
Aleksandar Bandović
National Museum of Serbia
a.bandovic@narodnimuzej.rs

GRADIŠTE ABOVE THE CHURCH OF ST. ERASMUS NEAR OHRID: *ON THE TRAIL OF THE ILLYRIANS*

Abstract: The first excavations of Gradište near Ohrid Lake were conducted in 1931 and 1932 in a collaboration between the German Archaeological Institute and the National Museum in Belgrade (now the National Museum of Serbia). One of the first international projects was clearly linked to the prestigious finds at Trebenište during the First World War and the questions raised by this inventory. Based on various types of archival and documentary material, this study analyses different social and archaeological contexts of the Gradište excavations, as well as the motivations that brought together different parties in this joint endeavour. On the one hand, German archaeology was guided by the broad concept of “Nordic thought” and the belief that Gradište could be evidence of the Illyrian prehistoric migrations from Central to Southern Europe. On the other hand, by participating in the project the National Museum aimed to assert itself as the most prominent Yugoslav institution in the field of archaeology. Although the research results did not yield the expected outcomes, the subsequent reactions speak to the specific context in which archaeology found itself before the Second World War. Even though, at first glance, the excavations could be seen as irrelevant or marginal, their impact on Yugoslav archaeology and the way the Balkans were perceived by foreign researchers in contemporary and the following years is more than significant.

Keywords: History of archaeology, National Museum of Serbia, German Archaeological Institute, Illyrians, Iron Age, Hillforts, Nordic thought, Ohrid, Gradište, Trebenište.

The antiquities of Ohrid await a more diligent and prepared traveller than myself, for I have only recorded as much as I know, and that is not everything and not much (Нушић 1894, 72).

After a warm July day of archaeological work at the Krševica “Acropolis”, Petar Popović would often engage in discussions about various archaeological topics. As the team gathered for lunch in the kitchen of the village school in Žbevac, conversations would arise about Krševica itself and the ethnicity of its ancient inhabitants. The location of Krševica was contemplated in relation to its position “between the Celtic and Greek worlds,” prompting discussions about Celtic migrations and the conquests of Hellenistic rulers in the interior of the Balkans. Pera’s boyish curiosity extended to the history of archaeology, and it was through

his personal stories that I gained insights into the history of Serbian/Yugoslav archaeology. As a young researcher, I was fortunate to have Pera as a storyteller, and I eagerly listened to his accounts. These stories ignited my interest in the history of the discipline, and I am indebted to Pera for sparking my curiosity. Among the many tales he shared, one that stood out was the history of the research conducted on the Hellenistic fortress of Gradište above the church of St. Erasmus in Ohrid, northern Macedonia. Gradište is located above the road that connects Struga and Ohrid, with remains of the fortification being visible in the field and on satellite images (Fig. 1). The remains of the “cyclopean” ramparts, constructed using the *opus quadratum* technique, cover an approximately 10-hectare area (Битракова Грозданова 2017: 46-47). Today, these structures are also interpreted as the potential “tribal capital” of the upper Macedonian tribe known as Engelani or even as the town of



Fig.1. North Macedonia and the Lake Ohrid region

“Engelana” (Kuzman 2009: 38-1). Putting aside the semi-mythical nature of the Engelani tribe and the romantic interpretations of Polybius’ writings, it is evident that even in the present day, this archaeological site continues to generate curiosity. This is not surprising, as Hellenistic settlements remain a subject in which contemporary political and nationalistic perspectives intersect with archaeological interpretations (*see* Vranić 2014).

In my opinion, the history of archaeology can contribute to a reflective and relevant understanding of our scientific discipline. Although, until recently, the history of the discipline was regarded as a hobby for retired archaeologists, there has been a growing emphasis on the significance of this field of research in recent times (*e.g.*, Corbey and Roebroeks 2001; Kaeser 2008; Moro Abadía 2013). However, it is important to recognise that the history of archaeology should not be perceived as a linear progression of the discipline “from darkness to light.” Archaeologists now understand the importance of delving into dusty archives, examining private and official correspondence, studying notes and institutional decisions, and exploring archaeological and private diaries in order to gain insights into the development of archaeological ideas (Kaeser 2013; Schlanger 2002: 130). Let us approach the history of archaeology with an ‘ethnographic zeal,’ viewing it as a means to

understand and illuminate the ideas, practices, and cultural, social, and political contexts in which our predecessors created and worked. This perspective allows us to explore how archaeological knowledge was disseminated and shaped within these contexts (Schlanger 2002: 128; Hamilakis 2010): “Herodotus thought of historians as the guardians of memory, the memory of glorious deeds. I prefer to see historians as the guardians of awkward facts, the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory” (Burke 2011[1989]: 192).

Bearing this in mind, let us now revisit the research conducted on Gradište. The origins of this research date back to the period between the two world wars when the

National Museum in Belgrade held significant authority as the primary institution overseeing archaeological heritage in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Since there were no specific laws regarding the protection of cultural monuments at the time, the museum took on the dual role of safeguarding the heritage and functioning as a prominent scientific, educational, and propagandistic entity. Under the leadership of the art historian Vladimir Petković (1874-1956), the National Museum in Belgrade extended its activities and jurisdiction to encompass a wide region, including present-day Serbia, Kosovo and Metohija, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Aligned with the cultural policy prevalent in Yugoslavia, archaeological research in northern Macedonia served not only as a scientific endeavour but also as a socio-political project, integral to the overarching goal of “the people’s enlightenment” (*sensu* Jovanović 2014: 177-201). Soon, northern Macedonia became known as “the land of archaeologists”, “the real Eldorado” or “the archaeological California”. These poetic epithets romanticised and emphasised the role that archaeology played in the cultural and educational mission of the Yugoslav state in northern Macedonia (Bandović 2019: 32-35).¹ The most significant

¹ During the 1920s, a part of the territory of present-day North Macedonia was referred to as Southern Serbia, and later as the Vardar Banovina.

state archaeological project, which began between the two world wars, is undoubtedly the research of the ancient site of Stobi (Novaković 2011: 418). However, the excavations of Gradište above the Church of St. Erasmus hold a distinct place in the history of archaeology for a different reason. What sets Gradište's research apart is the fact that it was one of the earliest instances of international cooperation, specifically between the National Museum and the German Archaeological Institute (DAI). So, what drew the attention of archaeologists to this site, and how did this collaboration come about?

