

TRANSNATIONAL NOMINATIONS FOR THE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST AS A POLICY TOOL IN POST-WAR CONTEXTS:

The case of Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards



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Transnational nominations for the UNESCO World Heritage List as a policy tool in post-war contexts: The case of Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards

Višnja Kisić

Centre for the Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe (CESK)

Faculty of Sport and Psychology TIMS, EDUCONS University Novi Sad

Visnja.kisic@tims.edu.rs

Višnja Kisić, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Sport and Tourism Novi Sad, lecturer at UNESCO Chair MA in Cultural Policy and Management in Belgrade and University Hassan II Casablanca, and a visiting professor at the University Lyon II and International Relations University Beijing. In her research, teaching, and practice, she explores entanglements between heritage, politics, social issues, and ecological relations. Beside academic work, she is engaged in heritage practice and activism and has led projects, trainings, lectures, and research in over 20 countries across Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America.

Abstract

The UNESCO World Heritage List is one of the best-known and most-praised international cultural policy mechanisms of all time. At the same time, it is also one of the most criticised cultural policy mechanisms, which has led to numerous cycles of revisions and adaptations of this mechanism. One such adaptation is the concept of transnational cultural property, which could be inscribed in the WHL following a transnational nomination process that foresees transnational management and protection of the heritage in question. Besides their important goal of balancing the World Heritage List, transnational nominations are promoted as having the potential to de-nationalise competition for the WHL, create transnational cooperation around heritage protection, and foster intercultural understanding among different societies. At the same time, they are seen as being more complex, resource-demanding, and conflictual than ordinary state party nominations. This is further enhanced when the heritage being nominated is highly dissonant and when the nominating states have been through political and armed conflicts in recent history. This paper analyses exactly such a case—a joint effort of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia in nominating and managing Stećci Medieval Tombstones. Using this example, it looks at the achievements and limitations of transnational nomination as a policy tool.

Keywords: regional cooperation, heritage dissonance, post-conflict reconciliation, transnational nomination to the World Heritage List

Introduction

The World Heritage List (WHL), adopted by UNESCO in 1972 as an international legal instrument, has for the last 50 years been the most prestigious and ‘the most effective international legal instrument for the protection of cultural and natural heritage’ (Strasser, 2002: 215). At the same time, it has been a cultural policy tool harshly criticised for its competitive, nationalising, and western-driven approach to heritage (Buchanan, 1980). These criticisms have led to some adaptations and changes, all with the goal of establishing a more balanced and representative global list of heritage sites, promoting governance models that do not rely just on a single nation-state, and encouraging transnational cooperation and the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders.

Consequently, UNESCO, together with the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), has been promoting and supporting transnational nominations and subsequent transnational management within the UNESCO World Heritage framework. Even though UNESCO’s *Global Strategy for a representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List* highlighted the need for balancing representation and distribution of the sites by encouraging transnational serial nominations for heritage sites (WHC-08/32.COM/10B)¹, transnational nominations account for only 2% of all the sites inscribed to the WHL. The situation in Europe is similar in terms of underrepresentation of transnational nominations, and only 12 out of 442 sites in Europe inscribed on the World Heritage List are serial transnational nominations (ICOMOS Europe, 2021).

From a cultural policy perspective, transnational nomination is a desirable practice that pushes state parties to recognise shared and interlinked aspects of history and heritage across today’s nation-state borders and establish models of governance that are transnational. Politically, the transnational framework acknowledges that numerous historical phenomena reflected in material remains are not the sole ownership and responsibility of one nation-state, thus disturbing the methodological nationalism present within the UNESCO WHL. These are the reasons why transnational nominations are promoted as having the potential to de-nationalise competition for the WHL, create transnational cooperation around heritage protection, and foster intercultural understanding among different societies. Recent research done by ICOMOS Europe (2021) highlights these claims:

World Heritage transnational serial nominations embody the essence of the spirit of the World Heritage Convention: the principle of the universal value of heritage for humankind and the role of transnational cooperation in the recognition and conservation of the world’s heritage.

¹ Transnational serial nomination consists of two or more spatially distinct components that create a thematic, functional, historic, stylistic, or typological series with other spatially distinct components and can be found in two or more countries.

