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**Museum Archaeology in Serbia and the Myth of
Museum Neutrality***

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„All museums are political,
why do some pretend that they're not?“
(Fleming 2012, 4)

Abstract: The standpoint according to which museums present objective and unbiased facts dominates both the public and professional discourse. However, the widely accepted idea that museums can be trusted – because they are prestigious authorities, independent research institutions, morally and intellectually neutral, in constant quest for knowledge – is essentially wrong. From the inception of museums, over their many types, till today, not a single museum nor a museum professional, has been neutral. Museums are social constructs, and politics is a part of their base.

Nevertheless, the myth of museum neutrality perseveres, especially thanks to a large number of museums whose staff still proudly use their knowledge in order to collect and represent the museum material in an allegedly neutral and objective fashion, without interferences of reality and everyday life.

The hypocrisy is evident in Serbia too, particularly in the case of historical narratives, but also obvious in permanent displays and exhibitions of archaeological material, as well as in the domain of museum archaeological research. The paper investigates the examples of apparent neutrality, the national, regional and local museums authorizing the achievements and superiority of the nation, glorifying the mediaeval history or celebrating the link to the Roman Empire, the ones that are the prestigious demonstration of authority, but as well the examples of personal interests and values that have formed the public discourse. These considerations raise the issue of ethics in museums.

Keywords: neutrality of museums, political museum, museum displays, museum archaeology, ethics in museums, Serbia

The old model and the new model political museums

Museums are neutral, they do not take sides; they do not have a standpoint. Museums present facts in an objective and unbiased manner. We can trust them – they are prestigious authorities, independent research institutions, in a continuous quest for knowledge. This a widely spread, but generally erroneous idea: any museum activity is filled with meanings, tendencies and prejudice, both personal and collective (Fleming 2012, 1). From the inception of museums until the present time, throughout their evolution into various types, not a single museum nor a museum professional have been neutral. But the mask of neutrality – both of morals and the intellect – has enabled many museums to keep their distance from the important issues affecting the world today.

Museums have always been a political construct: they were established simultaneously with the birth of modern nation-states, they served as means of their confirmation, as prestigious *showcases of power* (Šola 2011, 72), *mirrors of the state* where “treasure is presented to the people, and the youth are taught to know and love their fatherland completely” (Jovan Žujović, “Poklič za Muzej srpske zemlje” [A Cry for the Museum of Serbian Land], according to Gavrilović 2011, 41). Even today, the narratives, pictures and artefacts displayed in museums

shape the official history according to the needs of the state (Gable 2013, 141–143) and affect the creation of collective memory and official representations (Aronsson 2012; Aronsson and Knoll 2012; Eilertsen and Bugge Amundsen 2012, 6), at the same time presenting thus both an *imaginary community* and its memory (Gable 2013, 143). Museums are a mechanism/medium for transforming knowledge, but, above all, standpoints and moral standards on “culture, history, nature and technology transformed into clusters of aestheticized practices, meanings and values” (Luke 2002, xxii). Furthermore, museums are not only a venue where dominant values are presented, they are also the place where many cultural realities are initially defined (Luke 2002, xiii) and articulated. Of course, the museum itself is not a protagonist: stories, pictures or values are presented by museum professionals, and in the process of defining key cultural values, *personal becomes political* (Luke 2002, xiii). It is in this relationship between the museum and cultural values that the true power of a political museum lies.

Many museums, and professionals who work in them, use their knowledge to collect, care for the museum collection and present it in a supposedly *neutral* manner, “floating in the sea of learnedness”, without any interference or participation in daily life and reality (Janes 2009).¹ Other museums – their staff – however, knowingly and intentionally use museum collections to speak about important present issues, present certain values and affect public opinion (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). The first type of museums is known as *the old model political museums* and they do what most museums have managed to do since their inception – they are political, but pretend not to be. They pretend to be ordinary and truthful, thus providing the nation with a concrete form, creating authoritative history, preserving the public memory of past conflicts, identifying the martyrs and heroes (Aronsson and Knell 2012). The other type, *the new model political museum*, creates and accepts new practices, materializing changes which have marked the museology around the world since the 1990s (Marstin 2013), guided by the idea that, if museums are to be relevant to most people, they must be a part of the political world.² They deal with various important topics, such as imperialism, exploitation – new types of slavery, migrations – economic and those resulting from conflicts, intercultural dialogue (Simansone 2013), social cohesion, peace building (Poulot, Guiral and Bodenstein 2012; Walters, Laven and Davies 2017), social justice, civil and human rights (Sandell 2007; Sandell and Nightingale 2012). Other than topics important for the society in general, relevant today, they raise issues sensitive for museums themselves, such as repatriation,³ illegal trade or exhibiting remains of the deceased (Gavrilović 2011, 69–89; Gerstenblith 2014, 660–663). The transformation into an openly political museum which understands its power and wants to be a participant in the creation of a

¹ The stance on museum neutrality is precisely illustrated by the response of an art critic asked to explain „the current relationship between museums and the public...’Museum directors are not social workers; their job is not to take care of the social intricacies of its audience, but to procure, research and look after best possible artefacts.’ For him, the present role of museums is ... reduced to what is exhibited, and to presenting ’best possible exhibits’, as if the concept could define the role of museums in the society; as if the concept had *any true meaning*” (Fleming 2012, 2–3).

better society is neither simple nor easy for museums – apoliticism and neutrality are a much more comfortable position. The transformation is layered and slow, but it turns museums into fully inclusive institutions, whose purpose is known and whose future lies ahead.⁴

Have the new practices reached museums in Serbia?

