

The Mesolithic site of Vlasac – Interpretative planning

Project description

This Interpretative Plan sets out a unique and engaging visitor experience at the Mesolithic site of Vlasac, Serbia, focusing on an assessment of the site's values and meanings. With proposals to improve transparency, accessibility and local engagement, the key aim is to make Vlasac a fun and engaging 'must visit' destination.

Project background

Vlasac is situated approximately 3km downstream from the type-site of Lepenski Vir in the Upper Gorge of the 'Iron Gates' on the Serbian side of the river Danube (Fig.1). It is one of many archaeological sites within the Djerdap National Park, in the area of particular cultural and natural significance and diversity. The evidence suggests that the site was continuously occupied from the Early Mesolithic, around 9500 BC to Middle Neolithic, c. 5900–5500 BC. The site is known for numerous and elaborate burial practices and domestic features, such as trapezoidal dwellings and rectangular stone-lined hearths. Several classes of objects were found across the site: a typical knapped stone industry and large collection of bone, specifically antler and ivory tools; ground stone tools in the form of pestles, mortars and some specific tools such as stone clubs/fish-stunners as well as large collection of body ornaments (Borić et al 2009; Cristiani and Borić 2012).

The site was first excavated between 1970 and 1971 by D. Srejović and Z. Letica (1978). New excavations began in 2006 and are ongoing, taking place upslope from the excavation area that was investigated in the 1970s. Today, Vlasac is generally in a fragile state and endangered due to insufficient management systems. Since the excavation in 2006, the River Danube exposed a part of the site and in 2009 the nearby hydroelectric power plant "Djerdap" funded a stone embankment in an effort to preserve the rest of the site from further erosion and flooding. Human presence is scarce - the excavation team and occasional visitors take a boat ride from the shores near the Lepenski Vir Museum, provided courtesy of the local fisherman. In 2013 a semi-permanent reconstruction of a Mesolithic house was built on the site, but due to the lack of maintenance and funding it has shared a similar fate to the rest of the site (Fig.2). While the Lepenski Vir Museum remains a popular touristic and a mandatory educational destination, Vlasac is little known outside of academia, with very few visiting due to its 'tricky' location, the lack of organized tours, and current unimpressive condition.

The Interpretative Planning proposal identifies three priorities in relation to the site:

- Site transparency – raising public awareness of the existence and importance of heritage resources via social media presence and better signage on the spot (Fig.3);
- Accessibility – enabling site visits for leisure and education (Fig.4);
- Community-based activities and site attractions based on tangible and intangible assets:
 - On-site activity: 'Creative Dig-In' weekend (Fig.5).
 - Off-site activity: Fishing event.

Vlasac, as an archaeological site, is understood within the wide area of the eponym site of Lepenski Vir and in the general context of the prehistory of the Iron Gates with its specific trapezoidal houses, elaborate burial practices and richness of archaeological finds. However, Vlasac as a heritage site is also a place of living memory. Many of the local inhabitants are proud of Vlasac as a place where their memories were formed 'now and there', and not so rarely, in relation to us 'just like in the old days with Srejović', thereby connecting their experiences with the ones from the 1970s and the discovery of Lepenski Vir. In response to such feelings of belonging and pride, and in an effort to offer potential visitors something more than just sightseeing, this interpretative plan also considered values that are associated with the site, whether they reside or take place there or elsewhere. Private stories, old photographs, local customs, food and music, are all deployed in telling the story of Vlasac and how this collection of rather spiritual values shaped the idea of the site's interpretation and presentation.

Context

1. (Wider) public awareness – media presence and information panels

Although the site is in close proximity to the well-known Lepenski Vir and a part of the National Park, it is relatively unknown outside the academia and surrounding villages. A short survey conducted with SurveyMonkey in May/June 2020 with 22 participants from Serbia and abroad (Appendix 1) and some personal enquiries confirmed the 'trend' of Vlasac's anonymity or the fact it is overshadowed by Lepenski Vir. A popular touristic attraction and a place of mandatory school field trips, the Lepenski Vir Museum could offer a perfect platform for raising awareness of the Mesolithic site in its vicinity. One way of doing so is by developing/hosting and advertising Vlasac's web site and placing touristic panels within the Lepenski Vir Ethno Park.

