

Return to the *Otars* (*Altars*)

ANTO Ivić
Mostar
E-mail: Anto.Ivic@hteronet.ba

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47960/2712-1844.2025.11.273>

UDK: 279.23(497.6) "17"

2-526.2 (497.6) "17"

Preliminary communication

Received: 29 April 2025

Accepted: 1 July 2025

Summary

The consequences of Ottoman expansion were changes in social relations, demographics and the confessional structure of the population in the conquered territories. After the disappearance of the Bosnian Kingdom, Islamization, initially insignificant, was accompanied by the destruction of Catholic churches or their conversion into Muslim places of worship in the 16th century. Along with urban centres taking on an oriental Islamic character, an important element of the Ottoman state's security strategy was colonization, which altered the confessional structure of the population. The 17th-century wars reduced the Catholic population to its lowest numbers ever and confined it to the smallest area in history. In this confessionally divided society characterised by a specific spatial distribution of the population, Catholics primarily inhabited suburban and rural areas, with the exception of mining centres. They were financially and materially weaker. Lacking sacred buildings, the few remaining parishes conducted their worship services in the open. In such places, far from urban centres, older sacral layers can often be discerned, which are more noticeable in areas less affected by migration processes and demographic shifts. Some of these locations have preserved the noun *oltar* (altar), or its archaic form *otar*, in their names. The centuries-old tradition of gathering Catholics in such places, which oral tradition connects with the pre-Ottoman period, reveals the specificity of the religious practice of Catholic Croats under the Ottomans in the area covered by the Bosnian Apostolic Vicariate in the 18th century.

Keywords: Otar; Misište; portable altar; sacral layering; Apostolic Vicariate of Bosnia.

Povratak otarima

Prethodno priopćenje
Primljeno: 29. travnja 2025.
Prihvaćeno: 1. srpnja 2025.

Sažetak

Posljedica ekspanzije Osmanlija bila je promjena društvenih odnosa i demografske slike na osvojenom području. Nakon nestanka Bosanskoga Kraljevstva, u početku neznatna, islamizacija je u XVI. stoljeću praćena uništavanjem katoličkih crkava ili prenamjenom u muslimanske bogomolje. Uz poprimanje orijentalnog islamskog karaktera urbanih centara, važan element sigurnosne strategije osmanske države bila je kolonizacija. Time je mijenjana i konfesionalna struktura stanovništva. Brojnost katolika nakon ratova u XVII. stoljeću pala je na dotadašnji minimum i svedena na najuže područje do tada. U konfesionalno podijeljenom društvu sa specifično nastalim prostornim razmještajem stanovništva, s iznimkama rudarskih središta, katolici nastanjuju uglavnom prigradska i seoska područja. Slabije su imovinske i ekonomske moći. U nedostatku sakralnih objekata, njihovo bogoslužje u malobrojnim preostalim župama odvijalo se pod otvorenim nebom. Na takvim mjestima, udaljenim od urbanih središta, često su prepoznatljivi stariji sakralni slojevi. Uočljiviji su na prostoru manje zahvaćenim migracijskim procesima i zamjenom stanovništva. Pojedine lokacije sačuvali su u nazivu imenicu *oltar*, odnosno arhaični oblik *otar*. Višestoljetna tradicija okupljanja katolika na takvim mjestima koju usmena predaja povezuje s predosmanskim razdobljem, ukazuje na specifičnost vjerske prakse katolika Hrvata pod Osmanlijama na području koje u 18. stoljeću pokriva Bosanski apostolski vikarijat.

Ključne riječi: Otar; Misište; prijenosni oltar; sakralna slojevitost; Bosanski apostolski vikarijat.

Introduction

The medieval Bosnian Banate, and later the Bosnian Kingdom until its fall to the Turks, was a participant in civilisational, social and religious processes characteristic of the wider environment in the European Mediterranean zone and its hinterland.

The Ottoman invasion and the implementation of their state's strategic goals resulted in depopulation, the settlement of a new population, a new way of urbanization, changes in the confessional composition and social relations. Over a longer period, these changes had a

significant impact on the remaining, previously dominant, Catholic population and its spatial distribution. This is evident not only from tax rolls but also from reports on the state of Catholic parishes, mainly after the visitations of bishops from the 17th to the 19th century.

The way of life of Catholics adapted to the different environment without visible signs of their earlier Christian identity, in a society that European countries had begun to perceive as oriental. The article shows how a specific religious practice survived in extremely unfavourable circumstances, after the devastation or conversion of churches to other purposes, and how it adapted to the new circumstances. The practice was conditioned by relations in a confessionally divided society, and the chosen locations were not just places far from urban areas; they often held a preserved sense of historical sacredness.

1. A Different Society

1.1. The Territory of War

During the decline of the states into which the earlier Seljuk Empire had splintered, Osman (died 1323/4), who had initially been proclaimed an independent ruler in the small northernmost Turkmen territory bordering Byzantium in 1299, was accepted as the leader of the *ghazis* throughout Anatolia, and they became the Ottomans. An important driving force of Ottoman expansion was *jihad*, holy war or *ghaza*. Even when the Ottomans were not warring, they used the time to prepare for future conflicts. All societal values coincided with the ideal of *ghaza* and the concern that the land of Islam (*dar-al-islam*) expand at the expense of war territory (*dar-al-harb*).¹

Osman's emirate was preoccupied with holy war against Christian Byzantium. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans, as typical *ghazis*, expanded their territory deep into the European continent.² The disunity of European policies and inter-

¹ HALIL INALCIK, *Osmansko Carstvo. Klasično doba 1300-1600*, Sarajevo, 2018, pp. 80, 88.

² *Ibidem*, p. 78. "With the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II became the most respected Muslim ruler. The Ottomans considered him the greatest

ests benefited them. The next major power that could oppose them in Europe was the Kingdom of the Crown of St. Stephen or the *Archiregnum Hungaricum*, to which the Croatian Kingdom had belonged since the personal union. The Bosnian Kingdom, burdened with its own internal relations, was also on this course. The murder of King Stjepan Tomašević was in line with the Ottoman policy of destroying ruling dynasties. Hungarian-Croatian forces had already consolidated the border on the Vrbas River in the autumn of 1463 by forming the Banates of Jajce and Srebrenik. Seven decades later, one of the most important battles of the 16th century took place in Mohács in 1526 and ended with the decimation of the Hungarian nobility and the penetration of the Turks into Central Europe. The decisive Hungarian defeat led to the defence line being moved to the Una River. The fortification and stabilisation of the battlefield under the Habsburg dynasty created the Ottomans' most important future opponent.

The Ottoman advance through the remnants of the Byzantine Empire and part of Hungary terrified Europeans. Martin Luther interpreted this as a sign of the end times. The final assault on Buda in 1541 prompted him to publish *Exhortation to Prayer against the Turks*, in which he interpreted the present threat as judgment on the Germans for their sins.³ Luther did not live to see the peak of Ottoman expansion. The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest territorial extent at the close of Sultan Suleiman II the Lawgiver's reign (1520–1566), who was known in the West as the Magnificent.

Islamic leader since the first four caliphs, and the Islamic world began to respect holy war as its greatest source of power and influence."

³ MITCHELL BEAZLEY, *From the Dark Ages to the Renaissance 700-1599*, London, 2006, p. 112.



Map 1: Gradual Ottoman conquest of territory 1463-1592.

After the fall of Bihać in 1592, the final defence on historical Croatian territory was stabilised on the Kupa River. The Long War (1593-1606) ended with the Peace of Zsitvatorok, which showed for the first time that the Habsburg Monarchy (and Hungary and Croatia within it) could deal with the Ottomans. The Great Turkish War (the Vienna War) and the Morean Wars (ended in 1699) began the liberation of Lika, the area north of the Sava River, and the coastal hinterland. Ottoman territorial expansion and retreat, migrations, and religious consolidation of the population over four centuries formed a triangle, whose northern and southwestern sides became the borders of the Austro-Hungarian province called Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the end of the 19th century.

