

## AVALA: FROM A SYMBOLIC TOPOS OF SERBIA TO THE MONUMENT OF YUGOSLAVIA

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this paper is to reveal how, over the time, Avala was put on the map, and became an influential symbolic topos of Serbian national memory. Furthermore, having fostered the evocation of national tradition related to this place, using the natural characteristics of this particular area and by the means of updating its exceptional historical and memorial capacity, Avala gained a highly committed and symbolic meaning in the mental geography of our nation. Later on, this potential was recognized as a tempting opportunity to create a monument with an overwhelming capacity for imposing a newly created Yugoslav cultural model by means of a highly needed transforming and re-designing the ideological identity of Avala. Raising a prominent national monument, the memorial complex to the Unknown Hero on Avala, near Belgrade, is a paradigm of obliteration, redefinition and alteration of tradition and collective memory. In the case of Avala we can clearly follow the process of exploitation and revision of the strategically selected image of the past and its adaptation to the needs of the current period.*

**Key words:** *Avala, monument to the Unknown Hero, memory erasure, memory alteration, national monument, symbolic capital*

### 1. GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND ETYMOLOGY OF AVALA

Avala is a mountain, located about 20 km southeast of downtown Belgrade. It extends along the main road to the inland of Central Serbia standing 511 m above the sea level and featuring a characteristic form of a conic island. (Vujović 1994, 332) The cone of Avala consists of two peaks: the higher southeastern peak that is pointed and that once held the ruins of the fortified town (nowadays complex of the Tomb to the Unknown) and then the northwestern crest that is somewhat lower and square – shaped so that the entire skyline of Avala appears reminds of the shape of a saddle (Fig. 1).

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Avala has been closely attached to the history of the Serbian capital and it has always been considered a symbol of Belgrade and it is deeply rooted in the collective memory of the Serbian nation. This mountain was crucial for the development of the early settlements on the banks of the river Danube. Avala has been mentioned in records from the earliest times and continuously throughout Belgrade history as an important strategic landmark (Čubrilović 1974). The very first reference to Avala was made in the adventurous myth of Jason and the Argonauts. During their journey toward the fabled Colchis searching for the Golden Fleece, while sailing from the Black Sea to the Danube, Avala was described as Mountain Angur “where the River Istros (Danube) divides the flow of water...” (Appollonius of Rhodes 2015, 122–125). The sources show that the area around this low mountain was inhabited in prehistoric times (Bošković 1940, 70). It is substantiated by the remains of mining activities in a mercury mine on Avala named Suplja stena (the Hollow Rock) (Vujović 1994, 332). There have been some still living stands believing that, at the time of Romans, Avala was Mons Aureus (the Golden Hill) (Bošković 1940, 70). According to the findings, it is sure that the Romans did build some sort of smaller settlement and a watchtower in order to control the access to the ancient city of Singidunum, as well as to protect the mines on the slopes of the mountain.



**Fig. 1** Avala Mountain, a photo from 1930s, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

During the Middle Ages, between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, Avala belonged to the territory of medieval Serbian rulers, and it played an important role in controlling the access roads to Belgrade. Some researchers have assumed that a heart shaped medieval stronghold made of stone at the top of Avala was first built by Despot Stefan Lazarević and members of his dynasty as a protective shield of the Serbian capital, the city of Belgrade (Krstić 2010, 109). However, recent research has strongly confirmed the presumption that the medieval fortification was built by the Ottoman commander and governor (beylerbey) of Rumelia, Hadım Sehabeddin Pasha (Katić 2015, 254–256) in May 1442 on top of late antique or Byzantine remains during the first fall of the Serbian Despotate (1439–1444) as a counter-fortress to the Hungarian Belgrade.

The Serbs used to call this fort Zrnov, most likely after the old Serbian term *zrvanj*, signifying a crunching mill for turning grains or minerals into powders (Detelić 2007, 27; Damjanović 2007, 19). Some foreigners referred to this hill-fort as Sarnov (Katić 2015, 258). The Ottomans renamed the mountain in Havala whereas the fortress on top of it they called Guzelce Hisar (Ibid., 257; Šabanović 1964, 541) or, in short, Guzelce (Čelebi 1973, 329; Detelić 2007, 28) meaning a lovely fort. Meanwhile, the term Avala (without the letter h) has

been in use for the fortress as well, and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century it replaced the original name and its other versions even though the local Christian population kept calling the old fortified town by its Serbian name Zrnov (Katić 2015, 257–258). Havala originally comes from Arabic and it means an obstacle or a shelter (Bjeletić et al. 2003, 46) that also fits the toponym since Avala held the significant role of a shield for the mines of lead, zinc, silver and mercury positioned at the foot of the mountain. On the other hand, in Turkish and its Balkan versions *havala* is used for a hill, a place or fortress that dominates the city or its surrounding area (Ibid.; Čelebi 1973, 329; Šabanović 1964, 541).

