

Head-Hunting in Europe

Montenegrin Heroes, Turkish Barbarians and Western Observers

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Jezernik, Božidar 2001: Head-Hunting in Europe. Montenegrin Heroes, Turkish Barbarians and Western Observers. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 31: 21–36.

From the 19th century onwards, Western travellers paid full attention to the custom of cutting-off human heads in the Balkans which they perceived as a clear-cut line between civilised and barbarian forms of existence. The image of the Balkans and its people in these travel reports was seasoned with a liberal measure of partiality and biases, for it was not unimportant at all who did it. Montenegrins head-cutters were heroes, “Turkish” head-cutters were the barbarians. On the other hand, the vivid interest by Westerners showed for the “barbarous custom” in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries indicate that in the West the barbarian “Other” had been but repressed rather than completely eliminated.

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Until the beginning of the 20th century the Balkans was a promised land for hunters of bizarre phenomena. The cutting off heads, as one British anthropologist put it, was common in Turkey and could be performed without fear of scandal (Durham 1905: 148). From the 19th century onwards, Western travellers paid full attention to this custom treating the sight of such trophies in the Balkans as a clear-cut line between civilised and barbarian existence. The custom reminded them, as a German author put it, “of the naivety of the Homeric age” (Hertzberg 1853: 19). At the beginning of the 20th century the custom was considered proof that in the Balkans “but a century ago much of the population was as wild as the Red Indians of the same date” (Durham 1920: 26). Sir Layard, for instance, famous in later life for his discovering of Nineveh, described the following picture from Cetinje in 1839:

“(A) number of gory heads with their long tufts of hair waving in the wind, the trophies of a recent raid upon the neighbouring Turks. It was a hideous and disgusting sight which first greeted the traveller on his arrival at the residence of

the Priest-Prince. Our guides, however, pointed to it with exultation. They had all, as it was the duty of the warlike inhabitants of the Black Mountains, taken part in raids upon the Mussulmans and in the border wars, which were constantly taking place, and had their stories to relate of slaughtered Turks and bloody spoils, such as those exposed on the round tower” (Layard 1903: I, 128).

During his stay in Cetinje Sir Layard visited the vladika of Montenegro whose fort was decorated with Turkish heads. To contrast this custom with civilisation more clearly, he described how the vladika had procured a billiard-table (a symbol of civilisation) from Trieste and that they played together several times.

“On one occasion whilst we were so engaged, a loud noise of shouting and of firing of guns was heard from without. It proceeded from a party of Montenegrin warriors who had returned from a successful raid into Turkish territory of Scutari, and, accompanied by a crowd of idlers, were making a triumphal entry into the village. They carried in a cloth, held up between them,

several heads which they had severed from the bodies of their victims. Amongst these were those apparently of mere children. Covered with gore, they were a hideous and ghastly spectacle. They were duly deposited at the feet of the Prince, and then added to those which were displayed on the round tower near the convent" (Layard 1903: I, 132).

But it seems that the West had a short memory and indeed had forgotten its own practises a few generations earlier "when it, too, was young." In the early centuries of the modern era, for instance, London Bridge attracted tourists with its criminals' heads stuck on to the points of spears (Maczak 1995: 223). In England, the custom of displaying severed heads was retained until the second half of the 18th century, when passers-by paid six pennies for the privilege of viewing them.

"I saw the heads when they were brought up to be boiled," wrote a seventeenth-century prisoner in Newgate.

"The Hangman fetched them in a dirty dust basket, out of some by-place; and, setting them down among the felons, he and they made sport with them. They took them by the hair, flouting, jeering, and laughing at them; and then, giving them some ill-names, boxed them on the ears and cheeks. Which done, the Hangman put them into his kettle, and parboiled them with Bay-Salt and Cummin-Seed – that to keep them from putrefaction, and this to keep off the fowls from seizing them" (Hibbert 1966: 43).

The First Reports

A detailed report about the custom of cutting off and displaying heads was written by a Russian naval officer who visited Montenegro in the first decade of the 19th century. He looked upon the people of Montenegro as brave and reliable allies of Russia in its wars against Turkey. The custom of taking heads, in his eyes, was convincing proof of Montenegrin heroism:

"A Montenegrin never sues for mercy and whenever one of them is severely wounded, and it is impossible to save him from the enemy, his own

comrades cut off his head" (Bronevsky 1818: I, 267–268).

Some years later, a French staff-major of the Second Division of the Illyrian Army (French) at Dubrovnik visited Montenegro. He watched this custom with less compassion and saw more details. According to him the Montenegrins cut off the heads of captured robbers and Muslims. In his accounts, he informs his readers about a journey he took with a group of Montenegrins, during which they encounter a group of Muslims. The Montenegrins darted forward and the "Turks" retired abruptly in great disorder, leaving one of their party dead and two wounded. The latter were immediately seized and decapitated; their heads were brought in triumph to the French officer. This spectacle was not a pleasant one for the officer. It caused him, he wrote, "many painful sensations" and made him "more than once regret having undertaken this journey" (Sommieres 1820: 24). Yet it was not so unpleasant that he changed his plans of visiting and seeing as much of this strange land as possible. During his journey, he came across further examples of this practise. He saw the greatest number of severed heads during his stay in the monastery of St Vasil. In every direction at a distance of two or three leagues, he saw the "horrible spectacle" of vast numbers of Turkish heads fixed upon staves standing upon the hills (Sommieres 1820: 35).

In the spring of 1838 king of Saxony, Frederic August, visited Vladika Peter II of Montenegro during his botanical tour. Frederick August was less delicate than the French staff-major and expressed his wish to see "a souvenir of valour of the Montenegrins" namely the embalmed head of Mahmud Pasha of Shköder. The Montenegrins had been incorporated into the pashaluk of Mahmud Pasha according to the peace treaty between Emperor Leopold II and the Sublime Porte in 1791, but refused obedience and tribute. This led the pasha to attack Montenegro with fire and sword in 1796. During the war Vladika Peter Petrović I found himself in the middle of the clash, holding a cross in one hand and a spade in the other to animate his people against the invaders. His people were victorious and slaughtered many enemies. They

even seized the pasha himself, cut off his head, and preserved it as a token of their deed. The head was preserved in the monastery of Cetinje, together with his sword and turban, where it was "religiously kept" in a special nut-wood chest of fine work (Biasoletto 1841: 95–96).

