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NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT IN DRENOVAC, SERBIA – FROM EXCAVATION TO PRESENTATION

Abstract: In this paper, we review several steps of the process leading to the creation of the on-site museum at the Neolithic site of Drenovac: archaeological research (geophysical survey, excavations, processing of findings and samples), conservation and presentation of archaeological heritage. The concept of the site's presentation revolves around *in situ* remains of the Late Neolithic houses. The process of their conservation was a pioneering project in Serbia and included cooperating and consulting with various experts. The presentation of the site is still an ongoing project with the focus of the final stages on the exhibition space in the area surrounding the preserved houses. The exhibition will be designed to tell a story about the site, excavations and findings. In addition to the presentation of life in the Neolithic settlement, the goal is to show the work of archaeologists in discovering the past - from excavation to interpretation. This approach provides a unique experience for the visitors - an introduction to the life of the Neolithic community in the original location on one side, and on the other side – it offers an opportunity to get acquainted with the methods and processes of discovering the past.

Key words: Drenovac, Neolithic, Late Neolithic settlement, architectural conservation, on-site museum, *in situ* presentation

INTRODUCTION

A journey from archaeological research and excavation to the „final product“ – the presentation of heritage includes time-consuming, hard-working processes and involves many experts in different fields. Within the project *Permanent Archaeological Workshop – Middle Morava Valley in the Neolithisation of Southeast Europe*,¹ for nearly two decades,

¹ The work within the workshop started in 2002. under the auspices of the Institute of Archeology, Belgrade (project director S. Perić), Regional Museum Paraćin and Regional Museum Jagodina, funded by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia. The research of the Middle Morava region was also conducted within other projects: *Archaeology of Serbia: Cultural Identity, Factors of Integration, Technological Processes and the Role of the Central Balkans in the Development of European Prehistory* (O1177020), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological development of the Republic of Serbia (2011-2019); *Deciphering the Origins of the Sediment Complex at the Neolithic Settlement Site of Drenovac in the Morava Valley, Serbia*, Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade and The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (2019); and *Palaeo-landscape Reconstruction of Neolithic*

extensive investigation of this region has been done, including fieldwork, analyses of different kinds of material, revision and digitalization of documentation, education of students, conservation and presentation of archaeological heritage, etc. Field investigations were focused on reconnaissance, geophysical survey, geoarchaeological research, and excavations of some of the sites. Various types of remains – pottery, bone and stone tools, lithics, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological, were analyzed by specialists, in search of many aspects of life in the Neolithic (economy, food practices, technology, etc). One of the key sites of the project, which is the most extensively investigated is Drenovac. This site, with remarkably preserved architectural remains, a non-disturbed landscape, and an easily accessible location on the highway route Belgrade-Niš (E-75), provides great tourist potential for interpreting and presenting prehistoric archaeological heritage.

In Serbia, there are a few examples of the presentation of Neolithic sites, both in the form of archeological sites with a museums and open-air archaeological parks. The example of the former is the eponymous site for the Late Neolithic culture – the site of Vinča – Belo brdo. The site lies on the confluence of the Bolečica river into the Danube, c. 14 km from the Belgrade center. The site is approached from the southern side, where the imposing 10m high profile illustrates long habitation at this location, dating from Early Neolithic to modern times. The architectural remains from the Neolithic period are currently protected and not visible, but parts of the excavated structures as well as numerous artefacts are kept inside the on-site museum. Recently, in front of the museum a replica of the Late Neolithic house has been built. The site has a long tradition of site promoting and presentation organized both on and off site, in the form of variously themed exhibitions, practical workshops, virtual reconstructions, etc.² Open-aired archaeological parks, such as the examples of Stapari near Užice and Pločnik near Prokuplje, are based on the reconstruction of several dwellings in the vicinity of the prehistoric sites. House replicas are based on available archaeological data about size, organization, technique and tools available at that time, using resources from the local environment. At Pločnik, presentation to the wider public is achieved by reconstruction of five houses, each house illustrating different crafts - making of pottery vessels, textiles, copper smelting activities, etc. The idea of this project was to create a living museum on site, including museum building and open space classroom.³ At Stapari, four houses were built - the replicas of Neolithic and Bronze age structures. Similar to Pločnik, they would function as exhibition spaces and would be used for various workshops.⁴

