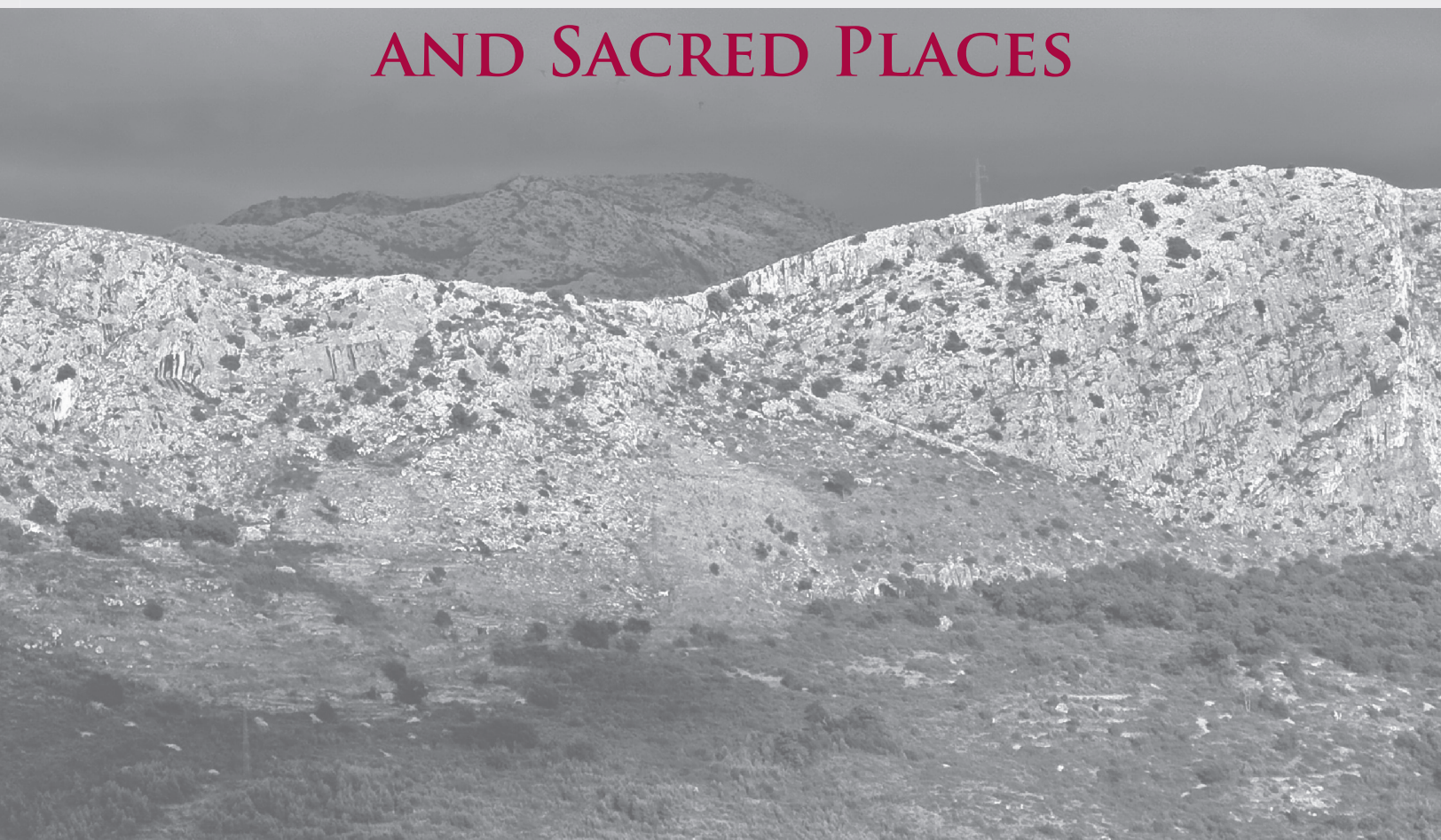


ZBORNIK INSTITUTA ZA
ARHEOLOGIJU

SERTA INSTITUTI
ARCHAEOLOGICI

KNJIGA
VOLUME 10

SACRALIZATION OF LANDSCAPE AND SACRED PLACES



Edited by Juraj Belaj, Marijana Belaj, Siniša Krznar, Tajana Sekelj Ivančan and Tatjana Tkalčec

INSTITUT ZA ARHEOLOGIJU
INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY



SACRALIZATION OF LANDSCAPE AND SACRED PLACES

Proceedings of the 3rd International Scientific Conference of Mediaeval Archaeology of
the Institute of Archaeology
Zagreb, 2nd and 3rd June 2016

Zagreb, 2018

ZBORNİK INSTITUTA ZA ARHEOLOGIJU
SERTA INSTITUTI ARCHAEOLOGICI
KNJIGA / VOLUME 10

PUBLISHER

Institut za arheologiju / Institute of Archaeology
Zagreb, Croatia

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF AND MANAGING EDITORS

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DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Hrvoje Jambrek

PRINTED BY

Tiskara Zelina d.d., Sv. I. Zelina

CIRCULATION

200

COVER PHOTO BY

Karlo Lolić

Financially supported by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia

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CIP zapis dostupan u računalnom katalogu Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu pod brojem
001012819

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available in the Online Catalogue of the National and University
Library in Zagreb as 001012819

ISBN 978-953-6064-36-6

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FOREWORD

Human settlement of landscape raises the question of marking the landscape with one's own religion. Changes of religious systems or their coexistence documented in the landscape raises further questions, particularly those pertaining to broader socio-cultural phenomena and dynamics. Even if such processes are not documented in written sources, they could often be recognized in toponyms, folklore, archaeological finds and in contemporary religious practices.

