

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRAIL AT ST PETER



*Embraced by the Rivers
Temenica and Mirna*

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL



Gorenji Mokronog and its surroundings, as well as the places which reflect the

RAIL AT ST PETER'S



religious conceptions of the Old Slaves.

GORENJI MOKRONOG

The Debenško Mountains just south of Mokronog are not high, yet the slopes are steep, the valleys are narrow and marshy and consequently, they are difficult to traverse. These natural features are underestimated in 'good times', however they become decisive insofar as personal security is concerned. Frequent civil wars and incursions of various peoples, expectant of war loot or even settlement in the land of their dreams, accompanied the decline of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries. The goal remained constant: affluent Italy. The local population thus began retreating to more remote areas. One such region of refuge became the Debenško Mountains. Here the local population succeeded in surviving even after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the temporary settlement of various Germanic peoples. They awaited the arrival of the Slavs, who designated them as 'Vlachs'. In the following centuries they united into a new lineage of the Slavic language, maintaining strong ties with old traditions. Pre-Slavic names for bodies of water are characteristic in Slovenia only for large rivers. However, one particularity for the Mokronog area is that numerous small streams also carry such names (such as the Sotla). This would be inconceivable without the long-term cohabitation of the Vlachs and Slavs. The heritage of the wooden church of the first Christians at Gorenji Mokronog also survived its encounter with both. Is the correspondence between the orientation of graves at Vrajski breg and the axis of the nearby church Sv. Peter merely a matter of coincidence?

Gorenji Mokronog was upset by fantasy already in the 19th century. Consequently, the legend of the holy brothers Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius is still quite alive even today. These two brothers supposedly stopped in Gorenji Mokronog on their way to Rome and said mass in the Romanesque rotunda-ossuary situated there. The memorandum was of course artificially recorded in the people's consciousness through the then first Slovene newspaper, the 'Agricultural and Trade News' (Kmetijske in rokodelske novice). This was the simple response to the political circumstances. Under the influence of the then nascent Pan-Slavism, the 9th century custom of the Slavic apostles saying mass was still entirely arbitrarily set in the Romanesque rotunda. What do the initial field investigations reveal?

The group of sites at Gorenji Mokronog (Sv. Peter, Vrajski breg, Grad) presents an historic record, which remains unparalleled in Slovenia. Its narrative tells of two poorly understood periods that are fundamental for comprehending Slovene history: the transition from Vlach Late Antiquity to the Slavic Early Middle Ages, and the origins of the strong feudal castle.

The 19th century is a time of generating modern Slovene national myths. One also represents medieval society in Slovenia. It tells of the supposedly characteristic exploitative relations of the greedy German lords who would relentlessly dispossess the poor Slovene villains of even their last farthing. The area of the castle ruins at Gorenji Mokronog suggests a different story. It tells of the Old Slavic origins of the castle and of the last battle with the rebellious peasants, among which could have also been those from the nearby Nemška (currently Slovenska) Vas (German Village).

Pagan Slavs also left their mark. They can be surmised from a group of three holy names. Similar such names are also known from here and