In this paper, we will discuss a bit different approach to presentation of prehistoric settlement and Neolithic way of life that is based on the idea of *in situ* presentation of Late Neolithic architecture. Presenting Drenovac was a pioneering project in Serbia, as conservation of Neolithic houses, made of relatively unstable material, has not been done in the areas with continental climate and in this scale.

Drenovac and its Environs in the Middle Morava Valley, Serbia, Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade, University of Cambridge, Ghent University, University of St Andrews, University of Southampton (2020-2021).

² Filipović et al. 2018; Николић и др. 2008; Игњатовић и др. 2010; Тасић, Филиповић 2012.

³ Кузмановић-Цветковић 2013; 2014.

⁴ More information about the presentation of Stapari can be found at the following link: https://www.b92.net/putovanja/vesti.php?yyyy=2020&mm=09&dd=17&nav_id=1733736

THE SITE OF DRENOVAC: ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site of Drenovac is located near the city of Paraćin, in the Middle Morava Valley, central Serbia (**Fig. 1**). In this region, which represents a natural communication route (the Morava-Vardar corridor), more than 80 Neolithic sites are registered. Drenovac is a multilayered, deeply stratified site with the long occupation during the Early Neolithic-Starčevo culture (6100-5900 BC) and the Late Neolithic-Vinča culture (5300-4700/4500 BC). The site was recorded in 1966 and excavated on several occasions between 1968 and 1971.⁵ Archaeological Institute in Belgrade⁶ conducted more recent research, which started in 2004 and is still ongoing. Today, the site lies mostly on arable land and is cut in half by international highway E-75 (Niš-Belgrade). The size of the site exceeds 40ha, which place Drenovac as one of the largest Vinča settlements in Serbia.

Geophysical survey provided significant data on the Late Neolithic settlement size and layout (**Fig. 2**).⁷ In the surveyed area (2/3 of the site), around 600 anomalies of different dimensions and forms are registered. For the half of them, we can assume that were used as dwellings, most commonly 10-12 x 5 m in size, oriented southwest to northeast. Although there are some irregularities, the settlement layout shows a certain degree of planning - houses are densely arranged, set in parallel rows with the space between them of around 5-10 m. Within the settlement, there are also open space areas, probably used for communal activities. Three possible ditches were recorded around/within the settlement, possibly representing boundaries or were used to separate different parts of the settlement.⁸ According to the site size and number/size of the houses, the estimation is that, presumably, at least 2000 people lived in this settlement. They were farmers, with well-established practices of livestock management and land cultivation. Their diet was diverse, mostly based on animal meat (cattle, caprines, pig) and cultivated plants (hulled wheats, various legumes), with wild animals/plants and riverine resources (fish and mollusc) as an additional food supply.⁹ Other than agriculture, these people were very skilled in modifying clay, bone, stone and organic materials into artefacts used for everyday needs. The inhabitants of Late Neolithic Drenovac were not isolated, but were opened for contact with distant areas/people, judging by marine shell items and obsidian artefacts found in the settlement.¹⁰

⁵ Vetnić 1974.

⁶ Project director S. Perić.

⁷ Perić, Miletić 2019; Perić et al. 2016.

⁸ Perić 2017; Perić et al. 2020.

⁹ Обрадовић 2020; Dimitrijević 2021.

¹⁰ Vajčev, Stojanović 2016; Tripković, Milić 2016.