Museums in Serbia: *an ocean* of learnedness and objectivity

Changes have occurred in museums in Serbia too, ironically since the 1990s, but not under the influence of the new museology. After the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, the appearance of new nation-states and new cultural policies, former *peoples'* institutions, which, after the end of the World War II, became important to the new socialist regime as tools of education, science and especially propaganda and patriotism, whose role as ideological institutions provided them with a prestigious position of authority, now have been given a different place in society (Cvjetićanin and Vežić 2017, 77–79).

² http://www.intercom.museum/conferences/2011/conference_papers.html. Accessed on 2 May 2018.

³ An example is „*The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*“ drafted and signed by a group of 19 major European and US museums, self-proclaimed *universal* museums, from the Getty museum to the Ermitage, which treats repatriation, or “the universal culture“, by which the topic is actually evaded (http://archives.icom.museum/pdf/E_news2004/p4_2004-1.pdf. Accessed on 25 May 2018). This group of museums is the paradigm of the old model political museum.

Instead of glorifying war history and artificial narratives of progress under communism, and articulating a supra-national framework of Yugoslavia and a new identity of a country in which conflicts are deeply buried in the past, in the new wave of state control of culture (Đukić-Dojčinović 2003, 43), museums have turned to nation as the only proper community (Brkić 2013, 75). Museums have re-authorized the past: narratives of progress are now focused on the accomplishment and superiority of the nation, by celebrating carefully chosen currently important national dates and heroes.⁵ Only the best, most expensive, most beautiful, most valuable or unique is presented, while difficult topics are avoided.⁶ Recent history, minorities, marginalized groups, social justice or human rights issues – topics which are sure to raise debate – are still absent from museums.⁷ Museum staff are deeply convinced that they are learned, objective, neutral and distanced from politics; they believe that they do not deal with politics (Gavrilović 2011, 53–54).

According to their approach to heritage and reality, or according to their relationship with the past and the way they transfer their knowledge, most museums in Serbia (all museums?) belong to the old model political museums. There has been no change, therefore, in the role of museums – they remain important stakeholders in the promotion of the official, authorized history (Smith 2006, 4) and a mechanism for linking heritage to social values and meanings, now within a new narrative. Objectivity remains *a shell* covering power relations (Sandell 2007, 3–4). There has been no change to the focus either, since it is still more important to collect and process museum artefacts than to establish relevant connections between the museum and today's world. The museums' social position has changed: even though new museums are established and it appears that museums have flourished over the last decade (Gavrilović 2006, 48–49), museums occupy a position on the margins of society and struggle to keep their audience and former prestigious position. Although there are museums that manage to remain “necessary to their masters” (Šola 2011, 75), most are socially irrelevant and uncommunicative (Gavrilović 2007, 29), petrified in their learnedness and objectivity.

4 See examples such as <https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/social-justice-museums-resources/>, <http://museumplanning.com/museums-and-net-neutrality/> or <http://sjam.org/case-studies/guidance/>. Accessed on 2 May 2018.

5 Exhibitions of the Historical Museum of Serbia mostly operate within the code, often choosing topics related to assassinations, murder, retaliation, as if the history is made mostly of traumatic events (*Murdered Monarchs*, 2008; *Death of Karađorđe Petrović*, 2018) representing famous national narratives, but keeping alive the public memory of past conflicts using art exhibits (*Serbia 19 Years After 1999 – While Bombs Were Being Dropped*, 2018).

6 The permanent exhibit of the People's Museum Valjevo, *The Third Dimension of the Past*, opened in 2007, ends by the segment titled *Instruments of War*, in which it opposes hand weapons used during the World War II, both by the occupation and liberation forces, but without expressing any value attitudes towards the group actors. Valjevo has no more recent history in its museum.

7 A notable exception is the exhibit of the Historical Museum of Serbia titled *In the Name of the People! Political Repression in Serbia 1944–1953* (2014). Despite the museum being finally opened to debates and dialogue, however, the opportunity has been missed to link the issue with the present times.

Declarative neutrality is evident in terms of historical⁸ and ethnological exhibitions (Gavrilović 2007, 104–107; Gavrilović 2009), but it is also present in the representation of archaeological narratives (Cvjetičanin 2015a: 559–579). The obvious question is: “all museums are political; why do some pretend that they’re not?” (Fleming 2012, 4).