Keeping this in focus, **the Institute of Archaeology** organized the 3rd International Scientific Conference of Mediaeval Archaeology, entitled ***Sacralization of Landscape and Sacred Places***. The Conference took place on the **2nd and 3rd June 2016**, at the **Archaeological Museum in Zagreb**, Croatia.

This is the third in a series of conferences designed to thematise mediaeval archaeology. However, for this third conference we have conceived a much broader framework – our intention was to stimulate an exchange of experiences and knowledge among participants with different research perspectives and disciplines and from different geographic areas and chronological periods.

As many as 74 participants took part in the conference, coming from Croatia, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia, Romania, Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Italy, Czech Republic, Germany and Iran. All in all they contributed a total of 57 presentations.

Introductory plenary lecture “Sacral spatial arrangement of landscape” was given by prof. ddr. Andrej Pleterski, Research Advisor at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The Conference was divided into the following panels: Human and sacred landscape: paradigms; Traces of sacred sites: prehistory; Myth in landscape; Sacred place - the arena of religious discourses; Social realities in the sacralization of space; Narratives and practices in the sacralization of space; Reading of holy places and sites in Islamic tradition; Traces of sacred sites: antiquity; (De)Sacralizations: spatial biographies; Christian spatial symbolisation.

Most of the presenters at the conference readily adapted their presentations into papers. This publication presents analyses of sacred landscape from the perspective of: archaeology, folklore, ethnology, cultural anthropology, literature, architecture, history, art history, mathematics etc., and at the same time covers the period from prehistory, through antiquity and Slavic period and the Middle Ages to the modern period and contemporary times. In addition to this, it also compares different processes from different regions and times, by and large from Europe.

All the contributions were separately reviewed by carefully selected experts from the international academic community according to their particular discipline or research perspective. By publishing a book in English, we have tried to provide to the authors the widest visibility in the international scientific community.

I would like to thank once again all the participants of the conference for excellent cooperation, as well as to the institutions that helped make it a great success. Special thanks are reserved for the reviewers of individual papers and the proceedings on the whole for their effort, expertise and contribution, as well as for the colleagues from the Institute of Archaeology for their help in the organization of the conference and the publication of these proceedings. We are grateful also to the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb for their support in the organization of the conference. We sincerely hope that the contributions gathered in this publication will encourage colleagues from various scientific disciplines, especially researchers of younger generations, to engage further with the sacralization of landscape and sacred places.

Juraj Belaj

CULTURAL PRACTICES IN SACRALISATION OF PLACE: VOWS IN THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF MARIJA BISTRICA

Scientific paper

A general insight into cultural-anthropological perspective on the processes of sacralisation of pilgrimage sites we shall concretize through the results of research of vow (ex voto) practices, as non-institutional personal religiosity, in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica. In terms of content and performance, vow practices offer insights into the dynamics of the pilgrim's understanding of the sacred place. They can also reveal and point to particular historical, religious and sociocultural events and processes, which remain permanently inscribed into the sacred place once the vows have been concretized.

Key words: sacralisation, vows, pilgrimage site, the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica

In this paper we deal with the processes of sacralisation of place from cultural-anthropological perspective, focusing on the practices of creating pilgrimage destinations as sacred places. We shall concretize the insight through the results of the research of vow practices, as a non-institutionalized personal religiousness, in the Croatian national shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica near Zagreb.

We approach the concept of sacralisation of the place as a process that takes place in the interaction between the site itself and those who consider it sacred. In our approach, we do not observe the sacred as something that exists beyond culture, but as a realm conditioned by culture: "it is imagined, defined, and articulated within cultural practice" (Bowman 1991: 120). In that sense, we can hardly expect a site to become sacred, or continue to remain so, by a decree or by institutionalisation. It is not constant by or in itself, nor does it radiate objectively from the place itself (Preston 1992: 33). As Christopher McKeivitt stressed, when he speaks about pilgrimage sacred places, the sacredness to be real,

"it must be constantly created and recreated. A conscious effort is required on the part of the pilgrim to use the appropriate symbols, myths, and rituals in order to vivify the experience of pilgrimage and to make real the sacredness of place." (1991: 79)

