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THE TOMBSTONE EPITAPH AT THE CHURCH OF ANNUNCIATION OF THE HOLY VIRGIN IN KARAN

Abstract: In 1998 an archaeological excavation was conducted at the church of Holy Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, better known as 'White church' in Karan. This 14th century medieval church was an endowment of the Župan Petar Brajan. Archaeological excavations in the churchyard revealed a tombstone with a Cyrillic epitaph. The preserved Cyrillic inscription contains seven lines with clearly visible letters tightly formatted. The morphology of the letters according to the latest analysis dates from the end of 14th and the early decades of the 15th century. According to the inscription the entombed Braišna was executed by the Tatar soldiers which were likely operating from within in the Ottoman army. Scarce is such an epigraphic in which Tatars make mention.

Key words: Karan, Užice Museum, Bela Crkva, Braišna, epitaph, Peter Brayan, Tatars, tombstone epigraphy

The 1997 archaeological survey in the Lužnica valley, Serbia, was conducted by the archaeologists Miloje and Liljana Mandić of the Užice National Museum. This research engaged full-scale archaeological excavations that were commenced in the churchyard of the Holy Annunciation of the Virgin Mary within the village of Karan, locally known as the "White church" of Karan.¹ (Fig.,1) The village of Karan retained a medieval place of Christian tradition with a preserved church complex and a medieval graveyard. The church building has been built in the Raška architectural style on the location of the older Roman sanctuary. According to the prior archaeological research by Mr Mandić in this place already an older stratum of medieval necropolis had existed, that can be dated between the 12th and 13th century. During the archaeological excavations which were conducted between 1997 and 1998 some fifty-two medieval graves were uncovered, the majority in chaotic condition due to the medieval reconstitution of the aforementioned Roman cemetery site. The location where the church was erected has a tradition of 'Sacer loci', a poorly preserved an-

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of Miloje Mandić (1953-2014). A poster was presented on the 23 Byzantine conference in Belgrade in 2016 and a short presentation at the 20th Australasian association for Byzantine studies conference in Sydney, 2019.



Fig. 1 Map of Medieval Balkans

Сл. 1 Мапа средњовековног Балкана

cient Roman temple with a necropolis that was covered by the multi-layered medieval graveyard and the Christian church. Around 1340 the church building was renovated,² according to the results of 1975 archaeological excavations, conducted by G. Cvetković-Tomašević.³

The interior mural decoration can be dated in the period between 1340 and 1342 by the church patron Župan Peter Brayan, a contemporary of Serbian Tsar Dušan (1308-1355) who erected this church over the older building. Portraits of the ruler and nobility with their families, along with the clergy and saints are represented on the interior walls. On the northern and on the western wall a patron's composition is presented in which is the Župan Peter with his wife, his three daughters and a son, all dressed in medieval court garments.⁴

During the 1998 archaeological campaign in the church enclosure, conducted by M. Mandić and Lj. Mandić some new discoveries

were made. In the archaeological probe number 1, in the western part of the churchyard, next to the bell tower, some large gravestones plates were unearthed. Some gravestones had been re-used as spolia for the drainage channel, but still some of the graves were left intact. Next to the bell tower a large gravestone, in medieval times known as "usadnik" was unearthed, with a preserved Cyrillic inscription. Unfortunately, no human remnants were found in the grave.⁵ The incised inscription had seven lines, undoubtedly an epitaph. It has dimensions of 1.83 m. long, 70-76 m wide and 7.65-10 cm thick. (Fig., 2, The tombstone) The incised letters are 10.7 cm. with the highest of 16.5 cm. (the last one 'Z')

² The report of the archaeological excavations in the period between 1997-1998 written by Miloje Mandić from the Narodni muzej, Užice.

³ Г. Цветковић-Томашевић, *Бела црква у Карану-маузолеј жупана Брајана, Археолошка ископавања у цркви 1975. године*, Саопштења XXII-XXIII, (1990-1991), (Београд 1991), 1-18.

⁴ Župan was an administrative title used in Central Europe and in the Balkans between the 7th century and today, especially among the South Slavs. It is considered that the title origin can be traced to the Slavic and Iranian cultural interrelation in the Eastern and South-eastern Europe in the first centuries AD.

