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## BRONZE-AGE STONE TUMULI ON PLANINICA HILL, OBŠ. TUZI, MONTENEGRO

### ABSTRACT

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Tumuli in Montenegro are regarded as Bronze and Early Iron Age structures, but the majority of those sites have not been explored. The archaeological record indicates significant differences in their construction. The tumuli on Planinica — the first investigated stone burial mounds in Montenegro — regarding their construction, have analogies with the Early Bronze Age site of Rječani near Nikšić only, they do not compare with sites with a later chronology. Giving the state of research on the topic however, it should be pointed out that this is only hinted at. The Brillenspirale found in the sarcophagus of Tumulus II, based on finds from the comprehensively published site Velika Gruda near Tivat, indicates a much later date — to the Late Bronze Age. The minimum number of 7 individuals (probably males) buried in Tumulus II — fitting the ancestral pattern — encourages the interpretation of a long-term burial.

Key words: the Bronze Age, Montenegro, stone tumuli, 3D modelling

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bronze Age in the territory of Montenegro is a very poorly explored period. On the one hand, unique relics have been discovered, suggesting the importance of the region as a cultural crossroads, with incoming cultural influences from the Mediterranean and Central Europe; on the other hand, however, there is a severe lack of fundamental data regarding culture, settlement forms or social structure (see: Harding 2000, 100–103; Della Casa 1996b, 142–146; Kristiansen, Larsson 2008, 108; further literature). This results partially from the state of research, and partially from the specificity of the sites themselves.

The massif of Planinica (Albanian: Pllänices) reaches 267 m above the sea level and dominates the northern region of the Zeta Plain. From the north and west, its foothills are encircled by the Cijevna River, a tributary of the Morača (Fig. 1). Three stone tumuli form a separate group of structures identified on Planinica Hill. They are located on the ridge of the prominence, in its eastern part, below the summit. The small tumulus marked as No. I is located in the central part of the ridge. Tumulus No. II, the most prominent one, is located on its eastern edge, with small Tumulus No. III to the south-east of it, down the slope. Their arrangement is roughly linear, with Tumulus II positioned in the middle (Fig. 2–3). It might have been deliberate, but it might also resulted from the formation and accessibility of the terrain on the summit of Planinica. The size and state of preservation varies from tumulus to tumulus.

Field research on Planinica Hill was undertaken as part of “The cultural landscape of Copper/Bronze Age Malesija, Montenegro” project. In the 2012 season, research encompassed a preliminary study of archaeological sites in the area of the village of Dinoša, including their location, character and the state of preservation. Descriptive, graphic and photographic documentation, geodesic survey and photogrammetric documentation based on aerial photographs were prepared for selected sites and areas. In the course of research on Planinica Hill, the structures were inventoried, elevation measurements were taken, orthophotographs were prepared, and the photographic and descriptive documentation were made. Having ascertained that the sarcophagi of Tumulus I and Tumulus II had been disturbed, the fillings of their chambers were wholly explored.

### **Tumulus No. I**

The structure is damaged and poorly discernible. It has an oval ground plan, the diameter at the base is ca 14.0–14.5 m, the current height is ca 0.9 to 1 m, the cross-section has the profile of a segment of a circle (Fig. 4). The tumulus has the form of an embankment of medium-sized broken stones filled with stone rubble. In its central area there is a sarcophagus measuring ca 1.4 by 0.9 m (calculated along the outer boundary), consisting of four upright stone slabs, with their edges overlapping at the corners (Fig. 5). The interior of the chamber measures ca 1.2 by 0.70 m, with a depth up to 0.75 m. A damaged stone lid



Fig. 1. The massif of Planinica viewed from the north east (photo U. Bugaj)

