

## BEFORE THE ROMANS: THE HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE DOCLEA VALLEY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing about the pre-Roman period of Montenegro appears not really feasible from a strictly methodological point of view, because the modern geo-political limits of the State of Montenegro do not correspond to the wider cultural areas of the past that encompassed much of the southern-western Balkans: especially in the pre-Roman period (MARKOVIĆ 1985; MIJOVIĆ 1987). In recent years several publications about Balkan archaeology have underlined the necessity of envisaging a geographical entity crossing modern frontiers and without modern boundaries. Consciously or not, they are proposing as the appropriate area for study the one which approximates to the older Yugoslav borders (GORI 2015; GORI, IVANOVA 2017; GIMATSIDIS *et al.* 2018). It is a matter of fact that archaeology, since its development as a discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has always been interconnected with modern and contemporary politics, which ‘used’ archaeology – sometimes intentionally, sometimes not – as a way to achieve political and cultural ends often related to the promotion of forms of nationalism or national identity. This attitude has been recently investigated, for example, for Greece, but also for other Mediterranean countries, with particular reference to the use made of the past by museums, where their collections act as instruments of ideology and politics (SOLOMON 2003; HAMILAKIS 2006; TASIĆ 2014).

Until very recently, the modern history of Montenegro likewise profoundly affected the development and management of archaeological research there. Some of the richest theoretical discussions in modern archaeology and anthropology, such as identity and ethnicity topics, were skirted around and passed over, probably because of the then political and social tensions existing concerning ethnicity. The exceptions are few and recent (GORI 2017, 2018; GORI, IVANOVA 2017). In today’s Montenegro, the need to bring out its specific cultural identity from among the former components of Yugoslavia (ANDRIJAŠEVIĆ, RASTODER 2006; MORRISON 2009) means also a growing interest in the history of the region from antiquity (see lastly CULTRARO 2013). This is being realized by an increase in scientific and cultural programs with foreign countries, especially those of Europe.

Today, Montenegro territory *in toto* very rarely represents the focus of any research, probably because the data – both published and unpublished – is split and scattered. It is extremely difficult to identify those cultural phenomena limited

only to this region: rather it appears as a sort of liminal area between the Illyrian area *strictu sensu* of Albania and the central northern Balkans (HAMMOND 1982; WILKES 1992; GIMATSIDIS, PIENIAZEK, MANGALOGLU-VOTRUBA 2018).

Recently, following on from the so-called *transitional period* the country has experienced and after its independence achieved in 2006, Montenegro has undertaken an autonomous and thoughtful political attitude concerning its rich cultural heritage, increasingly opening itself to external collaborations and striving for integration in the network of Mediterranean scientific archaeological research programs (ALBERTI in press), from which the Balkans, with the sole exclusion of Greece, were partially isolated due to the historical events for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Ministry of Culture of Montenegro and the related Institutions are rigorously analysing the possibility of changing laws and procedures, in order to improve the quality of research into and the management of Montenegrin cultural heritage. Today many factors exist that continue to affect and delay the enhancement and relaunch of ancient sites as Doclea. Among these may be counted: the lack here of a faculty dedicated to Cultural Heritage and archaeological methodologies, which in turn has prevented the development of younger generations of archaeologists, conservators and professionals on cultural heritage management; the plural involvement at the same site of different institutions (sundry centres of control dealing with cultural heritage and museums); and the scarcity of the considerable funds required, as indeed and unfortunately is happening at many archaeological sites in the Mediterranean countries. All these issues have produced real obstacles in the study and the maximizing of the opportunities presented by ancient sites such as Doclea and its territory. Montenegro is working hard, though, and on its way to perceptibly improving the situation and resolving these impediments.

## 2. SPACE AND TIME

From the geographical point of view, the territory we discuss is the valley in which the Roman city of Doclea is placed: an area of more than 200 hectares, occupying the northwestern sector of the wide Zeta plain in which the capital Podgorica is located (Fig. 1). The Roman walls of the city delimit a smaller area of about 25 hectares, almost a triangle, naturally delimited by three rivers. In this account on the pre-Roman period, we will briefly refer also to sites located at the borders above delineated and even beyond this limit, up to the Skadar Lake area, in order to better understand the dynamics and strategies in the habitation-patterns of the region.