When Sir Gardner Wilkinson visited Montenegro in 1844 he saw a round tower above Cetinje decorated with Turkish heads. He inspected the tower down to the smallest detail:

"On a rock, immediately above the convent, is a round tower, pierced with embrasures, but without cannon; on which I counted the heads of twenty Turks, fixed upon stakes, round the parapet, the trophies of Montenegrin victory; and below, scattered upon the rock, were the fragments of other skulls, which had fallen to pieces by time; a strange spectacle in a Christian country, in Europe, and in the immediately vicinity of a convent and a bishop's palace. It would be in vain to expect that, in such a condition, the features could be well preserved, or to look for the Turkish physiognomy, in these heads, many of which have been exposed for years in this position, but the face of one young man was remarkable; and the contraction of the upper lip, exposing a row of white teeth, conveyed an expression of horror, which seemed that he had suffered much, either from fright or pain, at the moment of death" (Wilkinson 1848: I, 511–512).

Bowling with Heads

Until the middle of the 19th century, the Montenegrins cut off heads of killed or wounded enemies and took them in battle as a sign of their heroism, even if thereby exposing themselves to danger of death. Head-cutting was a way of triumphing over a contemptible foe and provided a means of achieving personal renown within Montenegrin community. The importance of a victory or defeat they expressed in numbers of heads. If someone was said to be a *dobar junak* (great hero), the number of heads he had taken was immediately cited as evidence. Folk songs, celebrating heroes, say that they cut off the heads of their enemies in battle or brought home heads from raids into neigh-

bouring territories. This practise provided Montenegrin society which did not have hereditary rank with a system of social prestige (Karadžić 1837: 29, 35, 53; Hertzberg 1853: 19; Krasinski 1853: 50; Pelerin 1860: 27; Neale 1861: 186; Frilley and Wlahovitj 1876: 437, 450; Andrejka 1904: 344; Durham 1928: 172; Nenadović 1975: 41).

According to accounts up to the 20th century old men enjoyed telling tales of the heads they and their friends had taken. In a monastery near Danilovgrad, a local doctor and young monk proudly showed a British anthropologist the tomb of Bajo Radović. His weapons and medals were carved upon it and his epitaph stated that he fell in the battle with the Turks in 1876 after hewing off fifteen Turkish heads. As the doctor explained, when King Nikola rode by, he reined his horse, lifted his cap and prayed: "God give thee salvation, Bajo. Fifteen heads to one sword – *O Thou dobar junak!*" (Durham 1928: 172–173).

Grand Vojvoda Mirko, father of King Nikola, wrote a poem *A Monument to Heroism*, describing exploits of the Montenegrin heroes in their battles with the Turks. The tale of nearly every fight ends with a list of booty taken – heads included. In *The Avenging of Priest Radosav*, for example, Mirko sings that to atone for one priest, the Montenegrins cut off thirty-three heads and carried them upon stakes. They mounted the stakes where Turkish women in the town could see and understand them as a monument to Radosav. Even more heads were taken in wars. In Kolašin in 1858, for instance, one thousand heads were said to have been taken and in the fight at Nikšić in 1862 the score was given as 3,700 (Durham 1928: 175–176).

The Montenegrins also brought home human heads from their raids into neighbouring Muslim territories and not only from the battlefield. They would give the heads to the vladika, who would reward them. Heads, including those of women and children, were then usually fixed on the poles on the round tower above Cetinje, called Kula, atop houses, or the nearby trees (Sommieres 1820: 24; Karadžić 1837: 53; Wilkinson 1848: I, 431, 562; Kohl 1851: I, 271, 295, 336; Hertzberg 1853: 19; Pelerin 1860: 27; Lenormant 1866: xiv; Tozer 1869: I, 266; Freeman

1877: 24; Frischauf 1883: 268; Marcotti 1896: 77; Passarge 1904: 333).

Montenegrin likewise cut off the heads of French soldiers regardless of rank, when they were neighbours (Karadžić 1837: 113). According to the French commander at Dubrovnik many French soldiers, including General Delgorgeus, “have fallen victim to this barbarous practise.” During the siege of Hercegnovi “instances of singular atrocity occurred,” when “some Montenegrines, in a fit of intoxication, amused themselves by playing at nine-pins with the heads of some Frenchmen, and, at the same time, directing insulting language towards them. ‘See, see,’ said they every moment, ‘how roundly these Frenchmen’s head roll;’ – a cruel irony on the imputed levity of the French nation” (Sommieres 1820: 24). – A more prudent British diplomat from the end of the 19th century was of the opinion that the story of Montenegrins bowling with the heads of the French soldiers, while remarking how light-headed their enemies were, was “probably an invention” (Miller 1896: 414).

There were rules for head taking. If in a fight two Montenegrins wounded the same man, the head belonged to the Montenegrin who had drawn the first blood. Great disputes arose on this question, and Durham was told of cases in which two men fought each other almost to the death on the very battlefield where their enemy’s corpse had fallen (1928: 173). Conforming to their code of military honour, the Montenegrins would rather take the heads of their fallen comrades than let them fall in the enemy’s hands. This was to ensure that their comrades were buried “as humans.” When two *pobratims* (sworn brethren) went to war, it was the duty of the one to cut off and carry away the head of the other if slain, to prevent the head from falling into the hands of the enemy. He was even to cut off the head if the man were fatally or so badly wounded that he could not be carried from the field and might be taken by the enemy. Tradition declared this had often been done (Hertzberg 1853: 19; Krasinski 1853: 51; Lenormant 1866; Pieńkowski 1869: 7; Kutschbach 1877: 82; Mackenzie and Irby 1877: II, 202; Wyon 1904: 292; Durham 1928: 173–174).

