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CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE LEVANT AND THE BALKANS IN THE LATE MIDDLE PLEISTOCENE

*The discovery of the Serbian-Canadian team was published in the prestigious scientific venue **Journal of Human Evolution***

Press release of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

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BELGRADE – Numerous stone artifacts, remains of Neanderthals and Pleistocene fauna dating from the period 300-240 thousand years ago were found in the caves Velika and Mala Balanica in Sićevo George near Niš. The results of dating and findings from these two caves are now published in detail in the *Journal of Human Evolution*, by an international team of experts from Serbia, USA, France, Spain, Australian and Canada, led by Professors Dušan Mihailović from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade and Prof. Mirjana Roksandic from the University of Winnipeg.

The existence of cultural ties between the Balkans and the Middle East in the distant past has often been debated, especially in the context of westward spread of anatomically modern humans 40 thousand years ago or the spread of agriculture around 8 thousand years ago. Earlier links between the two areas have often been disputed; however, archaeological research at Balanica caves demonstrates that Europe's earliest prehistory cannot be viewed in isolation from the Middle East. The team confirmed that the cultural ties between the two

areas existed more than 240,000 years ago, at a time when people began to use fire regularly and make standardized tools for processing leather and fur. It is in the Middle East, in the Yabrudien culture, that the oldest fires and very specific tools for processing leather and fur (the so-called Quina scrapers) were discovered. Identical tools and the combustion feature similar to those found in the Qesem cave in Israel were discovered recently in Balanica, and date back to the period when specialized tools of this type have not yet been used in other parts of Europe. This indicates that 300-240 thousand years ago there was a cultural connection between the Balkans, Anatolia and the Middle East. It is still not possible to say with certainty whether the spread of cultural innovations was due to population movements or to cultural transmission from the Middle East and who were the bearer of these changes (Neanderthals or anatomically modern humans). It is certain, however, that these innovations later led to the final shaping of cultural patterns characteristic of the Middle Paleolithic - a period that represents one of the major turning points in the early history of the humankind.

Archaeological excavations of the caves near Niš (Balanica, Pešturina) are undertaken in cooperation between the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and the University of Winnipeg, and financed by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia.

The Journal of Human Evolution is one of the leading academic journals in the field of human evolution. The published paper can be found at

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047248421001901>

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