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DESTRUCTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE AREA OF SVRLJIG

ABSTRACT

After a large survey of the territory in the region of Svrljig over the past seven years, we found the very desperate situation on the ground. At the archaeological sites we clearly noticed the traces of activities by the people who illegally possess metal detectors. Roman, byzantine and medieval fortifications, ramparts and towers are often completely drilled with the deep holes that measure up to several meters, while the walls are often cut and dig under the foundations. The most vulnerable archaeological site is the Svrljig-fortress. During the 1999 bombing, the local treasure hunters blew up two towers of Svrljig-fortress by dynamite. The round tower then collapsed to a height of about 3 m, while the rectangular is brought beyond recognition. Architectural structures in the suburbs are also targeted by local treasure hunters. At the Gradac site, next to the village of Grbavče, only 25 years ago were registered the remains of fortifications with walls about 1.5 m wide, several towers and small suburb. Today, this site on the small hill is completely bare.

Keywords: cultural heritage, area of Svrljig, Roman, byzantine and medieval fortifications.

The difficulties in the protection of cultural heritage have been present in Serbia for more than two decades. We cannot declare that our colleagues in the field of protection of cultural heritage are not trying to fight against this persistent problem. It is obvious that the relevant institutions and individuals did not have the enough power and legislative capacity to combat this social phenomenon or at least to reduce it to a smaller extent. This communication will try to display the very serious situation in south-eastern Serbia, more precisely in the small municipality of Svrljig in the Timok river valley.

Over the past seven years, the region of Svrljig was examined in the professional manner by the team of archeologists from Belgrade (Петровић, Филиповић и Миливојевић 2012 with complete older literature). After a large survey of the territory, we found the very desperate situation on the ground (Филиповић и Миливојевић 2008), especially in terms of damage to antique roman and medieval architecture.

At the archaeological sites that do not have the visible architectural remains above ground we clearly noticed the traces of activities by the people who illegally possess metal detectors. Almost

all sites have drilled holes and dimples with the depth to 20 cm (fig. 1). In this context, it should be emphasized the destruction of cultural layers in many of so far even unregistered caves. Moreover, the natural fractures in the rocks are considered to



Fig. 1 Big hole under the village stone cross made by treasure hunters

be the alleged “roadmap” to a hidden treasure and deepened by picks or heavy machinery where possible and often undermine by dynamite. Cultural layers of Prekonoška cave, one of the first paleontological and archaeological cave sites in Serbia, which was explored even in 19th century are today dug, heavily damaged and lost to science.

Roman, byzantine and medieval fortifications, ramparts and towers are often completely drilled with the deep holes that measure up to several meters, while the walls are often cut and dig under the foundations. The most vulnerable archaeological site and the most famous in scientific literature is the Svrlijig-grad fortress. Felix Kanitz and Jovan Misković accurately describe the remains of the fort 125 years ago, saying that the round tower, with 4 floors and doors, was preserved 10 m in height, while the rectangular tower

was better preserved, with a height of about 12 m. Experts from the Institute for Protection of Cultural Monuments in Niš visited the area about 25 years ago and then concluded a satisfactory degree of conservation of the architecture (fig. 2a). During the 1999 bombing, the local treasure hunters took advantage of the war and they blew up two towers by dynamite. The round tower then collapsed to a height of about 3 m (fig. 2b), while the rectangular is brought beyond recognition and its height does not exceed 2 m. Architectural structures in the suburbs are also targeted by local treasure hunters. At the fort Kulište in the village of Manojlica, defensive rampart is cut with a hole about 2 m wide and 2.5 m deep. Below the fort, at the plateau next to the Manojlička River, the half meter wide hole is recently dug, with the depth of more than 3 m and length of about 6 m. At the site Gradac next to the village of Grbavče only 25 years ago (fig. 3a) were registered the remains of fortifications with walls about 1.5 m wide, several towers and small suburb. Today, this site on the small mount is completely bare (fig. 3b), and on its milder slopes local treasure hunters continue to chase for treasures and to destroy the foundations of this fortress.

Holy places - churches, church grounds, hermitage-caves, mosques and stone crosses with votive trees, have also been targeted more recently by teams searching for buried treasure. The most endangered are abandoned church grounds, but in the last couple of years the holes were dug in the church yards, especially where there is no permanent priest. The most vulnerable sanctities and in the mean time the oldest churches in the area of Svrlijig are four churches under the fortress of Svrlijig-grad at the place called Banjica. Only one of those four churches is less destroyed due to the fact that it is next to an asphalt road and traffic. However, around this church about 15 graves were desecrated, the grave stones are misplaced and all around is visible a large number of holes. Christian churches in the lower terrain were damaged to a greater extent. In the middle of the northern wall of the one large church we noticed a big hole about 2 m large and 3 m deep. Along its northern wall it exists an excavated zone more than 3 m wide, dug to the bottom of the wall foundation. The St. Stephen church with the late antique barrel-vaulted brick grave is the most destroyed of all the holy places. Place of compound of the north wall of the narthex and the church is completely



