had been drowned about 1790. K. M. B. born in 1912 thought that the woman was his great great-grandfather's sister and that she had drowned more than 100 years ago. M. M., born in 1933, thought the woman had been the sister of his grandmother or great-grandmother and that it had happened 100 years ago. Even without knowing the relationship of the three informants it is obvious that the drowned woman cannot have been the same and that she could not have been related to all three. Making the story part of one's own family history was supposed to give it credibility.

2. On the road between Holmac and Taržić is said to stand a wooden cross in a heap of stones (March could not find it). According to one informant two brothers had been on a journey and stopped at that place to have something to eat, they only had one onion and quarreling about how to divide it one brother killed the other. This informant thought the brothers were shoemakers, and that it had happened 400 or 500 years ago. A woman gave a somewhat different account: the brothers were not on a journey but were working in that place, they came from the Fernandović family and the event had happened more than 200 years ago.

3. A wooden cross stands in a heap of stones at a place called Počivalica. On the basis of the story March found it. It was an improvised cross made of two slender branches joined with nylon thread. March discovered the name of the man who had put up the cross two years earlier (1977); a vivid telling of the legend had led him to renew the cross which had earlier been made of very poor materials and had decayed. All three informants agreed that at that spot a man from Nerezine had been overtaken by a storm and had frozen to death. They did not agree over when this had happened: according to one it was 100 years ago, the second said 200 and the third said even more than 200.

While staying on Lošinj in 1979 he did a little research, the results of which he kindly let me have.

Besides these three examples from Nerezine on the island of Lošinj accounts of another four similar memorials were gathered at the same time. Three older informants told of a wooden cross on Križina (I do not know if the toponym, which is undoubtedly derived from the noun "križ" [=cross, trans.] and is connected with the story) where somebody had died, but they did not know any details. March did not find any memorial. In connection with the next story, however, he found an iron cross cemented into a stone base. According to one informant it marked the place where Lucijanka S. had died on her way home from visiting her daughter in Sveti Jakob. At that spot she had fallen and, being old, could not get up and froze to death. This was supposed to have happened about 1919 or 1920. A second informant added that the woman had come home late because she didn't want to spend the night at her daughter's house.

An iron cross stands on the shore at a place called Arci. Two informants agreed that it marked the place where the sea had washed up a body but they gave two different names of the victim. It had happened between 1933 and 1935. On the waterfront in Sveti Jakob there is also said to be an iron cross marking the place where someone had drowned in 1946, but the informant knew no details.

In comparing these accounts of seven memorials placed where people had lost their lives we are immediately struck by the fact that it is the oldest events that are told with the greatest amount of detail which gives them a place among well formed and well preserved legends with a developed story. I do not consider that all these accounts should be treated as legends, but I have included them all for a number of reasons. First they make a group because they were gathered in the same way, by information based on memory and oral communication. March moved from people and what they remembered and only then tried to find the memorial. Secondly they form a group in that they all relate to a small area, part of an island, and witness the number and density of such memorials; while at the same time they say something about the place such events take in the consciousness and memory of people of the locality. By giving all seven it is possible to compare them. It is possible that these cases of accidental death, still today recorded on the basis of relatively fresh memories of the recent past, may with time become legends.

In this light we may consider other accounts recorded during research into memorials put at places where people met sudden death. For instance on a derelict cross from Bosnia only the family name and the date 1938 can be read. All additional information that: the cross had been put up in memory of a man who had been killed by his own nephews in a quarrel about the division of the estate, that he was found dead where the cross now stood, that it had been put up by his family was supplied to me

by people who lived nearby. They had been born twenty years later and had not witnessed the tragic event but heard the older generation relating it. Can we take this as an example of the first links in a narrative chain, and will it go on?

