

Texas-based contractor Semir Osmanagic has raised tens of thousands of dollars to excavate what he says is an ancient pyramid overlooking the Bosnian village of Visoko.





Pyramid Scheme

Has a Houston contractor discovered the world's oldest pyramid in Bosnia?

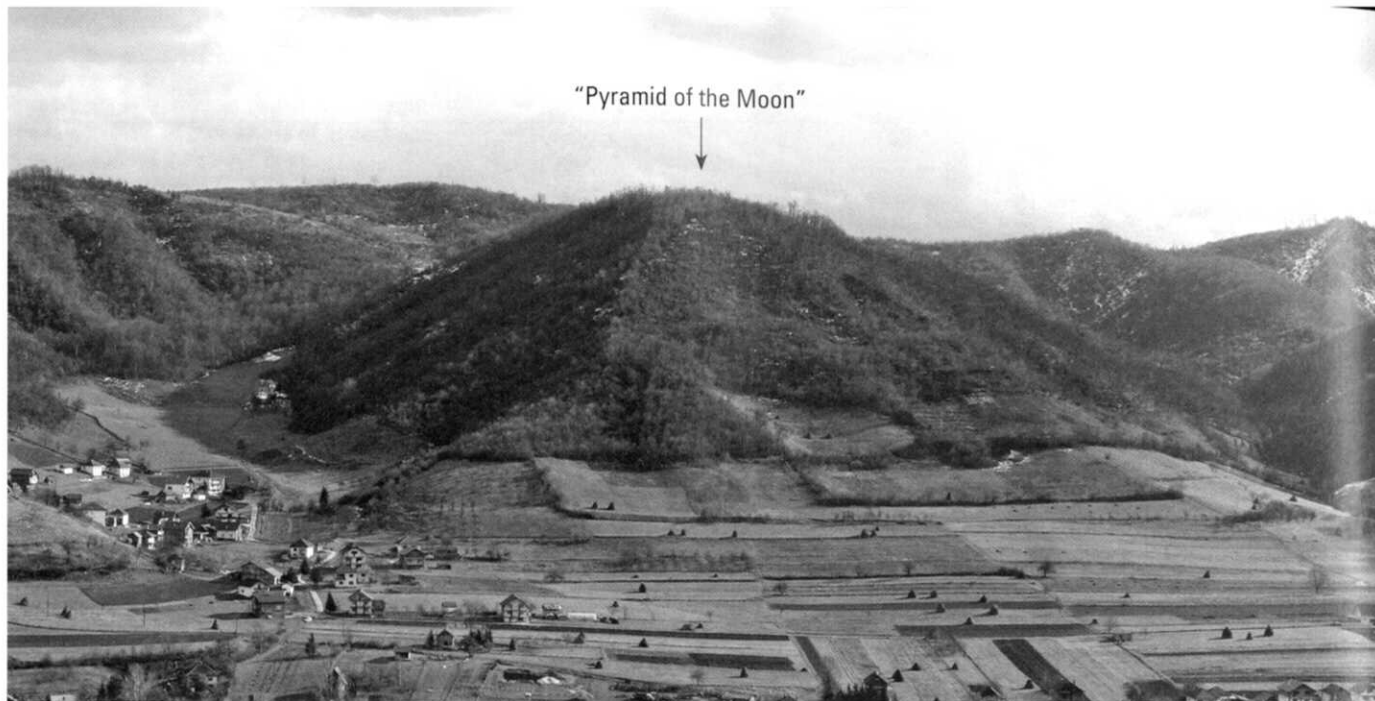
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by BETH KAMPSCHROR

DRIVING TO THE TOP OF THE POINTY HILL that looms above Visoko, some 20 miles northwest of Sarajevo, is a bit of a hassle these days. A brown sign points the way to the medieval ruins that cap its peak, and our car crawls up the winding mountain road, dodging considerable traffic. Halfway up, a uniformed policeman stops the car. "Do you have a permit?" he asks. This is crowd control. Thousands of people are making a pilgrimage to this hill, but they're not coming to see the stone walls of medieval Visoki, or to have a vantage point from which to marvel at the rebuilding that has taken place since the 1992–1995 war. They're coming to look at, or help dig up, a pyramid in the heart of southeastern Europe.

