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'BOSNIAN PYRAMIDS': A PSEUDOARCHAEOLOGICAL MYTH AND A THREAT TO THE EXISTING CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Dear Director-General Koichiro Matsuura,

At the beginning of this month, the international media reported that UNESCO is to send a team of archaeology experts to Bosnia, to 'probe the Bosnian mystery pyramid'.¹ This came after the Bosnian media reported that Mr. Sulejman Tihic, the President of Bosnia-Herzegovina Presidency, talked about the alleged discovery of pyramids in Bosnia to Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, the UNESCO Director-General, at a recent international summit.² The discovery refers to the claims made in October 2005 by a self-proclaimed expert on ancient civilizations, Mr. Semir Osmanagic³, that the Visocica hill near the town of Visoko in central Bosnia-Herzegovina hides the world's biggest and oldest pyramid. Recently, Mr. Osmanagic told the Bosnian media that Mr. Matsuura concluded that there is 'certain' proof of the existence of the Visoko pyramids and implied that this conclusion was the reason UNESCO decided to send a team of experts to Visoko.⁴

Ignoring the public outcries by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian geologists⁵, archaeologists and historians⁶, Mr. Osmanagic started excavating in the area in the fall of 2005 and continued in the spring of 2006.⁷ His activities raise great concerns about the survival of existing cultural and historical heritage in the area.

The Visocica hill – location of the Bosnian medieval capital Visoki

On the Visocica hill, claimed by Mr. Osmanagic to be the world's earliest pyramid, are the remains of the royal Bosnian town of Visoki. The remains of the town's main fort, located on the summit of the hill, are protected as a national monument.⁸ Bosnian archaeologists and historians have on many occasions publicly warned that amateur excavations by Mr. Osmanagic will irreversibly damage this important Bosnian site.⁹ In turn, Mr. Osmanagic has publicly proclaimed all of his critics to be bad Bosnian patriots and all Bosnian scientists who do not support his pyramid project to be 19th-century relics. His team of amateurs does not include one single archaeologist familiar with the history and archaeology of the area, and they continually purport the false idea that the medieval town of Visoki was only the size of 30x60m.¹⁰ It would be very difficult to believe that the capital of the medieval Bosnian Kingdom and also a very important trade center of the area, mentioned in numerous charters of the 14th and 15th¹¹ century was smaller than a football field.

Also, there are indications of deliberate suppression of those archaeological finds that do not fit the theories of Mr. Osmanagic and his team.¹²

The Visoko region – location of the earliest historical traces of the Bosnian statehood

Since Mr. Osmanagic broadened his activities to other hills in the Visoko valley, there is great concern that other archaeological sites could be in danger. The initial excavations at the Pljesevica hill, which he has dubbed the Pyramid of the Moon, revealed a tiled pavement. Mr. Osmanagic asserts that the pavement somehow belongs to the pyramid structure. But without proper excavation techniques, we cannot tell what the «pavement» belong to, or even if it is man-made at all.

The Visoko region is, in many ways, the heart of the historic Bosnia. It is home to the remains of over five different neolithic settlements¹³; of Illyrian and Roman ruins (fortifications and roads); of numerous medieval necropoleis of *stecci* (sing.: *stecak*; a particular form of Bosnian medieval tombstones, often decorated with reliefs and inscriptions). In addition, there is the nearby village of Muhasinovici, where a decorated plate with inscription of a famous 12th-century Bosnian ruler, Kulin ban, was found (also indicating remains of a church and settlement in the vicinity), as well as the village of Arnautovici (the medieval town of Mile where Bosnian 14-15th century kings were crowned) with the remains of King Tvrtko's royal and burial church. The remains of the royal medieval town of Visoki, a preserved national monument, sit right on top of the hill Osmanagic claims to be a pyramid and in the town of Visoko itself are three old Ottoman mosques and the Orthodox church of St. Procopius, all national monuments. Even more important, this region is known for occasional and accidental archaeological finds that indicate yet more historical structures, but systematic long-term archaeological projects have never been carried out here.¹⁴

The late Bosnian archaeologist, Mr. Pavo Andjelic, after years of studying the region, in the late 1980s proposed that the early medieval Bosnian town of Desnek should be searched for in that very area. Desnek and Katera are the first Bosnian urban settlements from the 10th century to be mentioned in a written historical source, the Byzantine scripts of Constantine Porphyrogenitos.¹⁵ These towns have not yet been located by the Bosnian archaeologists.

