

THE PHENOMENON OF ASTRAL MOTIFS ON LATE MEDIAEVAL TOMBSTONES

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Abstract. The authors study astral motifs present on some mediaeval tomb-stones found in present-day Serbia and Montenegro and in the neighbouring countries (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The authors discern some important astral motifs, explain them and present a short review concerning their frequency.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper treats a group of astral motifs appearing as a decorative element in the period of late Middle Ages on tombstones of the Central Balkan Region. The present authors want to specify several astral symbols and to indicate various models used in their presentation. The available material can be found in the literature concerning the necropolis covering the entire territory enclosing the tomb-stones called "stećci" including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Dalmatia and also in the literature concerning the necropolis within a greater area of Serbia. It should be emphasized that the notion of "stećak" is considered in the present paper in its broadest meaning - as a **mediaeval tombstone** (Zečević, 1996).

2. TERRITORIAL OCCURRENCE AND DATING

It is generally accepted that "stećci" are a special cultural and artistic kind among tomb varieties, characteristic of the territories of Serbian and Bosnian mediaeval states. One meets several variants of these monuments being accepted afterwards in a basic form, or in a variant of this basic form, which largely depended on the area or on the taste and possibilities of the inhabitants. They are characterized by a large assortment of motifs whereby many of them are not original because in all ages they contain the same universal and "out of time" symbolism concerning the eternal theme of afterlife. One can indicate a large group of "stećci" motifs, the main and segment ones, encountered through their modalities over almost entire period of stećci existence, but also at significantly later epochs. There are various theories treating the origin time, duration and vanishing of these monuments. It has been largely accepted that the time of their originating covers the interval from the late XIII to the XVI centuries (Miletić, 1982).

Table 1: Basic forms of astral pictures

Group	Basic motif	Variant
astral motifs (pictures of Sun, Moon, of a star)	1) circle	simple, with rays, with inscribed point or little cross
	2) circular garland (ring)	plastic or engraved, twisted, concentric
	3) crescent	combined with another motif or sole, twisted
	4) star (rosette)	with different number and shape of limbs, free or closed within a circle, stylized
	5) knob	plastic, with oblique engravements

3. ASTRAL MOTIFS

Although it is difficult to determine precisely and rigorously which motifs belong to this presentation group, it could be said that above all this group involves signs basically meaning celestial bodies - *the Sun, the Moon, stars*. In the symbolic sense astral motifs involve folk-beliefs and the cult of the deceased (Erdeljan, 1996). Astral motifs as bearers of old beliefs appear at some tombstones also after the Middle Ages (Dudić, 1995). Observed as a group this type appears as the most frequent motif extending at the same time over most of the territory with stećci. Bešlagić's division of astral pictures into five basic motifs - *circle, circular garland (ring), crescent, star (rosette) and knobs* is acceptable because it comprises all the motifs found in the stećak area (Bešlagić, 1982). The basic motifs within this group have their 19 subtypes (Bešlagić, 1982), but considering that any complete systematization and classification of them is still absent the number of variants can exceed this amount. In the present paper this division will be accepted because within its frameworks one can roughly put most of the signs concerning astral motifs covering an exceptionally large territory.

4. CIRCLE

It is thought that the circle on a stećak represents the Sun. It is given most frequently as a plastic circular surface of different sizes and it can be sole (more rarely) or combined with other astral motifs (most frequently crescent) or, in the framework of other motifs. In some cases such a circle contains a point in its centre (Kaludjerovići, Hrte, Donje Štitare) or a small cross (Kobilja Glava near Skender Vakuf, Tolisavac, Velika Župa, Dučevo, Gradac, Hrte). Circle motifs with rays on plates from Dić (Jež, 2001) are exceptional ones. In some cases the circle can be engraved, imprinted by using a shallow cannelure. It has been found in all shapes of tombstones, but much more rarely than the crescent and star. The territorial distribution is such that the circle is found mostly in central, western and in some parts of eastern Bosnia, in Herzegovina in the surroundings of Nevesinje and Lištica. It is very rare in the surroundings of

Kalinovik and in Podrinje, as well as in necropolis in western Serbia. It has not been found in the areas of Trebinje, Ljubinje, Stoc and Ljubuški in Herzegovina and in the immediate surroundings of Duvno in western Bosnia.