Or rather, five pyramids. So says the Bosnian expatriate and self-styled researcher, Semir Osmanagic, who's leading the dig. In April of last year, the Sarajevo-born Osmanagic was in Visoko visiting the local museum director when he had an epiphany: The large hill overlooking the town, with its pyramid-like shape and sides corresponding with the four compass points, is actually the Bosnian "Pyramid of the Sun." He reckoned that four other pointy hills in the valley are the "Pyramid of the Moon," the "Pyramid of the Dragon," the "Pyramid of the Earth," and, at press time, an as-yet-unnamed pyramid. On the strength of photographs and his unearthing of a few large blocks of conglomerate and sandstone that area geologists say are as common to Bosnia as land mines, Osmanagic is convinced his six-month dig is about to rewrite history. "If those objects are accepted by the international community as pyramids, which I believe they will be within six months, all of a sudden you have such objects that are bigger than the ones in Egypt or in Mexico, and simply certain periods in European history will not have to be rewritten, they will need to be done from scratch."

Osmanagic, looking every inch the movie archaeologist in canvas pants and boots, his fair hair covered by a wide-brimmed hat, has managed to convince other people

AP Photo/Hudajet Dolic



AP Photo/Halasz Dolic

here too. And not just the several hundred volunteers, mostly local, who have turned out to help him. "It's quite obvious that it's man-made when one looks at it from a distance," says Erik Strom Sorensen, a Danish tourist. Groups of about 30 come daily to tour three dig sites on the side of the hill. "This is nothing," Osmanagic says of the tour. "Last weekend we had 12,000 people here." In Visoko, a town of about 20,000 with narrow, dusty streets lined with shops peddling cheap clothes from Turkey or household appliances, people stop Osmanagic to shake his hand and say, "Keep up the good work." Television cameras bearing the acronyms of the international press—CNN, BBC, AP—have all filmed segments here. And local

Inspired by the Mexican site of Teotihuacan, Osmanagic has dubbed this hill the "Pyramid of the Moon," seen here from the top of the "Pyramid of the Sun."

Volunteers explore a network of tunnels beneath the hill. According to Osmanagic, the tunnels connect the pyramids. They may be medieval mines.

television has pronounced it the first good news to come out of this former Yugoslav republic since before the 1992–1995 war, which pitted Bosnia's Catholic Croats, Muslims, and Orthodox Serbs against each other, leaving some 150,000 dead and half the country homeless.

But as the town, much of Bosnia, and parts of the wider world are lauding the pyramids as the greatest find ever, experts within and beyond the country are warning that what Osmanagic is practicing is pseudoarchaeology. And that unlike other such pseudoarchaeologists, Osmanagic is being allowed to dig and to endanger real archaeological sites here, because of Bosnia's weakened academic community and political chaos—and because its residents want to believe in a miracle.

So, who is Semir Osmanagic? According to the press—the BBC and AP among others—he's a Bosnian archaeologist who's spent 15 years researching pyramids in the Western Hemisphere. But Osmanagic is no archaeologist. He's a Houston-based metalwork contractor who holds Sarajevo University degrees in economics and political science. His 15 years of "independent research" have resulted in publications like *The World of the Maya*, which claims the Maya were descendants of aliens from the Pleiades by way of Atlantis. As to why the Maya disappeared in the tenth century A.D., he ridicules standard archaeology as the work of "Masonic cliques," and postulates, "Were perhaps those who were ready picked up in spaceships by their mentors from the Pleiades star cluster? Or perhaps they joined the Lords of the Galaxy and, in pods of light, set off on a journey with no return."

Osmanagic says the Bosnian pyramid is about 12,500 years old. Archaeologists note that the only people in the Balkans at that time were stone-tool-wielding Paleolithic people who



Felton Demirev/EPA/Landow

never built a house, much less a pyramid. Osmanagic nods at this, saying that the "millions of 40-ton stone megaliths" here provide obvious evidence of who built the pyramids: "It's such a huge construction undertaking that the only answer is, yes, this is the work of a supercivilization." To date Osmanagic has not excavated anything he claims is an artifact, or material that might be radiocarbon dated, though he has offered geothermal imaging, as well as satellite and radar images to bolster his case.