⁵ The report of the archaeological excavations in the period between 1997-1998 written by Miloje Mandić from the Narodni muzej Užice.

and the depth of carving is 2 cm. The letters resemble the Cyrillic majuscule written in Serbian medieval redaction. The stone is well processed and the inscription epitaph with seven regular lines with letters that are clear and tight. The epitaph can be read as:

+ А СИ / КАМИ / НА БРА / ИШНА / ПОГУБИ / ШЕ ГА ТА / ТАРЕ Z

'This is the tombstone of Braišna, executed by the Tatars (in the year) 6 (000)'

The Cyrillic letters 'Ш' and 'И' are wide, while the letters 'Т' and 'М' are smaller than others, the letters 'Б' and 'Г' have a triangle in the upper end of the horizontal line, while the letters 'Р' and 'У' were incised in single strokes with triangular loops and sickle arches. The letter 'У' has hooks at its upper part, the right part of letter 'К' is separated from its vertical line, the letter 'А' has a vertical line creating another letter 'Т'.⁶ The letter 'Е' and 'С' are rather shallowly incised. There are similarities with the epitaphs of Polichania Radača from Veličan (1383-1391), the epitaph of Goisava from Biskup near of Konjitz (1398-1399), and the epitaph of Knjaz Batić from Iljaš (1432-1433).⁷ The last letter in the epitaph inscription, the inversed letter 'S' (in church Slavonic alphabet, letter Сялю) is 16.5 cm in high. This letter is a Cyrillic numeral used for the year 6 (000) according to the Christian creation of the world.⁸ The sign for multiplication is hardly visible on the right side and the other numerals for the rest of the year are missing, and it is evident that the stone carver left his work unfinished. (Fig. 3, Inscription)

According to the latest epigraphic analysis by G. Tomović, the morphology of the inscription can be dated in the period between 1390 and 1430.⁹ At the beginning it starts with a damaged sign of cross and inscription: "A SI KAMI" (This tombstone), a formula that was common in the territory of the medieval Bosnian state from the 13th to the 16th century. It was a religious formula used in southern Bosnia, Herzegovina and in medieval Serbia. According to the



Fig. 2 The tombstone

Сл. 2 Надгробни споменик

⁶ I am grateful to the colleague D. Obradović for his information about the tombstone inscription at the village Zdravinje near Kruševac from 1292 (6801). The letter **B** has a small triangle in the upper part, and some parts of the letter **K** are separated in the same manner.

⁷ Г. Томовић, *Морфологија ћириличних натписа на Балкану*, Београд 1974, 85-86. We are very grateful to G. Tomović for her expertise and support.

⁸ S. Chrysomalis, *Numerical notation, a comparative history*, Cambridge university press, 2010, 180-182.

⁹ Томовић, *op.cit.*, 85-86, 92, 93, 103.

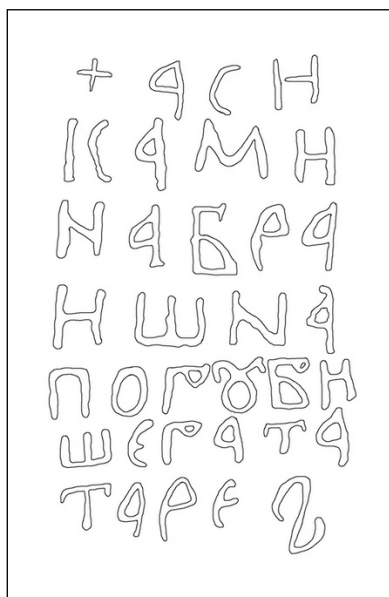


Fig. 3 Tombstone inscription

Сл. 3 Надгробни натпис

research studies by M. Vego in the region of Bosnia and Hercegovina a number of preserved tombstones from the period between the 13th and 16th century can be found.¹⁰

The inscription bears no indication of the stonemason or the craftsmen who incised it. The grammar and syntax in the traditional medieval Serbian language had some minor orthographic mistakes, which indicates that the text was written by a literate person possibly a monk or priest. It is not possible to identify the deceased person Braišna, since his remnants had not been preserved, probably he was a member of the nobility or the clergy, or a craftsman working at the monastery. According to R. J. Đurović, the personal name Bratišna, Braišna itself is an Slavonic archaism, a local remnant in the region of Bosnia and in the highland of Herzegovina.¹¹