Archaeological exhibitions in Serbia: *hearth of old*

Learnedness, objectivity and neutrality is recognized as an important characteristic of archaeological exhibitions, or archaeologists/archaeology in museums. Most museums which possess archaeological collections (still) act like research institutions, prestigious authorities or temples of history. Masterpieces mark the exhibits of national museums, and unique and precious artefacts characterize exhibits of all. Despite the appearance of new museological concepts and the development of new theories in the original discipline (Johnson 2008; Olsen 2002; Palavestra 2011a), changes occurring in archaeological exhibitions of museums are formal, not substantial (Cvjetičanin 2015a). The framework and the approach have remained cultural and historical, and the idea of continuity (Palavestra 2011b) and linear development – progress – is still dominant. Exhibitions apply the “political concept of the *hearth of old*” which provides „the belief that dwelling in that very area has forever been ensured by the presupposed cultural/ethnic/political continuity” (Gavrilović 2009, 40).⁹ National museums – expectedly – but also regional and town museums, reminiscent of small-scale national museums (Gavrilović 2009, 43), authorize the accomplishments and superiority of the nations, continuously producing narrative for the ethnological and national audience.

⁸ Within the exhibit of the Historical Museum of Serbia titled *Serbia 1914*, that opened in September 2014, the exhibition titled *The Woman’s Face of the Great War* opened in November of the same year, in a separate gallery, as an added segment to the main exhibition. Different roles and engagements of women during the World War I were presented, which are often invisible or neglected in our society. Even though the author intended to present women as major participants in the war, the later date of its opening, the entry into the gallery venue through a small, side door to the main exhibit, and the design which was in contrast to the powerful visual language of the main exhibit suggesting a special (women’s) *discourse*, clearly indicated the museum’s bias – everything about women and their role remained invisible, secondary.

⁹ An example is the exhibit *Serb Artistic Heritage in Kosovo and Metohija. Identity, Importance and Endangeredness* (2017), of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Museum, Belgrade and the Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to Vladimir Kostić, President of the SAAS, at the opening: “The idea of this exhibit is... for creative feats of our heritage in Kosovo and Metohija to become a permanent part of our very identity as such, thus not allowing the disappearance of what determines our very being notwithstanding the circumstances” (<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:688017-KOSOVO-JE-U-NAMA-Otvorena-izlozba-Srpsko-umetnicko-nasledje-na-KiM-FOTO>, accessed on 2 June 2018).

The mythologized relationship with the past glorifies the Medieval national history, celebrates the connections (and continuity) with great civilizations such as the Roman (Kuzmanović and Mihajlović 2015; Cvjetičanin 2015a, 578–579; Cvjetičanin 2015b, 366–368), but it more than symbolically appropriates individual prehistoric cultures. The exhibition of the National Museum in Belgrade titled *Covenants and Messages. Stefan Nemanja – Nine Centuries* (2013), prepared with the intention of “restating the value and extreme importance of the historic persona ...for the inception of the Serbian sovereignty”, as well as the religious and cultural ambiance of the medieval Serbia.¹⁰ There was nothing in the exhibit that would suggest anything other than the myth of the splendor of medieval courts. In terms of the Roman heritage, since the 2000’s, it has become usual to establish a linear relationship between the Roman Empire and modern Serbia. The significance of Serbia in the survival of the Roman Empire is emphasized; special attention is paid to the late antiquity, the period when this territory was “the center of the civilized world”. The idea appeared in the public discourse, via the academic one, in 1993, when the 1,700-year anniversary of the tetrarchy institution was celebrated (Babić 2014a, 253–254). Marking of the 1,700-year anniversary of the Edict of Milan in 2013 clearly articulates the national project titled *The Edict of Milan 313–2013, Serbia*, the aim of which was to depict the effect “of the Roman heritage on the territory of modern-day Serbia on shaping the European civilization as we know it and to contribute to promoting the role of Serbia economically, culturally and politically” (Mihajlović 2013, 805–806). Its museum expression was the exhibit of the National Museum in Belgrade titled *Constantine the Great and the Edict of Milan. 313*. The confirmation of the idea of the importance of Serbia to the Roman Empire is found especially in the number of Roman emperors born on the Serbian soil and their continuous (ever increasing, professional) counting, levelling the roles and significance of emperors who ruled for several years and those whose rule lasted several months only, culminating in the exhibit of the Institute of Archaeology titled *Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae and the Viminacium Archaeological Park, or Journey to the Past – Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae – Viminacium*, travelling the world since 2010, “with 18 bronze heads of emperors”.¹¹ The narrative of continuity and “our” culture is demonstrated for prehistoric epochs as well – hand in hand with the pseudo-science.¹² The conference titled *Signs of Civilization* and an exhibition by the same name organized for the occasion (Novi Sad, 2004) opened room for the so-called alternative archaeology, with far-reaching consequences (Palavestra 2017, 158–159). The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts co-organized the event. Pseudo-science received the “approval” of the leading scientific institution.

10 https://www.b92.net/kultura/vesti.php?nav_category=1087&yyyy=2013&mm=10&dd=03&nav_id=761134. Accessed on 2 June 2018.

11 <http://viminacium.org.rs/izlozbe/>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

12 <https://www.archaeomythology.org/publications/signs-of-civilization-exhibition-catalogue/>. Accessed on 25 June 2018.