1.2. Depopulation and Emigration

Turkish incursions were carried out in different ways, and thus the consequences for the population were different. The first was achieved through voluntary recognition of the authorities, whereby certain privileges were granted, with fewer material and human losses and weaker Islamization. This was characteristic of the area

between the Neretva and Cetina rivers. It was not in the interest of the Ottomans to hold a deserted area, so they entered into agreements with the leaders of the people on return and the payment of taxes.⁴

The first lists of taxpayers in certain areas in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Ottoman conquest show a large number of *mezra*, abandoned lands, in areas that had not been easily conquered by the Ottomans. In the regions that fell under Turkish rule quickly and almost without a fight, the population was significantly preserved.⁵ In contrast to the longer acquisition and Islamization processes in central parts of Bosnia, in areas of long-term, decades-long resistance, such as Turkish Croatia, the consequences were more severe, and the degree of Islamization was greater. For security reasons, the population moved from areas which were exposed to frequent invasions towards Hungary and eastern Austria.⁶

From the fall of Bobovac in 1463 to the fall of Bihać in 1592, about 130 years had passed. During this entire time, the area of present-day northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina was a frontier for defence against the Turks. This meant long-term material, physical and psychological exhaustion. Military incursions left their mark on the demographic picture. There was fear for one's own life, but also the fear of being captured. The main spoils of war were people and livestock.⁷

⁴ HAMID HADŽIBEGIĆ, "Kanun-nama sultana Sulejmana Zakonodavca", in: *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja*, sv. IV-V, Sarajevo, 1949-1950, (295-382), p. 364; "Collecting the raja that has separated from the timar is a legal requirement", in: AHMED S. ALIČIĆ (ed.), *Poimenični popis sandžaka vilajeta Hercegovina iz 1477.*, Sarajevo, 1985, p. 82.

⁵ MIROSLAV DŽAJA – KRUNOSLAV DRAGANOVIĆ, *Sa kupreške visoravni*, Baško Polje – Zagreb, 1994, p. 379.

⁶ STJEPAN PAVIČIĆ, *Seobe i naselja u Lici*, Gospić, 2010, pp. 67-68.

⁷ ANDRIJA ZIRDUM, "Introduction", in: MIJAT JERKOVIĆ, *Hrvati plehanskog kraja sredinom XVIII. stoljeća*, Sarajevo – Plehan, 2006, p. 7.



Map 2: Migration of indigenous Catholics from the 15th to the end of the 18th century.

With the liberation of today's Slavonia, Lika, Dalmatia and Serbia from the Ottomans, the Muslim population migrated and clustered in the Bosnian Pashalik from the end of the 17th century onwards. During the Ottoman Empire's three-centuries-long clash with its European neighbours, both larger organised and smaller individual movements continuously altered the confessional composition and population distribution of this area.

1.3. Social Structure

The most important goals of the Ottoman state's security strategy were the establishment of state financing, an internal and external security apparatus, and the legal regulation of social relations.

Therefore, in the conquered regions, it was necessary to:

- ensure the collection of taxes for the costs of the state apparatus, civil servants, and the army
- create a loyal population,
- carry out planned urbanization,

- secure roads and communications,
- establish economic and business flows that would generate new income, and
- create judicial mechanisms for resolving disputes.

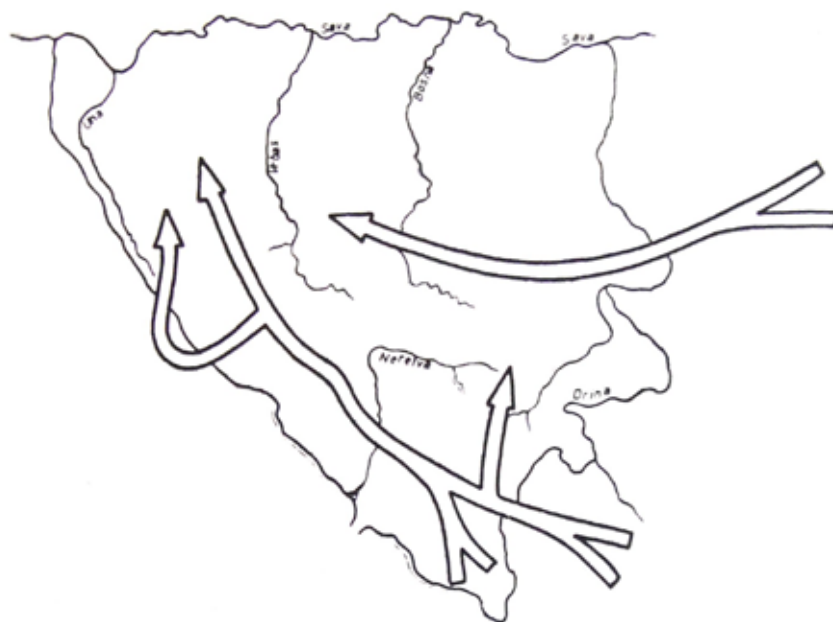
The implementation of the above evolved alongside parallel Islamiization processes, the core of which were towns and the settlement of Vlachs⁸ as part of their colonization plans.⁹

The *timar* system, i.e., the allocation of land to the *spahis* (cavalrymen as part of the army participating in further expansion), did not bring about a revolutionary change to the previous social order. In the 15th century, it encompassed a significant number of former Christian noblemen and helped their gradual assimilation into the new society.¹⁰

⁸ ADEM HANDŽIĆ, "Konfesionalni sastav stanovništva Bosne i Hercegovine u doba Osmanske vladavine", in: *Prilozi za orijentalnu filologiju*, 42-43, Sarajevo, 1995, (119-154), p. 121. "Then, the large immigration of a new population ensued, especially in the 16th century, but it also continued uninterrupted later, which represented a new chapter in the history of Bosnia in terms of confessional recognition of the Eastern (Orthodox) Church, and in terms of the overall influence of Eastern culture, as well as in terms of its economy (animal husbandry)." VLADISLAV SKARIĆ, "Porijeklo pravoslavnog naroda u sjeverozapadnoj Bosni", in: *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja*, Sarajevo, 1918, pp. 219, 223. "We found undoubtable signs that the Orthodox people, if not all the people, and for the most part, they are not indigenous to northwestern Bosnia, but newcomers from the far south. We just did not know for certain when the migration occurred. We noticed the appearance of large masses of Orthodox people on the Dalmatian and Croatian borders immediately after the Turks took Bosnia. Knowing that there had been no Orthodox element in those regions before the Turks, except for a few Vlachs, who had appeared earlier, it was natural to think that the Orthodox people had appeared in northwestern Bosnia by the will or permission of the Turks. This resolved the question of when the Orthodox people settled."

⁹ H. INALCIK, *Osmansko Carstvo. Klasično doba 1300-1600*, p. 19. "Holy war and colonization were the dynamic elements in the Ottoman conquests; the administrative and cultural forms adopted in the conquered territories derived from the traditions of near- eastern politics and civilization."

¹⁰ HALIL INALCIK, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", in: *Studia islamica*, 2, Paris, 1954, (103-129), pp. 103, 114-115.



Map 3: Directions of movement of the Vlach population in the 15th and 16th centuries (Petric, 1963).¹¹

Taxpayers were divided into farmers, merchants and herdsmen, with some also including craftsmen in this division. Society consisted of the military class and the *raja* as producers and taxpayers.¹² Livestock farmers were included in the *filuri* tax group. In tax terms, the term "Vlach" took on a different meaning from its original one. The taxes encouraged non-Muslims to convert to Islam. Depending on one's religious affiliation, Christians paid the *ispence*, and Muslims paid *resm-i-çift*. Non-Muslims also paid a poll tax, or head tax – *jizya*.¹³

¹¹ MARIO PETRIĆ, "O migracijama stanovništva u BiH", in: *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja*, 18, Sarajevo, 1963, pp. 5-16.

¹² H. INALCIK, *Osmansko Carstvo. Klasično doba 1300-1600*, pp. 92-93.

¹³ It existed among the Romans and in Byzantium as a tax on the inhabitants of conquered lands.

It was derived from Sharia law and applied to the *zimi*.¹⁴ It was abolished by a ferman in 1856.¹⁵

Alongside Muslims, who served as a strong pillar of Turkish rule, the population which had settled from the deeper, earlier conquered areas of the Ottoman Empire had the task, in addition to military service, to secure roads and mountain passes in the conquered territory.¹⁶ Besides the *derbencis* service,¹⁷ they were also organized into paramilitary units such as the *martolos*. Martolos households were the minority with respect to the total number of inhabitants of a village. They could be found in the districts of Lašva, Brod (Zenica), Rama and Uskoplje, but also in northeastern, western and north-western Bosnia. In addition to the military, they also played an important role in local security.¹⁸

¹⁴ HAMID HADŽIBEGIĆ, *Glavarina u Osmanskoj državi*, Sarajevo, 1953, pp. 56-57. "The word *jizya* in Arabic comes from the verb *žezaun*, which means: to reward, to pay, to be sufficient. Therefore, the word *jizya* can mean reward or punishment. As a term, it has the meaning of compensation, because the one who gives *jizya* gets the right to protection and the safeguarding of their lives and property. This is why non-Muslims in Islamic countries were called wards (*zimmî*)."