The medieval town of Zrnov (Fig. 2) was built of stone and surrounded by a wide earthen moat (Bošković 1940, 72). The Upper Town is the oldest part and it was located at the highest mountain peak featuring a slightly elongated shape with cylindrical towers rising on the east, south and west corner. The north side represented the most accessible element of the fortification and it featured the largest defensive guard tower granting or preventing access to the inner part of the city (Ibid., 83–86). The lower part of the city represents a somewhat later extension entirely designed to meet the need of firearms warfare. It was of an irregular shape and its walls contained numerous gun ports (Ibid., 90–91).

In 1444, the Ottomans lost Zrnov and it was for a short time returned to the property of the Serbian Despot Djuradj Brankovic (Katić 2015, 258, ref.19), but in May 1458 the grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire Mahmud Pasha Angelovic regained it (Ibid.). This is the first written Ottoman record of Mount Avala (Šabanović 1964, 241). Just a year later in 1459, the entire territory of Serbia was under the Ottoman rule with the exception of Belgrade. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in 1515, the Hungarians attempted to conquer Zrnov, but the attempt ended in defeat (Katić 2015, 262). The first Serbian record of Avala dates back to 1515 and it refers to this unsuccessful siege (Daničić 1864, 406). After the fall of Belgrade in 1521, this fortress lost its strategic importance. Still, it kept being used as a protective shield of the newly opened silver and lead mines on Avala (Katić 2015, 267). There is no precise record of when the fortress was abandoned, but it is assumed that it was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after the last Austro-Tuskish war 1736–1739. After 1738, the fortress on Avala was never again restored (Ibid., 269).



**Fig. 2** The medieval Town of Zrnov on Avala, aerial view from the period 1930–1934, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

## 2. AVALA IN ORAL LORE

Avala held an important place in the oral lore, epics and popular tradition of Serbia. In an epic folk song titled *Imprisonment and Marriage of Jakcic Scepan* collected by Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, a famous Serb scholar and linguist, (Stefanović Karadžić 1845, 605), the opening lines introduce the Avala Mountain: “The white fairy has loudly cried / from Avala green mountain.”

During the Ottoman rule, the city of Zrnov was remembered by Porca, a notorious Turkish commander and bandit leader, where according to the well known legend (Chadwick, M., Chadwick N. K 2010, 322) was his seat in order to control access to Belgrade. The surrounding residents feared him because he kept attacking, blackmailing and robbing them. Evliya Celebi, a renowned Ottoman explorer recorded in his celebrated travelogue from mid 17<sup>th</sup> century that the grave of Porca was located within the city of Avala (Čelebi 1973, 331). The aforementioned legend says that Porca of Avala was assassinated by the Serbian nobleman Vuk Grgurević Branković remembered via heroic epics as Vuk the Fiery Dragon. He was the famous fighter against the Ottomans and the grandson of Serbian Despot Djuradj Brankovic, thus belonging to the last ruling medieval family of Serbia before it was finally conquered by the Ottomans after the fall of Smederevo in 1459 (Fajfrić 2014, 428). In a poem of the Karadzic collection named *Vuk the Fiery Dragon and Porca of Avala* (Stefanović Karadžić 1845, 587) we again find Avala in the opening verses: “Two companions are drinking wine, at Avala above Belgrade.” Furthermore, Vuk the Fiery Dragon was the last noble knight to have mythological features of supernatural forces and the strong individuality of a dragon hero. The oral lore and epic poetry have attributed to him crucial epithets and extraordinary characteristics of loyalty and heroism. Thus, this early incorporation of Avala into distinctive heroic milieu and its association with the legendary past of the capital of Serbia, as well as the glorious deeds of epic heroes have significantly contributed to its active role in building up the modern national consciousness and its important place in the patriotic topography of the Serbian people.