Pilgrims, that is, believers' categories and cosmologies are the primarily basis of observing and clarifying the processes of sacralisation of place from cultural-anthropological perspective. For pilgrims, pilgrimage sites are sacred places *par excellence*, because there – so it is believed – the sacred is so near that one may come to a direct encounter with it, without intermediaries, right there, at that very place. According to that, the key to understanding pilgrimage sites are pilgrims themselves, respectively, their ideas, symbols, practices and meanings they inscribe into places, transforming them into sacred, or pilgrimage sites. The basic questions, among others, that we are interested in researching of the sacralisation of pilgrimage sites are focused on the interaction and interchange between pilgrimage experiences and places: How is a site imagined, defined and created as a pilgrimage place, that is, as a sacred place, in pilgrims' ideas, meanings, practices? How the pilgrimage centre embodies the sacred? How the pilgrimage site in turn influences the pilgrim's experience, that is, the

way pilgrims experience the sacredness of the place? Such questions reflect the perspective within which the sacralisation is considered to be a two-way process. On the one hand, it entails the inscription of certain ideas, symbols, narrations, practices and experiences into the space through which a place is meaningfully created as a sacred. On the other hand, the site itself is an actor of this process, in the sense that it affects the shaping of the believers' experience of the sacred.

Pilgrimage and pilgrimage places are almost universal religious phenomena (and also non-confessional or secular ones; cf. Belaj 2012: 14–15; Margry 2008), however universality is not extended to ideas, meanings and practices the pilgrims inscribe into them – pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites differ in religious traditions; the attributes of pilgrimage places and pilgrimages of the same religious traditions change through history; experiences of two pilgrims in the same pilgrimage site are not the same; experience of one pilgrim changes with each new visit to the same pilgrimage site. Therefore, pilgrimage centres, as well as pilgrimage, we understand as highly dynamic, complex, ambiguous and heterogeneous meaningful places.

Vow practices that enter into the scope of this paper belong to the frame of non-institutionalised religiosity – religiosity that is generally comprised of beliefs practices, attitudes and styles of religious expressions that are present outside of liturgy or that are non-liturgical, but which lean onto the official religious doctrine and are in a constant interaction with it (Badone 1990: 5–6; Belaj 2006: 11). According to W. A. Christian (1989: 129), vows are instrumental prayers with a distinctive aspect of invoking the saint to act in this world. In terms of content and performance, vow practices often reveal and point to particular historical, religious and sociocultural forces and their dynamics, which remain permanently inscribed into the sacred place once the vows have been concretized. With this, they offer an insight into the dynamics of the pilgrims' understanding of the sacred place. In the next part of the paper, as we have stated, on the example of individual vow practices in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica we would try to sketch the interaction between vow practices and pilgrimage centre, respectively, to show how vow practices shape and create the sacredness of the shrine, how they reflect the dynamic of shrine understandings, and how the shrine in turn affects the pilgrims' experience.

THE SHRINE AND VOWS

The shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica is located about 40 kilometres north-east of Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia. Since its founding in the 16th century, and especially since the revival of the shrine in the 17th century, until today, it has been attracting pilgrims from its surroundings as well as more distant places including the neighbouring countries (cf. Buturac 1993). Through many years the stories about unusual events connected to the statue of Mary as well as pilgrims' testimonies of healings and miracles have contributed to the shrine's popularity (Jembrih 2001). The shrine was proclaimed the Croatian national shrine in 1971 due to constant increase in its importance through the last several centuries and specific historical context (Buturac 1993). Today the shrine is visited by about 800,000 pilgrims each year (*Marija Bistrica* 2014).

The shrine in Marija Bistrica keeps records of personal prayers (promises, vows) and gratitude expressed by pilgrims. In this paper two record books are used. The first book, *Kinč osebnosti*... [*The Distinctive Adornment*...] by Petar Berke published in 1775 brings the oldest and rare records from the 16th century and subsequent records until the second half of the 18th century. The shrine chaplain Petar Berke wrote this first history of the sanctuary and collection of pilgrims' stories and miracles connected to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica. Such books that used to be read by the pilgrims and the priests in various parishes considerably contributed to the popularity of the shrine (cf. Hrovatin 2015: 73–75). The second book, *Knjiga uslišanja, milosti, zagovora i čudesna Bl. Dj. Marije Majke Božje Bistričke* [*The Book of answered prayers, graces, vows and miracles granted by the Blessed Virgin Our Lady of Marija Bistrica*], is the only one published on the shrine's web site and contains testimonies of pilgrims taken by the shrine's officials during the 20th century, more closely from the end of the 1930s until the beginning of 2000s. As it is the case with many other shrines, the testimonies are usually accompanied by a gift pilgrims bring to the shrine (but the gift is not mentioned in every record). Although each testimony contains different information (most of them contain the date), they can be compared and used in the analysis in order to gain the insight into the main motivations of coming to the shrine and thoughts of the pilgrims during their pilgrimage, as well as religious activities and prayers with partial reflections upon their lives in general. The research of personal testimonies in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica is a part of the previously conducted systematic research of vow practices in the shrine (cf. Hrovatin 2015), which also included the open interviews from 2009 until 2014 with believers in Croatia, most of them living in the region of Zagreb. Although only some of the testimonies and interviews are chosen for this paper, they clarify the question of the sacralisation of the pilgrimage place.

The shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica has a big reputation among the pilgrims. The shrine's reputation, that is, its spiritual magnetism, as defined by James J. Preston, is the power of the shrine to attract the pilgrims, and it is conditioned

by miraculous healings, apparitions, difficulty of access and sacred geography – it derives from human concepts and values inscribed into the pilgrimage centre (1992: 33). The power that pilgrims inscribe into the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica is already visible in the fact that it is the most popular Marian pilgrimage centre in Croatia, and one of the best known in this part of Europe. The analysed records in the Marija Bistrica shrine show that the pilgrims most often ascribe the power to this place that is reflected in miraculous healings. The two out of three founding stories of the shrine in Marija Bistrica are connected to health problems, more specifically illnesses of legs and eyes. Many examples show that those two illnesses are the most often mentioned in the prayers until today in the shrine. The miraculous healings in this place, as pilgrims believe, represent the manifestation of the sacredness of this pilgrimage centre:

“She made a vow to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, came to her on a pilgrimage and was there, in Bistrica, miraculously healed.” (beginning of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

A miracle is a kind of special social event in the shrine experienced by all who are present there (Dubisch 1990):

“And there was a miracle! When he kneeled in front of the altar [...] he started to talk in front of a large number of people [...] who couldn't stop marvelling over this event and couldn't stop praising the merciful Mother of Marija Bistrica.” (1720, Berke 1775: 132—133)

On the one side, the miracle for the believers belongs to a specific dimension of the sacredness always pointing to transcendence and holds a special place in the personal religiosity; on the other side, it is a specific confirmation that the belief is “right”, it “reinforces” the religiosity, and sometimes it can gain the meaning of a warning (Bajsić 1974: 53, Belaj 2006: 280). As the cited records of testimonies state, the motif of the miraculous is connected to a concrete experience of transcendental intervention in the shrine. At the same time, it is an important segment of the “truth” about the power of this particular pilgrimage place. The emphasising of the extraordinary events and miracles, for example, in the narrations or in the objects that are being left in the shrine, represents a certain propaganda of the shrine, that is, a confirmation of the effectiveness of praying at this particular place – and not only for the ones that have witnessed the miraculous events themselves, but also for future pilgrims. Relying on the pilgrims' experiences, McKevitt points out that pilgrims sense that the sacred resides in that sacred place in the shape of special powers (1991: 93); otherwise, there would be no pilgrimage, that is, a visit to meet the sacred at that place would not happen. This special desire of the believers to meet the sacred exactly there, in the shrine, is evident in the following records:

“She heard once that someone talked about graces and miracles that happen in the vicinity of the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, and after hearing that, she started to think if she could also pray there and receive herself the mercy of birth [...] 1686.” (Berke 1775: 96)

“Dear priest! As I am unable to leave this little letter in the vicinity of the statue of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica I would like to ask you to do it for me as a favour. Canada. [...] The Prayer for intercession to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica! Dear Mother of Bistrica, Jesus' and my mother. Ask your son for my health, my children's and my husband's health.” (middle of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

“It is hard for me as it is probably for all the people who come for consolation to this sacred place. And you know that, in this place, here, where the walls also breathe spiritual strength, that sadness doesn't remain and that is why I feel lighter in my soul.” (end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

“I decided to go to Marija Bistrica because I have already been here several times with my parents. My Mum's family origin is connected to this area and I feel I belong here. Bistrica has been in my heart already since my childhood.” (end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

In addition to the fact that it is important for the pilgrims to be present in the shrine, they often accompany their visit with different religious practices such as confession, altar circumambulation, kneeling etc., in order to accomplish healing in the shrine or solution to some other problem:

"So the husband did it in that way and from true heart prayed to the Bistrica Mother for Her merciful help [...] and there was the second miracle, he kneeled down and by praying Our Father and Hail Mary he praised the merciful Bistrica helper to bring into life his dead child. Soon the child was brought to life and still lives until this day. 1759." (Berke 1775:193–194)

"Today she came with crutches to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica and here, in the sacristy, she made a confession, and recently she confessed more often, she attended the holy mass and went with the crutches on the sacred Path of the Cross with her family. She started to feel pleasant on the Path and felt that she didn't need the crutches. Now she walks without the crutches and leaves the crutches as a gift to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica." (middle of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja*... 2012)

The importance for a person to be physically present in the shrine, even in a symbolical way, is also obvious in the practice of bringing to the shrine a photograph of another person who cannot come there due to various reasons:

"Mommy! We recommend You the poor refugee [the young man in wheelchair on the photograph]. Ask the son Jesus Christ that by Your prayers He allows him to walk. Find him in [address] Germany. Thank You Mummy!" (1999, *Knjiga uslišanja*... 2012)

Coming to the shrine to leave a gift that has a special meaning for pilgrims and is closely connected to physical aspect of religious practices. They often give objects with personal symbolic meaning, such as a wedding dress for granting a marriage:

"As a sign of respect and the vow, she gives to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica her own wedding dress as a gift, thank you!" (middle of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja*... 2012)

Except as an expression or a sign of worship, a gift can mean an extension of oneself by which the pilgrim would like to leave a more permanent sign of their visit to the shrine:

"This is why I wanted to leave at least a part of myself that is knitted within [...] that piece of handiwork so that it connects me to its good intention." (end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja*..., 2012)

Furthermore, the pilgrims' gifts already present in the shrine are the motivation for other pilgrims to follow the same practice, what additionally testifies about a two-way influence between the shrine and pilgrims:

"I give the ex-voto painting to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica and let it be in Marija Bistrica with the rest of the ex-voto gifts." (end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja*... 2012)

Given for the other pilgrims to see them, gifts left in this way testify about the repertoire of pilgrims' difficulties or received mercy, about a direct encounter with the sacred at that very place; as a part of the shrine's inventory they are indicators for future pilgrims in shaping of their perception about this pilgrimage centre and they become a part of narrations by which the power of the sanctuary is propagated – the power to which the given objects refer (Belaj 2012: 41–42).