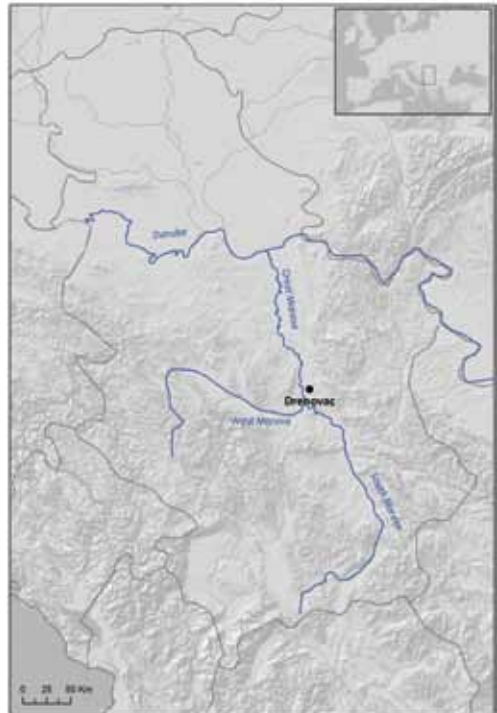


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Drenovac (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)



Fig. 2. Drenovac – geophysical plot (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION

The results of the geophysical survey enabled archaeologists to target specific locations for excavation (and future presentation). First large scale excavations in Drenovac were done with the goal to investigate three complete houses recorded on geomagnetic plan and the space between them¹¹ (**Shelter 1**, **Fig. 2**). During the excavations of this area, the initial step was done for preservation and future presentation of excavated remains, by building Shelter 1 in 2014, covering 1200 m² in total (**Fig. 3**). The protective structure comprises of arched girders made of glued laminated timber, covered with PVC membrane.¹² Installation of a shelter had three main purposes: 1) to facilitate further archaeological excavations, 2) to protect the remains from different agents of deterioration and 3) for presentation – as an on-site museum with *in situ* remains of Neolithic houses and their inventory.

Very important and necessary work that had to be done before the presentation is the process of conserving of the archaeological heritage.¹³ Along with excavations, the work on the assessment of the shelter's environment as well as the state of findings started

¹¹ Perić et al. 2017a; Perić et al. 2017b.

¹² This kind of architectural design is used mostly for Roman buildings in Serbia, which are made from the more solid material than Neolithic ones. For more information on shelters used at archaeological sites in Serbia, see Vasić-Petrović, Momčilović-Petronijević 2015.

¹³ Done within the project *Conservation, Restoration and Presentation of Neolithic Architecture in Drenovac*, funded by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia.

in 2014. Various specialist from Center for Conservation (CIK)¹⁴, Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade¹⁵ and National academy of arts, Sofia,¹⁶ worked on the best strategy for preservation and conservation of Neolithic houses. This included monitoring conditions of the environment and tests for the most effective procedures in order to propose the necessary conservation and restoration treatment. In 2016, The Center for Preventive conservation, from the Center for Conservation (CIK) introduced preventive conservation.¹⁷ The goal was to perform an initial condition survey and the assessment of the environment. Preventive conservation has been implemented on site (inside the shelter), during excava-



Fig. 3. Shelter 1, Drenovac, view from the south
(source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

tions, which required several steps: continual monitoring, evaluation, revision, planning, so as re-implementation. First steps included gathering information on the presence of solar radiation and values of relative humidity and temperature. Having in mind that discovered findings are in contact with oxygen and new, altered environmental conditions, they are subjected to the process of decay and are more prone to alterations. Climate conditions were monitored for one year and eight months, covering all four seasons. The analyses showed daily fluctuations in climatic conditions, which are the most frequent cause of damage to archaeological material. It is concluded that the shelter protects from atmospheric events, but not quite from temperature oscillations and humidity. Certain benefit was noted after additional protective constructions were installed (wooden frame with geotextiles) over the archaeological remains *in situ*.¹⁸

Intensive work on conservation of houses and their inventory¹⁹ started in 2017.²⁰ Before final consolidation, cleaning the dust and fixing the cracks was done (**Fig. 4a**). Cleaning and preparing for consolidation was a long term and tactile process, having in mind the great number of mobile finds inside the dwellings. Later Neolithic houses were built from light material in the wattle-and-daub technique, and since they were all burnt,

¹⁴ B. Lazarević-Tošović, M. Aleksić, N. Ćosić.