5. CIRCULAR GARLAND (RING)

In the opinion of most of authors the circular-garland motif, like the circle, represents the Sun (Bešlagić, 1982). There are also alternative interpretations. Nada Miletić's opinion, according to which this motif directly is related to the rite itself should certainly, be, mentioned (Miletić, 1982). In describing this motif it is said that it is a shallow plastic part of a circle in the form of a circular belt. Sometimes within it can be a smaller, also plastic, concentric circle. In some cases it is realized by engraving in a stone. It has been found sole, but most often followed by other motifs. The most frequent case is its combining with other astral pictures (star, more rarely crescent), with cross and in complex scenes with figure pictures. Combined with astral motifs it is most often presented to surround individual ones or a whole number of rosettes - stars. Quite rarely it surrounds the crescent (Hum near Trebinje). The picture of small circular garlands surrounding a circle (Moremišlj near Višegrad) is also interesting. Its appearance in the framework of the cross picture, where it is given in two variants, is specific. In the first one it surrounds a cross, while in the second one the cross limbs end in the form of circular garlands (surroundings of Kalinovik, Hodovo near Stoc, Bučje and Hrte in western Serbia). As a part of figural pictures the circular garland bears a more complex symbolism. It can be given over the heads of human figures with hands up (Radimlja) or, however, in one lifted hand of the human picture. A special symbolism is to be assigned to the circular garland if it is in the hand of folk-dance leader representing a Serbian folk-dance on stećci. This motif has been found at all forms of tombstones and its territorial occurrence is frequent. It has been mostly reported in the surroundings of Kalinovik, Stoc, Lištica, Nevesinje and Kupres. A relatively small number has been found in necropolis in western Serbia.

6. CRESCENT

The crescent is a motif often used in numerous and various artistic works of many peoples. As a motif, the application of which on stećci has been interpreted in different ways, it is very frequent and, perhaps, one of most frequently occurring (Bešlagić, 1982). It is logical that this motif symbolises death and at the same time the hope for resurrection (Wilke, 1924). Its basic form is an arch in different positions (with peak downwards, upwards or sideways). It is always realized plastically, sometimes twisted. Its several variants have been reported: with ends continuing into small circles or rosettes (the variant not found in Serbia), as the basement of a cross, as a handle of a stick (Lištica). In some cases the crescent is realized in such a way that a double spiral detaches from it (Vlasenica) or surrounded by a garland (Hum near Trebinje). Sometimes it also appears in a pair. It has been found in all basic shapes of stećci (without cross and high chest) and there it occupies different places. The frequent appearance of the crescent on the upper surfaces of slemenjaks is interesting. It has been rarely met sole, most frequently it is followed by a star-rosette and cross. Besides to the rosette it is among the most frequent motifs. It is especially frequent in eastern Bosnia, middle Podrinje, in the areas closer to the Neretva valley and

in western Herzegovina. It has been also found in western Serbia, especially in its north-western part, being as a motif completely absent on tombs of south-western Serbia.

7. STAR-ROSETTE

This motif involves shapes of a star and of a kind of rosette and also of a similar flower picture so that sometimes it is difficult to establish which motif is implied. The star is among the motifs most frequently met on tombs. It is realized mainly plastically, but it can be also engraved. It is most frequently followed by other astral motifs (crescent, Sun) and cross. This picture has several variants. It can be free or closed inside a circle with various numbers (four, five, six and eight) and shape of rays. The rays can be stressed by double lines or given in a twisted form when the star picture is converted into a rotating disc (symbol of Sun). The star is often stylized by adding circle lines, angles and arches acquiring thus characteristics of an ornament rather than of a symbol. As for the territory, this motif is characteristic of all large areas with tombstones. A high number of these symbols has been found in Herzegovina, western, central and eastern Bosnia (the most near Olovo). It is a rare phenomenon in Montenegro (in Žabljak surroundings), while in western and south-western Serbia only a relatively small number with less variants has been found. It is completely absent in the necropolis of upper Podrinje.

8. KNOBS

The knob is a plastic, convex, circular motif, met as an ornament on various shapes of stećci. It has been assumed in the literature that the knob should belong to astral motifs because it symbolises the Sun (Bešlagić, 1982). Its Solar character is also indicated by the fact that in many cases it was engraved together with the crescent and the star, as well as the presence of oblique engravements on its upper surface (resembling a star). Within the group of astral motifs it is the least frequent one. Its territorial occurrence is non-uniform. It is more characteristic of Bosnia than of Herzegovina. It is most frequently met in Ludmer and in some parts of central Bosnia, in the surroundings of Kalinovik and Kupres. It is very rarely met in eastern Bosnia. As a motif it is completely unknown in the territory of Serbia.