¹⁵ STANFORD J. SHAW, "The nineteenth-century Ottoman tax reforms and revenue system", in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6 (4), 1975, (421-459), p. 431. "...the *cizye* as a distinctive and discriminatory tax... was abolished and replaced by a simple military service tax (*bedl-i askeri*)... the tax was in fact apportioned among all non-Muslim males between the ages of 20 and 40."

¹⁶ S. PAVIČIĆ, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁷ Derived from a Persian *dar-band* – pass, gateway; MILAN VASIĆ, *Martolosi u jugoslavenskim zemljama*, Djela ANUBiH, Knjiga XXIX, Odjeljenje istorijsko-filoloških nauka, knjiga 17, Sarajevo, 1967, p. 95. "In some areas, there were strings of *derbencis* villages."

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 96-97, 141. "Of interest is a fact from a 14th-century document which called the greater part of the area between the Sana and Una rivers Martolosia."

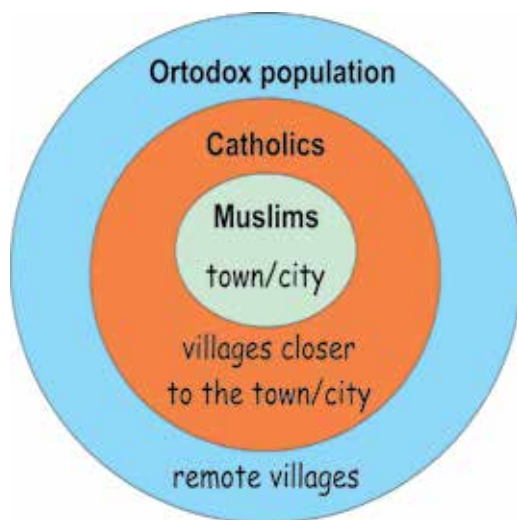


Figure 1: Confessional spatial distribution of the population.

First, while Bosnia was a frontier region, some old laws remained valid, such as the mining law.¹⁹ Mining towns, such as Fojnica and Vareš, enabled the survival of a larger number of indigenous Catholic community members. When the number of Catholics fell to an absolute minimum²⁰ because of the Great Vienna War (1683-1699), the Catholic urban traders and craftsmen disappeared. They were replaced by Orthodox traders. An analysis of three lists of Catholics from the period 1743-1813, created after the visitations of apostolic vicars, do not give a complete picture of the number of Catholics, which is understandable, because they were created in demanding circumstances for church needs, without the approval and knowledge of the Turkish authorities. But they broadly show that only every fifteenth Catholic in the 18th century was the resident of a larger settlement or suburb (Table 1).²¹

¹⁹ H. INALCIK, *Osmansko Carstvo. Klasično doba 1300-1600*, p. 97.

²⁰ Bishop Fr. Nikola Ogramić Olovčić visited 48 parishes in 1675. MIJO V. BATINIĆ, *Djelovanje franjevac u Bosni i Hercegovini*, sv. II., Zagreb, 1883, pp. 150-151. Most of these parishes, especially those in northeastern Bosnia (Srebrenica, Olovo, Tuholj and Gostilja near Kladanj, Tuzla, Modriča) were never restored. The remaining Catholic population, estimated at 80,000 in that year, would not recover to this figure for a full 100 years.

²¹ The settlements were designated in bishops' reports as *civitas* (city), *oppidum* (small town, mining town), *vicus* (part of the city, *mahala*, village, hamlet), *suburbium* (suburb), *villa* and *pagus* (village), *insula* (group of houses). In 1813,

larger settle- ments	number of Catholics 1742	of the total number in the parish	num- ber of Catholics 1768	of the total num- ber in the parish	number of Catholics 1813	of the total num- ber in the parish
Banja Luka	79	16,53%	80	12,03%	72	5,22%
Bihać			336	34,12%		
Bugojno					122	6,12%
Čitluk	111	5,66%	207	7,23 %	561	11,42%
Donji Vakuf					33	1,65%
Fojnica	450	12,89%	517	55,60%	731	31,44%
Gabela	14	0,71%	30	1,05%	142	2,89%
Glamoč	58	1,46%	60	0,89%	117	4,08%
Gornji Vakuf	74	7,70%	53	3,32%	282	6,85%
Gradiška					56	1,34%
Grahovo			85	1,26%	250	8,71%
Jajce	328	27,56%	288	20,18%	692	19,15%
Ključ	36	4,40%				
Konjic	16	0,94%				
Kreševo	747	43,71%	963	43,00%	1066	39,24%
Livno			66	0,98%	151	4,31%
Ljubuški					288	12,84%
Mostar	(i Ilići) 86	7,63%	73	6,60%	(i Ilići) 339	11,64%
Novi Grad			53	4,67%	(i Vrbova) 143	5,40%
Sarajevo	77	20,48%	107	18,26%	95	17,06%
Sutiska ²²	99	6,47%	149	8,51%	162	6,06%
Travnik			457	13,60%	154	1,88%

Miletić recorded the urban settlements of Banja Luka, Jajce, Travnik, Livno, Žepče, Tuzla and Sarajevo as *civitas*, *šeher* and *kasaba*. (Gabela was also listed as a *civitas* in 1768). Vareš, Kreševo, Fojnica and Gornji Vakuf were recorded as *oppidum*. The number according to the censuses does not represent the total number of Catholics, which can be explained with a more detailed analysis, but they are a sufficient indicator for this purpose.

²² Today's Kraljeva Sutjeska.

Tuzla			33	1,45%	52	1,38%
Varcar Vakuf	223	18,74%	110	7,70%	478	13,23%
Vareš	77	6,90%	1093	61,79%	1227	48,48%
Žepče			19	2,04%	133	6,02%
Županjac					115	2,51%

Table 1. Share of registered Catholics in larger settlements in the total number of Catholics per parish.²³

Very early on, Catholics in rural areas lost their land (*baština*), and through the *chiftlik* system, the land passed into the hands of the beys.²⁴ The Christian *raja* who cultivated the land were never certain if they would be expelled from the land by their overlords. In the middle of the 18th century, the serf paid a tenth of the crop yield to the spahi, and a tenth to the bey. At the end of the same century, the beys took all the land and demanded a third, and even a half of the annual harvest, which the serf had to bring home to the bey. There was also an obligation to serve the bey for 3-5 days in the house or in the field.²⁵ The pressure on the peasants did not even abate after the Hatti Sherif of Gülhane.²⁶

²³ Based on the analysis of Bishop Fr. Augustin Miletić's report to the Holy See in 1813. Archivio storico della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide, Scritture riferite nei Congressi, Bosnia, v. 9, f 447-463. (hereinafter: ASCPF).

²⁴ AHMED S. ALIČIĆ (ed.), *Opširni katastarski popis za oblast Hercegovu iz 1585. godine*, sv. II, Sarajevo, 2014.

The census shows that the estates (*baštine*) with a domicile Christian population were largely in the hands of Muslims who did not live on these estates. It is wrong to derive the number of households and the confessional affiliation of the inhabitants in individual villages from the ownership of the estates (land plots, *baština*), several of which were chifts.

²⁵ VJEKOSLAV KLAČIĆ, *Bosna. Podatci o zemljopisu i poviesti Bosne i Hercegovine*, Zagreb, 1878, Stuttgart, 1989. (reprint), pp. 107-108. "Not only did the serf have nothing of his own, but he was persecuted and abused by his master in every way; he could even be killed by a bey, and no one would even say a word."

²⁶ Although the Gülhane Hatt-i şerifi of 1839 proclaimed equality in principle and introduced uniform taxes, the *çifluk* relations remained unresolved. The collection of taxes through representatives caused dissatisfaction, and the spahis and beys sought to retain their privileges.

The Catholic population, which was mainly agricultural and paid taxes accordingly, was also engaged in livestock breeding due to the scarcity of soil in the Dinaric region. In order to utilise seasonal grass growth, they spent most summers in mountainous areas, which provided both pasture and additional arable land.

2. The Religious Life of Catholics

2.1. Sacred Buildings

Taking advantage of the strategic importance of Christian disunity, Mehmed II the Conqueror personally installed Patriarch Gennadius Scholarius, an opponent of unification with the Catholic Church, after the conquest of Constantinople.²⁷ He thus introduced the practice of the Turkish government appointing the clergy of the Orthodox Church (patriarchs, bishops, archbishops).²⁸ The Turks attempted but failed to appoint an Armenian bishop as the supreme head of all non-Orthodox Christians in Constantinople in 1461, whereby they primarily wanted to separate the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from their compatriots.²⁹ The Patriarch of the Patriarchate of Pec was subject to the Turkish administration, as was the entire Orthodox hierarchy. He welcomed the expansion of Orthodoxy that coincided with the Ottoman military's expansion westward. On the other hand, Catholic bishops, as representatives of the Church headed by the Pope, who opposed the Ottomans, found themselves in a very unfavourable position, as were Catholic believers.

