



Gorenji Mokronog: Archaeological Site

ESH 9147

Location	Gorenji Mokronog
Time of origin	from 6th or 7th centuries
Time of restoration	1999
Chief Conservator	Uroš Bavec and assistants Dr. Andrej Pleterski and Tomaž Golob
Visits	Access from the village of Trebelno or from Mokronog, or along a somewhat longer route from Šmarješke Toplice through Male Strmice and Velike Strmice.

There are few places in Slovenia as vividly rooted in the oral tradition as Gorenji Mokronog in the central Dolenjska region. Rather than describing it as an archaeological site, it would be better to denote it with the expression “mythical landscape”, since archaeological sites, sacred monuments, written sources and oral traditions are indivisibly connected, rendering the landscape a touch of olden times.¹ The landscape can be divided into three parts that are worthy of attention: the so-called Vrajk with a cemetery from late Antiquity, the area of the former castle Gorenji Mokronog as a settlement and the only still discernible part, and the sacred area with an ossarium and the church of St. Peter.

Vrajk or Vrajski Breg is a dialect form of the genitive case of the Slovene phrase ‘v rajū’ (‘in paradise’). The old word “paradise”, i.e. Christian Heaven, indicated for the pagans a country where the souls of the righteous resided. The antiquities excavator, Jernej Pečnik, who was active in this area in the last third of the 19th century, recorded the discovery of “strange graves built up of stone slabs and very similar to Roman graves” in the “Perko estate”. Oral tradition indicated the existence of an early Christian timber church located in the vicinity. A visit to the near-by sand quarry where human bones have been discovered for years, incited the Institute for the Protection of the Natural and Cultural Heritage of Novo Mesto to make some trial pits in 1996. The result was the discovery of the south-eastern border of a damaged skeleton burial-ground from late Antiquity with sixteen preserved graves, two partly preserved ones and two completely destroyed ones. Traces of twelve holes for props were discovered in the plain above the burial-ground, which indicated the existence of a small circular wooden building. The notion of an early Christian wooden church expressed in oral traditions seemed very probable. Unique and decayed artefacts contained in the graves typical of the turn of the 6th or beginning of the 7th century, indicated a self-sufficient and isolated community. That was the period when the pagan, Slavonic-speaking inhabitants of Carinthia (i.e. the historic predecessor of Slovenia) already enthroned their first dukes. The authority of the Byzantines as heirs of the centuries-old Roman Empire was

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1 Acknowledgement is due to Franc Hočevar, sexton and village chronicler, who kindly related the oral tradition to the author. For a more detailed analysis as to the meaning of the data see Bavec 1999, pp. 231–245.
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◀ Chapel of St. Michael: “Between 1335 and 1372, the Lords of Scharfenberg of the near-by Gorenji Mokronog castle had the vault embellished with cross ribs.”

contracted to the province of Liburnia Tarsaticensis (present-day Istria with the Quarnero islands in Croatia, and perhaps even a part of the Bela Krajina region in Slovenia). The central area of Slovene ethnic territory was left over to the ingenuity of sparse groups of the remaining native inhabitants – Wallachians. A typical pair of basket-shaped ear-rings executed in bronze, discovered in two individual graves, not in a single one, testified to that period. The grave of a woman over forty years old contained a unique form of such an ear-ring on the right side of her head, while another, younger woman



Ear-rings, baby's rattles:
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wore a bad local imitation of the Byzantine ribbed form of such an earring on her left side. Was it a peculiarity of the local garb or merely a simple consequence of modest means? Some finds indicated nothing by themselves, e.g. two carefully polished, pierced fragments of goblets from late Antiquity. However, with the additional information of the fragments having been used as baby's rattles and laid in the arms of a four-or five-year-old child, a vivid picture of distant grief was revived. The anthropological study by Leben-Seljak presented the lives of those people indicating that most of them died at the so-called *adultus* 11 age (30 to 40 years), and nobody from the trial pits surpassed the *maturus* 11 age (50 to 60 years). Badly healed fractures of bones and arthritis at an early stage were discernible from the skeletons, with additional traces of heavy burdens having been carried by women on their heads. Even some family ties could have been discovered indicated by the aquiline form of noses in the case of two men. The deceased were laid in the sunrise direction, according to Christian tradition, and they were buried in shallow holes with no grave architecture indicated in the above-mentioned report by Pečnik.