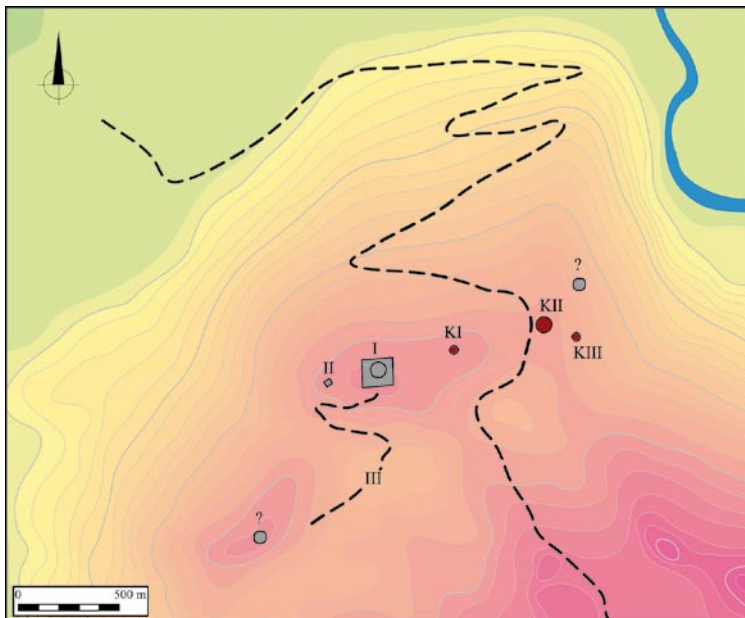


Fig. 2. Planinica — the position and correlation of the structures on the summit of the hill. The tumuli are marked in red and with the letter “K”. Modern-era structures are marked in grey (by M. Trzeciecki)



Fig. 3. Bird's eye view of the ridge of the hill with the location of Tumulus No. I, II and III (photo M. Bogacki)

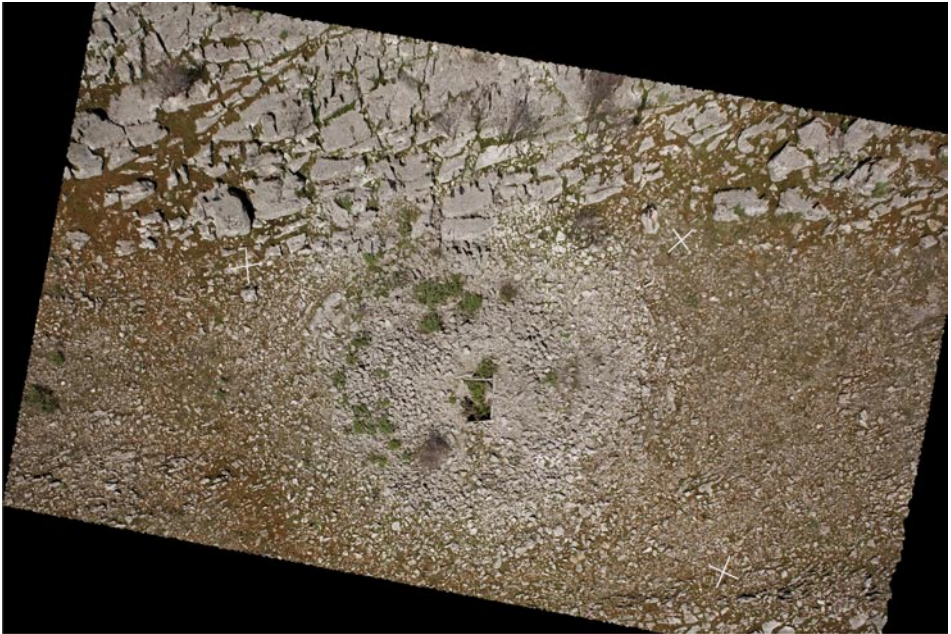


Fig. 4. Tumulus No. I — orthophotographic map (by M. Bogacki)