Russian navy officer Bronevsky reported how

a Montenegrin soldier supplicated a Russian officer, when he lost his ground in retreat from a battle, to take his head, in order that it not fall in enemy’s hands:

“When at the attack of Klobuk, a small detachment of Russian troops was obliged to retreat, an officer of stout make, and no longer young, fell on the ground from exhaustion. A Montenegrin perceiving it, ran immediately to him, and having drawn his yatagan, said, ‘You are very brave and must wish that I should cut off your head. Say a prayer and make the sign of the Cross.’ The officer, horrified at the proposition, made an effort to rise and rejoined his comrades with the assistance of the friendly Montenegrin. They consider all those who have been taken by the enemy as killed. They carry out of the battle their wounded comrades on their shoulders; and, be it said to their honour, they acted in the same manner by their allies the Russian officers and soldiers” (Bronevsky 1836: I, 268).

Any Montenegrin who fell in action but did not have his head cut off and taken away did not quite count as dead. An individual whose head had been reclaimed in exchange for several enemies’ heads was considered a fortunate man (Nenadović 1975: 41). If the head of a fallen man was taken by the enemy, great efforts were made by his relatives to obtain his head for burial with his body. Grim tales were told both sides of the Montenegrin border of women who had crawled over the border at night at great risk and brought back their husband’s or brother’s head from the pole on which it was rotting (Durham 1928: 174).

Heads in Bags

Some authors went beyond merely reporting the custom of head-cutting in Montenegro and pondered theories about how the victors carried the heads of their dead enemies. According to one British anthropologist:

“According to popular belief, the long lock is to serve as a handle to carry home the head when severed. A head, it seems, can be carried only by

the ear, or by inserting a finger in the mouth” (Durham 1904: 81).

Her theory was based on stories she came across with Slavs, Turks and Albanians. Among all Balkan people the custom of head-shaving prevailed, only one top-lock or side locks or large patches of hair were left. According to popular explanation, she heard in Montenegro, clean-shaven heads could not be carried away save by sticking a finger in the mouth. A Christian, even when dead, would object to a Muslim finger in his mouth. And a Muslim, with equal justice, would object to the finger of an unclean *giaour*. Therefore a convenient handle was left (Durham 1928: 174).

In fact those who succeeded in cutting off an enemy’s head, carried it in a bag, if necessary for three, four days together with their allowance of stale bread and onion. When they were appeasing their hunger, they emptied the bag all together. They put up the head in front of themselves to see it and spoke to it in a monologue while they were eating, thus incorporating the enemy as friend (cf. Freeman 1979: 245). Obviously, they were not much disturbed by the fact that they were cutting the food with the same handzhar they used to cut off the head (Ebel 1842: 44; Holeček 1876: 43, 65; Knight 1880: 76; Marcotti 1896: 14; Gjurgjević 1910: 101).

The Strength of Custom

Western observers, however, saw these heads from a very different perspective. Sir Layard could not conceal from the vladika his disgust at what he had witnessed and expressed his astonishment that someone with his desire to civilise his people “permitted them to commit acts so revolting to humanity and so much opposed to the feelings and habits of all Christian nations.” The vladika readily admitted that the practise of cutting off and exposing heads of the slain was shocking and barbarous, but added that it was “an ancient custom of the Montenegrins in their struggles with the Turks, the secular and blood-thirsty enemies of their race and their faith, and who also practised the same loathsome habit.” He was compelled “to tolerate, if not to countenance, this barbarous

practice which he condemned on every account, because it was necessary to maintain the warlike spirit of his people.” Montenegrins were continually in a state of enmity with their neighbours. They were few in number and, unless always prepared to defend their mountain strongholds, would soon be conquered and exterminated by the Turks or the Austrians. There was nothing he dreaded more, the vladika declared, than a long peace. Once the Montenegrins slept with a sense of security and abandoned their state of continual warfare, they would soon be conquered. It would thus be unwise on his part to make any attempt “for the present” to put a stop to a practise that encouraged his people in their hatred of the Turks and determination to perish rather than allow the Muslims to obtain a foothold in their mountains (Layard 1903: I, 132–133).

When, a few years later, Sir Gardner Wilkinson tried to persuade the vladika to abolish the custom, the latter replied, that he could not do so for the sake of Montenegrin security. It was impossible, according to the vladika, for his people to be the first to abandon the usage. Their foes would mistake their humane intentions to fear and responded with increased vexations. “Our making any propositions of the kind would almost be tantamount to an invitation to invade our territory” (Wilkinson 1848: I, 475–476).

Then Sir Gardner Wilkinson tried to persuade the Vizier of Mostar Ali Pasha Rizvanbegović. The pasha agreed that nothing was more desirable, but added that “all attempts hitherto made had been fruitless, and there was no trusting to a reconciliation with Montenegro” (Wilkinson 1848: II, 74–75).

Nevertheless in 1853, Prince Danilo of Montenegro ordered all heads exhibited in Cetinje to be removed. He forbade his soldiers from salting and keeping the heads of enemies from battle. The immediate cause for his order was the semi-official visit of a Russian colonel after Omar Pasha’s expedition in the spring of 1853. The Russian colonel represented it to the Montenegrins as a specimen of domestic manners not well calculated to raise them in the estimation of all other nations of Christendom in the 19th century. He finally succeeded in persuading

Montenegrins to stop cutting off the heads of their prisoners by paying them a ducat for every prisoner instead (Krasinski 1853: 56; Wingfield 1859: 200; Pelerin 1860: 24; Tozer 1869: I, 308; Rasch 1873: 228, 246; Frilley and Wlahovitj 1876: 437; Gopčević 1877: 92; Rossi 1897: 25; Hulme-Beamon 1898: 160; Lavtižar 1903: 200, 212). However, “the habit was stronger than his word” (Gopčević 1914: 330).

The custom did not completely die out. If nobody practised it, there would be no need to sanction it either. But, as visitors in Cetinje in 1875 were informed, a Montenegrin was undergoing a short term of imprisonment for decapitating a dead Muslim at Podgorica (Creagh 1876: II, 264; Denton 1877: 138). Prohibition of the practise had to be reiterated by Knjaz Nikola, who no longer bought so much a head to be exhibited on the round tower and had constructed a wooden belfry on its summit (Knight 1880: 65, 75). He even forbade his soldiers in 1876 to cut off noses and ears. He ordered instead that they bring fezzes, rifles, or swords, in order to prove who fought valiantly and deserved to be rewarded. He advised them to capture and bring back alive as many noblemen as possible (Gjurgjević 1910: 119).

