

LOST SPIRIT AND FOUND MEMORY:

_abji grad in the Ljubljansko barje and its surrounding landscape

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Abstract. _abji grad is a low hill, which lies on the southern fringes of the Ljubljansko barje (marshland) in central Slovenia. Several archaeological sites have been recorded in its immediate vicinity. The earliest is dated to the mid 3rd millennium BC. These sites are now under threat from unplanned urbanisation and small-scale development. The threats to the area include the loss of memory of heritage sites, abandonment and degradation of traditional land use and by intense fly tipping of building and other waste materials on the marshland.

The remains of a medieval castle are known on the hill summit, with Bronze Age settlement, revealed by archaeological excavation on its southern slopes in 2007. This in turn has aroused renewed public interest in the surviving local vernacular tradition, particularly the tales and legends, linked to the locations of ancient settlements in the area.

1. The location of _abji grad

_abji grad (Frog Castle) and its immediate environs lie on the southern edge of the Ljubljansko barje (Ljubljana marshes). The latter represent a specific cultural landscape, which has formed through human interventions in space from the Neolithic period to the present day. The greatest changes in the landscape took place in the Roman period and in the period from the end of the 18th century onwards. These were in both cases attempts to drain the marshes with the intention of

creating good quality arable farmland. The first metalled roads were built across the marshes in the Roman period. The course of the river Ljubljana was also canalised, in order to improve conditions for the extraction of the Jurassic limestone from the Podpe_ quarry, used in the building of the Roman town of Emona (Vuga 1982, 23; Gaspari 1998). The reforms of Maria Theresa and her successors in the 18th century envisaged the drainage of the Ljubljansko barje and the creation of a breadbasket for the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire. This drainage process led to the creation of the modern landscape of fields and meadows with drainage ditches and hedges (Melik 1946, 130-133; Zupanc 2004).

The _abji grad rise is the north-easternmost extension of _alostna gora. Access is possible from the western side, via a saddle from the direction of Sodni vrh, as well as from the south, where the land drops off in a relatively steep slope. The north-western, northern and eastern sides of the rise are naturally defended by steep cliffs. It is also surrounded on all three sides by the wetlands and streams of the Ljubljansko barje. The position of the watercourses has been altered considerably by the drainage works from the end of the 18th century onwards. The watercourses flowed or flow into the river Ljubljana. The latter represents an ancient line of communication, along which Jason and the Argonauts sailed, as legend has it. The specific marsh landscape with its mists, still and running water was understood and viewed differently by people in the past. It was seen more as a sacred environment. Thus, the range and number of archaeological artefacts found in the river Ljubljana and the other watercourses in the Ljubljansko barje come as no surprise (see e.g. _inkovec 1996; Gaspari 2006a; 2006 b; 2007).

2. Archaeological research on the site and its immediate environs

The first discovery of archaeological artefacts and pile dwellings in the Ljubljansko barje dates to the period between 1826 and 1875, when the wetland had already been partially drained and the construction of the first modern communication across the lowlands of the Ljubljansko barje, the I_anska road, had begun. This was the first

road in this area after the abandonment of the Roman roads, for all communications had run around the edge of the marsh in the intervening period. The economic exploitation of the peat in the marsh and the construction of the Vienna – Trieste railway also contributed to these archaeological finds (Harej 1986, 14). The fame of the discovery of the pile dwellings led to the organisation of the first Austrian anthropological and prehistoric congress in Ljubljana in 1879.

The wider hinterland of *Abji grad* is rich in archaeological sites, which have largely been discovered by accident during non-archaeological interventions in space, or during field survey and systematic watching briefs on drainage ditch construction. Such work led to the discovery of the *Zalunica* pile dwelling settlement, an area of the marsh edge to the east of *Abji grad*, which was occupied in the late Copper Age (mid 3rd millennium BC) (Harej 1986, 19; Velušek, Ufar 2003). A new settlement type, the probably defended lowland settlement on dry land of the marsh edge appeared in the later part of the middle Bronze Age and in the late Bronze Age (2nd half of the 2nd millennium BC) (Velušek 2005, 77; Gaspari 2006a, 219). The first defended upland settlements, the so-called hillforts, appeared above the *Ljubljansko barje* in the early Iron Age (1st millennium BC). There are two such sites in the area under discussion, sv. Ana and *Alostna gora* (ANSI, 194).

