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DIMENSIONS OF A SITE – THE CASE OF VAJUGA¹

Abstract: The *archaeological site* is one of the basic concepts in the discipline, aimed at demarcating the spatial limits of research. More often than not, a chronological dimension is added, creating distinct units of observation. Sites usually bear the names of the current settlements in their vicinity. The text discusses the ways in which separate units of analysis are discerned, on the particular example of the village of Vajuga (Eastern Serbia), mentioned in the archaeological literature for over a century. Here, various traces of past occupation were registered on several occasions and systematised into separate units (*sites*), according to varying disciplinary standards. Finally, the role of fieldwork and the immediate experience of a *site* in the training and subsequent professional identity of archaeologists is discussed.

Keywords: archaeological site, spatial/chronological determination, horizontal/vertical stratigraphy, fieldwork, training of archaeologists

One of the basic terms that archaeologists use, and yet rarely reflect upon, is that of the *archaeological site*. Standard manuals of field research offer quite broad definitions, such as: “*that is where people have done things in the past and left some residue of having done something*” (Drewett 1999: 17), or state that “*any place where human beings have established themselves, even momentarily, is considered a site*” (Joukowsky 1980: 38). However, in actual research practice these broad strokes are somewhat narrowed and archaeologists apply this term, more or less intuitively, to denote an area of special interest, primarily on the grounds of the high density of registered traces of previous occupation (cf. e.g., Bintliff, Snodgrass 1988; Foley 1981; see below). On the other hand, even the volumes setting the path to reflexive reconsideration of fieldwork practices and their theoretical implications, such as those written by Gavin Lucas (2001, 2012) or Ian Hodder (1999), although extensively discussing a wide range of decisions taken during excavation in the field in relation to their epistemological implications, do not dwell

upon this very basic issue: when and why a plot of land is considered to “become” an archaeological site? How are these places different from any other spot in the landscape, leading professionals to investigate, process and make them reference points for further research? What practices are enacted by archaeologists that single out some locations as those of particular importance?

The aim of this paper is not to offer a definite answer to these seemingly simple questions, but to demonstrate some of the potentially productive lines of inquiry they may initiate. The example will be discussed of the archaeological site(s) near the village of Vajuga, in whose excavation I was fortunate to take a part, under the direction of Mirjana Vukmanović and Petar Popović, and where I received my first training in many aspects of archaeological fieldwork. The lessons I was given during these summers in the early 1980s have formed firm cornerstones of my subsequent professional life (Babić 2018: 127-130) and I remain deeply grateful for the willingness and patience with which I was introduced to many dimensions of an archaeological site. This experience made me aware of the various modes in which sites partake in the construction of the professional identities of archaeologists.

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Surface

“Sites must first be discovered before they can be explored.”
(Cherry 2005: 249)

Vajuga is a village in the region of Ključ in eastern Serbia, situated on the right bank of the Danube river, in the municipality of Kladovo. This spot was first brought to archaeologists’ attention at the beginning of the 20th century, when Miloje M. Vasić mentioned it in his seminal paper (Vasić 1912: 13), introducing his comprehensive interpretive system of the remote Balkan past, to be elaborated in the following years (Milosavljević, Palavestra 2016; Palavestra 2020). The aim of this text, stated very clearly by Vasić himself, was to establish the area over which the “*cultural traces of the Iron Age in Serbia*” are spread (Vasić 1912: 2, Tab. I). Although the title of the text indicates a larger geographical scope (“*Serbia*”), it was based solely upon the material registered along the Danube Valley from Vinča, by Belgrade to Radujevac, a village in the vicinity of the town of Negotin. The bulk of the objects was acquired by a local “*antiquities collector Miladin Vukašinović*”, and Vasić himself paid a short visit to the region in 1907, when he observed “*the location of the finding spots, the mode of discovery of the remnants and, where possible, the appearance and character of their cultural layer*” (Vasić 1912: 2). In order to link the distribution of the registered finds into a coherent pattern, Vasić produced the list of places proceeding in an orderly fashion along the Danube Valley, to reach Ključ and the village of Vajuga. In the article, this particular place is represented by seven ceramic fragments, three attributed as fragments of clay figurines and four as parts of pottery vessels (Vasić 1912: 13; Tab. IX – X, No. 78 – 83), considered by Vasić as “*characteristic occurrences*” of the Iron Age (Vasić 1912: 1) and, therefore, included in his survey on the matter. All the fragments are described, measured and photographed. However, no data is given on the more precise location(s) of these finds, apart from the general introductory remarks that “*the material is collected either on the surface of the sites or in their base, on the Danube bank, where they were washed down by water*” (Vasić 1912: 2, underlined by S.B.). No detailed information is given as to the