- **Website**

In the digital age, the lack of a website or site specific page on Vlasac damages its visibility and image. In this regard, a section on Vlasac could either be developed within the Lepenski Vir Museum website or using externally hosted platforms. Apart from being the first and sometimes the only point of information for visitors with special needs, a website would offer a platform for community engagement and serve for public education and effective communication. A web presence is also a useful tool in raising awareness of the site amongst heritage authorities and possibly attracting funding for capacity building. An accessible and attractive website would also create the space for possible future digital improvements such as virtual tours, 3D modelling and open source database platforms for research, publications, high quality images or online interaction.

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- **Information panels**

Due to the open-site nature of both Lepenski Vir and Vlasac and shortage of employees and volunteers on the grounds, panels would need to offer general information, be self-explanatory and give directional instructions. The parking and entrances are the two main points where visitors gather and so they provide an excellent opportunity for informing the visitors of what lies ahead (Fig.3):

- Panel at the car park – all visitors arrive at the Lepenski Vir car park. It is the first place where they interact with the site, regroup and make a plan of where to go first and what to see. A general 'route map' panel could be placed here with the whole Lepenski Vir and Vlasac area, outlining what's there to be seen. To provoke the curiosity of visitors, a sign on this panel should bear '1/3' signalling that there are two more panels with further information.
- Panel at the entry point to Lepenski Vir Ethno Park, with '2/3' sign – a perfect location to place a panoramic panel, facing the direction of Vlasac. This panel could contain more detailed information on Vlasac and mention its cultural heritage significance, to show that effort has already been made to protect and preserve the site. This might urge visitors to be interested in further support of funding and research in the area.
- Panel at the docking area, along the riverside, with the '3/3' sign - this panel could include information on the geology, flora and fauna, thus introducing visitors to the natural surroundings, making the connection between cultural and natural environment.

2. Accessibility, site visits and attractions

The personal fulfilment, research, sense of pride and something deemed worth showing foreign friends or visitors, came as the most frequent answers to 'why would it be worth visiting Vlasac' question on the survey (Appendix 1). This was reflected in personal enquiries, together with 'finding out something new' and 'getting to the location by boat', as something unanimously considered an unusual experience.

In contrast with Lepenski Vir which has been relocated up the hill from its original position when the Danube hydroelectric power plant was built, Vlasac has the advantage of being situated in its original prehistoric location. This connection with the past and physicality of the space where people would have a chance to 'walk where ancient people once did', was highlighted as important more than once in personal communication.

However, the reality of managing regular tours and building capacity and facilities to support transport of visitors and their movement on the site, would be a laborious task requiring substantial investment. In that regard, the following would have to be considered:

- establishing and securing a travel route and travel means (boats, petrol, emergency and life-saving equipment;
- safe docking on the stone embankment at the frontage of Vlasac;
- construction of walking platforms and resting benches;
- establishing volunteer riverside wardens.

As for the site's main attraction, an informative, educational, modern interpretation offer with fun content could help provide visitors with a first-hand experience of the heritage elements and a vision of the former life on the site (Fig.6):

- Reconstruction of the Mesolithic house - The theory coined in the 1970s that the mountain called *Treskavac* (*Trescovat* in Romanian) on the

Romanian side of the River Danube, opposite Lepenski Vir and Vlasac, was the inspiration for the Mesolithic dwellers due to its trapezoidal shape, still stands (Srejović 1972; Bonsal 2002; Borić 2016). Hence, if reconstructed and well preserved, this intriguing trapezoidal 'house' could tie together tangible evidence of past human creativity with the natural landscape and the sense of spiritual dimension of the place.