From Trebenište and Illyrians to Gradište

More than 100 years have elapsed since the discovery of the necropolis near Trebenište, which was first documented in a book authored by Bogdan Filow (1883-1945) and Karel Škorpil (1859-1944). The book, published in German by the prestigious publishing house Walter de Gruyter, was a lavish edition dedicated to Filow's mentor, Ernst Fabricius (1857-1942), a professor of Roman archaeology and history at the University of Freiburg (Filow und Schkorpil 1927). In 1918, a group of Bulgarian soldiers, under the leadership of Colonel Dimitar Mustakov (1874-1973), discovered five graves from the Iron Age containing magnificent grave goods. The excavations were subsequently continued by Karel Škorpil. While some of the finds from 1919 to 1921 were displayed at the National Museum in Sofia (Chukalev 2018: 17), it was the publication of the book rather than the exhibition that generated a particular sense of excitement among European archaeologists. The rich funerary finds, including gold masks, helmets, weapons, tools, luxurious bronze vessels, and other movable objects, sparked a debate regarding the ethnic identity of the individuals buried in the necropolis. Much speculation arose, suggesting "Greek mercenaries in the service of local tribes" (Filow), Illyrians (Dassaretæ) (Jacobsthal), and even Celts (Čajkanović) (Filow, Schkorpil 1927; Jacobsthal 1928; for Čajkanović see Палавестра 2000: 20). It has been speculated that these individuals were warriors who perished in battle, which could explain the absence of a corresponding settlement (Filow, Škorpil 1927: 3, n.6). Filow

and Škorpil were the first to draw attention to the similarities between the masks found at Trebenište and those from Mycenaean culture, even associating the depiction of lions in antithetical positions with the Lion's Gate in Mycenae (Filow, Škorpil 1927: VIII, 15-16). Similarly, British archaeologist Stanley Casson wrote about the "conservative nature of Macedonians and Illyrians," considering Ohrid and Mycenae as "two phases of the same culture" (Casson 1928: 270). The perception of Trebenište by German archaeologists, particularly Carl Schuchhardt (1859-1943), was of significant importance. Schuchhardt, educated as a philologist and classical archaeologist, possessed extensive experience in excavating prehistoric and ancient sites. In 1908, he was appointed as the director of the prehistoric department at the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin. Although in Germany he is considered one of the greatest opponents of Gustaf Kossinna (1858-1931) and his nationalist and racist perceptions of archaeology (Grünert 2002: 174-184; Bandović 2012: 640), even his "antipode" (Eggers 2010 [1959]: 268), Schuchhardt shared similar perspectives (Härke 1991: 205; Härke 1998: 21; Клейн 2000: 125; see Schuchhardt 1934: V; *contra* Roth 2020: 67, n. 283). Like Kossinna, Schuchhardt shared the belief that ethnic identity in prehistory could be determined through the analysis of pottery, which he considered to be the "finest seismograph for migrations" (*die-ser feinste Seismograph für Völkerbewegungen*) (Schuchhardt 1919: 296; cf. Kossinna 1911: 10). Unlike Kossinna, who placed the cradle of the "Indogermanen" (Indo-Europeans) in a small area of Northern Germany and Scandinavia (see Bandović 2012: 637-638), Schuchhardt located the cradle of the Indo-Europeans in Central Europe (Thuringia), suggesting their alleged origin from the Paleolithic population (Schuchhardt 1934: 73). Like many German archaeologists, Schuchhardt rebelled against the *ex oriente lux* theory and held the belief that migrations originating from Central and Northern Europe played a significant role in the development of Mediterranean civilizations. He saw these newcomers, despite their small numbers, as comparable to Alexander the Great and his elite army, asserting themselves as the "ruling nation" (*Herrenvolk*) (Schuchhardt 1919: 214; Schuchhardt 1935: 3-4, 250-251). According to Schuchhardt, the Illyrians played a very important

role in this process. He considered them to be the bearers of the “Band Ware” (*Bandkeramik*), who set out for Greece during the first invasion of the Indo-Germans, carrying the spiral motif on pottery vessels (Schuchhardt 1932: 343; Schuchhardt 1934a: 78). Judging by his character, even Odysseus, in his opinion, was an Illyrian king (Schuchhardt 1935: 254; Schuchhardt 1934b: XLIX–LIII).² In light of the findings from the Trebenište necropolis, Schuchhardt believed that the occurrence of death masks was an old Illyrian custom, present wherever the Illyrians were or wherever they spread their influence, from Mycenae through Kleinklein to Trebenište (Schuchhardt 1934a: 78, 182; Schuchhardt 1935: 253). No doubt it was one of the variants of “Nordic thought” (*Nordische Gedanke*), a subtle identity myth woven into the prevailing academic discourse (see Клейн 2000: 125). Essentially, it was a Eurocentric, migrationist, and colonial perspective on prehistory, serving as a symbolic appropriation of Mediterranean classical civilizations, which were attributed to the influence and origins from Central and Northern Europe. Following the *Machtergreifung*, this ideological viewpoint would thrive, giving rise to the ideological myth of the Nordic Mediterranean (Chapoutot 2016: 51–97).

The perception of the book about Trebenište in the National Museum in Belgrade was markedly different. Miodrag Grbić, a young curator and prehistorian who had been educated in Prague under Lubor Niederle (1865–1944) and Albín Stocký (1876–1934), strongly reacted to the situation. Alongside director Vladimir Petković, he accused the Bulgarians of disregarding the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine (article 126). They demanded that the finds be handed over to the National Museum in Belgrade. Grbić publicly voiced this request by delivering a lecture on Trebenište and

publishing an op-ed in the newspaper *Politika*. In his article, he stated, “Mr. Filow’s book is an excellent archaeological study, but Bulgarian scholars have erred by neglecting the regulations of the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine. These regulations demand scientific objectivity and prohibit the appropriation of other people’s archaeological treasures, which rightfully belong in one of our museums” (*Политика* 19.1.1928). However, the note in protest addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Yugoslav Embassy in Sofia was not met with support. A few years later, when a new display was implemented in the Museum of Prince Paul, Grbić repeatedly requested the return of the finds from Sofia. In response, the museum’s new director, Milan Kašanin, wrote that they should not insist on the Bulgarian government returning the Trebenište finds, considering the fortunate circumstance in which they were discovered by the Bulgarians themselves.³