Moreover, promises of the potential of transnational nominations go as far as to assume that this policy tool can be beneficial in post-conflict contexts, where previously warring state parties might be willing to sit at the same table, work, and negotiate because of the significance and motivation to acquire the UNESCO WH label. This study analyses the potential and limitations of transnational nominations as a cultural policy tool, especially in a post-conflict context. It does so by focusing on the project of joint transnational serial nomination of Stećci Medieval Tombstones, which is the first case of transnational nomination to the World Heritage List of an openly dissonant (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Kisić, 2016) and disputed heritage site done by countries that were at war twenty years prior to the nomination.

Stećci transnational nomination – a good fit for the post-war ex-Yugoslav context

The historical and geopolitical context of the Stećci nomination is closely connected to the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. During and after the Yugoslav wars, heritage and memory were used for radical political and cultural transformations. Official Yugoslav, multicultural, and supranational identities have been attacked or neglected, while ethno-national cultural identities have become desirable (Dragićević Šešić, 2010; Čopić, 2011; Keiser, 1996). Official cultural policies in newly founded states have dedicated resources to ethno-national interpretations of the past. Museums and heritage have been reinterpreted; old memorial sites have been abandoned and new ones established; names of streets and heroes have changed; and school curricula have been reformed. Almost by rule, official heritage interpretations in one state have been in direct conflict with the interpretations established by neighbouring countries.

Unlike official national cultural policies, international organisations and their cultural policies have pursued the agenda of intercultural dialogue and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Because heritage has been such a divisive mechanism during the wars, numerous actors, such as the EU, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and Cultural Heritage without Borders, have included culture and cultural heritage in reconciliation agendas in the post-war period (Kisić, 2019). Policies, projects, cooperation programmes, and funds dedicated to reconciliation and peacebuilding have been numerous from the 2000s onward, and reconciliation has become sort of a buzzword in international cultural policies connected to the Western Balkans. However, even though often mentioned in public speeches, project proposals, and media announcements, reconciliation and peacebuilding through culture and heritage have never acquired a deliberate cultural policy framework. Numerous efforts and projects could be said to deal with reconciliation, but what reconciliation meant and looked like when achieved, as well as the tools, principles, and mechanisms for its achievement, have remained blurry and vague. In such a context, almost each project that involved citizens or professionals from more than one state and more than one ethnic and religious background could be tagged as striving towards reconciliation.

One of such efforts is the transnational nomination and subsequent management of Stećci Medieval Tombstones to the WHL, a process in which UNESCO has played a much more central role than it would usually play in other nomination processes. For UNESCO, this project fit perfectly into the agenda of fostering reconciliation in the region by encouraging regional

cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. A transnational nomination coming from states that have recently gone through wars carried more political weight than those submitted by countries that have stable mutual relations.

Another layer that has made this nomination complicated is heritage, which was the object of the nomination. Stećci are medieval monolith tombstones dating from the period between the 12th and the end of the 15th century, which are located throughout the overall territory of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina and parts of the territories of today's Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia. Impressive in their monumental appearance and multitude, numbering a total of approximately 70,000 tombstones throughout 3,300 sites², Stećci 'testify associations with prehistoric, ancient, pagan, and early medieval traditions of both East and Western Europe' (TLF no. 5619). While Stećci are an ideal example of shared heritage in the region, they are also the site of dissonant confrontations, different opinions, and opposing views as to their archaeological, artistic, and historical interpretation. These confronted interpretations coincide with the creation of nation-states and rising national awareness in the region, in which researchers and historiographers from Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia have all claimed ownership of Stećci for their nation-states by linking them with medieval Serbian, Bosnian, or Croatian states. These interpretations have been reinforced in the period of wars in the 1990s, but also in the regional memory wars that followed it (Kisić, 2016). This dissonance has been further enhanced by popular science, pseudoscience, the arts, and literature since the 19th century, as well as folk superstition.