During the reign of the Bosnian kings, nine Catholic dioceses spread across the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, and

²⁷ H. INALCIK, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", p. 106. "The period after the conclusion of Union between Rome and Constantinople in 1439 was critical. [Church Council in Florence, note A.I.] Mehmed II having been deposed in 1446 and his warlike advisers having been eliminated from the government, it was evident to him upon his second accession to the throne in 1451 that the conquest was a necessity for the firm establishment of his own position as well as for the future of the Ottoman Empire." ILBER ORTAYLI, *Naša historija i mi*, Sarajevo, 2017, p. 209.

²⁸ PETER HEATHER – ANDREW BELL – ANDREW PETTEGREE, *From the Dark Ages to the Renaissance*, London, 2006, p. 113.

²⁹ JURAJ KOLARIĆ, *Istočni kršćani*, Zagreb, 1982, p. 107.

Catholic religious life continued throughout the Middle Ages. Ottoman occupation destroyed the earlier Church organization.

In the legal code (*kanun-nami*) of the Bosnian Sancak of 1516, a law on the state persecution of Catholics was passed: "Let such newly built churches be demolished, and those infidels and (their) clergymen, who, while staying in them, spy on the situation and report to infidel countries, let them be severely punished, and let them be punished with severe corporal punishment. Let the crosses that have been placed on the roads be demolished and let them not be allowed to be erected in the future. And if they are erected, let those who do so be punished with corporal punishment."³⁰ Then followed the repressive period of rule by the Turkish governor, Ghazi Husrev-beg, who destroyed churches and annihilated traces of Christian identity. At the time, even the culture of marking burial sites was reduced to minimalism, with no morphology of the cross on the tombstone other than flat relief.



Photo 1 and 2: The gravestone crosses from Rapovine near Livno and Sovići near Grude.

³⁰ DOMINIK MANDIĆ, *Hrvati i Srbi, dva stara različita naroda*, Zagreb, 1990, p. 112; ANDRIJA NIKIĆ, *Kratka povijest Bosne i Hercegovine do 1918.*, Mostar, 2002, p. 89.

After the defeat at Mohács and the fall of the Jajce and Srebrenik Banates, a period of Christian despondency began in the Ottoman-occupied area,³¹ as did a period of more intensive Islamization, which is evident in tax lists. Catholics were unable to rebuild churches because of legal obstacles and poverty. Of the approximately five hundred churches from the pre-Ottoman period, only a small number remained in use. After the lesser-known 16th century, the number of Catholic parishes generally declined. After a period of relative stability in the 17th century, the Great (or Vienna) War and the Morean Wars brought widespread devastation by the century's close.

in Bosnia and in Western Herzegovina		in Eastern Herzegovina	
year	number of parishes	year	number of parishes
1623.	64	1629.	12
1630.	61	1660.	5
1672.-75.	59	1683.	4

Table 2: The number of parishes in the 17th century (S. Džaja, 1999).³²

The Franciscan monasteries that found themselves in the path of Habsburg and Venetian military campaigns, as well as those near the border, were doomed to ruin after the exodus of Catholics. Some of them also disappeared after the war. The Olovo monastery was burned down by the Turks in 1704, and the one in Donja Tuzla was mentioned until 1708.³³ At the beginning of the 18th century, the

³¹ BENEDIKT KURIPEŠIĆ, *Putopis kroz Bosnu, Srbiju, Bugarsku i Rumeliju 1539*, Banja Luka, 2006, pp. 26-27. Describing the troubles with which the Turks oppressed both the Bosnian native-Catholics and the Orthodox immigrants, Kuripešić recorded on his journey through Bosnia in 1530: "Oh, how many times did we watch them standing in front of us with their arms crossed, sighing and looking at the sky, not being allowed to speak to us. But when some of them found themselves alone with us, they said: 'Ah, how eagerly we expected you to free us with Christ's help! We would very much like to move from this tyranny to your country. But now we have lost hope because we can see that you also have to bow to the Turkish emperor and that you are going to him now to sue for peace.'"

³² SREĆKO M. DŽAJA, *Konfesionalnost i nacionalnost Bosne i Hercegovine*, Mostar, 1999, p. 155; KRUNOSLAV DRAGANOVIĆ, *Katalog župa i nazadovanje katoličkog elementa u Bosni i Hercegovini u XVII. stoljeću*, Rim – Sarajevo, 2021.

³³ STJEPAN IKIĆ, *Povijesne crtice o Tuzli, Orašje*, 2023, p. 32.

pastoral care of the parishes that survived in the areas under Ottoman rule, excepting the territory of the Trebinje diocese in eastern Herzegovina, was redistributed to the three remaining Franciscan monasteries: in Fojnica, Kreševo, and Sutjeska.³⁴ Since 1675, the guardians of these monasteries near the pasha's seat had to hand over a sum of money – the julus – to the centre of power in Travnik upon the arrival of each new pasha. It was also given to the Sarajevo mullah.³⁵ The guardians were also taken there to be extorted for various reasons. In unstable times, they also often ended up in prison for brief periods.³⁶ Due to heavy taxes and mounting debts, the monasteries were forced to borrow money from the beys and pawn church

³⁴ FILIP LASTRIĆ, *Pregled starina Bosanske provincije*, Sarajevo, 1977, pp. 116-120. He lists the destroyed, burned and abandoned monasteries in Mile, Vesela Straža, Skakava near Tuzla, Usora, Lašva, Jajce, Glamoč, Zvornik, Konjic, Mostar, Ljubuški, Modriča, Srebrenica, Olovo, Visoko, Gradovrh near Tuzla, Donja Tuzla, Rama. Besides them, only three monasteries: Sutjeska, Fojnica and Kreševo only survived throughout the entire period of Turkish rule in the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. KRUNOSLAV DRAGANOVIĆ, *Bosna u očima apostolskog vizitatora Petra Masarechija 1624.*, in: *Napretkov calendar*, Sarajevo, 1937, p. 219. The author, citing a source from 1623, according to which 101 parishes were served by Franciscans within the borders of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17 of which were monastic, remarks: "in terms of numbers, the 17th-century reports are a heavy burden for the historian." Regardless of the exact number of parishes, the fact is that the number of religious buildings dramatically decreased.

³⁵ Theologian, judge.

³⁶ MARIJAN BOGDANOVIĆ, *Ljetopis kreševskog samostana*, Sarajevo – Zagreb, 2003, *passim*, p. 159. "On the 5th day /of December 1770/ the Sarajevo mullah summoned the guardian to bring with him the documents on the basis of which he had renovated the church. May God curse them, because this is the fifth mullah who has extorted money in the same way! ... And the guardian has not yet returned from Travnik, nor do we know what is happening there, except that everyone assumes that they want to extort money there too"; p. 201. 1777. "Mustaj-pasha intended to hang the vicar in Skopje without taking him to Travnik. ... when the Turks found out that the vicar had escaped, the Turks brought all three guardians to Travnik, threatening them that they would either deliver the chaplain or be hanged. Until they were released, after 16 days of terrible imprisonment, they had to pay 900 grosches"; p. 202. "In April 1778, contrary to his word, the Pasha *Dagistanli* (Ali Pasha from Dagistan – noted by A.I.) took our entire julus, keeping all three guardians in prison for nine days; and so, over eleven months we have given three julus." p. 202.

objects and vestments. When they were unable to repay a loan in 1712, the friars ended up in prison.³⁷

Due to the tolerant relations of the Ottomans towards the Republic of Dubrovnik, which paid them tribute for peace, some of the churches in this border area survived. Even such a reduced number of churches in eastern Herzegovina indicates their dense concentration in medieval Hum and Bosnia.

Despite the numerous Catholic conversions to Orthodoxy and the "Serbian faith" in eastern Herzegovina,³⁸ especially in Popovo after the construction of the Zavala monastery (built before 1514), Catholics, living as the sources say, "scattered among the noble Muslims and very bad schismatics,"³⁹ did not disappear. A new church was built on the foundations of the older medieval one in Ravno in 1579. Built on the site of Mukušina (after the Slavic goddess Mokoš, Croatian also Mukoš), it was dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The churches which had not been usurped by the Orthodox were the medieval church of St. Demetrius and Evarist on Oblat Hill, known as the church of St. Mithra, the church of St. Elijah in Belenići (Kijev Dol), mentioned in 1622, and the church in Rupni Dol from the 17th century, which changed dedications (now St. Roch).⁴⁰ In the parish of Gradac on the border with the Republic of Dubrovnik, the churches of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Anne were recorded in documents in 1733.⁴¹

³⁷ BERISLAV GAVRANOVIĆ, *Franjevački samostan sv. Ive Krstitelja i samostanski distrikt Kraljeva Sutjeska*, Petričevac – Banja Luka, (typewritten text), p. 23.

