

## BILEĆKE RUDINE

### Some Unresolved Questions

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It is only when one attempts to investigate local history that one realizes how many important questions from the history of the Croats and Serbs still remain unresolved. Significant problems are often dismissed with generalizations which gain currency by uncritical repetition. For several years this author has been investigating the history of Bileća Rudine, a region of Yugoslavia that offers the student of history many challenges. Although written records on Bileća Rudine are scanty and scattered, once collected and made accessible, they will enable the historian to produce a meaningful history of the region. A number of Roman and Byzantine classics shed light on Bileća Rudine. As far as the medieval and the Ottoman periods are concerned, apart from the several basic Serbian documents and the eyewitness accounts put down by foreign travellers, there are references to Bileća Rudine in many documents in the Dubrovnik State Archive, the archives of Venice, and in the Turkish archives in Istanbul.

Located about fifty kilometers north of Dubrovnik, Bileća Rudine has played a significant role throughout history due to its geographical location between the Adriatic littoral and the Balkan hinterland. Although a part of the economically underdeveloped Karst, Bileća Rudine has long been of strategic importance. Each of the succeeding civilizations (Illyrian, Roman, Byzantine, Serbian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian) left its traces in the region. Even the fleeting moments of the Hunnic invasion and the presence of Ostrogothic rule have left something behind. In the cultural symbiosis of the local population, therefore, one finds Illyrian, Graeco-Roman, Slavic, Ottoman, Austrian and other elements. The region abounds in archeological and historical monuments. The Illyrian ruins (*gradine*) and burial mounds, the Roman roads and villas, the medieval churches and cemeteries, the medieval monoliths or *stećci*, and various Ottoman architectural survivals attest to Bileća Rudine's rich and diversified past.

Since the days of Roman rule important roads traversed Bileća Rudine, linking the Adriatic Coast with Central Europe and the Near East. The region was an integral part of medieval Travunija (Tribonia), one of the first localities which the Slavs occupied and in which they were able to secure a semblance of political organization. At different times it was a part of Byzantium, Duklja

(Dioclia), and Raška (Rascia), and was long an integral part of the Nemanjić Serbia. In 1388, a year before the fateful battle of Kosovo, the native and Bosnian warriors engaged the Turks in a fierce battle at Bileća. The Turks were defeated and the conquest of Bileća Rudine was delayed for almost a century. At the end of the fourteenth century Bileća Rudine was annexed by the kingdom of Bosnia and in the first half of the fifteenth century it was a part of Herceg Stjepan's short-lived state of Hercegovina. Sometime between 1468 and 1472 Bileća Rudine fell to the Turks and in the course of the ensuing half century it became fully integrated into the Ottoman state and social system.

Despite the considerable mobility of the population in Bileća Rudine throughout history, partly as a result of epidemics and droughts, and partly due to wars and civil strife, since the medieval days the settlers nearly always came from regions with similar patriarchal culture. This tended to cement the existing cultural and social institutions in Bileća Rudine. But much research remains before we can answer with certitude several basic questions: the precise directions of population movements to and from the region; the periods in which these movements occurred and the reasons for them; the accuracy of the family legends preserved by both the »old« families (*starinci*) and the newcomers; the origins of the two predominant physical types among the local population; the origins of the non-Slavic and Slav family names; and, the stages in the long process of the Slavonization of the indigenous Romanized Illyrian population.

At various times since the 1890's, archeologists have explored Bileća Rudine, a region particularly rich in Illyrian tumuli and the medieval monoliths (*stećci*), and have excavated many of them. Various Roman monuments (roads, inscriptions, traces of a Roman bridge over the Trebišnjica) have been recorded. The first systematic archeological investigation in Bileća Rudine took place in 1967—1969, prior to the harnessing of the Trebišnjica river into a man-made Bileća Lake. In the fear that with the submersion of some two dozen villages important historical monuments would perish, archeological investigations of the Trebišnjica basin became urgent. Working against time, the excavation was carried out by a combined team of experts from the Zemaljski Muzej (Territorial Museum) in Sarajevo and Stanford University in California. The head of the project was Zdravko Marić and the head of the American contingent was Wayne S. Vucinich.