Semir Osmanagic

Mr. Osmanagic has no credentials in archaeology. His work, in fact, carries all the hallmarks of pseudoarchaeology, as recently defined in some detail.¹⁶ Many features of his project make this conclusion clear: Osmanagic reached his conclusions about the existence of alleged pyramids before investigative work was carried out, to the point of even naming the supposed pyramids; the work was undertaken to prove Mr. Osmanagic's conclusions, not to test them (he says, on his own webpage: "I am working intensively on proving the improvable"); extreme, history-altering claims are being promoted on the basis of flimsy or non-existent "evidence"; countervailing evidence is suppressed; Mr. Osmanagic runs a slick PR exercise and communicates his "results" directly to the press rather than through genuine, scientific channels; critics of Mr. Osmanagic's enterprise are met with political sloganeering rather than reasoned argument; Mr. Osmanagic is guided by a powerful nationalist ideology, which distorts and corrupts his efforts (he says: "Bosnia is a source of civilization of Europe and that is a reason enough that Bosnians

should be proud of their heritage"); several archaeologists are claimed to support the project, when they are either not involved or actively oppose Mr. Osmanagic's destructive efforts (e.g., Prof. Bruce Hitchner of Tufts University, USA; a signatory to this letter); the whole enterprise is being run as a money-making exercise rather than a scientific investigation; the academic credentials of many supporters are proudly proclaimed, when those credentials have nothing to do with archaeology.

We could go on. Let there be no doubt: Mr. Osmanagic is conducting a pseudoarchaeological project that, disgracefully, threatens to destroy parts of Bosnia's real heritage.

Conclusion

The pyramid claims of Mr. Osmanagic and the activities of his team pose a serious threat to the rich historical, cultural and archaeological heritage of the Visoko region. The visit of the UNESCO experts to this area should not be allowed to be represented by Mr. Osmanagic as support for his pseudoarchaeological claims.

This visit, should it occur, ought also to include Bosnian experts, geologists, archaeologists and historians and allow for their scientific opinion to be heard. Bosnia-Herzegovina came out of the 1992-95 war without some of her most important and beautiful cultural and historical heritage gems. It would be irresponsible to let pseudoarchaeology finish off what is left intact.

This letter will also be published in the online edition of Archaeology Magazine, the publication of the Archaeological Institute of America.¹⁷ Other media will be informed as well.

Signatories:

Mark Rose, Online Editorial Director, Archaeological Institute of America, PhD in Classical Archaeology (Aegean Prehistory), Indiana University, USA

R. Bruce Hitchner, Professor and Chair of the Department of Classics, Tufts University, USA; Chairman of the Dayton Project

Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, Wayne State University, USA

Andras Riedlmayer, Harvard University, USA

Dubravko Lovrenovic, Professor of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina; member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Commission to Protect National Monuments

Garrett G. Fagan, Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and History, Penn State University, USA

Paul V. Heinrich, Research Associate 4, Louisiana Geological Survey, Louisiana State University, USA

Richard Carlton, Museum of Antiquities, University of Newcastle upon Tyne; director of the Archaeological Practice, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Mary Lefkowitz, Mellon Professor in the Humanities Emerita, Wellesley College, Dept. of Classical Studies, USA

Katherine Reece, owner of *In the Hall of Ma'at* website : <http://www.hallofmaat.com/> ; contributing author to "Archaeological Fantasies: How pseudoarchaeology misrepresents the past and misleads the public"

Anthony Harding, President of the European Association of Archaeologists

Michael Witzel, Wales Prof. of Sanskrit, Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, USA

Kenneth L. Feder, Ph.D, Professor at the Department of Anthropology, Central Connecticut State University, USA

Alun Salt, Mphil, World Archaeology (Cantab), Archaeoastronomer for the Centre for Interdisciplinary Science, University of Leicester, UK

Martin Smith, Research Assistant (PhD thesis under examination), Australian National University, Australia

Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Professor, Social Historian and Chair of the Department of Sociology, The City College of CUNY, USA

Blagoje Govedarica, professor of Archeology at the Heidelberg University, Germany; member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Arts and Sciences Academy (Center for the Balkan Studies)

Gary Huckleberry, Ph.D., Chairman of the Archaeological Geology Division of the Geological Society of America, Tucson, USA