³⁸ KRUNOSLAV STJEPAN DRAGANOVIĆ, *Masovni prijelazi katolika na pravoslavlje hrvatskog govornog područja u vrijeme vladavine Turaka*, Mostar, 1991, *passim*.

³⁹ MILENKO KREŠIĆ, "Katolici Trebinjsko-mrkanske biskupije prema popisu nadbiskupa Marka Andrijaševića iz 1733. godine", in: *Radovi Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Zadru*, 48, Zadar, 2006, p. 439-452.

⁴⁰ DOMAGOJ VIDOVIĆ – STANISLAV VUKOREP – VESNA SLOBODAN, *Neispričana priča. Turistička monografija općine Ravno*, Ravno, 2028, pp. 32, 56, 164. The small church of St. Demetrius and Evarist, with a medieval necropolis, has been preserved on Oblat Hill. According to tradition, it was built in 1320 and has been mentioned in historical sources since 1622.

⁴¹ M. KREŠIĆ, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

2.2. Care for Catholic Believers

Religious care for Catholics was demanding, often life-threatening. For example, the bishop of Makarska, Fra Marijan Lišnjić, whose jurisdiction extended to the territory of the Herzegovinian Sancak, was beaten almost to death twice – in Mostar in 1669 and in Ljubuški in 1670. In both cases, he had to pay a ransom.⁴² During the 16th and 17th centuries, many Franciscans in the territory of the Bosnian Pašalik were killed in a very cruel way.⁴³ The first decades of the 17th century were also challenging. Fra Marko Bulajić, a former Bosnian provincial, wrote from Našice on 25 August 1715 to the vice-commissioner general about the difficult situation in the province due to Turkish persecution. He wrote: "Fra Ivan Brkić, the parish priest in Banja Luka, a place close to our borders, was captured in a village and tied to a horse's tail because he was saying Holy Mass and preaching at a cemetery outside Banja Luka. And so, dragged, he was brought to Banja Luka, where he was put in prison with chains around his neck and legs, and it is still unknown what sentence will be pronounced on him."⁴⁴

Fr. Nikola Ogramić Olovčić (1672-1701) visited 48 parishes affiliated with 12 monasteries and described the very difficult situation.⁴⁵ He was the last Bosnian bishop in the 17th century, and for his own safety, he fled to Slavonia in 1684. In 1692, he restored his residence in Đakovo. After he was killed by bandits in 1705, the Bishop of Đakovo

⁴² MILE VIDOVIĆ, *Nikola Bijanković, splitski kanonik i makarski biskup 1645-1730*, Split, 1981, p. 88.

⁴³ M. V. BATINIĆ, *Djelovanje franjevacu u Bosni i Hercegovini za prvih šest vjekova njihova boravka*, sv. II, *passim*.

⁴⁴ BAZILIJE PANDŽIĆ, *Acta Franciscana Hercegovinae*, sv. II, 1700-1849, Mostar – Zagreb, 2003, pp. 137-139. *Fra Ivan Berkich, paroco di bagnaluca, luogo vicino a nostri confini, per aver detto la S. Messa e predicato in un cimitero fuori in Bagnaluca, fu preso in un villaggio e legato per la coda d'un cavallo, così strascinato fu condotto in Bagnaluca, ove con le catene al collo e piedi, fu posto in prigione, non sapendosi sin'ora che sentenza gli sarà data.*

⁴⁵ M. V. BATINIĆ, *Djelovanje franjevacu u Bosni i Hercegovini za prvih šest vjekova njihova boravka*, sv. II, pp. 150-152. The Turks cruelly beat and persecuted the Catholics of Lišnja. In Banja Luka, the Turks, great opponents of Christians, destroyed a church. The Catholics of Sarajevo were persecuted by the Orthodox. The parish of Maglaj had not seen a bishop for 100 years, etc.

retained the title of Bosnian, although he did not visit Bosnia. After Franciscans and Catholics had spent years endeavouring to have a local man appointed as bishop in the territory under the Ottomans, Pope Clement XII (1730-1740) established the Bosnian Apostolic Vicariate (Vicariatus Apostolicus in Bosna Othomana) in 1735, uniting all Catholics in the Bosnian Pashalik, except for those in the Trebinje-Mrkan diocese. The pope appointed Fr. Mate Delivić as the bishop serving as an apostolic vicar. The circumstances in which Catholics lived are evidenced by the fact that during a canonical visit to 13 parishes in western and central Bosnia, Delivić confirmed almost 80% of the Catholics in those places!⁴⁶



Maps 4 and 5: Parishes of the Bosnian Apostolic Vicariate in 1741 and 1813 shown within the borders of present-day BiH.

In 1741, the Vicariate had 31 parishes, and in 1813, 38 parishes and 3 chaplaincies. In 1813, the parish seats were on average a 3-days walk from the foundational monastery. The settlements where Catholics lived were on average 2 and a half hours away from the parish centre, and in some very remote places, such as those in the Neretva chaplaincy (Konjic area) and in the parishes of Mostar and Livno, the parish priest had to walk 10 to 17 hours. On average, each priest in

⁴⁶ JULIJAN JELENIĆ, *Spomenici kulturnog rada franjevaca Bosne Srebreničke*, Mostar, 1927, pp. 51, 59-64. During a canonical visit to the parish of Ivanjska, the bishop stated: "I found very few of those who had been confirmed by *illustrisimus* Fr. Nikola Olovčić, for 57 years have passed since he confirmed in Bosnia."

1813 ministered to almost 1,300 believers.⁴⁷ Apart from three monastery churches and the churches in Vareš and Podmilačje near Jajce, there were no other sacred buildings in the Vicariate. Taking out large loans at usurious interest rates, the Franciscans and Catholics under Ottoman rule were allowed to maintain only a hundredth of the former number of churches with the same non-permanent material. The decree of Sultan Ahmed III from 1716 was: "At the request of our holy faith, when repairing a roof, not a single pebble, not a single piece of wood is to be added to the church, let alone a new one be built outside."⁴⁸

Therefore, religious rites were held, and Holy Masses were celebrated in Catholic cemeteries and open-air places, often in secret. The altar was protected by a cover stretched over stakes.⁴⁹

After the Morean War, when the Kopčić beys in Duvno tried to maintain good relations with the Venetian Republic and keep Catholics on their estates, the bishop of Makarska also visited the territory under the Turks. In 1706, during a visit to the Duvno region, Bishop Bijanković suggested that small wooden chapels be built with an altar and a picture of Jesus and Our Lady. Under the altar, the vestments and other items needed for mass would be kept. The chapel would be locked, and four men would bring it to the cemetery where mass would be held on a feast day. It would be kept in a private house where the people could pray daily for preservation in the Catholic faith.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Based on an analysis of Bishop Augustin Miletić's report to the Holy See from 1813, ASCPF, v. 9, f. 447-463.

⁴⁸ AUGUSTIN KRISTIĆ, "Bosanske crkve i njihovo opskrbijivanje za otomanske vlade", in: *Napretkov kalendar*, Sarajevo, 1937, p. 144.

⁴⁹ JULIJAN JELENIĆ, *Kultura i bosanski franjevci*, sv. I, Sarajevo, 1912, p. 175. "The (Franciscan) fathers in Ottoman Bosnia, Herzegovina and Dalmatia, left to themselves for spiritual care, endured hundreds of various troubles. They did indeed have some parishes, but in most of them, they had no houses or churches; only insignificant chapels or small wicker houses, or they would rush out of the monasteries and give the sacraments to the faithful and celebrate masses in cemeteries, forests and under the ruins of monasteries."

⁵⁰ M. VIDOVIĆ, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

One source speaks of Friar Sixtus, who celebrated Holy Mass in Hutovo on St. Peter's Day in 1526 with a large number of believers.⁵¹ Although there is no written confirmation, it is very likely that this happened in Vrutak near the settlement of Hutovo, where there was a stone altar at which mass was occasionally held. A cross carved on the rock above the altar is clearly visible.



Photo 3. Altar in Vrutak (Dijana Pinjuh).

In this context, it is essential to mention the so-called Duvno Cathedral, i.e., a cave in the village of Bukovica, which is the source of a seasonal stream. The centre of the Duvno parish changed over time, and the parish priests most often lived in Bukovica, in the central part of the parish, until 1806, when they had to cross to the other side of the field, to Seonica, due to Turkish pressure.⁵²

Nikola Bijanković, the bishop of Makarska, visited these regions several times (1706, 1710, 1713, 1718 and 1723) with the permission of

⁵¹ IVICA PULJIĆ (ed.), *Hutovo. Dobri Do, Glumina, Mramor, Prapratnica, Previš, Tuhinje, Vjetrenik, Zelenikovci*, Mostar, 1994, p. 160.