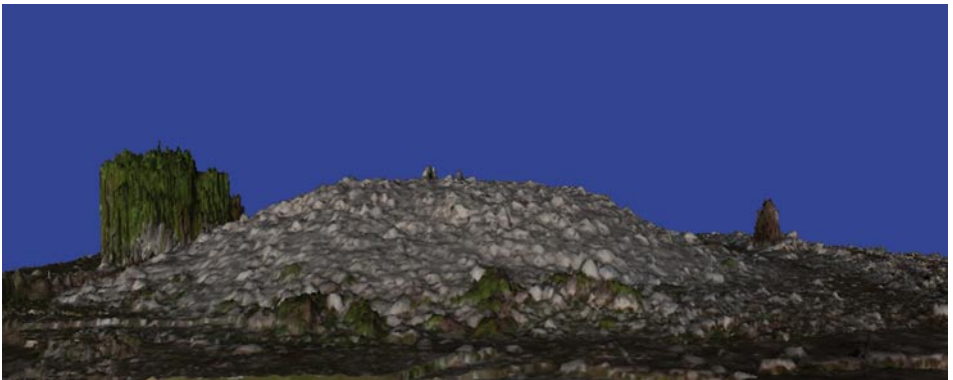
**Fig. 5.** Tumulus No. I — the sarcophagus after exploration (photo M. Trzecicki)



**Fig. 6.** Tumulus No. II — bird's eye view (photo M. Bogacki)



**Fig. 7.** Tumulus No. II — orthophotographic map (by M. Bogacki)



**Fig. 8.** Tumulus No. II — digital elevation model (DEM), view from the west (by M. Bogacki)



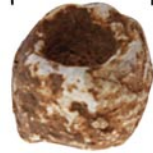
**Fig. 9.** Tumulus No. II — peak of the tumulus with the sarcophagus (photo U. Bugaj)



**Fig. 10.** Tumulus No. II — the sarcophagus after exploration (photo M. Trzeciński)



0 2 cm



0 1 cm

Fig. 11. Tumulus No. II — finds from the sarcophagus (by M. Trzebiecki)





