

Introduction

1.1. Position and characteristics of the site

The village of Ranutovac is located in the hilly-mountainous zone of the Central Balkans, on the southern foothill of the Kukavica Mountain along the upper course of the Južna Morava River and the western edge of the Vranje-Bujanovac Basin, some 5 km northeast of the city of Vranje (Fig. 1.1). The site of Meanište is situated in the southern periphery of the village of Ranutovac, on the furthest portion of the Južna Morava River terrace at the point where the terrain slightly elevates towards the southern slopes of the Kukavica Mountain (Fig. 1.2). In geographical terms, the site is located at the transition from the alluvial zone to the zone of sands, clay, marlstones, bentonite clays and lignite,¹ meaning the transition from the alluvium to diluvial-proluvial relief (the area of moderate rinsing and dredging).² The Early Iron Age settlement partly covered the gentle slope to the northwest of the Early Bronze Age necropolis, which is nowadays urbanized with modern houses (Fig. 1.3).

The eastern periphery of the site is located some 600 m from the present-day riverbed of the Južna Morava, and the site was surrounded by small streams which have meanwhile dried up (Fig. 1.2). The vertical stratigraphy of the site, observed during the excavations, pointed out that the entire site, and especially the eastern and northeastern portions, had been flooded during a period preceding inhabitation. Likewise, there are certain indications that the site was periodically flooded afterward, and the degree of flooding is represented by different layers – the deepest with a depth of more than 1 m, composed of yellow sand mixed with gravel, followed by a layer of greenish-yellow sandy soil and a layer of greenish-grey clayish soil that covers the entire surface of the site at the relative depth of around 0.5-0.7 m. These layers indicate that the Južna Morava River periodically shifted the riverbed and flooded the part of alluvium on which the site is positioned. On the other hand, it is possible that the streams descending from the slopes of Kukavica Mountain, which surrounded the site from the north and south, flooded the area during torrents.

The Neolithic site of Čuka is located on a nearby elevation, some 250 m east of the site of Meanište and elevated some 50 m above it (Fig. 1.2).³ Although both sites, Čuka and Meanište, are quite close to each other, not a single fragment of Neolithic pottery was recorded during the excavations at the site of Meanište, and therefore it can

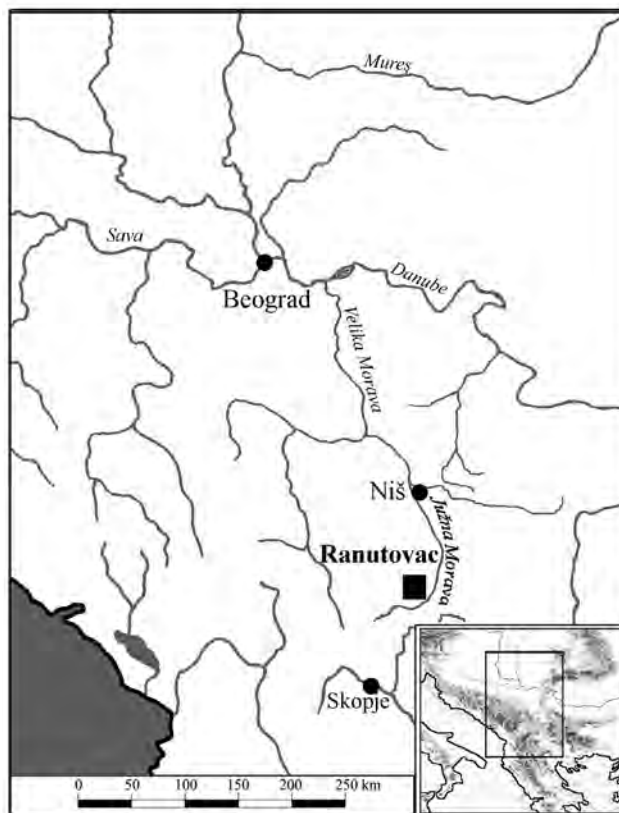


Fig. 1.1. Map of the Central Balkans with the position of Ranutovac.

be assumed that during the Neolithic, meaning the second half of the 6th and the first half of the 5th millennium BC, the site of Meanište was unsuitable for life as it was most likely marshy or often flooded. The intensive hydrographic potential of the site is confirmed by numerous wells that were active in the area up to 30 years ago. During the dry periods such soil was suitable for the cultivation of various domesticated plants, which has been confirmed by paleobotanical analyses of the samples from the site, and even nowadays this terrain is utilized for cultivation of wheat, corn and other crops.