All this sounds familiar to Kenneth Feder, an archaeologist and professor of anthropology at Central Connecticut State University, whose book *Frauds, Myths and Mysteries*, is the standard textbook on pseudoarchaeology. The tradition goes back at least to 1882 and the publication of Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. Modern-day self-styled researchers follow in Donnelly's footsteps by expounding theories of prehistoric, highly advanced civilizations that harnessed mystical secrets and energy, and built enormous monuments ("Seductions of Pseudoarchaeology," May/June 2003). "I would imagine that this guy is following the same track, that 'We know there were these great civilizations' and their monuments turn out to be interestingly shaped hills," says Feder.

To archaeologists, most of these "pseudos" are like fruit flies, buzzing back with bogus theories no matter how many times they're swatted. They're annoying, but don't do any damage on the ground. Osmanagic's dig makes him more like a termite.

"Why should he be allowed conduct excavations in this region?" asks Garrett Fagan, an associate professor of classics and ancient Mediterranean studies at Penn State University who's spent the past seven years debunking pseudoarchaeology. "For a [pseudoarchaeologist] to be given the right to do digs and to have the money to do so is unparalleled. [Bosnians] should be aware that their heritage is being destroyed by an enthusiast. Once he's ravaged those hills it will be too late."

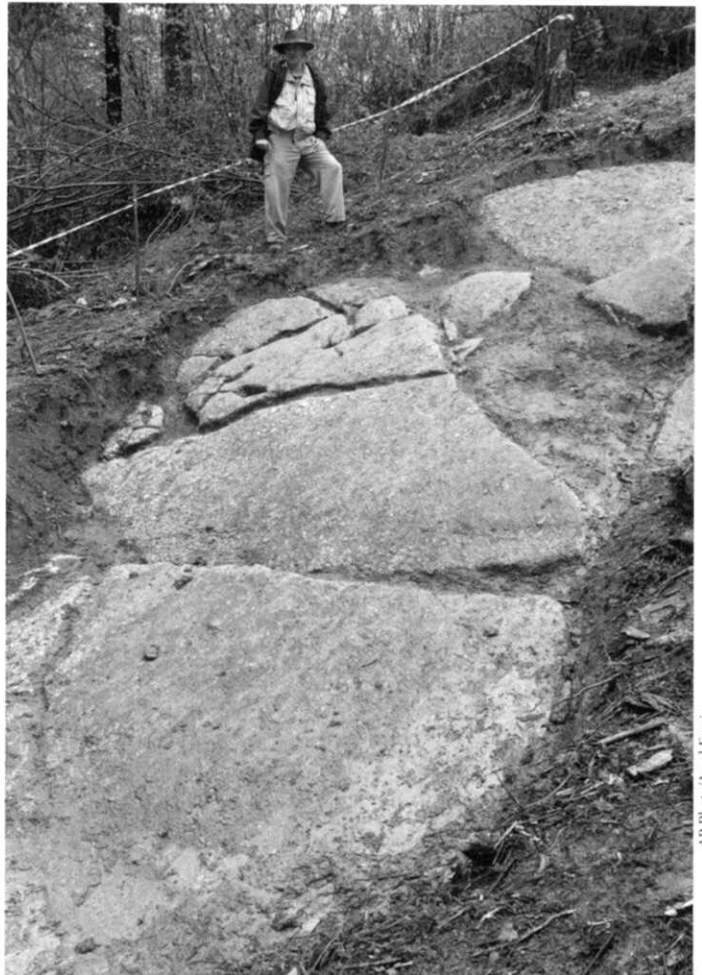
Bosnia's archaeological heritage is considerable—of the six former Yugoslav republics that broke apart in the 1990s, only Macedonia has more sites—and in April some 20 Bosnian archaeologists and historians issued a protest letter and lobbied for Osmanagic's dig to be stopped. They noted that the Visoko area holds *stecci* (medieval Bosnian gravestones) and remains of Neolithic, Roman, and medieval sites, which they fear an amateur dig could destroy. Archaeologists say that Osmanagic has already destroyed medieval graves, though at press time there was no publicly available evidence he had disturbed burials.