The question of what was cut through by the forest road additionally incited the protective surveys in the area of the Gorenji Mokronog castle (*Obernassenfuss* in German). The ruins of the former

castle first recorded in written documents as early as 1137 are still discernible on the wooded crest between the two tributaries of the brook Laknica. It used to be one of the most important castles in the Dolenjska region. When the lower castle was erected in the present Mokronog, the earlier castle was gradually denominated with the adjective Gorenji ('upper').² Protective excavations begun in 1996 partly surveyed the tower in the forecourt of the castle in question. With the support of the Institute of Archaeology of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences (ZRC SAZU) in



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1998 and 1999, the settlement area was chronologically and partly functionally defined by means of a series of 78 manual excavations (in an intensive sub-surface survey) and some non-destructive methods like the execution of a digital model of the relief and the geophysical measurements of the area (geolectrical charting and the use of georadar). The surveys revealed that the prehistoric fort on the top of the crest was the first to come into being. Remnants of the edge of a rampart on the south-eastern and north-eastern sides were still slightly discernible, while the northern side was probably never included due to the steep, almost precipitous slope. The village of Wallachians buried on the hill of Vrajski Breg came into being on a hidden and somewhat more graded north-eastern slope at the turn of the 6th or in the 7th century. It seemed that the village was deserted in the period between the 7th and 9th centuries; wooden houses were at least partly burned. Four early Mediaeval settlement terraces were entrenched in the crest to the north of the fort. The old Wallachian refuge was thus not entirely forgotten and was again occasionally inhabited during the dramatic period of Hungarian incursions at the

2 Acknowledgement is due to Andrej Pleterski, who kindly related the information of the earliest written record of the castle to the author.

turn of the 9th and beginning of the 10th century. The construction of the castle tower on the top of the crest largely destroyed traces of the earlier settlement. The tower was divided from the level of the forecourt by a moat. The forecourt was also walled in and fortified with a deep moat to the south. Traces of walls, defence turrets and stone-built castle buildings of unknown purpose were discovered on the eastern and western sides. The only partly excavated and presented archaeological remnant was the defence tower by the southern entrance to the forecourt.



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The sacred area consisted of the church of St. Peter and an ossarium with the chapel of St. Michael. The church basically originated from the 12th century; a small Romanesque window was preserved from that time. Surveys employing georadar indicated the remnants of earlier floor plan structures. A minor archaeological excavation performed next to the northern side of the church in 1998 discovered 34 graves; all the grave holes were indistinct or dug through, despite very careful excavations. An interesting change in the orientation of burials was discovered: from the traditional (east-west) to the subsequent orientation “facing the church”, which was to take place at the beginning of the 16th century, in view of the articles in the graves (holy images, coins). In 1780 the burial-ground was moved to Trebelno. The earliest phase of the graves was at least partly older than the southern wall of the church nave located on one of the graves. The ossarium from the 12th century was located in the steep hill above the church. The Romanesque rotunda was concluded by a lower, semi-circular apse on the south-eastern side. The lower part of the building contained bones discovered when new graves were dug up, while the upper part comprised the chapel of St. Michael. Between 1335 and 1372, the Lords of Scharfenberg of the near-by Gorenji Mokronog castle had the vault embellished with cross ribs supported by cube-shaped consoles with obliquely truncated sides. The model

for the design of the vault was the parish church of Svibno.