criteria according to which some locations along the river were identified as *sites*, and it may well be assumed that all the places where surface finds were registered were considered as such.

This was the period of the establishment of professional archaeology in these parts and Miloje M. Vasić was certainly one of the most important figures in this endeavour. Notwithstanding the particularities of his interpretation of the Balkan prehistory (Milosavljević, Palavestra 2016; Palavestra 2020), his attempt to plot the identified archaeological material and to discern the regularities in its spatial and chronological groupings is very much in accordance with the culture-historical agenda of the time (Milosavljević 2020). This mode of organising and mastering the information by projecting chronological attributions onto spatial coordinates has a long tradition in the study of the past. Although customarily considered to be one of the most neutral tools of archaeological reasoning, this procedure in fact stems from a number of theoretical premises, linking human behaviour to the distribution of its material traces in lawlike generalisations (Bandović 2017). One of the most important results of this practice of archaeological plotting onto maps is the deeply ingrained concept of *cultural group* as the basic temporal and spatial unit of archaeological research, particularly under the culture-historical paradigm (Babić 2015a). In his attempt to discern the “*cultural traces of the Iron Age*” (Vasić 1912: 2) along the Danube Valley, Vasić was diligently working towards establishing one such unit, although not explicitly naming it. The village of Vajuga thus became one of the reference points on the archaeological map of the Iron Age, since Vasić judged that the stylistic characteristics of the sherds found there represent typical artefacts attributed to the period whose “*area of spread*” (Vasić 1912: 2) he was intent on delineating.

However, this initial information did not lead to further research on the location, and for decades to come Vajuga remained a dot on the map of the Iron Age finds drawn by Vasić, until 1971, when the right Danube bank surrounding the region of Ključ was extensively surveyed (Vasić, Janković 1971). This archaeological activity was brought about by the planned construction works on the hydroelectric plant bridging the river near the village of Kusjak by the town of Negotin, and the expected rise of the river course, due to the construction of the res-

ervoir of the dam. Previously collected data on the region of Ključ indicated that this was an area of particular interest for archaeologists and a survey was organised in order to determine the plan of rescue excavations in the locations endangered by the increase of the water level. Half a century after Vasić collated the evidence primarily collected by an amateur – Miladin Vukašinović, this time the survey was conducted by the archaeologists themselves and the criteria for their identification of potential places of interest were somewhat different. Since this project was initiated by a wider context – the pending huge state-sponsored construction works, and primarily oriented towards the protection of the archaeological record from flooding, the main goal was to identify all the potential locations for further research, regardless of the chronological and/or cultural attributions (*cf.* Cherry 2005: 250). While Vasić had endeavoured to establish the geographical span of a particular archaeological phenomenon, determined by the stylistic qualities of artefacts, this time the aim was to collect and register *all* archaeologically pertinent traits over the area – the focus was not on chronology, but rather on geography. The report published after this field prospection states the “*huge importance of future archaeological work in this region*”, since “*the survey of the Danube bank from Kladovo to Prahovo emphasized once more... the existence of complex sites in the region, encompassing various periods, where it will be possible to monitor almost continually the cultural development from the earliest agricultural cultures to the late Middle Ages*” (Vasić, Janković 1971: 112, 113, underlined by S.B.).