As opposed to the 1950's and 1960's, these examples show that, by the end of the 20th century, the historical distance became extremely important and that the position according to which "heritage is to be viewed from afar" (Smith 2006, 34), makes it almost completely logical to ignore everything that does not date far back to the past (Šola 2011, 85) and justify avoiding getting involved in the reality. It enables supposed neutrality.

The image that is offered is general, safe and distant from today's world, with no room for new interpretations of the past or open narratives. Exhibitions which could relate archaeological exploration to the issues and topics of the modern world, thus providing an insight into new ideas and values are not featured. Continuity is illustrated, both the territorial – the special nature of *our* area, and also the spiritual – the special *spirit* of the area (Babić 2014a, 254), *a nation with its history*. The continuity and ancientness manage to emerge even when the intention is completely different, as was the case of the exhibition of the National Museum in Belgrade titled *The Central Balkans between the Greek and the Celtic World. Kale Krševica 2001–2011* (2012). It was intended to raise awareness of the importance of heritage and bring to the attention the state of the site, but thanks to its design, the focus of the exhibition shifted towards the emphasis on the connection with the classical Greek heritage (Palavestra 2012, 649–650; Cvjetičanin 2015a, 578). The history of *others*, even if represented at all, appears to be less important. In addition to the artificial and mechanical progress timeline, and *beauty* (Cvjetičanin 2015a, 566–570), museums find it important only to represent scientific results using series of artefacts organized chronologically.¹³ The new exhibit of the Homeland Museum of Bela Palanka, that opened in 2013, realized by the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia with (less apparent) cooperation of the museum, is a clear illustration of unwillingness to accept changes to the museology, continuing to display typologies. By such an approach, museums contribute to the very restricted role they have in the overall archaeological scene,¹⁴ and especially to the marginal role they perform in the community. Simultaneously, museums provide space for "suspicious" narratives, unprecise knowledge mixed with idealistic views from the past, and affirm the pseudoscience (Vuković and Vujović 2014, 609–624).

¹³ http://www.heritage.gov.rs/latinica/radovi_i_aktivnosti_stalna_postavka_zavijajnog_muzeja_u_beloj_palanci.php. Accessed on 25 June 2018.

¹⁴ Similarly to ethnographic exhibitions (Gavrilović 2007, 12).

Furthermore, museums claim that they focus on visitors and are accessible to all. Still, they rarely admit that there are various audience identities¹⁵ and mostly organize collections and exhibits for ideal visitors, well-educated and well off (Marstin 2013a, 47–48). Museums remain elitist institutions.¹⁶

Moreover, museums – and archaeological collections – support the traditional perception of museums as temples of knowledge and art. The audience is expected to “bow” to the authority of the institutions, since museums own both *treasure* and *knowledge*, as well as *real*, concrete, *true* evidence. Visitors learn how to observe and assess artefacts as they enter the exhibit (Luke 2002, 3), moving forward along the line of progress, where they are faced with prominent commodified iconic artefacts emphasized by stage lighting. Additionally, the usual method of object classification and representation – some are seen as art, and some as artefacts (Vogel 1991, 191–204) – where aesthetics outweigh the understanding of humans from the past, contributes to the effect on visitors. Nothing is left to chance (Lindauer 2013, 258) – visiting exhibitions means threading on the well-known map of existing knowledge, during which visitors submit to the museum authority and the dominant force – the curator.

A critical standpoint towards archaeological exhibitions is, therefore, seldom to be seen, both in the public and among professionals – how do you critique beauty and rarities? Although ideas, viewpoints and values presented in the exhibitions should be questioned by the public, both curators and the science itself are reluctant to discuss them (due to a lack of interest or because of loyalty, or a lack of understanding of the new museology and the interpretative archaeology). Visitors, on the other hand, are not trained to identify or dispute curators’ choices; critical museum visitors are not cultivated (Lindauer 2013, 249–275).

Archaeological exhibitions intended to demonstrate the history of a nation or the longevity of a (national) culture are not characteristic of only Serbian museums. It is national museums, both in “old” nation-states and in the “new” ones, that are recognized as instruments of identity negotiation (Eilertsen and Amundsen 2012, 6). In most Balkans states, there is limitless trust in the powers of history and archaeology, so that old testimonies and archaeological artefacts of past cultures become an undisputed scientific confirmation of the national existence. In Macedonia, the new archaeological museum is a powerful statement of the already radical expression of the new heritage discourse, in which the artificially constructed link with Phillip and Alexander’s Macedonia is considered as the proof of the longevity and civilization of the nation. Bulgarian or Hungarian museums, for example, also showcase ethnicity (and religion) as a constant national trait, not to be negotiated in future (Aronsson and Knell 2012, 50).

14 This is also how it used to be: in a document depicting the Stobi exhibition in 1932 (ANM, document no. 943/1932), which shall be discussed further, which attracted considerable public interest, it is stated that the museum “noted that most visitors were members of the lower classes of our society” (Cvjetičanin 2014, 588). Obviously, other types of visitors were expected.

15 Even though it seems that elitism is demonstratively abandoned in *The Night of Museums*, an event that draws large numbers of new visitors, some museums underestimate this audience and prepare “fun” exhibitions bordering on vulgarity: an example is the exhibition titled *What is underneath?* organized by the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade especially for the event, depicting underwear.

