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Introduction

Bosnia and Hercegovina is extraordinary and beautiful, a country of extremes in landscapes, personalities and history. Visually stunning and able to draw in thousands of tourists despite the devastation of civil war in the 1990s, it combines climatic zones and both Eastern and Western styles of living. In Livanjsko polje, an almost completely flat valley where wild horses graze, there is an intriguing disappearing karst river called the Jaruga.[1] At Vrelo Bune, extremely cold and clean water flows out of a small cave from a huge subterranean lake carrying a large variety of fish with it. In Visoko there is a rare symmetrical pyramid, a type of hill that is known to geologists as a flatiron. It looks like an ancient Egyptian temple that has been covered in shrubs and trees and it draws in tourists from around the world. The series of salt lakes in the centre of the city of Tuzla are rare to Europe and are a small remnant of the once vast Pannonian sea. Bosnia's highest peak Maglić, in the Sutjeska National Park, forms part of the border with Montenegro and stands 2,386 metres above the sea. Beneath it lies the virgin forest of Perućica, one of the wildest and least accessible parts of Europe where bears and wolves live almost undisturbed by humans. In the Middle Ages, the remote towns of Vratar and Vratac were only accessible by single file and were a place of refuge during political crises. Bosnia's scenery such as the waterfall at Jajce has been captured by numerous writers and

[1] Hoernes, Moritz *Dinarsiche Wanderungen: Cultur- und Landschaftsbilder aus Bosnien und der Hercegovina* (Vienna: C. Graeser, 1894), p. 296.

artists, both native and foreign. Sketches of daily life, the costumes worn by locals and their houses, musical instruments and food have all been carefully recorded for posterity.

Bosnia has a rich natural heritage, but has been subject to almost every major social movement or ideological experiment in the last millennium. This long-term instability has had its inescapable impact on the people and their destiny. Indeed before the referendum in 1992, Bosnia had not been an independent state in any form since the Middle Ages. In this concise history, a discussion of long-term structural trends has been woven into the micro-narratives of towns, cities and villages. Events in Sarajevo, Medjugorje, Jajce and Srebrenica have had lasting significance and put Bosnia on an international map. Several themes run through this discussion are crucial to the evolution of modern Bosnia. The most important of these themes is its boundaries with neighbouring lands and peoples, which are linguistic, ethnic, geographical and political. Modern Bosnia and Hercegovina has a unique national heritage, but it also shares a great deal with its immediate neighbours. For most of its history Bosnia has been ruled from outside the country and the legacy of empires and wars and of rule from Istanbul, Vienna or Belgrade is a constant theme. Bosnia is a country where the past matters and is lived experience for most. Writers from Veselin Čajkanović to Vera Stein Erlich have stressed how the people of the region saw themselves very much as part of a infolding chain of history. This sense of connectedness comes through very strongly in memoirs and autobiographies written by Bosnians. Growing up in Oglavak in the 1920s and 1930s, osteologist Dr Nadžija Gajić-Sikirić knew that it was her great-great-grandfather (*prapradjed*) who had built the *tekija* (Dervish monastery) in Fojnica.[2]

The impact of religion especially Sunni Islam, the Franciscan Order and the Orthodox Church and the disparities in wealth, opportunity and privilege that divisions entailed are also constant themes in the narrative here. Many scholars of Bosnia have focused upon the overlaps and blurred edges between those religious beliefs, of the Bosnian Muslims who stored bottles of alcohol for their Catholic friends, for the Christians who refrained from eating in

[2] Gajić-Sikirić, Nadžija *Sjećanja iz Bosne* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2012), p. 8.