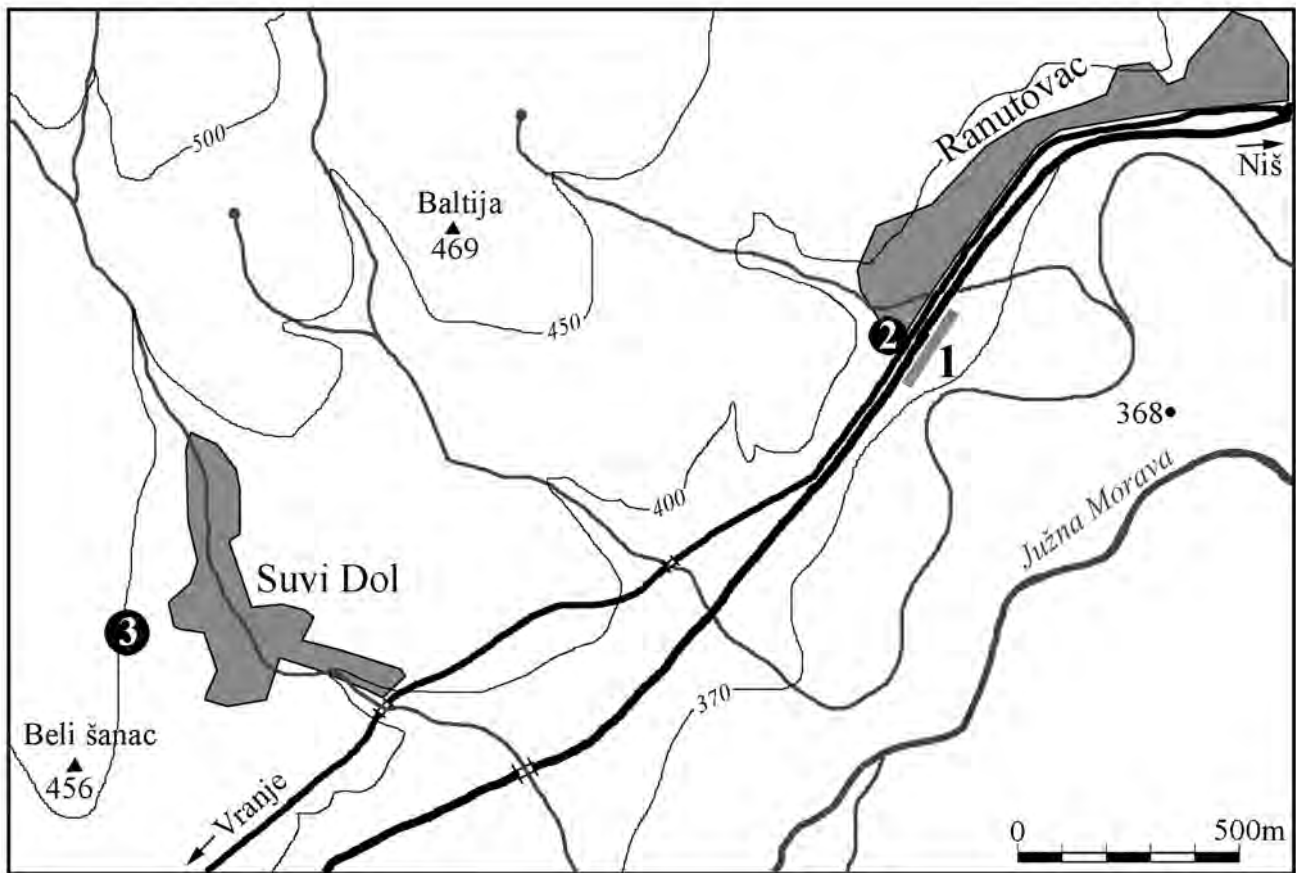
Despite the favorable hydrogeological and pedologic conditions, it seems that yet another factor played an important role, if not the most important, in terms of the selection of the location for the settlement: namely, a clay pit with high-quality pottery clay located in the adjacent village of Suvi Dol some 2 km southwest of the site by air (Fig. 1.2) and which is still in use today.⁴ This clay

¹ Basic geological map of SFRY, Vranje, R 1:100000, portion Leskovac-K34-44.

² Menković 2003.

³ M. Garašanin, D. Garašanin 1965, 10; Bulatović 2007, 111.

⁴ I would like to thank Iva Laković, the curator ethnologists of the National Museum in Vranje for providing me with the information. For the results of the analyses refer to the appendix 2 in this monograph.