Oral narration concerning fratricide in Kozjak (Dalmatia) was, in his own way, recorded by the folk writer I. P. Carev in 1950 and begins thus: "The cross in the stone. Long ago a brother killed his brother in the field beside that big rock... where today there is a cross hollowed out..." (Carev 1950, 111-112, mss). The story tells how two brothers were driving a flock of sheep into shelter from a storm. Throwing a stone at a laggard sheep one brother accidentally hit the other on the head and killed him. No one examined the cause of the death but the brother confided in a relative, he told his wife what had happened and soon the story spread. The living brother was so tortured by his conscience that he fell ill and after a few years died. After his death the relative who he had confided in hollowed out a cross in the rock where the tragedy had happened. The writer found no record of the event in the parish registers between 1770 and 1825, the years which seemed to him right for "long ago", thus his approximate dating of the event. In spite of the fact that there is no reliable evidence of the event in official records Carev insisted on the truth of the legend as narrated, and stressed the oral mode of its preservation over several generations. He also wrote that many places where a murder occurred are marked by crosses and mentioned two more cases known to him. One of them had been recorded in 1914 by don Frane Bulić, the famous Croatian archeologist. Bulić based his record on the oral account of a local informant: "In Trogir, about 1840, lived the Lubin brothers and a sister. One brother, called Marko, was a blacksmith. He fell in love with Ana Danilova from Kaštel Stari. Her family was against her marrying a commoner such as Marko Lubin. After one of their nocturnal meetings, for Marko would go on foot from Trogir to Kaštel Stari, someone was waiting for him near Divulje on the road from Trogir to Stari and killed him, throwing his body under the bridge below the road. In the morning the corpse was found, taken to Trogir and later buried. A stone cross was erected to Marko beside the stream at the place where he had been murdered, which still stands today" (Museum archives 1914, mss).²

If we compare the date of the record (1914) and the date which Bulić's informant estimated as when the murder happened (1840) it is probable that he was retelling a story heard from an older generation rather than one remembered from early childhood. The already men-

² Maja Bošković-Stulli drew my attention to this document and let me use her notes on it.

tioned memory of Lubin's death and memorial raised to mark the place by Carev's informant means that the recollection and retelling was still going on in 1950.³

There are accounts of legends mentioning the marking of places of sudden and unexpected death in the manuscript *Povies'sela Duba* (History of Dube village, Matković 1912, mss) in which the writer attempts to reconstruct the history of his village on the basis of oral narration. His neighbours, mostly old people, told him the history of their families. Their memories reached back much further than the number of years they had lived, which means that what they related was part of family tradition. In this manuscript, which dates from 1912, fourteen examples are mentioned of places where a "memorial cross" was raised where someone had died - a rock was placed on the spot and a cross cut into it.

The greatest number of these memorial crosses seem to be connected with murders as is the following account from the island of Brač recorded by Maja Bošković-Stulli in 1969:

"... legend of the nickname *Hajdukovi* [= brigands, trans.] given to the Karmelić family from Bol: from ancient times they had pastured their flocks in the mountains, hardly ever going down to Bol; near their pastures the Petrinčić family had fields and the Karmelić animals damaged their crops. One day a Petrinčić found a Karmelić goat on his land, he killed it and threw it over the fence. In revenge the Karmelić brothers killed him. A cross still stands on the place where he was murdered" (Bošković-Stulli 1975, 36, summary of legend).⁴

A legend circulating among the Burgenland Croats of the village of Frakanava mentions a "red cross" marking the place of a murder and raised by the murderer himself. A man married to a hunchback wife had a mistress. The lovers were surprised in a field by a neighbour. The lover killed the neighbour and buried him, secretly putting up a wooden cross to

³ The same tragic events were recorded in verse by the folk poet Janko Čipiko from Kaštel Novi. In the volume of the *Museum archives* mentioned here there is a record of Čipiko's poems (probably copied) among which is his *Poem on the Murder of Marko Lubin from Trogir*. A manuscript poem recalling the same event is in Stipan Poparić's book of poems (mss) and is attributed also to Janko Čipiko; in this collection it is called *On the death of the Beloved Marko Lubin of Trogir*. (Poparić, 88-93, mss.) This collection contains photocopies of manuscripts from three notebooks found by Tanja Perić-Polonijo while doing fieldwork in 1980 in Donja Kaštela. On the basis of his poems she considered that the folk poet, Janko Čipiko, was writing between the twenties and fifties of the nineteenth century. She dates the Poparić collection to the first half of the present century.

⁴ The murderer fled to the mainland and joined the *hajduks* and the family got the nickname after him. The entire legend is in the manuscript collection of *Folk tales and legends of the island of Brač* (Bošković-Stulli 1969, 62-66, mss).

mark the place, the cross was said to have been red. It was not known who put up the cross until much later. The truth was only revealed when the murderer confessed on his death bed to a young priest. This priest was the son of the man who had been murdered. Later the family (the story does not make it clear which) put up a stone memorial. The record does not mention if the informant had ever seen the cross or the memorial (Ritig-Beljak 1969-1982, 9-10, mss).