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- Acrylic see-through panels on the walking platforms: The visitors would position themselves in front of the panels and be able to project a cut-in drawing from the panel to the recreated 'Mesolithic landscape'. Acrylic see-through panels could feature:
 - Mesolithic settlement;
 - Every-day activities (sitting around the fire, playing with dogs etc.);
 - Burial customs.

3. Community-based activities

When discussing site related activities, one has to either make a choice or balance between the activities directly related to the site, often education-, experience- or employment-driven, with indirect engagement, that mainly focus on off-site activities and intangible values. Although trends indicate the need for attractions to appeal to the broader public, this may entail increased collaboration with the tourists and set aside the local community (Wanhill 2008, 7). And so, following the research, choices for community-based activities resulted in the combination of the two: majority of correspondents and survey-respondents opt for one site-related activity directed towards children's' involvement, and one off-site related activity, particularly valued within the local community – a fishing event (see below).

Action field

- ***On-site activity: 'Creative Dig-In' weekend***

Families with children aged 6-15 (elementary school in Serbia, grades 1 to 8), would get a chance to entertain themselves for a day, learning how people lived in the past, how to identify archaeological finds or make archaeological illustrations. Although educational, the activities would aim to be creative and interactive in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, encouraging imagination and independent conclusions. The Lepenski Vir Ethno Park could install an environmentally-friendly play area for such activities to take place in. In this way, through play, a more profound connection can be formed with the environment and heritage.

The advantage of this approach is giving an opportunity for adults to get engaged in their children's learning and have an alternative leisure time. This would significantly improve the image of the place and possibly generate re-visits. At the same time, the local community would get engaged with their past and those from afar would get to spend some time in the area, learn local customs, try local food etc. Activities such as these would give a reason to the wide range of stakeholders to recognise the potential of the place, be they interested in education, revenue or conservation.

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The key theme: Prehistory lives within us all.

Supporting storylines:

- How far back can you remember? How long ago was *prehistory*?
- What is a *house*? Have humans always lived in houses?
- *Humans* in prehistory – what did they look like, where did they come from?
- Were *rivers* important in the past? How can we protect them today?
- Have animals always lived with humans? Is it true that domesticated *dogs* lived in Vlasac?

- **Off-site activity: Fishing event**

The everyday life of local fishing communities on the River Danube is buzzing. Specific to the area, a technique called '[bučka](#)' is used to catch catfish, and interestingly, the fishing techniques from the past could have been strikingly similar to those of today (Zivaljevic 2019). The technique requires training, skill, dexterity when manoeuvring the boat, knowledge of the river currents, and the configuration of the river bed, but above all, patience and perseverance. It consists of taping the water with a club called 'bučka', a sort of a wooden or metal splashing stick (Brinkhuizen 1983), making a sound that most likely irritates catfish and encourages them to swim closer to the surface where it is easier to catch it. Following the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, this kind of fishing in Serbia is regulated by law („Službeni glasnik RS" 104/09) and is considered mainly commercial, but allowed as a competitive discipline.

Should the town of Donji Milanovac host some of these fishing tournaments would inevitably attract more people to the sites of Lepenski Vir and Vlasac, where certain events could take place (e.g. prize award ceremony). The community of local fishermen would get a chance to teach more about their lifestyles and fishing techniques. More so, as the organised commercial fishing is advancing, the solitary fishing is becoming hardly the only means of income for individuals in the local community, and this technique, is in danger of becoming forgotten.

Having fishing events organised around these prehistoric sites would contextualise and connect tangible and intangible heritage, offering a solution to preserve and pass on the practice that has been a living part of what is a rich regional heritage. Although organising such events would require other tourism operators and government bodies in the area to work effectively and in correlation, the value of such events would underwrite pure economic benefit of developing local tourism, as it could generate new and returning visitors interested in the wider cultural and natural heritage of the Danube Gorges.

The key storyline: Fishing in prehistory and today.

Supporting themes:

- Fishing as a food resource and leisure activity - prehistory v. today.

