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## MASTER CONSERVATION PLAN FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF STOBI: GOALS AND OUTCOMES

### ABSTRACT

*The Master Conservation Plan for the archaeological site of Stobi was created in cooperation between NI Stobi (RN Macedonia) and the Balkan Heritage Foundation (Bulgaria), with the generous support of the J. M. Kaplan Fund (USA). The plan was produced in the period between 2019 and 2021, involving professionals from the partnering institutions as well as foreign and local experts. The Master Conservation Plan for Stobi is a strategic document created with the main goal of offering directions and recommendations for the better preservation and presentation of the diverse cultural heritage of the site, to promote a modern methodological approach in the assessment of the potential risks, damage and problems, to offer the best possible solutions, to foster the usage of the proper conservation materials and methods, and to point to the importance of building institutional capacity and using skilled professionals in the field of cultural heritage preservation. The plan also offers directions for the improvement of the tourist presentation of the site, as well as guidelines for the development of a fundraising strategy, with a list of potential donors, programmes, funds and grants. The plan especially emphasises the recommendations concerning two segments of our work: authentic preservation and preventive conservation during ongoing excavations, practiced worldwide, which is crucial for the preservation of the excavated structures. Also to diminish the disbalance between excavations and conservation, for which wholesale changes in the legislation, especially concerning archaeological remains, are needed. In fact, the Master Conservation Plan is a basic tool for present and future managers of the archaeological site of Stobi to better plan short- and long-term activities related to preservation, presentation and maintenance, thus providing opportunities for the sustainable development of the site.*

**KEYWORDS:** STOBI, CONSERVATION, PLAN, MANAGEMENT, MAINTENANCE, PRESENTATION, FUNDRAISING.

The ancient city of Stobi was the largest city in the northern part of the Roman Province of Macedonia (Fig. 1). It is located at the confluence of two largest rivers Axios and Erigon (today's Vardar and Crna Rivers) and on the crossroads of major trading routes north-south and east-west. Known as *oppidum civium Romanorum* in the time of Augustus and later as a *municipium* of citizens who were granted *Ius Italicum*, the city flourished in the Roman im-

perial period. An imperial mint was established at Stobi during the reign of Vespasian, which produced coins until the reign of Caracalla. In Late Antiquity, Stobi became an important Early Christian centre and for a short time the capital of the newly established province of Macedonia Secunda. Surviving the barbaric raids in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, earthquakes, climate changes, famine and plague in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the general decline of the empire, the city exist-



Fig. 1. Archaeological site of Stobi, aerial view from SW, 2009 (Archive of the National Institution Stobi).

ed until the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century, when it was abandoned.<sup>1</sup>

Excavations at Stobi began a century ago, during the First World War, forty years after Leon Hezey and Georg von Hahn independently located the ruins of the ancient city (Hezey 1873:25-42; von Hahn 1867: 158-160). To date, 23 buildings of secular and religious character, a theatre, a library, baths, a temple of Egyptian deities, civil and Early Christian basilicas, residential buildings with rich architectural decoration, cemeteries and a large collection of finds have been discovered (Wiseman 1973; Микулчиќ 2003; Blaževska 2021: 189-215).<sup>2</sup> The site was proclaimed as a cultural heritage property of the first category of national

1 For the general history of the city and its urban development, see: Wiseman 1986: 37-50; Микулчиќ 2003. Blaževska 2021: 189-215 with quoted earlier bibliography. For the final moments of life in the city and causes of its abandonment see: Wiseman 2006: 225-261; Wiseman 2007: 85-110; Snively 2009: 37-44; Pavlovski and Blaževska 2017-2018: 49-83.

2 For extensive bibliography of the excavations at Stobi and discovered buildings until 1973, see: Radošević 1973, 233-268. The updated bibliography on Stobi will be published in the forthcoming *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi* vol. 5 (forthcoming).