## 3. AVALA , ITS ROLE AND RECEPTION IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SERBIA

Early Serbian leaders understood and followed modern European concepts when it comes to the legitimacy of claims to the nation and its territory (Makuljević 2006, 153). In line with the European trends that, besides the cult of heroes, set up the cult of ruins and the national territory in service of stirring modern national feelings, nature and natural environment were introduced as equally important aspects of collective memory and national topography. At the time of the awakening of the national consciousness and the setting up of the modern Serbian state during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ruins and old historical nuclei along with those landscapes associated with legendary past were understandably included in the corpus of historical national monuments, providing legitimacy to the national self – definition (Borozan 2008, 34–35).

With its almost ideal characteristics in terms of strategic and symbolic importance, Avala secured its influential symbolic position within Serbian national memory. The overwhelming impression of the fort’s dominance was so stunning that the aforesaid traveler Evliya Celebi described it so vividly: “It lies on a steep cliff that rises to the heavenly heights” (Čelebi 1973, 329). Turbulent history and mythological background of Avala and its continued existence in Serbian oral epic songs and legends have been

recognized as an ideologically useful device. Prince Milos Obrenovic found this old culturally symbolic place perfectly convenient in supporting his ruling ideology and endeavors in rising national awareness. It wasn't too long before Avala would obtain an epithet of an area of the antique and noble origin and of the lasting continuity.

The excellent position of Avala, rising above the city of Belgrade, properly isolated in the silence of the natural environment, has provided a wide uninterrupted skyline, distant horizon where the Royal Palace was strategically distinguished, noted Felix Kanitz, an extensive Austrian traveler (Kanic 1985, 13). The abundance of Avala's gardens and vineyards as well as its number of springs of drinking water were already well known and widely praised turning it very early into a popular pleasure trip resort (Čelebi 1973, 330). However, at the beginning of the 19th century due to constant fight and clashes over the territory of Belgrade, Avala did not look neat. In the spirit of modern European culture and landscape design (Hirshfeld 2001), nature is a place of tranquility and inner peace, and as an allegorical representation of the garden of eternal bliss, it must be cultivated and trimmed. Consequently, Josif Pancic, a renowned Serbian physician, botanist and first president of the Serbian Royal Academy, wrote a letter in 1856 to the Serbian Ministry of Education warning it about endangered condition of Avala and mentioned that its' flora and fauna would be seriously extinct if the state did not do something to improve the serious problems (Šehovac, Jovović et. al. 2007; Milanović 2008, 110). Based on this letter, Prince Milos ordered in 1859 that Avala should be "deeply trenched" to prevent the forest from further clearing and cutting trees. Five years later, in 1864, as the peasants from the surrounding villages broke the fence and cut down the young trees in order to make poles, the authorities of the District of Belgrade appointed a forester. The activities for the cultivation and rejuvenation of the Avala forest, were intensified in 1887 and in 1891. In the Forestry Law, Avala was declared an excursion park – forest. Later on, in 1900 the roads were set and the forest base at the top of Avala was turned into a national park with an area of 309 hectares in 1936 (Ibid.).

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Avala turned into a highly popular and frequently visited excursion destination for the people of Belgrade, in particular during the city's hot summers. The ruling elite supported and encouraged organized visits to Avala. Until World War II, the city of Belgrade and its citizens have celebrated the Day of Avala – Saint George's Day (Jovanović 2008, 31) when gymnasts, scouts, mountaineers, nature lovers and villagers would gather there dressed in the picturesque folk costumes from early dawn to the late evening hours recognizing the patron saint. By this means the sense of belonging to the community was encouraged, and it demonstrated unity and strengthened loyalty to the nation.

Modernization of the capital introduced activities providing the easier access to Avala and more comfort for the visitors via an active approach in road construction and a growing number of restaurants and rest areas. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a modern road network was set significantly improving the traffic flow and the city's connection to Avala. Once again, Kanitz noted: "The hotel with a restaurant and tram line should soon come, so Avala would be for Belgrade, what Kahlenberg is for Vienna" (Kanic 1985, 131).

During the First Serbian Uprising of the Serbian Revolution against the Ottoman Empire, at the foot of Avala took place a bloody clash between Karadjordje and his soldiers confronting the Turkish army. On that occasion in 1806, a large number of people from the surrounding villages participated in the struggles for the liberation of Belgrade. The people were led by Karadjordje's military commander Vasa Carapic, from the nearby village of Beli Potok (Čubrilović 1974, 22–31). He was nicknamed the Dragon of