Although Knjaz Nikola was unyielding in his prohibition of the practise and he himself personally went on the spot, if he learned that the Turkish heads were exhibited somewhere, British women travellers during their stay in Montenegro saw three heads dangling on an apple-tree (Mackenzie and Irby 1877: II, 202). And another British traveller could still see during his visit to Montenegro and Albania in late 1870s “an astonishing number of men who have been victims of this barbarous custom.” He came across more mutilated men in Shköder alone than in all Montenegro (Knight 1880: 90).

Knjaz Nikola’s order was in force where the Montenegrins were victorious and were more powerful in battle; but where the Turks drove them into the corner, the old shrieks could be heard urging the Montenegrins to go on for heads (Nenadović 1975: 50). Sporadically they were incited to this also by the fury excited in them because of the inhumane treatment by the Turkish soldier with their captives (Still-

man 1877: 71–72; Gopčević 1879: I, 103). Many heads were cut off in the battles that took place in 1876/77, but due to an anti-Turkish attitude that prevailed in the West, Europe was not prepared to believe eyewitness reports about the practise:

“Poor Canon McColl was jeered at and discredited when he came from the seat of war and said he had seen heads on stakes and that the heads were those of Turks. Gladstone had represented the Balkan Christians as something like angels – never having lived among them – and Canon was completely disbelieved. But the truth will out. About twenty-five years afterwards I was at the Grand Hotel at Cetinje. An English parson and his wife arrived and talked with some Montenegrin officials who were dining there, spoke French, and wore nice frock-coats. They talked of Turks, and the reverend gentleman mentioned Canon McColl’s foolish blunder. ‘Of course, no one believed him.’ ‘But why not?’ asked Miouskovitch (afterwards Minister of Foreign Affairs), completely puzzled, ‘in a war naturally one sees decapitated heads.’ Then, seeing the horror on the other’s face, he added hastily: ‘But when one teaches children to put cigarettes in the mouths – no, that is a bit too strong (c’est un peu fort, ça).’ For one moment the Balkans were unveiled” (Durham 1928: 179).

An Enemy’s Nose for a Wife

The Montenegrins finally succeeded in eliminating the custom of decapitating dead enemies among troops under regular Montenegrin discipline. But the custom of cutting off the dead enemy’s nose, as a kind of substitute for his head, had still been kept up both by the irregular insurgent bands and by the Albanians who sometimes joined the Montenegrins (Freeman 1877: 24; Gopčević 1879: I, 116). According to a report by a British correspondent from Bosnia-Herzegovina from time of uprising, in Trebinje in 1875 clashes between the Montenegrins and rebels in Herzegovina cut off a lot of “Turkish” noses. According to his report they cut off over 800 noses instead of heads in a single battle (Stillman 1877: 107–108, 121–122). As reported

by a German correspondent some Turkish heads, too, were cut off (Kutschbach 1877: 82).

The custom remained in force until they made war each in his own name and in small groups. The most efficient weapon in chasing it away were long range rifles. In the time needed for a soldier to cut off a head, he could fill up his rifle twenty times and shoot. Severed heads were quite an inconvenient impediment. A man who carried on him two or three of them, could not fight anymore: the heads impeded him while running and manipulating with his arms (Nenadović 1975: 50). Edith Durham reported the last heads that she heard of as being cut off were those of three Montenegrins killed in a border fight in August 1912 (1928: 177).

If the Montenegrins were yielding slowly and unwillingly in the matter of cutting off the heads of dead foes, their princes were more successful with abolition of a custom which was not less cruel, namely, cutting off the nose of a living foe. The desire to take a nose was so great that occasionally a man whose hands were not free would seize his enemy's nose with his teeth and try to bite it off, for successful participation in a battle seems to be prerequisite for marriage for a young man (cf. Jensen 1963: 162).

A Montenegrin gendarme once told his personal story:

"Then came war and I went to fight the Turks in Herzegovina (1876). We fought almost to Mostar. But I was ashamed in the eyes of my comrades, for I had not taken a head. Other younger than I had taken heads and sent them home to their mothers, and I, never an one. I swore in the next fight to take one or die. I fixed my eyes on a Turk and slashed at him with my handzhar, but he fired his pistol and caught me there' – he showed a deep scar on his right forearm – 'the handzhar fell from my hand. I snatched my pistol with my left hand, but as I fired he sliced me with his knife and the pistol fell, too. (He showed two fingers of his left hand stiff and contracted.)' Both my hands were useless, but I saw nothing but that Turk's head. I must have it. I flew at him like a wolf and fixed my teeth in his nose. God! how I bit into him! And I knew nothing more till I woke up in the Russian field-lazaret. There was a Russian nun;

she told me my sworn brother, Joko Shtepitch, had brought me in – God rest his soul. He shot the Turk through the head. My teeth were locked in the Turk's nose as we fell together. Joko severed it with his knife. He knew I had sworn to take a head, and that now I should not have another chance. With us, you know, a nose count as a head. He could not carry me and the head too, so he thrust the nose into my breeches pocket. I found it there and it did me more good than all the doctor's stuff..." (Durham 1928: 177–178).

Some authors were of opinion that the custom of nose-cutting developed from a practical reason: it was inconvenient to carry a head (Holeček 1876: 65). The others stated that, as we learn from the *Odyssey*, this was an ancient custom (Minchin 1886: 13). However, the custom was an old and widespread form of corporal punishment for slaves and women. For instance, a famous French traveller from the 17th century reports that the slaves in Tunis were punished with bastonades or they cut their ears or nose according to the quality of the offence (Thevenot 1687: I, 279). According to some reports in the 19th century the Montenegrins still used to cut off a wife's nose, if caught "in a heavier sin" (Medaković 1860: 127–128). In case of the wife's adultery the husband could, if he pleased, cut off his wife's nose and, according to a British anthropologist, "not infrequently did so" (Durham 1928: 213).