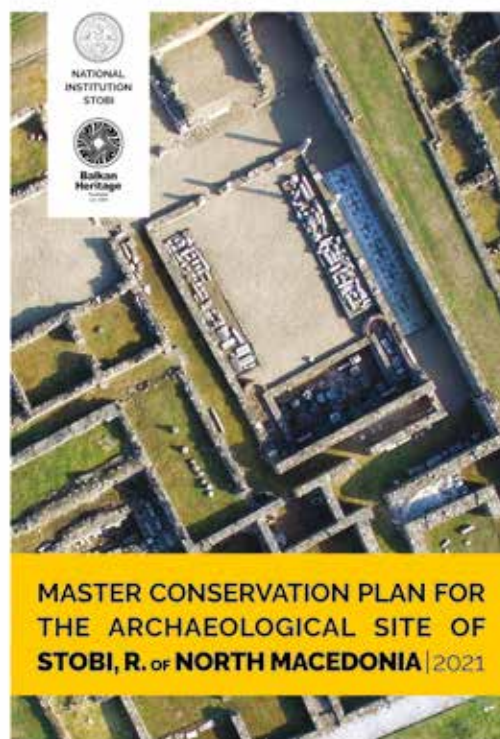


Fig. 2. Master Conservation Plan for the archaeological site of Stobi, cover page (Blaževska et al. 2021).



Fig. 3. Risk from flooding: rise in the level of subterranean waters and flooding in the Building with Arches, 2010 (Archive of the National Institution Stobi).

interest in 1956 and 1971, and in 2016 evaluated as a cultural heritage of especial significance, sub-category - great, based on UNESCO's criteria for the significance, authenticity, integrity, diversity and rarity incorporated in the national legislation.<sup>3</sup> Since the discovery of Stobi, the excavations, preservation and presentation of the site have been under the jurisdiction of various institutions: National Museum in Belgrade, Council for Stobi, Archaeological Museum in Skopje, National Museum in Veles and the Republic Institute for Cultural Heritage Protection (National Conservation Center). The National Institution for Management of the Archaeological Site of Stobi (National Institution Stobi / NI Stobi) was established in 2008 as an independent governmental institution under the Ministry of Culture, with the main goal of taking care of the site from every possible aspect: excavation, preservation and presentation

<sup>3</sup> The Document for evaluation of Stobi is still pending in the Ministry of Culture.

(Службен весник 2008; Службен весник 2009).<sup>4</sup> The different policies and strategies implemented by the various institutions responsible for the site in the past have resulted in the present condition of the ancient remains, moveable finds and infra-structural facilities.

Conservation and preservation of the discovered buildings started in the 1930s, under the patronage of the National Museum in Belgrade, focused on presentation of the richly decorated phase of the residential buildings. For that purpose, the later walls built of sandstones and mud mortar were removed and the remaining walls were protected with a cement-based capping, some of which is still visible at the site. After World War II, the conservation of the architectural remains was undertaken by the Republic Institute for Cultural Heritage Protection (National Conservation Center) until 2008, when NI Stobi took over the jurisdiction of the site.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, cement-based mortars were used for conservation and restoration of the architectural remains, for consolidation of the mosaic and stone slab pavements throughout the site, as well as for restoration and anastylosis of the architectural marble elements. NI Stobi made significant efforts to improve the condition of the site through permanent maintenance and the implementation of various conservation projects of the ancient structures and their elements, taking into consideration available human and funding resources and national legislation. Besides the professional team of NI Stobi, many experts from other institutions in the country and abroad were involved in the projects. A strong collaboration has been established with the Balkan Heritage Foundation (BHF), from Bulgaria<sup>6</sup>, in the organisation of international field schools in archaeology, conservation of pottery, glass, mosaics and a variety of other educational initiatives.

In 2018, NI Stobi received an invitation for funding from the J. M. Kaplan Fund through the partnering institution the Balkan Heritage Foundation,

<sup>4</sup> For the activities of NI Stobi see the official web site of the institution: <http://stobi.mk>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.stobi.mk/Templates/Pages/Excavations.aspx?page=3315>

<sup>6</sup> For the activities of the Balkan Heritage Foundation see the official web site: <http://balkanheritage.org>.



Fig. 4. Risks from atmospheric influences: degradation of the discovered buildings caused by rain water, The House of Polycharmos (Archive of the National Institution Stobi).

when members of the family and board visited the site.<sup>7</sup> The decision was made that for the sustainable preservation and presentation of the archaeological site of Stobi, a Master Conservation Plan (MCP) (Blaževska et al. 2021) was urgently needed. The plan was designed between 2019 and 2021 and besides the professional team from NI Stobi and the BHF, local and foreign experts in conservation, presentation and fundraising were involved in its creation. With the completion of the MCP, NI Stobi and the BHF celebrated the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their institutional collaboration at Stobi.