⁵² ROBERT JOLIĆ, *Župa Seonica*, Tomislavgrad, 2006, pp. 69, 76.

the Turkish authorities, who wished to maintain good relations with the Venetians. For the first time, he celebrated masses and confirmed believers in the cave in Bukovica (*Bukovička pećina*). The faithful also gathered in Rakitno, in a cave where a wooden altar with a cross was erected. In Kongora, he held mass on a hill under Turkish escort. During another visit, he also celebrated masses and confirmed the faithful in the Bukovica cave.⁵³ Bishop Stjepan Blašković also visited this area in 1735. He noted that the cave in Bukovica had been blessed by Bishop Bijanković and placed under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The faithful of Duvno call it a church because Holy Mass is constantly celebrated in it.⁵⁴ Bishop Fr. Marko Dobretić also celebrated Mass there in 1779.⁵⁵



Photo 4: The cave in Bukovica where the Catholics of Duvno celebrated Mass.

⁵³ MILE VIDOVIĆ, *Nikola Bijanković, biskup makarski (1695.-1730), izvadak iz doktorske disertacije*, Split, 1979.

⁵⁴ ANDRIJA NIKIĆ, *Blaškovićev dnevnik iz 1735.*, Mostar, 1994.

⁵⁵ J. JELENIĆ, *Spomenici kulturnog rada franjevaca*, p. 242.

2.3. Portable Altars

According to liturgical regulations, the altar table is made of stone, and if it is wooden, it must have a stone plate embedded in the wood, containing relics. Accordingly, when it was impossible to build churches, portable altars were consecrated and used.

On 27 February 1778, Bishop Fr. Marko Dobretić consecrated 23 altar stones in the Sutjeska monastery, of which 10 were intended for the area, six for the Fojnica monastery, six for the Kreševo monastery, and one for the bishop.⁵⁶ After the third visit of the Bosnian Apostolic Vicariate, Bishop Dobretić sent a report to Rome in June 1780, mentioning 158 adequately equipped portable altars in the vicariate.⁵⁷



Photo 5: Example of a preserved portable altar from the 19th century (Archives of the Franciscan Monastery in Mostar).

⁵⁶ BONO BENIĆ, *Ljetopis sutješkog samostana*, Sarajevo – Zagreb, 2003, p. 297.

⁵⁷ J. JELENIĆ, *Spomenici kulturnog rada franjevac*, p. 287, "*altaria cum sua plena, et honesta suppellectili*".



Photo 6 and 7: Portable altar consecrated by Bishop Miletic in 1820
(Archives of the Franciscan Monastery in Mostar).

In October of the same year, the bishop praised most of the parish priests in a circular preserved on partially damaged paper:

"Dear and beloved brothers, know that we are greatly consoled to see the holy altars restored by the meticulous monks [and by?] Christians, [...] the mass on them, also [...] the covers around the mentioned altars so that neither the altar nor [...] the holy sacrament gets wet, and the wind does not carry [...] the holy hosts across the ground (as has happened to us much to our bewilderment where they failed to listen to us). And we have nicely thanked such holy and careful fathers, *qui primum quaerunt honorem dei*.⁵⁸ Also, we have obviously very sweetly and kindly thanked and praised all the honest people from the altar for the devotion and respect they show God in their altar."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Who first seek the honour of God.

⁵⁹ Archives of the Franciscan Monastery in Fojnica, K20, XVI. "Draga i poljubljena bratjo, neka znate kako jur već i znate, da smo veoma bili utišeni razgovoreni vidjevši od pomljivih redovnika [...] krstjana ponovljene svete otare, [...] misničkoga na istomu, također i pokriv [...] tende oko rečenoga otara da ne kisne ni ot(ar ...) isnise, ni *sacramenat* sveti i da vitar ne nosi [...] luku i po zemlji sveti oštia (kakono se i nami istim dogodilo s velikom smutnjom, gdi

The bishop sternly admonished individuals for not sufficiently maintaining the dignity of the altars, because many had been "blackened, torn, destroyed and neglected, and mass is said on them as if they were ordinary boards. You know that the number of altars is the number of churches in our enslavement."⁶⁰

If Catholics had truly been allowed to build churches or chapels, then there would have been at least as many of them as there were portable altars in Ottoman "enslavement." According to the report of Bishop Fr. Augustin Miletić from 1813, there were 194 portable altars in the Vicariate.⁶¹

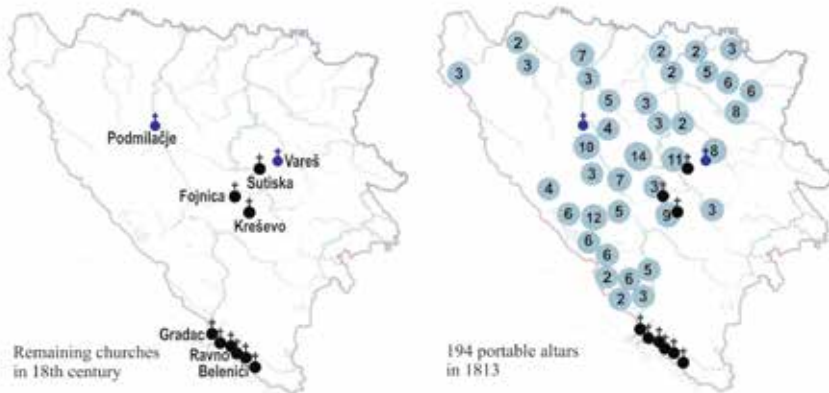
Bishop Miletić ordered that in the villages where the vestments were kept, a folded board be provided on which Holy Mass could be celebrated, and that they should "affix *Convinia* to it, and the image of the Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints; and that the Altar Board may not be used for any other purpose except for Holy Mass." Furthermore, "in those places and cemeteries where Holy Mass is celebrated on Sundays and feast days, if the altars cannot be fenced off and covered with boards, they should be covered with a clean cover or tablecloth, or at least with clean and washed fabric while Holy Mass is being said."⁶² This cover was to be stored in a clean place and not used for other purposes.

nismo bili poslušani). I lipo smo zafalili takim svetim i pomljivim ocem, *qui primum quaerunt honorem dei*. Također i svemu poštenom puku onomu, očito s otara jesmo veoma slatko i ljubeznivo zafalili i pofalili i njihov devocion i poštenje koje nose i čine Bogu u otaru njegovu."

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ ASCPF, v. 9, f 447-463.

⁶² JULIJAN JELENIĆ, *Kultura i bosanski franjevci*, sv. II, Sarajevo, 1990 (reprint from 1915), p. 93. "da se u onim mistim, i po grebjim, gdi se Misa S. u Nedigle, i u Svetkovine govorit običaje, Otari, ako se ne bi mogli oplest, zagradić, i daskama nadkrit, budu barem nadkriveni, dok se Misa S. govori, čistim pokrivačom oliti od musheme, oliti barem od sukna čista, i oprana"



Maps 6 and 7: Remaining churches in the Vicariate and the Trebinje Diocese and the number of portable altars in the Vicariate.

The zealous Bishop Miletić died among the Catholics in the parish of Livno during a canonical visitation in 1831, so the ceremonial folding portable altar he used has been preserved the Franciscan monastery in Livno.⁶³



Photo 8: Portable altar of Bishop Miletić from 1804 (Franciscan Museum and Gallery Gorica-Livno).

⁶³ See photo 8.

2.4. Places of Mass Gathering

Bishop Fr. Rafo Barišić appealed to the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand I for help in 1838, informing him of the daily hardships and injustices faced by Catholics. He described the gathering in secret places and the use of portable altars.⁶⁴ Instead of the forbidden bells, wooden and iron hanging plaques (tahte) and horns were used to summon the faithful. Parish priests and their assistants lived in uncomfortable small houses in the villages, and often in hidden mountainous and swampy places in the plains. During a visitation in 1741, Bishop Dragičević noted that in the Duvno parish, "the parish priest has no permanent residence, nor his own house, but wanders here and there as a guest carrying his burden."⁶⁵

The Franciscans had to pay a *julus* as tribute for permission to worship freely, perform rituals, and administer sacraments. According to the Franciscan chronicle, the reason for its introduction was given by Fr. Matija Fojničanin,⁶⁶ who, as parish priest in 1672, instead of mass in the usual places (cemeteries), gathered the people in the

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 157. "Since we have no churches, except a very small number, we meet for the service of God in the fields, in the woods and in hidden places; we set the altars under an oak or another tree, we cover the holy table with the coarsest cloth and branches from the trees; and we kneel down to the service of God under the sky, on wet ground, covered with mud or snow, often exposed to the worst weather conditions. If we cover the aforementioned altars with boards, then the Turks not only envy it, but also forbid it, accusing us of having built a church. We are not allowed to use bells, except in two churches, which requires a lot of money, while in other monasteries the monks and believers call to the service of God by hitting iron plates with a hammer, and even that (the Turks) can hardly bear. In other places, where the faithful are dispersed, they are called from higher places by blowing an ox horn; but this custom is also forbidden in many parishes under threat of the most severe punishments. The houses of our priests are exposed to much greater inconvenience, injustice, and expense than our own. They are inns for vagrants and passersby, who must be given whatever they want."