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- What is the technique called 'bućka'?
- Everyday lives of local fishing communities.
- Sustainable fishing.

Media

Video presentation

https://liveuclac-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/uczciwe_ucl_ac_uk/EfOHldh9sZZlr49fOcVrMmkB4WwbMLPGjVsQkQ37XsUwtA?e=opPihB

Final results

Time constraints, distance and the outbreak of Covid-19 constrained my , ability to icontract a larger sample of the local community, however, some research was possible via social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter) and emails. Appendix 1 shows the short survey done via SurveyMonkey, ran in an effort to get a better idea of the various aspects of Vlasac's heritage potential. In addition, some information was drawn from state-ran papers (Politika), foreign press, and local newspapers where occasional stories about the site or Lepenski Vir are published. Various academic and scientific publications were consulted for general information and the condition of the site. Lastly, this interpretation plan was partly based upon personal experiences developed over four years of work in the area, between 2007 – 2012 and personal contacts and conversations with former archaeologists and friends. Hence, Vlasac's value was assessed and interpretative planning made as a result of a co-creation process involving the community (respondents, interviewers) press and media, academic research and personal observations. As for the current situation on the site and feasibility of this project, it remains a prospect to collaborate with the management of the Lepenski Vir Museum and the Tourist Organization in Donji Milanovac.

Creating an interpretative planning for a site that only exists in academic papers was an ambitious task. With its rich tangible and intangible heritage, but neither means of secure access nor developed amenities or visitor content, and no media visibility, the interpretation could go in many possible directions. One might think that this is a perfect scenario for creative development in which values of the local population can meet European standards, educational objectives, touristic feasibility and leisure attractiveness. To some extent that is true, but each category bears potential problems. Cultural awareness within the community we are operating in is paramount, as is the economic feasibility. In order for Vlasac to survive beyond a few seasons of excavation, families' weekend events and a fishing tournament, a strategic, long-term plan, based on sustainability, has to be implemented. That plan has to be rooted in the increased business opportunities around the town of Donji Milanovac and Lepenski Vir Museum, as Vlasac itself cannot operate in isolation.

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In that sense, the extenuating circumstance is that there is a constant influx of locals and tourists generated by mandatory school visits to both Donji Milanovac and the Lepenski Vir Museum, and in general, to the National Park with other cultural and natural sites of significance. In considering henceforth how to organise 'life' around the site of Vlasac, success of the attraction would depend on site transparency and local community engagement. In that regard, following solutions have been presented:

1. Raising awareness - Developing educational/tourist-based web site; Placing information panels within the Lepenski Vir grounds/Ethno Park.
2. The logistics of site visits and site content - construction of a dock, walking and resting platforms; re-building of the Mesolithic house and see-through panels with prehistoric content.
3. Local engagement:
 - Involving locals in site management, consultation and staffing support.
 - Engaging families with children in creative site-related activities.
 - Organising a competitive fishing event with the aim to show and preserve the local tradition.

In conclusion...

Whether it is a prehistoric site, a medieval monastery or a modern parkland space, a flexible approach must be adopted with multiple stakeholders and local/regional/national governments, using carefully nuanced local and universal values and 'memory meaning'. Paradoxically, despite the effort to include a myriad of actors in the co-creative process, a heritage professional will in the end have to prioritise and embrace some and discard other aspects of undoubtedly divergent interests. To that end, interpretative planners have to keep the right not to 'fossilise' one image over many possibilities and thus bequest unchangeable heritage narratives. After all, communities are "continuously in motion, rather than fixed entities and descriptions..." (Waterton and Smith 2010) and our aim should be to understand them and help re-tell their ever-changing stories.