Maja Bošković-Stulli several times recorded legends of collective murders on the Adriatic coast and islands and in Kastav in Istria. A feudal ruler or his representative would be killed by his subjects in revolt against injustice, and in the trial these would claim collective guilt and remain unpunished (Bošković-Stulli 1956, 1973, 1975, 1991). In Kastav the people drowned the *kapetan* (overseer of a feudal estate) in a pond because he demanded more than the recognized tithe. In the trial they confused the judge by saying that they had all killed him together. On the islands of Brač, Mljet, and Koločep there is a story that the people killed an unjust and brutal lord (governor of the island) and at the trial said that he had been killed by a mallet and that everyone had held the mallet. In the last mentioned article especially (1991) Bošković-Stulli very finely analyses the interplay of fact and fiction in these narratives and asks whether an actual event was gradually transformed into a legend or whether a legend model already existed and took to itself new historical facts. For most of the accounts that she recorded she did not find a basis in history but considered that "the historical background was clearly marked by actual social relations" and that all these legends recorded history as seen by the people (Bošković-Stulli 1991, 123).

The case of the Kastav *kapetan* is recorded by an inscription on the cistern built where once the pond had been. The memorial was placed much later and the inscription on it runs "Kapitan Frane Morelli, we all did him in the pond at the time of Judge Kinkela 1666". Bošković-Stulli, on the basis of historical records showing the frequency of conflict between the people of Kastav and their feudal lords, concludes that the Kastav legend subsumed memories of what happened over a whole century in a single event (it is true that Morelli was killed, but another similar murder happened at the same place, and the legend itself follows another well known model). "Thus a story, indirectly inspired by a historical event, was linked to a clearly determined event and became a local symbol which was given visual presence by the inscription on the cistern" (Bošković-Stulli 1991, 114). It is clear that the real aim of the inscription is not to mark the place where the *kapetan* was killed but to record the legend and that those who put it up intended it to be a symbol of resistance and a flattering tribute to the people's historical virtues: love of justice, courage and soli-

darity, and to nurture in the younger generation a feeling of pride in their local traditions.

An example from Montenegro: on the basis of a still living legend about a Montenegrin hero (the name is not recorded) in the fighting against the Turks in 1678, the Veterans Association of Nikšić in 1956 put up a memorial to him on a road at the entrance to the town.

Some legends of the killing of local rulers or some of their variants mention a memorial at the place of the murder. Details of such memorials are not important for the story and are often left out. The legend of the murder of the lord of the island of Koločep (or Kalamota) near Dubrovnik is recorded in four variants - three by Bošković-Stulli and one by Vicko Lisičar - which mention a memorial at the place where he was killed. These four accounts are a good example of how details of a memorial may get "lost" in the telling. In the second Bošković-Stulli record a memorial to the murdered lord is mentioned; "Once there was a lord of Kalamota who was teasing girls and the islanders could not abide him and killed him with a mallet at the crossroads between two villages, Gornje and Donje Čelo. At the place a memorial plaque was put with a cross and a mallet - on that plaque there was a mallet" (Bošković-Stulli 1975, 134). The legend goes on how the islanders were summoned to answer for their deed. All but one went to Dubrovnik. To the question who had killed the ruler they answered the mallet, and who had held the mallet: all of us. They were found not guilty. In her first record the same author noted "At that place [the place of the murder, Z. R.] there was a cross put on the road between Gornje and Donje Čelo", and in her third record "Once a lord came to Kalamota and passed by this place where there is now a cross" (Bošković-Stulli 1975, 134). This last example shows how an account of a memorial at the place of a murder may become so truncated as to make no sense.

Lisičar's account of the legend is largely the same as Bošković-Stulli's second record but includes one special detail found nowhere else. The Dubrovnik Senate made the islanders put a memorial at the place where the murder was committed - "A huge, thick slab with a crucifix". Lisičar is of the opinion that this legend about Koločep has no historical foundation for the island never had its own lord, but that it was adopted from the island of Mljet where such a murder, so it seems, was committed. As far as the memorial is concerned - the carved relief - Lisičar thought that it had been brought from the nearby chapel of St. Peter and placed halfway between the two island villages for a different reason; to incite the passers-by to say a prayer, as it seems to have been the case in other parts of Dalmatia (Lisičar 1932, 154-155).