Of course, since museums and exhibitions have been a political construct since their inception, the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century are not the only periods in which *objective* archaeology was used as an element of prestige. The first archaeological thematic exhibition of the National Museum, held in the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Pavilion in 1932, presenting the results of nine years of research in Stobi (Cvjetičanin 2014, 587–588), demonstrated not only the great scientific value of the research, but simultaneously utilized “the high culture of... the second Pompei” to confirm the national territory and emphasize its value and significance. Furthermore, a sensation added to the already “sensational discoveries” were “the unusually precious artefacts found in a tomb near Trebenište” (ANM, 1932). That was the first test of the recipe which still yields great results: universal admiration for an ancient culture spiced up by gold artefacts wrapped in a sensational discovery.¹⁷

Archaeological collections are, therefore, only seemingly neutral. In its most public forum, museums offer images of the nation close to the romanticist concept dating back to the 19th century, a time when modern states were formed (Gavrilović 2011, 54). Those patriarchal images, in which prehistoric cultures are appropriated as our own, show that Serbian culture and art were built on the foundations of the archaic, Roman and medieval state of Nemanjići¹⁸, which is also represented as a part of the European civilization. Either by offering desirable and appropriate narratives or using narratives which are supposedly apolitical, museums continue to *construe*, while claiming that they *represent*.

Archaeological research in museums: personal standpoints in the identification of heritage

The mask of neutrality does not cover only exhibitions: all segments of the archaeological activity in museums – as the museum itself, as the discipline itself – contain politics in their foundations. The apparent objectivity and neutrality can also be recognized in archaeological research conducted by museums, both in the early stages of institutionalization of the discipline (Palavestra 2012, 2013) and grand-scale projects of the 20th century (Bikić and Šarić 2017), and in the archaeological research we shall leave as legacy – current policies of acquisition, research strategies or conservation and revitalization of the archaeological heritage (Crnobrnja 2017).

17 In Serbia, the recipe is especially popular in the media. The discovery of gold plates with inscriptions in Viminacijum in 2016, was reported by a daily newspaper which also added claims such as: “Scientists ranging from classical philologists to archaeologists were *stricken* by the unique findings, *unprecedented* on the territory once occupied by the Roman Empire, *from Asia to the Britain*” (<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:618438-Zlatne-i-srebrne-plocice-s-tajanstvenim-tekstom-otkrivene-u-Viminacijumu-Poruke-bogovima-neznanim-jezikom>. Accessed on 25 June 2018).

18 Of course, the images from the museum also are transferred to monuments: the paradigm is the future monument of Stefan Nemanja, or the entire spatial plan for Savski Square in Belgrade (<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/nova-atrakcija-beograda-evo-kako-ce-izgledati-spomenu-stefanu-nemanji-ali-i-ceo/y0g4fh6>. Accessed on 6 July 2018).

The question is whether professionals in archaeological heritage in Serbia, and especially curators, can recognize the consequences of their activities on the society, whether they are aware of their role and power, whether they understand the extent to which individual preferences of professionals define the archaeological practice and the public discourse; whether they intentionally ignore new trends in museology and new archaeological theories which should be an integral part of the archaeological activity in museums, or are they truly unaware of the implications of their work, since they have been trained in a code which believes that truth and objectivity is immanent in their approach.

“Notwithstanding the type of the museum and the contents of the collection, the decisions we make on what to collect, what to keep, what to research, what to represent and how to interpret it, as well as on what *not* to collect, *not* keep, *not* research, *not* represent.. are the result of our conditioning as individuals” (Luke 2002, xxii). If we add professional or institutional authority to the individual (knowledge and viewpoints, opinions, preconceptions of the discipline, but also personal tastes and interests), it shows that the personal has a powerful effect on the public discourse: from the establishing of individual collections and museums (Palavestra and Mihailović 2018) to defining scientific and cultural strategies.¹⁹

Archaeological research in Serbia, which began in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the collecting of antiquities that was institutionalized by the establishment of the National Museum, were originally equally aimed at all periods of the past (Đorđević, Cvjetičanin and Radić 2005, 15–16), with the intention to present various evidence of a nation with a history. Research was conducted at prehistoric sites, some of them Roman, and “antiquity excursions” were organized mostly to visit medieval monuments (Cvjetičanin 2014, 585). In the early decades of the 20th century the focus is transferred to classic antiquities: the personal – in this case the German educational background of Miloje Vasić and values which he found in the classical civilization (Babić 2008, 129–132) – affect the museum’s research policy and the choice of sites the artefacts from which are added to museum collections. That was the moment in which archeological finds are not only discovered, but are also *identified* (Smith 2006). Sites and objects are identified, which are material not only to the understanding of the past, but are also representative of the stories of heritage which museum professionals – but not only them – want to create. Until mid-20th century, archaeological activities take place almost exclusively within the National Museum, determined also by specific interests of its staff (Cvjetičanin 2014, 587).