Despite diverse claims and dissonance over Stećci, the prospects of having these sites inscribed on the UNESCO WHL have motivated officials and heritage professionals from previously warring states to engage in a transnational nomination process. The cooperation, which lasted from 2010 to 2015, was nudged and supported both technically, financially, and politically by UNESCO through its Antenna Office in Sarajevo. The transnational cooperation in the nomination process has been followed by the successful inscription of Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards to the World Heritage List in 2016, which has led to continued transnational cooperation in the management and protection of this heritage.

Methodological framework

The methodology used for this case study includes a mix of desk research, field research, and interviews. An interpretative constructionist approach, rooted in critical heritage studies and cultural policy studies, was used. Within desk research, a series of internal and public documents related to the nomination process and transnational management process of Stećci were analysed – including the nomination file, Management Plan, Communication Plan, State of

² Out of 70,000 recorded tombstones from about 3,300 sites, some 60,000 are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, about 4,400 in Croatia, about 3,500 in Montenegro, and some 4,100 in Serbia. Besides their regional differentiation manifested in shapes, ornamental motifs, and quality, the medieval tombstones are usually found in clusters: in cemeteries belonging to the same families, containing only a few stones; in cemeteries of whole clans, with about 30 to 50 stones; and in village cemeteries, sometimes with several hundred tombstones. See Tentative List File No. 5619, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5619/> (accessed March 24, 2016).

Conservation Reports, and others. In addition, media announcements and articles, websites and social network entries were analysed and consulted. These tangible outputs of the project were complemented by in-depth interviews with UNESCO representatives from the Antenna Office in Sarajevo and participating professionals from all four nation-states. Site visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia were carried out in 2020 and 2021, i.e., after the inscription of Stećci on the WHL.

A first round of interviews took place in 2015, after the submission of the nomination dossier to UNESCO but before the successful inscription on the WHL. The second round of interviews with key actors was conducted in 2022, six years after the successful inscription to the World Heritage List, in the context of the INVENT project. If interviews in 2015 focused more on transnational nomination challenges and achievements, the ones conducted in 2022 focused more on the challenges and achievements of transnational management. Taken together, these interviews paint an interesting picture of transnational nomination and management of world heritage as a cultural policy tool. They provide different perspectives and insights on multiple questions.

What are the challenges and achievements of this transnational cooperation? What does it tell us about transnational nominations as a cultural policy tool? What does the transnational nomination and management process bring to the actors involved, and what kind of approaches to heritage and regional cooperation does it enable? How are heritage dissonance and contestations approached within a transnational World Heritage Site as a framework? In what way does the nomination of a dissonant heritage site pose additional challenges as well as additional benefits when it comes to post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding, and regional cooperation? What is the interplay between bottom-up heritage discourses and professional ones in this case, and how do these narratives coexist?

Transnational nominations for the UNESCO WHL as a cultural policy tool

Transnational nominations are defined as ‘serial nomination of properties located in the territory of different States Parties, which need not be contiguous, and which are nominated with the consent of all States Parties concerned’ (UNESCO WHC). In practice, this requires that the state parties closely cooperate with each other in identifying, documenting, valorising, nominating, and then managing heritage that is located on their territories, and that they do so in a manner that is shared, jointly planned and consensual. Despite their desirability by UNESCO and ICOMOS, such nominations are seen as being more complex, resource demanding and conflictual than ordinary single-State Party nominations. The complexity of these nomination processes, both in terms of valorisation, documentation, conceptualisation of the site, as well as the management, administration, policy frameworks and political support for the process, make them highly challenging.

The research conducted by ICOMOS Europe in 2021 assessed the most positive outcomes as well as the biggest issues and challenges related to this policy mechanism. Among the positive outcomes are ‘professional and scientific collaboration, networking of grass-root associations and enhanced awareness among citizens of the significance and meaning of cultural heritage’

(ICOMOS Europe 2021, p.2). The key challenges relate to the difficulties of having a proper overview of the heritage in question and developing a common conceptual framework and valorisation; effort, resources, and time needed to establish and maintain transnational cooperation; working across different institutional and policy frameworks and traditions in heritage protection and management; differing professional and institutional capacities; as well as negotiating particular state interests, priorities, and objectives (ICOMOS 2021, p. 2–3).