Bošković-Stulli agrees that the legend of the killing of the Koločep lord is not based on any known and witnessed event but the same is true of other islands, including Mljet (Bošković-Stulli 1991, 123). And an older account of the legend from Mljet says that there was no lord there (Engel-Stojanović 1922, 402). In Mljet records there is no mention of any memorial which could be associated with the legend of the lord. There is a similar legend concerning the Črnomir (or Crnomir) family from the island of Korčula in a record by Stjepan Stepanov who also mentions the murder of a lord (Stepanov 1962). Stepanov was primarily interested in the Korčula poem about the Crnomirs but he noted the legend and drew attention to the persons who had recorded it long before. The legend, Stepanov records, is about the Crnomir family from Čara village. The oldest man of the family, who was also village headman, Petar Crnomir, refused to give the lord representing the Prince of Venice the best land, he even insulted him and then ran away. The Venetian police caught him and killed him near a place called Klokolina. To revenge Petar his brothers killed the lord near a place called Knežev grob [Lord's Grave, trans.]. Venice sent soldiers to Čara, killed two of the brothers and sentenced the rest to the galleys. During the trial they were asked "Who killed the lord?" and they answered "A mallet", "and who held the mallet?" and they answered "All of us". Stepanov's transcription of the poem about the Crnomir family does not mention the murder of the lord nor any kind of memorial.

However, in an manuscript record of the same legend a man from Korčula in 1980 brought a drawing of a stone cross which was said to come from the place where Petar Crnomir was killed (Bačić Grlica 1980, 127-128, mss). When I inquired about the cross the author told me that he had done the drawing on the basis of a photograph owned by another man from the island. I asked Zoran Palčok, who comes from Korčula, to see what he could find out. He found the cross, photographed it, and from the owner of the land on which it stood heard a story about the death of Petar Crnomir. According to this variant Petar Crnomir had been wounded in the knee on that spot (Klokolina) and had died in another place where he was temporarily buried and later transferred to the family grave. The stone cross at Klokolina stood in a big pile of stones, the owner of the land said that a bigger cross had once stood there but about 1905 a great storm had knocked it over and from the remains the smaller cross had been made.

Another widespread set of legends relate to what are known as "wedding graveyards"; they are memorials to deaths that took place at weddings mostly as a result of the clash of two wedding parties meeting, neither of which would let the other pass. But there are other causes too: freezing, fights with *hajduks* or with Turks, (Dorđević 1930). Records of

these legends do not always mention whether the wedding parties were buried at the place where they were killed. Bošković-Stulli has recorded some of these legends; two of them from near Sinj. The first (no. 52) relates the death and burial of wedding parties in a field. The second (no. 53) is entitled *Svatovsko groblje, stećak i Markov skok* (Wedding graveyard, stećak and Marko's leap) and runs: "They say in Trilj of the big rocks lying in a field, that once wedding parties were killed there, but nobody knows whose, and that their memorial is here in rocks"; (Bošković-Stulli 1968, 377). The explanation given here of the big rocks lying on flat land is that they are "in memory" of wedding guests who died; the place is not known as wedding graveyard, nor does anybody say that they were buried here.

The above has similarities with two other legends from the same region noted by Nikola Sikirica. The first concerns the death of a wedding party which was "marked by big rocks", and in the second, much more detailed story, a wedding party died in a clash with *hajduks*, again we have rocks of unusual form which are said to show the members of the wedding party in the position in which they met death: "and so they placed rocks in memory where people had died" (Sikirica 1979, 132). Another record from the same region says: "In Otok village there is a legend about the death of wedding parties and a cross that marks the place" (Milinović 1863, 132).