WE WON'T LET THEIR negative energy get in the way of what we're trying to do here," Osmanagic tells a tour group at one of the dig sites—to a round of applause. Support for the pyramid reaches across Bosnia's bitter ethnic divides, says Osmanagic. He's a Bosnian Muslim, but when he went on Bosnian Serb television to face off against three prominent Serb archaeologists, nearly 90 percent of the Serb viewers who phoned in for the show's poll believed in the pyramid. "And this was in the Republika Srpska," he says, referring to the

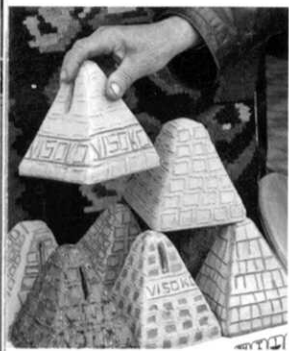
Serb half of Bosnia, "And I don't have a Serb name." Bosnia's other postwar half, the Muslim-Croat Federation, is full of believers. In Visoko, where the leather factory that thrived before the war is working at about half its capacity, the Café Huaca del Sol serves up triangular-shaped pizzas, and the 28-room former Hotel Hollywood has become the Bosnian Sun Pyramid Motel. One of Visoko's souvenir shop owners, Eseref Fatic, who hawks pyramid T-shirts, clay coin banks, postcards, and clocks, says, "As much as we're making, we're selling quickly. A lot of our own people are buying things, but some people from outside are coming too and buying." Pyramid frenzy here is such that Visoko museum curator Senad Hodovic says proudly, "Some people don't believe in the pyramid—well, some people don't believe in God." The few skeptics shrug, saying that if the pyramid legend brings in even a fraction of the 20 million visitors that have flocked to the southern Bosnian town of Medjugorje since 1981 (lured by alleged Virgin Mary sightings), the tourism could at least make a dent in the area's 30 percent unemployment rate.

"Maybe a miracle is important for people after a war," sighs Zilka Kujundzic, one of the Sarajevo archaeologists who signed the protest letter. She's the last remaining prehistory specialist at Sarajevo's National Museum, the 103-year-old Austro-Hungarian complex that's seen its funding dwindle since the war's end. On a recent drizzly April afternoon at the

Osmanagic stands by a slab of sandstone he claims is a cut stone block and "the first uncovered walls of the pyramid."



AP Photo/Amel Emric



Anticipating a tourist boom, enterprising craftspeople are flooding the village of Visoko with pyramid-themed kitsch, including slippers, a bottle of pear brandy, wooden plaques, and clay banks.



AP Photo/Hidajet Delic (4)

unheated, deserted museum, metal scaffolding rods were piled next to Roman floor mosaics from the first and second century A.D. The prehistory wing was empty, its ceiling paintings flaking away, its walls flecked with wartime bullet holes. Two winters ago the museum closed to the public for lack of money. It was only reopened after Bosnia's so-called high representative—one of a succession of UN-approved diplomats overseeing the 1995 peace agreement—twisted the arms of local politicians to find some extra money.

There's still no money to heat the complex through Bosnia's bitter winters, or to repair the empty prehistory wing. "When it's very cold we work from home," Kujundzic says. The Bosnian state government does not fund the museum at all; two lower levels of government chip in for meager salaries but nothing else. Kujundzic makes about \$440 a month. Without money, she says, forget about extensive excavations or the kind of media blitz that Osmanagic has managed to pull off. "We don't excavate something if we don't have money to preserve it," she says.

Her excavations near Visoko, of the largest Neolithic village yet found in southeastern Europe, have since 2002 been a joint project with Germany's University of Kiel and financed by the German government's archaeological fund. Circa

4800 B.C., the Visoko basin had a population of 30 people per square kilometer, and therefore could be crowded with artifacts. Amateurs armed with shovels could pose a danger to the area, says University of Kiel archaeologist Johannes Müller. "But the danger, too, is that they don't have any powerful heritage organization in Bosnia," he says.

Though in 2005 government funding for archaeological digs was \$93,750 from the Federation, and just \$6,250 from the Republika Srpska, various levels of government have this year found money for Osmanagic's pyramid foundation. Visoko municipality is earmarking \$62,500 in support. The next-highest level of government, the canton, is giving \$6,250 to the foundation, and allocating \$18,750 to improve the access road to the "site." At the government level above that, the Federation vice president pledged in April that the pyramid project would get as much budget money as possible this fiscal year. While this is an election year, and politicians love to make promises, the National Museum's Zilka Kujundzic points out, "In your country, people go to find Atlantis, but they pay for it themselves—they don't get money from the government!"

