

With the violent 1990s behind them, archaeologists in Bosnia hoped they would receive more support for academic research; instead, they are being pushed aside by amateurs

Mad About Pyramids

SARAJEVO—It should have been a great day for Balkan archaeology. For the first time since the bloody civil war, experts from all corners of ethnically divided Bosnia gathered for an impromptu meeting at the National Museum. Television crews were waiting outside for interviews. Foreign scientists were on hand, too—including the president of the European Association of Archaeologists, Anthony Harding of Exeter University in the U.K.

But the mood was one of deep frustration. The journalists weren't interested in the scientists' plans for restarting international collaborations. Nor did they want to hear about rebuilding the ailing university curriculum, or saving the country's archaeological assets from neglect and looting. "They only want to hear about one thing," says Zilka Kujundzic-Vejzagic, the museum's expert in prehistoric archaeology, who organized that 9 June meeting: "pyramids, pyramids, pyramids."

The "pyramids" in question are 30 kilometers northwest of Sarajevo near the town of Visoko. A Bosnian businessman named Semir Osmanagic, who runs a construction company in Houston, Texas, announced last year that a 360-meter-tall hill that looms over Visoko is in fact a buried pyramid built, he claims, by an unknown civilization 12,000 years ago. He has dubbed it the Pyramid of the Sun. With the help of volunteers, Osman-

agic has uncovered stone blocks beneath the hill's surface and a system of tunnels, which he says are like those of the pyramids in Egypt. Osmanagic has proposed that two smaller hills nearby are part of the same "pyramidal complex."

That vision is not shared by any of a half-dozen archaeologists and geologists who spoke to *Science* after visiting Visoko. The truth is plain, says Stjepan Coric, a Bosnian geologist at the University of Vienna, Austria, who was invited by Osmanagic to examine the site: The stone slabs are nothing more than fractured chunks of sediment called breccia, the remains of a 7-million-year-old lakebed that was thrust up by natural forces. "This is what gives the mound its angular shape," Coric says. As for

the tunnels, "if they were made by humans, without establishing their age, I would assume they are part of an old mine." Harding's verdict: "It's just a hill."

But this humdrum assessment has been swept aside by a pyramid-mania that has gripped the media. Osmanagic, aided by a publicist and an Indiana Jones-style hat, is widely depicted as a maverick bravely pursuing his unorthodox hypothesis. Even the BBC contributed a wide-eyed report in April. The Bosnian public and politicians have fallen deeply under his spell. Archaeologists are concerned that funding for real research projects is being drained away to support Osmanagic's "Pyramid of the Sun Foundation," and those who voice dissent are receiving hate mail. "To believe in the pyramids has become synonymous with patriotism," says Kujundzic-Vejzagic. Worse than that, some archaeologists say, Osmanagic is starting to dig up the remains of unstudied human occupation, possibly a long-sought medieval town. "Pyramid-mania" will probably be short-lived, says Harding, but it would be "tragic" if it damaged "real archaeological material."

Picking up the pieces

"Sarajevo was a real center of excellence" for archaeology before the war broke out in 1992,