The pilgrims' need to leave a physical mark of their presence or to testify in the shrine is visible in the practice of writing down the prayers or just one's own name on the wall behind the main altar in the shrine (Fig. 1) or in placing the votive tablets in the shrine, that usually express gratitude (Fig. 2).

In recent data more information are given about sensory level of the experience in the shrine, the level that less relies on concrete life problems, expectation of a miracle or testimony, as was the case in the older records. In recent records the shrine reveals itself as a place where believers come to induce and experience their positive inner sensations, so as to focus on their (sacred) self (Pandian 1997: 509):

"In sign of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, who is a console to me in these hard moments and to who I go on a pilgrimage every year with the feeling of warmth, joy and peace in my heart and soul." (middle or end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja*... 2012)

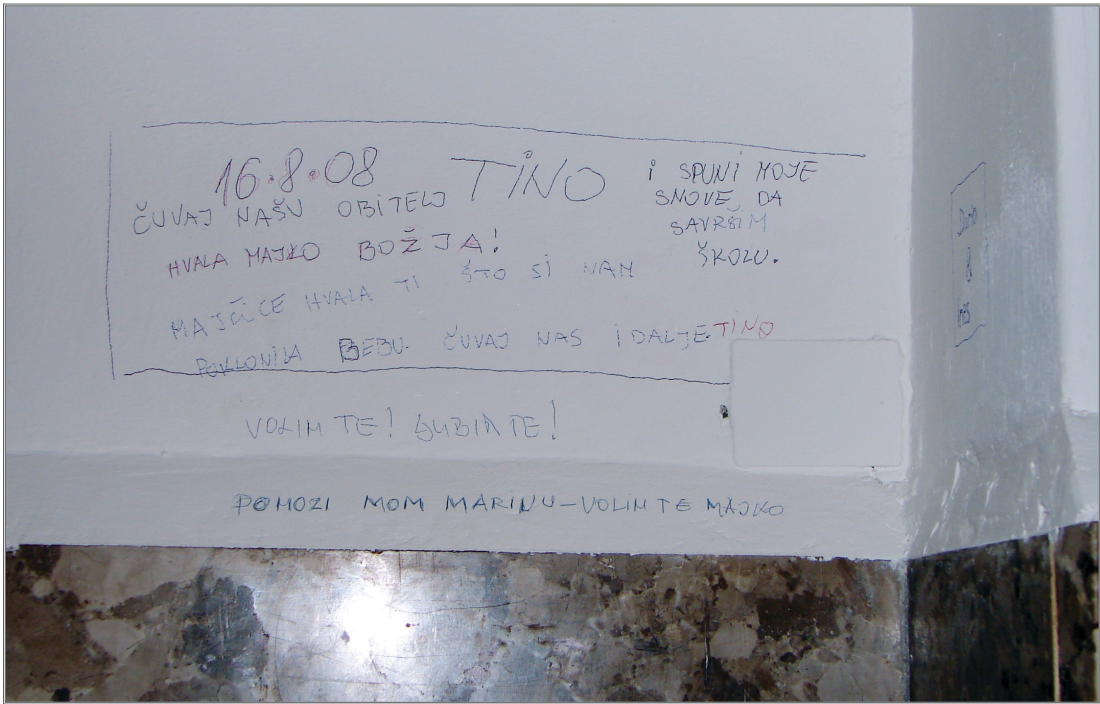


Fig. 1 Prayers or names written on the wall behind the main altar in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica (photo by M. Hrovatin, 2013)

| | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| MAJKO HVALA TI NA POMOĆI. POMOZI NAM I DALJE 1983. B.M.I.R. | MARIJO HVALA TI NA POMOĆI 1982. M.V.S.D | M.B.B. HVALA TI ZA POVRATAK SINA. POMAŽI NAM I DALJE U SVEMU. OBITELJ DROPULIĆ 1983. | MAJKO BOŽJA BISTRIČKA HVALA TI NA POMOĆI. MOLIM ZA NAS 1982. KATARINA S. | MAJKO HVALA TI ŠTO SI NAM VRATILA ALIDU. ČUVAJ JU I DALJE 1983. RODITELJI. | MARIJO, HVALA TI NA POMOĆI. BLAŽIĆ 1983. JELICA I ŽELJKO | SRETAN POROD KĆERI I ZA OZDRAVLJENJE SINA 1983. ANA KOREN | BOŽJA OZDRAVLJENJE SINA 1983. |
| HVALA TI MARIJO 1983. OBIT. IVANČIĆ | HVALA TI MAJČICE ZA OZDRAVLJENJE 1983. P.I. | HVALA TI MARIJO OBITELJ 1982. RADAČIĆ | HVALA MAJKO 1983. A.G. | MAJKO HVALA TI. OBITELJ: PAPIĆ ZIDARIĆ 1983. WEILER | HVALA TI M.B.B. ŠTO SI NAM OZDRAVILA DIJETE. MILAN I DRAGICA 1980. | MAJKO HVALA TI ZA OZDRAVLJENJE NAŠE KĆERKE MARIJE. OBITELJ 1982. ŠIMUNIĆ KELEMEN | MARIJO ZA OZDRAVLJENJE NAŠE KĆERKE MARIJE. OBITELJ 1983. UZ NAS |
| HVALA TI MAJKO ŠTO SI MI POMOGLA KOD OPERACIJE. POMOZI MI I DALJE. MARIJA KLJUNIC 1983. KLENOVNIK | HVALA TI MARIJO NA OZDRAVLJENJU. OBITELJ 1983. FILEŠ | HVALA TI MAJKO NA TVOJOJ MILOSTI. KATICA KUČINIĆ 1983. ČORLUKA | MARIJO HVALA TI OBITELJ 1983. MAKOTER | MARIJO POMOZI DALJE MOJOJ DJECI. ZA SVE TI HVALA. MARIJA 1983. WEILER | HVALA TI MARIJO ZA OZDRAVLJENJE OD OPEKOTINA. ĐURE I SUPRUGE INGE ŠALKOVIĆ. 1930. | HVALA TI MAJKO ZA PRIMIJENE MILOSTI. ZORA 1983. STUPARIĆ | MARIJO ZA OZDRAVLJENJE NAŠE KĆERKE MARIJE. OBITELJ 1983. UZ NAS |
| M.B.B. BILA SI NAM UVIJEK U POMOĆI. ČUVAJ NAS I DALJE. OBITELJ HORVAT 1983. KOPRIVNJAČ | M.B.B. DAJ MOJOJ ŽENI I OBITELJI ZDRAVLJE. 1983. M.J.K. | MARIJO, HVALA ŠTO SI MI SPASILA SINA U NESREĆI. ČUVAJ GA. 1983. V.S.S. | MAJKO HVALA TI 1983. I.I.M.Č. | MARIJO, PREPORUČAMO TI ŽUPU G. STUBICU I DUHOVNA ZVANJA. ZAHVALNI I VJERNI 1984. ŽUPLJANI | MARIJO, VODI NAŠE SJEMENISTARCE I ONE KOJI ČE POČI ZA POZIVOM ISUSOVIM ŽUPA 1984. GORNJA STUBICA | HVALA TI MAJKO NA USPJEŠNOJ OPERACIJI. 1983. ZDRAVKA BREŠKIĆ | MAJKO TI ČUVA 1983. |
| HVALA TI MAJKO BOŽJA ZA MOJ ŽIVOT. I.Ž. 1983. N.GRAĐIŠKA | HVALA NA POMOĆI DRAGA M.B.B. OBITELJ 1983. SMOLČIĆ | HVALA TI MAJKO BOŽJA ŠTO SI MI SPASILA SINA DAVORA SELJAN. ČUVAJ GA I DALJE. MAMA 1983. | HVALA VAM ISUSE I MARIJO ŠTO STE ME OČUVALI OD NEPRIJAVNE SMRTI. KATICA 1983. VUJANKOVIĆ | HVALA M.B.B. ZA OČUVAN TUDI ŽIVOT U SAOBRAĆAJNOJ NESREĆI. 1971. F.ŠIMEK | MAJKO BOŽJA HVALA ŠTO SI MI POMOGLA SLAVA 1980. PALATINUŠ | MAJKO BOŽJA HVALA TI NA OZDRAVLJENJU. BISERKA 1983. JAGER | HVALA TI MAJKO BOŽJA 1983. |
| HVALA TI M.B.B. NA USLIŠANOJ MOLITVI. BUDI NAM NA POMOĆ. A.J. 1983. S.M. | MARIJO HVALA TI. ELIZABETA 1983. GAIJNOV | HVALA MAJKO 1983. M.V. | M.B.B. HVALA NA SVEMU. PREPORUČAMO SE. PETEK NEVENKA I 1983. KĆERKA DIJANA | ZAHVALJUJEM TI M.B.B. NA ČUDU OZDRAVLJENJA. STANKO 1983. JANČIĆ | DRAGA M.B. BISTRIČKA IZMOLI NAM DOBRIH SVEČENIKA. ZAHV. OBIT. BADURINA 1983. K.I.L. | M.B.B. HVALA TI NA SVEMU. POMOZI NAM U NAŠEM OZDRAVLJENJU. 1983. AO I A.I. | M.B.B. IMAJMI MILOST. MOLIM ZA OZDRAVLJENJE NAŠE KĆERKE MARIJE. OBITELJ 1983. |
| MAJKO DRAGA HVALA NA MILOSTI. 1983. | ZA SVE TI HVALA, MARIJO. MAJKO NAŠA. 1983. V.M. I Z.T. | HVALA TI MAJKO ČUVAJ NAS. ANTONOVIĆ 1983. | MAJKO POMOZI MOME TATI. H.A. HVALA TI. 1983. H.A. | HVALA TI MARIJO ZA SVE ŠTO SI NAM POMOGLA. POMOZI NAM I DALJE. 1982. Ž.F. | HVALA TI MAJČICE. POMOZI NAM I DALJE. OBIT. FRANJO 1983. OSTRUGAČ | MAJKO. JA SAM MOLILA TEBE I TVOGA SINA ISUSA KRISTA ZA POMOC. HVALA TI 1983. | M.B.B. IMAJMI MILOST. MOLIM ZA OZDRAVLJENJE NAŠE KĆERKE MARIJE. OBITELJ 1983. |
| HVALA TI MAJKO VERA 1983. ŠPOLJARIĆ | HVALA TI MAJKO NA POMOĆI 1983. | HVALA TI MAJKO 1983. | MAJKO HVALA TI 1983. | PUNO TI 1983. | MAJČICE, NA SVEMU TI HVALA. 1983. | MAJKO HVALA. ČUVAJ NAS I 1983. | MAJČICE 1983. |