9. CONCLUSION

The present authors conclude that astral motifs are very often present on mediaeval tombstones found in the territories of present-day states of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Among these astral motifs there are some very important ones. Three sorts of astral motifs are specified: Solar, Lunar and starry ones. In order to determine precisely the role of astral motifs at tombstones precise systematization and classification of the mentioned motifs is needed. The authors emphasize that not all of them have equal territorial distribution and frequency. In any case the importance of astral motifs in the study of mediaeval culture for a part of Southern-Slav population is indisputable.

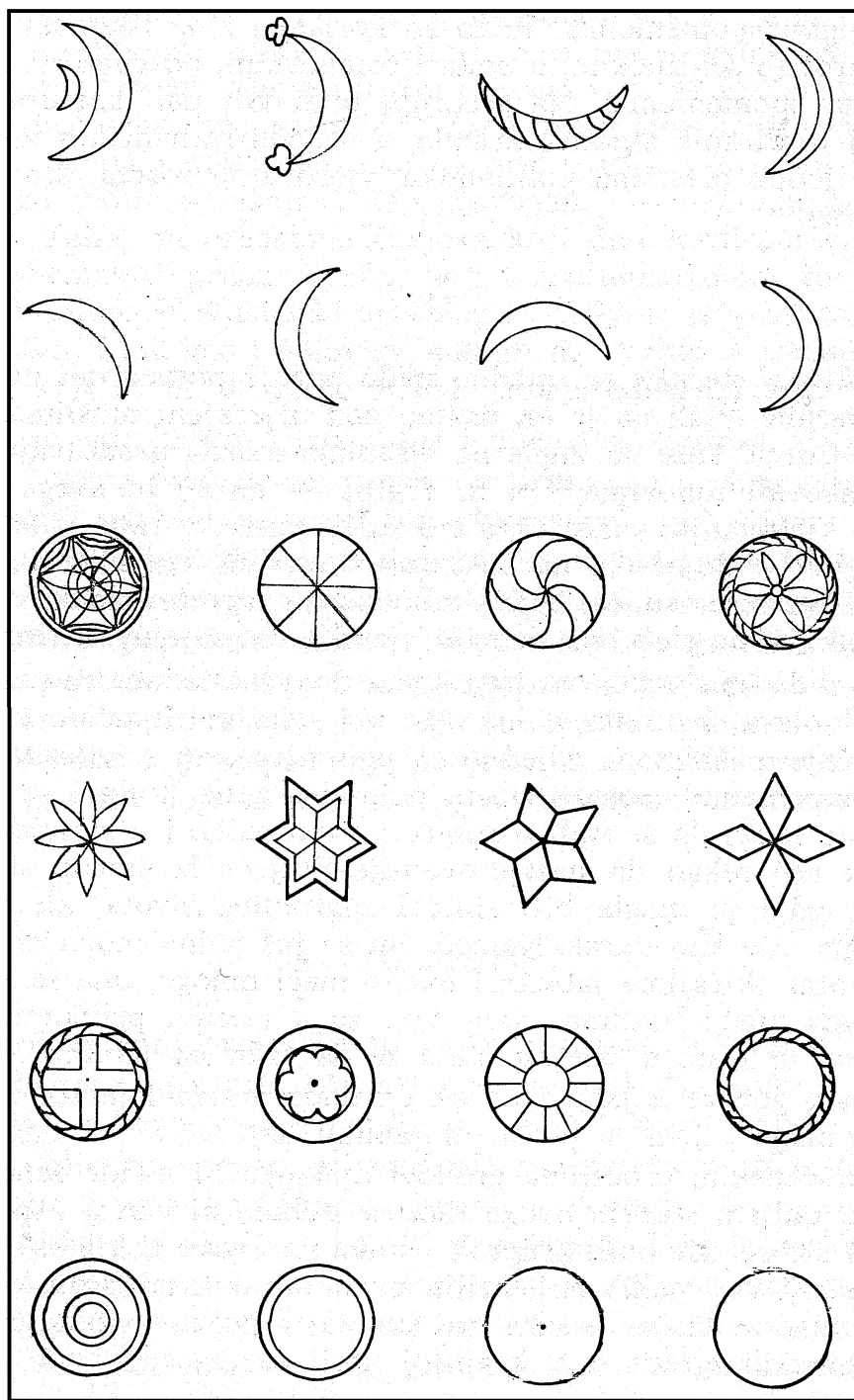


Figure 1: A group of astral motifs on the late mediaeval tombstones - stećci (from Bešliagić, 1982)

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