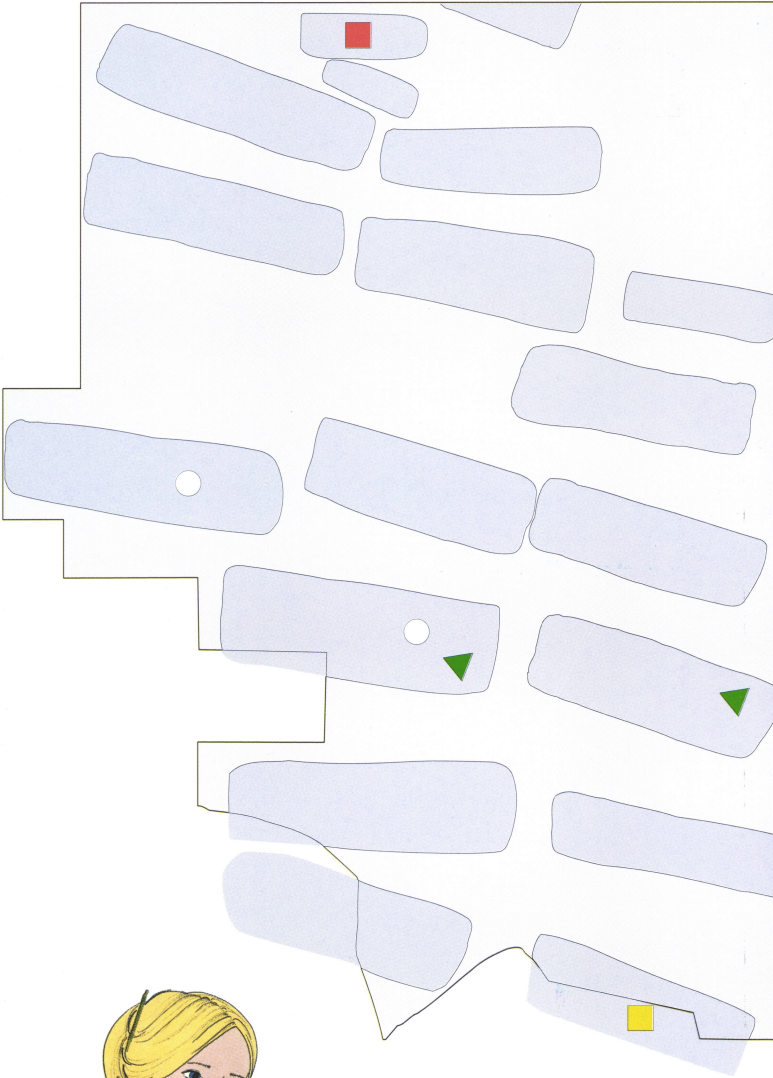
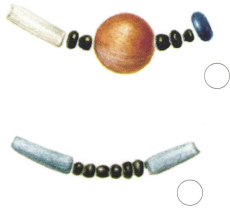
there in the Slavic world. Their presence in the Dolenjska region is established here for the first time. The toponyms are the following: Ragac (Rogatec), Sveti Vrh with the church of Mary, (Gorenji) Mokronog with Sv. Peter. These are localities where the gods of the sky, earth, fire and water were worshipped.

VRAJSKI BREG

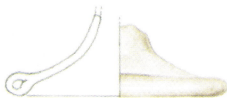
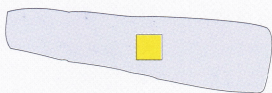
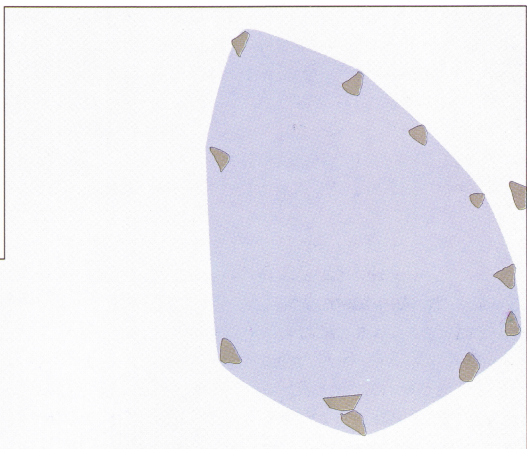
“Vrajk” or “Vrajski breg” is a dialectal derivation of the locative case of the term “v raju” (meaning ‘in heaven’). Paradise, meaning heaven to Christians, betokened to pagans the land to where souls went after death. From the second half of the 19th century onwards, skeletal graves were often discovered here during various excavations, and in recent times primarily through digging for sand. Furthermore, folk tradition divined of a wooden church of the first Christians that was supposedly situated somewhere hereabouts.



An archaeological view of the remains of the wooden building and the graves along the slope beneath it.



A plan of the site with drawings of the discovered material find.