⁶⁵ ANTO IVIĆ, *Pučanstvo duvanjske župe 1469-1800, Prilog Matica Krštenih don Antona Ljubosovića (1750-1758)*, p. 134; also facsimile in LUKA ĐAKOVIĆ, *Prilozi za demografiju i onomastičku građu BiH, I ANUBIH, Građa*, knj. 23, Sarajevo, 1979, p. 387.

⁶⁶ Archive of Franciscan monastery in Fojnica, AT. In the contract from 1675, Fr. Matija from Fojnica, the guardian of the monastery in Fojnica, took out a loan from the Sarajevo bey, Ahmet bey Hašćerić.

forest. The Turks accused him of stirring up the people against them. Another possible reason was the bishop's visit and confirmation in the parish.⁶⁷ These are not, however, the reasons for its imposition.⁶⁸

Misišće or *Misište*, the places where masses were celebrated, were far from Islamized urban centres. They also had other similar names. Misni dolac is not far from the current parish church in Skopaljska Gračanica. Under Tušnica and Bužanin, not far from Livno, there is Fratarski dolac. Catholics often gathered in hilly areas far from cities for security reasons and to avoid harassment.⁶⁹ According to the chronicle from 1766, Fr. Ivan Domazet from the Kreševo monastery served the faithful in the hills of the Sarajevo parish on Christmas and in the week after.⁷⁰

Some of these locations have preserved the noun *Oltar* (altar) in their names, or rather its archaic form *Otar* (formed by dissimilation). The centuries-old tradition of gathering in such places, which oral tradition also connects with the pre-Ottoman period,⁷¹ indicates the specificity of the religious practice of Catholic Croats under the Ottomans.⁷²

⁶⁷ NIKOLA LAŠVANIN, *Ljetopis*, Sarajevo – Zagreb, 2003, p. 256.

⁶⁸ B. GAVRANOVIĆ, *op. cit.*, p. 2. "The imposition of this tax is yet more evidence that the Franciscans and the faithful were harassed and hindered in their service to God by the bullies, so they had to seek hidden, secluded places so as not to be seen by their persecutors."

⁶⁹ A legend about Otar and Misište (which is hidden in a sinkhole with a flat grassy bottom) on Bile near Mostar has it that during mass gatherings in the Turkish period, individuals were deployed to the surrounding elevations to warn of the possible arrival of Turks.

⁷⁰ M. BOGDANOVIĆ, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁷¹ TONI MARIĆ – VLADO BOŠNJAK – VLADO MARIĆ, "Pučke obljetnice na području širokobrijeških sela župe Mostarski Gradac", in: *Vitko*, 16, Široki Brijeg, 2017, pp. 32-35.

⁷² This does not exclude the existence of other Catholics in the wider area under the Ottomans in southeastern Europe, who were not Croats, but the focus here is on the Croatian historical space.



Map 8: Toponyms with the name of O(l)tar and places of traditional Christian gathering.

The word altar does not have exclusively Christian connotations; it also refers to an older concept where, in certain places, its sacral character can be established. At the site known as Oltar-Kraljev Stolac near Otočac, in Gacko Polje, lie the remains of a sanctuary dedicated to the god Mithras, dating back to the 2nd–3rd century.⁷³ This area, although close to the border with the Ottoman Empire, was never under Turkish control, nor were the Altars on northern Velebit or the Oltar Cape near Cavtat.

⁷³ Registar kulturnih dobara RH, Arheologija Z-2376, <https://registar.kulturnadobra.hr/#/details/Z-2376> (18. 2. 2025).



Photo 9 and 10: The altar on Bile covered with a chapel in 2004 (left) and a mass celebration the year before (right photo: Vlado Bošnjak).

Otar, also known as Otarić (Altar, also Small Altar), on Bile near Mostar is a prominent rock, uniquely situated to frame the winter solstice sunrise over the Jastrebnika.⁷⁴ The site Otari on Tribanj is situated in the same way to frame the summer solstice sunset on the horizon behind the peaks of Troglav.⁷⁵ The hill Tribanj, where the Otari are located, points to a pre-Christian altar. This, along with other Slavic place names, also suggests a Croatian pre-Christian worldview.



Photo 11 and 12. O(l)tarnik on Mačja glavica on Raška gora (left) and Magovnik near Čerigaj (right).

⁷⁴ ANTO IVIĆ, "Bile – središte svetog prostora", in: *Zbornik radova Kulturna baština i identitet Hrvata u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Zagreb, 2024, pp. 87-109.

⁷⁵ ANTO IVIĆ, "Središnje livanjske bjeline", (article accepted for the Proceedings on the Occasion of the Founding of the Parish Bila near Livno).

With interruptions during the communist period (since 1947), this tradition has been preserved near Mostar: at Otar on Bile⁷⁶ and at Oltarnik on Raška Gora.⁷⁷ Similarly, the tradition has been preserved at Otarišće, today a Catholic cemetery on a hill in the village Puteševica above Tihaljina near Grude, as well as at Oltarnik, the area around the peak of St. Elijah on Biokovo. The Christian layering of the Old Slavic and early Croatian thunder god is not only still visible to this day on the peaks of Biokovo (St. George and St. Elijah), but also on the Vranica and Vlašić mountains. The pilgrimage to Bandijera on Čubren above Lepenica is also of such a character.⁷⁸ Many sites in the South Slavic region are also tied to pastoral traditions, with Spasovište being a frequent representation among the Orthodox. The strong influence of ancient pilgrimages to peaks as places closer to heaven is visible in areas where there were no Ottomans, such as the Christian pilgrimage sites on Sveta Gora in Gorski Kotar (Croatia) or on Sveta Hora in the Czech Republic.

⁷⁶ TONI MARIĆ et al., "Digitalizacija sadržaja o nematerijalnoj kulturnoj baštini", in: *Zbornik radova predavača sa seminara folkloru Hrvata u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Mostar, 2020, (247-281), pp. 255, 268-269. According to folk tradition, Mass has been celebrated in Bile for over 700 years. The mass is celebrated with public festivities on the first Sunday after St. Peter's Day.

⁷⁷ Mirko Miško Pandža from Podivačje near Mostar recalled the stories of elders who had gone there at the beginning of the 20th century; however, the tradition is much older (noted by A. I.). The communist authorities banned the celebration of mass here, as well as on Orlovac above Mostar, in 1947. It was reinstated 50 years later on Raška Gora, and today the mass is held at the end of September or the beginning of October.

⁷⁸ MILO JUKIĆ, "Starija katolička molitvišta na otvorenom u Lepeničkoj dolini", in: *Bosna franciscana*, 61, Sarajevo, 2024, (163-196), p. 178.



Photo 13: Mass at Vrankamen on the Vranica (photo: Tomislav Bošnjak).

After Islamization, similar religious practices were retained by Muslims in some places, especially in northeastern Bosnia. This is evident, for example, on Mount Ratiš, at the top of which prayers for rain are still performed today.⁷⁹ Besides the intentions, the annual occasions for prayer gatherings (until Ilindan-Aliđun), and toponyms which point to an older historical sacrality, the oral tradition also confirms the earlier Christian worship of St. Elijah, and indirectly also of the pre-Christian Perun.⁸⁰

It is known that some of the places of earlier cults were overlaid with Christian content during Christianization. Over time, Christian worship was moved to settlements and churches. When the Turks demolished churches or turned them into mosques, worship "returned" to nature, to locations that clearly had an earlier tradition

⁷⁹ RUSMIR ĐEDOVIĆ, "Ratiš kao značajno islamsko-bogumilsko dovište-molitviše Sjeverne i Sjeveroistočne Bosne", in: *Gračanički glasnik*, 21, Gračanica, 2006, pp. 14-19.

⁸⁰ According to legend, the local population agreed to accept Islam on the condition that they could retain their previous customs, i.e., "*gunj i Ali-đun*" (the manner of dressing and praying). (According to Hazim Osmanović from Puračić, recorded by A. I.)

of being used for such purposes. It is necessary to emphasise that despite long-term Christianization, awareness of the sanctity and uniqueness of certain places in the environment was preserved by the indigenous population. They, mostly engaged in livestock breeding, lived a bisessile, transhumant way of life and spent the summer in the mountains.