1. The site of Meanište - excavated area
2. Stošić Backyard
3. Clay pit Suvi Dol

Fig. 1.2. The portion of the topographic map with the positions of the sites of Meanište, Stošića backyard and the clay pit in the village of Suvi dol.

pit contains two different types of the so-called *Suvodolka* clay, a dark-brown variety that is fat and less porous and a greyish-white variety that is lean and less porous. Both varieties are quite pure and mostly contain small stones which, when crushed, provide a certain stability during the baking process. Following the baking process, both varieties have the same color. All of the aforementioned properties make this clay very suitable for processing, modeling and baking.⁵

In terms of the broader geostrategic position of the site, it should be pointed out that the site lies on one of the main natural communication routes in the Central Balkans, along the upper course of the Južna Morava Valley some 40 km north of the Kumanovo-Preševo watershed, which divides Aegean and Black Sea drainage basins. Judging by the numerous prehistoric sites recorded along this communication route, as well as the importance of this route during the Antique and Modern periods, it can

be assumed that the route following the valleys of the Vardar, Južna Morava, Velika Morava and Danube was extremely important in prehistory, especially in several distinct periods when it served as a bridge between the Mediterranean world and Central Europe.⁶

All of the aforesaid suitable life conditions led to the settlement of the site of Meanište by Early Iron Age communities, and it is assumed that the Early Bronze Age settlement was situated somewhere in the vicinity, not far from the concurrent necropolis that is the focus of this monograph.

1.2. History of research and stratigraphy of the site

The site of Meanište was registered back in 2000 when a local, Saša Stošić-Tašul, found an almost completely preserved beaker with one handle and numerous Early Iron Age potsherds while digging the foundations for a

⁵ I would like to thank Ivan Stošić, a potter from Vranje, for providing me with the information.

⁶ Bulatović 2007, 23-56, maps 1-5.



Google Maps. September 23, 2012

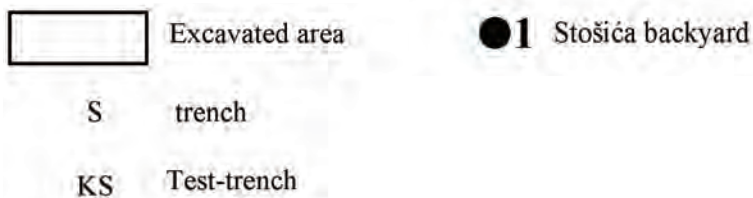


Fig. 1.3. The panoramic view of the site of Meanište with the excavated area (Framed space – excavated area; S1 – Trench 1; KS – Test-trench; Black dot – Stošić Backyard).

house.⁷ A 0.5-m-thick cultural layer was recorded at the depth of around 1 m during the supervision of the site. A layer of yellow sand was beneath it.

Two years later, the site was visited again during a systematic survey related to the construction of the E 75 highway. Pottery similar to the aforementioned one was recorded some 50 m east of the Stošić backyard, in the exact location in which the excavations would be conducted 10 years later (Fig. 1.3). No Bronze Age finds were recorded on that occasion.

Realized within the construction of the E 75 highway, the systematic rescue excavations at the site of Meanište were conducted in the eastern portion of the site, around 50 m

east-southeast of the Stošić backyard.⁸ The excavations directed by the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade took place between April and July 2012.⁹ The excavation zone was square shaped and oriented northeast-southwest, with a width of around 20 m and a length of around 200 m. A total of 4000 m² was excavated (Fig. 1.4). The northeastern corner of the excavated area was at the coordinates N42° 33' 42.54" and E21° 57' 10.49" at the altitude of 373.00 m, and the southwestern corner was at the coordinates N42° 33' 37.09" and E21° 57' 5.40" at the altitude of 373.18 m. The highest point of the excavated area, measuring an altitude of 373.80 m, was at the future location of trench 11. From that point, the terrain slightly descends towards the northeast, southwest and east. The lowest point, measuring

⁸ The excavations proved that this, in fact, represents the eastern periphery of the site and the Iron Age settlement.

⁹ The excavations were directed by A. Bulatović.

⁷ Bulatović 2007, 112-113, T. XVIII-XIX.