Avala. These mythical victories and bloody battles of the recent history additionally strengthened Avala's role in the coordinate system of historical places of Serbian memory. It grew into an important symbolic place where the past could be easily incorporated and engaged within the modern reality.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian patriotic poetry was an active factor in pointing out Avala's place in the symbolic topography of the Serbs. From the poem of Djura Jaksic *Perish, oh Brothers (Padajte braćo)* of 1862 (Jakšić 1862, 349) in which the still living term Blue Avala was introduced, to the one of Laza Kostic *Oh Avala (Oj Avalo)* of 1884 in which Avala stands as a symbol of Serbian glory (Kostić 1991, 63–64) and finally that of Veljko Petrovic, *To Avala (Avali)* of 1906 (Petrović 1969, 30–31) in which it stands for a bastion of freedom, the Avala Mountain keeps appearing as a vital historical motive of freedom and unity of the Serbian people, an iconic symbol of Serbian identity. Via the use of convincing correlation between the past and the present, the feeling of stability in time and space and faith in the continuity of the nation has been born.

#### 4. MEMORIAL TO THE UNKNOWN HERO ON AVALA

The idea of raising a monument to an unknown hero appeared in Serbian spirit after the First World War during the growing French influence (Dimić 1997, 193) and in the wake of the wide-ranging and growing cult of raising monuments to the fallen war heroes across Europe (Obrenović 2013, 313). The practice of marking and honoring memorials to the unknown heroes was widely known in 19<sup>th</sup> century European practice (Borozan 2015, 446). Mass destruction on an unprecedented scale, brutality of conflicts and countless causalities of the Great War caused the blossom of the cult of the fallen soldier (Pintar 2014, 115–128; 221–225). It is considered that the most influential was the French initiative to commemorate its heroes in Paris, France in 1920. This quickly spread all over allied countries in the First World War (Tucić 2008, 1). The mass death of the fallen warriors in the First World War was recognized as the most powerful integrative element and strengthening factor for the unity of the nation, and thus France made the decision to commemorate the Battle of Verdun one of the longest and the deadliest battles of the First World War on the Western Front by means of raising a monument to the Unknown Hero in the capital. The choice of the Unknown Hero who was to be buried in this newly built war memorial and to symbolize the sacrifice of all heroes who gave their lives for their countries and national interests was carried out in a ceremony (Živković 2016, 33) from Paris' garrison. A soldier from the infantry corps was sent to Verdun, to the legendary heroic defensive fortress and the mass grave. Eight coffins with dead bodies of unknown soldiers were arranged in front of him, and he chose the sixth. The chosen Unknown Soldier of the French Army was then buried under the Arc de Triomphe. Additionally, an eternal flame was lit in memory of the dead who had never been identified (Živanović 1968, 4).

Soon after France, other allied countries followed their example in glorifying the fallen heroes: the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Belgium etc. All countries took France as an example and so this concept of honoring the Unknown Hero was transferred to Serbia that was already part of the newly established Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Pintar Manojlović 2014, 221–225). Furthermore, provisions of the Treaty of Versailles referring to the military cemeteries obliged countries to take care of the war memorials on their territories regardless of national origin and religious beliefs (Obrenović 2013, 374). The newly formed Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes took over this obligation and the government

issued special regulations (Ibid. 80). Moreover the cult of the dead and the active process of honoring the memory of the fallen warriors were especially apparent on the territory of Serbia where memorial crosses and smaller monuments to the fallen soldiers kept being raised in the 1920s.

The act of raising a monument to the Unknown Hero in Belgrade was accomplished differently as compared to the experiences in the other allied countries. The first obvious difference is the choice of the monument's setting. The Monument to the Unknown Hero in Belgrade was raised on Avala, i.e. far away from the city center, whereas in the other allied countries of the First World War, the monuments of this type were most often built in the heart of their capitals (Ignjatović 2007, 214). Interestingly enough, the position of the monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala had already been chosen and to some extent predetermined by seeing that the first incentive to mark the site of an unknown fallen warrior came from a soldier of the opposing army. Namely, during World War I, the fortified town of Zrnov served as an observation post and a seat of the defense garrison of Belgrade. During the defense of Belgrade in 1915 a warrior of the Serbian army who was killed in a grenade attack, was buried at the side of the road by the enemies. Somewhere beneath the old town of Zrnov on the passage between the grand and small peak of Avala Mountain, Austro-Hungarian soldiers dug a simple grave and set up a cross with the inscription *Ein unbekannte serbischer Soldat (One Unknown Serbian Soldier) (Neznani junak na Avali 3)*. Journalists later reported that the surrounding residents, mainly the Great War veterans, have regularly venerated the grave on Sundays paying respect to the shadows of the unknown hero (Matekalo 1938, 15). It is also recorded that this grave of the Unknown was discovered by Svetislav Vicentijevic, a soldier who had been awarded twelve medals for bravery on the Salonic Front and a former president of the local nearby community of Beli Potok (Ibid.). This almost legendary and somewhat romanticized reference to the political cult of the dead objectified in the phenomenon of the Unknown Hero of the First World War could be understood as part of the manifestation of the official course of cultural politics of the unified state and its efforts to produce a new reality based upon the Great War traditions (Borozan 2015, 447–448) as well as to emphasize the idea of integral Yugoslavism (Ignjatović 2007, 215–217).