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Attachments

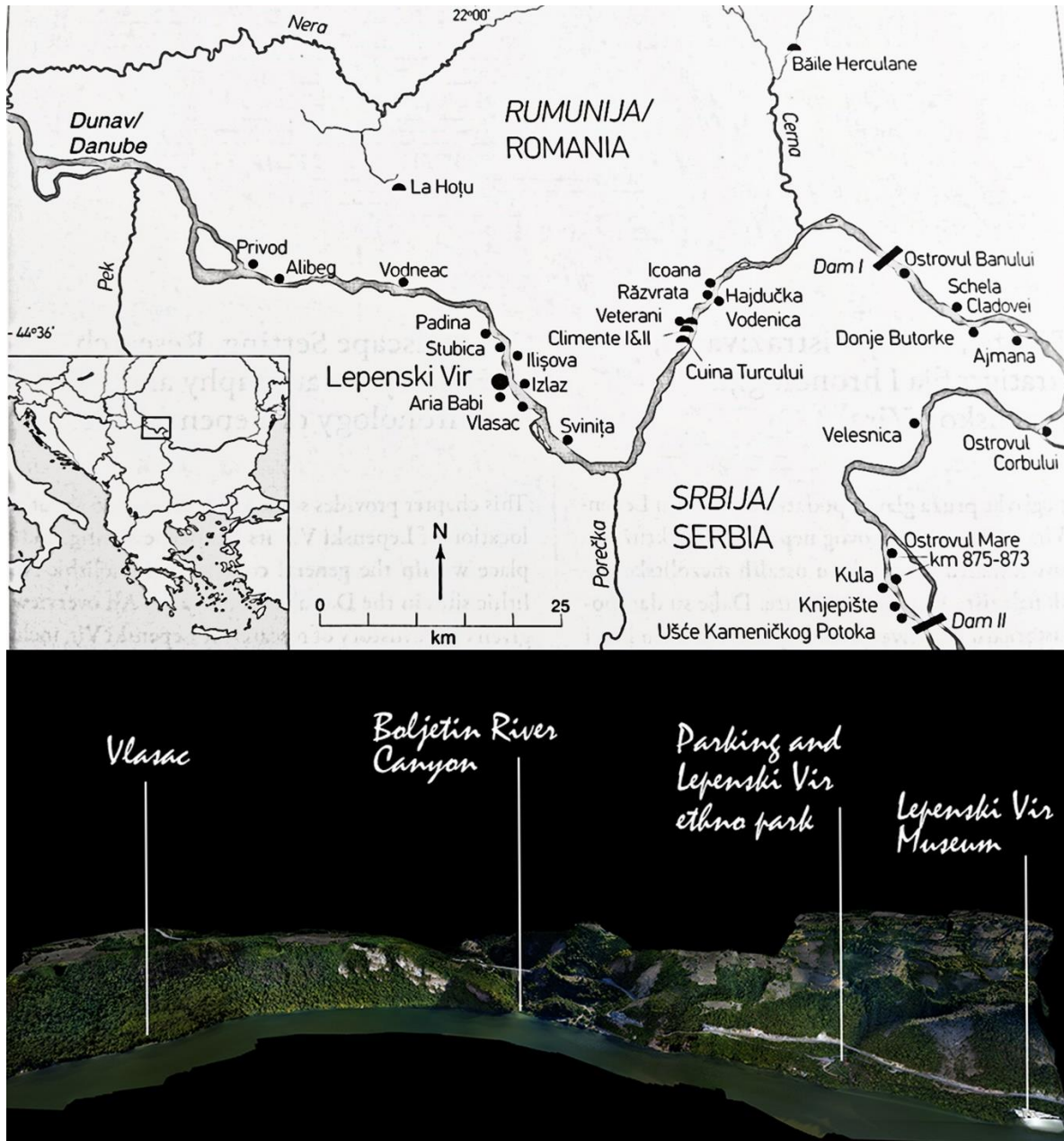


Figure 1: The locations of known Epipalaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic sites in the Danube Gorges (Top: Borić 2016, 2; Bottom: 3D model and snapshot by Karol Wehr).