Parallel to Grbić’s claims for the return of the Trebenište finds from Bulgaria, the National Museum in Belgrade was engaged in preparations for excavations in the vicinity of Ohrid (Bandović 2019: 89). However, the Museum was not the sole stakeholder interested in excavations in Trebenište. Nikola Vulić (1872–1945), educated as a historian but driven by a passion for archaeology, was also preparing to participate in the archaeological race in Macedonia. Vulić’s involvement in the Trebenište excavations also highlighted the significant disputes over various responsibilities that existed between the Serbian Royal Academy and the National Museum in Belgrade (Bandović 2019: 90–91). During the 1920s, Vulić dedicated his summers to tirelessly searching for archaeological sites in northern Macedonia. Alongside Milovan Kokić (1885–1950), who served as the museum trustee and later became the curator of the Museum of Southern Serbia, Vulić embarked on a comprehensive tour of Macedonia, tirelessly searching for epigraphic finds and ancient sites (Вулић 1928). Simultaneously, Vulić diligently popularised archaeology by delivering public lectures and writing articles for popular magazines and newspapers (Љубомировић 2013: 193–209). Unlike Grbić and Petković, Vulić was among the intellectuals who advocated the idea of fostering closer ties between

² While Odysseus was “undoubtedly the true Illyrian, one should not imagine the character of the ancient Greeks based on his appearance” according to Schuchhardt’s opinion “The true Greeks, after the northern invasions, the so-called “Germano-Greeks,” are Achilles, Ajax and Diomedes, who always attack from the front, never cease the fight until they have achieved victory, and become highly unforgiving when they feel their rights have been infringed upon.” (Schuchhardt 1934b: LIII). Schuchhardt’s words can be seen as reflecting a time when there was an invitation for the mobilisation of “Germano-Greeks” and can be seen as an example of the appropriation of classical heritage through a “Nordic perspective”.

³ ANM, br. 716, 20.11.1935.

Yugoslavia and Bulgaria (Љубомировић 2013: 41; Новак 1958: LXVI– LXVII).⁴ Prior to the start of World War II, Vulić strongly opposed the Macedonian emancipatory movement, refusing to acknowledge the existence of Macedonia and the Macedonians. He openly engaged in debates with members of the movement, often referring to them as “ignorant and dreamers” (Katardžiev 1981: 39; Време 16.11.1939; see Новак 1958: XXX).

During that period, another participant emerged on the scene who would later become a prominent figure in the archaeological race in northern Macedonia. This was Johann Albrecht von Reiszitz (1899-1962), a baron and autodidact (Fig. 2) who began to crystallise his romantic view of the Balkans during his travels around Yugoslavia during the 1920s. In his academic pursuits, Reiszitz explored various areas of interest, eventually obtaining a doctorate with a dissertation focused on Schopenhauer (Roth 2020: 31–32). From 1924, Reiszitz was a regular visitor to Yugoslavia, nurturing a correspondence with a circle of scholars dealing with the history, geography or folklore of Southeast Europe – such as Hermann Wendel (1884-1936) or Gerhard Gesemann (1888-1948). He was well acquainted with the work of Jovan Cvijić (1865-1927), whose work he wanted to translate and publish in Germany (Roth 2020: 43–49). Between 1926 and 1928, Reiszitz became interested in various historical aspects of Serbian-German relations, the history of *Bogomil* as well as the Illyrian question. Despite displaying contempt and employing a set of stereotypes towards Bulgarians, he regarded Filow’s book as a “Great book on Ohrid Lake” (*das große Buch über den Ohrid See*). In accordance with his interests, Ohrid became his passion (Roth 2020, 69). In the following years, Reiszitz became acquainted with Schuchhardt’s work, accepting ideas about the northern origin of the Illyrians and their importance for the process of the “Indo-Germanisation” of the Balkan Peninsula (Roth 2020: 67-68). He developed a deep admiration for Schuchhardt’s

work, as indicated by the fact that he referred to him as “Papa Schuchhardt” in private correspondence, suggesting his high regard for Schuchhardt’s significance and authority (Bandović 2019: 90).



Fig.2. Johan Albrecht von Reiszitz, passport 1925

Reiszitz visited Ohrid in 1928 and 1929, where by visiting the remnants of the past in the vicinity of Ohrid he prepared the terrain. In addition to the assistance of local professor Lazar Jovančić (1893-1977), who brought his attention to the Gradište site, which Reiszitz believed to be the remains of an “archaic settlement with the remains of Cyclops ramparts”, Reiszitz also conducted a thorough study of Filow’s book (Roth 2020: 69, 74-75).⁵ Based on the notes he gathered, Reiszitz also made use of the book “On the Shores of Lake Ohrid” by Branislav Nušić (1864-1938) as a guide

⁴ In the context of Trebeništa Vulić, after the discovery of grave VIII near Gorenci, thought that: “The Bulgarian government will likely not pose any obstacles and will return them to the Belgrade Museum. However, even if the Bulgarian government does not return these objects, our museum will still have a significantly larger collection of this kind, even after considering what they have excavated here” (Politika 18.7.1930).

⁵ Mündlicher Bericht an die Adresse des Herrn Professor Dr.VI.Petković gelegentlich des Archäologenkongresses in Berlin, April 1929, ANM, The legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiszitz

book (Нушић 1894).⁶ As he later expressed in a letter, he had the intention of conducting a thorough investigation of the “dark history of Ohrid” using a shovel (Roth 2020: 60). In addition to his field activities, Reiszvitz concurrently expanded his circle of acquaintances and quickly established himself as a liaison between the National Museum and the German Archaeological Institute, whose director at the time was Gerhart Rodenwaldt (1886-1945). In that context, thanks to Herman Wendel, Reiszvitz made contact with Vladimir Petković (Roth 2020: 73).⁷ Coincidentally, during the same period, Petković recognised the value of involving the German Archaeological Institute in the research project in Macedonia. Having such a strong ally in local disputes with the Serbian Royal Academy and broader Balkan disagreements with Bulgaria was an opportunity that Petković did not want to miss (Bandović 2019: 90-91). Simultaneously, the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) clearly recognised the interest and potential for mutual cooperation. Led by Rodenwaldt in the 1920s, the DAI aimed to expand its sphere of influence and broaden the scope of its archaeological excavations. In this context, archaeologists saw themselves as cultural ambassadors of Germany and as reconnaissance men, national *Kulturagenten* in service of *Kulturpolitik* (Marchand 1996: 279). Another crucial factor during that time was the enduring rivalry among the great powers, along with the involvement of British archaeologists and financiers in Miloje Vasić’s (Miloje Vasić, 1869-1956) excavations in Vinča (*see* Palavestra 2020: 64-79). This presence further intensified the pressure on German archaeologists to secure a concession for excavations near Ohrid (Roth 2020: 90; compare Marchand 1996: 279). Around the same time, the American expedition to Europe, led by Vladimir Fewkes (1901-1941), initiated negotiations with the National Museum in Belgrade to commence excavations at Starčevo, a Neolithic site that held the potential to shed light on significant questions regarding European prehistory (Bandović 2019:

96-106). This convergence of archaeological endeavours created a sort of gathering at the crossroads, as archaeologists perceived the position of the Balkans and Yugoslavia at that moment.