In this context, Vajuga once more caught the attention of archaeologists (Vasić, Janković 1971). This time, however, two separate locations (sites?) are identified in the village and its vicinity: the first is Selište, with traces of a possibly mediaeval necropolis (skeletal remains) and fragments of “*various periods – developed metal age, late Antiquity and Middle Ages*”; the second is Blato, where “*building constructions from Antiquity*” were registered, as well as another series of potsherds dated into periods of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (Vasić, Janković 1971: 110).² Since

Vasić had not provided a clear indication of the precise location where the material he attributed to the Iron Age was collected, it is not possible to conclude how these two newly identified positions relate to his vague reference to the village in general. Be that as it may, in this second appearance of the village in archaeological literature the “*image resolution*” is higher and there are now two dots on the mental map³, indicating “*the existence of complex settlements with the material from various periods*” (Vasić, Janković 1971: 107). While Vasić was explicitly searching for traces of the Iron Age and it was appropriate for his purpose to note that there are indeed the sherds corresponding to his quest, the later surveyors had a different task: to establish the wider archaeological relevance of certain locations. In this respect, they repeatedly emphasised the significance of the locations where a *complex* archaeological record may be expected, diverse in cultural and chronological terms, enabling inferences on *continual cultural development*. Consequently, they identified two locations in the region of the village, with differing chronological attributions of the collected material, but equally indicative of a possibly repeated (continuous?) presence at the location. The change in the perspective, thus, resulted in the differences in the maps produced. Finally, the fact that in 1971 two distinct locations were registered under the same toponym of Vajuga, indicating that the researchers posited some kind of demarcation between them, points to the intricacies of ascertaining the boundaries of a *site* (Cherry 2005: 251). The situation becomes even more complex when traces of previous occupations overlap, making it difficult to equate one particular spatial coordinate with its straightforward chronological dimension (Babić 2015). One possible way to solve the dilemma of the exact limits of a site and its contents is to change the research strategy and explore its other dimensions.

² In the illustrative part of the report from this survey the finds from Vajuga are represented by a sole pottery vessel described in the caption as an “*urn*” (T. LXII, 14).

³ Somewhat strange is the fact that the report on this survey does not include an actual map indicating the precise locations of the place-names listed in the text.

Depth

“When man made his advent on the Earth, he began a great revolution in the processes of stratification which then existed and were carried out by natural agencies.”

(Harris 1979: xii)

The archaeological activity in the area of Ključ, triggered by the construction of the Kusjak dam, became particularly intense by the beginning of the 1980s (Bikić, Šarić 2017: 70, 71; Cvjetičanin 2020). A massive research project was launched, based upon all the data previously collected by surveys. Starting from the observations gathered from the surface, the next step of the investigation was carefully planned and some of the previously identified places of interest were now chosen for further work (Bikić, Šarić 2017: 71). Vajuga was one such place and in the summer of 1980, the archaeological crews set off to investigate the situation in the field: *“After a detailed prospection, it was clear to a great extent what cultural groups are the most represented, so the immediate task was to find the sites (with a closed archaeological layer) belonging to them”* (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984: 111, underlined by S.B.). In order to advance the archaeological knowledge, a new criterion was now added to observations – that of *“closed cultural layers”*, implying undisturbed deposits of material traces of past human activities over a certain area (Lucas 1999: 148 f., 2012: 74 f.). Although in archaeological theory and practice some very fervent discussions have taken place over the issue of subsequent *disturbances* (Babić 2015), there are solid reasons archaeologists prefer to rely on evidence collected from the contexts judged to be least disturbed by ensuing events. Principally, this ensures more reliable observations of stratigraphic and chronological sequences of collected artefacts (Harris 1979: 92-95). Indeed, from the very start of the field prospecting in the area, efforts have been made to establish *“where possible, the appearance and character of ... cultural layer”* (Vasić 1912: 2). Apparently, though, it was not possible to obtain conclusive evidence of the *“character of cultural layers”* in the area of Vajuga without moving *from surface to depth*, thus adding another dimension to the *archaeological record (sensu Lucas*

2012), so the decision was made to start the next phase of research – that of test excavation.