Fig. 2a Round tower on the Svrlijig fort, 1984

cut through with a 2 m wide hole and more than 10 m³ of construction and demolition material was removed. Barrel-vaulted brick tomb with niches in the walls is completely destroyed. The fourth church, non-registered so far in the literature, also suffered substantial damage. There are two large holes measuring 4 x 3 m and 3 x 2 m and about 2 m deep, next to which are large grave stone plaques. All around lie scattered bones of deceased. In the suburb of the Svrlijig-grad fortress at the slope in the direction of the village Varoš are the remains of the mosque from the Ottoman period also significantly destroyed by hunters for treasure. In the village of Manojlica, not far from the Svrlijig-grad fortress is a small, not too long ago renovated church of St. Constantine and Helen, with an old school next to the sanctity. Since the church is not in a permanent use and that the priest holds the service only few times a year, the church and school were also targeted by teams of diggers for treasure. In the yard, next to the bell tower, gaping a big hole measuring 2 x 2 m and 1.5 m deep. Votive crosses and oaks are also left at the mercy

of treasure seekers. At some places, stone crosses were knocked down and under them pits were dug. At the end of this text, let us mention the old and abandoned mills and barns, some of which are completely ruined and brought to the unrecognizable level, by dynamite and heavy machinery.

From the facts and illustrations presented here we can determine some conclusions and identify specific, primarily negative trends regarding the wanton destruction of cultural heritage. Until 20 years ago one of the obstacles for destruction of cultural heritage was among other things the respect for churches and holy places. As we have seen in several cases, this respect is rapidly disappearing today. Moreover, old churches and other holy places are fertile ground for searching for treasures because at least three reasons. First, they had never been previously dug by the treasure hunters, which provide a greater “potential” for the contemporary diggers, driven by the old stereotype in the people’s mind that the church itself has to be rich and full of precious metals. Second, in addition to churches and stone inscriptions



Fig. 2b Round tower on the Svrljig fort, 2007

are often found old coins, often worthless, that were left there many decades or centuries before, which only make the further argument to nowadays treasure hunters that “there is something.” At the last place is the fact that many churches have lost their ever-present priest, and that the people comes only once a year to those holy places.

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REZIME

UNIŠTAVANJE ARHEOLOŠKOG I KULTURNOG NASLEĐA U OBLASTI SVRLJIGA

Кljučне речи: kulturno nasleđe, oblast Svrljiga, rimska vizantijska i srednjovekovna utvrđenja.

Na osnovu višegodišnjeg intenzivnog terenskog rada i dokumentovanih slučajeva, u radu se govori o uništavanju kulturne baštine na teritoriji Svrljiga. Najviše su ugroženi arhitektonski ostaci starih crkava i utvrđenja, ali je takođe dokumentovano i uništavanje grobova, zavetnih krstova, kopanje u okviru porti aktivnih crkava, kao i ruiniranje i rušenje starih škola, vodenica i pojata. Na arheološkim lokalitetima koji nemaju vidljive ostatke arhitekture jasno se uočavaju tragovi rada osoba koji nelegalno poseduju detektore za metal (sl. 1). U ovom kontekstu, posebno treba naglasiti uništavanje kulturnih slojeva po mnogobrojnim i do sada čak neregistrovanim pećinama i potkapinama. Slojevi Prekonoške pećine danas su potpuno prekopani i izgubljeni za nauku.

Na antičkim, vizantijskim i srednjovekovnim utvrđenjima, bedemi i kule očuvani do visine od nekoliko metara i prekriveni šutom i gustom vegetacijom, često su potpuno izbušeni rupama dubine i do nekoliko metara, dok se zidovi neretko presecaju i kopaju ispod temelja. Najugroženije utvrđenje je, svakako, stari grad Svrljig. Kanić i Mišković precizno opisuju njegove ostatke pre 125 godina i kažu da okrugla kula sa 4 sprata i očuvanim vratima ima 10 m u visinu, dok je pravougaona kula bila još bolje očuvana, sa visinom od oko 12 m. I pre 25 godina konstatovan je zadovoljavajući stepen očuvanosti arhitekture na Svrljig gradu (sl. 2a), ali su tokom bombardovanja 1999. godine lokalni tragači za blagom iskoristili ratno stanje i dinamičkom razneli obe kule. Okrugla kula tada je srušena do visine od oko 3 m (sl. 2b), dok je pravougaona dovedena do neprepoznatljivosti i njena visina ne prelazi 2 m. Na lokalitetu Gradac u selu Grbavče, do samo pre 25 godina registrovani su vidljivi ostaci utvrđenja sa bedemima širine oko 1.5 m, nekoliko kula i manjim podgrađem (sl. 3a). Danas je ovo brdo potpuno ogoljeno (sl. 3b).



Fig. 3a Grbavče fort, 1984



Fig. 3b Grbavče fort, 2007