Excavations at Gradište and the Echoes of the Spade

Although the contract between the National Museum and DAI was signed in September 1929, the German archaeological expedition had to wait for two more years before the excavations could begin. As per the contract, which was approved by Božidar Maksimović (1886-1969), the former Minister of Education in the Yugoslav government, the National Museum retained ownership of the archaeological finds, while the right to publish belonged to DAI. Additionally, an agreement was made with the museum in Belgrade to provide “duplicates” of the finds to the museum in Berlin. The contract also involved the employment of Yugoslav workers for the archaeological excavation.⁸

In June 1930, Nikola Vulić embarked on his quest for the “capital” in the “Valley of the Kings” (Vreme 22.6.1930). The reference to the “Valley of the Kings”, whether in a journalistic or Vulić’s context, indicates a profound and romantic appreciation for Howard Carter’s momentous discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922.⁹ For Vulić, who delivered a public lecture about Tutankhamun’s tomb “before all of Belgrade,” Carter’s discovery was akin to “a tale from One Thousand and One Nights... a fairy world... none of the archaeological explorations was as romantic as that (Правда 7.2.1927). Three years later, in the village of Gorenci, Vulić discovered another “princely grave” (VIII), and the sensation, reminiscent of Carter’s discoveries, reached London in December of the same year (Illustrated London News 27.12.1930).

⁶ Zur Geschichte des Ohrida-See-Gebietes, undated, ANM, The legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiszvitz. Lazar Jovančić wrote one of the first popular science books about the origin of humans, *Traces of the First People* (Јованчић 1933).

⁷ Wendel was a historian, travel writer and politician. His travelogues about the Balkans were of a significantly different sensibility than those of his contemporaries and without stereotypical images of the Balkans (Abramović 2013).

⁸ ANM, br. 658, 5.10.1929, Document of the Ministry of Education PBr. 21360, 30.8.1929 and draft contract on excavation of Gradište near Ohrid.

⁹ For example, Midorag Grbić writes in his autobiography “Lights under the Ground”: “During my studies, the marvellous archaeological discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in Egypt echoed throughout the world.” (Грбић 1956)

Vulić and Milovan Kokić¹⁰ discovered the grave together after conducting brief excavations in the same area where Bulgarian soldiers and Škorpil had previously dug in 1918. It was Budimir Buda Borislavljević, a former Župan (administrative head of a district) of the Bitol district, a lawyer, and one of the museum trustees, who recognised the burial site and informed Vulić (Krstić 2018: 21). At first, Vulić interpreted the identity of the deceased in line with Filow, considering them soldiers who had fallen in battle. The question of the ethnicity of the warriors remained open, but Vulić doubted the idea of Greek mercenaries fighting for the local tribes (Vulić 1930: 299).

As historian Andreas Roth has already pointed out, immediately after Vulić's discovery, Gerhart Rodenwaldt gave an interview to Belgrade Politika (2020: 101-102). In the interview, Rodenwaldt acknowledged that they (DAI) "received the news about the famous Trebenište discovery of our colleague Vulić with great joy, and we cordially congratulate him on his great success." During the interview, Rodenwaldt emphasised their intention to "clarify very useful historical facts" and stated that they did not expect to discover splendid finds similar to those at Trebenište. However, it is possible to interpret the matter differently. It is highly likely that archaeologists, including Vulić, actually anticipated finding the richest artifacts within the settlement, contrary to Rodenwaldt's claims. As previously mentioned, since Filow's publication of the findings, Trebenište had been compared to Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries in Mycenae. It can be assumed that archaeologists expected to find the richest artifacts *intra muros*, just like in Grave Circle A in Mycenae (Bandović 2019: 89).

Setting aside this hypothesis, it is crucial to note that neither the DAI, the museum, nor Reiszvitz were pleased with Vulić's success. Reiszvitz, for instance, wrote in his notes that Vulić "had taken over the supremacy of Ohrid". Concerns also arose due to Vulić's intention to search for the settlement of the princess buried in the necropolis. There were anxieties that this pursuit might endanger the

concession (see Roth 2020: 102). Nevertheless, Reiszvitz still held out hope that the excavation of Gradište would contribute to a "true understanding of the Trebenište findings." (Bandović 2020: 90). Great interest in the excavations by German and Yugoslav archaeologists is confirmed by a letter from Gerhard Bersu (1889-1964), the second director of the DAI, addressed to the future head of excavations Wilhelm Unverzagt (1892-1971): "About Lake Ohrid, I will provide you with a verbal report. I have heard very interesting things from Abramić and Saria."¹¹

Unverzagt was chosen as the director of the excavations at Gradište due to his extensive experience as a field researcher. He had succeeded Schuhhardt as the Director of the Prehistoric Department at the Museum für Völkerkunde and had a long-standing collaboration with him. Unverzagt became a full member of the DAI in 1927. Together with Schuhhardt, he co-founded the Association for Research into Pre- and protohistoric Fortifications in Northern and Eastern Germany (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft für die Erforschung der nord- und ostdeutschen vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Wall- und Wehranlagen*). This association aimed to conduct interdisciplinary research on the settlements and boundaries of Slavic and Germanic tribes based on the ethnic interpretation of archaeological findings. It is important to note that this organisation had a strong ideological basis and focused on Eastern research (*Ostforschung*) (Saalman 2017: 850-853; Fehr 2004: 203, 206-207). Unverzagt considered the excavations at Ohrid to be of significant importance for studying the relationships between the "Greek-Aegean world" and the "Illyrian-Thracian hinterland". In Christine Kott's recent work on "Kunstschutz im Zeichen des totalen Krieges", she reveals the content of a letter sent by Unverzagt to the Emergency Association of German Science (*Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft*). In this letter, Unverzagt emphasised the importance of cooperation between Yugoslav and German science, particularly in light of the potential risk if American aid to Yugoslav archaeology were to precede German participation (Kott 2017: 250-251). He certainly alluded to the American expedition

