

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Cultural Heritage on the Brink

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Cultural Heritage without Borders
Bosnia & Herzegovina

This paper will highlight numerous problems faced by the entire cultural heritage sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a particular focus on archaeology, in recent years.

These problems stem from a number of causes; unemployment, a lack of training, governmental apathy and a prioritizing of development over cultural heritage, amongst other issues. Such problems culminated, in October 2012, with the closure of several key National cultural institutions, including the National Museum.

Furthermore, the country's complex legal structure lends itself to confusion: both the Federation and each of the ten Cantons into which it is divided have their own Ministries of Culture, and some have developed their own cultural protection laws, which can, at times, contradict those of the Federation. It is unclear which set of laws takes precedent.

Alongside these difficulties is the major problem of 'pseudo-archaeology'. Several years ago, a self-styled 'amateur archaeologist' claimed to have discovered pyramids within the country. The knock-on effects of this to the archaeological profession have been disastrous, and some of these outcomes will be detailed.

Introduction

On October 4th 2012, after 125 years of continuous operation, the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina closed its doors due to ongoing disputes regarding its legal status and funding. This event acted as a symbolic emblem of the cultural impasse which has overcome the country in the years following the cessation of the bitter 1992-95 hostilities.

Unemployment, a lack of training opportunities, and an apathy towards education in areas invaluable to the cultural heritage sector in favour of subjects perceived to be more economically beneficial both to the individual and the country (communications and information technology, business, economics and law) are great problems facing the public and the cultural heritage sector. Meanwhile, the hugely complex legislation of the country, combined with rapid post-war development and a lack of transparency further exacerbate many of the problems faced within archaeology and related disciplines.

When discussing the difficulties facing the cultural heritage sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one cannot avoid the problem of ‘pseudo-archaeology’, and in particular the case of the ‘Bosnian Pyramids’, in which several years ago a self-styled ‘amateur archaeologist’ claimed to have discovered pyramids within the country. The knock-on effects of this to the archaeological profession have been disastrous.

These key problems, and a number of their interrelationships, will be detailed below through a number of case studies from throughout the country, alongside a brief overview of the complexities and deficiencies of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s myriad cultural heritage laws.

Background

Archaeology was taught at the universities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, Zagreb and Split (in Zadar) during the period of SFR Yugoslavia. Numbers of archaeologists prior to the war published in the journal of the Slovenian Association of Archaeology (*Slovenskega Arheološkega Društva*) show a relatively healthy archaeological workforce; approximately 50 archaeologists active in 1981 and 30 in 1989. Although these numbers seem small, one must also take into account the fact that Yugoslavia had an open internal labour market, and the ‘major’ hubs of archaeological research and academia were located in other Federal Republics.

Due to demographic shifts and wartime and post-war migration, Bosnia and Herzegovina was left with a dearth of archaeological professionals after the war. This problem was exacerbated by the ageing population; whereas younger archaeologists had sought and forged careers elsewhere, the majority of professionals who had remained in the country were older. During the decade following the end of the war, the number of archaeologists working in the country had dwindled to approximately fifteen, of whom a number were no longer actively involved in excavations. The *Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe: Bosnia-Herzegovina* report (Lawler, 2010) estimated approximately 25-35 qualified personnel¹ to be working with excavations in the country.

This situation may be beginning to change. In recent years two universities (in Sarajevo and Mostar) have begun to offer archaeology degrees, and the first graduates have begun to enter the labour market. Preliminary results from the 2012-14 *Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe*

¹ This figure includes students undertaking paid excavational work, and, sadly, personnel working on exhumations from the 1992-95 war, such as forensic anthropologists.

project, however, suggest that only a miniscule number, if any, of graduates have entered the archaeological profession in capacities other than teaching assistants on the (relatively) newly-created archaeology courses from which they themselves have graduated.

As well as the effects on the numbers of archaeologists operating within the country (both directly through migration and indirectly through the closure of the labour market resulting from independence), the cessation of the 1992-95 war through the Dayton Agreement resulted in a complex legislative overhaul. The country has 14 governments (State at the top level, two entities – the Federation and Republika Srpska – plus Brčko district at the next level, and ten Cantons within the Federation), plus the administrations of all municipalities, numbering 142 in total. With regard to cultural heritage, this legal and administrative setup has a number of ramifications.

There is no Ministry of Culture at the state level, but the two entities, plus the autonomous Brčko district, each have its own Ministry of Culture, responsible for a variety of functions, including archaeological research and excavation, and the upkeep of a number of museums and other cultural heritage institutions.