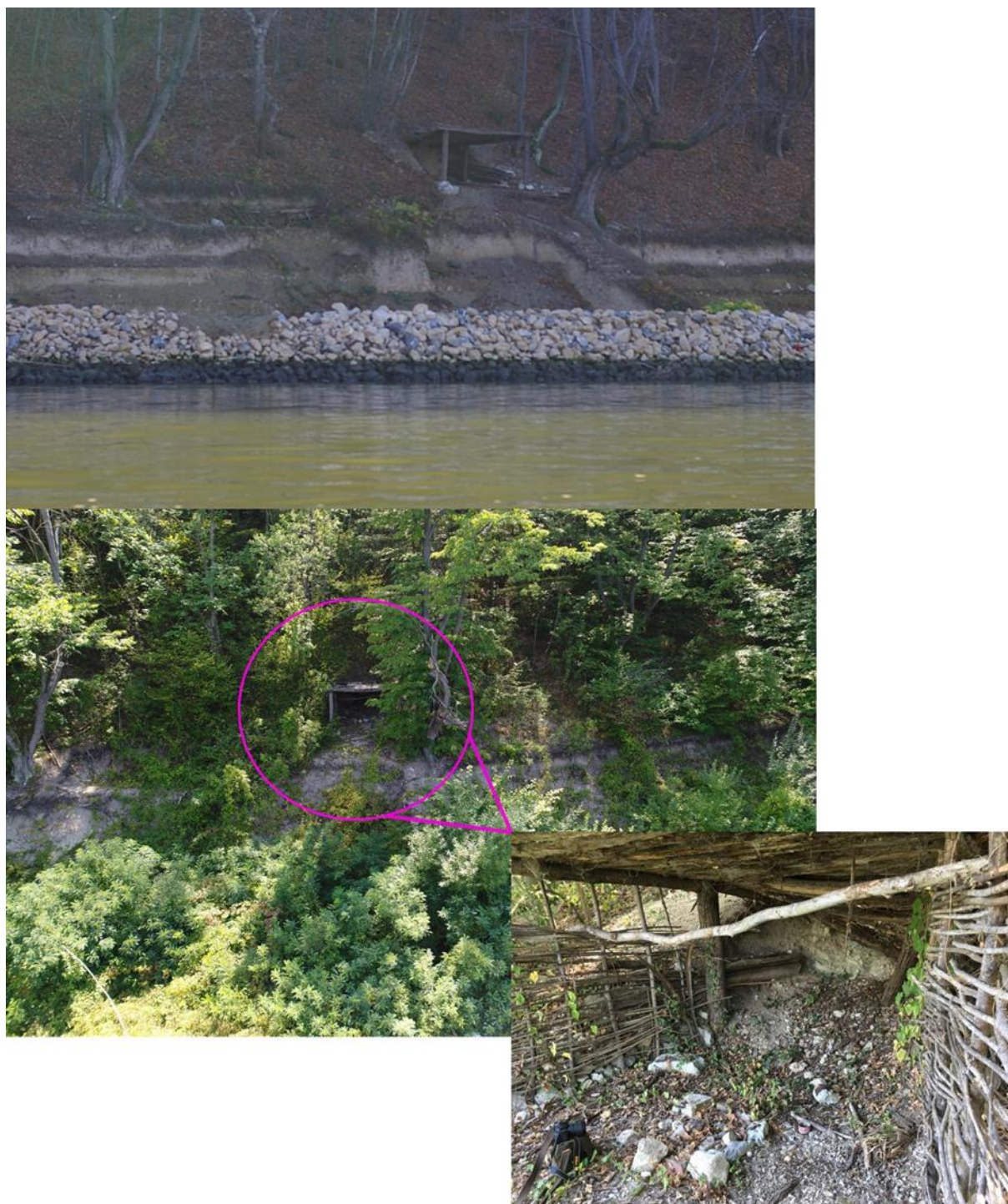


Figure 2: Reconstruction of a Mesolithic house at the site of Vlasac. Top – Reconstruction from 2013. Bottom – Condition of the Mesolithic house in 2017 (Photos: Karol Wehr and Dušan Borić).