The specialist literature rarely mentions the site of *Abji grad*. The remains of individual fortifications, located some 1100 paces below *Notranje Gorice* and supposedly dated to the Roman period, are mentioned in the commentaries of the military maps from the final third of the 18th century (Rajp, Ficko 1996, 4). These must have included *Abji grad*, which was provisionally given a Roman date by A. Müllner less than a century later (Müllner 1879, 111). Two Roman gravestones that have now been lost were found here (CIL III 10749+p. 2186 and 10750; AIJ 56). The first archaeological research on the site was undertaken on the south-eastern slopes in the spring and summer of 2007 (Nadbath, Rutar 2008). Further work was carried out on the summit of *Abji grad* in autumn 2007. This included the excavation of a piled stone barrow, containing the burial of possibly four individuals, which has a date in the late Copper Age. The close proximity to contemporary pile dwellings leads to the suggestion that the barrow represents a cemetery of the inhabitants of these pile

dwelling. This represents the first case of the discovery of any type of formal burial area from the period of the pile dwellings in the area of the Ljubljansko barje. A dry land settlement was founded on _abji grad in the middle Bronze Age or during the transition from the middle Bronze Age to the late Bronze Age.

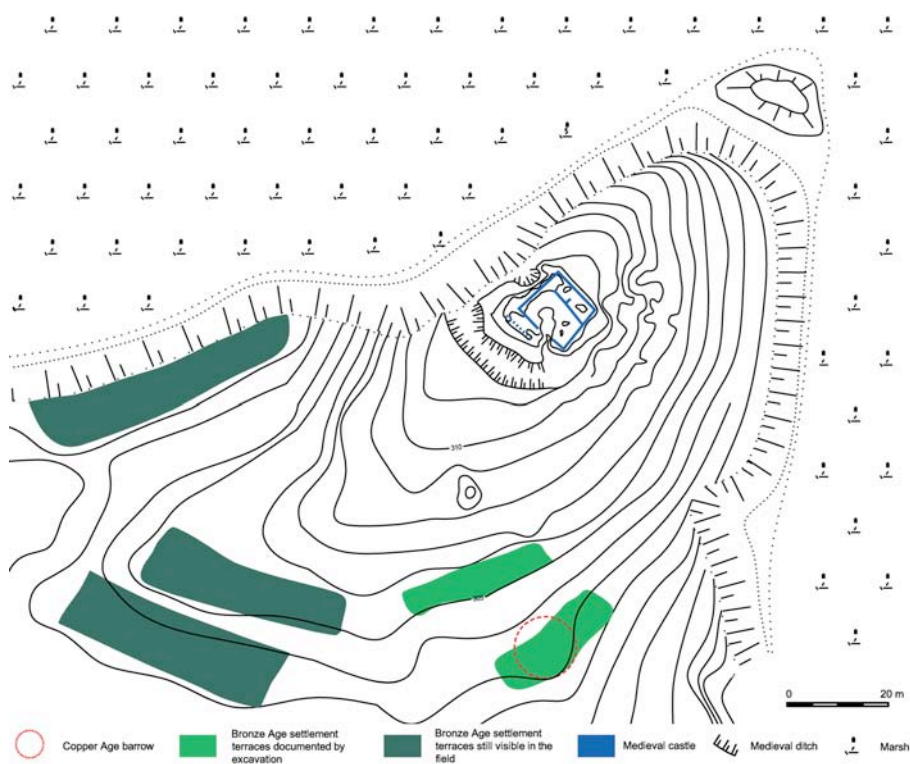


Figure 1. Plan of the site _abji grad (author: G. Rutar).

The settlement terraces, visible on the ground as concentrations of limestone rubble for the consolidation of the terrace edges, run across the south-eastern and south-western slopes of _abji grad. The above mentioned piled stone barrow was damaged at this time and reused for the consolidation of a terrace. Non-destructive survey on the small levelled plateau (15 x 12.5 m) on the summit revealed the remains of a

stone defensive tower castle or keep of sub-rectangular plan (10.5 x 10.5 x 12.5 m) with internal divisions. The easiest approach on the western side of the tower was defended by a 5 m wide defensive ditch with an elliptical plan. The ditch survives to a depth of 0.80 m to 1.50 m. Its course disappears at the south-western corner of the tower.

The initial archaeological field survey recorded a stone wall and a mortar floor. There were no small finds in the trial trenches. The absence of finds might be understood as an indication of short occupation or the removal of most of the material by the inhabitants on the abandonment of the site. The castle keep and defensive ditch were erected on a rise, from which it was possible to maintain visual control over the main communications around the northern edge of the Ljubljansko barje from Ljubljana to Vrhnika, together with the branch route to the Podlipska dolina (Podlipska valley) and traffic on the upper course of the river Ljubljanica. The strategic location of the castle also permitted direct control over the important routes around the southern edge of the marsh (Vrhnika – Podpe_ – Ig – Babna Gorica) and the turnoffs for Cerknica and Lo_ (Truhlar 1975, 100-101).

