

Four Days in Bosnia

Background

The Archaeology Practise of Newcastle University have for some years been involved in a research project in Bosnia; this trip, by Richard Carleton (who works for the Practise) and Peter Ryder was made with the intention of recording a selection of the fast-disappearing vernacular buildings in the area.

Saturday 28th April. Getting There

Landing at Zadar felt like landing on a building site (or de Ryanair always land like this?), a bone-jarring thump then a shuddering roar of brakes until, thankfully, movement ceased - and all the passengers applauded! Outside was a clean and shining new terminal building and above it a clear late evening sky - strange as the whole journey from Stansted seemed to have been spent ploughing through thick cloud. We were not booked in anywhere, but Richard practised his Bosniac (formerly Serbo-Croat) and a couple of taxi rides later we arrived at a seafrent youth hostel that provided basic but quite satisfactory accommodation.

Sunday 29th April. A Landscape with Ghosts

Breakfast (of sorts) came in exchange for a little blue ticket given to us on arrival - two slices of bread and three little packages - one a cube of butter, on a tub of two-tone brown/white grease ('Eurocrem') sticky and sweet, and the third a translucent orange gel claiming to be marmalade. The drink was ready-sugared fruit tea - if you wanted coffee it would be extra. Then into a taxi again and back to the airport, with just a glimpse of the church spires of the historic city centre. At the airport we picked up our hire car, a brand new little three-cylinder Chevrolet.

Then north, through sad places, the aftermath of the most recent of Europe's wars, when the regions three ethnic groups, Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Bosnian Muslims fell out catastrophically. Nationalistic politicians in Serbia and Croatia, and the concept of old grievances still to settle after World War II, fanned the flames. Here it was the Serb population that fled, leaving behind ruined village after ruined village. The Serbs had a day's notice to escape north, those who stayed (largely the elderly) were butchered the next day in what the Croats termed 'Operation Storm' ('Oluja'). We stopped in Obrovac where there is a provocatively-titled 'Café Oluja' in the square; were the grizzled locals who sat drinking coffee in the sunshine involved in the bloodshed fifteen years ago? Not a place to stay long. Faded Cyrillic script (the language of the Orthodox, now outlawed) announced that a decaying property had once been the village bread shop. High above on a crag the red, white and blue flag of victorious Croatia flew from the fragmentary ruin of a medieval castle.

Leaving the coast with its ridges and inlets, the road now hair-pinned up into dry limestone mountains capped by craggy tors like miniature Dolomites, before a pass and a sudden change-of-landscape into undulating hill country, greener now, with broad closed depressions dotted with small trees - poljes (fields). There must be caves around, although all we saw was one gloomy crifice in a road cutting. We stopped for coffee at Lošani, where the bellcote of an old church rose from trees a few hundred metres above the road. The trees concealed the ruins of a village; it could have been abandoned centuries ago, but here we learned a common theme in these parts - things are often not as old as they look. It was the war again; out of a local population of 700 Serb families, only one old couple had returned to their roadside bungalow. The church had a metal sheet roof, and had clearly long served as an animal shelter - it was a World War II abandonment, patched up in the 1950s by a local who had made good in the USA, a simple rectangle with a narrower apsidal sanctuary, the church could well have been medieval although the boarded wagon roof was not original, replacing one with a steeper pitch, the line of which remained visible on the bellcote.

Another larger church of basically the same design stood roofless by the roadside at Krenica a few km further north. Instead of a bellcote this had a lofty western tower, with a corbelled-out parapet now reduced to a few dangling fragments). A couple of local men were tidying the graveyard and were pleased to see us; this church too had been wrecked in World War II. The problem with

this place was not the people, they said (lowering their voices) it was the politicians.

The Border

Two conjoined but very modern frontier posts usher one out of Croatia and into Bosnia; their uniformed inmates peer hard at passports, but there was no real problem. We were now into Muslim Europe; every village had its mosque. The biggest ones, with domes and sometimes twin minarets, often sited conspicuously on hilltops, are often recent, built with Saudi-Arabian money. Some of the older ones looked for all the world like Methodist Chapels, simple boxes with vaguely Gothic windows, but with the addition of course of the minaret. We stopped in the town of Bihać; taken by the Ottoman Empire in 1592, the nave of its medieval church was converted into a mosque and a minaret built onto the west end. Looking around the town there was nothing else to indicate the faith of its occupants - modes of dress, the adverts on the billboards, the bars, were all the same as one might find in any Southern European town.