public during Ramadan or the Orthodox who believed that hospitality was one of the tenets of Christianity (rather than a pillar of Islam) and that church bells signalled a call to prayer. Although Bosnia produced plenty of religious radicals, it also produced many people who took personal risks to protect their neighbours. Among the prisoners at the prison camp at Omarska in 1992 were 'two Serb women arrested for protesting the behaviour of Serb soldiers and reservists towards their neighbours'.[3] Perhaps most striking of all the themes is the élan, bravery, creativity, but also sometimes destructiveness of many of its people. For the novelist Ivo Andrić there were 'few countries with such firm belief, elevated strength of character, so much tenderness and loving passion, such depth of feeling, of loyalty and unshakeable devotion, or with such a thirst for justice. But in secret depths underneath all this hide burning hatreds, entire hurricanes of tethered and compressed hatreds maturing and awaiting their hour.'[4]

Scientific evidence suggests that the modern population of Bosnia and Hercegovina is largely descended from Palaeolithic and Mesolithic populations. An article by Damir Marjanović and several co-authors that appeared in the *Annals of Human Genetics* in 2005 aimed to demonstrate that 'the three main groups of Bosnia-Hercegovina … share a large fraction of the same ancient gene pool distinctive for the Balkan area'.[5] In other words, most modern Bosnians are descended from folk that lived in the region before the arrival of the Slavs, before Christianity and before Islam. The population was augmented over the centuries by settlement by speakers of South Slavonic, Vlach, Ladino and Turkish languages. There were also migrations from Central Europe under the Habsburgs and various parts of the former Yugoslavia. All of the population movements were significant in the making of modern

[3] Hukanović, Rezak *The Tenth Circle of Hell: A Memoir of Life in the Death Camps of Bosnia* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 41.

[4] 'Letter from 1920' from Andrić, Ivo *The Damned Yard and Other Stories*, (Dufour: Forest Books, 1993), p. 115.

[5] Marjanović, Damir, Fornarino, S., Montagna, S., Primorać, D., Hadžiselimović, R., Vidović, S., Pojskić, N., Battaglia, V., Achilli, A., Drobnić, K., Andjelinović, S., Torroni, A., Santachiara-Benerecetti, A.S. and Semino, O. 'The Peopling of Modern Bosnia-Herzegovina: Y-chromosome Haplogroups in the Three Main Ethnic Groups', *Annals of Human Genetics* 69, 2005, pp. 757–763.

Bosnia and no one group can claim to be any more 'autochthonous' or genuine than any other.

The peoples of the Dinaric region of mountains are often very tall and certainly the loftiest in Europe in this century.[6] At 2.2 m, the basketball player Bojan Dodik, originally from Sarajevo, is one of the tallest men in the world. In the early twentieth century, racial theorists were convinced that the Dinaric people were part of the distinct 'race' and vestiges of similar beliefs linger in popular culture to this day. Height levels may have been nurtured by historically high protein consumption and a diet of lamb, goat, eggs and cheese. Red meat often forms the staple for a meal. *Ćevapi* or *Ćevapčići* are made with spiced minced meat and onion and usually don't contain pork in Bosnia. Meat is often served a preserved with a winter vegetable (*zimnica*), such as the red pepper relish *ajvar*. Bosnians produce hard crumbling cheeses, and softer varieties were introduced by the Ottomans. *Vlašićki* is a ewe's cheese that resembles feta, whereas *kajmak* is a curd cheese. British archaeologist Arthur Evans, well-known for his work on the Minoan civilization, spent some time studying the antiquities in Bosnia and left us animated and detailed descriptions of everyday life in the region in the 1870s. Staying with the Franciscans in the Guča Gora Monastery just east of Travnik, he remembered, 'we met with most sumptuous entertainment – as we thought it at the time – consisting of some lumps of mutton, good brown bread, eggs poached in cheesy milk, vermicelli, and a sweet melon'.[7]

Both Orthodox believers and Catholics are traditionally obliged to fast and not eat meat on some days and before mass. Muslims fast for Ramadan, which means that no food is consumed during the daylight hours. This habit and practice meshed particularly well with Ottoman cuisine, which is rich in cultivated food with a strong emphasis on vegetables. Casseroles could be prepared in advance for meat free days or for the evenings. *Sarma* is generally

[6] Pineau, Jean-Claude, Delamarche, Paul and Bozinovic, Stipe 'Les Alpes Dinariques: un peuple de sujets de grande taille' *Comptes Rendus Biologies* 328, 2005, pp. 841–846.