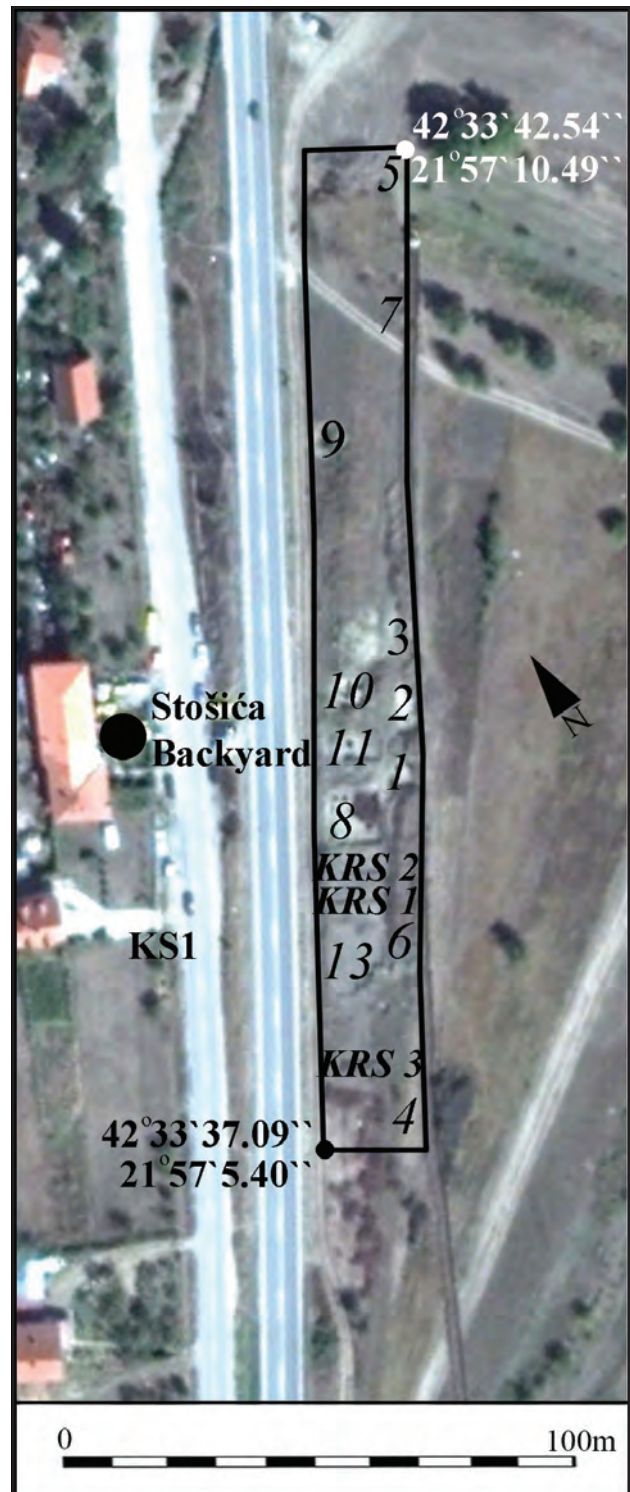
an altitude of 372.03 m, was registered in trench 4 in the southeastern corner of the excavated area (Fig. 1.4).

Test-trenches 5, 7 and 9 (Fig. 1.4) indicated that the northwestern part of the excavated area had no traces of human activity in the past. Similar was indicated for the southwestern part of the excavated area.

The remains of the Early Iron Age settlement were registered in trenches 1-3, 6, 8, 10, 11 and 13 in the southeastern part of the excavated area, as well as in trench KC 1, some 35 m northwest of the excavated area and south of the Stošić backyard (Fig. 1.4). On the other hand, remains of the Early Bronze Age necropolis were recorded in the trenches 6, 8 and 13.¹⁰ Sporadic finds and a small medieval pit¹¹ were all recorded in trenches that contained the remains of the Iron Age settlement (trenches 1, 2, 3, 11 and 13).¹²

The vertical stratigraphy indicates that the site was marshy or flooded before the first settling in the Iron Age, as well as later, before the younger phase of the Early Iron Age. The cross-sections in trench 6, in which an Early Bronze Age grave was recorded in brown soil with greenish-grey clayish soil beneath (Fig. 2.22), indicate that the site was marshy or flooded even before that period. Similar can be noted for trench 13, in which the necropolis lies on the bottom of a layer of brown soil with clayish greenish-grey soil beneath. According to all of the available data, and especially the stratigraphy, it can be concluded that the site was often flooded, and most certainly prior to the Early Bronze Age as well as between two phases of the Iron Age. Therefore, the site was dry and available for settling during the Early Bronze Age, most of the older phase of the Early Iron Age and during the medieval period at the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD.

The Early Bronze Age necropolis lies in brown soil in those trenches that do not contain the remains of the older phase of the Early Iron Age, such as trenches 6 and 13, while in trench 8 the necropolis lies on the bottom of a layer composed of brown-yellow soil that belongs to the older phase of the Iron Age.



Google Maps. September 23, 2012

7 - Trench
KRS - Test-trench

Fig. 1.4. The area of excavation with trenches and geographic coordinates.

¹⁰ Trench 12 is not marked in plans since it was gradually incorporated into trench 13.

¹¹ Those finds most likely belong to the 11th century AD, and gratitude for the chronological attribution goes to Vesna Bikić from the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade.

¹² The publication of the results of the excavations of the Iron Age settlement is in preparation.