The castle lay within the area that was held by the Spanheim Dukes of Carinthia in the 12th and 13th centuries (Komac 2006, 112). They founded the Carthusian monastery at Bistra in 1260. Until its dissolution in 1782, this foundation was the largest and most important landowner in the western part of the Ljubljansko barje. The foundation charter precisely defines the boundaries of the estates of the Carthusian monastery (Schumi 1884-1887, 211-213; Mlinari_ 2001, 37, 512-513; Komac 2006, 258). The extreme eastern boundary of these possessions was located in the immediate vicinity of _abji grad. The church of sv. Ana (St. Anne) on the hill was part of the Lordship of Ig at this time. The fief and castle can probably be assigned to one of the Spanheim ministrals. The archive sources mention the Spanheim ministrals Gizilbert von Gurnitz (Krnos) in Carinthia, who held land around Bistra (Kos 1985, 293; Mlinari_ 2001, 71). It is recorded that his son Vulfink and his wife Elizabeta sold a farm near Kamnik pod Krimom to the monastery at Bistra in 1300 (Kos 1975, 251; 1985, 293; Mlinari_ 2001, 71). _abji grad was probably built at the same time as the other Spanheim ministrals castles in the area around Ljubljana, by the 12th century at the latest

(Kos 1994, 125, 129; Komac 2006, 112, 117). It was most probably abandoned by the first half of the 13th century.

3. Vernacular tradition

The ruins of _abji grad are difficult to recognise on the ground at the present time. The proximity of local settlements and the relative ease of access to site have meant that the castle ruins have been quarried for building stone in the past. The majority of the stones from the walls have been used by the local population to build their houses and terrace walls. The stone has been robbed out to the bedrock itself on some parts of the site. The last removal of stone are supposed to have taken place in the 1930s, when the stone was used in the construction of the so-called Kobijeva villa in Podpe_, but may also have continued after the Second World War. The extant building remains are damaged by larger or smaller recent cuts. Gravel was extracted from the weathered bedrock for use in building work.

However, a vernacular oral tradition that shows awareness of the castle has survived through the toponym and the story about “stare gavge” (the old gallows), which were formerly supposed to have stood on the top of the hill called Sodni vrh (Judgement hill). The legend attached to this place relates that the lord of the castle punished his tenants here. The local people also relate a story of the existence of deep caves that contain hidden treasure in the area of the castle. Oral tradition also locates an older castle on the hill of the church of sv. Jo_ef (St. Joseph), to the east of _abji grad (Krajevni leksikon 1937, 355). However, it is highly likely that this legend is unfounded. Fragments of legends about the castle are also hinted at by other stories, which are directly or indirectly concerned with the Carthusian monastery at Bistra. One such story is that of the relics at _alostna gora, which is known in two variants. The church is supposed to preserve the mortal remains of Jucundus, who was supposedly a native of the village of Prevalje pod Krimom at the south-western foot of _alostna gora. He supposedly served in the Papal Guard in Rome in the 15th century. The relics were supposedly brought here from Rome at the behest of the Carthusians. The second version of the same story

states that these are the mortal remains of St. Jucunda (Krajevni leksikon 1937, 355). In spite of the dissolution of the Bistra monastery in 1782, the border between the Lordship of Bistra and the Lordship of Ig has remained vivid in local folk memory up to the present day. It is seen as the boundary between Notranjska (Inner Carniola) to the west and Dolenjska (Lower Carniola) to the east.

4. Modern urbanisation

The immediate environs of Žabji grad were still part of a rural area in the mid 19th century. The land was covered by fields and meadows.