¹⁰ Svetozar Radojčić (1909-1978), under the initials S. R., published a short note in *Starinar* after Kokić's death. Radojčić refers to him as the "right hand of Professor Vulić" and states that this teacher from Prilep had the most credit, among others, for the large lapidary of the museum in Skopje (Радочић 1951, 356)

¹¹ Bersu to Unverzagt, 10.09.30, Archiv RGK, Akte 1244. Bersu mentioned Mihovil Abramić (1844-1962) and Baludin Saria (1893-1974).

to Central Europe led by Vladimir Fewkes (1901-1941). Competition was set as an important motivation for the whole story but also as a convenient way to obtain funds for excavations. Unverzagt was well known as a person who did not question how the funds for excavation were obtained, offering in return a “völkisch” agenda and nationalist narratives (Saalman 2017: 852).

The German archaeological expedition finally set out for Yugoslavia in the spring of 1931. In addition to Reiszvitz and Unverzagt, the German team also included Josef Franz Keller (1902–1982), while Miodrag Grbić represented the National Museum in the field. Interestingly, before the start of the excavation, Reiszvitz sent a letter/travel guide to Unverzagt, suggesting where he should stay in Belgrade, Skopje, and Ohrid. He also rec-

and Unverzagt wearing spring coats and hats. According to the report, their expectations were that “under the ruins of Gradište they would find a city where the dead from the necropolis near Trebenište had their homes and from where they ruled the valley” (Politika, April 15, 1931). Ten days later, Politika announced that the German expedition had discovered three prehistoric cities, and excavations at Gradište (St. Erasmus) were scheduled to begin in September of the same year (Politika, April 25, 1931). The political potential and propaganda value of the Ohrid excavations, as well as the desire to please the Yugoslav press, were evident in Unverzagt’s statement: “After the Roman epoch that maintained order and peace in Macedonia for centuries, the Yugoslav epoch is coming, which puts an end to the unfortunate



Fig.3. German archaeological expedition at Gradište, May 1930.
1. Johan Albrecht von Reiszvitz 2. Wilhelm Unverzagt 3. Georg Caro
4. Franz Josef Keller 5. Miodrag Grbić (after Kott 2017)

ommended taverns (kafanas) to him and, based on his rich experience, wrote: “Anyone who has visited Belgrade and Yugoslavia and has not dined in Tri Šešira has not truly experienced Yugoslavia.”¹²

On April 15, 1931, the newspaper Politika reported on the arrival of the German expedition delegates. A photo was taken at the train station in Belgrade, capturing Reiszvitz, Grbić,

setbacks to which Southern Serbia has been exposed for centuries” (Politika, May 6, 1931). In addition to field surveys, the archaeologists also undertook excavations at three archaeological sites, indicating settlements from different periods, ranging from the Neolithic to the Roman period. These sites were Trebeniško Kale, Lakočeri, and Gradište, with Gradište showing the greatest potential (Politika 6.5.1931).

Based on the information provided, it appears that Unverzagt had doubts about the interpreta-

¹² Reiszvitz to Unverzagt, without a date, ANM, Legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiszvitz

tion of the findings at the excavation site. In a letter to Bersu, he expressed uncertainty and decided to break the contract by taking pottery samples to Berlin for further analysis. Unverzagt assumed that the pottery might have a Hellenistic provenance, and he believed that the Serbs were not well versed in this area of study (Roth 2020: 105-106).¹³

But how did the representative of the National Museum, Miodrag Grbić, cope with the German expedition? Indirectly, we learn from a letter that Vladimir Petković sent to Grbić from Stobi, where he led the excavations. Grbić was initially unsure of his position, but he had the impression that the Germans were becoming more receptive. Petković expressed his confidence in Grbić's ability to keep the Germans satisfied, stating, "I had no doubt that you would do everything to keep the Germans, who were with you in company, satisfied." Petković believed that Grbić may have misunderstood some gossip or rumours that led to initial distrust from the Germans. He reassured Grbić that it was known for Germans to be reserved and distant at the beginning of acquaintances, but he was glad to hear that Grbić was able to soften their attitude.¹⁴ Grbić had already established contacts that would continue for the next decade and, according to the same letter, he had plans to travel abroad. While at Gradište, Grbić had the opportunity to meet Georg Karo (1872-1963), who was en route to Athens (Fig. 3).¹⁵ This meeting proved beneficial as it eventually helped Grbić secure a DAI scholarship to Athens in 1934 (Bandović 2019, 118–121). Initially, Grbić had a promising relationship with Unverzagt, and as a memento of their first joint trip to Ohrid, Unverzagt sent him the book "Archaeological Discoveries in the 20th Century" (Archäologische Entdeckungen im XX Jahrhundert, Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski).¹⁶

Although the archaeologists had anticipated that full-scale excavations would proceed from September 1931, they had to wait for an entire year. It is interesting to note that during this interim period, Grbić took proactive measures to protect

all potential DAI sites. He did so by advocating police supervision and coordinating with the municipal authorities in Ohrid (Bandović 2019: 93).

German archaeologists returned to Yugoslavia in the spring of 1932. Reiszvitz, having obtained a *Laissez Passer* (a diplomatic travel document) from the Yugoslav embassy, travelled to Yugoslavia for the purpose of "scientific research in the Kingdom."¹⁷ Predrag Milojević (1901-1999), a journalist of *Politika* and a friend of Reiszvitz, informed readers about the return of the German delegation to Yugoslavia.¹⁸ Milojević also conveyed several important ideas of Unverzagt that would appear as recurring motifs in the narratives about the excavations at Gradište. Besides emphasising the significance of the Yugoslav region for understanding key aspects of European prehistory, Unverzagt stated, "We in Germany are particularly interested in the history of the Illyrians, as their influence has been traced as far as the Lusatian area in Germany" (*Politika* 1.4.1932). It was Schuchhardt's postulate that Reiszvitz would later explain in the article "On the Trail of the Illyrians" (*Auf den Spuren der Illyrer*) for *Deutschen Allgemeinen Zeitung (DAZ)*, connecting the Illyrians from south-eastern Germany, Pomerania, and Lausitz with the "Balkan" Illyrians: "...before their migration to the south, which may have occurred around the turn of the second to the first millennium BC, Illyrians settled in eastern and south-eastern Germany, in Pomerania and Lusatia. With 'Gradište' near St. Erasmus, we seem to have one, if not the southeasternmost, point where Illyrian tribes built their fortresses." (*Deutschen Allgemeinen Zeitung* 18.08.1932).