When war was declared in October 1912, Kovačević, "professor of modern languages," at Podgorica predicted gleefully that there would be baskets full of Turkish noses to see. When Durham commented that such conduct would disgust all Europe, he flew into a rage and declared nose-cutting was a national custom and Turks not human beings:

"It is our old national custom, how can a soldier prove his heroism to his commander if he does not bring in noses? Of course we shall cut noses; we always have" (Durham 1914: 185; 1928: 177).

And so they did this time again (Durham 1914: 197, 218, 237–238).

Durham herself saw nine victims who had survived: the nasal bone was hacked right through and the whole upper lip was removed. Her Montenegrin patients boasted to a man of the noses they had taken and wanted to be cured so as to take more. They told her that they had not left a nose on a corpse between Berane and Peć with shouts of laughter how they had mutilated living victims and said: "Go home and show your wife how pretty you are" (Durham 1928: 177).

When reporting about this custom authors with strong sympathies for the freedom-loving Montenegrins attributed it to Montenegrin allies instead of the Montenegrins themselves:

"The determined severity of their rulers really seems to have put down this barbarism in Montenegro itself; every foreign agent to whom we referred was of opinion that no noseless patients has been seen or authenticated at Scodra. On the other hand, it appears that such were seen at Ragusa and on board steamers for Corfu, and there are grounds for believing what the mountaineers assert, viz., that those mutilated suffer at the hands of the Herzegovinian insurgents, whose barbarities the Prince of Montenegro cannot control, and who, being Turkish rayahs, behave as such..." (Mackenzie and Irby 1877: II, 202).

On the other hand, the authors who attributed it to the Montenegrins, added that their motives for this practise were "not altogether bad:"

"The Montenegrin, who is a Christian, and by nature of a gentle disposition, felt scruples about taking the life of his Turkish prisoner. At the same time, he did not wish the Turk to boast that he had discomfited a Montenegrin. He therefore put this mark upon his face, that all might know the Turk was a vanquished man. That this was a common practice in Montenegro within recent years I will not deny; but what I do assert is, that no Turkish prisoner has been mutilated by the Montenegrins since the last battle of Medun in 1876. On that occasion several Turks were brought into Scutari in a mutilated condition, and our consul there, Mr. Kirby Green, wrote a report which drew the attention

of Europe to the subject. This report was read by the Prince of Montenegro, and he forbade the practice under the severest penalties. The result was that this abomination went out of fashion with the Montenegrins" (Minchin 1886: 13–14).

The Wine of Honour

A custom perceived by the 19th century travelers as a particularly Balkan barbarian custom, was, in fact, much older. In Europe, head-hunting as a proof of prowess was far older than Turkish invasions and there is clear evidence for it as far back as Mesolithic times. The head-hunt was a rather common practise considered a precondition for being recognised as an adult and deemed suitable for marriage. This practise is well documented among Indo-European peoples such as the Scythians. According to Herodotus, a Scythian drank of the blood of the first man whom he had overthrown. He carried to his king the heads of all whom he had slain in the battle in order to receive a share of the booty taken. He scalped the head and kept the skin for a napkin, attaching it to the bridle of his horse. The more scalps a man had, the better man he was judged to be. Once a year each governor of a province would brew a bowl of wine for those Scythians who had slain enemies. Those who had slain more than one enemy received two cups and drank of them both, while those who had killed no one sat dishonoured without a taste (book iv, 64–66).

The Hungarian historian Istvánfy described how the Croatian nobleman Nikolaus Zrinyi killed Johann Kazianar in 1539, cut off his head and sent it to Emperor Ferdinand in Vienna (Gruden 1941: 581).

In the 16th and 17th centuries Austrian soldiers, as described by Baron Valvasor, were also in habit of cutting of the heads of Turkish soldiers found dead on the battlefield after falling in retreat. They, too, would erect the heads on a stake as a sign of triumph. In Croatia and other frontier lands once no one was allowed to wear a feather in the cap, until he killed a Turk and brought home his head (Valvasor 1689: XII, 63, 64, 65, 115, 116). Baron Valvasor described seeing, how the people of

Senj, the Vlachs and the Uskoks cut off a Turkish head, lifted it up and let the warm blood dribble in their mouth “in a barbarian way with a great lust” (Valvasor 1689: XII, 93).

Enemies’ heads were also used as a deterrent. An English traveller in the 17th century reported that the governor of the town of Komarno judicially tried the Turkish messengers whom Sinan Pasha sent to him during the siege of the town, “till they had declared their whole treachery.” Then he commanded four of their heads to be struck off and to be set upon long pikes upon one of the bulwarks for the pasha to look upon (Browne 1685: 17).

This practise was even more common in the Ottoman Empire. On the walls of Turkish towns in the 17th century it was customary for the heads of highwaymen to be displayed spiked on the end of a lance. French and Turkish travellers from the middle of the 17th century saw such heads in towns in Serbia, and an English traveller from the same period, for instance, saw them in Osijek. These heads were to serve as a deterrent for other robbers (Quiclet 1664: 126; Burbury 1671: 212; Çelebi 1979: 63). In the Ottoman Empire this practise remained current through the 18th century (Bašeskija 1987: 118). A British traveller in Mostar in 1844 saw human heads stuck on poles when he paid a visit to the governor’s kula. The whole parapet of this tower bristled with sharp wooden stakes placed at a convenient distance from each other for receiving the heads of Montenegrins killed or taken in war (Wilkinson 1848: II, 69). A similar scene was described a few years latter by a British captain who on entering the castellated residence of the governor in Plav observed human heads stuck upon poles, “the trophies of war which the fierce Arnouts had gained in a skirmish with their equally fierce assailants, the predatory hordes of Tchernagora” (Spencer 1851: I, 380).

In the capital city itself in the 18th century at the main entrance of the Seraglio the severed heads of criminals, German and Russian noses, ears and lips nailed against it, were exposed regularly (Tott 1785: I, 63; Watkins 1797: II, 231). From time to time heads of most prominent figures were to be seen, for instance, the head of Vizier Emin Pasha to which an inscrip-

tion was added: “For not having followed the plan of the campaign sent directly from the Emperor” (Tott 1785: III, 11).