The valley today probably is not so dissimilar to what the first researchers saw at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (MUNRO *et al.* 1896). Fortunately, today as well it is not much occupied by dwellings or enterprises: few houses are

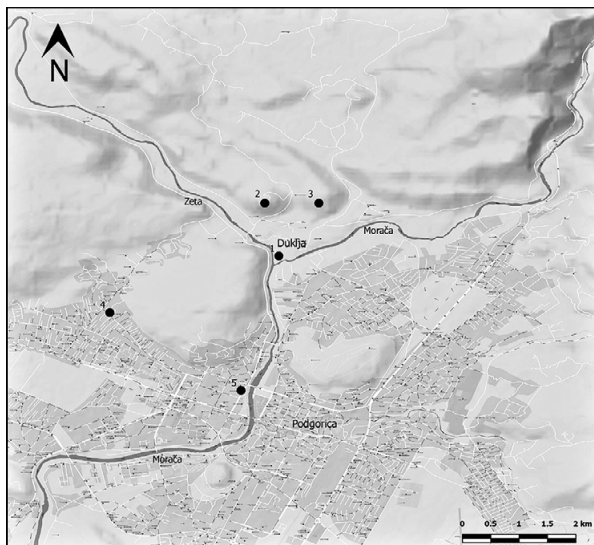


Fig. 1 – The Doclea valley: 1. Doclea; 2. Trijebač; 3. Doljanska Glavica; 4. The Copper-Age Gruda Boljevića tumulus; 5. The Middle Bronze Age Neškova Gruda tumulus.

being built on the fertile, if small, portions of land near the rivers and at the lowest slopes of the hills (where some commercial vineyards are established). Despite the great attention the site has enjoyed on the national TV and media, and despite the local people's interest in what they feel is one of the pillars of identity for the country, very few tourists visit Doclea.

From the chronological point of view, we are concerned with the later phases of prehistory, with special reference to the final part of the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age – that is most of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, encompassing the so-called Illyrian period. We omit the earliest and richest phases of prehistory that are particularly interesting in the Balkans and that are the focus of some important research activities and publications (GARAŠANIN 1982; DELLA CASA 1996; PRIMAS 1996; MARKOVIĆ 2006; GORI, IVANOVA 2017), for these are less pertinent for the understanding of the development of the Doclea territory and the reasons for the foundation and development of the Roman city. Also the theoretical discussion and the historical definition of the Illyrians, their history, location, material culture and languages is passed over here (for an overview, though, see HARDING 1976 and see also GARAŠANIN 1976, 1982; WILKES 1992; DŽINO 2014; RIBICHINI in press).

This long pre-Roman period, lasting until the Augustan campaign in 30 BC, is still not well known at Doclea. The reasons are numerous and obvious:

no systematic archaeological surveys of the land have been undertaken, an aspect which contrasts with the discovery and very occasional publication of many very important finds, that often cannot be placed in a context. The varying quality in the accuracy of the literature: very often the available data, and especially on the prehistory of the valley, are thin indeed, even though many preliminary reports exist on excavations and fortuitous recoveries. For western scholars, further difficulties are represented by the languages of most of the publications of the last century, written in Serbian and Serbo-Croatian until the 1990s and in Montenegrin since 2007. Moreover, few of the publications even exist in western libraries.

For all these reasons, this paper presents a very general and preliminary picture of the area where, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Doclea was founded<sup>1</sup>. One of our goals in the hoped-for continuation of the project is an intensive diachronic survey in the valley and the surrounding hills, in order to reconstruct a credible picture of the pre-Roman evidence as well. This will be backed by assembling old and new data, through archival and bibliographical research, and the application of the new technologies available to landscape archaeology.

### 3. THE LANDSCAPE

From the point of view of the researcher into proto-history, the analysis of the landscape, having in mind the settlement strategies of the involved communities, is one of the first steps in reconstructing the movements of the human groups settling the area and to identify in strategic and economic terms the points in which they settled. As is well-known, the human choice of a territory in pre-industrial times is linked to water availability, proximity to fertile lands and defensibility.