However, the results of the research in 1932 were much more modest than the expectations of German archaeologists. They discovered a later fortification from the Hellenistic period (Fig. 4) that could not be connected in any way with the Trebenište necropolis or the "northern" Illyrians. Nevertheless, for the public (Fig. 5), archaeologists appeared satisfied with the excavations and quickly provided an answer: "that Gradište played an extraordinarily large, and perhaps crucial, role in the struggle between Macedonia and Rome"

¹³ Unverzagt to Bersu, Archiv RGK, Akte 1244, 28.04.31

¹⁴ Petković to Grbić, 14.5.1931, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund

¹⁵ Karo to Grbić, 8.5.1931, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund

¹⁶ Unverzagt to Grbić, 9.7.1931, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund g Grbić

¹⁷ *Laissez Passer*, 17.3.1932, ANM, Legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiszvitz

¹⁸ Milojević to Reiszvitz, 2.4.1932, ANM, Legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiszvitz

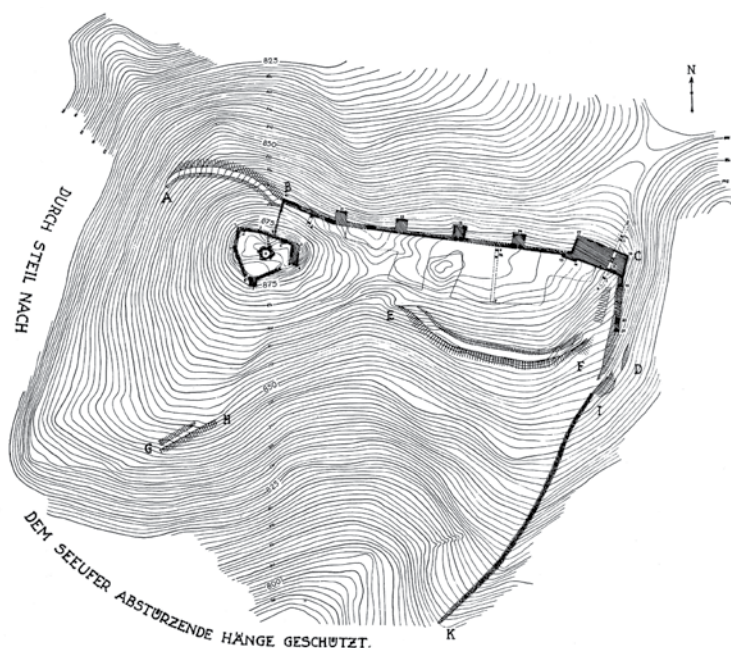


Fig. 4. Plan of Gradište (after Unverzagt 1953)

(Politika, May 5, 1932; Pravda, May 15, 1932). It was evident that war and conflict were a narrative that Unverzagt liked to exploit. As Susan Grunwald writes about the Zantoch excavations that Unverzagt started the same year: “He successfully applied for funding for the project with the argument of the everlasting struggle to control Zantoch.” (Grunwald 2019: 87).

The visit of the American expedition to the German excavations in Ohrid is indicative and speaks very clearly of the rivalry that existed between the foreign expeditions. The director of the expedition, Vladimir Fewkes and Robert Ehrlich (1908-1992), together with Grbić, began excavating Starčevo in 1931. The following year they were joined by Hetty Goldman (1881-1972), as an experienced connoisseur of Aegean prehistory. Their intention was to establish a missing link between Central and South-eastern Europe in the Neolithic period and to establish a relative chronology (Bandović 2019: 97–98). The visit of the American expedition to the German excavations took place in May 1932. Some comments that Fewkes wrote about the visit in the logbook speak of an unpleasant atmosphere: “Excellent fish dinner in unpleasant German surroundings.” However, the American expedition also had its plans in Ohrid, as Fewkes stated, “We know from the work of Vulić

and the German Expedition that this is a promising region for us” (Roth 2020: 107-108). While Fewkes had a good opinion of the German excavation methodology, he had a negative view of the Bulgarian and Vulić excavations. He wrote, “What a lousy job... Awful methods visible” (Roth 2020, 108). Caught in the crossfire, Grbić, as a member of both expeditions, faced objections from both sides. For example, Unverzagt furiously accused him of being to blame for all the events, stating, “You are to blame for all of these occurrences, as you called the Americans to Ohrid and neglected our excavation from the moment the Americans appeared in Ohrid.” On the other hand, Unverzagt sought guarantees that the Ohrid area would remain reserved for the German expedition: “Since

it is undoubtedly in both of our interests, for the sake of our scientific community and further development of good relations, to settle this unpleasant matter, I kindly request that we put an end to all the discord. Engaging in further disputes would only create more inconvenience. I have never had any doubts about the sincerity of your statement, made on behalf of Director Petković, that the surroundings of Ohrid will remain reserved for us”.¹⁹

Unverzagt’s reaction to Vulić’s new discoveries in July 1932 (see Krstić 2018, 24; Vulić 1933) is particularly interesting. He could not hide his surprise when he learned about the discovery from the newspaper rather than from Grbić or Vulić themselves. Furthermore, he expressed disappointment that the Belgrade newspapers did not provide any coverage of the German excavations. Unverzagt believed that such an approach was not conducive to raising funds for future excavations in Ohrid.²⁰

What contributed to Unverzagt changing his tone and mood in the following months was the shipment of six boxes of pottery to the Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde in Berlin. This fulfilled his primary idea, which he had conceived after

¹⁹ Unverzagt to Grbić, 15.6.1932, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund

²⁰ Unverzagt to Grbić, 13.8.1932, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund

the first campaign in Gradište. Unverzagt desired to have Robert Zahn (1870-1945), whom he considered the best expert in the field, examine and process the ceramics from “Gradište”.²¹ Based on the decision of curators and the director of the National Museum, Miodrag Grbić, Jozo Petrović, and Vladimir Petković, it was concluded that the ceramics from Gradište had “no material or scientific value.” As a result, the Museum sent six boxes of pottery fragments to Berlin, under the condition that they would be returned after processing. However, over time, this transaction was forgotten, and the National Museum in Belgrade never requested the findings again (Bandović 2019: 94-95).