The conservation works in Gorenji Mokronog can be divided into two phases: the survey and the conservation with a presentation of the remnants. The above-mentioned results of archaeological surveys executed on the cemetery of Vrajski Breg from late Antiquity, Gorenji Mokronog castle and the church of St. Peter, facilitated the execution of the foundations for the scheduling of buildings as monuments. The idea was initiated to create an archaeological route along the forest path with the presentation of the ruins of the partly excavated



Chapel of St. Michael as seen by K. Grefe at the turn of the century in the *Old Carniola* album.

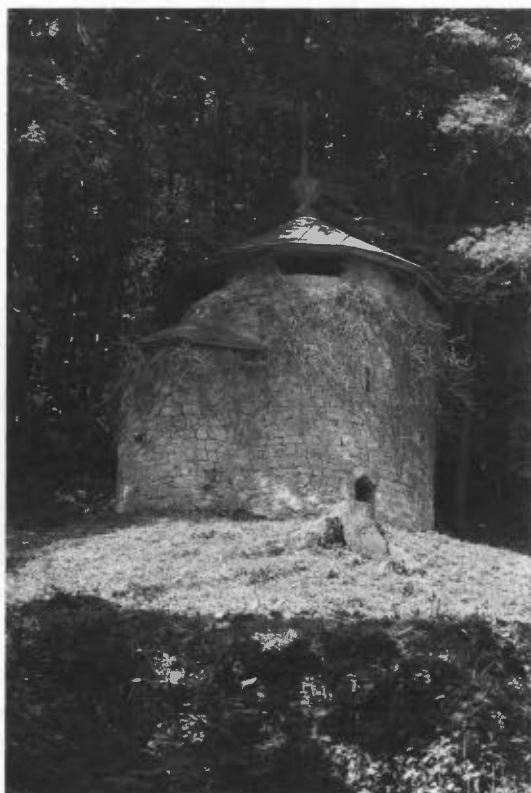
tower in the forecourt of the castle. The basic rule was to preserve the authenticity and durability of the excavated walls. Larger quarry stones from the layer of the ruins, separated in the process of excavation, were used for that purpose. It was still possible to trace the Romanesque manner of construction on the partly damaged external side with the use of lime mortar and some added white cement. The crown of the wall was somewhat heightened and slanted in order to drain rainwaters. For the purposes of drainage in the interior, the original walkway was protected by a membrane and drainage fill (of gravel and sand) on a thin levelling layer of foundation concrete slanting towards the drainage pipe. Additional layers of felt and sod were laid on it in order to ensure easy maintenance. The foundations, built very firmly and deeply into the decayed dolomite sandstone, facilitated the solution of problems of frost and erosion in the interior of the tower.

Preliminary archaeological trial pits were made by the southern wall of the church of St. Peter primarily due to renovation works. In the recent past, the problems of pressure of earth layers and humidity on that wall were tackled by means of a stone-built supporting "dry wall" erected along the entire southern side of the church. The wall had to be temporarily removed for the excavation by the southern facade. After the execution of drainage and insulation of the filled sections, the original condition of the wall was restored and the repairs

were continued. The same held true for the rotunda; the problem of vandalism was solved by fitting a metal grate over the entrance.

The establishment of the archaeological route with four information boards was accomplished in cooperation with a utility company from Trebnje; clearing the undergrowth, physically building the trail and removing illegal refuse pits and sand quarries would have been a difficult problem to solve without their assistance. Acknowledgement is due to the company that is to regularly maintain the trail in the future.

The information boards containing the basic data on individual



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sights are written in English and Slovene. The first one contains an overview of the trail and is located at the car park. The second one is erected at the location of the Vrajski Breg cemetery dating from late Antiquity. The excavated part is to be covered with grass and marked in the future. The route leads through a forest to the third board by the renovated tower, and the final board was erected by the entrance to the church area of the Church of St. Peter with the chapel of St. Michael. Different shades of colours used on the boards indicate different features (e.g. red – the colour of the dead). More information is contained in a leaflet that is about to be published in English and Slovene.

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