Apart from these identified challenges, my previous research indicates that an additional challenge is posed if nominated transnational heritage is openly dissonant and an object of competing interpretations. This relates not only to the interpretations of the State Parties in question but also to those of different fringe and interest groups. Difficulties also arise when nominating states have gone through political and armed conflicts in recent history (Kisić 2016). In such cases, issues of interpretation and presentation become as important as issues of authenticity and integrity, in which UNESCO has traditionally taken an interest. Thus, transnational nominations are not just a complex professional endeavour; they also require complex cultural policy and diplomacy. All this is evidenced in the case of Stećci Medieval Tombstones nomination and management.

Analysis of achievements and limitations of transnational nomination and management of Stećci

In the text that follows, an analysis of the achievements and limitations of transnational nomination and management of the Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards is presented. The seven sections of the text relate to (1) transnational professional cooperation leading to trust and mutual respect; (2) new relevant knowledge and skills acquired through the transnational nomination and management process; (3) increased understanding, funding, and protection for Stećci monuments; (4) encouraged but limited involvement of local stakeholders and awareness among the public; (5) establishing a shared discourse of Stećci as regional heritage; (6) silencing dissonances and excluding interest and fringe groups; (7) the lack of shared interpretation and education plans and actions.

1. Transnational professional cooperation leading to trust and mutual respect

The transnational nomination process requires continuous cooperation from all state parties in selecting, valorising, describing, and foreseeing the management of the heritage in question. This process has resulted in the Nomination Dossier and the Management Plan. In the case of Stećci, the preparation of the Nomination Dossier and Management Plan alone involved more than 4,000 joint emails, more than 20 international meetings, and continuous work of key experts within the team as well as many other experts and collaborators on a shorter-term basis. Transnational cooperation has continued after the successful nomination, this time through the official new governance bodies foreseen in the Management Plan. Namely, the International Coordination Board (ICB) has been formed, consisting of experts from each country in charge of developing common strategies, principles and standards of protection, communication, capacity

building, presentation, and research. In these six years of work, the ICB has created a series of guidelines and documents, such as Working Principles and Guidelines, Communication Strategy, Guidelines for Training of Local Site Managers, State of Conservation Reports, and Risk Impact Assessments. Also, the Secretariat of the ICB has been established, in charge of interstate communication as well as communication with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

Regional professionals who participated in the nomination process as well as the subsequent management structure have created strong ties and professional connections among each other. The fact that professionals could work without linguistic barriers, had similar educational and professional backgrounds rooted in former Yugoslav experiences, and could understand heritage management and protection frameworks from each participating country has meant that the technical aspects of transnational cooperation have been smoother than in some other cases, where different languages, educational, and policy frameworks play a part. While research by ICOMOS (2021) suggests professional and scientific collaboration as a positive outcome of transnational nominations, in the case of Stećci, the regional cooperation that resulted from the process can be thought of as even a bigger achievement. Namely, this inter-state cooperation involved many problems, including hidden political pressures, unspoken differences, and silenced disputes. However, common ground was found even in situations where problems seemed unsolvable. Going through this process together and observing the professional standards in a common spirit has led to increased respect and trust among the involved professionals. It also led to cooperation in exchanges outside of the Stećci framework. The professionals involved in the process have become the most important advocates and stakeholders of the transnational nominations and of the Stećci monuments as a regional heritage.

2. New relevant knowledge and skills acquired through the transnational nomination and management process

The completion of a transnational serial nomination dossier is a highly complex work that contributed to the acquisition of new skills and knowledge related to both Stećci and UNESCO's frameworks. This is especially true when it comes to the nomination process, management plans and structures, risk impact assessment, and community participation. These newly acquired capacities had an impact on the broader practices of protecting and managing heritage in each of the participating countries. The capacity-building process is still ongoing, both when it comes to professionals employed in state institutions as well as local site managers. Joint tasks and requirements from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre continue to lead to new learning possibilities to this day. Also, local workshops and training happen within each country, while regional trainings involve many more professionals than those who are part of the ICB.