Ostrozac

About 10 km north of Bihać the road suddenly climbed up the steep side of the river valley, to the town of Ostrozac, overlooked by a great castle string out along a narrow spur. This was the only castle in Bosnia we had to pay to enter, partly because it doubles up as a sculpture park. One enters by a simple gatehouse flanked by the tall curtain of the inner bailey; the outer bailey is large (and doubles up as a sculpture park). At the far end is a further archway leading to a grand but derelict mansion of c 1900, incorporating some medieval towers. The inner bailey is complex, and built around a circular tower keep, the interior of which seems inaccessible; externally there is a moulded string springing from the mouth of an impressive dragon - otherwise the Castle is pretty devoid of architecture or carving, except for the obviously-restored bits.

Mala Kladusa

We eventually arrived in this village, to stay with a family Richard knew well, receiving the warmest of welcomes. They all live in a four-bedroomed farmhouse built about twenty years ago, in concrete and brick but still with features - the basement store room, the perch-cum-stair-lobby, the balcony - echoing older vernacular forms. Father and mother are around fifty; both have (separately) spent a few months in the USA, but otherwise been hereabouts all their lives. Mother has limited English, limited in fact to two words, 'OK' and 'cheese', exactly matching the extent of my Bosniac, 'dobro' (good) and 'hvala' (thank you), enough to allow a rather basic working relationship. Father is cheerful and friendly; do not be alarmed if he asks you to feel his knee - it is to demonstrate the existence of a titanium plate and bolts within. Visiting grandchildren in the States, he started work as a roofer (hoping to earn many times what he would at home) but on his second day fell six metres onto concrete. The company employing him paid for the rebuild of the knee, terrified the authorities he would find out they were employing illegal labour - the doctor was told he had fallen down a few steps whilst with the grandchildren. Then there were three sons, all in their twenties. The youngest (Kamel, our 'tour guide') at university in Bihać, the elder two joined by their wives, one with two little boys. Then there was grandfather in his late seventies, always wearing a black French beret. He was the butt of the family jokes - his hypochondria (every day he announced he was going to the doctor), his refusal to go out if any wind (even a gently breeze) was blowing, and his unrequited love for an equally aged widow next door. All the above lived in the house, although part of the barn alongside had been converted into a 'summer kitchen', above the five immaculately-kept cows in their basement byre and below the hay loft. The guest is continually fed and the coffee pot on the table constantly restocked - as is ones cup if one dares drain it. Most people smoke most of the time, and in the background the TV plays Croatian pop videos. Imagine a Croatian pop video - yes, you are probably right..

Evening spent sitting outside sampling foodstuffs and 'Foca's Blood' (Croatian red wine); a pack of semi-feral dogs hung around in hope of pickings, and the family's tortoiseshell-and-white cat arrived and was very friendly. All nature seemed present

when we were also joined by a mouse and then a huge stag beetle, but the cat rather spoiled things by promptly eating both, the latter with loud crunchings.

Monday 30th April. Cottages, Castles and Caves

Awoke to the lightest of rain, then after an ample and leisurely breakfast drove along winding gravel tracks, usually following the crest of a wooded ridge, in search of an old cottage Richard had seen before. Eventually found it, hidden in trees a hundred metres beyond the end of the negotiable track. It was a simple single-storeyed building, just three rooms under a steep shingled roof, now home to an elderly and very threadbare dog who just stared at us and wandered off into the trees without betraying any emotion other than a supreme world-weariness. Nearby a small upright gravestone, dated 1973, perhaps marked the demise of the last human inhabitant. We drew and measured, then moved on to a more elaborate house, only just abandoned, a sort of wooden bastle. The ground-floor byre had walls of massive horizontal planks dovetailed together at the angles, with posts midway along, and a more conventional timber-framed upper floor, jettied out all round. The family now live in a framed and clay-daubed block alongside (built in the 1960s); out came the coffee pot. I gave them a sketch of the old house, they gave us a piece of old carved woodwork; Richard drove down to the village and bought them some groceries, they insisted on giving him a box with a set of (Chinese) cups and saucers.

In the afternoon we headed back south down the main road as far as Pecigrad, where the hill is crowned by a ruined castle enclosing, as often, a mosque. The brand new porch and stainless-steel cladding of the minaret did not exactly give the mosque any air of antiquity, but this is misleading. A young and friendly verger (?) opened up for us; inside the main body of the mosque had walls 1.2 m thick, and on climbing the steep and dark spiral stair in the minaret we found that it was actually a timber construction of some age. The castle has suffered much, the walls being badly robbed in the Communist era of the mid-20th century, but a fair part of the curtain stands, with projecting polygonal towers, and there is a detached round tower outside it, with a domical vault, right on the edge of a limestone crag; it is not quite clear how it related to the main castle.