Following the phenomenological approach in archaeology (TILLEY 1994, 1996) and looking at the Doclea landscape with a prehistoric mind-set, we notice first of all that the almost triangular plain in which the city is located is very well protected by the Morača and Zeta rivers and the torrent of Širalija. It is also sheltered at the N and W by a series of low hills, the last spur of a higher chain of mountains. The Morača and Zeta rivers contribute significantly to the defensibility of the area: both of them have cut deep courses in the valley and carry a considerable amount of water even during the very hot summers that affect all the low plain around the capital city of Podgorica. The Zeta has the bigger quantity of water, whilst the Morača appears swifter,

<sup>1</sup> The information collected is the result of a friendly and invaluable collaboration with our Montenegrin colleagues, without whom the difficulties would be insuperable. In particular, I desire to warmly thank Dr Olga Pelcer-Vujačić for the invaluable and competent help in collecting and reading with me some hard-to-find Balkan bibliography and Igor Vujačić for his very kind help in explaining to me the not easily comprehended toponyms of the area.

because it receives the melted snow coming from the northern and eastern high mountains of inner Montenegro.

The northern part, where the Širalija torrent is today canalised, is the weakest: significantly the Roman wall of the city is here higher and reinforced by bastions. An important role in the plain's defence was played by the northern two hills of Trijebač and Doljanska Glavica, that enjoy a dominant position over the area.

The bedrock is a conglomerate, rich in pebbles rounded by the water action, a fluvial sediment covered by a thin stratum of humus, apparently only few centimetres thick. In spite of the oft-claimed fertility of the land, that indeed and especially after the winter rains appears covered by wild and edible herbs, it seems that farming is difficult, with the exception of the very high quality products of vineyard cultivation. The surrounding, quite barren hills have a karst subsoil, probably limestone, which is not good at retaining water; very few water springs exist, notwithstanding the rivers presence.

The geology of the area, which will be investigated in detail in the future, seems one of the reasons for the apparently relatively light exploitation of the land. It is used mostly for pastoralism, traditionally the major cornerstone of Montenegrin exploitation of the land both today and in the past, at least until the industrial revolution. One of the more intriguing features we noticed during our preliminary archaeological survey is the very scarce quantity of pottery fragments visible at the surface, even in the recently excavated sectors. This phenomenon requires more thought to be explained: it may have something to do with history of occupation of this spot in the Roman and earlier periods, still but vaguely comprehended. Broadly speaking, as stated above, all the wide zone at the northern borders of the Zeta plain, under the slopes of hills and mountains, is karst territory, with small portions of fertile land located near the rivers or in small plains surrounded by mountains.

Specific studies on geomorphology, environment, palaeoecology, vegetation, resources and subsistence backgrounds of the micro-region represented by the Doclea area are still missing. They too will all be the subject of future analyses.

#### 4. ROUTES AND FINDS

An appreciation of the terrain of the wider area, stretching from the northern passages opened by the Morača and Zeta rivers up to the Skadar (or Skodar/Skoutari) Lake to the SE, is fundamental to understand the possible routes, both commercial and cultural, used by the communities that inhabited the region.

The confluence of the Morača and Zeta rivers marks the end of the Bjelopavlići (or Zeta) valley, one of the few flat and fertile areas of the country, even

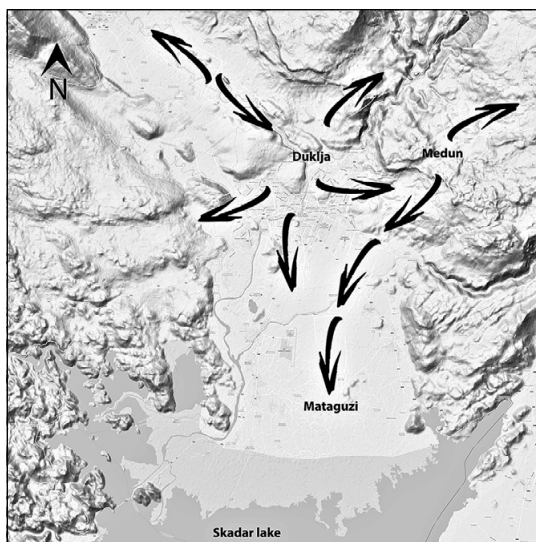


Fig. 2 – The Zeta plain with hypothetical ancient routes.