After preliminary explorations it was decided to concentrate on the investigation of about a dozen Illyrian *tumuli* at Orah, Panik, Čepelica and Ljubomir (in charge were Boro Čović and Zdravko Marić), the Roman villas at Panik and Ljubomir (in charge Irma Čremošnik), the medieval tombstones at Ljubomir and the monoliths at Mistijalj\* and several other places (in charge Marian Wenzel), and the medieval churches at Panik, at the Trebišnjica source, and in Trebinje (in charge Janko Bjelošević and Marko Popović). In this brief essay, however, we shall make no attempt to assess the historical and artistic significance of the Illyrian finds (especially those in Ljubomir), the exquisite

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\* The author prefers to use the form »Mistijalj« employed by local inhabitants than »Mistihaalj«, introduced by scholars who came from outside.

mosaics of the Roman villas in Panik and Ljubomir, and the medieval churches and tombstones in Trebinje and Ljubomir. Instead we shall make a few comments on the *stećci* which are probably the most enigmatic historical question in Yugoslav historiography. To unravel the *stećci* mystery would not only help us understand important aspects of medieval history of Bileća Rudine but also some aspects of the medieval history of the Croats and Serbs in general.

There is an abundance of monoliths of different kinds in Bileća Rudine. Šefik Bešliagić estimated that, using contemporary population figures, there is one monolith for every eight inhabitants in Bileća Rudine. The monoliths are particularly numerous in what was once the eastern part of the geographic and ethnographic Bileća and is today a part of the district of Nikšić in Montenegro. The monoliths in the form of high tombs are most common in regions of Bileća Rudine and Trebinje (Kajmaković). An individual monolith is found here and there but they come mostly in clusters of a few or many, as at Mistijalj, and often in the vicinity of an old church, renovated and in use, or still in a state of ruins. Wherever the monoliths appear, they are usually located on a prominent place, and sometimes on rock mounds as at Krvnica near Divin, along the Stolac-Bileća road (Vego). There still remains much mystery, however, concerning the actual cutting and transporting of the monoliths, some of which weigh more than six tons. The Zemaljski Muzej-Stanford archeologists discovered a quarry, in nearby Čepelica, at which at least some of the Mistijalj monoliths were cut. Under one of the monoliths at Mistijalj a wooden beam was found which was probably used in transporting the monolith or for installing it in its place.

The combined Zemaljski Muzej-Stanford team investigated about 400 monoliths of which more than 300 were concentrated in one place at Mistijalj, inside a wall-enclosed modern cemetery and church. The monoliths at Mistijalj were located on elevated ground on the right bank of the Trebišnjica and included all three principal types: slab (*ploča*), chest or chest-shaped (*sanduk*), sarcophagus-shaped or peak-typed (*sljeme*). All of these heavy monoliths were moved to one side, the graves under them exhumed, the skeletons recovered, the form of burial studied and the few artifacts found in the graves collected. About 300 skeletons were removed from the graves at Mistijalj, sketched, photographed, measured, and shipped to Harvard's Peabody Museum for osteological study (by Alden and Judy Redfield, and Gloria Edynak). A number of finer examples of monoliths were moved to the Zemaljski Muzej and the newly established Museum at Bileća for preservation. Only a few of the monoliths were decorated. A close study was made of the architecture of the monoliths, and the symbolism of the ornamentation on them. The monoliths were sketched and photographed, and this evidence preserved in the files of the Zemaljski Muzej.

Probably the largest number of monolith inscriptions are found in the Bileća Rudine and the adjacent districts, although the inscriptions on the monoliths specifically at Mistijalj are conspicuously absent. The ornamentation on the monoliths at Mistijalj and in other parts of the Bileća Rudine is much like that which appears on the monoliths elsewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in adjoining districts. Thus one finds geometrical motifs, borders, bounded

arches, transitional arches »A«, horseshoes, crosses, crosses and swastika, hollows and rings, crescents, swords, shields, birds, male figures, figures with weapons, male dancers, male and female dancers, single horsemen, two horsemen, and two horsemen with deer between them (Mandić, Solovjev, Truhelka, Wenzel).

