

Balkan Mysteries: The Bosnian Pyramids of Semir Osmanagić

Visoko, around 30 kilometres away from Sarajevo, became the empire of an adventurer who attempted to turn ideas about Europe's history upside down

I drive along, like a snail, on the only stretch of highway in Bosnia, surrounded by ancient trucks spewing out toxic smoke, and the thirty kilometres start seeming like a hundred. After following the directions of a competent guidebook – “drive straight for fifteen minutes and then turn right,” I enter Visoko.

This is the new empire of Semir Osmanagić – an adventurous, amateur archaeologist with a dramatic sense of publicity who claims that he discovered pyramids dating back 12,000 years in the region.

“The valley of the Bosnian Pharaohs” stretches out like a belt around the town, considered by Bosnia's official historians to have been an important medieval centre. The pyramids are actually hills, covered in grass and slightly built-up – similar to the Thracian tumuli

discovered in Bulgaria and northern Greece, but on a scale of at least 50:1. Inside them, Osmanagić claims, a tunnel system leads to the centre where tombs are located.

The assertions of the Bosnian-American lay archaeologist evoke sarcasm among scientists. But Visoko nevertheless is preparing for its Golden Age: new tourist kitsch stores sell pyramid souvenirs and overpriced mineral water and young children have learned by heart a short introduction to the discoveries, investing in their professional future as tour guides.

The town is immersed in fog – a usual occurrence for most of the year because of the two rivers that surround Visoko – Bosna and Fojnica. I park on a raised sidewalk in a row of old Zastava and Yugo cars, and – upon opening the door – I catch the smell of freshly-baked *börek*.



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I soon notice the food is the most appealing side of Visoko, at least when it is foggy. The town is not the attractive place described in official tourist brochures. The post-socialism culture, mixed with the post-war economy, has not produced an especially colourful reality. The grey streets wind around new, nondescript houses and people walk around as if trying to escape. There is no trace of Visoko's pride – the legendary leather-workers.

I spend half an hour in the corner bakery, while waiting for the director of the local history museum, Professor Hodović. He has decided to personally give me a tour. Only after leaving my car behind and climbing into his, I realise the problem: I am to be taken to the OFFICIAL medieval fortress excavation site on top of one of the hills, Visočica, while Osmanagić's team – scandalous dilettantes

according to the professional community, are working at its base, but on the opposite side, around 4-5 kilometres from the place the director is taking me.

“You insist on having a direct answer to everything!” he looks at me in irritation, when I ask whether there is a dose of truth in the discoveries announced by Osmanagić. His reaction makes sense – he is the front man of the inconvenient situation in which local archaeologists find themselves because of Bosnia's Indiana Jones. That role, it seems, is too much to bear for Professor Hodović. Almost on a daily basis, he has to give explanations to people like me and while, on the one hand, his heart is on the side of the professionals, on the other he realises the economic benefit to his region from the new-comer's bombastic assertions.

“They might be true and they might not be. I will not say anything,” Hodović smiles faintly, as he drives along the road that winds around the lower part of the hill. “Here is part of the digs,” he waves to the right, without stopping. He's tense, not just because of Osmanagić, but also because his supervisors are coming to inspect the Visočica excavations.

As we crawl upwards, the fog begins to thin out and a moment later, we are bathed in bright sunlight. We stop 300 metres beneath the peak, surrounded by a surreal view: clouds underneath, sky overhead and – in the middle between them – a green pyramid, covered by hordes of sheep. I notice several more green cones suspended in the empty space around us. The hanging pyramids of Semir Osmanagić...

We climb up the last several metres to the peak and spend the following three hours there, waiting for the supervisors to arrive, then leave. A team of around 30 people works here, on the excavation of the fortress that crowned the medieval Bosnian town of Visoki. Historians say that its ruins were still visible until around 100 years ago, but before the last excavations began, they were levelled to the ground. The archaeologists are now digging out the remains of external and internal rooms, for now invisible.

I use the time to look over the green valley: the two rivers and their several tributaries cut through it, hills are scattered around. One of them – Pljesivica, has a surprisingly faultless form, just like Visočica, on top of which I am standing. It was precisely this sight that caused Osmanagić to suspect in 2005 that there are pyramids buried underground.

Even though he is not a professional archaeologist, Osmanagić considers himself a connoisseur. He asserts that he worked on the Mayan remains over a few years, and

visited dozens of ancient places, including the pyramids in Peru. He also studied the pre-Ilyrian civilization in Herzegovina and Dalmatia.

His professional claims, however, sound a little unconvincing after one reads parts of his book on the Mayas: “The Mayas have to be considered the watchmakers of the Cosmos, whose mission is to adjust the earth’s frequency and attune it to the vibrations of our Sun... Their predecessors, the civilizations of Atlantis and Lemuria, raised the first temples of powerful energy spots on the planet. Their fundamental function was to serve as a portal to other worlds and dimensions.”

When I find myself, three hours later, back in my car, I have to start from scratch. I go back to Visočica and stop at the spot the director waved at without stopping. A steep set of wooden stairs leads to one of the important elements of Osmanagić’s discoveries. During excavations here, his team found that underneath a layer of grass and earth, the hill is coated with massive stone tiles that – according to

him – were made and laid by a human hand.

Osmanagić’s version: There are pyramids in Bosnia. It is a matter of time before everybody realises it.