¹⁵ S. Đuričić.

¹⁶ V. Todorov.

¹⁷ Done by N. Ćosić.

¹⁸ Ćosić, Perić 2019.

¹⁹ Perić et al. 2019.

²⁰ Conservation of architectural remains was done by prof. dr Valentin Todorov, The Department of Restoration, National Academy of Art, Sofia, M. Matic, Regional museum Paraćin and Maria Slavkova, conservator.



Fig. 4. Process of cleaning (4a) and conservation (4b) of House 1, Drenovac (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

a large quantity of daub was preserved. This kind of material needed specific treatment, usually by different inorganic consolidants (Fig. 4b).²¹ The important issue that had to be taken into account was to preserve the original colour and texture.

After few years of the initial conservation, some minimal damage was noted – occasional cracks, fragmentation, the presence of vegetation. So far, this can be considered as a minor and manageable damage that can easily be repaired. In the future, we should define a plan of long-term control and maintenance (regular monitoring of the situation and periodic implementation of simple interventions aimed at slowing down the degradation process and preventing the deterioration of the findings). Also, having in mind fluctuations of temperature and humidity inside and outside the shelter and their impact on the preservation of the remains, we still need to find an appropriate solution for the effectiveness of the cover and the perspective for the long-term preservation of archaeological artefacts.

Aside from architecture, more than 200 pottery vessels found during excavations inside and in the immediate vicinity of the Shelter 1 needed conservation and/or restoration (Fig. 5).²² The idea is, after the treatment, to place them back to their original place of findings, inside the house, while a part of them will be displayed in on-site museum.

INSIDE THE SHELTER: PRESENTATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

Inside Shelter 1, two spatial units are distinguished (Fig. 6): 1) central part – a basin with the re-



Fig. 5. Conservation of a pottery vessel (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

²¹ Protectosil SH 100 proved to be the most effective.

²² The treatments were done in a cooperation with: M. Matić (Regional museum Paraćin), Z. Popović, M. Živković (CIK), B. Šarenac and M. Slavkova.



Fig. 6. Shelter 1, interior (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

mains of the houses - on excavation level, up to 2 m under the surface. This space is secured with retaining concrete wall and enclosed with a wooden fence; 2) open space, on the surface level, designed for communication, sighting and as an exhibition space.

Inside the basin, the remains of four²³ Late Neolithic houses are investigated and preserved for *in situ* presentation (Fig. 7). The idea was to present the part of the settlement – „a neighborhood” – as houses differ in preservation so each has a different feature visible and a story to tell. With the exhibiting a part of the densely packed settlement, where neighboring houses had to communicate and share immediate open spaces, we also aim to visualize communal life in the settlement.



Fig. 7. Shelter 1 with position of the houses, photographed during excavations (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

²³ Results of geophysical survey showed three anomalies (houses) within this space, but the excavations revealed remains of four houses.

All houses were burnt and partly destroyed by fire. First, what can be seen is their mutual relation – they are set up in a „block“ - parallel with each other, oriented south-west to northeast with the space between them of around 2-3 m. They were built in the wattle-and-daub technique with the floor out of compact clay, and had two or three rooms. Inside the houses, there are ovens, clay containers and grindstones with a clay receptacle. A pattern in an internal space organisation is suggested by the location of the ovens – always found next to the northern wall. Each house had a large number of pottery vessels of various types, size and use.²⁴

One house stands out for its remarkable preservation (House 1), thanks to the thick layer of colluvium that „sealed“ the remains soon after the dwelling was abandoned and burnt (Fig. 8). This house was a two-storey building with three separate rooms in the ground floor measuring 12 by 5 m in total. Two horseshoe-shaped ovens were found *in situ* on the ground-floor, while the remains of a third oven felt from the upper storey. This particular house provided an insight into common daily activities of the household residents: food-preparation activities are connected to the ovens and large number of different types of vessels and grindstones. Two locations with loom weights – one in western and one in the central room, are clear indications of space allocated for weaving. Four small clay tables were part of the house inventory, but their function and use is not clear. One of them was found along with the weights, which may indicate a certain connection between these artefacts within a specific activity.²⁵