A number of experts have systematically collected and studied the ornamental motifs on the tombstones or the monoliths in hope they might find the clues to the religion, culture, and social background of those buried under them. Marian Wenzel produced a monumental tome on the monoliths and their ornamentation. But, the heterogeneity of motifs and their contradictions have made it impossible to associate the monoliths exclusively with the followers of any one religions community. It is common knowledge that throughout history Christians in the Balkans embellished their tombstones with decorative symbols that had nothing to do with their professed religious beliefs. Yet, the simplicity of the monoliths, and the rarity of ornamentation or inscription on them seem to confirm the views of those who link the monoliths to the dualistic *krstjani*. That one encounters occasional Christian symbols on the monoliths could be interpreted to mean that local tradition in the architecture of tombstones and ornamentation on them was stronger than religious tabus, or that in time the »Bogumils« had compromised with Christianity and began to employ Christian symbols on their tombstones.

The monoliths at Mistijalj, like those in other parts of Bileća Rudine, have been traced to the second half of the fifteenth century, and probably do not span more than two generations. This, if true, would suggest a possible linkage to the dualistic *krstjani* or Bogumils or the followers of the Church of Bosnia (*ecclesia bosniensis*), who after persecution by the Bosnian king Tomaš in 1459 found refuge in the lands belonging to Herceg Stjepan. There is good reason to believe that if the *krstjani* ever existed in Bileća Rudine, they came there not from the east (Bulgaria, Raška, Duklja) but from Bosnia to the north, and that they did not appear in Bileća Rudine until the second half of the fifteenth century. By then the *krstjani* no doubt had lost most of their original Manichean attributes. But as yet one cannot say with certainty that the *krstjani* lived in Bileća Rudine. Nor has it been possible to link the monoliths to the *krstjani* exclusively.

If the *krstjani* were driven from Bosnia in the second half of the fifteenth century as some writers assert, then one might ask what happened to the autochthonous population in the Bileća Rudine. Were the inhabitants of Bileća Rudine after the Ottoman conquest dispersed, destroyed, or converted? Were they driven out or assimilated by the *krstjani*? Or, did the autochthonous population survive and co-exist with the newcomers? There is evidence to the effect that at first the Ottoman Turks did not exert pressure either on the Christians or *krstjani* to accept Islam, and that they continued to live as heretofore until the beginning of the sixteenth century (Mandić). If the Christian and *krstjani* communities co-existed, did they influence one another and how? How does one account for the disappearance of *krstjani* and not the Christians? Did the Christians prove more resilient to Islamization, or more prone to compromise? Did the *krstjani* go over to Islam *en masse*, die in

fighting the Turks, or were they assimilated into the Christian community? If Bileća Rudine was left deserted after the Ottoman conquest, how and when was it repopulated? Strong evidence indicates that the inhabitants of Bileća Rudine in the fifteenth century were of Orthodox Christian persuasion. Yet, there are writers (Dominik Mandić, for example), who insist that they were predominantly Roman Catholic and that they were converted to Orthodoxy with the Ottoman blessing. None of these, and still other questions, has thus far been given a definite answer, which of course makes the investigation of the monoliths and the *krstjani*, all the more challenging.

The superficial study of the evidence on the monoliths gathered at Mistijalj and other parts of Bileća Rudine by the Zemaljski Muzej-Stanford team, has not added thus far much to what is already known about the monoliths and the *krstjani*. However, additional evidence may yet come after further study of the voluminous and multifarious data collected at Mistijalj. If after the completed study the answers to all the questions are not found, it will be possible at least to refute or modify some of the existing hypotheses.

That the monoliths have been frequently associated with the *krstjani* seems natural and logical. Unable to explain the origin of either the monoliths or the *krstjani*, scholars have linked the two mysteries. Some Yugoslav historians have suggested the possibility that the monoliths were erected by the Vlachs. The American scholar, Marian Wenzel, who has elaborated upon this theory, contends that the custom of using monolithic blocks as tombstones, sometimes decorated with architectural features, or created shields, was inherited by the Vlachs (inhabitants of the Bileća Rudine) in the mid-fourteenth century from »the feudal landowning class«, and that owing »to new-found economic prosperity« (resulting from profitable livestock trade, rental of horses for purposes of freight, the thriving mining industry in Bosnia), employed monoliths to mark the graves of the dead, and introduced on the monoliths rich, figural decoration. This sudden outburst of prosperity is said to have occurred in the latter part of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, that is, in the period to which some experts trace most of the monoliths in Bileća Rudine. The exponents of this »Vlach« theory, however, do not explain who the Vlachs were — the descendants of the Latinized Illyrians, who spoke a Latin language, or the Slavic (Serb) pastoral communities (*katuns*). It is also not clear whether the Vlachs in question were Christians or *krstjani*.