**Fig. 12.** Tumulus No. III — orthophotographic map (by M. Bogacki)



**Fig. 13.** Tumulus No. III — general view. In the foreground the sarcophagus lid (photo U. Bugaj)

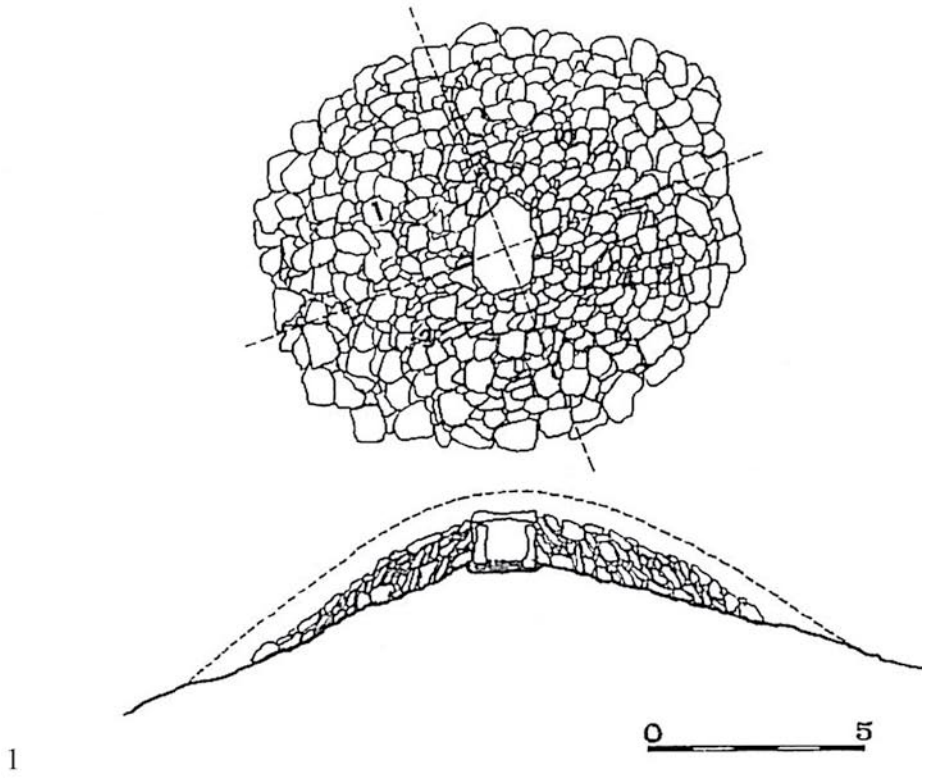


Fig. 14. Rječani, Tumulus No. 3 — cross-section (1), general view of sarcophagus (2).  
After Marković 1992, by M. Trzeciecki

lies inside the sarcophagus. Slabs forming the side walls of the sarcophagus were positioned directly on the bedrock and subsequently covered round with heaped stones that form the embankment of the tumulus. Currently, the upper edges of the slabs forming the sarcophagus are level with the surface of the embankment. The interior of the sarcophagus was wholly explored. It was filled with a homogeneous layer of dark-brown, clayey humus mixed with a large amount of small stones. No traces of a burial were ascertained. The character of the layer indicates a very long and undisturbed accumulation inside the chamber. It may therefore be assumed that the sarcophagus was opened a relatively long time ago and its entire contents were removed.

### **Tumulus No. II**

This is the largest and best preserved structure. It has the ground plan of an oval approximating a regular circle; its diameter is *ca* 21.3–21.5 m. Its cross-section has the profile of a trapezoid. The diameter of the upper surface is *ca* 9 m; the height of the embankment is 3.8 to 4 m (Fig. 6–8). Contemporary cavities, probably break-in holes, are visible in the crest of the tumulus. The tumulus has the form of an embankment of large and medium-sized broken stones filled with stone rubble. No traces of the use of definite techniques in forming the tumulus were observed. Currently its surface is covered almost exclusively with large stone blocks, whereas in its interior similar blocks are positioned in a layer of rubble consisting of small stones. It seems, however, that this cannot be taken as a basis for an assumption that originally the embankment was covered with an overlay of large stones; it appears that this condition results from natural processes of erosion and the washing out of smaller material. In its central area there is a sarcophagus measuring 1.9 by 1.4 m (calculated along the outer boundary), consisting of four upright stone slabs, placed so that the slabs forming the longer sides lean against the slabs forming the shorter sides (Fig. 9). The interior of the chamber measures 1.2 by 0.9 m, with a depth up to 1.80 m. The lid of the sarcophagus was not preserved; the interior bears traces of robbery. Slabs forming the side walls of the sarcophagus were positioned on the core of the embankment, which indicates that the sarcophagus was completed, at the earliest, in the final phase of constructing the embankment. Currently, upper edges of the slabs forming the sarcophagus project *ca* 20–30 cm above the level of the embankment's surface. The interior of the sarcophagus was wholly explored (Fig. 10). It was filled with a homogeneous layer, *ca* 30 cm thick, of dark-brown, clayey humus mixed with a large amount of small stones. Numerous very small fragments of human bone (see M. Novak, anthropological analysis) and a single artefact were found in this layer. Discolourations evident on the walls of the chamber indicate that the original filling of the chamber, which accumulated inside after its opening, was up to 70 cm thick, and that the chamber was partially emptied a relatively short time ago. A small bronze ornament (*Brillenspirale*) and a small bone bead were found inside the sarcophagus (Fig. 11: 1–2).

### Tumulus No. III

The structure is very damaged and poorly discernible. It has a roughly oval ground plan, the diameter at the base is ca 13–14 m, the current height is ca 0.9 to 1 m, and the cross-section has the profile of a segment of a circle (Fig. 12). The tumulus has the form of an embankment of medium-sized broken stones filled with stone rubble. In comparison with the structures described previously, the embankment contains exceptionally few large stones, which may indicate that the structure was dismantled in the past, possibly during the construction of modern-era military structures on the hill. No traces of the sarcophagus were found; it can only be indicated that a stone lid measuring ca 1.8 x 1.3 m lies in the north-western part of the embankment (Fig. 13). It may therefore be assumed that originally the appearance of Tumulus No. III was parallel to that of Tumulus No. I, which has been described above, and its current state is the effect of demolition. That such demolition works were conducted is confirmed by the fact that fragments of sarcophagus lids were found in the debris of the walls of a watchtower from the modern period, located on the summit of the hill and marked as Structure A.