In 1921, the National Parliament accepted a proposal of Radoslav Agatonovic, a member of the Parliament, that the state should encourage and support building of a modest monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala (“Neznani junak na Avali”, 3). The Committee for raising a Monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala was formed and it was decided that it should be shaped as a modest memorial fountain (“Spomenik neznanom junaku”, 3). Doubting the officials and their active approach to the construction process, the local administration organized the building of the memorial in 1922. Induced by the initiative of Dragomir Dimitrijevic – Cele (Stojanović, N., Janković, S. et al. 2005, 546), an engineer, the Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education called for proposals for the memorial fountain on Avala (Kečkemet 2009, 110; Božović 2014, 79). Meanwhile, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1921 the excavation of the grave of the Unknown Hero was carried out in the presence of high ranking state officials, members of the military and the local people (“Neznani junak sa Avale”, 2). The soldier found in the crater formed by the explosion of the grenade that killed him had no identity badge most likely suggesting that he had been drafted a short time before the battle as the skeletal remains and his small skull pointed out to a young, twenty-year old male. Therefore, it was officially concluded that it was undisputedly a young Serbian soldier of an unknown personal identity (“Nepoznati junak

na Avali”, 2). All of the personal belongings and items found with the unknown hero: piece of his blouse, shoulder belt with pockets for ammunition, military boots with telephone wires instead of shoe laces, a wallet with three coins, and a piece of hardly recognizable paper, were at first kept as some sort of national relics at the cabinet of the President of the National Parliament and later in 1929 they were handed over to the newly founded Military Museum in Belgrade Fortress (Matekalo 1938, 15).

The first monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala was raised in 1922 over the excavated tomb of the fallen soldier, at the place where today’s flagpole is located and it was designed by Milan Minic (Stojanović, N., Janković, S. et al. 2005, 546). Minic was an architect employed at the Ministry of Construction, student of the influential *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and moreover he had been a volunteer in the Great War (Kadijević, A., Marković. S. 2003, 24). The construction work that started on 1 April and lasted until 14 May 1922 was done by the local peasants of the Vračar district and the railway workers who built the tunnel as part of the railway section Topčider-Mala Krsna in the nearby village of Beli Potok (“Neznani junak na Avali”, 1). The National Railways of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes donated the necessary material.

The simple memorial fountain was made of rustic cut stone shaped as a four-sided pyramid set on the two-levelled square based pedestal with a characteristically shaped six-armed cross on the top made of Carrara marble (Figs. 3, 4).



**Figs. 3, 4** Memorial to the Unknown Hero on Avala, photo cards from around 1928, collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

With its two pairs of horizontal arms this cross was projected equally in all four directions. Each side of the pyramid had rectangular segments that additionally emphasized the shape of a cross and its undisputedly Orthodox Christian character (Obrenović, 314). Those leaning segments were actually four rustic stone jardinières with evergreen seedlings, pointers to heavens and symbols of eternal life (Fig. 4). There were two plaques, the one on the west side bearing the inscription: *To the Unknown Serbian Soldier Confirmed by the State Committee in November 1921*. The epitaph on the east side acknowledged: *To the Fallen Heroes in the Wars of Liberation and Unification between 1912 and 1918, this monument is erected by the thankful people of the Vračar District* (“Neznani junak na Avali”, 2). The entire monument was encircled by 16 short stone pillars connected with chains securing the individuality and sanctity of the memorial space.



The monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala was consecrated and unveiled on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1922 (“Narod svome junaku”, 1). The reporters noted that the unveiling ceremony was modest but solemn, and that besides priests, students, residents and heads of the surrounding municipalities there were representatives of the Parliament, several ministers, high ranking military officers and city officials, the rector of the University of Belgrade and the head of the National Theater who were also members of the Committee for raising a Monument to the Unknown Hero on Avala. On behalf of King Alexander I, who was in Topola and briefly visited the monument later that day, there was his adjutant general Hadzic who brought and laid a wreath at the memorial (“Neznani junak na Avali”, 1). The ceremony was opened by a military band that played a prayer followed by a commemorative church service in the presence of a local singing society and a monastic school choir. After one soldier and a former delegate removed the flag from the inscription, the president of the Parliament Assembly and the president of the Committee Ivan Ribar gave a speech. Following a brief thank you speech from a local representative, the honorary military guards fired salvos which marked the end of the official ceremony (Ibid., 1–2).



**Fig. 5** Commemorative Ceremony at the Memorial to the Unknown Hero on Avala, postcard, around 1928, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

The details of Ivan Ribar’s speech pointed to the fact that this monument was temporary and that the “real” one, the national Pantheon, was yet to be made. The noticeable absence of the King at the official unveiling ceremony, and the fact that one of the inscriptions called for merging the tradition of both Balkan Wars and the First World War into a single historical narrative reveal the tension of the multicultural and multi-confessional society and the intention of the state’s leaders to build a new paradigm of national unity upon the bones of the fallen hero (Ignjatović 2010, 624–627). The raised monument of the Unknown Hero was way too much Serbian and Orthodox, so neither by its symbolic, nor by its size and visibility could support and reflect the efforts of the state leadership and the spirit of the time.

Moreover, Avala was already firmly set as a topos of the Serbian nation, a shield and a guardian of Belgrade. We refer again to the patriotic poetry that continued 19<sup>th</sup> century

tradition in securing Avala's importance in Serbian mental geography. In a poem named *The Wedding of King Alexandar* (*Ženidba kralja Aleksandra*) (Drinosavčić 1922), and the Royal wedding of King Alexandar I and Queen Maria was beyond any doubt the most important event in 1922, Mladen St. Djuricic, a writer and a war correspondent of the Serbian army from the Salonic Front wrote:

“When the wedding guests arrived in Belgrade / they were spotted by Avala Mountain / on Avala lives fairy Raviola / the guardian of the Holy Sumadija / and of eternal glory of the Serbs / the sister by choice of King Alexander”.

On the same occasion Vojislav J. Ilic Jr., a notable Serbian poet in the period between the two World Wars, wrote a poem entitled *Let You Be Happy* (*Nek Vam je srećno*) (Čuričić St. M. 1922) Avala again gains an important role:

“What Karadjordje once began / Alexander the Great completed / Oh faithful guardians of the King and the house / shout victoriously with the voice of a thunder / ‘From Avala Fairy sings’ / to welcome the pride of our countries / Serbian Queen and Serbian King!”

Nonetheless, in spite of the powerful symbolism of a particular (Serbian) tradition of the raised memorial on Avala, and the state's continuous engagement to make a new worthy memorial to the Unknown Hero by organizing countless fundraising events in 1922 and promotional activities such as distribution of visual materials, coupons, photographs, leaflets, printed lectures and cinema shows (“Za ‘Neznanog Junaka’”, 3; “Za Neznanog Junaka”, 5), during the 1920s attempts have been made to affirm Avala as a resting place of a martyr and a hero of the entire nation. There was an attempt to incorporate the glorious role of the Serbian army and mass losses it suffered in the Great War into the imaginary military tradition of Yugoslavism (Ignjatović 2007, 27–32). Visiting the grave of the Unknown Hero was included as a mandatory route within the itinerary of foreign delegations, military and political officials, and also within the protocol of celebrating public holidays which made Avala and its memorial very prominent in the topology of the patriotic religion of the state (Fig. 6). In 1924 the Ministry of Forests and Mines initiated an action plan to modernize Avala and make it an



**Fig. 6** Commemorative Ceremony at the Memorial to the Unknown Hero on Avala, photo card from 8 May 1933, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

inviting excursion area which included reconstruction of the old and construction of the new road as well as a number of trails and resting areas with drinking fountains. At the top of the Avala stairs leading to the walls of the old city of Zrnov should have been built. (“Modernizovanje Avale”, 5). It was also planned to build a pavilion for the King and his guests, a modern hotel, as well as visitor’s facilities (Ibid.).