Consequently, the fieldwork campaigns of 1980 in the area of the village established two locations in the zone of the village where reliable information on stratigraphic sequences could be gathered, and new place names were introduced to identify them. In the first case – **Karaula** (Lj. Popović 1984: 109), the previously recorded surface finds of Late Roman pottery sherds were supplemented by observations of the configuration of the terrain and additionally confirmed by the fact that the location had been included in the list of Roman fortifications compiled by Felix Kanitz (Kostić 2011: 227-228), one of the first authorities on the subject (Cvjetičanin 2011). On the grounds of the architectural remains, pottery, glass and metal objects retrieved, the test excavations established that there was a military fortification at that location, with 3rd – 6th centuries dates confirmed, and that further and more detailed fieldwork on the area may produce *“even more important discoveries”* (Lj. Popović 1984: 109). Vajuga-Karaula thus became a *site* with a number of pertinent features: established and fixed spatial and chronological parameters, confirmed both by the archaeological excavations and by the written testimony of the esteemed authority of Kanitz. The results of the ensuing excavations have never been published *in extenso*, but the Late Roman material from Karaula has been included in comprehensive studies of Roman pottery in the region (Cvjetičanin 2006: 134; 2016: 127-129) and specialised catalogues of museum exhibitions (I. Popović 1994: 342). Finally, although the original report from 1984 emphasised the Roman component of the material, the finds from the site most frequently mentioned in subsequent literature are those from a grave dated into the Migration Period (Milinković 2006: 32-34; V. Popović 1987: 129-132, Špehar 2012: 142).

The second campaign of test excavations in 1980 was conducted on a 1,100-metre-long strip of the Danube bank, upstream of Karaula, identified as **Vajuga-Pesak** (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984). Since, in this case, the configuration of the terrain did not offer any conclusive indication of previous occupation, a larger area was researched and a more diverse pattern was revealed. Based on the stylistic and typological traits of the artefacts gathered, several distinctive groups of finds were

identified, cited in the report in chronological order. Five graves with cremated human remains, dated into the periods of the Bronze and Iron Ages, were interpreted as a part of a larger necropolis and posed questions about the complex relationships between the cultural groups of Žuto Brdo and Gava (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984: 114). In another trench, some 500 metres from these graves, a distinctive construction built in gravel and pebbles was identified, with pottery fragments indicative of another, stylistically and chronologically discrete Iron Age cultural group, the Basarabi, also registered in two adjacent trenches (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984: 114, 115). Finally, in two locations, separated by c. 400 metres, two groups of graves were identified, dated into the Middle Ages on the grounds of the mode of burial (skeletal remains, body position, scarcity of grave offerings) and rare artefacts (pottery, parts of jewellery) spanning from the 10th to 15th centuries (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984: 115, 116). So, during this test excavation at Vajuga no less than four separate locations along the river were registered, with stylistically, typologically and chronologically identifiable archaeological contexts. However, should all these diverse groups of finds, stretching over more than a kilometre, be considered as one single *site*, marked by a single toponym: Vajuga-Pesak, or as four distinctive *sites*, linked in space and investigated during the same fieldwork campaign, but separated by their chronological determinations? Since “*the immediate task was to find the sites*” (Premk, Popović, Bjelajac 1984: 111), it may safely be assumed that the researchers considered them to be separate units, although encompassed under the name of the modern village or, more precisely, the stretch of the sandy (“pesak”) Danube bank on its outskirts.

The actions that followed confirm that this was indeed the case and in 1982, the systematic fieldwork at Vajuga-Pesak started, focused on one archaeological feature – the platform built of pebbles and containing the traces of funerary practices. The material registered during the previous research is mentioned, but relegated to a footnote (Popović, Vukmanović 1992: 358, footnote 3). In the process of selection, the section of the landscape was singled out as the most productive in terms of potential knowledge that may be gained by a more detailed approach. This is a hard choice that archaeologists