## THE ANALYSIS

Stone tumuli encountered in Montenegro are usually regarded as dating from the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age structures, but it must be noted that the majority of those sites have not been explored archaeologically (see Harding 2000, 100ff.; Marković 2006, 45ff., with further literature). The oldest sites of this type are tumuli located in the Zeta Plain dating to the Copper Age and Early Bronze Age; in this context, the foremost is the tumulus at Kuća Rakića dating to the late Copper Age. It contained 9 skeleton burials covered with an earthen embankment. The most spectacular find discovered during the excavations of this tumulus was a series of anthropomorphic clay figurines with clear references to the area of the eastern Mediterranean (Saveljić-Bulatović, Lutovac 2003, 12; Maran 1998, table 50; 4–8; 51; 1–6; 71). A different form of burial was ascertained in the similarly dated tumulus at Boljevića Gruda near Podgorica. A grave pit with a sarcophagus made of stone slabs was found in its central part. Inside, apart from a skeleton of a single individual, a set of unique objects was discovered, including a golden application, decorated with the cross motif, for a shaft-hole of a battle axe (?), two golden earrings (Noppenring type) and a pickaxe made of green polished granite (Baković, Govedarica 2009, 13–14). The tumulus at Neškova Gruda-Momišiči, dated to the Middle Bronze Age, was similarly richly furnished. The burial discovered therein was furnished with, among others, a bronze knife with three rivets, a *saltaleone* made of thin bronze wire and a biconical beaker with a handle (Saveljić-Bulatović, Lutovac 2003, 33). Among the sites located further away, the foremost is the oldest, “founding” burial, dated to the Copper Age, in the multi-phase tumulus at Velika Gruda near Tivat (Della Casa 1996, 21ff.). Although the

above sites demonstrate a variety of formal and constructional solutions, they have many features in common. Among these is the inhumation burial rite, the practice of covering the skeletal remains with an earthen embankment, and the richness of the grave furnishings. The latter led to those burials being called “princely graves” and interpreted as the burials of members of the nascent power elite, whom mediated between contacts from the Mediterranean and Central Europe (Cf. Saveljić-Bulatović, Lutovac 2003, 12–16; Guštin 2006, 87ff.).

The tradition of burying the dead under the tumuli continued in the Bronze Age and early Iron Age (see Harding 2000, 100, with further literature). Typical to these periods are mounds constructed of broken stone (in the mountain regions) or earth (on the plains). They are distinguished by having stone sarcophagi, usually positioned centrally, with the body typically placed in the contractile position (Saveljić-Bulatović, Lutovac 2003, 17–20). The best researched, but also atypical site of this period is the already-mentioned Velika Gruda. The Copper-Age tumulus at Velika Gruda became the site for subsequent burials, dug into the systematically enlarged embankment. The dead were buried in single and multiple graves often provided with sarcophagi made of stone slabs. In the course of research, collective burials were recorded in some graves and, having found pits acting as ossuaries, the practice of moving the human remains was noted. On the basis of detailed analyses of the stratigraphic context and anthropological data it may be assumed that this particular form of cemetery continued its use for at least 4 generations and was used by a group consisting of several families (Della Casa 1996a, 137, 140–142; 1996b, 21–98). The termination of its use is considered concurrent with the early Iron Age (Della Casa 1996b, 81).