¹⁹ *The 2017 Draft Culture Strategy*, Subchapter 1.5 Defining priority national projects (pages 84–85), lists major archaeological sites which will be in focus in the following ten years: Caričin grad, Medijana, Vinča, Sirmijum, Drenovac and sites along the Roman limes. The list, which includes two prehistoric sites, others being Roman, among which there are no medieval archaeological sites, obviously not based solely on the archaeological, or cultural or scientific value of the sites – appears to be very personal (<http://www.kultura.gov.rs/docs/dokumenti/nacrt-strategije-razvoja-kulture-republike-srbije-od-2017--do-2027-/-nacrt-strategije-razvoja-kultu-re-republike-srbije-od-2017--do-2027-.pdf>. Accessed on 25 June 2018).

With the establishment of other museums, and especially the Archaeological Museum (Bikić and Šarić 2017), the quantity of archaeological research increased rapidly. Even though it was established to coordinate archaeological activities in Serbia (Bikić and Šarić 2017, 12), among other, the Institute director himself noticed, ten years later, that „the results of the zeal“ of the organization and associates merged with „general, common, although insufficiently coordinated efforts of archaeologists... in Serbia“ (Bošković 1959, 1).

The personal also determines the museum profile. It has been a long time since it was found that the development and activities of complex regional and town museums is affected by “individual preferences of professionals who, according to their personal interests, focus on subjects and problems of a science or art, so that it often happens that some *regional museums have, in fact, the character of archaeological institutions*, while others prefer ethnology, or dedicate their efforts to starting an art gallery” (Han 1962, 10).

There are current examples of the personal, i.e. individual proclivities, still affecting both research strategies and acquisition policies, but also programming orientation of museums and heritage attractions, or cultural events related to archaeology²⁰. A new field in which individual preferences are also reflected is conservation, or safekeeping of the archaeological heritage for the future. Based on the current conservation ethics, “archaeological heritage includes valuable and original sites currently under the threat of destruction or neglect, which, therefore, must be kept safe so that they could be studied or enjoyed in future” (Holtorf and Högberg 2013, 741). Under the pretense of *safekeeping of the past for the future*, i.e. preserving the past as the historical testimony to be given to future generations in the best possible condition, archaeologists and conservators continue working together (while believing that the social values of the future will be the same as today) in the ambience of presumptions and prejudice (Holtorf and Högberg 2013, 740–741).

Even if we could believe that the pioneers of archaeology in Serbia, the first guardians and curators of the National Museum, or first generations of archeologists trained at the University of Belgrade, worked within a specific social context unaware of its effects and their status, this is certainly not the case with archaeologists today. We are aware of our bias and of our effect on the environment: postprocess archaeology believes that objective facts are culturally relative and that

20 Marking of the Edict of Milan proclamation anniversary included various events. At the same time when the exhibition titled *Constantin the Great and the Edict of Milan 313* opened in the new gallery in Viminacijum, the opera *Aida* was performed in the newly built Roman-style amphitheater. Newspaper headlines read: „Aida and Constantin in Viminacijumu” (<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/258214/Aida-i-Konstantin-u-Viminacijumu>;
<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:434365-Izlozba-i-opera-Aida-u-Viminacijumu>. Accessed on 6 July 2018). Issues relating to the choice of venue, link between *Aida* and the Edict of Milan, or tolerance, were not raised.

they also depend on the context in which they appeared, or on the analyst context (Shanks, Tilley 1992, 93–94). Moreover, even though defining, or constituting the value of archaeological heritage is not solely the archaeologists' prerogative (Smith 2006), our authorized heritage discourse dominates the public sphere. Do we choose to act according to our awareness?

Ethical approach of professionals: from Lepenski vir to the ironed sausage

“There is no part of the museum that is free from political implications” (Besterman 2014, 629). The Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) articulates activities that do not compromise professional museum standards, by promoting the safeguarding of heritage, social responsibility, tolerance and respect (Code of Ethics for Museums 2007). Museums have the ethical responsibility and commitment to the public. Speaking about exhibitions, as the museums' public forum, the public expects them to be *reliable* and *honest* (Dean 2003, 280–281), notwithstanding if they are organized within the museum or elsewhere. Being able to rely on the truthfulness of the information presented is based on the public opinion that the basis for the exhibition is the result of efforts invested in the research and scientifically established and verified facts. Honesty refers to the presentation method, i.e. readiness to admit that ideas presented in the exhibition represent someone's opinion, which may be inaccurate. Another, presently more important aspect of *honest* presentation relates to the context in which exhibits are placed. Recontextualization is a “delicate and powerful manipulator of values and public opinion” (Dean 2003, 283).

“Artefacts are exhibited in the eastern hall of the symbol of Yugoslav architecture, and especially attractive is the replica of the sculpture of Adam from Lepenski Vir. In that part of the building, guests will be able to see 18 artefacts from the Pločnik site, a replica of the Empress Theodora's portrait, but also a set of gold jewelry from Jagodin Mala... there is also an exhibition of ‘17 Roman emperors born on Serbian soil’... bronze heads of Roman emperors – Trajan Decius, Claudius Gothicus, Quintillus... Thanks to the specific historical time machine, visitors will also see Constantine the Great, known as the greatest emperor of the Late Roman Empire.”²¹

21 https://www.b92.net/kultura/vesti.php?nav_category=1087&yyyy=2017&mm=06&dd=22&nav_id=1275009. Accessed on 25 June 2018. Please note that the journalist mentioned 17 emperors by mistake – all 18 were exhibited. The manner in which they were exhibited was also interesting: even though the heads were not cultural property, they were fenced by special barriers, making them inaccessible and distant, presented as if they were masterpieces. The barriers set them on a pedestal of extraordinary value and included them in the (authorized discourse) heritage.