In 1926, a wooden pavilion (Fig. 7) for mountaineers and the Mountaineering Society of Serbia, known as the Mitrović House, was built on Avala, representing the oldest surviving mountain lodge in Serbia and named after Dr. Dusan Spirta Mitrović, a medical doctor and the Salonica Front volunteer, one of the pioneers of mountaineering in Serbia. (Jovanović 2008, 40–41). Two years later, Vladimir Corović (Samardžić 2014), a distinguished Serbian historian and a professor of the University of Belgrade, gave a lecture at the Kolarac National University entitled *Avala in History and National Oral Lore* in which he stressed the importance of this topos and its memorial that belongs there based on *historical circumstances and national feelings* (“Avala je bila i ostaje čuvar Beograda”, 6).



**Fig. 7** The Mitrović House on Avala, a postcard with a photo of Cedomir Kusević taken before 1927, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

However, in 1930 we find completely different views and understandings of what Avala should represent and how it should be shaped within the official memory. The experts in the field of protection and maintenance of the antiquities called for restoration of the remains of the fortified town of Zrnov with the idea of renovation of the monument to the Unknown Hero (Krakov, 1, 3). On the other hand, the initial reception of a national monument and topos wherein Serbian and Yugoslav identity were not mutually exclusive had significantly changed during the following decade. Due to the national crisis, under the circumstances of ever growing socio-political conflicts and the rising animosity of the constituent members of the unified Kingdom, King Alexander I decreed royal dictatorship on 6 January 1929 and soon after the country was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Avala with its strong national (Serbian) and religious (Orthodox) content represented a potential hazard for the cultural politics of a multinational and multi-confessional state, consequently implying the strong state intervention (Ignjatović 2010, 627). The inner insecurity of the state had to be supported by monumental, visible,

durable and powerful works of art. Thus, it is understandable why the Monument to the Unknown Hero Avala caught the King's attention.

##### 5. SHIFTING THE TOPOS' IDENTITY

Avala was clearly recognized as an exploitable and influential propaganda tool for the glorification of the new state and the unification of the nation. The international matrix of the phenomenon of memorials to the fallen heroes could be successfully and symbolically expanded for the purpose of unifying different historical contents into the uniqueness of an Yugoslav national feeling. In order to make full use of the impressive symbolic capital of Avala and to overcome its single national determinant factor for the creation of a successful memorial to the martyrs and the heroes of the whole community an important and uneasy task was set. The strategy included the process of relocating Avala's identity from the Serbian to the Yugoslav focus and to carry out an organized process of memory oblivion related to this place. Deeply rooted in Serbian oral lore, patriotic lyrics, ruling, dynastic panegyrics, Avala with its suggestive semiotics and direct association to the Serbs, necessarily had to undergo a complex symbolic revision and deconstruction.

It is right in the early 1930s that we find Avala mentioned for the first time in the context of Yugoslavia within the Hymn of the Sokol Movement:

Fly the peregrine falcon/ fly to the utmost of your power / from the summit of  
blue Avala / over Yugoslavia (Jovanović 2008, 31).

In the same period, a decision was made to raise the new monument on the site of the medieval city of Zrnov. For this task, King Alexander commissioned Ivan Mestrovic, the most celebrated Yugoslav artist, to design the memorial to the fallen heroes (Mestrovic 1969, 215). Prior to the construction, at the very beginning of 1934, Mestrovic made sketches and a plaster model, which was approved by the King himself (Kečkemet 2009, 111) (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8** Ivan Mestrovic, Model for the Tomb of the Unknown Hero on Avala, photo taken around 1935, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

In order to provide full legitimacy for the construction of a new monument to Yugoslavia, and to emphasize its importance, a special army unit was formed. It was named the Avala Platoon and it was visibly present in each stage of its construction (“Prenos kostiju Neznanog junaka iz privremene u stalnu grobnicu na Avali”, 5). The crucial step in carrying out the idea was an act of demolition of the remains of the medieval fortified city of Zrnov. Even before

the demolition of the epic town of Zrnov, there was sharp criticism and voices against the demolition of such cultural monuments. The Association of the Friends of Antiquities, the Institute of Folk Art of the Technical Faculty and the Club of Architects publicly condemned this act of the King (Rajčević 2001, 19). However, the political moment demanded the sacrifice – the removal of everything that represented a hazard for national unity and for creation of a new national memory that clearly expressed the desired features and moral values of Yugoslav society through its form and content. The fortified city was mined by the order of King Alexander I on 18 April 1934. It took two series of explosions that day and another one the day after to remove the remains of the old medieval fortification (“Stari Porčin grad na Avali srušen je juče uz strašnu detonaciju”, 10; “Juče su razorene minama razvaline grada na Avali”, 3; “Danas pre podne porušena je polovina grada na Avali”, 5).