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Francesco Brighenti, Ph.D., VAIS -- Venetian Academy of Indian Studies, Venice, Italy

Christopher Hale, Producer of pseudoarchaeological exposés for the BBC, UK

Mike Brass, MA in Archaeology degree, University College London, UK; "The Antiquity of Man" <http://www.antiquityofman.com>

Greg Reeder, www.egyptology.com

David Meadows, B.A. in Classical History and Civilization and History, University of Calgary; B.A. in Latin, also from the U of C; and M.A. in Classics from Queen's (Kingston); and ABD in Roman Studies at McMaster, Canada

Christopher O'Brien, Ph.D., Forest Archaeologist/Adjunct Professor, USDA Forest Service/California State University, USA

NOTES

¹ Reuters: http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=scienceNews&storyID=2006-06-05T123609Z_01_L05547078_RTRIDST_0_SCIENCE-BOSNIA-PYRAMID-DC.XML ; Euronews: http://euronews.net/create_html.php?page=detail_info&article=362506&lng=1

² The fourth South-East European Summit on «Communication of Heritage» held in Opatija, Croatia, on June 2, 2006: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=33207&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html . According to the Bosnian media, Mr. Tihic informed Mr. Matsuura that there is more than one ancient pyramid discovered in Bosnia and that the pyramids are being researched by renown archaeologists. According to the Bosnian media, Mr. Matsuura replied that Bosnian pyramids are a spectacular discovery and that UNESCO will gladly send its experts to verify it. Mr. Tihic separately told the Bosnian media that there are at least nine ancient pyramids hidden in Bosnia.

³ Semir Osmanagic, an American of Bosnian origin, a construction contractor in Houston (Texas, USA). Author of articles and two books on «alternative» history: <http://www.alternativnahistorija.com> . He claims that he has found traces of 27,000 year-old civilization in Bosnia and that this discovery will change the entire history of the world.

⁴ *Experts from Egypt, India, Pakistan, Croatia and Mexico coming to Visoko*, <http://www.sarajevo-x.com/clanak/060607008> : [quote translation] „According to him [Osmanagic], the exploration of the Bosnian Pyramid Valley is entering a mature phase supported by the fact that the UNESCO Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, concluded that there is „certain proof” of the existence of pyramids and decided to send a team of experts to Visoko.“ The official website of the “Archaeological Park: Bosnian Sun Pyramid” Foundation (<http://www.piramidasunca.ba>) carries information that UNESCO experts are coming to Bosnia „to join the project“. Another website related to the Osmanagic's Foundation carried the following news report on June 2 (http://www.bosnianpyramid.com/index_files/News.html): „UNESCO to join search for pyramids in central Bosnia -- Sarajevo - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) will join Bosnian experts in searching for what is believed to be one or more ancient pyramids in central Bosnia, the Bosnian Presidency said Friday in a statement. UNESCO director-general Koichiro Matsuura promised to send soon a group of UNESCO archaeological experts to investigate the find.”

⁵ A report on the Visocica hill made in April 2006 by the Faculty of Mining, Geology and Civil Engineering of the Tuzla University concludes that the hill is a natural formation.

⁶ Various articles, interviews and public statements for the Bosnian media. Dr. Zilka Kujundzic-Vejzagic, archeologist and prehistory expert at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dr. Enver Imamovic, archeologist and history professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo; former director of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dr. Blagoje Govedarica, archaeology professor at the Heidelberg University, Germany; member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Arts and Sciences Academy (Center for the Balkan Studies). Dr. Dubravko Lovrenovic, history professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo; former minister of the Federal Ministry for Culture, Education and Sport; chairman of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Commission to Preserve National Monuments: <http://www.aneks8komisija.com.ba/index.php?lang=4> . Etc.

⁷ Mr. Osmanagic founded an organization in Visoko, called the “Archaeological Park: Bosnian Sun Pyramid” Foundation (<http://www.piramidasunca.ba>). Using the local museum as legal cover to obtain necessary permits for excavations from institutions of state that are normally in charge of such works, the Foundation began digging on the Visocica hill slopes, without consulting any expert familiar with the archaeological, cultural and historical significance of the area. So far, the Foundation claims to have discovered four more pyramids in the Visoko valley, now dubbed the Valley of Bosnian Pyramids, renaming the four local hills into Pyramid of the Moon, Pyramid of the Dragon, Pyramid of Love and the Temple of Earth.