In the mountainous regions of Montenegro a more typical seems to be a group of tumuli, located in the vicinity of the village of Rječani near Nikšić in north-western Montenegro. Two of them (tumuli 1 and 4) contained characteristic fragments of pottery, probably of the Early Bronze Age date (Posusje culture; Marković 1992, 207). Stone tumuli with diameters ranging from 11–16 m and heights up to 2 m were excavated; traces of burials were ascertained only in Tumulus No. 2 and No. 3. In the context of sites investigated on Planinica Hill, Tumulus No. 3 is particularly interesting. It is situated on a slight knoll. A sarcophagus of massive stone slabs was positioned at the ground level and embanked with stones of varying sizes (Fig. 14: 1–2). Regrettably, not enough data is available to establish, even conjecturally, the chronology of Tumulus No. 3.

The data given above indicates the insufficient nature on which the basis for the chronology or cultural attribution of the tumuli discovered on Planinica Hill could be ascertained. This is connected with the relatively poor state of research and the following publication of research results. It can be stated, however, that the group of tumuli discussed herein belongs to a definite tradition of burying the dead, which developed in this part of the Balkan Peninsula from the late Copper Age. Tumulus No. I, and part of Tumulus No. III, have their analogies in the above-mentioned Tumulus No. 3 from Rječani. The available literature does not provide any analogy with the form of Tumulus No. II or with the location of the sarcophagus on its peak.

The exploration of material fills within the sarcophagus in Tumulus No. II yielded two items, of which the so-called *Brillenspirale* makes it possible to approximately determine the chronology of its use. Ornaments of this type are a widespread find in the western Balkans in the Late Bronze Age (Basler, Benac 1983, 314, 418, fig. 20: 20, 21: 15, 24: 2, 28: 7). The other item, a bone bead, is unfortunately an object that is impossible to establish a chronology with any accuracy.

Dates given for Tumulus No. II, established on the basis of the *Brillenspirale*, are relatively late in comparison to the thus far accepted chronology of other such structures. It must be remembered, however, that those are the only objects found in a tumulus that had already been robbed. Also, considering the fact that during the anthropological analysis the bones extracted from the sarcophagus were determined to have belonged to at least 11 individuals, it may be assumed that Tumulus No. II continued to be in use for a relatively long time, and it is not impossible that those two relics are linked with the latest burials laid in the sarcophagus.

Some analogy to Tumulus No. II is perhaps provided by the Velika Gruda tumulus which has been described above. The *Brillenspirale*, discovered in several burials from the phase dated at Velika Gruda to the Late Bronze Age directly link the two structures. An element that links them indirectly are the multiple burials dated to that period (Della Casa 1996b, fig. 4: 16–17; 66; 75). It cannot be ruled out that a similar community of several families were “served” by Tumulus No. II for a relatively long time, and that the sarcophagus at its peak fulfilled the role of a multiple grave or even an ossuary. Having made this assumption, it might be worthwhile to investigate the possibility that under the stone embankment lies a “founding” burial analogous to that at Velika Gruda.

It is also necessary to bear in mind that the tumulus in question is accompanied by two structures which find direct analogies (at least in the case of Tumulus No. I) in Tumulus No. 3 at Rječani, which is dated, in all probability justifiably, to the Early Bronze Age. In this context, the tumuli on Planinica Hill may be interpreted as remains of a necropolis which functioned for a relatively long time, retaining the tradition of the location while the burial rite or the forms of graves were changing.

## SUMMARY

The group of tumuli on Planinica Hill is the subject of the first archaeological investigation of stone tumuli in this part of Montenegro. On the basis of the outcome of research related herein and the available analogies, their Bronze Age chronology may be determined and their relatively long period of use may be supposed. The far-from-satisfactory state of research regarding this period in relation to Montenegro makes every newly published find unique and significant. Bearing that in mind, it is all the more important to emphasise the originality of the constructional solutions applied in Tumulus No. II.

The study of the Bronze Age in Montenegro is just beginning. So far, on the basis of the still fragmentary data it can only be ascertained that it was a dynamically developing region open to influences from various cultural circles. Hence the systematic study of such structures as the Planinica tumuli is indispensable in order to determine and fully explain the complexity of the cultural processes which took place in this region.

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