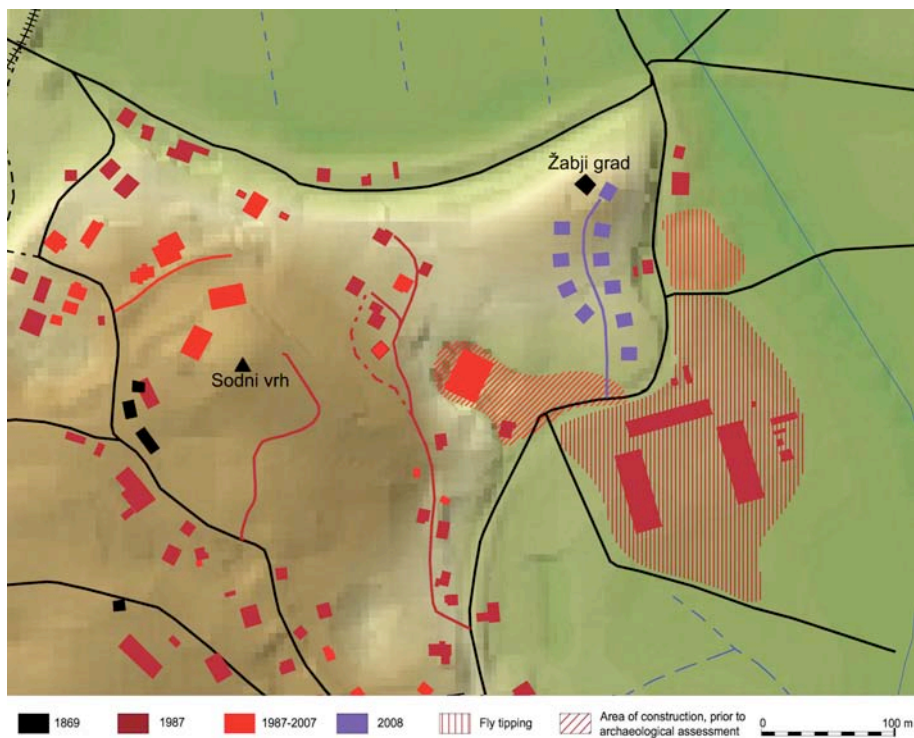


Figure 2. The spread of urbanisation in the immediate vicinity of Žabji grad (author: G. Rutar).

The first farmhouse stood beside the Kamnik - Brezovica road at south-western foot of Sodni vrh. New settlement cores of the village of Kamnik have developed on the southern slopes of Sodni vrh, at Laze and along the Podpe_ - Borovnica road during the 20th century and particularly in the period after the Second World War. The last few decades of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century have seen the unplanned construction of detached houses on the western and north-western slopes of Sodni vrh. New small developments of detached or semi-detached houses are also planned. One such development is now being built on the site of the 2007 protective excavations on the south-eastern slope of _abji grad.

A factory was built on the marsh edge below _abji grad in the immediate vicinity of the Zalo_nica pile dwelling settlement in the 1970s. This now forms the core of an area, which the local authority wants to develop as an industrial zone. As a result of this plan, private investors have begun on their own initiative to dump waste material (gravel, building rubble etc.) on the sensitive wetland without the necessary planning permission. Unplanned dumping to consolidate land and the resulting unplanned construction of new housing developments or detached houses is a particularly acute problem throughout the Ljubljansko barje. This makes it difficult or impossible to undertake non-destructive archaeological research and in many cases results in the complete destruction of archaeological sites. These activities also cause irreparable damage to the cultural landscape and biological diversity of the Ljubljansko barje.

5. Conclusion

The medieval fortress was located on a height, which permitted visual control over the then more important communications, by land and by river. The use of the ruins as a quarry for building stone for the construction of buildings in the area over a long period of time has impoverished the ruins of the site to such an extent that they are barely recognisable in the landscape. This has led to the gradual loss of local knowledge of old stories and legends about _abji grad. The projected construction of a new housing development at the foot of the castle

hill and the demands of the heritage conservation service for the undertaking of archaeological research and excavation in advance of development has reawakened interest in these half-forgotten legends amongst the interested local population. The informants are members of the generation, which was born immediately after the Second World War. These are stories that were told to them at early age by their parents and grandparents, which they later categorised and put to one side as something old-fashioned, unsophisticated and uninteresting. This meant that they sadly did not pass them on to their children. In the period after the Second World War, the new social regime brought new field names and new ways of naming other important features in the landscape, such as crossroads. Thus, the crossroads below _abji grad is now named after the nearby farm. The toponym _abji grad has been forgotten by those who are under forty years of age. It is highly likely that only a fragment of the legends and stories that were once associated with the castle and its immediate environs have been recorded.

The expansion of housing developments that is usually understood as one of the main causes of the destruction of cultural heritage has in this case proved to be mechanism, through which knowledge of the past has been reawakened. The old stories and legends have once again become popular amongst the local population and the recent incomers. Evidence for this can be seen in the new housing development on the southern slope of _abji grad, which is named _abji grad after the site itself.

(Translated by Philip Mason)

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