In June 2017, a special exhibition complex was organized for the occasion of a formal reception on behalf of the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić in the Palace of Serbia, in which, in addition to archaeological heritage, various cultural and other property from all parts of Serbia was presented, ranging from the Prince Lazar's cape to the early 19th century drawing room, from the photographs of Toplički uprising to the "Kosmaj 49" radio receiver, with performers who brought to life important protagonists of progress in Serbia. The exhibition was organized for the guests of the reception, statesmen, diplomats and major public figures, but, foremost, for "the people", via a direct TV link, and by opening the venue to the public on weekends later on.

The exhibition seemingly only displayed the rich Serbian heritage, its dynamic history and heroes, as well as the entrepreneurship today. The clear message of values also had a (not so) subtle, concealed other side: it carried the idea of a continuous line of progress culminating in the present, and the inevitable link between the heroes of old and the modern hero. Discoveries and achievements became a tool in leading the state. The deliberate and construed version of reality, "establishing the order and the truth" (Rydell 2014, 210), in its spirit, resembles most closely world fairs and expositions, especially prior to the World War II.²² Just like the "noisier and more ephemeral museum counterparts" (Rydell 2014, 203), the *Serbia theme park* was the rhetoric of power. Nothing was neutral. Everything was suggesting the public what to think (Vogel 1991, 27), how to construct meaning from the fragments offered. In case someone did not understand properly, there were the "exotic" performers to recite the main messages.

Let us go back to archaeology. The recontextualization which linked Lepenski vir, Pločnik, Roman emperors and present times, the iron sausage included, for many was "an opportunity not to be missed".²³ Even though the Code of Ethics (2007) stipulates, as one of its fundamental presumptions, that museums be independent from political influence, notwithstanding the source of funding (state or private) (Fleming 2017), this was an obvious example of fictitious independence. While museums around the world increasingly often ask themselves, as we have seen, not how far they can afford to go in a political role (Edson 2003, 175), but rather how can they afford *not to go*, the question we ask ourselves is "to what extent we can tolerate... promoting certain policies or ideologies" (Gavrilović 2009, 31). Also, why is so little thought given to progressive and conservative results of the archaeological practice?

22 World fairs and expositions that were first organized in the mid-19th century, demonstrated the links between scientific and technological breakthroughs and the national progress, and served as a means of obtaining the trust of the public and its faith in progress. Exhibiting artistic achievements, as well as showcasing exotic (non-white) peoples, provided the sense of superiority. They were the driving force of consumerism, but also an exercise in nationalism (Rydell 2014, 201–202).

23 In the past decade, there has been intensive critical thought about the relationship towards heritage and its use, including the heritage located in museums. See also <http://www.criticalher-itagestudies.org> (Accessed on 6 August 2018).

As professionals, instead of being the first to question the standard archaeological narratives, traditional portrayals based on the cultural and historical ideology and the use of archaeology for daily politics (Babić 2014b), instead of developing heritage literacy (Babić 2009), we adjust – either unintentionally or deliberately – to the right of certain interest groups to provide multiple interpretations of heritage. This right does not simultaneously signify the legitimacy of various readings of the archaeological heritage, often completely diverging from the scientific data. But it is easier to adapt. Too much contemplation may cause suspicion, both in the discipline, but also in the management structures, especially if it appears within institutions identified as material to constructing the national identity or achieving social cohesion (Edwards 2009, 73), such as museums, and especially education.²⁴

Unless we discuss theoretical and ethical aspects of the archaeological practice, starting from the way in which archeological knowledge is created and transferred (Babić 2018), through new museological concepts and accessible, relevant and readable exhibitions, to the future archaeological heritage and new practices and policies it will require (Holtorf and Högberg 2013), the discipline is “nothing but an escape from our own space and time” (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 208). Clinging to the cultural and historical approach, sensationalism and tabloidization of museums and heritage attractions, boastful evaluations of the quality of work performed by non-professionals,²⁵ narratives created in support to questionable national myths or to raise funds, provide a platform for all sorts of alternative, fantastic and cult archaeology. Museums today must be “aware”, present and conscientious (Janes 2010, 2015). Let me repeat, there is nothing neutral about a museum, nothing is random. All exhibitions are events and venues with their own causality effects and ethical agendas. We do not merely *organize* an exhibition, we *curate* it; we not only research or protect, we *create* heritage, i.e. we deal in subjective political negotiation of identity.