if narrow and restricted, leading northwards and hemmed in along its length by the very high mountains making up most of Montenegro. This passage seems to have been associated also in antiquity with important cultural and commercial exchanges (MARKOVIĆ 1985): the Balkan ‘amber route’ passed along it and very possibly it assisted nomadic pastoral movements of flocks and people that, through Montenegro, connected the northern and western Balkans with Albania and northern Greece (HAMMOND 1982; TASIĆ 2014). The Morača river has excavated a deep canyon, creating the narrow Rovca and Piperi valleys, with their slim and fertile portions of land. Although this specific geomorphology makes its crossing very difficult, it is feasible to suppose that the river could be crossed at many points, and not only in the southern part of the valley, where old traces of the Roman presence are referred to. Alongside its course, in fact, ran an important route for man and beast that led to the interior of northern and western Montenegro. Thanks to the river and the roads associated with the same, the Doclea valley becomes a nodal point, connecting the northern lands to the wide plain, and on up to the Skadar Lake and thence to the coast. To the NE, the valley runs along the slopes rising up and giving access to the high mountain-chains of Kuči, through which only a very few passes are available, and only during spring and summer, being closed by the snow during the very hard winters (Fig. 2).

The Doclea area represented therefore a key point for those pre-Roman communities, and probably also for later human groups, wishing to control

the passages from the northern and eastern mountainous area to the western and southern flatter zone, and on to the Skadar Lake and the Adriatic coast. Here an intensive maritime trade existed, as is well recorded in literary sources (ZDRAVKOVIĆ 2016), but less confirmed by finds for the Bronze Age, when the pattern of commercial exchange seems to assign to the eastern Adriatic a secondary role (TOMAS 2009).

Concerning the routes of communication, it is important to underline the possibility that in particular the Zeta river, characterized by a less impetuous flow than the Morača, could have been partially navigable through barges, at least for some sectors of its flow. Only an intensive archaeological survey on the traces left on the river borders can improve this state of knowledge.

Moreover, in an aerial photograph taken in 1942 during the World War II, a very clear trace going WE is detectable on either side of the Morača river, in an area then free from dwellings, but today occupied by many private houses. The trace, still visible in a modern satellite image, appears to be an extension of the *decumanus* beyond Doclea's walls. As with a number of other cases, it could represent an earlier road, later reused and straightened by the Romans (Fig. 3)<sup>2</sup>. 19<sup>th</sup>-century travellers and archaeologists gave accounts about ancient roads running WE (from Naronā to Skodra), but their routes are difficult to locate, as is whether they crossed the city area or not (MUNRO *et al.* 1896; STICOTTI 1913). At the point where the *decumanus* encounters the city eastern walls, Sticotti placed an internal defensive tower, built to protect a supposed bridge (STICOTTI 1913; ŽIVANOVIĆ, STAMENKOVIĆ 2012). Beyond the Morača, where the supposed bridge led, he identified the remains of an aqueduct and of a building under a modern house (STICOTTI 1913). The fact that the road visible in the aerial photo continues the line of the *decumanus* makes more plausible the existence of a bridge at that point (a wooden, disassembled one?). More investigation is necessary to say if the bridge traversing the Morača existed also before the Romans, which would then mean that the *decumanus* was following the direction of an earlier road.

Despite being sited at a key point, at the moment only a few prehistoric and pre-Roman finds have been found inside the walls of the Roman city, even though some sections of the site have been excavated to some depth<sup>3</sup>. The reasons could be cultural and historical. Illyrian sites seem to be usually

<sup>2</sup> I thank the architect Elisa Fidenzi for having drawn my attention to this trace.