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5 m

All the graves were situated along the eastern slope. None were positioned along the leveled top of the crest. However, there were a few remains of a small, round and wooden structure here. Traces of twelve postholes were disclosed. That these are the remains of an exceedingly modest church, as the legend claims existed, is entirely possible.

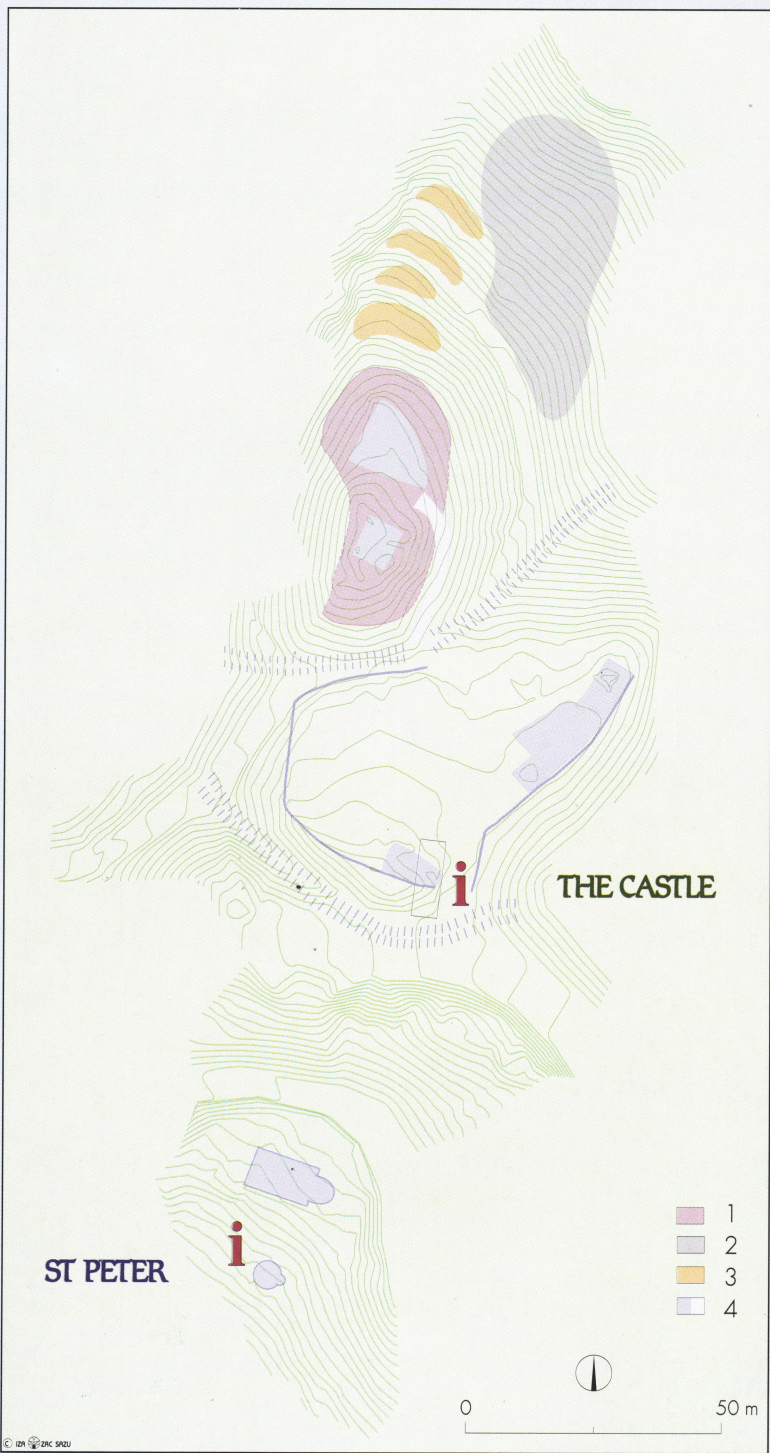
This is a time when the church organization with its educated priests disintegrated, and only the common people remained. These people assumed the role formerly performed by the priests. From the viewpoint of the official church, this 'mimicry' was unorthodox. Nevertheless, just as the people were contented with the wooden hut in place of a real church, they were also satisfied with their unschooled and rural priest, who would christen them. Towards the end of the 8th century the Franks and their allies militarily encroached upon Pannonia, and written sources cite that even here they came across illiterate priests.