In the 19th century, it was still “the fashion of those times” to hang heads of prominent figures who lost their favour with the sultan in public (Elliot 1893: 5). The heads of the whole divan of ministers under Sultan Selim III were treated in this fashion, “the janissaries falling on them like wild beasts, and carrying them off to the Atmeidan barracks above, to range these bloody trophies before the historic kettles” (Elliot 1893: 5, 258–259).

An English visitor to Istanbul in the first half of the 19th century described the heads he saw there in 1827 in detail:

“We now arrived at the gate of the Seraglio... At the gate on the right hand, in a niche in the wall, we saw about a dozen human heads, or rather scalps, the skull and bones having been carefully removed, and the skin stuffed with hay. They were said to be Greeks; but I have reason to believe them to have been Bosnians, who had lately fallen victims in partial attempt at insurrection, which had been quelled by the devouring sword of the Mussulmans: they had long beards, which the Greeks do not wear, and the shaven crown and long topknot of the Somanlees; there were likewise several pairs of ears. The Turks came and looked at them, and walked away apparently proud of these disgusting trophies” (Frankland 1829: I, 111).

Human heads were much admired trophies within the Ottoman army in the 16th and 17th centuries. Soldiers forced their captives to take the heads of their dead enemies and stuff them with hay. Before they started an expedition, they solemnly stuck the heads on poles in the morning and carried them at the head of the column. Heads were salted and, together with other trophies of war (trumpets, flags and crosses) wrapped in woollen bags and sent to the sultan (Çelebi 1979: 183, 187, 193; Valvasor 1689: XII, 30, 92).

In the arsenal of the castle of Turjak, Baron Valvasor saw a wooden chest with “inestimable valuables” hidden in it, including two pieces of skin peeled off human skulls and stuffed from

the inside. The heads belonged to Herbart von Auersberg and Friedrich von Weixelberg, who were both killed in a battle with the Turks near Budački in 1575. Both heads were cut off, skin tanned and sent to the Turkish emperor in Istanbul. From there, the lords of Turjak ransomed them for “a substantial reward” and brought them back home “in eternal memory” (Valvasor 1689: XI, 27; Dimitz 1876: III, 56; Gruden 1941: 774–776).

In December 1575 Ferhad Pasha victoriously entered Constantinople. Stefan Gerlach, the predicant of the Imperial Ambassador David Ungnad, gives the following account of the event:

“On 9 December a sad and shameful procession took place. It was led by some mounted Turks from the border, wearing their caps with long points. They were followed by two Turks carrying a flag each and another two carrying the heads of Herbart von Auersberg and Friederich von Weichselberg on long poles. The head of the provincial governor had a broad pleasant face with greying red beard and grey hair. It appeared to have a wound under the cheek. Friederich von Weichselberg’s head was beardless and had a longish face. Those who cut off their head carried them themselves. Deli Peruana, who took Auersberg’s head, was made a *zaim* (junior commander) and his wages were increased by 250 thalers. Undoubtedly he will also be made an *alori* or *sansabeg*. Deli Reggier, who carried Weichselberg’s head, also became *zaim* and was bequeathed the annual income of 2000 aspers. These two were followed by four flags. Then came the captured captain in a Hungarian hat and Croatian boots, his name was Lorenz Petrizowitz and he was the caretaker of Jobst Joseph von Turn in Sichelberg. He was followed by two captured trumpets and a piper, twenty captives with iron chain around their necks – all of them young and strong men. The last in the procession was the young Burgstaller in broad sleeves, leather trousers and a hat with a green and blue feather. The Croatian and Carniolan captives were brought by Nessimi Tihaja, the courtier of Ferat Beg of Bosnia, who was rewarded with the title of *chaush* on the court” (Gerlach 1674: 132–133).

In preparations for an expedition to Montenegro in 1768, the pasha of Shköder issued a proclamation forbidding the sale of wheat and gunpowder to the Montenegrins under pain of death. In order to incite in his people fighting spirit against the Montenegrins, he promised payment for each Montenegrin head (Stanojević 1957: 57). As late as the second half of the 19th century, Turkish soldiers beheaded many wounded prisoners who fell into their hands, or cut off their noses or ears. Some of these heads impaled on stakes adorned the walls of Turkish towns as trophies of victory (Serristori 1877: 15; Gopčević 1879: I, 134–135; II, 109).

Turkish soldiers used the cutting of heads, noses and ears as retaliation against insubordinate Balkan peoples. Such methods were employed through the second half of the 19th century to make killings, the burning down of villages, robbery and rape even more terrifying. The orders from Istanbul explicitly demanded that the officers had to fight against the mutilation of corpses under the threat of death penalty. However, some reports claimed that Turkish soldiers did not reckon their victory as complete if they could not desecrate their foe’s body (Freeman 1877: 24; Mackenzie and Irby 1877: I, 52; Evans 1878: 32, 77–82; Fife-Cookson 1879: 68–69; Yriarte 1981: 82–83).

There are reports of such instances even from the 20th century. For instance, in Rugovo in 1913, a Montenegrin from the tribe of Vasojevići was killed during a raid. The Rugovians brought his head to Peć, where it was the object of derision and laughter for the people during a whole day. Finally it was given to children who used it to play ball until nightfall when they threw it on a rubbish heap in the Serbian quarter. The next day the Serbs decided to bury the head. Reportedly, for the Turkish government the only problem in all this was the photographer who shot the scene of this funeral: he was condemned to fifteen years of imprisonment for his audacity (Bashmakoff 1915: 62).

Serbian soldiers in Northern Albania as victors in the First World War in 1918 robbed Bahtjar Kollowozi. They shot him, but he survived. Kollowozi swore vengeance, assembled his neighbours and with their help killed sixty Serbs. They took two captives “who were not

worth a bullet” and cut off their heads “as the Serbs did” (Matzhold 1936: 42).

