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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

IN THE LAND OF STEĆCI: THE CHILDREN'S GRAVES OF HATELJI MOUND AND THE BURIED CHURCH OF MILAVIĆI

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Introduction

When travelling in the Western Balkans, one comes across groups of stone blocks that look like flocks of sheep from afar. See Figure 2. Whether one drives in Serbia, Croatia, or Montenegro, these monuments, called stećci, are a constant in the landscape but are especially frequent in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The images of stećci still stimulate the same questions that Arthur Evans asked of them a hundred and fifty years ago: What are these stones? Who built them?



Figure 2. A group of stećci at Milavići. Photo from Dežela stečkov Archive.

Today we know for certain that they are grave markers (Bešlagić 1982; Bujak 2018). Evans wrote about stećci tombstones (1876) and spread a controversial and incorrect theory that the monuments were Bogomil tombstones. Even today, some scholars and lay writers adhere to this same theory although it was rejected decades ago by local and international scholars (Bešlagić 1982, 2004; Lovrenović 2009). The same curiosity that pushed Evans is still present in the 21st century; however, the naivety has been somewhat lifted. We now know that stećci are the mediaeval tombstones that were in use between the 12th and 16th centuries in the territories of the modern Western Balkans countries. Interest in these extraordinary and very vocal monuments has driven a team, led by Dr Čaval, to perform systematic archaeological research in the Herzegovina part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The outstanding universal value of stećci was recognized in 2016 when UNESCO accepted the multinational nomination, and stećci became a part of the world heritage list. Since the monuments are located in four countries, their legal protection was ensured on an international level. Coordination of this recognition took place through the International Coordination Committee in Sarajevo, BiH, which helps implement strategies, principles and standards.



Figure 3. Trench 1 (T1) at Hatelji during excavation by our hard-working team. Photo by A. Gopee.

Our research and the sites

Our case study is focused on the medieval region of župa Dabar. As a historical reference for this territory, we used a monograph (Pekić 2005) based on archival documents from the National Archive of Dubrovnik, Croatia. Non-destructive pre-excavation research included archaeological reconnaissance and a geophysical survey of the area. We initially surveyed all of the 47 sites with stećci tombstones in župa Dabar. For the geophysical survey, we focused on seven sites and finally decided to systematically excavate two entirely different sites. The two sites we set upon are Hatelji and Milavići.

The multiperiod Hatelji site (Figure 3) is a prehistoric earth mound that retained its symbolic significance for the local community and was reused to bury the dead up until the Middle Ages. This mound is one of just a few near the village of Hatelji, with only two having been used for burials during the medieval period. The thirteen stećci at the site reflect this later chapter. Time has left its mark on them. The changing climate has damaged many of the stones. However, they retained their prominent position in the landscape.



Figure 4. Two excavated graves at Hatelji. Adult graves 12 (in front) and 11 (in the back), excavated during the 2022 field season. To the left of grave 11 is a child's grave 5 excavated during our 2019 work. The close proximity of the adult and child presumably indicates a family connection, to be confirmed through molecular analysis. Photo by Ž. Jevšnik.

Why people of the past chose prehistoric mounds for their burials is an intriguing question. Stećci cemeteries in Hum were frequently located on earlier burial locations. The pan-European custom of reusing prehistoric mounds for medieval burials is indeed echoed in the stećci phenomenon (Figure 4), particularly in medieval Herzegovina (comp. Williams 1997, Mitkoski et al. 2016). The research on this specific feature of stećci is too limited to provide any solid chronological framework; however, the commencement of the stećci phenomenon, supported by a few multiperiod sites that have been excavated, displays the earliest medieval occupation of a prehistoric mound from the late 12th century onwards (Bešlić 2004; Miletić 1959; Jašarević, Antić 2017), which is between two and four centuries after it can be observed in the rest of Europe (Greece: Curta 2016; Hungary: Türk 2014; the W Europe: Van de Noort 1993; Bradley, Williams 2013). Does this reflect the geographic isolation of this territory, or does it testify to the lack of exploration of this important and information-rich heritage?