The MCP for Stobi (Fig. 2) is a strategic document created with the main goal of offering directions, recommendations and strategies for the better preservation and presentation of the diverse cultural heritage of the site, considering its importance, integrity and authenticity and the necessity for sustainable development within its natural environment. It aims to promote a mod-

ern methodological approach to the assessment of the potential risks, damage and problems, to offer the best possible solutions, to foster the usage of the proper conservation materials and methods, and to point out the importance of building institutional capacity and skilled professionals in the field of cultural heritage preservation. The plan also offers directions for the improvement of the tourist presentation of the site, as well as guidelines for the development of a fundraising strategy with a list of potential donors, programmes, funds and grants. It is aimed at serving as a basic tool for short- and long-term planning for present and future managers of the NI Stobi and its professional team and as a basis for the creation of additional action and strategic plans, and working protocols.

The MCP contains six chapters, twelve appendixes and numbered illustrations, following the text. The first three chapters contain an introduction of the plan's goals, structure and phases of its development, followed by a basic description of the site's history, discovered buildings and other infrastructural facilities, the significance of the site, as well as a historical overview of its excavations, conservation activities and management in-

<sup>7</sup> See: [https://www.jmkfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/HC-GRANTS-LIST\\_12.2021-1.pdf](https://www.jmkfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/HC-GRANTS-LIST_12.2021-1.pdf). <https://www.bhfieldschool.org/news/jm-kaplan-fund-grant-awarded-to-bhf-and-ni-stobi-for-master-conservation-plan-for-the-archaeological-site-of-stobi>.



Fig. 5. Poor quality building material – soft sandstone, lichens and the use of cement-based mortar for conservation, Small Bath (Archive of the National Institution Stobi).

stitutions. A brief description is also provided of the collections of movable finds, the infrastructure and the existing documentation.

The next three chapters deal with conservation policy and practice, visitor management, interpretation and presentation, and fundraising and resource development. They are the key elements in the plan. Conservation Policy and Practice is the most important chapter in the document, starting with the condition and a significance assessment of the excavated and presented buildings and their decorative elements, of the infrastructure and storage facilities, and of the moveable finds. During the assessment process the priority buildings and interventions were identified, as well as reasons for their current condition and the risks facing their further existence.

The condition assessment of ancient features (stone masonry and pavements), observed in the context of the current conservation practices, has detected various problems and risks for the ancient structures at Stobi (Figs. 3-6):

Natural hazards such as seismic activity in the region and floods caused by the rise in the level

of subterranean water or the level of the rivers Vardar and Crna;

Salts and vegetation, especially lichens;

Atmospheric influences and pollution from traffic on the nearby motorway (the latter especially refers to the marble parts of the theatre);

Poor original construction material (most of the buildings at Stobi are built of sandstone and lime mortar, which easily deteriorates after being exposed to atmospheric influences and temperature differences after excavations);

Lack of a conservation policy, imbalance between the excavations and conservation and restoration vs conservation as it is discovered, and a lack of maintenance;

Lack of professional training and use of inappropriate conservation materials. The larger conservation issues detected at Stobi are the use of cement-based mortars in most of the conservation and restoration works of the stone masonry, the pavements and architectural decoration, and the use of aluminium honeycomb plates as bedding for mosaic pavements outdoors;

Current legislation and administrative issues, such as long and complicated procedures,



Fig. 6. Risk from air pollution: black surface on marble blocks at the Theatre, caused by exhaust gases from vehicles on the nearby motorway (Archive of the National Institution Stobi).

especially for preventive and emergency conservation.

Recommendations for improving the condition of the excavated structures are the most important part of the document and they include:

Establishing routine conservation processes and protocols for interventions that are crucial for a proper assessment of the priorities and preventive interventions, based on the importance and risk assessment.

Establishing a substantial database and set of documentation for all processes;

Establishing protocols for routine maintenance and monitoring that are important for long-term preservation of the ancient structures;

Defining a proper conservation policy: philosophy, standards and guidelines: (for example: a balance between excavation and conservation and preventive conservation vs conservation and restoration, the use of the proper conservation materials based on the contemporary standards, securing the buildings and the excavated areas, defining the role and type of wall capping and shelters in order to authentically preserve ruins in their natural environment, etc.);

Defining reburial (for example: short- and long-

term proper reburial of ancient pools, basins and pavements, especially for those that are not on the visitor's path, to facilitate their better preservation;

Defining interdisciplinary investigations and technical conservation research for which the establishment of partnerships with scientific institutions is needed (for example: analysis of the effects of pollution or lichens in the processes of stone deterioration, analysis of the original stone and mortar composition, etc., in order to establish a proper conservation approach);

Building professional capacities through training.