constantly face: guided by the information gathered from the surface, aided where possible by test excavations and/or written record, we decide what particular places are the most suitable for further research. Constraints are numerous, from financial to logistical, and have to be mitigated by scholarly rigorous considerations of the most productive course of further action in the field (*cf.* Cherry 2005: 249, *passim*). The platform at Vajuga-Pesak outweighed other features registered at this location and the systematic excavations aimed at exploring its purpose (Popović, Vukmanović 1998: 11) lasted from 1982 until 1989, resulting in several interim reports (Popović, Vukmanović, Radojčić 1986; Popović, Vukmanović 1992), and the comprehensive monograph published nine years after the fieldwork was finished (Popović, Vukmanović 1998). This detailed account of the information gathered starts with the reference to prior research at the location, acknowledging both the 1970 survey and the records by Vasić. However, of seven artefacts listed in his account of the Vajuga finds (Vasić 1912: 13; Tab. IX – X, No. 78 – 83), only one is mentioned: the one numbered as fig. 85 (Popović, Vukmanović 1998: 11, footnote 2). This is again the consequence of scrupulous selection; since only this potsherd is indeed correctly dated by Vasić into the Iron Age and corresponds with the results of the extensive research of the pebble platform. The remaining six fragments, also included by Vasić into his list of Iron Age finds, are now stylistically and chronologically attributed to the Bronze Age – the period which is registered on the location both by the 1971 survey and the 1980 test excavations, but not pursued further. The now well-known chronological inaccuracy of Vasić’s interpretation of the Balkan past (Milosavljević, Palavestra 2016; Palavestra 2020) is tacitly corrected by taking into account only the corresponding evidence, and not commented upon. At the same time, the finds now firmly dated as the Bronze Age artefacts were registered on the spot in all the instances of archaeological visits to the region of Vajuga, from 1907 up to the works of 1980. However, in the extensive research plan launched in 1982, the focus was on the pebble platform and its Iron Age contents. Other traces of human activity at the location are duly registered, but are not considered to be the key feature of the now firmly established *site*.

Focusing

Let us now briefly review the contexts in which the name of the village of Vajuga has appeared in the archaeological literature. It was first introduced by Miloje Vasić in his 1912 review of the finds along the Danube Valley he considered as manifestations of the Iron Age in the region. After a long pause, the toponym was again used in the 1971 survey, aimed at identifying the archaeologically relevant locations possibly endangered by the rise in the river level, in order to determine the plan for future rescue excavations. This time, the objectives of the survey were not chronologically restricted to the artefacts dated into a certain period, and the results indicated a much wider range of finds, originating from the prehistoric times up to the Middle Ages. This wider scope of observation is reflected in the diversification of locations in the village zone, and the introduction of more precise naming of two particular locations where the density of surface finds was the most prominent – Selište and Blato (Vasić, Janković 1971). Ten years later, the large-scale test excavations began in the region of Ključ and the river bank in the zone of Vajuga was included in the long string of places to be researched in more detail. Two separate locations were singled out, but the toponyms established previously, in the 1971 survey, are not mentioned in either of the reports from the 1980 test excavations. Instead, two new names are introduced: Karaula and Pesak, each with its distinct chronological determination. In addition, the second location – Pesak, is further broken down into four separate units, again based upon the stylistic/typological and, hence, chronological attributions of the recovered material.

Consequently, over the course of almost nine decades, the representation of the village of Vajuga on archaeological maps has been transformed from a single dot to seven disparate locations singled out as *sites* and two of them were thoroughly investigated by systematic fieldwork campaigns. Each of these locations is characterised by its chronological determination and this temporal dimension is then projected onto the spatial distribution of artefacts. Since in almost all of the locations a very diverse set of material is identified and reported, spanning several chronological units (Bronze Age, Iron Age, Antiquity, Middle Ages), in two cases, where extensive fieldwork produced a more de-

tailed insight (Karaula and Pesak), the predominant material is emphasised. In subsequent research, the complexity of successive presences of various human groups that inhabited the area and/or buried their dead is noted, but the focus is firmly set on the segments of the past that are represented by the densest, best preserved and most scholarly challenging archaeological record. As the result, Vajuga is now present in the archaeological literature predominantly as the site representative of the burial rites of the Basarabi culture of the Iron Age and the period of the Great Migration in these parts. The Bronze Age is mentioned in passing, as well as the two mediaeval necropolises registered at Pesak. The temporal dimension is identified with the spatial one, to constitute two fully defined *archaeological sites*. Thus, it was through continued archaeological practices, each building upon the previous one, but at the same time selecting the most relevant information, introducing new criteria, new approaches and new information, that Pesak and Karaula have been established as reference points in the archaeological knowledge of the region. Other features registered in the zone of Vajuga, although repeatedly mentioned, have not been extensively researched. The Bronze Age material, or the one from the two mediaeval cemeteries at Pesak, has remained out of the focus, in the grey zone of *disturbances* (cf. Babić 2015; Lucas 2001: 60). In order to partake in these processes of identification and selection of pertinent information, leading to the determination of the spatial and temporal dimensions of a site, archaeologists need to acquire particular skills. (Fig. 1)