<sup>3</sup> When this article was already in draft-form, some results of an archaeological excavation (conducted in the southern part of the city, near the Diana temple, by the Centre for Conservation and Archaeology of Montenegro) became available. Here, at a depth of about 80 cm, it seems that Late Bronze Age pottery fragments have been found. Also other rescue excavations have brought to light several Illyrian temples and some coins dated «to the reign of the Illyrian King Ballaios and Queen Teuta of the Ardiaei, a tribe who ruled in the mid-second century BC»: <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2018/12/illyrian-temples-found-at-ancient.html?pref=f-b&m=1#rmHRUjU1el2eE0D1.97>.



Fig. 3 – Traces of an ancient road, being the continuation of the Doclea *decumanus* beyond the Morača river, as seen both in a 1942 aerial photograph of World War II and in a 2014 Google Earth satellite image (satellite WorldView-2, 29/08/2014).

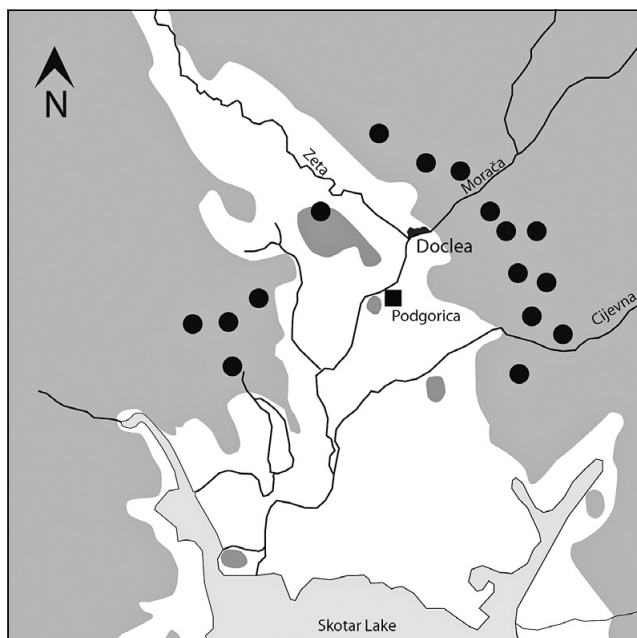


Fig. 4 – Gradinas in the Zeta plain (modified after DELLA CASA 1996, fig. 7).



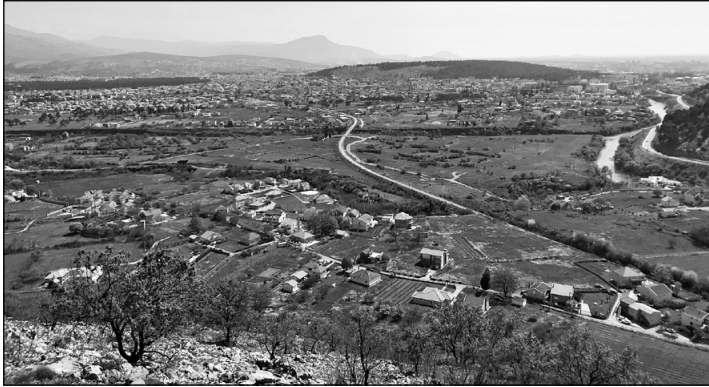


Fig. 5 – The view from the Trijebač gradina: from the N, toward the Skadar Lake (photograph by the author).

located on hills, in easily defensible and dominant positions, and not down on the plain. Immediately N of Doclea, in fact, the two low hills previously referred to have brought to light important traces of the pre-Roman period.

On the western low hill of Trijebač, at a high of 187 m above the sea level, a ‘gradina’ has been found. Gradinas are fortified settlements generally located on hills or in a dominant position on a plain, probably for defence or refuge. In this area they are usually dated to the Illyrian period, that is the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, but as in other Balkan areas, they can be traced back to the Early Bronze Age too (GARAŠANIN 1982; WILKES 1992; MARKOVIĆ 2006; VUČINIĆ 2014). They do not have a specific and standardized layout, but follow the local terrain configuration; they are often characterized by monumental walls and big terraces, even if they do not seem to have a true urban structure (GARAŠANIN 1982). Even though we do not know either the precise chronology or the structural details for gradinas, the last published (if summary) account about their location around the Zeta plain indicates that they were disposed in a sort of arc running W to E, so that they established a degree of control of the territory and probably had a system of intra-communication exploiting their intervisibility (Fig. 4; DELLA CASA 1996).