Bosnian soldiers who resisted the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina also cut off many heads (Andrejka 1904: 43, 68, 121, 259, 261, 336; Alešovec 1908: 97, 112). A Czech author who himself took part in this expedition was scandalised by “the Bosnian cannibals” who, in Vranduk on 18 August 1878, stuck several heads of Austrian soldiers on poles:

“We stood in full armaments against the ignoble cannibal enemy and it is no exaggeration to say that the Zulus, Bagurus, Niam-Niams, Bechuans, Hottentots and similar South-African gangs behaved more chivalrously towards European travellers than the Bosnian Turks did towards us. I always recollect with dismay the peoples of the Balkans, where the foot of the civilised European has not tread for decades, how the Turks, ‘native lords,’ probably rule down there!” (Chaura 1893: 38).

That the “Turkish” atrocities were just too much for some Austrians to forget witnessed the famous war correspondent John Reed, who visited the town of Šabac in Serbia during the First World War. He testified in his book to the hundreds of reports, affidavits and photographs, giving names, ages, addresses of sufferers and details of the horrible things the Austrians had done. Among other things, he saw a picture “showing more than a hundred women and children chained together, their heads struck off and lying in a separate heap” (Reed 1916: 84).

It is Hard to Get to Heaven with only One Leg

For long, the Turks performed no operations, nor did they consent to amputation, even when the loss of life was certain to follow. In the Turkish army it was necessary to get permission for each amputation, which could be issued only after an investigation. According to Western authors the reason for this regulation laid in the belief, widespread between the Muslims, that those who come to Heaven’s gate without a limb or mutilated, are allowed to enter only

after a long period of waiting to participate in the pleasures promised by the Prophet (Eton 1798: 218; Curtis 1903: 299; Alešovec 1908: 123; Yriarte 1981: 83).

A strong disinclination towards the loss of a limb, even when life was at stake, was widespread all over the Balkans. People insisted on keeping limbs that were mere black and offensive lumps of suffering. As reported by two British nurses, the Serbs had a superstition that if a man went to his grave with one leg, he would rise in the day of judgement and exist in all eternity with only one leg (Pearson and McLaughlin 1877: 183; Fife-Cookson 1879: 13; Minchin 1886: 19; Durham 1905: 149; Aldridge 1916: 54). An Australian war correspondent, for instance, reported that Bulgarian soldiers in the Balkan Wars also had very strong feeling against amputation, and if they understood that amputation was intended, they sometimes begged to be “killed instead” (Fox 1915: 143). From this point of view decapitation would be an extremely severe punishment indeed. Perhaps this explains why, in battles between the Christians and the “Turks,” so many mutilated corpses were left on the battlefield.

In some provinces the custom survived until the very beginning of the 20th century. Albanians in the Turkish army suppressing insurrection in Bulgaria, supposedly even “displaying pickled women’s breasts and ears as trophies when they were on their way home” (Wyon 1904: 68). During the insurrection in Bulgaria, “blood shed in stream and pyramids made from 1 000 human heads were rising into heights of infected air” (Gjurgjević 1910: 102).

At the beginning of the 20th century a photographer in Bitola shot many pictures of Turkish soldiers and officers standing behind tables on which laid the battered heads of Bulgarians and other “brigands” (Moore 1906: 259). And the Turkish troops that attacked a Montenegrin village in August 1912 decapitated several villagers and took their heads as trophies (Durham 1914: 168).

Four Eyes See More than Two

The Montenegrin custom of cutting off and exhibiting human heads in public, scandalised

the West in the 19th century. But some spoke in defence of those who treated their enemies in such uncivilised fashion:

“It is very easy for us, enjoying all the good things of civilisation, to rebuke the Montenegrins for returning in kind to their pitiless enemies those very cruelties which they suffered themselves at their hands” (Minchin 1886: 13).

Some authors quoted the following anecdote to illustrate just how short was the memory of the West. When Marshal Marmont reproached Vladika Peter with this horrible custom of his people, the vladika replied that there was nothing surprising in it at all. What did surprise him, he added, was that the French should have beheaded their lawful king. Perhaps, he went on, the Montenegrins had learned their barbarous practise from the French, with the improvement that they beheaded only their oppressors and not their prince or fellow-countrymen (Miller 1896: 414–415; Marcotti 1896: 186).

For their part, the Montenegrins were bitterly unhappy with the opinion they enjoyed around the world:

“The Montenegrins are cutting-off heads!” – Those five words sufficed that a greater part of the world press has been writing for a hundred years against Montenegro. This they arbitrarily proclaimed as a barbarity and then took this as a base; on this base they construct and evolve all the horror and savage atrocities, for which they knew that exist with these really barbarous people. Nobody stood in their defence to say and prove what has been latter said and proved: that the Montenegrins are no barbarians, but that Montenegro is Thermopile, a trench against barbarity; that they are not inhumane, but opposers of inhumanity. Montenegro is unknown. Her enemies took more care to know her and wrote about her more than her friends did. Slavdom which nowadays glorifies and extols them so much, had not been awakened yet” (Nenadović 1975: 42).

The secretary of the Montenegrin prince flew into a passion over the “irrational *lacman*” (scornful term for a stranger, B. J.) press that

piled infamies and barbarities on the Montenegrin name:

“Nobody would say that it is barbarity, because even today in England there exists a law, according to which they can imprison a man and leave him without food until he die of hunger; in Prussia they have even today a law, according to which they spread a living man on the floor and then slowly break his bones with a heavy wheel starting from the feet then moving to the head, until he expire with these torments.”

He was persuaded not only that such reproaches were unjustified, but also that just the opposite was true:

“When have you heard that the Montenegrins, as the Englishmen did, fasten their captives in front of the cannon mouth, and then pulled the trigger? The Montenegrins were never inhumane with their enemies. They never tortured the captive Turk, not even to a small degree, they never beat him, they never gauged out his eyes, they never hanged him! Never! – In which death you can find more beauty and poetry, than when it is said: ‘He swung his sword and cut off his head?’” (Nenadović 1975: 43).