Figure 3: Aerial view of the Lepenski Vir Ethno Park (Photo: Karol Wehr).

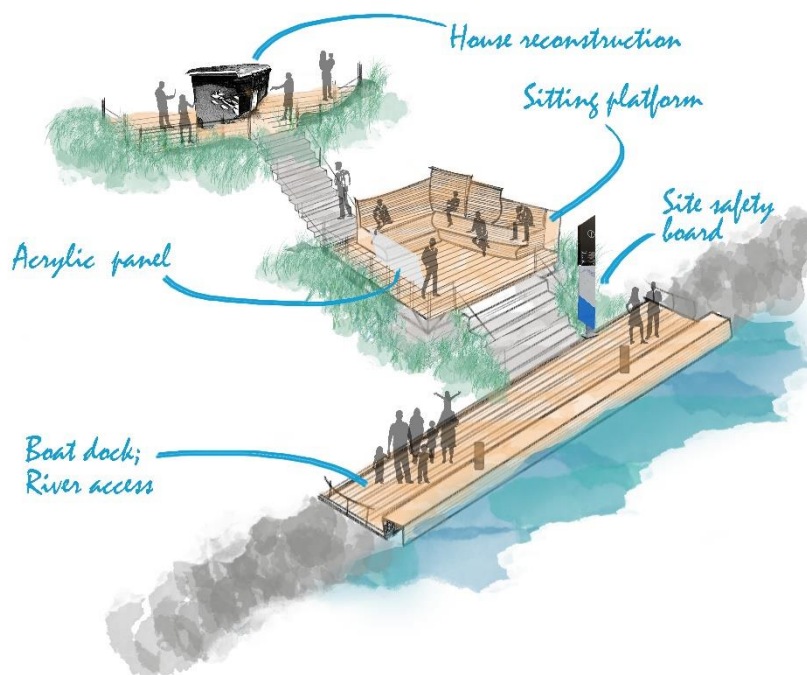


Figure 4: Proposed site construction with boat dock, resting benches, walking platforms and Mesolithic house.



Figure 5: Proposed 'Creative Dig-In' event newsletters, invitations or billboards.