The gradina in Trijebač had three terraces and enjoyed a very dominant position in the valley, controlling the road descending from the N through the Zeta plain to the Skadar Lake at the S, with a great range of visibility, especially in clear weather (Fig. 5). Unfortunately, the site is today built over with modern reinforced concrete, making it impossible to detect the original structures or other ancient traces, but its dominant position on the valley remains outstanding and was critical for its ancient use. Moreover, all the hills around Doclea have played a part in many conflicts, right up until World War

II, as military outposts, and so the ancient remains are profoundly disturbed. A survey done in 1956 describes the gradina as composed of a flat top with terraces at the NE, E and SE, on which were still detectable big blocks of the foundations. Many fragments of black and red pottery, badly baked, were found. In a hole surrounded by stones, in the NE sector of the top, a green stone axe with other stone and pottery fragments were retrieved (MLAKAR 1960).

The very similar hill of Doljanska Glavica, E of Trijebač, also holds a dominant position, controlling the Širalija stream, the Doclea valley, and the Drezga and Strganica plains. Here a gradina with two terraces was found, and prehistoric coarse and finer pottery fragments were collected (MLAKAR 1960; GARAŠANIN 1976). In addition, important Roman structures as well were excavated – a rectangular structure divided into two rooms and very fine Roman pottery, of better quality than that from Doclea, was found, indicating the possible existence of a Roman residence (villa?) (MLAKAR 1960). The local population also remembers the existence of a tumulus (maybe more than one), that at that moment we cannot identify.

N of the two hills lies even today a small portion of intensively cultivated plain, called Crnci, ‘black lands’, plausibly a toponym related to the humus’ colour and the consequent fertility of the terrain. From here another ancient mountain-path starts, used only in the good seasons.

Other pre-Roman terraces have been found on the left bank of the Zeta river, on the hill of Kabalj, NE of Trijebač. At Rogami, where the Morača enters the Podgorica plain, stone tools and handmade pottery fragments of a low level of technology (especially in their firing) have been recovered. The finds have been dated to the Early Bronze Age, indicating a very early occupation of the area.

Concerning the funerary aspects, many tumuli – the typical funerary remains of Balkan Bronze Age – are referred to at different points of the Zeta valley, both around Doclea and up to the Skadar Lake, but only a few of them are fully published. They are usually of earlier phases (DELLA CASA 1996; PRIMAS 1996; MARKOVIĆ 2006; SLADIĆ 2012). Adding to the few recently recorded remains nearby, in the Tološi suburban quarter of Podgorica, only 3 km SW from Doclea, the Gruda Boljevića tumulus dated to the late Copper age was located (GUŠTIN, PRELOZNIK 2015; SAVELJIĆ-BULATOVIĆ 2015a). In the very close-by suburb of Momišići, the Neškova Gruda tumulus, dated to the Middle Bronze Age, stands (SAVELJIĆ-BULATOVIĆ 2015b), testifying to human occupation and the possible presence of ancient settlements in the area. Numerous tumuli and other sites are recorded all over the Zeta plain as far as the Skadar Lake (MLAKAR 1960; DELLA CASA 1996).

In order to understand the importance that the Doclea valley had in the past for the wider interconnections and human movements through inner Montenegro, so linking the coast to the northern and southern Balkans, it is

important to mention at least two sites: Medun and Mataguži. Both set at the border of this vast plain, they have yielded important finds dated to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.

As one moves E towards the Skadar Lake, suddenly the plain is interrupted by high ground, where the important Illyrian site of Medun (or Medeon/Meteon) is located. In the ancient literature and recent bibliography alike, Medun is referred as the capital of the Illyrians and its name is linked to Polybius's reference to the defeat of Teuta (POLYBIUS II, 8, 8) queen of the Illyrians, during the Illyrian wars, caused by the Roman need to control Illyrian piracy more than for imperialistic purposes (229-219 BC) (HARRIS 1979; MARASCO 1986). The site was in the territory of the Labeates tribe, while Doclea was in the Docleates tribal lands.

