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

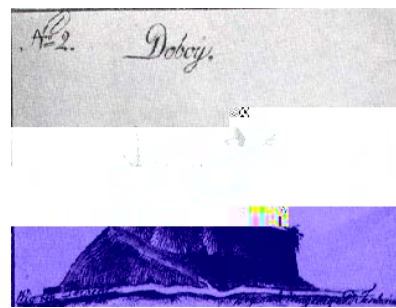
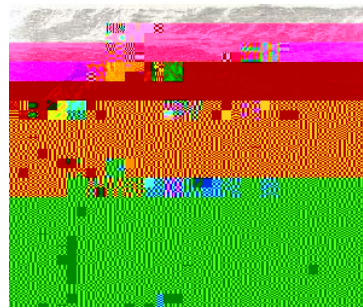
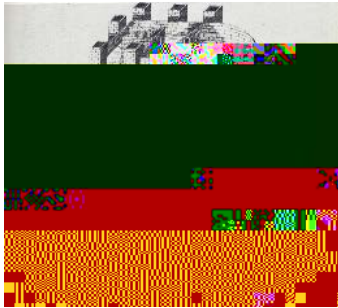
This article is based on folklore studies of the oral epic tradition in the Serbo-Croat (or, depending on territory, Croatian) language which was mutual to the majority of the former Yugoslavia's population (in fact all but Slovenes and Macedonians). The corpus of 1200 oral epic songs was chosen among 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, etc.) or as a notion with a name but without a content (as in etiological and other legends). 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—urban spaces are modelled as places with structure, important enough to go to war. 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 XV 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, % R V Q L D D Q G % L K D ü L Q & U 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 battles 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 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. One Roman cities in the Balkans were classical urbs-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 dwelling 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 *varoš* and in Slav languages particularly *podgradje* (literally: suburbium).



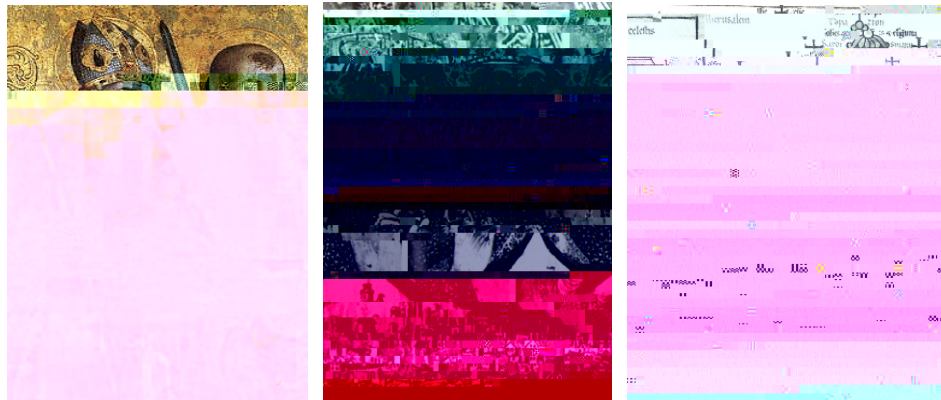
= Y H p D Q L Q 6 H U Užice in Serbia XV c.

Doboy in Bosnia XIII c.

XII 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 church with the cross on top of it.

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



St Blasius, Dubrovnik (Croatia), XVII c.	St Gemignano (Italy), XIV c.	Celestial Jerusalem (Germany), XII c.
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In oral epic poetry, which is by definition—singing in praise of heroic ancestors, all pre-Ottoman towns and cities are strongly connected to the names of their holders, often in contradiction of historical facts<sup>4</sup>. More important still, they are used as a poetical tool for symbolizing the moral value of the protagonists of an epic. For example:

Z K H Q W K H - D N ä L ü E U R W K H U V<sup>5</sup> the Good Church in Rakas by Grad H W K H L U

(beo= white, grad= town) and the Rosary church in it, while the “bad” brother chooses

Karavlaška and Karabogdanska lands (kara meaning black)<sup>7</sup> Elaborating it one step

further, use of the motif connection between the place and its owner leads to a very

useful feature of literary chronotopes point is in repeating the same space-time

model whenever, at the beginning of a poem, some fatal development is to be

D Q Q R X Q F H G - stand<sup>8</sup> for example, Dec some most important information

about his future fiancé in front of the church, on Sunday, after the **t** and he

immediately sets off to fetch her. Within the common ritual practice of **t**nal culture,





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<sup>12</sup>—has always been a privilege of rural people. This total change of official i(me)6004 7al paae5.2m

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 the brutal force of the newcomers and put it into powerful **trude** verses:

<p>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.<sup>14</sup></p>	<p>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<sup>15</sup>          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.</p>
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So, that was the making of the new model of ~~epic~~, 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.

1941-1945), and—most recently civil wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) and in Kosovo (1998-2004). The latter were also urban 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 urbanic intent 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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<sup>8</sup> Poem no LQ 9XN .DUDG, ~~áblüñ V FROOHFWLRQ~~ " df b]Z lj\_„Z  
;\_h]jZ^).

<sup>9</sup> For an elaborate analysis of this poem see >b,]\_ ~~F b j • Z g Z~~ " 0' " "  
(The Charm and the Bride. The Poetics of Epic Formula), ;\_h]jZ^

<sup>10</sup> Poem no LQ 9XN .DUDG, ~~áblüñ V FROOHFWLRQ~~

<sup>11</sup> For that reason, churches were built relatively deep in the ground, so ~~there~~ was usually ~~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~~ ~~doors~~ opening on the street, ~~bright~~ colours for facades.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Lord, ~~The Singer of Tales~~ (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1960) Oral epic poetry in SerboCroat was the subject of long and fruitful studies ~~by~~ both Lord and Milman Parry

<sup>13</sup> Of all non-Atlantic slave trade centres active in the area, epic poetry ~~is~~ 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 ~~wh~~ spent his very substantial wealth buying ~~of~~ ~~Christian~~ slaves from Turks and setting them free. The Catholic Church established a regular office for the same purpose, which was active