What brings archaeologists like Sarajevo University's usually cheerful Enver Imamovic to a boil is that Bosnia's "chaotic and lawless" system of government allowed an amateur to get permits. "It's like if they let some charlatan into an operating room at a hospital and allow him to work instead of some expert heart or lung surgeon," he says. Imamovic remembers the prewar 1980s, when he and other Yugoslav colleagues had the clout to stop a Mexican mountebank who wanted to prove that ancient Troy was in fact to be found in Bosnia's Neretva River valley. Back then, Bosnia's archaeological commission vetted dig requests and gave permits only to credentialed experts. Today—on paper—applicants should be applying at the municipal, canton, and Federation levels. Imamovic notes that not a single archaeologist sits on the Federation board, and that last year Osmanagic was able to get all three permits. In April, however, the Federation board backpedaled and said he couldn't dig at the top of the hill, where the state has declared the medieval town of Visoki a protected area. But the canton and Visoko municipality issued permits and decisions for the rest of the hill, over which they have jurisdiction, even though the property is a patchwork of privately held lots. The dig began in April.

Imamovic plans to resuscitate the state-level archaeological commission this year. But creating strong state-level structures in divided Bosnia has proven difficult. The 1995 peace agreement called for three presidents and two ethnically based "entities"—the Federation and the Republika Srpska—that kept their own militaries, police, courts, and culture ministries.

Under the peace agreement, Bosnia does have a state-level commission to protect national monuments, but as the

commission's dapper, silver-haired medieval historian Dubravko Lovrenovic can attest, that protection is in name only. "We can decide that the medieval town Visoki is designated a national monument, we can prescribe all the measures to protect it, but those measures have to be taken by the entities—that is the problem," he says. "We can ask the Federation minister to send inspectors to a site, but it's the Federation's responsibility." Asked whether the Federation is likely to stop the highly popular dig, Lovrenovic laughs and says the Federation doesn't stop or tear down illegal modern buildings in parts of the southern town of Mostar that are on the UN's World Heritage List. "There is no law," he says. "Anyone can do what he or she wants to do."

The status quo looks unlikely to change. The Bosnian parliament voted down a package of constitutional reforms this spring, following a year-long, U.S.-backed effort to convince politicians to change the postwar constitution. Bruce Hitchner, a professor of classics and international relations at Tufts University, was one of three Americans who tried to bring Bosnian parties together. He's also an archaeologist and the

former editor of the *American Journal of Archaeology*. He says the pyramid project is a scam made possible by the lack of effective central authority. "Bosnia's highest level of organization is the entities, and in this case the guy's exploited that weakness," he says. Like his counterparts in Bosnia, Hitchner advocates a state-level culture ministry. Its first job would be to update and record all the known surface archaeology and create a catalog of what's here. No such catalog exists now; no one is 100 percent sure what archaeological sites may lie in the Visoko area, or anywhere else. In lieu of that, he says the European Commission should send a small archaeological team here to debunk the "stupefying scale of stupidities" that he says surrounds the pyramid dig.

For now, Osmanagic's pyramid foundation is registered and open for donations. Foundation finances are not public record under Bosnian law; as of this writing Osmanagic estimates the foundation has some \$50,000 in its coffers. But he's vague and sometimes defensive about funding. "Why do you keep asking me about the money?" he testily asks a reporter. He

Media Pyramid Mania

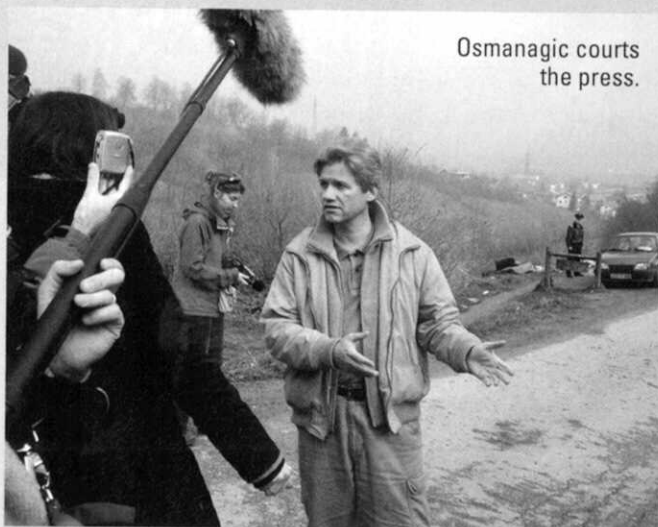
IN A COUNTRY WHERE press conferences are typically dour, postcommunist affairs held by gray, droning politicians, Semir Osmanagic's snazzy PowerPoint presentations with attractive photos and scientific-looking thermal images may partially explain the adoring media coverage his project has received within Bosnia.