Only the northwestern edge of the necropolis is known today. The remainder of the site yet awaits investigation. Excavation along the southern edge of the sand source revealed a group of inhumation graves, 15 of which were preserved and 5 burials that were devastated or damaged. The rectangular grave pits were orientated towards the east of the autumn sun, and dug shallow into a foundation of decaying dolomitic sandstone. The graves incorporated few yet characteristic grave-goods from the 6th and 7th centuries: two bronze earrings with basket-shaped pendants, the bases of Late Antiquity goblets that were used secondarily for children's rattles, two iron belt buckles, cylindrical and round beads of glass paste as well as carnelian.

Analysis of skeletal remains of past populations can prove to be quite revealing. Interestingly, a larger portion of the deceased was between the ages of 30 and 40, and no one surpassed the age of 60. This is perhaps a consequence of the highly demanding living circumstances at the time; the observation that women transported heavy loads upon their heads is a further substantiation of this. One man suffered from arthritis in his younger years, and poorly set bone fractures were also a more frequent occurrence. At least two men were related to each other, as is substantiated by their similar hooknoses. Another indication of the humble circumstances of the time is that now women could only afford to wear one earring from a pair, as opposed to the otherwise customary pair. Likewise, even their necklaces were adorned with only a few select parti-colored beads. Purchasing money was no more, and merchants probably rarely bothered to travel to these remote areas. Only the valuables from mother's chest still remained, and even these eventually ran short.

THE CASTLE

The plot of ground is very uneven, revealing numerous human interventions. With the modern geodetic technique of digital recording, the possibility of investigating the surface of the site as an artifact seemed to almost volunteer itself. A computer image was created depicting a bird's eye view of the site. Individual components of the site could thus be united into a more extensive, composite plan. Combined with the material goods discovered in the field, a rough explanation of the site's formation can be generated (1- prehistoric fortification, 2- Late



A plan of the settlement remains:

*1 - the prehistoric fortification
2 - the Vlach settlement*

*3 - Early medieval settlement terraces
4 - the medieval castle and church*

Antiquity settlement terraces, 3- Early medieval settlement terraces, 4- medieval castle and church).

Investigations revealed that initially there was a prehistoric fortification along the highest part of the crest. Remains of the rampart are still perceivable along the north and southern sides, while the extremely steep and precipitous slope probably precluded the existence of it along the western side. A Vlach village stood along the gentler slope of the northeastern side at least from the 5th to the 7th centuries. These people are buried at Vrajski breg. The trial excavation showed the remains of at least two settlement periods. The buildings of the older one were burnt. Their houses being wooden, this population evidently no longer knew the art of firing lime. During the period between the 7th and 9th centuries, they abandoned this remote village and moved elsewhere. Whereabouts is still a mystery. Just north of the fortification, four Early Medieval terraces gradually transverse the crest. These terraces are certainly later than the Vlach settlement. It seems that the local population lived in temporary refuge during the troubled times of the Magyar incursions at the end of the 9th century and the first half of the 10th century. This only added to the exceptionally defensive military significance of the place, and furthermore, it was made good use of when the medieval castle was built.

