Halil Bajgorić lived in the small upland village of Dabrica in the region of Stolac, that area of central Hercegovina where Milman Parry and Albert Lord began their collection of Serbo-Croatian oral traditional texts in 1933-35. Halil was a fine singer; his repertoire included some thirty epske pesme, not a few of them long and elaborately sung. In the present paper I will place him and his songs in a series of three contexts. In the first section, his description of the ideal guslar (“singer”) will be presented alongside a similar description given by Ibrahim Bašić, another singer from Stolac; afterward, analogous figures from the Old English poetic tradition will be adduced. The second context involves two versions of the “heroic oath” theme from Halil’s performances of Kraljević Marko and Nina od Koštuna and two instances of the corresponding multiform from Beowulf. Finally, the “Readying the hero’s horse” theme is briefly compared in structure and internal dynamics to the “feast scenes” of the Homeric Odyssey.

Context 1: The Greatest of Singers

Bajgorić was among many guslari who spoke of a semi-legendary singer
from the past, an idealized figure whom they characteristically distinguished from the men who actually taught them their craft. Gifted with special talents and sought after in many quarters, Hasan Čoso, as Halil called this figure, was a singer of wide experience: "On je svukuda hod'o po svijetu. On je znao, kažu, puno pjesama, a sto dvadeset godina je živio."³ ("He traveled everywhere throughout the world. He knew, so they say, a great many songs, and he lived for one hundred twenty years.") Despite Halil’s efforts to locate Hasan in time and space (the idealized singer is said, for example, to have spent most of his life in Dabrica), the overall nature of the biography reveals that this best of guslari was more a symbol than a fact: "Boga mi je ovaj starac umro davno; kako pricaji da ima-jedno moguće-sedamdeset godina. Nije to moga oca otac" (6698). ("My God, that old one died very long ago; from what they say it was probably seventy years ago. He was not even my father’s father.")⁴ Though he claims that his father learned to sing from Hasan, Halil himself denies any personal contact with the man. From these and other indications, it becomes apparent that he understood Hasan as a kind of personification of the epic tradition, as an anthropomorphic focus for the stories and wisdom of oral song.

Another singer from Stolac, Ibrahim Bašić, also described an idealized guslar in conversations with Parry, Lord, and their native assistant Nikola. Isak, as Ibro referred to him, moved about from place to place and from the residence of one bey to that of another, earning a variety of "payments in kind" for his performances. Besides his monthly changes in locale and the favor he enjoyed in various royal courts, he was also said to have won an "epic" singing contest with a certain Gačanin, himself a famous singer from the Mostar region. Like Halil’s Hasan, Isak was not to be confused with the poets who were directly contacted and from whom one actually learned songs; the following exchange over a comparison of Isak and Selim (a singer who was the apparent source for quite a few of Ibro’s tales) makes the point:

Nikola: Je li taj Selim, je li on pjev’o kao taj Isak, kao begovima?
Ibro: Nije, Boga mi, on niste. Najbolji je u Hercegovini Isak bijo pjevač. De god bi koja bila svadba, pa ili bilo u Latinina ili bilo u Srbina ili bilo u Muslimana, on ti je svade; [svi] su ga zvali. Taki je on pjevač bijo (6598).

³. All editions and translations of Serbo-Croatian and other materials are, unless otherwise indicated, my own. An attempt has been made to preserve the formulaic character of the original and to present the poetry very literally. Bajgorić’s conversation is drawn from text 6698, the italics here and elsewhere indicating a text which was recorded rather than taken from dictation.
⁴. Further probing established this last expression as an idiomatic way of denoting relative age rather than an assertion of kin relation.