A Serbian author was of similar opinion. He argued that cutting-off heads was not a Slavic custom at all, “but Asiatic-Turkish” (Gopčević 1877: 26). Or, as a German author put it:

“The atrocities of which the Montenegrins are guilty of, go on the greater part on account of the Turks, perhaps the wildest and cruellest peoples who ever invaded the European territories. Then they brought the custom of cutting-off heads and even upgraded it into a system and who could take it amiss to the Montenegrins, if they took over the habit simply as a retaliation!” (Passarge 1904: 318).

Others claimed that this was not an act of barbarity at all, but an act of compassion when practised by Montenegrins:

“What should they do with wounded persons? It was impossible to carry them, since they had

hardly enough men to carry away their own wounded, and where should they have brought them? To Montenegro?" (Gopčević 1877: 91).

The Montenegrins were described with passionate eloquence by Western authors as a nation of heroes, endowed with every virtue of the heroic age who had with unsurpassed bravery resisted every attempt of Turkish hordes to subdue them. Some would persuade their readers that the Montenegrins were the finest people in Europe, exaggerating the virtues of the noble Montenegrins in contrast to the "unspeakable" Turk. Or, as reported by a correspondent to the *Times*:

"I left Cetinje with the feeling of having extended my own horizon by the discovery of a people of the old heroic type – a survival of the Homeric age, doubtless with heroic vices which also survive elsewhere, but with some virtues which hardly survive larger civilization. I think that few Englishmen could resist this impression, and most would entertain a wish that Montenegro might preserved intact and unchanged by civilization as a study of what mankind has once been" (Stillman 1877: 26).

There was, of course, in all this grand exaggeration, accompanied by a vast deal of ignorance of the real condition and history of the people, and spiced with some desire to conceal and pervert the facts of political reasons. Thus, according to a French author, because of such testimonies as we have seen, in time "when civilisation expanded in Africa and Asia and already stretching towards the Far East," Turkey should have been excluded from the European nations "in the interest of civilisation," while the Montenegrin heroes deserved their support "in the name of liberty" (Pelerin 1860: 27).

The Montenegrins and their love for freedom was admired most strongly by Slavic authors, who loved them, were proud of them and admired them as Slavic Spartans (Holeček 1876: 1). They were ready not only to overlook many things, that others saw as evil, but rather to see in them a virtue. A Russian author, for instance, who spent four months in Montenegro in the

middle of the 19th century was enthusiastic about its inhabitants:

"Isn't it odd: the sources of the Nile had seen travellers from strange and remote countries, but Morača, a part of Europe, remained for them *terra incognita* and does not provoke any curiosity: even on maps it does not exist. But in Morača there are up to 1200 young soldiers, and what soldiers! Each of them has behind him five, six, even twenty Turkish heads" (Kovalevski 1841: 108).

Tower of the Skulls

When the marriage of the king of Italy to Princess Jelena of Montenegro was announced in 1896, many Italian reporters visited Montenegro to see the future queen of Italy. Sure enough they, too, paid attention to the "barbarous custom" of decapitating dead or wounded enemies (Cerciello 1896: 20–21; Erba 1896: 12; Mantegazza 1896: 92; Rossi 1897: 25). In their reports, the round tower was poetically called the Tower of the Skulls and described as a curious "historical monument" (Mantegazza 1896: 92). However, some of them were of the opinion that valiant Montenegrin history needed also some romantic embellishment and attributed the authorship of the Kula in Cetinje to the Turks:

"The 'Tower of the Skulls' has a singular history, because of its association with epic battles in 1690 between a handful of Montenegrin heroes and the Turks. Once, these after a ferocious combat, conquered the tower, decapitated the dead, fling down the heads on the floor to intimidate the survived heroic defenders of Czernagora" (Cerciello 1896: 20–21).

Such a tower reminds one not on the real Kula but rather on Čele-Kula ("tower of skulls" in Turkish) which some other travellers thought the only "object of absorbing interest" – in Niš (Jaekel 1910: 101). That was literally a tower composed of twelve hundred human skulls, commemorating the Turkish victory over Serbs near Niš in 1809.

“The story connected with the place is a romantic one... One Stefan Sindiélitch, commander of a brave little band, after stoutly defending an outpost near Nisch was defeated by overwhelming odds, and sooner than surrender exploded the powder magazine, killing himself, his gallant followers, and an even greater number of the enemy. The Pasha, infuriated at the loss of his men, resolved to punish the Christian population by collecting the heads of their vanquished ones, and erecting this ghastly monument...” (De Windt 1907: 191).¹

This Turkish trophy was “gruesome enough” when seen by Lamartine, early in the 19th century, “for many of the skulls were furnished with hair and hundreds of grinning rows of teeth added to the horror of the spectacle” (De Windt 1907: 190). But when an Austrian archaeologist visited Čele-Kula in June 1860, the skulls had almost altogether disappeared. Some were undermined by the tooth of time, the others were bought by foreign travellers and taken away. Only one remained, too deeply embedded in the mud-cement for easy extraction. After the annexation of Niš by Serbia in 1878 Čele-Kula was fenced off and covered to protect it from ruin and to preserve this barbarous monument for future generations, in memorie of the by-gone “black days” under the Turks (Popović 1882: 362; Minchin 1886: 133; Aškerc 1893: 63; De Windt 1907: 191; Kanitz 1909: II, 144, 179–180; Jaeckel 1910: 101; Reed 1916: 47).

Western travellers to the Balkans were fascinated by local custom to cutting off the heads of enemies slain in battle. To their eyes, such a practise was barbaric, and marked a clear division between the backward Balkans and the enlightened West. And yet, not all who practised the custom were reckoned completely barbaric. Montenegrin head-cutters were esteemed heroes, “Turkish” head-cutters were considered the barbarians. On the other hand, the vivid interest that the Western observers showed for the “barbarous custom” in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries seems to indicate that in the West the barbarian “Other” had been but repressed and not completely eliminated. But this is already another story.

Notes

1. When Timur the Lame in 1400 invaded northern Syria, his warriors were permitted to go on a pillaging spree in Aleppo that lasted three days. From the severed heads of more than twenty thousand slaughtered citizens they made a tower ten feet high and twenty feet wide. And to avenge the death of some of their officers, they decorated Baghdad with one hundred and twenty mounds made from the heads of those killed (Hitti 1988: 629, 631).

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