These examples are expressly concerned with the marking of the place where the tragedy occurred, they do not mention that the people were buried there, though this does not mean that they were not. We must remember that these are legends and not historical events. It is obvious that rocks, either natural or shaped by man, particularly if they are found in an unusual place or have an unusual shape, lead people to wonder about their origin and meaning and thus stories and legends come to be woven around them. A similar thing happens with old graves of unknown origin. Thus naturally occurring rocks that are unusually shaped, and memorials of unknown origin, sometimes figure in legends as the places where a tragic death occurred and sometimes as tombstones. Thus for example at the entrance to Solin Bay on the island of Mljet there is a fourteenth century cross, rustically worked and with an inscription in italicized Bosančica (Gušić-Fisković 1958, 13, 49). An islander told Bošković-Stulli that it marked the place near where a man had sunk in his boat. Incorrect linkage of an old cross with a more recent tragedy is not mere chance: the man did not know the origin or purpose of the cross, but he did know that memorials of this kind were placed to mark the place where such tragedies happened.

The question of the connection between a legend and an object was inspiringly dealt with by Bausinger. He believes that legends do not grow out of objects, what is decisive is an interpretation rooted in general cognitive horizons and objects only provoke this interpretation: "Ein Feldkreuz, irgendwo in der Flur, reizt zur Deutung - und auch dort wird dann von Unglücksfällen oder Verbrechen erzählt, wo *kein* derartiges Ereignis nachgewiesen werden kann." (Bausinger 1968, 175)

Let us return for a moment to the already mentioned Koločep case and add one more dimension to the complex problem of the relationship between oral tradition and historical event. In his book Lisičar published a photo of the Koločep memorial which shows a stone slab bearing a relief of the crucifix, above it the sun and moon, below it two objects one of which might be a spear, the other has a shaft similar to that of a spear but ending in a ball not in a point (Bošković-Stulli's informant saw it as a mallet!). This relief undoubtedly represents Christ's Passion, however we identify the two objects below the cross.⁵

When writing about the reasons for placing memorials in Slovenia Marijan Zadnikar mentions as the first reason the legal cause; in crimes of passion, in addition to other forms of punishment, the murderer was obliged to mark the place of the crime (*Zadnikar 1965, 14*). In older times all over Europe those who had committed such a crime had to mark the place with a stone cross as penitence for the crime. A large number of settlement contracts dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, reached with the family of the murdered person, expressly mention the obligation to put up a stone cross; they were put for the salvation of the person's soul or to redeem him from Purgatory, for which reason Christ's Passion was often shown on them. According to some authors such crosses are to be found from Scandinavia to Italy, and from the Rhine to Silesia. In a later development stone crosses were replaced by reliefs of Christ's Passion and memorials known as *marterln*, placed for the victims of murder and also for those who had died other kinds of violent death. On them the tragedy was depicted. (*Wörterbuch der dt. Völkde 1974, Marterln, 540, steinkreutz 774-775*)

In the light of all this it is difficult not to ask how is it that so many details coincide; why do we find a relief of Christ's Passion on Koločep, and is it an accidental detail in the story that the Dubrovnik Senate ordered the memorial to be put up? The relief of the crucifix as an incentive to prayer, as suggested by Lisičar, does not preclude it having been placed as

⁵ When Christ was on the cross the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and gave him to drink with a sponge filled with sour wine and fastened to a reed or a spear. This is how I would explain that which the informant saw as a mallet.

a memorial to a death, for incentive to prayer for someone's soul is the fundamental intention of stone crosses, reliefs and the Marterln.

In conclusion one may say that on the one hand the existence of memorials, especially those of unknown origin as well as rocks of unusual forms, leads people to weave legends and favours their spread which may or need not be based on a historical event. On the other hand the existence of a legend concerning human death sometimes leads to its unfounded connection with some memorial of unknown origin found in the vicinity. Sometimes legends mention a memorial which does not exist (either because no one knows where it is any more or because it perished in time). Sometimes the memorial is not mentioned in the story but a patient researcher may find trace of it. In this case mention of the memorial was lost somewhere in the telling and retelling since the legend's main purpose is recounting the tragedy not the placing of a memorial to it. Finally, the existence of a legend may in itself be incentive for the placing or renewal of a memorial.

Even more complicated than the complex relationship between legend and memorial is the relationship between legend and historical event, the interweaving of story and reality. For those carrying out research into the marking of places where people met violent death it is important that legends which only mention a memorial, or legends connected with some specific memorial, founded or not, confirm the marking of the place of death as part of traditional culture. Even when it can be proved that a given legend had no connection with a particular memorial, or that a given legend is not based on a historical event, the existence of such legends and the memorials referred to in them shows that the marking of the place where a death occurred is a well-known and widespread cultural experience.

(Translated by Sonja Bićanić)