It seems that the Tatars were well known in the Balkan states and in the ter-

ritory of medieval Serbia. The Tatars were semi-nomadic tribal warriors of the Eurasian steppes speaking an idiom of Mongol languages. Byzantines preferred to call them 'Scythians' but also the terms of 'Tataros' and 'Mongolios' were only rarely used. They were subjugated by the Mongol ruler, Genghis Khan who in 1202 invaded Eastern Europe, creating a profound impact in the Medieval Balkans. The term 'Tatar' was widely used for Mongols as well, and they were known under that name in Russia, Cuman steppes and Eastern part of Europe.¹² Their well-organized invasions had military success and they had a political influence on the Byzantine, Bulgarian and Serbian states and other Balkan warring factions. Some of them were mercenaries and some of them settled in the area, mingling with the local population. Sometimes they carried out marauding incursions in the periods of prevailing political and military anarchy in the Balkans. In medieval Serbian history writers often failed to distinguish the presence of Tatars and another group of Turkic speaking Cumans. In 1282 the Serbian King Stefan Uroš Milutin II (1282-1321) invaded northern Macedonia, then a part of the Byzantine empire. The Byzantine Emperor Michael Palaiologos VIII invited Nogay's Tatars to assist his military actions.

¹⁰ M. Vego, *Zbornik srednjovekovnih natpisa Bosne i Hercegovine*, vol. I, Sarajevo, 1962, 21,36; Ibid., *Zbornik srednjovekovnih natpisa Bosne i Hercegovine*, vol. III, Sarajevo, 1964, 163

¹¹ R.J. Đurović, *Prelazni govori južne Bosne i visoke Hercegovine*, Srpski Dijalektički zbornik, (ed. P. Ivić) vol. XXXVIII, Beograd 1992, 372. (9-378).

¹² O. Prisak, *Tatars*, Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, (ed A.P. Kazhdan et alli) New York, Oxford 1991, vol.3, 2013.

They marched under the guidance of the Grand Constable Michael Glabas to the Byzantine -Serbian frontier near Liplyan and Prizren. The Tatar's cavalry, led by their commander Qara Baš 'Crna glava' tried to cross the river Drim on their horses, but, most of them were drowned.¹³

Turkic speaking Cuman and Tatar auxiliaries were fighting for the various ruling groups in Serbia, sometimes looting and marauding. In 1292 the Bulgarian Tsar Šišman as vassal of Prince Nogay invaded Serbian lands with Tatar troops. According to the Archbishop Danilo the monastery of St Saviour in Žiča was burnt with fire by the nomadic warriors speaking 'Ezyka kuman-ska'. It took a long period of time to rebuild the monastery of Žiča, but it was not monumental as it was before.¹⁴ It may be that the 'White church' in Karan was devastated in a similar manner, because around 1342 it was completely renovated by Peter Brayan, the nobleman from the court of Tsar Dušan.¹⁵ After Nogay's death in 1299, the heavy pressure on the territory was relieved.¹⁶ In 1311, the short-lived king Dragutin launched a battle against his brother king Stefan II Uroš Milutin, fighting for the Serbian throne. King Milutin's state treasury was housed in the monastery of St Stefan in Banjska and he hired Tatars, Yas (Alans) and Turkish mercenaries to win over the king Dragutin, (mnogiye voisky ezyka tatar'ska i turs'ka i yashs'ka)¹⁷ In the Bulgarian army the Tartars were known as 'Black Tartars' (Černyh Tartar'), because the term Qara 'Black' was used in the Turco-Mongolian ethno-structures, as a term for Tatars. Even in one of the manuscripts of the 'Zakonik' of Tsar Dušan there is a similar explanation for the Tatars. In the Chinese written documents the Black Tartars (Hei T'a-t'a) were mentioned as the genuine nomadic Tatar people, fearsome horse warriors.¹⁸ In 1341 during the Hesychast movement crisis in Byzantium, the great Özbek Khan passed away and the 'Golden horde' lost its interest in the Balkans. He settled Tatars of Dobrudja and Bucak in Romania became separated from the central horde that then moved to the East. Later, in the Ottoman armies there were military units mainly from the Crimean Tatars, but the military power of the Tatars had faded away.¹⁹

In the Ottoman armies some nomadic auxiliaries and regular troops of Turkish speaking Yörüks but also nomadic groups called Tatar were engaged. They served as auxiliary units in the Balkan Peninsula, like the Yörüks in Rumelia in the 15th–16th centuries. The Tatars were similarly subdivided into 'Ocaks' consisting of five eşkincis and 20–25 yamaks. Although all groups of

¹³ I. Vasary, *Cumans and Tatars, Oriental military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365*, Cambridge 2005, 102

¹⁴ J.V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, vol II, Ann Arbor, 1983, 230.

¹⁵ Цветковић-Томашевић, *op. cit.*, 161.

¹⁶ Vasary, *op. cit.*, 108

¹⁷ Vasary, *op. cit.* 110

¹⁸ Vasary, *op. cit.*, 112.

