MIRJANA DETELIĆ

The Place of the Symbolic City in Constructions of Nation and Religion: A Case of Balkan Folklore

This article is based on folklore studies of the oral epic tradition in the Serbo-Croat (or, depending on territory, Croat-Serbian) language which was mutual to the majority of the former Yugoslavia's population (in fact all but Slovenes and Macedonians).[1] The corpus of 1200 oral epic songs[2] was chosen among other folkloric genres because of their strong ideological position, which makes them the only form of oral literature in which the town appears as a human habitation clearly defined in time and space. In all other forms of traditional culture, 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, epic poetry builds the image of urban space as a centre of power and earthly rule, equating the very concept of the potency of the "state" with the number of a state's towns and cities. In epic poetry only—because it deals with ethical, social, and political norms as they effect (and affect) the complex relationship between the state, its ruler, religion, and nation—urban spaces are modelled as places with structure, important enough to go to war over. 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 otherwise.

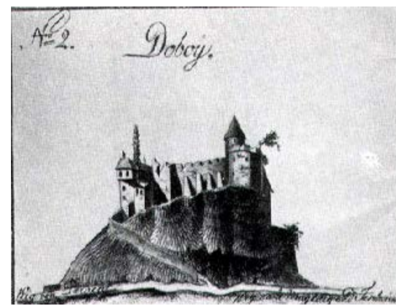
The arrival of Ottoman Turks in the Balkans by the end of the XVth century was an event of the greatest consequences for the people it affected. First, it cut them off from the European history of which they had originally been a part. The fall of Constantinople (1453), Smederevo in Serbia (1459), Jajce in Bosnia (1463), and Bihać in Croatia (1592) moved the borders between Europe and the Orient far to the west. The border zone, which extended 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 apt name: the Military Frontier (Vojna Krajina). Whatever was left east of that frontier had to submit to the prevailing oriental influence. All the cultural exchanges in progress had to be aborted, redefined and eventually either rejected or redirected. The concept of the city was 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 the former Yugoslavia built their own network of towns with fortresses for their protection. They differ in no way from the typical 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); below it there were market-places, craftsmen's shops, and dwellings, 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 *varos*, and in Slav languages particularly—*podgradje* (literally: suburbium).

Zvečan in Serbia (Kosovo) XII c.

Užice in Serbia XIV c.



Doboj in Bosnia XIII c.

Naturally, visualisation of those urban spaces did not differ much from the way monastic complexes were depicted during the period, because they shared the same symbolic features of great simplicity: a circle of protective walls, and the dome of a church with the cross on top of it.

Studenica monastery, Serbia (Kosovo), XIII c.

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

In a way, it was a universal icon of the later Middle Ages in Europe.

St Blasius, Dubrovnik (Croatia), XVII c.	St Gemigniano (Italy), XIV c.	Celestial Jerusalem (Germany), XII 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 of historical facts.[4] More important still, 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 *Beo*grad (*beo* = white*, grad* = town) and the Rosary church in it, while the “bad” brother chooses *Kara*vlaška and *Kara*bogdanska[6] lands (*kara* meaning *black*).[7] Elaborating it one step further, use of the motif of connection between the place and its owner leads to a very useful feature of literary chronotope. Its point is in repeating the same space-and-time model whenever, at the beginning of a poem, some fatal development has to be announced: Milić the ban-stander,[8] for example, gets some most important information about his future fiancé in front of the church, on Sunday, after the liturgy, and he immediately sets off to fetch her. Within the common ritual practice of traditional culture,

this is fatally wrong because some of the most important phases of the wedding proceedings are deliberately omitted. In fact, the *sujet* really is 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 liturgy is one of the most potent epic chronotopes. It is usually used to mark an ominous or symbolic intervention either by God or, older still, the nameless *vis maior*.[9] The same goes for the duke Prijezda[10] who gets his important information in the same way (in the public square in front of the church, on Sunday after liturgy): his town Stalać was being "taken by enemies through the underground tunnels" and he immediately, then and there, decides to lead his knights to the last charge. The 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 the subject of epic singing even when they do not perform such a crucial role. They are a standard stage for cavalcades of Christian kings, princes and knights, quite a scene for showing off glamorous outfits and weaponry, good and mighty horses, and fair maidens. All these had to stop the very moment the Ottomans came into the limelight.

It is common knowledge that Balkan Turks were a mainly urban population. Spreading from the big cities of the Levant, especially at the beginning of their rule they had no intention of changing any of the indigenous and Byzantine codices referring to the rural way of life and agrarianism. In contrast, the towns were divided into *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, the Jews were the privileged nation in the Ottoman Empire, and therefore formed a pretty

dense population in Turkish cities, especially after they were cruelly banished from Spain and Andalusia. Christians were treated differently, depending on their geographical and political position with 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* (the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire) was best in Istanbul itself, deteriorating 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), this borderline zone ended first at Smederevo (1459), and then at Beograd (first conquered by Turks in 1521).

Under the new circumstances, less than ten per cent of the Christian population in the territory of the former Yugoslavia was left to live in towns, with restrictions on 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 floor[11]), profession (no official could be anything but Moslem), lodging location, etc. The majority of the population, living in villages and farmsteads, gradually came to identify urban people with Turks, transferred their hatred for the oppressors to the place of their dwelling, and made one long-lasting synonym: Turks = citizens (Turci gradjani). This means that they literally made no distinction between their own people living in the cities and the Turks whom they hated, and that in time they were all seen as equal enemies. In addition, poverty, famine, and the brutality of the administration caused—even in the relatively early days of 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 the authorities as outlaws.