Fig. 8. House 1, orthophoto (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

Beside the presentation of houses *in situ*, we made a reconstructed model of the Late Neolithic house (Fig. 9), which will be presented as part of the exhibition. The model was made based on the preserved elements of architecture of House 1, in 1:20 scale.²⁶ Some elements of reconstruction were clear – such as the size, two-storeys, interior space division, position of the ovens. And some features were done based on the assumption by ar-

²⁴ Perić et al. 2020.

²⁵ Perić et al. 2020; Perić, Bajčev 2021, 141.

²⁶ Done by the architect Nikola Jovanović.

chaeologists and architects - the entrance to the house, communication with upper storey, the appearance of the roof. This ideal model was made to „revive“ the house, to visualize destroyed elements of architecture to visitors and to bring them closer to the appearance of the houses (and settlement) back to 5000 BC. Having both the model and original *in situ* remains creates a better balance between what is known for sure and what is conjecture - between real



Fig. 9. Model of the Late Neolithic house (source: Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

and reimagined, stating the visitors clear what are the limits and process of archaeological interpretation. This approach can perhaps evoke more respect for the past and knowledge about the past, that sometimes contains more mysteries than answers.

While excavating, we decided not to investigate each house to the floor level, but to preserve and present the different phases of research. For example, House 1 was investigated to the floor level, to show space organisation and the division by partition walls; most of the fixed finds were left *in situ*, and part of the findings that were lifted up during excavations and afterwards conserved and/or reconstructed, will be returned to their original place of finding. In House 4, part of the destruction layer was left *in situ*, in order to demonstrate the existence of the upper storey. The goal of this kind of presentation is not just to show how people lived in the Neolithic, but also to document a process of archaeological research and interpretation.

Other than the presentation of Neolithic architecture *in situ* – the remains of houses and their inventory, different mediums are used to visualize material culture and provide information and data discovered by archaeologist. Along the basin side walls, canvases with photos of research and conservation of the houses are showing different phases of archaeological work. They also document some other objects that were investigated during rescue excavations. This solution has aesthetic function, on one side, because it revives the monochrome space around the houses, and on the other hand, it illustrates all phases of archaeological work before the final display of the house remains.

The project, which is currently in realization, represents the final stage in completing the presentation of Neolithic Drenovac in Shelter 1. Outside the basin, along the walls of a shelter, it is planned to set up an exhibition presenting the site and archaeological excavations and results. This way, the visitors – both specialist and general public will get familiar with history of research, important findings and different analyses done by the experts, which speak directly about the life of the inhabitants of the Late Neolithic Drenovac – environment, settlement organisation, demography and social organisation, economy, food practices, technology. Also, selected items will be displayed in glass showcases, with interpretation and various multimedia means. In the future, we plan to organise themed workshops which will involve visitors as active participants in exploring life in the Neolithic and the work of archaeologists.

Presentation of the site is still ongoing process – further work will include completion of construction and design for exhibition, but also – resolve the issues of management,