⁸ See documentation of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Commission to Preserve National Monuments: http://www.aneks8komisija.com.ba/main.php?id_struct=50&lang=4&action=view&id=2409 .

⁹ Mrs. Zilka Kujundzic-Vejzagic, interview for the Sarajevo-based daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje* (May 12, *People need a sensation*): „**As far as I understand, Mr. Osmanagic never got a permit to dig up there, where the medieval town is. But the suburbia, that remained unexplored, will be destroyed. On TV, I saw several of the smaller blocks that were used as building material in the past and are still used in some places. Not the big ones - he says they weigh 40 tons - those are natural formations, and not hand-made under any circumstance. It is probably the remains of some medieval houses.**“ Also, Mr. Mirko Babic, director of the Bijeljina museum: „**It was suppressed that the Osmanagic team illicitly dug up a 4x2m probe near the west wall of the fort and that I collected dozen of medieval ceramics fragments from the ground.**“

¹⁰ In his book *Alternativna historija*, Osmanagic writes that the royal town of Visoki was just a small fort. That is false and reveals Mr. Osmanagic's ignorance of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian history. One of the most renown Bosnian archaeologists, dr. Pavo Andjelic, presented the urban structure of Visoki through two complex ensembles. The older one is the medieval town of Visoki, on the Visocica hill, consisting of the fortress, the settlement next to it, protected by walls, and another settlement outside the walls, a graveyard and a house of the Bosnian Christians. The other one, the town of Podvisoki, leans on the town of Visoki in the northeast and east hillfoots of Visocica. Podvisoki develops as an open trade center and in time gains its settlement structure.

¹¹ For more on the historical background for Visoki, see documentation of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Commission to Preserve National Monuments: http://www.aneks8komisija.com.ba/main.php?id_struct=50&lang=4&action=view&id=2409 .

¹² In May 2006, Mr. Osmanagic gave an interview to the *National Geographic*, implying that there were no organic remains found at the Visocica hill: „**Hopefully we can find some organic material, you know, the bones or the wooden fragments, or charcoal. ... Then we can tell for sure.**“ (<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/pyramid-bosnia-1.html>)

But a report that his team made in November 2005, six months prior to the interview, says: „However, in the second (II) sequence of sandstone plates at the right hand side of the probing well we found two plates one over another at the angle of approximately 25 degrees. Between those two plates there was clay marl and a **human skeleton** in it. The skeleton was not complete. It consisted of a left leg bones and fractions of

a skull placed in the area of pelvis. All sandstone plates in the III sequence were paved one over another under the same angle as it was done in the II sequence. In the II sequence of plates remains of a **human skeleton were found again**. The remains of this skeleton were photographed by an archaeologist and its orientation was defined. Then they were packed and sent to analysis in order to determine how old they were.“ (Word document:

<http://www.piramidasunca.ba/eng/podmeni/izvjestaji/egeoloskivisocicaokt2005.doc>)

This information coincides with the opinion of Dr. Enver Imamovic that at least one of the Osmanagic's probes ran into a medieval necropolis, which is also in concord with the traces of medieval settlement in the vicinity. However, Mr. Osmanagic has publicly denied existence of any necropoleis on the Visocica hill, and never mentioned the bones he found. There is only one photo of the human skeletons excavated in November 2005: <http://img222.imageshack.us/img222/4029/skelet0mb.jpg> (courtesy of APWR: <http://antipyramidwebring.blogspot.ba/>). It is not known where these bones are and whether any analysis is being done.

¹³ One of the known neolithic settlements in the Visoko region is Okoliste, with traces of the specific Butmir culture. Okoliste is considered one of the most important European neolithic sites and has recently been researched by a team of German and Bosnian experts: http://www.dainst.org/index_930_de.html .

¹⁴ Also, a large part of the Balkans is known for the so-called *gradine* (sing.: *gradina*), artificial burial and fort hills made by Illyrian tribes, some of which do look like rounded pyramids. Many early and late medieval churches and settlements were made on top of such *gradine*, and in Bosnia there are many town names and other toponyms that originate from this word.

¹⁵ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, Byzantine emperor, in his scripts *De administrando imperio*.

¹⁶ Garrett G. Fagan (ed.), *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), esp. 23-46.

¹⁷ <http://www.archaeology.org/>