Below the entity level of government, each of the Federation's 10 Cantons has its own Ministry of Culture, and some have developed their own cultural protection laws, which can, at times, contradict those of the Federation. It is unclear which set of laws takes precedent, and Cantons have been known to take exception to the Federation granting permission to foreign institutions to undertake archaeological excavations within their jurisdiction without first consulting them, or obtaining the necessary permits and paperwork, delaying research for several seasons. Conversely, a Canton can, in many cases, grant excavation permits and licenses to individuals without the permission or agreement of the government of the Federation. Matters regarding the archaeological heritage are supposed to be dealt with by each government's appropriate department. However, not all Cantonal culture ministries have departments dedicated to cultural heritage (eight in total), and not all dedicated departments have employees with a background in archaeology (three in total). Paradoxically, one Canton (Zenica-Doboj) has no Ministry or Department responsible for cultural heritage, but has implemented its own cultural heritage law (see below).

Legislative weaknesses – Case Studies

i – Okolište, Visoko Municipality, Zenica-Doboj Canton, the Federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 2002, archaeological research was begun at the Neolithic site of Okolište², on the outskirts of the town of Visoko. The preliminary investigations were undertaken by staff from Kiel University, Germany, in collaboration with the National Museum. Permits for excavation were issued by the entity-level Institute for the Protection of Monuments, an organ of the Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports. However, Zenica-Doboj Canton, within which the site lies, had established its own cultural heritage laws, which it claimed superseded the laws of the Federation, and which stated that all sites of archaeological interest within Visoko Municipality were placed under the administration and responsibility of Visoko's local museum. The Director of this museum, Senad Hodović, objected to the excavations taking place without his involvement, stating:

² See <http://www.okoliste.uni-kiel.de> for more detailed information on the research undertaken.

"They have to respect the laws of Zenica-Doboj Canton ... I am the one that is really in charge of that area, and we should be recognised as partners."³

As a result of this, excavations were delayed by three years, and did not resume until 2006⁴ (although it would appear that geophysical investigations were allowed to continue⁵). The permits were finally granted when the German research team and the National Museum entered into a tripartite agreement with Visoko's local museum.

ii – Al-Shiddi Development, Centar Municipality, Grad Sarajevo, Sarajevo Canton, the Federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

One of the largest construction projects currently being undertaken in the country's capital, Sarajevo, is the Al-Shiddi development. Sited opposite the national parliament, this huge development, totally out-of-proportion to the surrounding Austro-Hungarian buildings, has proven controversial with many groups⁶. One of these is archaeologists: the development is sited on the known location of a Butmir-culture cemetery and settlement, identified during the Austro-Hungarian rule of the country while undertaking the development of the Obala (Riverside) district of the town, but never fully excavated⁷. The site was suitable for the development of low-rise structures without the need for archaeological investigation, due to the depth at which the archaeological strata lie below the silt that built up from the flooding of the Miljacka and the artificial heightening of the riverbanks in the late nineteenth century. However, the Al-Shiddi construction, due to its height, required deep-pile foundations, which would destroy invaluable archaeological remains. Despite the protestations of archaeologists and historians throughout the country, the construction went ahead without an archaeological evaluation or excavation.

iii – The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ???

The complex administrative system of the country has been the predominant reason for the closure of the National Museum, which has been well-publicised in both mainstream and social media in recent months. All cultural institutions established on a national level in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the National Museum, are caught in the curious position of being responsible to no governmental ministry. As a result of the lack of a national Ministry of Culture, funding for the museum should, theoretically, be drawn from the budget of the two entities. However, the Republika Srpska directs its funding towards the Museum of Republika Srpska, located in its capital, Banja Luka, and the Federation has shunned its responsibilities back up to the national level, and down to the Cantonal level, to Sarajevo Canton, within which the museum is situated. In actuality, funding for the museum has been sourced from a variety of budgets; the Cantonal and Entity Ministries of Culture and the State Ministry of Civil Affairs amongst them⁸, plus donations from various charitable and private sources. The museum (which is the largest employer of field archaeologists within the country) will remain closed until its funding situation is clarified by politicians.

The Case of the "Bosnian Pyramids"⁹

³ http://www.cin.ba/Stories/P2_Culture/?cid=400,2,1

⁴ <http://irna.lautre.net/Beneath-contempt.html>

⁵ <http://www.dainst.org/de/node/24076?ft=all>

⁶ <http://www.avaz.ba/vijesti/teme/bakirov-al-shiddi-opet-zeli-prevariti-drzavu>

⁷ <http://www.bhdani.com/arhiva/273/t27304.shtml>

⁸ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nailed-wooden-planks-close-bosnian-national-museum>

⁹ For reasons of transparency, the author must note that he was associated with this project and its organizers from July 2007 until August 2008