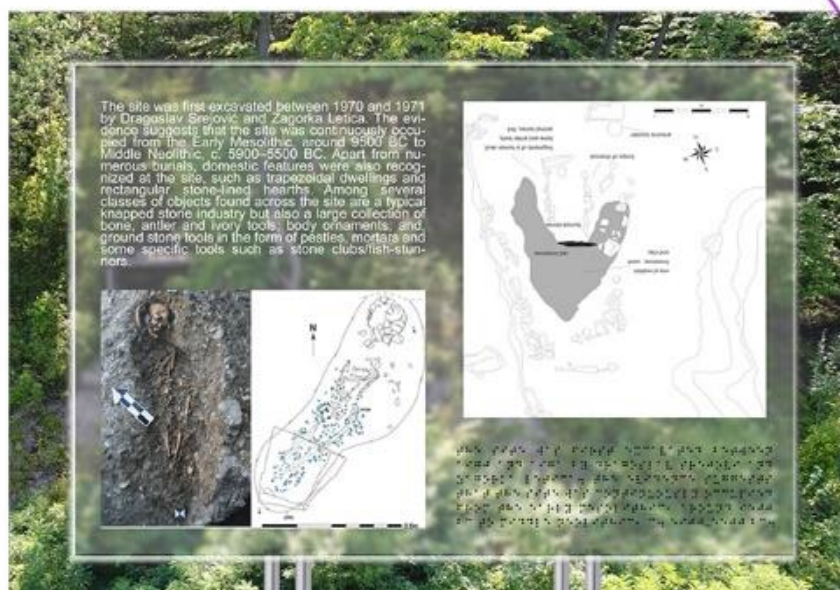
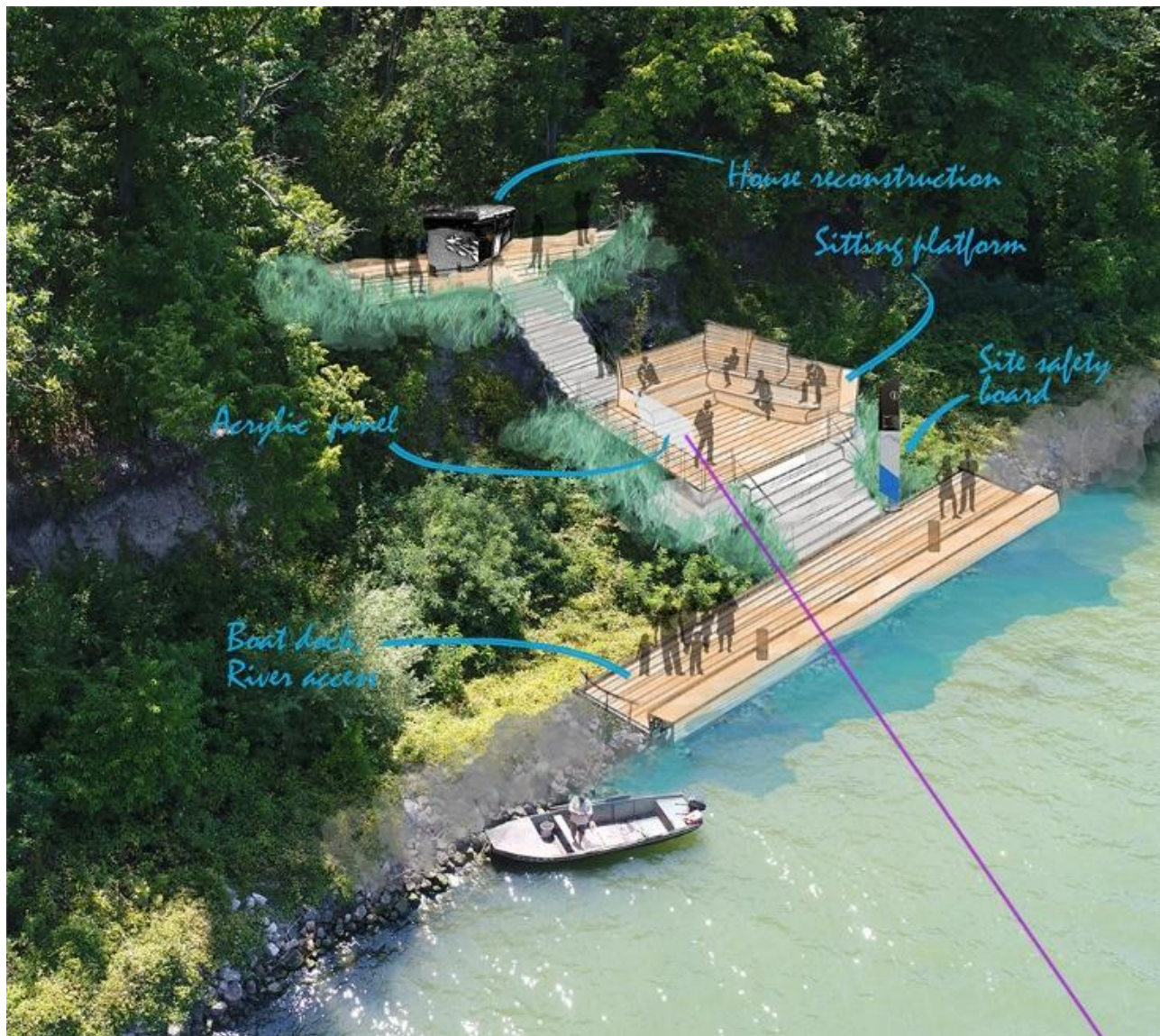


Figure 6: Proposed site reconstruction with an acrylic information panel.