We then made our way to Rodetine Kula, where there is another ruined medieval round tower, really quite similar (but this time an empty shell), similarly sited on the edge of a limestone precipice. A steep gully leads down from the tower to a natural arch through a wall of cliff, and then to a cave entrance right beneath the tower. A ludicrously ill-equipped speleological expedition (three people, one tiny head torch) explored about 150 m of passage at a cost of getting our shoes extremely muddy. The entrance had been walled up at some time, and there seemed to be remains of another wall a few metres in. Beyond the cave opened into a sizeable cavern; we turned back, after passing a cow's skull grinning from a rock. Ahead the passage reared uphill amongst huge boulders, although there may well have been a way through or over. How do the cave and tower relate? There is said to be a cave below the Pecigrad castle as well.

Returning north again, we stopped to investigate a decaying house beside the road - a heavy stone basement, a framed upper floor with clay daub walls and a shingle roof. The owner assured us that his grandfather had built it in 1959; in England it would have been 17th century at the latest. It is salutary realising that one is older than a decaying vernacular building.

Tuesday 1st May. Barking Mad

Useful invention fantasised into existence after a sleepless Bosnian night - a remote digital dog de-barker. Takes four AA batteries, range up to 300 metres. Switch on, wait for the green light, press the red button - and every canine is frozen into silence mid-woof, its jaws clamped together. Or rather more brutally, one could simply take a machine gun to the pack beneath the window - there is clearly such weaponry still around to judge from the odd ratatat burst last night which accompanied the accordion playing and song as locals celebrated their bank holiday.

Omer's Cottage

Omer Omeragi is eighty and lives in a cottage that redefines both the adjective 'vernacular' and perhaps also the noun 'cottage'; timber-framed with clay daub walls, two rooms (one has a window) and a straw thatch half covered with random pieces of metal sheet, held down by a few tree branches thrown across it. One room has a stove, with its pipe poking up through the gloomy chaos above; it is pretty much chaos below as well, with little that relates to normal human living arrangements. A piece of old foam sheet on the floor serves as a bed. However Omer is fit, active, and claims never to have seen a doctor in his life; neither has his younger brother (a mere seventy) who is hand-ploughing the field outside; a younger relative is turning a spitted lamb (its eyes still fixed in a mournful stare) over an open fire. They have some bottles of coke, and are going to have a party that afternoon. 'Would we join them? 'We are the real people' they said.

Podzvizd

It is now safe to walk up to Podzvizd Castle as the mines have been cleared from the footpath; the man who assured us of this said he had taken part in the clearing, and found twelve mines 'with his own bare hands'.... Yellow tape bounds the path; the trees beyond have boards with skulls-and-cross-bones on. This is another ancient strongpoint that saw action in the 1990s war, and in fact suffered extensive damage. Old photographs show the huge circular keep towering above the curtain walls, and a remarkable 16th-century timber mosque - complete with minaret, perched on top of the gatehouse. What is left of the keep is now shattered and almost featureless, and the mosque is a few burned beams, but this is still a dramatic site, and the shell of an octagonal tower at one end of the oval bailey is quite complete.

Beside the road near Podzvizd we spotted another framed house, derelict and soon to be demolished. This one had a stone basement and a framed first floor (and attic) with contemporary brick infill. Access was by a ground-floor door and internal stair; the byre had its own separate doorway. At the back was the usual pendant wardrobe with its triangular hole in the plank floor. Locals said the house had been built 'just after the Second World War'.

Serb Houses

We then explored the valley running west from Pelsje, to look for Catholic or Orthodox houses, which Richard thought would follow a different tradition. At Siljkeva La we spotted one picturesque semi-derelict group. The local farmer, already well into his bank holiday celebrations, showed Richard his tattoos as a visual aid in recounting the story of his five marriages, PFR thankfully escaped to sketch. This really was quite a different house, said to have been built by a Serb. On a sloping site, the stone basement contained two byres. The plank-and-post upper floor was entered via a later porch on the uphill side whilst on the downhill was a full-length balcony with the usual wardrobe at one end. Tellingly, the weather boarding at one end of the attic was decorated with cross-shaped loops, the one motif all Muslim buildings avoid. Inside on one of the walls was a sticker with a portrait of a smiling grey-haired man called 'Babo' ('Papa'), a business man who during the War decided to settle things by turning from successful chicken farmer to warlord, and raising his own private army to fight everybody else. He is currently in jail on war crimes charges, and the area is dotted with the rusting remains of his chicken farms.