In contrast to Hatelji, Milavići cemetery is a modern community burial ground. See Figure 5. It officially houses 352 stećci tombstones. However, our research documented over 390 monuments, with the exact number still unknown due to the cover of dense vegetation growing around some clusters of monuments. Our research also showed the existence of a medieval church that lived only in the oral history of the Dabar valley. The Milavići cemetery holds a toponym 'Crkvina', which refers to a church that was supposed to stand in this location. At the initial survey of the site, we approached local farmers for any information about the site and its recent history, as viewed through the eyes of the population that lived with this place. Apart from the childhood stories of jumping games consisting of leaping from one stećak (singular of stécci) to the next, stories always returned to the long-lost church that once stood somewhere in this location.





Figure 5. Milavići: (left) A row of stećci, excavated in 2019 and catalogued in 2022; (right) a decoration detail of a tombstone in the central area of the cemetery. Photo from Dežela stečkov Archive.

The excavations & finds

The two seasons (2019, 2022) of stratigraphic excavations in the Dabar valley complicated the stećci narrative even further. The Late Mediaeval period is often not rich with archaeological artefacts, but fortunately, modern archaeological scientific research offers so much more than just collecting material culture. As such, finds are not necessarily physical objects; in this sense, the finds from our two seasons have been quite substantial.

Seeking not to destroy the impressive prehistoric mound and to understand the organisation of the burials in the restricted space, we chose to excavate between the rows of stećci tombstones at Hatelji. We excavated two perpendicular trenches (T 1 & 2) running from the centre of the mound to the north and east, respectively. We were surprised to find that in this 'middle space', only the graves of very young children were discovered - the oldest being just between 1½ to 2 years old. Although child-sized stećci tombstones exist, the children buried in this cemetery did not have them. However, T2 presented us with another exciting situation: the grave of a child next to a stećak, which marked the grave of an adult. Our initial findings hinted at a possible relationship between these two individuals, but we must await the final molecular analyses to be certain of any actual link. However, the depth of the graves allows for some more hypotheses. The age of all three excavated skeletal burials is different, and so is the depth of the graves. All of the children were buried about 50-70 cm deep. The two adults were buried at different depths, with the eldest

individual buried the deepest. Although our current sample size is only one, this could speak of the rites of passage marked by the depth of burial and the presence of a tombstone (Van Gennep 2019; Turner 1969: 95).



Figure 6. Overview of the Milavići site showing the central part of the cemetery with modern and medieval tombstones, and our excavation area in the top left corner. Photo from Dežela stečkov Archive.

Excavating through the medieval layers of the prehistoric mound, we also reached a prehistoric skeletal burial at the bottom of the mound. A small bronze pendant was the only object accompanying the burial. While we are eager to know more, nothing else can be said about this site until the analyses are completed.

In Milavići, we encountered a completely different situation. Besides modern graves, there are also approx. 390 *stećci*, aligned in rows running south-north, with graves oriented west-east. Thus, here the *stećci* cemetery matches the traditional European medieval trend of cemeteries delimited by rows. Initially, the excavations were performed in two areas: the southwestern corner of the cemetery and the highest spot with the sparsest accumulation of *stećci*. The 2019 season revealed that the space between the tombstones contains no burials and that a single individual was buried under every *stećak*. However, the central area displayed a more complicated story. Here, two well-structured graves contained three individuals. Both of the graves had been built adjacent to solid medieval walls, and each had disturbed a potential floor. So, during the 2022 season, we focused on cataloguing the *stećci* tombstones within the site and excavating only in the upper, central area, with the intention of exposing and documenting the church walls.

Epigraphist Dr Anja Roglič (ZRC SAZU) made a list of all visible stećci at the burial site and created an inventory with their details and features. Many of the tombstones are decorated with reliefs depicting crosses, architectural elements or swords, and figural motifs of dancers and various animals.