‘Skilled visions’

For over a century and a half, archaeology has been an academic profession and archaeologists are required to obtain a university degree in order to engage in research. The professionalisation in our discipline went hand in hand with other similar processes of the early modern era, when procedures were established to determine and maintain the standards necessary to vouch for the results of scientific inquiry (Babić 2018). However, along with the officially structured training track, designed to enable the introduction of new cohorts of professionals into the disciplinary knowledge, every particular academic community is structured by



Fig. 1 - Locations in the vicinity of the village of Vajuga identified by archaeologists: 1. Selište, 2. Karaula, 3. Pesak, 4. Blato (source: https://www.topografskakarta.com/jugo/download/srb_25/kladovo_3/h253.html , adapted by I. Vranić)

a number of less formal social norms determining the *field* of interaction, cooperation and exchange (Bourdieu 2014), whose mastering is equally important for the successful integration of newcomers. In the case of archaeology, these ‘initiation processes’ are often linked to fieldwork, where different generations, with varying levels of professional knowledge and skills, work and live together for protracted periods of time, forming temporary seasonal communities with their own rules of conduct (Edgeworth 2006; Holtorf 2006). Under these extraordinary circumstances, professional identities are constructed through various inter-generational transfers of knowledge and skills.

Fieldwork involves a series of tasks in which a researcher physically engages with the tangible objects of observation – artefacts and layers, employing his/her senses in order to ascertain the relevant qualities of the materiality before them and translate it into field notes, reports, charts, drawings and photographs, according to prescribed standards (Lucas 2001: 200 f.). This conversion of individual observations into generalised statements is the key step in conveying the information beyond the immediate and irreversible moment of the first encounter, enabling any future reference. When novices learn to discern changes in soil colour in the trench, ascribe meaning to them and express it in various standardised forms of textual and visual documentation (Lucas 2001, 2019), they are mastering “*methodologies practically embodied as sensibilities, dispositions, ways of interacting, knowing and seeing*” (Yarrow 2015: 34). The particular mode of disciplining one’s perception is

acquired through immediate practice and lived experience of these tangible, direct encounters with material traces of the past. Since the primary way of perceiving is visual, ‘*enskilment*’ is achieved through “*apprenticeship of particular skilled visions that are specific of situated practices*” (Grasseni 2007: 3). In other words, young archaeologists are in fact “*learning to see as*” (Chapman, Wylie 2016: 5; see also Palavestra 2019). The role of the experienced teacher in this *apprenticeship* is, therefore, vital for the success of this transfer of skills, and the initial habituation may remain a permanent disposition.

It was my good fortune that I was *learning to see* under the careful supervision of Petar Popović, while excavating the pebble platform at Vajuga-Pesak. Along with the skill to transfer my observations from the trench into field notes, I learned to see the dimensions of the site – its spatial parameters, the chronological attributions of the artefacts we were handling and the relevance of the information we were producing for the wider archaeological interpretation. I also learned that all sites are not the same – some remain ingrained in our own professional history and the ways in which we perceive our discipline. This vital part of archaeological experience often remains hidden from outsiders’ view and is rarely reflected upon in our scholarly writings. However, the ways in which we interpret the past, generate meaning out of objects, and ultimately produce relevant knowledge (*cf.* Lucas 2019) are decisively shaped by our own lived experience of observing and making sense of past materialities. Therefore, for me, Vajuga is not

only the site of the Basarabi necropolis, it is also the site where I wrote my first field notes and ex-

perienced that uniquely archaeological process of transforming objects into narratives.

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