Breathless copy trumpeting Osmanagic's theory from *Dnevni Avaz*, Bosnia's highest-circulation daily, was translated and picked up last fall by BBC Monitoring. Some news outlets that followed suit got a lot of play abroad. The frenzy was such that the Bosnian parliament passed a law forbidding construction on the newly famous "Pyramid of the Sun."

Once excavation began this spring, a short piece from the Associated Press (AP) on April 20, written by one of their photographers to go with images, was picked up in the United States by the websites of ABC, the *Boston Globe*, and *National Geographic*, among many, many others. AP writer Aida Cerkez-Robinson notes that her longer article about pyramid fever in Visoko, in which she didn't credit Osmanagic as an archaeologist, was a human interest feature.

"The moment the town actually caught up, and this became a potential industry, and they started making triangle pizzas, I think that all qualifies for a very good story. You can't miss that," she says. "Reuters and AP also have scientific desks, and if you approached them with this story, they'd say, 'Check your [facts].'"

But local newspapers don't have science desks. The con-



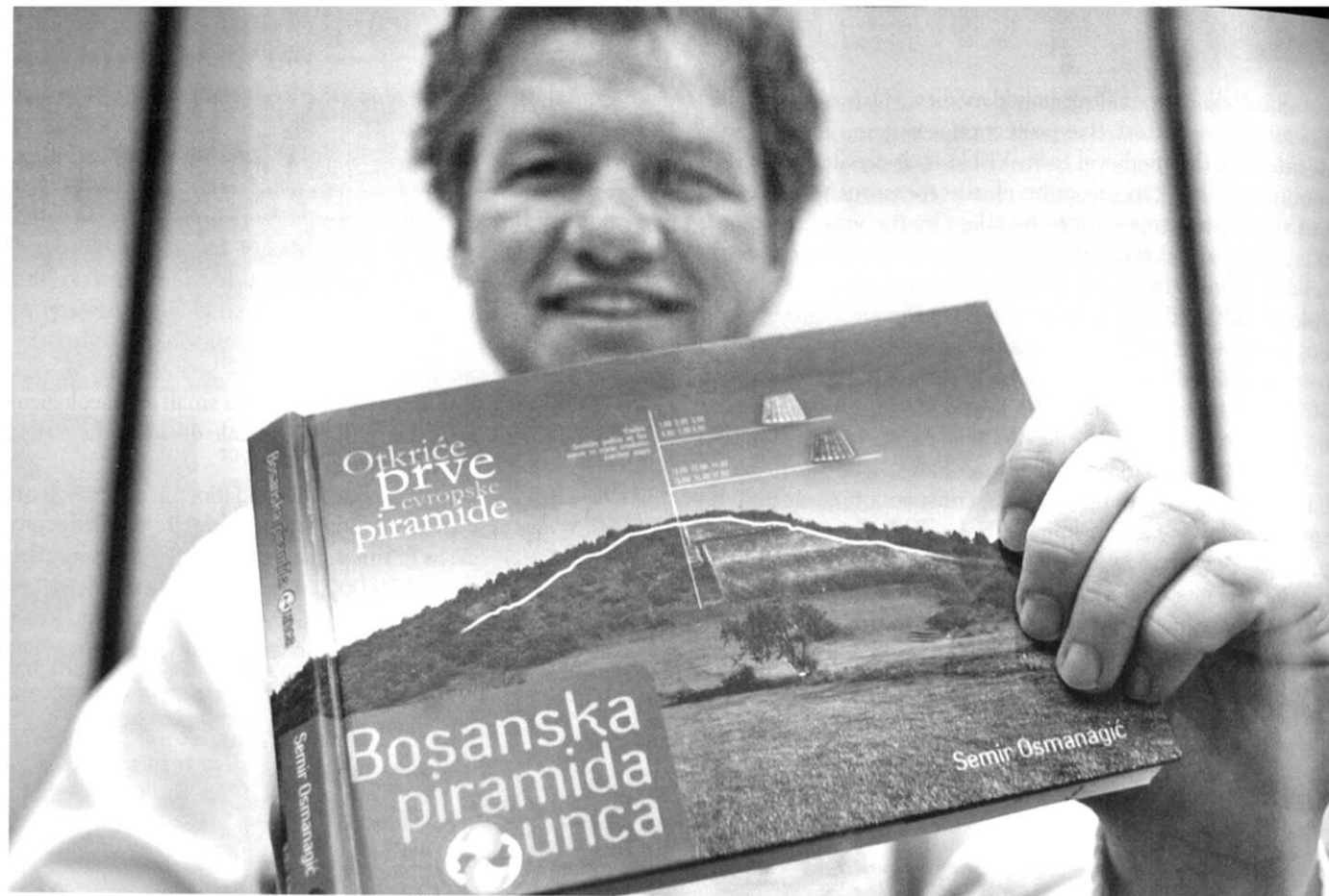
Osmanagic courts the press.