[7] Evans, Arthur J. *Through Bosnia and the Herzegóvina on Foot During the Insurrection, August and September 1875* (London: Longmans, Green, 1876), Vol. I, p. 181.

made from beef, onion and rice wrapped in cabbage leaves and served with *pavlaka* (sour cream). A similar dish known as *japrak* in Bosnia is made with vine leaves. When the dish was prepared, some of the leaf parcels only contained rice and vegetables for the fasting days. Local habits could sometimes lead to misunderstandings. British writer George Arbuthnot, who would later become MP for Hereford visited Vidosa (Vidoši) in early 1860 and found that 'the priest was profuse in his apologies for the absence of meat, proffering as an excuse that Roman Catholics do not eat it on Friday, a reason which would scarcely hold good, as I arrived on a Saturday. Of eggs and vegetables, however, there was no lack.'[8]

Bosnia and Hercegovina has had somewhat 'soft' borders with its neighbours in terms of religion, language and family connections, which often confound nationalism. There was continual Dinaric transhumance and then more permanent population movements between Hercegovina, old Montenegro and Serbia. The father of the Dubrovnik Jesuit scientist Rudjer Bošković came from Orahov Do in Hercegovina. As a result, the physicist who had a type of lunar crater (now known as a Boscovich) named after him is variously claimed to be Serb, Croat, Italian or even Montenegrin in origin. In time of crisis, the porosity of the borders suited people well. Bosnians could flee the state and take up residence in neighbouring regions. During the 1875 rebellion, the Adriatic port of Dubrovnik became a refuge for the people from the hinterland as it had been centuries earlier during the Ottoman invasions. In 1992, Bosnians who left their war-torn state most frequently went to other former Yugoslav republics. Modern Bosnia-Hercegovina has borders with three countries: Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia. Bosnia's neighbours all speak the same language with minor variants, which creates a potential problem if language is to be seen as one of the major determinants of nationality. Bosnian Croats and Serbs were particularly influenced by nationalist currents emanating from their neighbours. The break-up of the Ottoman State exposed the potential geopolitical vulnerability of Bosnia just as the collapse of both Yugoslav states was to do in the twentieth century.

[8] Arbuthnot, George *Herzegovina: or Omer Pacha and the Christian Rebels* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1862), p. 264.

Modern Bosnians are also only a generation away from belonging to a unified state with its neighbours and a devastating war in which its neighbours were aggressors. Bosnia's borders are also relatively permeable because they are easy to breach. The Drina can be swum across, as can the Adriatic at Neum, one can see Croatia from the banks of the Sava and a shepherd or hiker could wander into Montenegro without passing a border guard.

Bosnia has contrasting geographical regions that cover different zones of civilization. Heinrich Renner described the transition from the relatively lush Adriatic to the bare rocks of Hercegovina: 'Greenery … disappeared altogether and the wildest most magnificent mountain scenery surrounded us. Nothing but grey, bare mountain peaks all around, on which guard houses (*Karaulen*) stand everywhere … the road climbed sharply to traverse the border between the Hercegovina and Dalmatia. In the depth of individual valleys (*Dolinen*), are lonely farmsteads which hardly stand out against the grey rock.'[9] Other travellers compared the craggy Hercegovinian landscape to the moon.[10] The interplay between these zones is one of the most intriguing motifs in Bosnian history. The Adriatic region and its small coastal towns are susceptible to earthquakes. Although the mountains separate Bosnia from some of the worst tectonic instability, nevertheless it remains vulnerable. The terrible earthquake that destroyed the historic centre of Dubrovnik in 1667 was felt in Trebinje some 15 miles away.