The critics: The Bosnian pyramids are a misconception. Osmanagić is a dilettante and his excavations damage the architectural heritage.

Now, however, their efforts are focused on the hill’s base, renamed the Sun Pyramid by Osmanagić. The archaeologists who are working with him there are trying to find the path to the construction’s centre.

I go around the entire hill and stop for directions at least six times, until I am finally able to find the cave’s entrance. Until recently, everybody thought it was a natural phenomenon. But the excitement, with which people who look like miners greet me at the entrance, is not only because they have found traces of human efforts in the tunnel’s reinforcement, but also because they have come across a kind of signposts.



They claim that the large, smooth stones lined along the walls here and there turned out to be mini-maps of the tunnel that show the passage branches.

As I walk through the cave, I notice dozens of advertisements for private companies, barely discernible in the dark. If the scientific community sneers at Osmanagić's discoveries, the business one is obviously of another opinion – probably giving professional archaeologists another reason for contempt.

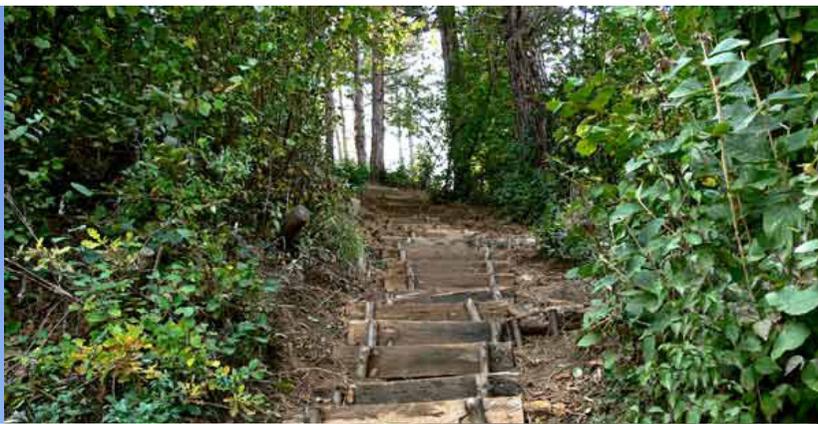
For now, the tunnel goes only a few hundred metres into the rock, but it continues to be cleared out in search of the tombs in the centre of the Sun Pyramid, foreseen by Osmanagić. But this is not the only place where remains from 12,000 years ago are being sought. Excavations are going forward on several other sites, including the neighbouring Moon Pyramid.

According to some “orthodox” archaeologists not only Osmanagić's claims, but also the excavations are outrageous, as they are destroying the true archaeological heritage.

In the meantime, the Bosnian-American adventure-seeker continues to produce sensational news: “The Bosnian Illyrians are an ancient people from 27,000 years ago. Their descendants make up half of the population of Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia”; “The phenomenon of the megalithic stone spheres in Costa Rica and Bosnia testifies for a pre-historic energy network.”

Many of Osmanagić's assertions seem like the product of a not entirely stable mind. It is true that the hypothesis that Africa and South America were once connected seemed similar just a few decades ago. But the Bosnian archaeologist will have to go a long way before he convinces the world of his claims that, for the time being, seem phantasmagorical.

I leave Visoko, feeling like I have just woken up from a dream. Somebody else's dream. At the town's exit, I see the only signpost: turn right to the Sun Pyramid. One thing is clear – the town needs it, even if it is just a mirage from an adventurer's dreams.



The Dispute

Osmanagić's version:

There are pyramids in Bosnia. It is a matter of time before everybody realises it.

“My discovery will change human history.”



The Bosnian pyramids were created by a highly-developed civilization more than 12,000 years ago.

The slopes of the Sun Pyramid are covered with man-made stones.

The pyramids have a faultless geometric form and they are connected by a system of artificially-made tunnels.

An analysis of thermal satellite images shows that the pyramids' walls cool down faster than the rest of the geological formations in the Visoko region, which proves that there are hollow spaces underneath their surface.

The best time to go:

May, June and the end of August until mid-October

How to get there: A 30-kilometre highway links Sarajevo to Visoko, with the trip lasting between an hour and an hour and a half, depending on traffic. It is best to go by car, as there is no public transport to the archeological sites.

The critics: The Bosnian pyramids are a misconception. Osmanagić is an impostor and his excavations damage the architectural heritage.

Anthony Harding, President of the European Association of Archaeologists “I’ve seen the site, in my opinion it is entirely natural.”

Sejfudin Vrabac, Faculty of Mining and Geology at the University of Tuzla, said that it was a natural geological formation, with dozens of similar formations in the Sarajevo-Zenica mining basin alone.

A letter signed by 26 professional archeologists from the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy and Bosnia and Herzegovina: “The pyramid claims of Mr. Osmanagic and the activities of his team pose a serious threat to the rich historical, cultural and archaeological heritage of the Visoko region.”

Mark Rose, Archeological Institute of America: “If you want to categorize this farce, it seems a standard-issue “amateur/maverick confounds establishment with great discovery” story, which no doubt makes it appealing to uncritical reporters looking for a big story. This kind of tale is a staple of the pseudoarchaeology or fantastic archaeology genre. And the term “pyramidiot” has been applied to those obsessed with pyramids and who offer strange interpretations of them on websites and in books and television programs.”