The plan especially emphasises the recommendations concerning two segments of our work: authentic preservation using original materials and preventive conservation during the ongoing excavations, such as wall capping or repointing, or replacement of severely deteriorated sandstones to preserve the stability of the walls. These activities, which are practiced worldwide, are crucial for the preservation of the excavated structures, but due to rigid legislation are not possible in our country without prepared conservation projects. Therefore, wholesale changes in the national legislation are recommended, especially concerning the

preservation of the archaeological remains. The chapter is supplemented with four Appendices where details are provided for performing various surveys of the masonry types and a significance assessment, the seasonal protection of pools, of maintenance and reburial examples, shelter design, wall capping, and repointing, all using examples from other sites in the world (Herculaneum, Sagalassos, etc.), and supported by a comprehensive list of references available on line. This chapter also contains an assessment of the storage facilities for the preservation of moveable finds at Stobi and recommendations for their improvement, based on the *RE-ORG* Model, a method for reorganising museum storage, available at the ICCROM (ICCROM 2022).

Besides the condition of the ancient features at the site, an assessment of current visitor management, and the presentation and interpretation of the site was made. A similar analytical methodological approach has been applied to analyse the site's presentation in various media, social networks, educational projects and visitor's infrastructure. Through an evaluation of the current condition of the site's promotion and the activities of NI Stobi, recommendations are given for improvement, stressing the need for a careful approach to visitor management and avoiding events for promotional needs, because of the high risk of damaging the vulnerable archaeological remains. The necessity for the development of a visitor's management plan was emphasised, which will contain directions for the interpretation of various other topics and not just simple explanations of the site's history and ancient buildings.

One of the most serious problems in the work of professionals and institutions in the field of preservation around the world is undoubtedly securing funding for excavations, technical research, conservation, maintenance and preservation. The very last chapter of the plan suggests recommendations for creating a fundraising strategy with opportunities for funding diverse aspects of excavations and scientific based research, and preservation and presentation from different sources: state institutions, European funds, philanthropic organizations and individual donors from around the globe.

At the end of the MCP there are detailed descriptions of the excavated buildings, with brief

details of the history of the excavation, conservation and condition assessment of each building, the condition assessment of the collections of finds and infrastructural facilities, as well as a list of ongoing and planned future projects of NI Stobi.

We hope that MCP for Stobi will serve not just as a basic tool for the effective and sustainable protection and management of Stobi, but will also serve as an example for the creation of similar documents for other archaeological sites in the country and in the region. Our goal is that this plan will not remain just a paper document, but that its implementation will result in the sustainable and systematic maintenance and preservation of Stobi for future generations. We are happy to announce that the first step in its implementation comes courtesy of the J. M. Kaplan Fund, who will fund conservation of the Theodosian Palace at Stobi in the following three years, during which time a training course for professionals will be included, under the guidance of foreign experts in architectural, mosaic and stone conservation.

On behalf of the National Institution Stobi and the Balkan Heritage Foundation, we would like to express our enormous gratitude to the international and local experts and editors and all colleagues who have participated in the creation of this plan, and for their useful advice and constructive discussions during both round tables, organized at Stobi. The Master Conservation Plan for the Archaeological site of Stobi is available to download from the websites of both the National Institution Stobi<sup>8</sup> and the Balkan Heritage Foundation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Download from <http://www.stobi.mk/Templates/Pages/Publications.aspx?page=255>.

<sup>9</sup> Download from <https://balkanheritage.org/master-conservation-plan-for-the-archaeological-site-of-stobi-r-of-north-macedonia-2021>.

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**REZIME**

**MASTER PLAN KONZERVACIJE ZA ARHEOLOŠKO NALAZIŠTE STOBI: CILJEVI I REZULTATI**

KLJUČNE REČI: STOBI, KONZERVACIJA, PLAN, MENADŽMENT, ODRŽAVANJE, PREZENTACIJA, FANDREJZING.

Antički grad Stobi je bio najveći grad u severnom delu rimske provincije *Macedonia*, kasnija prestonica provincije *Macedonia Secunda* i važan gradski, administrativni, trgovački i religiozni centar tokom rimskog i kasnoantičkog perioda. Smešten na izuzetno značajnom mestu, na ušću dve najveće reke Aksios i Erigon (današnji Vardar i Crna Reka) i na raskršću glavnih trgovačkih puteva koji su vodili od severa ka jugu i od istoka ka zapadu, grad je imao sve preduslove za značajan rast i razvoj. Preživевši varvarske napade u V i VI veku, zemljotrese, klimatske promene, glad i kugu u VI veku, kao i opšte slabljenje carstva, grad je opstao sve do kraja VI ili ranog VII veka, kada je napušten.