The Dinaric range extends like a spine along the western part of Bosnia. Blown by a dry wind – the *bura* (or sometimes *bora*) that comes in from the Adriatic – the rock is limestone, often dry and difficult to traverse. Arriving in Mostar in 1893, Guillaume Capus remembered that '[t]he bora blowing furiously, the sky was heavily overcast … The tremors were violent enough to crack houses … and bring a terrible confusion.'[11] Known as 'karst' from the local word *kras*, its study has become a distinctive subject and its contours have been carefully charted by earth scientists. The area around

[9] Renner, Heinrich *Durch Bosnien und die Hercegovina kreuz und quer* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1896), p. 322.
[10] Evans, *Through Bosnia and the Herzegóvina*, p. 355.
[11] Capus, Guillaume *A travers la Bosnie et l'Herzégovine. Études et impressions de voyage* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1896), p. 200.

Livno is one the largest of the karst fields or *polje* in the world and was submerged under water in the Neolithic era. Local idioms and words were adapted in the nineteenth century when the region was explored by researchers. The standard word for a sinkhole where water collects in the earth sciences is *dolina*, which comes from the word used by local people in the Dinarics and the term *uvala*, also used by geologists, means a coalescence of sinkholes. Describing the landscape, Émile de Laveleye found '[t]he surface of the ground is covered with large blocks of white limestone, which seems to be thrown down by chance, like the ruins of Cyclopean monuments. Water is almost everywhere very scarce; there are no springs, and the rivers issue ready made from grottos, giving rise in winter to lakes in the closed-up valleys; then they disappear again under the ground.'[12] In places, settlements have been hewn into the rock such as the medieval fort at Blagaj known as Stjepan grad.

Historically, many Bosnians lived in stone farmsteads with their extended families in what were known as *zadruge*.[13] Living with a larger group gave people a strong sense of their identity and mutual obligations. The concept of *moba* (mutual aid in times of need such as harvest) reinforced the obligations of traditional life. Fields full of stones, lack of water and the fact that it is hard for a pastoralist to become rich or to substantially change their life may have also contributed to the often noted fatalism of the Dinaric peoples.[14] The Bosnian word for destiny is *sudbina*, but sometimes the Turkish word *ksmet* has also been used, according to the geographer Jovan Cvijić.[15] Soil rarely settles for long enough for serious cultivation to take place so that fields are sparse and far better suited to ruminant animals than agriculture in Hercegovina. British writer Gerald Brenan, later known for his vivid descriptions of daily life in Andalucía, visited Hercegovina in his youth. 'Wherever I went

[12] de Laveleye, Émile *The Balkan Peninsula* (New York: G. P. Putnams, 1887), pp. 119–120.

[13] This could be translated as 'commune' and was close in concept to the Russian *obshchina*.

[14] Stein Erlich, Vera *Family in Transition: A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 78.

[15] Cvijić, Jovan *La péninsule balkanique: Geographie humaine* (Paris: A. Colin, 1918), p. 297.

Map 1. Relief map of Bosnia

there was the same emptiness – the land too poor or too rocky to cultivate, the settlements rare, the farms few, and the ground either greyish white or ribbed and streaked with snow. The blank denuded look of the country is what I best remember – bare stony plains scattered with thin clumps of oak or fir tree, bare stony valleys without streams or rivers, hills that when not covered were ribs of whitish limestone rock.'[16] In some places, traditional lifestyles have survived to the present day. Muslims still live a pastoralist life in the nomadic village of Lukomir, which is inaccessible for months every year due to harsh local weather. The elderly inhabitants live in antique stone houses with cherrywood roof shingles, a vestige of

[16] Brenan, Gerald *A Life of One's Own: Childhood and Youth* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 163.

a different age. They still spin and wear the clothes they produce including a type of heavy waistcoat known as a *zobun* and small caps called the *krmez*. Knitting is an important part of the preparations for marriage and men traditionally wore heavy long socks made for them by their female relatives. In 2010, a Dutch documentary crew made the film *Winterslaap in Lukomir*, which captured the desolation of the village during its 'hibernation', the drifts of snow and the sound of the wind.