The making of epic poetry, or "singing of the tales"—as Albert Lord first put it[12]—has always been a privilege of rural people. This total change of official ideology and—more than anything else—complete loss of the local gentry in the battle of Kosovo (1389) and during the Turkish campaigns of the XVth century, made *hajduci* the true epic successors of the old regime, no matter how big a paradox this might seem. This was also the 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—one of 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 ruler's 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 at that period), 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.[13] Within a wider historical frame, this was going on in the region from the beginning of the XVIIth 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* (singular of *raya*) had to say about cities at

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 crude verses:

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 sluge 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.[14]	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 poles,[15] The poles on gates in city walls. On the main gate the owner's head, For everyone to know who had once been in town.

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 this was exactly what really happened, for the answer of a *hajduk* (singular of *hajduci*), threatened with impaling and having his head drying on a pole over the city gate, is this:

Prođ' 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.[16]	Leave me alone, Verizović-Mujo! The very reason walls were built is to be adorned by heroes' heads: but if only you could 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.

So, that was the making of the new model of epic town, which in its finishing phase 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 oral epic tradition, but for the traditional culture and policy of the region in general. When, at the beginning of the XIXth century (1804-1813), the time had come for Christian insurrection at the borders of the Ottoman Empire, what actually happened was the uprising of Serbian peasants, the only successful rebellion of the kind in the history of the New Age.[17] The main goal of those rebels was to conquer as many Turkish cities as possible, and the end finally came in 1876 with the symbolic surrender of the keys to all the cities under Turkish rule (although they had been recaptured by the Serbian forces a long time before).[18] 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 would 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 to fill the gap of four lost centuries. Thus the epic history of towns ended halfway between urbanism and ruralism.

The generations to come adopted a more European and more dynamic lifestyle, 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 in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) and in Kosovo (1998-2004). 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 history almost two centuries ago, the roots of the urbicidal intentions of today must be sought elsewhere, maybe in this mistrust and hatred that have not yet had time and opportunity to heal properly.

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[1] Today, this covers three independent countries: Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia and Hercegovina, each of which claims to have a language of its own. Nevertheless, during the time these oral epic songs were being collected (XVIIIth and XIXth centuries), the language of the epics was considered one and the same, and even more so at the time when the songs were actually composed.

[2] This corpus is formed of the best collections by the most renowned editors of the XIXth century, when the oral tradition was still alive. The references about the collections are the following: *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 церногорска и херцеговачка, сабрана Чубром Чојковићем Церногорцем.* Па њим издана истим, у Лајпцигу, 1837; *Hrvatske narodne pjesme*, skupila i izdala Matica hrvatska. Odio prvi. Junačke pjesme, Zagreb 18990-1940.

[3] For example: *U Budimu gradu /čudno čudo kažu* ("In the city of Buda / a wonderful wonder is told"—the initial formula of children's poetry*); ni na nebu, ni na zemlji* ("Neither on earth, nor in the air"—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.

[4] For example, the famous town of Pirlitor (in the literature mistakenly identified as Periteorion in Greece), was in fact in Montenegro, and belonged to Count Sandalj Hranić (XIV c.) instead of Duke Momčilo, as the songs would have it. The town of Stalać in Serbia was built in the XIVth century by Duke Lazar Hrebeljanović as the first line of defence for 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 the XVth 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 nil.

[5] Poem no. 98 in Vuk Karadžić's collection, vol. II (*Пјесме јуначке најстарије*, књига друга 1845, Београд 1988).

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

[7] The best analysis of this motif is in Hatidža Krnjević, Обредни предмет – "молитвена чаша" у песми "Диоба Јакшића" (Ceremonial object – "the ritual cup" in the song "Dioba Jakšića"), *Српска фантастика* (Serbian Literary Fantasy), SASA, Belgrade 1989, 207-221.

[8] Poem no. 78 in Vuk Karadžić's collection, vol. III (*Пјесме јуначке средњијех времена*, књига трећа 1846, Београд 1988).

[9] For an elaborate analysis of this poem see Детелић, Мирјана, *Урок и невеста. Поетика епске формуле* (The Charm and the Bride. The Poetics of Epic Formula), Београд 1996.

[10] Poem no. 84 in Vuk Karadžić's collection, vol. II.

[11] For that reason, churches were built relatively deep in the ground, so the entrance was usually a few (5-6) steps down from 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, or bright colours for facades.

[12] Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1960). Oral epic poetry in Serbo-Croat was the subject of long and fruitful studies by both Lord and Milman Parry.

[13] Of all non-Atlantic slave trade centres active in the area, epic poetry directly mentions Azov (in Turkish variant *Azak*) 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 the hinterland depended on the good will of noble individuals.

[14] Song no. 67 in the Matica hrvatska (Home of Croatia) collection (vol. II), titled *Sin Matijaš ide na mejdan mjesto Marka Kraljevića* ("Matthew, 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).

[15] This also means sticks, or stakes, whatever might be a word for the tool of impaling.

[16] Song no. 139 in Sima Milutinović's collection, verses 72-78.

[17] There was no insurrection in Bosnia for it was annexed by Austria in 1878. The 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.

[18] See also: *Ослобођење градова у Србији од Турака 1862-1867. год.*, зборник радова, Одељење друштвених наука САНУ, Београд 1970. There is more about the subject (towns and cities in epic tradition and traditional culture of South Slavs) in Mirjana Detelić, *Митски простори епика* (Mythical Space in the Epics), Monographs DCXVI, SASA, Belgrade 1992, and on CD Rom *Gradovi u hrišćanskoj i muslimanskoj usmenoj epici* (Towns in Christian and Moslem Oral Epic Poetry), Belgrade 2004.