The new Memorial to the Unknown Hero was built from June 28, 1934 through June 28, 1938 (Kečkemet 2009, 110–123).



**Fig. 9** The construction of the Tomb to the Unknown Hero on Avala, aerial view, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

The cornerstone of the memorial was laid on St. Vitus Day, the 28<sup>th</sup> of June in 1934 and the Royal Charter was built at its foundations (“Nj. V. Kralj juče je osvetio kamen-temeljac novog spomenika Neznamom Junaku na Avali”, 3). The keystone was made of intensely red granite syenite from Tanda, a village near Zajecar in Eastern Serbia. The syenite of Tanda is a very rare material, and Tanda is the only and unique site in our country. Originality and authenticity were important qualities. The initial idea was to build the entire monument with this material, but since it does not allow pulling out large uniform monolithic blocks, the idea was unwillingly abandoned. The memorial was made of granite from the Bosnian town of Jablanica, a deeply dark gray stone (Kečkemet 2009, 113). The firmness of the stone implied the stability of the state (Obrenović, 317). Mestrovic's project involved monumental and representative approach with stairs reaching the top of the hill, then a stepped base of the memorial narrowing to the top, and finally a building shaped as a hollow sarcophagus with two caryatides in each corner. Having used this cascading approach, the desired impression of honor and glory was achieved (Fig. 10).





**Fig. 10** View to the Tomb of the Unknown Hero on Avala, a postcard from 1939, the collection of Mr. Miloš Jurišić

Elevated on a high stand, the monument is immediately visible, and the sky forms its impressive background reflecting the idea of the apotheosis of a national hero. The monument is very simple, without decorations and ornaments. The monumental female figures of caryatides dominate the composition representing the symbolic guardians of the last eternal home of the Unknown Hero (Kečkemet 2009, 122). All the surfaces are purified and their faces are serious, without expression. Everything is subordinated to the overall impression of undisturbed peace and harmony.

The opposite side of the memorial, (Ibid., 116), was later changed according to the wish of Prince Paul. According to this change, a stone roundel was made with a flag pole and two-headed eagle on top of it made in bronze (Ibid., 121). The construction of the monument followed the keen interest of the public. Numerous apologetic columns were published in newspapers, and the entire construction process was accompanied by an extensive landscape design.

The consecration of the new memorial mausoleum on Avala with accompanying transfer of the Unknown Hero's relics from the old memorial was organized on June 28, 1938 ("Prenos kostiju neznanog junaka u novi grob na Avali", 5). The old monument was demolished and the only part that remained is the cross that was transferred and is still located in the courtyard of the Church of Saint Mary of Magdala in Beli Potok (Jovanović 2008, 38). A clear space that was made available on Avala granted the new sanctuary an unhindered insertion into collective consciousness. Avala was secured as one of the most important Yugoslav memorial topos (Ignjatović 2010). The fact that only a century later, the public knows little or nothing about the old monument on Avala testifies that `a good job` was done when it comes to altering the topos' identity.

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## AVALA: OD SIMBOLIČNG TOPOSA SRPSTVA DO SPOMENIKA JUGOSLOVENSTVU

*Avala se, pokazaćemo ovim radom, tokom vremena mapirala kao uticajni simbolički topos srpske nacionalne memorije. Negovanom evokacijom nacionalne tradicije vezane za ovo mesto, korišćenjem prirodnih karakteristika samog područja i aktuelizacijom istorije ovog prostora koji poseduje veliki memorijski potencijal, Avala je zadobila angažovano i simbolično značenje u mentalnoj geografiji srpstva. Sve ovo je, razume se kasnije prepoznato kao primamljiva mogućnost za stvaranje spomenika sa ogromnim kapacitetom za nametanje novonastalnog jedinstvenog Jugoslovenskog kulturnog modela, uz nužno preoblikovanje i preoznačavanje ideloškog identiteta. Izgradnja memorijalnog kompleksa na Avali posvećenog Neznamom junaku, istaknutog nacionalnog spomenika, predstavlja paradigmatički primer brisanja, redefinisavanja i preoznačavanja tradicije i kolektivnog pamćenja. Na primeru Avale možemo da jasno pratimo proces eksploatacije i revizije strateški izabrane slike prošlosti i njenog prilagođavanja aktuelnim vremenima.*

Ključne reči: *Avala, spomenik Neznamom junaku, brisanje sećanja, izmena sećanja, nacionalni spomenik, simbolični kapital*