A quick search revealed four more of these more elongate Serb houses all within a couple of kilometres. At Begsvik a ruinous example bore a notice warning us that it was inhabited by a guard dog named Ben Lo who bayed and rattled on his chains so much that the tottering building - its basement wall had largely gone, leaving the upper floor poised and precarious - threatened collapse. Walking up a track we adjudged too rough for the car we found a third, its floor all gone, and looking across the valley to the north a fourth. This turned out to be the best-preserved of all, with a full-length gallery on the north. Richard and Kamel climbed in through a window (the door was nailed up) and then hurriedly shinned out again as they spotted the owner approaching. This was Tomo, a Serb; there was no problem, in fact within minutes we were seated in his garden and simultaneously presented with coke,

white wine (his own) and coffee. He told us the empty house was built 32 years ago (1975!); next to his own house was another bank house (although built on a gentler slope) which was plastered and looked thoroughly archaic; this one was older, built in 1957. He then took us to his mill, a lovely little post-and-plank structure, said to be 150 years old, but reconstructed on its present site more recently. It was fully operative - we were treated to a demonstration. Temo claimed to be the last man in the area to be able to make the wooden waterwheels with their paddle-like 'spoons'. During the recent war he had adapted the mill to provide his house with electricity as well, and sat tight as the shells flew over his head from the Croatian border a kilometre to the west. 'He is a Serb but he is a clean Serb' said Kamel to me in a low voice; 'not all Serbs are clean'.

Wednesday 2nd May

Vrangrova

One last trip out, past Podzvird and east to another hilltop castle, a shattered crag of a fortress crowning a heavily wooded crag rising directly above the little town of Vrangrova. The narrowest of paths swings steeply upwards from the town square, past a ruined wall that may mark an outer gate, within immediately within it, a natural cave; was this significant, and deliberately enclosed within the castle? It is now just a few metres of crawl, but could have been infilled. The path rises to another gateway (retaining one drawbar tunnel) into the outer bailey, which occupies a shelf on the west and north of the castle proper. This had ranges around a rectangular court, with towers at each corner. That at the north-east corner, a big round one, is best preserved, and here a scramble up from the outer ward offers the easiest way into the upper parts of the ruin. Little remains of the other towers, but the walls of the narrow north range are still substantially present, and parts of the east range including a tunnel-vaulted basement and a thick outer wall with a big Gothic arch (heavily ivied) high up that may mark a bay window. Otherwise there was little in the way of architectural features, or dressed stone, and the walls were rough rubble.

We quested around for suitable viewpoints to get a good distant view of the castle, but the trees around had grown so high as to shroud the ruined walls. Up a road to the north-east we found one last vernacular house, another variant on the local type. This one had a plank-and-post byre (but with posts at the corners rather than simply joints between the planking) and a covered external stair leading up to a lobby serving both the main rooms and the usual pendant wardrobe. The steep hip-ended roof was shingled, then had been covered by neat sheets of stainless steel.

Then it was time for lunch and fond farewells to the family at Mala Kladusa, departing clutching gifts of freshly-baked maize bread, and coffee. Back down the main road south, through Bihać and over the border into Croatia again. We made one brief detour to Udbina, following a brown tourist sign (a rarity here) pointing to the Cathedral of St James. Udbina turned out to be the bleakest of hilltop towns, mostly Communist era brick and concrete buildings, about half of them burned out or derelict, without as much as a hint of a cathedral. However just as we were about to give up another sign pointed on, beyond the town along a gravel track through open pastures, and at the end we found the foundations and lower walls of the cathedral, obviously recently excavated and still being conserved. The church had an aisleless nave, chancel, and an apsidal sanctuary with big radiating buttresses and on the south what looked like part of a cloister. There were no architectural features however, or interpretive material, but the clearance and consolidation at least show that Croatia has an eye to its past, and to possible future tourism..

One last red wine and a sandwich at Zadar airport, and Richard departed to the hostel before making his way to Dalmatia to do some repairs on his house there; PFR caught the 8.00 pm planet back to Standsted, a smooth and uneventful flight that arrive half an hour early, before spending a sleepless night (with a bad cough) in a hotel at Bishops Stortford before the 8.15 am Easyjet north to Newcastle.