This is not only a characteristic of the *Paganija* area, as the medieval area between the Neretva and Cetina was called, but also of other regions. During Turkish rule in Slavonia, Papal Legate Pavao Rovinjanin was surprised to find the Franciscans with the people in a round, in the "king's dance," which was performed "on young summer, at carnivals in the name of the cross, and at Christmas." In his assessment of the Franciscans who shared the people's joys and sorrows and "maintained popular prejudices and beliefs," a delegate wrote in 1629-30 that near Cernik, "a tree called the Lipa [linden] stands in a deserted place, where every Sunday after the new moon, a large number of Turks and Christians gather with votive candles and other things. A local parish priest says mass for them for the alms he collects there. They bow to the tree and kiss it, as if it were some holy body. They say that the tree works miracles and heals those who make a vow to the tree. These disorders arise from the tyranny of the Turks and the ignorance of the administrators of this people."⁸¹

It is not without reason that both the Livno and Duvno areas (and today's villages) each had an old parish with Lipa in its name. Besides the linden tree, the oak was also a sacred Old Slavic and Early Croatian tree. In the village of Dub near Travnik, where the population had been Islamized in the late phase of Turkish rule, it had been a custom to the end of the 20th century for the Catholics from the surrounding villages to make a pilgrimage to the site with the large anthropomorphic cross and celebrate Holy Mass there on the second day of Pentecost.

⁸¹ TADE SMIČIKLAS, *Dvjestogodišnjica oslobođenja Slavonije*, Djela JAZU, knj. XI, I. dio, Zagreb, 1891, pp. 96-97.

A feature of Slavic Christianization is the long-time existence of dual faith. It has also been characterised by some as a medieval heresy.⁸² However, old content was replaced early on by a Christian message; the rituals of the old faith were turned into harmless folk customs much earlier among the Croats, who were the first to accept Christianity, than among the Eastern Slavs.⁸³

The remnants of medieval religious practices preserved by the *krstjani* (as Catholics called themselves until the end of the 19th century) and the Islamized population were not the unique characteristic of the *Krstjani* of the Bosnian Church that tied them to Islam, as is the unfounded opinion that can be found in literature.⁸⁴ The Bosnian Church, as one of the numerous Christian heresies in Europe, emerged and also disappeared within the framework of Christianity, and not through Islamization.

Examples of places whose names point to the existence of "heresy" are *Babun* in Mostar and *Gostuša* near Široki Brijeg. They are connected to centuries-old traditions of local Catholics. A recognizable pre-Christian worldview was overlaid with Christian content in the

⁸² FRA MIJO V. BATINIĆ, *Djelovanje franjevacu u Bosni i Hercegovini*, sv. I, Zagreb, 1881, p. 23. "This is nothing more than the restoration of Old Slavic myths with a Christian worldview, and the repeated errors of the first Manichaeans and Paulines."

⁸³ RADOSLAV KATIČIĆ, *Naša stara vjera*, Zagreb, 2017, p. 49. "The peoples accepted the new faith; they became truly Christian, but the old faith could not simply be uprooted from their souls. This was not so much because it was not a theological construction, and even less a dogma, but rather an experience of life, the environment and the land, the rhythm of the annual cycle, germination, budding, flowering, flourishing, growth, ripening, withering, dying, and ceasing. And then once again, the same all over again. It had absolutely nothing to do with Christian religious content, nor did the content have anything to do with it."

⁸⁴ A. HANDŽIĆ, "Konfesionalni sastav stanovništva Bosne i Hercegovine", p. 120. "They prayed to God in the open or in simple rooms without statues and pictures, and they prayed five times a day and often fell to their knees"; R. ĐEDOVIĆ, *op. cit.*, p. 19. "This tradition originates from the time of pre-Slavic cults of peaks and the Sun for several millennia. Through the pagan early Slavic period and the era of the Bosnian Church and Bogumils, it continued as a place of prayer to the god of the Sun, thunder, and prayers for rain. With the advent of Islam, this cult place took on syncretic elements – a fusion of earlier beliefs with those of Islam."

pre-Ottoman period. Although a mosque⁸⁵ was built in front of the Babun spring on the site of the church of St. Ružica, according to the oral tradition, Catholics traditionally celebrated the memorial day of John the Baptist only 50 meters higher at the spring itself. Likewise, not far from Gostuša, at the source of Orovnik, there is a site where the Blessed Virgin Mary has been worshipped for centuries, the patronage of which was transferred to the Franciscan monastery in Široki Brijeg.



Photo 14: Participants in the mass at Orovnik in August 1983
(photo by Ante Marić).

The Franciscans gave a new transcendent Christian significance to places where remnants of old beliefs had survived, which cannot be exclusively linked to Bosnian Christians, but to Christianity, which preserved these remnants more significantly in the Dinaric region of today's Bosnia, Herzegovina and Dalmatia, and to which, due to its specific tradition, heresy could be attributed for political reasons. It is not without reason that the name St. James (*Giacomo della Marca*)⁸⁶ is associated with a certain spring and masses on Sundays after the new moon. The water of St. James in Deževica, formerly known

⁸⁵ FRA PETAR BAKULA, *Topografsko-historijski šematizam Apostolskog vikarijata i Franjevačke misijske kustodije u Hercegovini za godinu Gospodnju 1873.*, Mostar, 2016, pp. 102, 268.

⁸⁶ The Bosnian Franciscan visitor in 1432. After a conflict with King Tvrtko, he returned to Bosnia in 1435 and was elected head of the Bosnian Franciscan Vicariate.

as Grozničavca, is considered cult water.⁸⁷ Besides springs called Grozničava (*groznica* = fever) in different areas, there are also those called *Ružica* (Rose) and *Svetinja* (Sanctity), which are generally known in the traditions of several religions.⁸⁸



Photo 15 and 16: Mass celebration in Deževica in 2024 and the spring Crnašnica in Mostarsko blato.



Photo 17 and 18: Gathering at Misište near Mostar on the Sunday after St. Peter's Day in 2024 (left) and traces of the Mass site in Masna Luka (right).

The many sites where traces of a pre-Christian worldview can still be seen, and which also signify the continuation of Christian life during the challenging era of Ottoman rule are a living legacy for today's Catholic Croats. Although the other confessional groups also have

⁸⁷ MILENKO S. FILIPOVIĆ, *Lepenica - priroda, stanovništvo, privreda, zdravlje*, Sarajevo, 1963, p. 348; M. JUKIĆ, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

⁸⁸ ANTO IVIĆ – MAJA SOLDI, "Osvrt na predaje o crkvama (svetim) Ružicama", in: *Zbornik radova u povodu obilježavanja 140. obljetnice Franjevačkoga muzeja na Humcu (1884.-2024.) – prvoga muzeja u BiH, Vidici, časopis HAZU BiH*, 2025/XVIII, Mostar, 2025, pp. 86-109.

their own legacies, theirs were conditioned by different circumstances in the past.

Conclusion

The Ottoman invasion and the establishment of centuries-long rule in the territory of the former Bosnian Kingdom and surrounding area changed the confessional structure of the population with long-term consequences. The relations established in the confessionally divided and inequitable Ottoman society, which deprived Catholics of their places of worship, legally banned the building of new churches. The maintenance of the remaining churches, and of the Franciscan monasteries, required a lot of effort and financial expenditure. This state was reflected in the symbolically small number of churches that remained by the close of the 17th century. Under pressure from modernisation processes, although they were late coming to the Ottoman Empire, only in middle of the 19th century was the construction of a few churches permitted in the area of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the areas where they survived, the mining centres excluded, Catholics lived in poverty, mainly in rural areas, but without owning the land they cultivated and the houses in which they lived. Often exposed to harassment, they were forced to hold mass celebrations in the open, in cemeteries, forests, often in secret.

In addition to the mass places, often hidden from the eyes of the Turks, some of these gathering places were on mountain peaks and at springs. They often reveal traces of remnants of a pre-Christian, Slavic worldview.

Such a practice survived during the Ottoman era, and even today, it partially represents the living, intangible cultural and religious heritage of Croats. The reasons for its continuity are: the absence of churches because of the relations of the Islamic Ottoman theocratic government; the life of Catholics in predominantly rural areas; and the historical memory of the indigenous population about the uniqueness of certain locations. Certain devotions were also encouraged by the Franciscans.

The tradition rooted in pre-Christian remnants survived in certain areas, even amongst the Islamized population. Under freer conditions, Muslims continued the practice of gathering at places of prayer, performing prayers in nature at specific times of the year.