3. Increased understanding, funding, and protection for Stećci monuments

The process and steps required for nomination to the WHL have evidently mobilised numerous actors to improve the condition of Stećci. The transnational cooperation has been highly successful when it comes to heritage protection and management of Stećci, given the limited

resources within each member state. Already in the nomination phase, funds from UNESCO were used both for research and technical documentation related to the sites, including maps and photographs, in all countries. For example, the nomination process has encouraged experts from Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to conduct new archaeological research and valorise or reassess some heritage sites after almost three decades of neglect.

In addition, the ministries of culture allocated funds to conserve some of the sites that were chosen for nomination. The process of nomination itself could therefore be said to have created a higher level of protection for Stećci. After the successful inscription, this heritage has received high-level recognition, protection, and care, which would not have been the case within national frameworks. Consequently, other sites containing Stećci beyond the ones inscribed on the WHL are also protected and managed with higher care. Namely, institutes of heritage protection can insist that Stećci have been protected as a phenomenon and heritage, even though not all the sites got to the WHL. Obviously, there are still some challenges in this respect. But what could be criticised in relation to Stećci protection could equally be criticised in relation to most of the other protected heritage sites. These criticisms relate to the lack of unified digitalisation and documentation, the lack of agreed plans, programs, and actions for conservation and care, limited interpretation on sites, limited power to deal with investors, and new constructions on sites. One should say, however, that these challenges cannot be attributed to the failures of transnational nomination and management as a tool but relate more to broader society, politics, and national positions of power within the heritage sector.

4. Encouraged but limited involvement of local stakeholders and awareness among the public

Another positive aspect is related to the work with local communities in each of the locations. Keeping in mind that heritage institutes have traditionally had a low level of cooperation and participation with local stakeholders, the fact that workshops, consultations, and management structures have involved local communities is a positive step forward. Because of the nomination, inhabitants of the region are more aware of the Stećci as a heritage. Besides the ICB, there are National Organisational Structures (NOS) consisting of state, regional, and local municipalities that implement measures, strategies, and plans decided by the ICB and develop specific activities for each state. There are also local structures that include heritage site managers for each of the 26 sites. They are responsible for managing a particular site, implementing measures, and developing action plans for the site. These site managers usually come from the local communities, and most of them are not heritage experts but act as good hosts and are in charge of the basic maintenance of the sites. However, networking of grass-root associations, which is seen as one of the positive outcomes of transnational nominations by ICOMOS research (2021), has been a limitation in this case. Most trainings and workshops with local communities and NGOs are taking place within national contexts, limiting interstate connections, understanding, and cooperation outside of narrow professional circles.

5. Establishing a shared discourse of Stećci as regional heritage

The nomination process represented a big step whereby the expert team created not only a common technical dossier but also recognised Stećci as a common heritage unrelated to contemporary nation-states and national identities. This common interpretation is a consequence of both the newest historical academic interpretations and the structured process of inscription, which asks for a common denominator. It neutralises dissonance through the creation of a common meaning for the application. In this process, the recognition of shared heritage implies shared ownership, and the interpretation goes beyond national claims but does not threaten any of the sides. This de-nationalised, interrelated, and shared interpretation of Stećci has somewhat revived the common South Slavic background of the region:

Bridging confessional, political, ethnic and geographical divisions within a broader South Slavic region, bringing together the two, otherwise distinctly separated, mediaeval cultural concepts - the aristocratic (the court or the cleric) and the one of the common people - making universal the concept of the end of human existence by combining pagan and Christian motifs and expressions the complex mediaeval tombstone art is an expression of the deepest truth about the world, and then made whole by their inscriptions - epitaphs. (UNESCO WHL Tentative List, ref. no. 5169, see: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5619/>)

While most regional professionals were somewhat reserved towards this common interpretation back in 2015 when they created a Nomination Dossier, in 2022 they have all fully backed up this new narrative. This indicates the authorising and legitimising power of UNESCO WHL to frame a dominant understanding of listed heritage.