Fig. 2 Votive tablets in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica (photo by M. Hrovatin, 2013)

This new rhetoric about the role of the sacred place is in part the consequence of the increased influence of the Catholic Church during the 20th century over the attitudes prevailing in personal piety. As data show, the intensity of public display of miracles and healings diminished and intimate religiosity increased. Some practices such as walking on knees in the shrine have thus also decreased during time.

Also, the (re)building of the shrine has on several occasions been a significant historical moment that influenced pilgrims' practices through time. After the Path of the Cross was built in Marija Bistrica, the religious act of fulfillment of the promise by pilgrims has been partly transferred from circumambulation of the Mary's altar towards walking along the Path of the Cross. This coincided with the changes in the Catholic Church during the 20th century that highlighted both the role of Mary as an intermediary and Christ as the recommended centre of personal piety:

"I thought if it all went well, I would go to Marija Bistrica to pray there [...] so we prayed [...] station by station we prayed the Rosary's tenths along the Path of the Cross." (Interviewee Petra¹, 2012)

In addition to the religious needs of pilgrims, the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica serves the purpose of localizing ethno-national identity which is imagined as closely related to religious affiliation. Such meanings have been inscribed into the shrine since its founding. The founding of the shrine in Marija Bistrica is closely connected to the historical time of the Ottoman rule over some parts of today's Croatia, so one of the first miracles in Our Lady of Marija Bistrica shrine is associated with the liberation of the Croatian soldiers from the Ottoman captivity (Buturac 1993: 46). In 1935 the Zagreb archbishop Antun Bauer crowned the miraculous statue of the Mother of God with a golden crown and pronounced the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, the Queen of the Croats (*Povijest prošteništa* 2013), which is not without historical background, because the idea of connecting the Croatian identity to this shrine, more precisely the Christian identity when it is to be differentiated from the Ottoman Islam, was already present in the writings of Petar Berke:

"More than once have good and pious soldiers of the glorious kingdom of Croatia experience the protection and help from Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, especially in the time of the last battles against the Ottomans. 1738." (Berke 1775: 167–168)

The deliverance from the hands of the "others", e.g. non-Christians, has been ascribed to the power of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica through history, and that motif has been in times of war and in moments of emphasizing national identity reflected in many personal prayers of the pilgrims coming to the shrine to this day. For example, a part of the story about the event that took place on the second day after the statue was found is echoed in later records about pilgrims' religious experience:

"Mary appeared before seven captured Christians [...] and said to them: "Don't be afraid, children, but have confidence. Promise to go there [to the shrine], and you would be freed." They promised, shackles dropped and the prison gates opened." (Buturac 1993: 46)

"In 1945 he was sentenced to death. In the prison he made a promise to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica that if she freed him, he would give a gift [...] at that moment they pardoned him." (middle of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

Some of the mentioned symbols appear also in the case of the 1990s war general Ante Gotovina who not only went on the pilgrimage to the national shrine in Marija Bistrica as he promised during his captivity, but he also used a relic of the cardinal Alojzije Stepinac (1898–1960) whose beatification took place in Marija Bistrica shrine in 1998, thus symbolically underlining the connection between the religious affiliation and national identity.

"Besides the medallion with the preserved piece of Alojzije Stepinac's shirt, the priest Ivan Turčić sends to the general Gotovina in the Hague the letter in which he expresses the wish that the Stepinac's relic protects also the other imprisoned Croatian generals." (Kalmeta 2010)

"My vow was to visit Our Lady of Marija Bistrica the first Sunday of my freedom." (Gotovina zahvalio... 2012)

1 The name of the interviewee is a pseudonym as was agreed with her during the interview respecting her wish.

Some pilgrims' prayers also reflect some of these particular historical events:

"Grateful to God and Our Lady of Marija Bistrica that I have lived to go on a pilgrimage in this shrine where on the 3rd October 1998 a historic event for the Croatian people takes place. The pronouncement of [...] the Martyr for God and Croatia Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac BEATIFIED. Thanks to God for the gift of ST. FATHER the Pope John Paul II." (1998, *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

The concept of Mary as the heavenly protectrice of the Croatian people has through time been perpetuated by the shrine and the pilgrims' prayers:

"Dear Mother of God, the helper of all the Croats." (2002, *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

"[O]ur national shrine of Mary of Heavens [...] National Croatian Protectrice! [...] Our Lady of Bistrica [...] Defend Your Croatian people." (end of the 20th c., *Knjiga uslišanja...* 2012)

In a quest for the approval of the national identity and in times of national crises, the shrine has figured as a safe place. Still today the shrine is visibly marked in the national calendar of Croatian believers. They are grateful to Our Lady of Marija Bistrica for the national achievements they were striving for.