One cannot comment upon the current crises facing cultural heritage and archaeology in Bosnia and Herzegovina without discussing the notorious case of the so-called ‘Bosnian Pyramids’. In 2005, Texas-based businessman, and self-styled ‘amateur archaeologist’ Semir Osmanagich claimed to have discovered pyramids above the town of Visoko, approximately 30 kilometres northwest of Sarajevo. A media frenzy ensued, which attracted sponsors and donors, all keen to have their name associated with the ‘discovery’. Immediately, the project came under harsh criticism from the small community of archaeologists within the country¹⁰, and also from the international community^{11 12}. Nevertheless, Osmanagich undertook initial test excavations in 2005, with full-scale excavations begun in 2006. Despite numerous legal battles and recommendations from government officials that excavation permits be revoked^{13 14}, excavations continue to this day, albeit with considerably less media interest. Bizarrely, it would appear that another inadequacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s cultural heritage laws has enabled the excavations to continue in spite of challenges. In December 2011, Osmanagich’s Foundation won a court appeal, overturning a decision to refuse the issuance of excavation permits¹⁵. Reading between the lines, it would appear that the judge ruled in the Foundation’s favour owing to a technicality: they had been denied *archaeological excavation* permits, whereas, in fact, they had requested *multidisciplinary research* permits, which are not accounted for by the cultural heritage laws of the Federation.

The excavations, as well as endangering the historically-important medieval fort at the summit of one of the alleged pyramids, have had severe knock-on effects for the archaeological profession in the country. Primarily, the excavations have highlighted the heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s vulnerability to opportunists. This has not only potentially deterred collaborators from investigating the possibility of forging partnerships with organisations within the country, but has also encouraged would-be treasure seekers and ‘amateur archaeologists’ to conduct their own impromptu excavations, occasionally within the boundaries of legally-protected National Monuments¹⁶.

Furthermore, Osmanagich’s persistent alternative rhetoric has fuelled suspicion and mistrust of academic (in particular archaeological and historical) ‘orthodoxy’ amongst the general population; a dangerous situation for the country to face considering the simmering ethnic tensions and current rise of neo-Nationalism since the start of the first recession to hit the country since the end of hostilities in 1995.

As well as these problems, the fact that public money which could otherwise have been spent on legitimate archaeological research has been commandeered by Osmanagich’s Foundation. Also, his media-friendly approach to his project has led to the sidelining of authentic archaeological investigations and findings by the mainstream media within the country, thus inhibiting public outreach and awareness-raising, which could have proved invaluable to a country currently attempting to bolster its archaeological community.

Discussion

¹⁰ <http://irna.lautre.net/IMG/pdf/letter-ohr-final02.pdf>

¹¹ <http://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/osmanagich/UNESCO.pdf>

¹² <http://www.e-a-a.org/statement.pdf>

¹³ <http://irna.lautre.net/How-the-Bosnian-scientific.html>

¹⁴ <http://irna.lautre.net/How-the-Bosnian-scientific,108.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.balkans.com/open-news.php?uniquenumber=132956>

¹⁶ <http://www.piramidasunca.ba/eng/latest-news/item/7831-seasonal-guidelines.html>

The problems outlined here are just basic examples of those which are faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina's cultural heritage and those that attempt to research and protect it. However, further problems pervade the archaeological community itself. The Archaeological Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Arheološko društvo Bosne i Hercegovine*) has lain dormant since the onset of hostilities in 1992, and although it still exists on paper, has no membership, secretariat, or contact details. Although claims have been made for several years that efforts are being made to rectify this situation, with the closure of the National Museum in October 2012, it looks unlikely that there will be any progress with regard to the re-establishment of the Association in the foreseeable future.

Another problem facing the country's archaeological heritage is the fact that the *Archaeological Lexicon of Bosnia and Herzegovina* has not been updated since its first edition was published in 1988. This four-volume book is devoid of GPS coordinates, and instead relies on descriptions of geographical features (such as "near to a broken tree"), many of which will have changed drastically in the two and a half decades since its publication, and does not contain any of the information gained from archaeological research in recent years. Although there is a strong recognition that this tome needs to be updated, two major obstacles prevent this from happening: The first of these is a lack of resources, in terms of staff, equipment and finances. The second is a political issue – the Republika Srpska appears to be unwilling to collaborate on a single-volume publication for the two entities, perceiving such a work as a threat to its cultural autonomy. Instead, representatives have expressed a wish for the Lexicon to be updated by the two entities independently of one another, perhaps using different methodologies, publishers, and even alphabets.

As a final point, it is also worth noting that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a successor state of Yugoslavia with regard to the 1972 UNESCO *Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage* and acceded to the treaty in 1993, and both signed and ratified the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2009. However, in spite of this, the State has no mechanism or institution through which to identify either Natural Heritage or Intangible Heritage, both of these falling outside of the mandate of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments (Annexe 8 Commission), the only State-level body with responsibilities in regard to heritage, which was set up as a result of the Dayton Accords which brought peace to the country.

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