Medieval Remembrance: Mak Dizdar and the Stećak of Bosnia

Abstract:

Across the mountains and valleys of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and parts of Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia) medieval tombstones, unique to the region and known as stećci, have cast shadows and caught the light for nearly a millennium. These monuments preserve a wealth of symbolism from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. "Through 80 primary and 320 secondary motifs", Mehmedalija Mak Dizdar (1917-1971), a "true Bosnian poet whose literary career began before WWII,... in 1966 with the publication of Kameni spavac (Stone Sleeper) [thematised] medieval Bosnian tombstones known as stećak". With Dizdar's poetry as a guide to mysterious medieval symbolism and mythology, his collection of poems are not only an act of remembrance, but engaging companions to the region's medieval funerary stones and sarcophagi. This locates a unifying legacy within the complexities of a modern post-war cultural conversation. For many Bosnians, Dizdar's Kameni spavač (Stone Sleeper) confirms and magnifies an existing relationship with the stećci and the history they symbolise, emphasising the most universal aspects of history and human destiny. As the eminent literary critic of Bosnia, Enes Duraković, succinctly put it, "Dizdar's Ulysses is at once a Sisyphus who never ceases to be aware of the absurdity of his effort, yet never gives up the dream of defying the vicious cycle of ordinary life in order to experience the imagined comfort of 'homeland'". Amila Buturović's Stone Speaker: Medieval Tombs, Landscape, and Bosnian Identity in the Poetry of Mak Dizdar provides the historical context for his work, with valuable insights. Here, while introducing both Dizdar and the stećak to the reader, we look more deeply into Dizdar's relationship with death, which converses on, for, and with the stećak, and into how his own beliefs steered his engagement with these stones towards the poetic voice.

Keywords: *Dizdar Mak, stećci, medieval, Stone Sleeper, Sufism, poetry.*