Alongside the harsh landscapes of the mountains, there is also the Bosnia of rivers and small towns where fruit, tobacco and cereal crops can be grown. Fruit trees flourish, cows graze in lush meadows and the ground is kept moist by innumerable streams. Traditional houses (*Bosanske kuće*), often plastered and painted white, tended to have balconies and to be narrower at ground level. Their interiors were sometimes panelled with wood and then decorated with carpets. Passing from the mountains into the fertile valleys, Brenan discovered the other Bosnia: 'as I travelled south and east, the landscape began to alter. I came on mountain ranges that were dark with forest, valleys with clear rivers flowing in them, small towns and villages that in place of churches had minarets and mosques.'[17] In 1909 Maude Holbach visited the former Bosnian capital of Travnik, '[a] garden city with its mosques and minarets lying under the protecting walls of its ancient fortress', where she found herself 'wandering in the narrow streets of the old quarter, where the quaint Turkish houses have projecting upper stories, shaded by broad eaves and harem windows of muscharabiah work in the whitewashed walls'.[18] The novel *Travnička hronika* (1945), written about the town where author Ivo Andrić went to school but set more than a century earlier, evokes the imaginary smell of tallow, sounds and attitudes of an Ottoman-era city.

Historically Bosnia has had a small coast on the Adriatic since 1718 when it was taken over by the Ottomans. The sea and the recollection of visiting it for the first time became an important *lieu de mémoire* for Bosnians.[19] Although they often went to Dubrovnik

[17] Brenan, *A Life of One's Own*, p. 163.
[18] Holbach, Maude *Bosnia and Herzegovina, Some Wayside Wanderings* (New York: J. Lane, 1910), pp. 83–84.
[19] Gajić-Sikirić, *Sjećanja iz Bosne*, p. 22.

(Ragusa) rather that Neum, most of Bosnia is culturally very far from the sea. When Heinrich Renner visited in the 1890s, he described this small area of Bosnian coast as a 'Turkish wedge between Ragusa and Venice', which was still referred to by Dalmatian peasants as 'Turkey'.[20] The town of Neum and its environs including the islands of Veliki i Mali Školj remain very similar in economy to the rest of the littoral. Like neighbouring towns, it is also overwhelmingly Catholic. Neum has a stunning small church, Sveta Ana, and the folk costumes worn by local people are Dalmatian in style but clearly influenced by Ottoman traditions. The belt (*tkanica*) was made from woven material and not dissimilar to Turkish weaving in both styles and colour. Men wore the small cap or *bareta* and women covered their heads with white kerchiefs. Leather shoes with toes that turned up at the end (*opanci*) were worn across the Balkans and crossed the Dinaric Dalmatian divide. Other local traditions have preserved the *lindjo* folk dances accompanied by a lyre (*lijerica*). A cappella singing known as *klapa*, which involved the (usually male) tenor, baritone and base singers forming a semicircle also links Neum to the rest of the Dalmatian littoral. The long-term relationship between the Adriatic world and the hinterland is a constant historical theme in this region. Merchants from Dubrovnik traded in the old Ottoman towns such as Srebrenica. With them they bought knowledge of a wider Mediterranean culture of fish, wine and olive oil as well as the literacy of the Catholic world.

Much of the history of Bosnia and Hercegovina before the modern era is carved in stone. In 1976, Palaeolithic era carvings were found in the Badanj caves near Stolac. The image discovered probably represents the figure of a horse and as such is not unusual for Mediterranean region art from this era. Pottery has been found from the Neolithic era in Butmir and Obre with incised geometric patterns such as spirals and rhytons (drinking vessels). Until the early twentieth century, rural women tattooed themselves with vegetable dyes in similar patterns to those found on tombstones and even Neolithic figurines. For historians the written sources for the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the medieval Bosnian kingdom are relatively sparce. In 168 BC, Illyria (which

[20] Renner, *Durch Bosnien und die Hercegovina*, p. 328.