Pilgrims' vows and prayers shape the meanings of the shrine in Marija Bistrica as the place where cultural, ethnic and religious identity is kept through time. As any other shrine, so the shrine in Marija Bistrica has got periods of higher or lesser intensity of pilgrims' visitations during which more prayers are noted at turbulent or important historical times.

CONCLUSION

From our perspective, the process of spatial sacralisation is perceived as the shaping of religious landscape, that is, a process in which people define and maintain space as a sacred place, inscribing into it their religious symbols, practices and narrations. In pilgrims' imaginaries pilgrimage destination is considered as a sacred place *par excellence*. Diversity of pilgrims' imaginative framings and practices shape a pilgrimage destination to a multidimensional sacred place. Thus, pilgrimage places keep a large and complex interpretative potential in an endeavour to trace the processes of place sacralisation. (Although in this paper we have focused on the interaction between the pilgrimage place and pilgrims themselves, its other "users" – shrine officials, local inhabitants, merchants, caterers, tourists and other visitors – also participate in the creation of a pilgrimage place. Sacred (pilgrimage) places thus reflect a heterogeneous repertoire of perceptions and meanings.)

As in any other sacred place, sacralisation processes in a pilgrimage place are two-way processes between the equal actors – pilgrims (or any other "user") and the place itself. In this paper the two-way process of sacralisation is presented through the examples of vow practices in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica. As a modus of spatial sacralisation, vows primarily involve the presence of believers in the shrine, physical or symbolical (by photographs, personal items, letters). The physical presence of believers in the sanctuary as part of the vow is complemented by the saying of prayers, confessions, corporeal practices like walking on knees or circling the altar, writing down or verbalizing testimonies of miracles in the sanctuary, writing names or messages on sanctuary walls, leaving votive tablets, leaving gifts to reinforce prayers or to express gratitude for answered prayers (e.g. crutches, wedding dress). The objects left there, on the one hand, can be perceived as an extension of sorts of the believers themselves, that is, as a lasting trace of their permanent presence in the sanctuary. On the other hand, by reflecting prayers and gritudes, that is, the needs of believers, expressed precisely in this place, these objects point to the power this place has in resolving human problems and needs. The inventory of the shrine, as visible traces of pilgrims' presence, becomes an instrument in the propaganda about the power of the shrine for future pilgrims, as well as a landmark in the process of shaping their own perception of the sacred place. As the data shows, in Marija Bistrica "the walls exude spiritual power" and "Bistrica is in the heart" of the pilgrims. Through their vows and the votive objects they left, the believers demonstrate that it is possible to establish direct communication with the sacred precisely at this place, that the sacred is present here.

Furthermore, devotional practices in Marija Bistrica show that believers visited the shrine primarily to cure concrete illnesses. Lately, renewal and strengthening of spirituality, acquisition of spiritual safety and gratification, even conversion—in short, the need for "warmth, satisfaction and peace in heart and soul"—are increasingly put forward as incentives for visiting the shrine. These new records of devotion at Marija Bistrica show that in recent times communication with the

sacred is progressively penetrating into the sphere of the interior personality of believers. These changes in the forms of devotion, testified by the practices documented in Marija Bistrica, not only point to a new rhetoric in the believers' understanding of the sacred place and its role, but also reflect movements in the frame of the "global Christianity" (personalization, or even privatization of faith) and the associated changes regarding the comprehension of religious practices introduced by the Catholic Church (comp. Hrovatin 2015: 74), e.g. laying emphasis on the testimony of personal experience and interior reliving of faith as the centre of the life of the Church.

And finally, in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica, data collected on devotions provide us with an opportunity to perceive the shrine as the basis for the creation of ethno-religious identity. Starting above all from the moment this place was declared a national shrine, it particularly stimulated devotions and promises to the Our Lady of Marija Bistrica as the patron saint of the Croatian people. The execution of such devotions and promises further maintains and perpetuates the idea of the shrine in Marija Bistrica as a place that offers the believers a sensation of ethno-religious affiliation.

The described examples of devotional practices in the shrine of Our Lady of Marija Bistrica clearly outline the continuity of sacralisation of this place since its founding. Because devotions reflect the social and political dynamics within which they are shaped, only a deeper insight into the structure and motifs of devotion may offer an insight into the dynamics of comprehending the shrine and its feedback effect on pilgrims' experiences, that is, into the understanding of the spatial sacralisation process. In that sense, vows are a complex and exceptional interpretative material for understanding both the concept and the process of spatial sacralisation, as well as the concept of sacredness of a place. Due to this, vows certainly deserve far greater attention in research than they presently enjoy.

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