Beth Kampanich

cept of "beats"—where one journalist regularly covers police, city hall, education, or science—hasn't caught on here. Bosnian archaeologists dismiss the majority of local journalists as ill-educated. Hence April's *Avaz* headlines like "The pyramid will be visible by the end of the year."

Visits from the foreign press only feed the fire. All local television news shows trumpeted the presence of CNN, AP, Reuters, and the BBC—without mentioning that most outlets covered it as a cute human interest story. CNN, for example, did a light feature that was nearly a mirror image of Cerkez-Robinson's article. And Craig Smith of *The New York Times* became the news well before he even filed his piece. "NYT Journalist Craig Smith also on Visocica," read an *Avaz* headline. "Oh jeez," he said when he saw the article. He took it with him as a souvenir. —BK

For more on media coverage, see "*The Bosnia-Atlantis Connection*" on archaeology.org



Reuters/Danilo Krstamovic/J. Andow

says the pyramid search has gone from a one-man show to a wider effort, with sponsorships from BH Telecom, local food packager Vispak, and others. The car he drives is plastered with the logos of Visoko construction and insurance companies that sponsor the dig.

It's the marketing blitzkrieg that puts up a red flag for the organization that Osmanagic always mentions as the future protector of his valley of the pyramids—UNESCO. "I don't like all the fuss, I don't like all the circus," says Ivica Dronjic, a former lawyer and diplomat who heads Bosnia's national commission for cooperation with UNESCO. "If something looks too good to be true, it probably is. And he's going against the grain of the entire archaeological science, which can be cute, but only up to a point—when it becomes a national project and the politicians are involved." Dronjic says that if there is something there, Osmanagic's application to UNESCO will have to have better proofs than enthusiasm and photographs. Kenneth Feder suggests if Osmanagic wants anyone to take the work seriously, he'll be looking for dormitories, food remains, and cemeteries of the civilization that built the pyramid. He will also submit articles to scientific journals instead of displaying endless selective photographs.

"Peers will look at it and say, 'Hm, cool, you might have something here,'" he says. "Or another possibility is they'll look at it and say, 'This is a bunch of crap,' and they'll say why it's crap. I think what we're dealing with here is a part of the world where the niceties of preservation legislation have fallen by the wayside, because the issues of life and death have been more important there for so long."

Osmanagic shows off his book, which is going for \$22, a large sum in a country where the average monthly salary is \$315.

Back in Bosnia, Osmanagic is impervious to criticism. After promoting his book, *The Bosnian Valley of the Pyramids*, to a full house in a shiny Sarajevo business tower, he takes a break from book signing and posing for photographs to chat. No, he says, they haven't started looking for the civilization that built it. Oh yes, he says, they've submitted articles to scientific journals, like *Hera* in Italy. And yes, international archaeologists are coming to help. (Web searches on *Hera* bring up a journal with articles on Australian pyramids; and a search for the foreign archaeologists named yields nothing.) And yes, they'll continue digging through October. Osmanagic envisions eventually building an "archaeological park" at the site, featuring a museum where artifacts from the pyramids will be displayed for everyone to see.

"It will be the most exciting archaeological project in Europe for the next 20 years," he says. "We have such a significant monument that can show that little tiny and ruined Bosnia has something more to offer to the world. And instead of hundreds of thousands of these soldiers from Austria, Germany, Denmark, the U.S., we're going to have Austrians, Germans, and Americans, but not in uniform. It'll be their researchers, their visitors, their tourists, and they're going to share this excitement with us." ■

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