Figure 7. Stećci during excavation at Milavići. The image carved onto the stećak in the center depicts a ritual dance. Photo from Dežela stečkov Archive.

At the main excavation area, 15 new skeletal graves joined the two previously discovered. The graves can be divided according to the typology of the grave structures into two groups: the first with impressive and solid stone-slab grave construction, and the other with less enduring grave structures that were dug into the church floor. From the 2019 season, we know that the first group of burials dates to the second half of the 14th and 15th centuries. It is our hope that Carbon dating will provide better scientific clarification of the ambiguous chronological framework of the region.

The discovery of architectural remains was a welcome result of this year's endeavours. Part of the building's floor layout was preserved with larger stones. Although these were fragmentary, the plaster above them was still present. In the last days of excavation, we discovered a part of a wall, with an attached sitting bench that ran along the side walls of the building, well preserved and still adhered to by plaster. This wall section will be the starting point for the next season of excavations, during which we seek to confirm whether the discovered building was indeed a church.

As in the previous season of excavations at Milavići, one curious constant was that sherds of prehistoric pottery were sporadically found. These probably came from the layers of what was most likely the initial prehistoric mound, which were displaced when the mound was reused for burials in the mediaeval period and which subsequently extended beyond the mound's borders.

Conclusion - Finished to begin again...

The diversity in artistic expression of stećci tombstones reflects the diversity of the region's cultural expressions. Influences of prehistoric traditions can be seen in various forms, and their vast numbers speak of their importance for the past communities.

The Hatelji site displays direct relation to prehistory not only in its use of the existing mound. Fragments of prehistoric pottery were found during the excavation of the mediaeval graves, and this year we reached the actual prehistoric levels. The preservation of the human remains from the prehistoric context was quite poor compared to the medieval layers, but the small Bronze pendant additionally confirmed the chronological fit into the prehistory of the region. To fully understand the complex dynamics of the Hatelji mound, the micromorphological analyses will provide more information about its formation and activities at the site in its earlier phases.

With this year's campaign, the excavations in Hatelji have been completed (Figure 8). At Milavići, we are already planning the 2023 season. Our next season will see a larger excavation area as we will concentrate on following the wall and unearthing the whole structure. Perhaps skeletal burials found within the structure may complement the narrative of the site, emphasising its societal facet for the medieval community and of the potential church. We look forward to drawing many further insights from the archaeology of this intriguing and multi-faceted site!



Figure 8. Trench 1 at Hatelji fully excavated. Photo from Dežela stečkov Archive.

Collaboration and Funding

The international excavation team on both sites included over 50 people from all around the world. The excavations in Hatelji were led by Dr Lucija Grahek, Scientific-research centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), Ljubljana, Slovenia and Dr Monika Milosavljević, University of Belgrade, Serbia. The different areas within the Milavići cemetery were overseen by Dr Alessandra Cianciosi, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands and Dr Krish Seetah, Stanford University, USA. The students who joined us on this adventure came from University of Reading, UK; University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia, University of Sarajevo, BiH; University of Belgrade, Serbia; University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and from Stanford University and Harvard University in the USA.

The project team is in continual discussion with the archaeologist from the National Institution for the Protection of Historical, Cultural and Natural Heritage from Banja Luka. The BiH collaboration partner is Dr Edin Bujak from the University of Sarajevo.

Our current research is the continuation of an EU-funded project under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Programme, 'Social Landscapes as Multicultural spaces: Stećci in Bosnia and Herzegovina' (Grant No. 797881), awarded in 2018 and running until March 2021. The intriguing topic and the dynamics of the research required an expansion. The Slovenian Research Agency currently funds the 'The Land of Stećci' (Grant No. J6-3145), through their Aleš Debeljak program. Both projects are being led by Dr Saša Čaval, ZRC SAZU.

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