In 1933, although the excavations did not continue, Reiswitz still had Gradište on his mind. While reading *Politika*, Reiswitz wrote to Unverzagt mentioning that he observed “a lot of funny things politically,” but he did not come across any new information regarding “Vulić’s actions.” However, he expressed his unease, stating that his “nerve vagus” tormented him “with the idea that Vulić might be excavating beneath their Gradište or that something significant might be happening there. Perhaps Grbić climbs up to Trebenište with Miss Goldman”²². In the same year, Vulić’s text about his discoveries from 1932 was published, where he made reference to the German excavations and expressed a certain level of satisfaction. He wrote: “This year, some German archaeologists excavated an ancient city on a hill near Trebenište. They uncovered impressive walls, the remnants of a grand fortress. However, it is certain that the remains of the city whose inhabitants were buried in the necropolis near Trebenište should not be attributed to these ruins” (Вулић 1933: 29).

Unsurprisingly, in 1934, Vulić received a letter from Carl Schuchhardt sending him his Illyrian lecture (*Illyrier-Vortrag*)²³ and acknowledging that Vulić’s Trebenište graves provided the first explanation of the relationship between Mycenae and Illyria. Among other things, Schuchhardt thanks Vulić for the report about Trebenište and acknowl-

edges that the opinion he expressed in the lecture on the relationship between Illyria and Mycenae has now become a widely accepted view: “When E. Pernice (Greifswald) reviewed Filow’s publication, he explained that Filow’s belief in ancient Greek influence on Lake Ohrid must be reversed: the custom of producing gold masks, breastplates, and gloves for bodies found in Mycenaean graves originated from northern regions and continued to be practiced at Lake Ohrid by noble families until the 6th century BC. Wilamowitz, in his work “*Der Glaube der Hellenen*,” incorporated this perspective and attempted to explore the Illyrians’ belief in the gods during the final four weeks of his life.”²⁴

For now, setting aside Vulić’s opinion about Schuchhardt’s letter and the interpretation of the discovery, new archaeological finds from Macedonia sparked the imagination and curiosity of German explorers. However, subsequent attempts to continue the excavations of Gradište were unsuccessful. Grbić, Unverzagt, and Reiswitz maintained their correspondence, hoping for the continuation of archaeological work. The “great political upheaval,” as Reiswitz referred to the rise of Hitler to power in a positive letter (Bandović 2019: 118), also had an impact on their plans for the future. That same year, the museum commissioner Buda Borisavljević inquired why there were no Germans in Macedonia. In a letter to Grbić, he stated, “No Germans this year. Hitler must have interfered with their plans and spent the loan on cannons, machine guns, rifles, and poisonous gases because they are more contemporary goods than ‘old pots’ and statues. Such is the age”.²⁵

Despite various attempts and plans to resume the excavations until 1940, they were not realised due to tense political circumstances. However, Unverzagt remained determined to continue excavating in Ohrid, even after Bulgaria annexed Macedonia in 1941. A map, hand-drawn by Unverzagt, depicting the division of the Ohrid area between Italy and Bulgaria, reveals his unscrupulousness (Koth 2017: 253, fig. 4). During

²¹ Unverzagt to Grbić, 13. 8.1932, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund

²² Reiswitz to Unverzagt, concept, 6.8.1933, ANM, Legacy of Johann Albrecht von Reiswitz

²³ Schuchhardt is addressing his lecture *Die frühesten Herren von Ostdeutschland* (Schuchhardt 1934b)

²⁴ SASA Archive, 10331/517, Schuchhardt to Vulić, 22.5.1934. Most cordially, I give my gratitude to Mario Lončarić, who managed to transcribe the letter written in *Kurrent*. Schuchhardt mentioned Erich Pernice and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in his letter.

²⁵ Borisavljević to Grbić, 20.10.1933, SASA Archive in Sremski Karlovci, Miodrag Grbić Fund.

the war, Reiswitz, serving as a military adviser (*Kriegsverwaltungsrat*) at the military administrative headquarters in Belgrade, also expressed his interest in excavating Ohrid (*unserem alten Grabungsgebiet Makedoniens in Ohrid*), aiming to expand his area of expertise (Bandović 2019: 149).

As the war approached, Nikola Vulić frequently addressed the issue of Illyrians. He criticised Schuchhardt on multiple occasions, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly without mentioning his name. In the journal “Srpski književni glasnik” (Serbian Literary Herald), he sarcastically commented that the ideas about the Illyrians “are in great fashion among modern scholars (...) Today, according to these scientists, almost everything can be attributed to the Illyrians”. Mocking the “Illyrian hypotheses” and highlighting the exaggerated importance attributed to the Illyrians, Vulić further remarked, “Undoubtedly, all these hypotheses are very interesting, but they remain mere speculations in the absence of concrete evidence. Archaeologists, in their eagerness to fill gaps, often come up with witty hypotheses that can be impressive. With the endorsement of esteemed scholars, such hypotheses are readily embraced and quickly disseminated” (Vulić 1938, 378). However, in the *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* (Yugoslav Historical Journal), Vulić engaged in an open argument with Schuchhardt. In his review of several of Schuchhardt’s works, Vulić boldly stated that “there is a lot of fantasy” (Vulić 1939a: 248). Commenting on Schuchhardt’s idea about Odysseus being Illyrian, Vulić expressed his perspective by saying: “Odysseus is, according to Schuchhardt, “Iliros,” and the story of the Odysseus is of Illyrian origin. This story shares many similarities with Nordic tales, and the Illyrians are said to have come from the northern regions to the later Illyrian lands, which include the Ionian Islands. Illyrian influence even reached Crete and even Malta. The booklet is full of spirit and wit, but it is difficult to accept the results that are obtained in it.” (Vulić 1939b: 300).