24 Comments on the abovementioned Draft Culture Strategy, partially published in the weekly magazine *Vreme* (Ćirić 2017), whose authors (the author of this article included) mainly have academic and museum archaeology background, were met by indifference and disinterestedness of the competent ministry and the minister. There was a similar reaction to objections of a group of archaeologists to the revitalization of the Žitni trg site, in Sremska Mitrovica: That is only their (professional) opinion (<http://rs.n1info.com/a402196/Vesti/Kultura/Arheolozi-nezadovoljni-rekonstrukcijom-Zitnog-trga-u-Sremskoj-Mitrovici.html>. Accessed on 7 July 2018).

25 In the opinion of the Institute of Archaeology, a scientific institution, the exhibition titled *Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae* “represents one of the best examples of promoting Serbian cultural heritage in the world... For the past five years it has spread the findings of Serbian scientists throughout the world. By promoting the unambiguous Serbian brand, we indirectly present all the places where Roman emperors were born, by tying them into a “science product” – an attractive project of cultural and archaeological tourism.” (<http://viminacium.org.rs/izlozbe/izlozbe-u-inostranstvu/>. Accessed on 15 June 2018).

In a specific and unique manner, museums occupy the past, the present and the future. Current activities are the future of heritage. Neutrality should not, therefore, be a standard for museums. The appearance of neutrality does not mean, as many museum professionals believe, “that neutral museums do not censure themselves, do not take sides, but speak *the truth, allowing it to defend itself*”.²⁶ Museums should not merely display that which exists, without re-examination. The integrity of the discipline – academic, research, professional – does not hide behind neutrality. Silence is deafening.

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²⁶ Advocating neutrality, as has been mentioned, is not typical only of universal museums. The Museum of Brenham, Texas, USA, shares the same position (<http://www.brenhamheritagemuseum.org/museums-never-neutral/>, accessed on 25 June. 2018).

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Muzejska arheologija u Srbiji i mit o neutralnosti muzeja

Apstrakt: Stanovište da muzeji predstavljaju činjenice, objektivno i nepristrasno, dominira kako javnim, tako i profesionalnim diskursom muzeja. Međutim, široko rasprostranjena ideja da muzejima možemo da verujemo – jer su prestižni autoriteti, nezavisne istraživačke ustanove, moralno i intelektualno neutralne, u stalnoj potrazi za znanjem – jeste pogrešna. Od momenta nastanka muzeja, preko njegovih različitih tipova, do danas, niti jedan muzej, odnosno muzejski stručnjak, nije bio neutralan. Muzeji su društveni konstrukt, a u njihovom temelju je i politika.

Ipak, mit o neutralnosti muzeja opstaje, posebno zahvaljujući velikom broju muzeja čiji stručnjaci i dalje ponosno svoja znanja koriste za prikupljanje i predstavljanje muzejske građe na navodno neutralan i objektivan način, bez uplitanja i uključivanja u svakodnevnicu i realnost.

Ova je hipokrizija evidentna i u Srbiji, belodana kada je reč o istorijskim narativima, ali očigledna i u stalnim postavkama i izložbama arheološkog materijala, kao i u domenu muzejskih arheoloških istraživanja. U radu se razmatranju primeri prividne neutralnosti, nacionalni, regionalni i gradski muzeji koji autorizuju dostignuća i superiornost nacije, glorifikuju srednjovekovnu istoriju ili proslavljaju veze s Rimskim carstvom, oni koji su prestižna demonstracija moći, ali i primeri ličnih interesovanja i vrednosti koji su formirali javni diskurs. Sva razmatranja otvaraju i važno pitanje etike u muzejima.

Ključne reči: neutralnost muzeja, politički muzej, muzejske postavke, muzejska arheologija, etika u muzejima, Srbija

Le discours muséal, tant public que professionnel, est dominé par la position que les musées présentent les faits d'une manière objective et impartiale. Pourtant, l'idée que nous pouvons avoir confiance dans les musées parce qu'ils constituent des autorités prestigieuses, institutions de recherche indépendantes, neutres du point de vue moral et intellectuel, à la recherche constante des connaissances, est largement répandue, mais fautive. Depuis l'apparition du musée, à travers ses différents types, jusqu'à nos jours nul musée ou professionnel du musée n'a été neutre. Les musées sont des constructions sociales ayant aussi dans leur fondement de la politique.

Cependant, le mythe de la neutralité muséale subsiste et cela surtout grâce au grand nombre de musées dont les professionnels continuent à utiliser fièrement leurs savoirs à collecter et à présenter les artefacts muséaux d'une manière prétendument neutre et objective, sans implication ou inclusion dans le quotidien et dans la réalité.

Cette hypocrisie est évidente en Serbie aussi, transparente s'agissant des récits historiques, mais visible également dans les expositions permanentes et temporaires du matériel archéologique ainsi que dans le domaine de recherches archéologiques muséales. Le présent travail considère les exemples de neutralité prétendue, les musées nationaux, régionaux et citoyens qui autorisent les exploits et la supériorité de la nation, glorifient l'histoire médiévale ou honorent les liens avec l'Empire romain, ceux qui sont la démonstration prestigieuse du pouvoir, mais aussi les exemples d'intérêts personnels et de valeurs ayant formé le discours public. Toutes ces considérations posent la question importante sur l'éthique muséale.

Mots-clés: neutralité muséale, musée politique, expositions muséales, archéologie muséale, éthique des musées, Serbie

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