

ARCHAEOLOGY

Researchers Helpless as Bosnian Pyramid Bandwagon Gathers Pace

LONDON—An unusual soirée took place here at the Bosnian embassy last week. The star of the show, Semir Osmanagić, presented a slide show of his discovery of ancient pyramids northwest of Sarajevo and other evidence of what he calls a “supercivilization” that flourished in Bosnia 12,000 years ago—a time when most archaeologists believe small groups of hunter-gatherers were struggling to survive in a frozen Europe. He then posed for photographs in front of a pyramid-shaped cake baked in his honor.

Osmanagić, a Bosnian businessman, has riled professional archaeologists who see his pyramid hypothesis as completely unfounded. Last week, the European Association of Archaeologists published an open letter to the Bosnian government calling Osmanagić’s project “a cruel hoax on an unsuspecting public [which] has no place in the world of genuine science.” U.K. archaeologists are disturbed at the lack of criticism. “Support for this raft of nonsense has only increased,” says Richard Carlton, an archaeologist at the University of Newcastle, but “I have no idea what to do other than to continue to present reasonably argued opposition.”



Half-baked. Semir Osmanagić poses with Bosnian ambassador to the U.K. Tanja Milašinić.

Osmanagić declared last year that a series of pyramid-shaped hills near Visoko were structures built by a previously unknown

Neolithic civilization, and he set up a foundation to excavate and exploit them. Bosnia’s fragmented archaeological community is struggling to convince the public that the pyramids are simply natural features (*Science*, 22 September, p. 1718), but Osmanagić’s influence and popularity have only grown. He is planning to expand his “archaeological park” scheme across the country to include newly discovered stone sphere “megaliths” and stone temples—both of which scientists say are just geology. He is currently in Malaysia meeting business leaders interested in funding the parks.

Osmanagić began his lecture by saying that his excavation team includes an Oxford University archaeologist who “agrees that these are massive, manmade structures.” And after the embassy event, the Bosnian Pyramid Foundation Web site claimed that “Robert Harris, member of the British Parliament,” hailed “the significance of this discovery.”

“There is no British parliamentarian called Robert Harris,” says Colin Renfrew, a member of the House of Lords, and the Oxford archaeologist is Alex Cartwright, an undergraduate student. “Mr. Cartwright does not have any expertise and in no way represents the university,” fumes Peter Mitchell, an Oxford archaeologist.

In contrast to this academic turmoil, most conversations at the embassy gathering centered on the 200,000 tourists Osmanagić says have visited Visoko this year.

—JOHN BOHANNON

2007 U.S. BUDGET

NIH Trims Award Size as Spending Crunch Looms

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is asking most of its grantees to tighten their belts. The agency decided last week to cancel a scheduled inflationary boost for scientists with multiyear awards. Like other U.S. science agencies, NIH is preparing for an anticipated flat budget in 2007 that would freeze any new activities and take a bite out of existing programs.

The looming crunch is a result of a breakdown in the annual budget cycle. The 109th Congress adjourned earlier this month after completing only two of 11 spending bills—for homeland security and the military. Every other agency was ordered to operate, at best, at current funding levels until 15 February. Last week, the incoming Democratic chairs of the appropriations panels said they hoped the new Congress would extend the so-called continuing resolution (CR) through 30 September, the end of the 2007 fiscal year (*Science*, 15 December, p. 1666).

NIH decided not to wait. On 15 December, it eliminated a 3.4% inflationary boost in 2007 for “noncompeting renewals,” some three-quarters of the pool of grants held by principal investigators. The savings will be used to fund as many new awards as possible in 2007. That number, about 9600, would be similar to 2005 levels and nearly 600 more than in 2006, when NIH’s \$28.6 billion budget actually shrunk by \$100 million.

“The new policy is consistent with NIH’s concerns for new investigators, those who will be applying for their first renewal grants, and those solely supported by NIH,” says Patrick White of the Association of American Universities. “And while we appreciate that NIH is trying to spread the pain, the critical thing is [fighting for] a reasonable increase in 2008.”

Some other agencies will be even worse off. A CR will decimate the first step in the

proposed budget doubling of the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy’s Office of Science, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology. It could also wipe out a \$1 billion increase that a Senate spending panel had approved for NASA to help the space agency recover from the 2003 Columbia space shuttle tragedy and damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. NASA officials say a CR would leave it with a \$700 million shortfall that could eat into the agency’s \$5.2 billion science portfolio.

Many lawmakers are unhappy about funding the government on a CR but see no better alternative. “In some sense, a CR is like Iraq,” says the incoming chair of the House Science Committee, Representative Bart Gordon (D-TN). “It’s a matter of the least worst option ... and then going forward in 2008.”

—JEFFREY MERVIS