Vulić’s critique of Schuchhardt was driven by his anti-Nazi attitude, which he strongly held. While it raises the question of how effective irony is in combating mythomania, it is clear that Vulić’s anti-Nazi views were recognised by some German archaeologists even before the outbreak of World War II (Gašić 2005: 190; Bandović 2019:

142). On the other hand, Schuchhardt, as the president of the Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory (*Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*), was involved in the expulsion of anthropologist Franz Boas from the society in 1938. Boas was expelled on the grounds that he was Jewish and considered an enemy of Germany (Marshall 2013).

Epilogue and Conclusion

During World War II, the roles and affiliations of the individuals involved underwent significant changes. Reiswitz assumed the position of a major at the military-administrative headquarters, where he was entrusted with the task of safeguarding cultural and artistic monuments (*Kunst und Denkmalschutz*) in occupied Belgrade. Meanwhile, Grbić served as Reiswitz’s trusted assistant within the Ministry of Education, responsible for supervising museums under the collaborationist government led by Milan Nedić. The trio of Reiswitz, Grbić, and Unverzagt reunited, this time working together at the Kalemegdan excavation as associates of the Ahnenerbe organisation, which was headed by Himmler (Bandović 2019: 144-169). During this time, Reiswitz still held on to his fascination with the idea of “real little Illyrians” and believed he could recognise them in the blue eyes of a boy from Dalmatia whom he encountered on Balkanska Street (Roth 2020: 70). Meanwhile, amidst the changing circumstances, Nikola Vulić delivered one of the last lectures of his life. On July 14th, 1943, he presented a lecture titled “Dispersal of Illyrians” at a meeting of the Academy of Philosophical Sciences. The focus of his lecture was to challenge and criticise Schuchhardt’s interpretations regarding the role of Illyrians in Central Europe and the Balkans. Vulić dedicated a significant portion of his lecture to arguing against the idea that linguistic evidence for Illyrians could be found in geographical place names (see Љубомировић 2013: 163-165). He also questioned the significance of etymological parallels, suggesting that they did not hold much value. Furthermore, Vulić discussed the archaeological connections between Mycenae and Trebenište. He argued against the conclusion that the presence of similar customs, such as the use of

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Fig. 5. Headlines about Trebenište and Gradište in the Yugoslav newspapers (Politika, Vreme, Pravda etc)

masks in funerary practices, implied a direct link between the Illyrians and Mycenae. Vulić pointed out that covering the faces of the deceased with masks was not exclusive to the Illyrians and could be found in other cultures as well. He emphasised that Mycenae and Trebenište could be independent of each other and inhabited by different peoples. Vulić cautioned against the assumption of migrations or direct influences between these distant regions, highlighting the significant geographical distance between them.²⁶

Andreas Roth states that Reiswitz assisted in the rescue of the 69-year-old professor Vulić from the Banjica concentration camp, where he had been imprisoned along with other intellectuals after his arrest on the night of November 4th or 5th, 1941. That may be true. Roth also mentions that when Professor Vulić received an invitation to see Unverzagt's excavation works on Kalemegdan, he expressed his regrets with the words: "I am really sorry that I cannot see Mr. Unverzagt's brilliant excavation. But you will certainly come to me with no hesitation to tell me about your successes" (Roth 2020: 235). And that may be true. Given the context that Reiswitz and Unverzagt, who were protégés of

Schuchhardt, were leading the excavations at Kalemegdan, it can be inferred that Vulić, being aware of this, deliberately chose a form of silent resistance. Schuchhardt's "Illyrians" came, and the only way to express his intolerance of them was by doing what he knew best - giving a lecture.

Finally, let's take another look at the excavations of Gradište. Interestingly, when publishing the results of the excavations after WWII in the journal *Germania*, Unverzagt described in detail the remains of architecture but provided misleading information about the movable finds: "Solving the question of the time of the fortress foundation turned out to be extremely difficult, as there was no cultural layer in the entire area, and no remains of pottery or metal finds were found." (Unverzagt 1954: 21). At the same time, Unverzagt did

not abandon the idea that Gradište could be somehow connected to Gorenci. He proclaimed it a "refuge" (*Zuflucht*) for the people buried in Gorenci, while acknowledging that a permanent settlement should be sought elsewhere. (Unverzagt 1954: 21).

As we have observed, the excavations of Gradište in 1931 and 1932 cannot be fully understood without considering the impact of the excavations at Trebenište. Both sites hold significant importance in regional and European archaeology. The history of their research is characterised by various forms of appropriation, which involved romanticising and nationalising the past, projecting contemporary patterns and prejudices onto historical narratives, and exploiting the past for contemporary political purposes. The competition and rivalry that existed among different parties involved (such as the German Archaeological Institute, the museum, Vulić and the Serbian Royal Academy, and the American Expedition) further highlight the interconnectedness of political, personal, and scientific agendas during that time. For German scholars, the Illyrians represented a crucial link between Central Europe and the Mediterranean, seen as a wandering people whose legacy they sought to incorporate into the imperialist myth of the Indo-Germans. For former Yugoslav archaeology,

²⁶ SASA Archive, *Dispersal of Illyrians*, 13577

and especially the National Museum, of which Miodrag Grbić was the sole representative in the expedition, it was one of the small steps towards the international archaeological scene. Although Grbić's role in the expedition was relatively minor in this power asymmetry, the connections he established at that time would have echoes in the future. There is no doubt that migrationism would also leave a lasting impact on Grbić's understanding of prehistoric archaeology (Bandović 2019: 134). Determining the impact of this imperialistic myth on post-war Yugoslav archaeological thought is a complex task. Challenging the prevailing notions of Illyrian origins and migrations from Central Europe formed a crucial basis for Yugoslav archaeology. The concept of ethnogenesis, contrasting migrationism, played a significant role in reshaping the perception of the Illyrians now as an indigenous population with ancient Balkan roots (Benac 1964; Stipčević 1989: 17-18; Džino 2014: 17). Yet, this narrative represents only one strand in the multifaceted tale of the Illyrians in the Balkans, with Gradište being just a part of the larger picture.

It is indeed interesting that the story of the search for the Illyrians in the foreign press also had a local, "Balkan sound". For example, describing how Vulić, in 1932, discovered new graves and had to sleep in a tomb out of fear of grave robbers or curious individuals, the British newspaper, *The Sphere*, noted: "Professor Vulitch had many strange adventures during his work. He is probably the only man alive who can claim to have slept in the grave of an ancient Illyrian princess" (*The Sphere*, 12.11. 1932).

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