6. Silencing dissonances and excluding interest and fringe groups

While the creation of the common discourse for the nomination represented an important step forward, this also meant that other possible interpretations and dissonances related to Stećci were ignored or silenced—both in the nomination and in subsequent management. The process of the nomination itself was focused on the authenticity, integrity, and physical aspects of the sites, intentionally avoiding deeper engagement in the plurality of possible interpretations of Stećci. Throughout the interviews conducted for this case study, UNESCO's representatives and most of the professional participants undermined the issue of interpretation within the WHL nomination process and thus distanced themselves from the responsibility of creating meaning, identities, and borders through heritage, especially back in 2015. This has led to multiple amateurs, heritage entrepreneurs, and fringe groups persisting with their divergent interpretations of Stećci through publications, social networks, and webpages with higher visibility than the official nominations webpage. Despite cooperation with local communities where Stećci are located, there have been no attempts of cooperation with or involvement of any of those groups that show high but divergent interest in Stećci. This reflects the challenge of caring for and the need to deal with heritage dissonance as well. The question is: should one acknowledge dissonances and pluralities of interpretations but use public frameworks for dialogue and the involvement of fringe groups? Or should public

resources involve only those actions that are thought to be scientifically and professionally legitimate while disenfranchising all other interest groups?

7. The lack of shared interpretation and education plans and actions

The interpretation of Stećci within the nomination dossier promotes the values of coexistence, interconfessionality, and multiculturalism. This does not only relate to a shared past but also to the promotion of values that institutions are willing to communicate for a shared and peaceful future. However, the Management Plan and requirements from UNESCO and ICOMOS do not foresee a common effort to interpret all of the sites in situ.

This leaves a grey zone for national and local institutions and stakeholders to promote interpretations and discourses that might not be fully in line with the ones established during the nomination process. Furthermore, the lack of joint, transnational, and translocal education plans and activities means that the potential for activating Stećci for interethnic and regional dialogue is nonexistent. While official institutions are not seeing this as their own responsibility, only some non-governmental organisations are engaging in interethnic dialogue and reconciliation using Stećci as a starting point. In the meantime, fringe groups with other pseudoscientific and nationalistic interests might use this vacuum. Thus, the interpretation offered through Stećci is both the biggest strength and the biggest potential threat in terms of promoting messages of shared and interconnected history.

Conclusion

The project of a joint transnational serial nomination of Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards to the UNESCO WHL is an exemplary case for analysis of how such a policy tool can become a framework for cooperation and dialogue between post-war states. It should be interpreted as a process in which the nomination to the WHL, as the issue that was bringing actors together, prevailed over the issues that were pulling them apart. In analysing all the interviews, one thing has been certain: the level of protection and recognition that Stećci enjoy today would not have happened without the UNESCO WHL transnational nomination process. The UNESCO World Heritage Label has been a carrot that has held together heritage professionals and state representatives in all four states.

On the other hand, this project fit perfectly into the agenda of fostering reconciliation in the region by encouraging regional cooperation. The involvement of UNESCO representatives has been an essential element of creating stable relationships and cooperation among the former Yugoslav republics throughout the process. It was in moments of silenced conflicts, lack of communication, and cooled relations among the participants and states that UNESCO's representative had the legitimacy, reputation, and position from which to push for new meetings and deepen the value of this project in front of newly elected ministers or directors of participating institutions. Instead of being hidden as improper or outside the technical guidelines for the nomination process, this is the aspect that should be promoted as the added value of

UNESCO when designing transnational nominations among states that have been through violent conflicts.

The five-year-long nomination process and its outcome have set a good basis for continuous cooperation after the inscription to the WHL and have achieved more than what was technically required for the inscription to the WHL. Continuous professional relations, new knowledge and skills acquired, increased involvement of local stakeholders, and better protection of stem cells are some of the most positive outcomes. The most complex and questionable outcome is related to promises of post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding through heritage.

In this case, post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding should be interpreted more as political and policy contexts of cooperation than as a clear policy objective with key milestones and desired outcomes. Reconciliation acted as a background ideal that was driving UNESCO to provide additional support for the nomination and management processes. It has also enabled state parties to win allies in the World Heritage Committee and advocate for the inscription of this nomination as politically important because it reflects cooperation between recently warring states. However, one should also say that more targeted use of Stećci as a dissonant, but shared, regional heritage that could serve the purpose of regional reconciliation has so far been limited. To achieve this, involved professionals, states, and site managers would need to engage in wider public campaigns, on-site heritage interpretation, and interstate education.

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