That one should associate monoliths with the Vlachs, however, is natural, especially since the Bileća Rudine was the domain of the medieval »Vlach« pastoral communities (Mirilovići, Pilatovci, Vitkovići, Miruše, Banjani, etc.). For the study of the Vlachs and their possible link with the monoliths and *krstjani*, of no small importance is the fact that the names of the medieval *katuns* still survive in the toponymy of Bileća Rudine, and that there is valuable evidence on these *katuns* in the Dubrovnik archives. One encounters in the documents references to Vlachs from particular *katuns* as well as from specific villages (Rudine, Korita) of Bileća Rudine.

And there is still another question, and that is that we do not know with certainty whether those buried under the monoliths came from a particular segment of the society or from all social backgrounds. The sheer labor involved

in cutting the tombstones and transporting them to the burial site seems to have required more work and expenditure than any ordinary shepherd or cultivator of soil could have afforded. Consequently, it would appear that only a family of means could have installed a monolith on its relative's grave, that the monoliths, therefore, mark the graves of affluent persons and that the persons of lower social background were buried at random and without pretentious or extravagant markers. That there were well-off Vlachs, including leaders of the pastoral communities (*katuns*), the so-called *katunars* (*catunarius*), *knezes*, *primučars*, *vojvodas*, etc., goes without saying. But considering the number of surviving monoliths (untold numbers were destroyed and used in construction of roads, churches, houses, and walls), it is difficult to believe that there were so many prosperous pastoral heads, merchants and traders.

The interjection of the Vlachs in the discussion makes it even more difficult to unravel the mystery of the monoliths and the *krstjani*. A great deal of confusion still remains about the Vlachs, their ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds, and the role they played in medieval Croatian and Serbian society, and in the period of the Ottoman rule. Despite excellent work on the Vlachs by a number of historians (Jireček, Dinić, Hrabak, Kovačević, and others), many questions concerning the Vlachs remain in the realm of polemics, and like monoliths and *krstjani* they are subjects of continuing historiographic controversy.

None of the existing theories about the monoliths and the *krstjani*, and their possible connections can be either accepted or rejected. They are all mere hypotheses, some more and some less convincing. The problem is aggravated by the fact that many who have investigated the monoliths and the *krstjani* have looked at them through the prism of their national and confessional background, or under the influence of the momentary political climate, or both. They usually link monoliths to *krstjani* and argue either that the *krstjani* were members of the Serbian Orthodox community (Božidar Petranović, Vaso Glušac) or members of the Roman Catholic community (Leo Petrović). The most plausible theory regarding the *krstjani* is that first systematically developed by the prominent Croatian historian, Franjo Rački, and which is in one way or another accepted by most of the leading historians (V. Čorović, K. Jireček, V. Klaić, D. Kniewald, D. Mandić, I. Ruvarac, A. Solovjev, J. Šidak, F. Šišić). According to this theory the *krstjani* were dualists, related to the Albigensians of southern France, and to the Cathars and Paterines of northern Italy. But the debate goes on. One American scholar has suggested the possibility that the Bosnian *krstjani* may have their roots in the Benedictine (Fine) monastic order. Scholarship owes a great deal to Professor Jaroslav Šidak for his many original works on the Bogumils (*krstjani*) and his recently published critical survey of historiography on the Bogumil question.

This author is convinced that only through intensive and systematic investigation of the monoliths and *krstjani* in one locality will it be possible to find answers to most questions that have been asked. Such a study, on the local level, at each historical stage, would be far more rewarding than the investigations of the *krstjani* and the Bogumils on a broader regional basis.

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