¹⁹ A. Uzelac, *Tatars and Serbs at the end of thirteenth century*, Revista de Istorie Militaria, 5-6 (2011) 16-17: A. Узелац, *Под сенком пса-Татари јужнословенске земље у другој половини XIII века* [Under the shadow of the Dog-Tatars and South Slavic lands in the second half of the thirteenth century] Belgrade 2015, 256-257, 263-265.

Tatars in Rumelia were exempted from some taxes in exchange for military services or labour, they contained various groups who were treated differently from others.²⁰

The nomadic Crimean Tatars, who had crossed into the Balkans and Anatolia, were deported by Sultan Bayezid I and settled to the area of Filibe (to-day Plovdiv) to prevent political instability in Anatolia. The deportation of Tatars in the Balkans preceded the foundation of the town of Tatar Pazarcik, to-day Pazardžik in Bulgaria. For the same reason Tatars from Iskilip in Anatolia were moved to the same region by Sultan Mehmet I in 1418.²¹ It seems that during the Ottoman invasion on Đurađ Branković' Serbia (1377 – 1456), some auxiliary units of Tatars were used for the take-over of region of Lužnitsa valley. During the so called 'Long war' from 1594 to 1606, between the Ottoman armed invaders over the territory of Serbia and the Hungarian kingdom, a large company of Crimean Tatars led by Khan Giray had a destructive impact over the local population and their property.²²

This rare stone monument epitaph is an epigraphic primary evidence of the disruptive military incursions of the Tatars in Serbian territory during the early Ottoman period.

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НАДГРОБНИ ЕПИТАФ ИЗ МАНАСТИРА БЛАГОВЕШТЕЊА У КАРАНУ

У 1988 години, под покровитељством Народног музеја у Ужицу, извршена су археолошка ископавања у манастиру Благовештење у Карану, познат у региону и као Бела црква каранска. Ова црква је била обновљена око 1340-1342 године као задужбина жупана Петра Брајана, на остацима већ порушеног римског храма са некрополом.

Археолошка ископавања између 1997 и 1998 су резултирала у откривању педесет и два средњовековна гроба. У близини манастирског звоника откривена је надгробна плоча са ћириличним натписом, али у гробу нису нађени њудски остаци.

Димензије надгробног камена су : 1.83 m. дужина 70-76 m ширина и 7.65-10 cm дебљина. Висина слова је 10.7 cm. до 16.5 cm висине (задње слово 'Z') а дубина урезивања слова је око 2 cm. Текст епитафа је у седам редова и може да се прочита:

+ А СИ / КАМИ / НА БРА / ИШНА / ПОГУБИ / ШЕ ГА ТА / ТАРЕ Z

'Ово је (надгробни) камен од Браишне, погубише га Татари, (у години) 6 (000)'

Овај натпис може се датирати у периоду између 1390 и 1430. На почетку је урезан крст а затим следи средњовековна формула 'А СИ КАМИ' која је била честа у средњовековној Босни, Херцеговини и Србији у периоду између 13. и 16. века.

²⁰ Iwamoto, Keiko, *A Study on Nomads in the Pre-Modern Ottoman Empire: The Yörüks and the Tatars in Rumeli, the Descendants of the Conquerors, and the Nomad Settlement Policy* (in Japanese) Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University, 1-5. (Unpublished PhD)

²¹ N. Andov, *Ottoman "Wild West" The Balkan provinces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*. Cambridge, 2017, 43, n.12.

²² D. Popović, *Jedan boravak Tatara u našoj zemlji*, Šišićev zbornik (Melanges Šišić) Zagreb 1929, 605-608. I am grateful to A. Uzelac for his expertise and help.

Последње слово на епитафу, које је инверзно слово 'S' (Сяло) је веће него остала слова и има нумеричку вредност као прво слово од године од постанка света, 6 (000). Нажалост, каменоклесач није уклесао пуну годину, тако да немамо тачну представу на коју години се односи. Уопште врло мало знамо о личности погинулог човека по имену Браишна, вероватно је био члан племства или члан црквене хијерархије.

Присуство Татара и других степских турских народа на Балкану је наглашено у периоду између 13. и 15. века. Татари су познати ратници и често су били у служби византијских, српских, бугарских и османских армија. У османској армији они су служили као акинџије и коњаници, и били су присутни у освајању средновековне српске територије.

Ово је редак епиграфски докуменат у коме се спомињу Татари на Балкану у 14. веку.

Овај рад је посвећен спомену драгом Милоју Мандићу (1953-2014).