maintenance and financing. Today, Drenovac is opened for organized visits – in the last few years, there were several visits from local scientific and cultural institutions, as well as European universities and institutions. Also, it became a tradition during the excavation months for people from the local community to visit the site and ongoing excavations. A few exhibitions were organized in Drenovac and Paraćin, to spread the awareness and knowledge about the cultural heritage and its importance, life in the past and the archaeological practice to the locals.²⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Neolithic settlement in Drenovac is distinguished by its large size (over 40 ha), great level of preservation, and the long span of occupation, thus providing excellent conditions for research and presentation. Here, visitors have a unique opportunity to see the *in situ* remains of preserved Late Neolithic houses²⁸, having in mind that prehistoric settlements are rarely available for public visits. Moreover, this is the unique approach to the presentation of Late Neolithic currently available in Serbia. The environment of Drenovac site is not disturbed to a large degree, unlike many other prehistoric and historic archaeological sites endangered by modern development and pushed away from the ambient existed in the past. Today, the appearance of Neolithic site is obscured with Belgrade-Niš highway, which intersects the site in half, but being on site, one can still imagine and feel the landscape which Neolithic people inhabited and used. Showing both the artefacts as well as the archaeological site and its surroundings offers major advantages for interpretation. The site of Drenovac, with its 8000 years old settlement, can provide an opportunity for authentic tourist offers for visitors and a unique encounter with the past and archaeological practice.

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²⁷ It is important to mention the constant support of the Paraćin municipality during the years of research in Drenovac.

²⁸ In Shelter 1, the remains of four houses are excavated and conserved. On the other side of the highway, the foundations have been laid for Shelter 2 (Fig. 2), with the remains of four structures. The excavations of this area are in progress.

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Rezime:

NEOLITSKO NASELJE U DRENOVCU, SRBIJA

– OD ISKOPAVANJA DO PREZENTACIJE

Кljučне речи: Drenovac, neolit, kasnoneolitsko naselje, konzervacija arhitekture, muzej na lokalitetu, prezentacija *in situ*

Lokalitet Slatina-Turska česma u Drenovcu ima dugu istoriju istraživanja, počevši od šezdesetih godina XX veka. U poslednjih 18 godina se istražuje u okviru projekta *Stalna arheološka radionica – Srednje Podunavlje u neolitizaciji jugoistočne Evrope*. Projekat karakteriše multidisciplinarnost – uključeni su specijalisti iz raznih oblasti (geofizike, geoarheologije, arheobotanike, arheozoologije, konzervacije, i dr.) kako bi se ispitali različiti aspekti života stanovnika neolitskog naselja. Drenovac je veliki (preko 40 ha) i višeslojan lokalitet sa tragovima naseljavanja iz ranog neolita (starčevačka kultura, 6100-5900 p.n.e.) i kasnog neolita (vinčanska kultura, 5300-4700/4500 p.n.e.). Odlikuju ga izuzetno dobro očuvani arhitektonski ostaci iz perioda kasnog neolita, nenarušen pejzaž i lako dostupna lokacija - na trasi autoputa Beograd-Niš (E-75). Zbog svega navedenog, Drenovac se izdvaja po velikom turističkom potencijalu za interpretaciju i prezentaciju praistorijskog arheološkog nasleđa.

Nakon gotovo 10 godina kontinuiranog istraživanja, započet je projekat konzervacije i prezentacije ostataka neolitske arhitekture. Iznad dobro očuvanih ostataka četiri kasnoneolitske kuće je podignuta zaštitna konstrukcija – Balon 1; kuće su konzervirane i ispitan je uticaj uslova sredine (godišnje promene u vlažnosti i temperaturi) na njihovo očuvanje. Opremanje i formiranje izložbenog prostora oko neolitskih kuća je još u toku, ali je osmišljen kao deo koji bi posetiocima ispričao priču o istoriji jednog neolitskog naselja i aktivnostima u njemu (npr. šta su jeli i kako su pripremali hranu), kao i priču o uticaju čoveka na prirodnu okolinu - koliko se pejzaž izmenio od vremena neolita do danas i koliko je viševjekovno naseljavanje neolicihana igralo ulogu u tome. Osim prezentacije života u neolitskom naselju, cilj izložbe je i da se prikaže rad arheologa na otkrivanju prošlosti – od iskopavanja do interpretacije. Prikazivanje artefakata, kao i arheološkog nalazišta u njegovom prirodnom okruženju pruža velike prednosti za interpretaciju. Lokalitet Drenovac, sa naseljem starim 8000 godina, omogućava autentičnu ponudu za posetioce, uz jedinstven susret sa prošlošću i arheološkom praksom.