The site occupies a small plain at a height of 540 m, hidden from the coast and the valley, being surrounded by crags and mountains. It is a well-defended place, perfect to see from, but not to be seen: it controls the Zeta plain from the W (Doclea) to the SE (Skadar Lake) and also the northern mountainous passages leading to the inner continental lands (Fig. 6). The acropolis of the site is located on a very small rocky top, again very well defended by natural cliffs and further by still visible walls built in the cyclopean technique. This last allows its construction to be put in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, arguably with the involvement of Greek artisans (Fig. 7; PRASCHNIKER, SCHÖBER 1919; GARAŠANIN 1976; RADUNOVIĆ 2013). But the very defensible position makes it likely that the site had been occupied also earlier. From Medun, very important routes to the interior run off to the E and N: most of them are accessible only during the spring/summer, after the snow's melting, and were probably used also for transhumance. Medun is also one of the already mentioned set of pre-Roman hillforts located around the Podgorica plain and forming a sort of defensive arc (Fig. 4; DELLA CASA 1996).

Regarding the period immediately before the Roman, very recently important Illyrian finds have been brought to light at Mataguži, in the Zeta plain, about 20 km S of Doclea, where an important fortification system with a tower (10×10 m and 2 m thick), massive defensive walls and a fortified entrance have been found. Archaeologists of the Centre for Conservation and Archaeology of Montenegro argue that Mataguži was the capital centre of the Illyrians in that area (<http://m.portalanalitika.me/clanak/308490/otkriveno-sjediste-ilirske-drzave>; ARCCA<sup>4</sup>). Mataguži is already well-known for the important research conducted in the 1980s, when an important Illyrian-Hellenistic cemetery was found in Donji Gostilj and numerous traces of the old settlement, both now under water and on land, were traced (VELIMIROVIĆ-ŽIŽIĆ,

<sup>4</sup> ARCCA: Annual Report of Centre for Conservation and Archaeology.



Fig. 6 – The view from the Medun gradina towards the Zeta plain (photograph by the author).



Fig. 7 – The remains of the cyclopean wall in Medun (photograph by the author).

PRAVILOVIĆ 1985). Both Medun and Mataguži are pivotal key points in the control of the vast expanse embracing Doclea, the Skadar Lake and the Adriatic coast. Indeed, all the land of the Zeta plain, up to the Skadar Lake, is covered by remains of gradinas and Bronze and Iron Ages tumuli, indicating a widespread occupation. Another element to be investigated in the future in this attempt to reconstruct the dynamics of the Doclea area before the period of Romanization is the construction of a detailed geomorphological map of the area, in particular to achieve a better knowledge of the shore-line and extent of the Skadar Lake in antiquity.

Concerning the important sites of Medun and Mataguži, where some phenomena have been ascribed to contacts with artisans coming from the Aegean, another aspect to be further analysed is what cultural and economic role the Greek element played in the interconnections between them and the different Illyrian tribes, in the few centuries preceding Romanization.

The fragmented state of the present body of data, the lack of knowledge surrounding so many of the finds that the valley has yielded, the uncertain chronology of the same finds, must make one highly cautious in assessing the reasons that brought the Romans to occupy this area with so impressive a city as Doclea. The need to control the perhaps disputed border-zone between the Docleates and Labeates tribes and to access one of the most important and easy routes connecting the inner Balkans with the eastern Adriatic coast – along which products and people were moving for centuries despite the hard conditions the weather and terrain imposed in its transportation – certainly all played an important part in the strategy adopted by the Romans regarding their occupation of the Doclea valley.

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## ABSTRACT

After some general considerations on recent approaches in Balkan archaeology, the Author makes a first attempt to describe the Doclea landscape, through the eyes of a proto-historian. Drawing upon the collection of the existing published data on the pre-Roman period, the valley's history before Romanization is set forth, with some preliminary observations on possible roads and passages, both commercial and cultural, used by the communities that inhabited the region.