The ruins of the former (Gorenji) Mokronog castle are situated atop the crest between two sources of the Laknica stream. The first tower built of stone was positioned at the highest point. Bearing witness to the livelihood of the place are fragments of broken vessels that accumulated in the nearby surroundings continuously between the 10th and 16th centuries. Written sources first mention the inhabitants of the castle in 1137. At the time this was one of the most important castles in the Dolenjska region. This locality eventually attained the additional name of Gorenji (Upper) after the lower castle was built in current day Mokronog. The castle tower with enclosed court atop the crest largely destroyed any traces of older settlement. Between the castle and the castle-yard was the first defense ditch. The castle-yard had its own walls. Along its southern side was the second defense ditch. Traces of stone buildings are visible along the eastern side, while a defense tower was positioned to the south, by the entrance. This tower was archaeologically investigated in part.

Fragments of cooking and drinking wares, as well as clay kilns, were discovered in the burned and demolished layers. Stone cannon balls were discovered above walking surface. A burnt layer with remains of a wooden platform lay just above it. Charred huts made of chestnut wood were built from trees that were still growing at least in 1515. The tower was not renovated after the fire, which could possibly have been started in the 'great peasants' rebellion' in 1573. Valvasor's copper engraving depicts the castle in ruins.

SV. PETER (ST PETER)

The Gorenji Mokronog parish was established already in 1249. Oton, the parish priest from here, was among the witnesses signed on the founding muniment of the Cistercian monastery at Kostanjevica along the Krka. In 1331, the duke Otto Hapsburg bestowed patronage of the



Archaeological excavations revealed remains of a defense tower under shrubbery, beneath which were the remains of a burned platform and stone cannon balls of the last defenders at the bottom.

parish to the monastery in Kostanjevica. The Aquileian patriarch also confirmed this. In 1780, the seat was transferred to the Sv. Križ (Holly Cross) church in the nearby Trebelno.

The church area is composed of the church of Sv. Peter and the ossuary with the chapel of Sv. Mihael (St Michael), which was formerly enclosed within the walls of the cemetery. The church, with its preserved Romanesque window, dates to the 12th century. Three-leaved windows are still preserved as well as the pointed, stone arch of the portal. These are attributed to the Gothic style, as well as a part of a wall painting of the suffering Christ along the northern facade of the nave. The three-sided presbytery dates to the beginning of the 17th century. The level, wooden ceiling in the nave was replaced with an arched one during the second half of the 18th century. A bell tower was built as an extension to the western façade of the nave, as well as a vestry to the northern. The church accoutrements are also from this time. A small-scaled archaeological excavation along the northern side of the church revealed 34 burials. All grave pits were entirely obliterated, or dug up, despite the exceedingly exact excavations. Curiously, the earlier and 'traditional' orientation of burials, that is East-West, was

redirected to the later version, "with the legs towards the church". The oldest material grave goods of the later phase, holy icons and coins, indicate that this change occurred during the beginning of the 16th century. The cemetery was transferred to Trebelno at the beginning of the 18th century. There are no reliably datable elements discovered from the earlier phase of graves. However, it can at least be established as earlier than the southern wall of the church nave, which is situated atop one of the graves.

An ossuary dating to the 12th century is situated on the steep slope above the church. The Romanesque rotunda has a low, semi-circular apse along its southeastern side. Bones were kept in the lower space; they were revealed when the graves were turned over. The vaulted chapel of St. Michael stands above.

Thanks to the noblemen of Svibno from the nearby Gorenji Mokronog castle, the arch was enriched with transversal ribs that lean upon the cubic consoles with obliquely cut sides between the years 1335 and 1372. The model for this type of vaulting lies in the parish church in Svibno.



The place name Mokronog was initially applied to the castle and church of Sv. Peter at modern Gorenji Mokronog. The sky deity that also brought rain was worshipped here in the Early Slavic period. Hollows in the rock, which are interpreted as the footprints of God, are known throughout the world. Miraculous properties are ascribed to the water from these hollows. Churches were frequently built in such places; Sv. Peter is often identified as the Christian equivalent of the former sky

deity. The church of Sv. Peter at Gornji Mokronog is also built on rock. It is highly likely that such a water-filled footprint-shaped hollow was formerly present on this rock. The local population may have equated this with traces of the god Mokronog (Wet Foot), who provided them with rain and life.

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