Arheološka iskopavanja grada Stobi započeta su pre jednog veka, tokom Prvog svetskog rata, a sprovode se i danas, dok su prve aktivnosti na zaštiti otkrivenih antičkih ostataka pokrenute tokom tridesetih godina prošlog veka. Do danas su otkrivene dvadeset četiri bogato ukrašene građevine javnog, privatnog, svetovnog ili religioznog karaktera: pozorište, biblioteka, hram posvećen egipatskim božanstvima, civilna i ranohrišćanske bazilike, stambene građevine, kao i velika kolekcija predmeta.

Nalazište je proglašeno kulturnim dobrom od nacionalnog interesa prve kategorije, 1956. i 1971. godine, a 2016. godine je vrednovano kao posebno kulturno nasleđe od velikog značaja, i to prema Uneskovim kriterijumima za značaj, autentičnost, integritet, raznolikost i retkost, koji su uključeni u nacionalno zakonodavstvo Republike Severne Makedonije.

U proteklih sto godina, iskopavanja, zaštita i prezentacija nalazišta su bili pod nadležnošću različitih institucija. U 2008. godini je osnovana Nacionalna institucija za upravljanje arheološkim nalazištem Stobi (National Institution Stobi / NI Stobi), kao nezavisna vladina institucija pod okriljem Ministarstva kulture, sa ciljem brige o nalazištu sa svakog mogućeg aspekta: iskopavanja, očuvanja i prezentacije.

Različitost politika i strategija primenjenih od strane različitih institucija odgovornih za nalazište u prošlosti dovela je do sadašnjeg stanja antičkih ostataka, pokretnih nalaza i infrastrukturnih objekata.

Glavni problemi zabeleženi na nalazištu su:

- Upotreba neadekvatnih materijala za konzervaciju – maltera na bazi cementa u konzervaciji i restauraciji arhitektonskih ostataka, mozaika i podova od kamenih ploča, kao i u restauraciji i anastilozima mermernih elemenata arhitekture;
- Nedostatak balansa između iskopavanja i konzervacije;
- Nedostatak održavanja;
- Politika konzervacije koja se zalagala za neumerenu restauraciju umesto konzervacije ostataka u obimu u kom su pronađeni.

U cilju prevazilaženja ovih glavnih problema, a u saradnji Nacionalne institucije za upravljanje arheološkim nalazištem Stobi i Balkan Heritage Foundation iz Bugarske, i uz velikodušnu podršku fonda J. M. Kaplan Fund (SAD), izrađen je *Master plan konzervacije za arheološko nalazište Stobi (Master Conservation Plan for the Archaeological Site of Stobi)* tokom perioda od 2019. do 2021. godine, uz učešće stručnjaka iz partnerskih institucija, kao i inostranih i lokalnih eksperata.

*Master plan konzervacije za arheološko nalazište Stobi* je strateški document pripremljen sa osnovnim ciljevima pružanja uputstava i preporuka za bolje očuvanje i prezentaciju raznolikog kulturnog nasleđa na ovom nalazištu, promocije savremenog metodološkog pristupa oceni po-

tencijalnih rizika, oštećenja i problema, pružanja najboljih mogućih rešenja, negovanja upotrebe adekvatnih metoda i materijala u konzervaciji i isticanja značaja građenja institucionalnih kapaciteta i obučeni stručnjaka u oblasti očuvanja kulturnog nasleđa. Plan takođe pruža uputstva za unapređenje turističke prezentacije nalazišta, kao i smernice za razvoj strategije fandrejzinge sa listom potencijalnih donatora, programa, fondova i grantova.

Plan posebno naglašava preporuke vezane za dva segmenta našeg rada: očuvanje i preventivnu konzervaciju tokom tekućih iskopavanja koji se praktikuju širom sveta, a što je ključno za očuvanje iskopanih struktura, ali i za umanjene neravnoteže između iskopavanja i konzervacije, za šta su potrebne ozbiljne promene u zakonodavstvu, a posebno u njegovom segmentu vezanom za arheološke ostatke.

Zapravo, *Master plan konzervacije za arheološko nalazište Stobi* predstavlja osnovni instrument za sadašnje i buduće upravljače arheološkim nalazištem Stobi, kako bi bolje planirali kratkoročne i dugoročne aktivnosti vezane za očuvanje, prezentaciju i održavanje ovog nalazišta, i na taj način obezbedili mogućnosti za njegov održivi razvoj.

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