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View over the Balkan Peninsula
Поглед над Балканите

THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: URBAN MEMORY, IMPERIAL ECHOES, AND THE MICROGEOGRAPHY OF FEAR IN PREWAR BELGRADE

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Abstract. This article offers a microhistorical reading of Vladislav Maevsky's 1913 travel sketch of Belgrade, focusing on his descent into the Roman well at Kalemegdan Fortress. By analyzing this episode as an affective and symbolic site, the study reveals how subterranean spaces serve as repositories of imperial memory, historical anxiety, and national identity. Drawing on methodologies from urban history and memory studies, the article situates the well as a metaphor for Serbia's layered temporalities and contested sovereignties on the eve of the First World War. It further interprets Maevsky's encounters with museums, monuments, and civic spaces as part of a broader urban effort to stage national identity through selective remembrance. This essay demonstrates how even minor urban forms such as wells, portraits, or stairwells can function as dense sites of historical meaning and advocates for further microhistorical approaches to the urban landscapes of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.[1]

Keywords: microhistory; urban memory; Serbian nationalism; subterranean architecture; imperial borderlands

Introduction

In the early autumn of 1913, Russian traveler Vladislav Maevsky arrived in Belgrade, drawn not only by personal curiosity but by the wider geopolitical currents sweeping the Balkans. His published travel sketch, *Белград (Путевые наброски)*, printed in *Военный сборник*, reflects an ambivalent mixture of admiration and unease toward Serbia's capital. It offers much more than passing impressions, constructing a sensory cartography of urban life, one punctuated by moments of stillness, anxiety, and reflection. Amid his impressions of cafés, tramways, and officers in garish uniforms, one scene stands apart for its symbolic density: his descent into the Roman well at Kalemegdan.[2] The passage is vivid, prolonged, and laden with metaphor. Here, the city's vertical depth becomes a script for imperial memory, fear, and the psychic conditions of urban historical consciousness.

Kalemegdan, perched above the confluence of the Sava and Danube, is more than a fortress. It is, as scholars have shown, a symbolic complex encoding layers of power, conquest, and reinvention. Kalemegdan "exists as both a relic of the Ottoman past as well as a cultural site wherein government issued statues and monuments champion the Serbian national heroes, politicians, and intellectual elites who ushered in the modern Serbian state and brought an end to Ottoman sovereignty", writes Stull, linking it directly to Serbia's collective identity and memory practices, especially in the wake of Ottoman withdrawal and Austro-Hungarian threats (Stull 2021). The Roman Well, a deep stone well within the fortress grounds, provides Maevsky with the occasion for a descent into something more than literal darkness. He writes: "How many people perished during its construction!" ("Сколько людей погибло при его постройке!"), before imagining the bones that might still lie at its bottom (Maevsky 1913, p.165). The well, described as Roman in origin (its Austrian origins unknown to the visitor) and never repaired, becomes for him a death-haunted cylinder of history, so to speak.

This article reads Maevsky's well descent as a microhistorical episode in which architecture and anxiety intersect. Borrowing from the methodology pioneered by Carlo Ginzburg and further refined by Giovanni Levi, the study treats the well not simply as a physical structure but as a symbolic aperture into early 20th-century urban consciousness (Ginzburg 2013). Microhistory allows a focused, contextualized reading of Maevsky's travelogue that privileges the experiential and the marginal; qualities often elided in grander narratives of empire, war, modernization. In the narrowing stairwell and failing lamplight, we find a metaphor for a larger epistemic vertigo: *the loss of imperial certainty* on the eve of the First World War.

Urban history complements this approach by grounding the analysis in the city's material and spatial realities. Kalemegdan has been interpreted as a site of palimpsestic symbolism, where "city identity and memory" become entangled with physical form (Džalto 2014, p. 49). Mijatović points out that the fortress's layered function; as battlefield, prison, museum, and park, and renders it a physical condensation of Serbia's historical trajectory (Mijatović 2014). Within that complex, the Roman Well functions as an "invisible" monument, dark and below ground, yet densely inscribed in the emotional and narrative imaginaries of those who encounter it.

Belgrade in 1913 was a city strained by anticipation. The Balkan Wars had only just concluded; Austro-Hungarian forces gathered across the river in Zemun; and the memory of Ottoman rule remained tangible in architectural traces. Maevsky's unease is clear. He reflects on the possibility of the well collapsing above him. He fears running out of light. He imagines spectral presences ascending the staircase. "It seems as though someone unseen is walking toward us," he wrote ("Кажется, будто кто-то незримый идет нам навстречу") (Maevsky 1913, p. 165). This is not merely atmospheric embellishment. Rather, it reveals how urban infrastructure

could become a theatre for imperial dread. The Roman Well becomes not only a spatial artefact but a moral one, summoning an echo of imperial collapse even as the traveller descends to inspect it.

Travel literature, particularly in border zones like Belgrade, frequently registers more than topography. As Norris has noted, foreign observers often filter the city through allegory, metaphor, and civilizational anxiety, turning its landmarks into narrative proxies for broader political tensions (Norris 2008). Maevsky's well scene fits this pattern. In his eyes, the well is a reservoir of untold violence and submerged history. Yet it is also, paradoxically, commodified. A sign outside indicates the cost of entry (20 *para*) and a uniformed guide supplies lanterns to escort guests through the gloom.[2] Thus, the descent becomes both pilgrimage and performance, a touristic ritual of descent into Balkan history.

In this article, I argue that Maevsky's visit to the Roman Bunar represents a paradigmatic site of imperial-era urban anxiety. His narrative, dense with spatial detail and existential speculation, captures the convergence of memory, ruin, and performance in Belgrade's urban imaginary. The well reflects the city's past; it also becomes a dark mirror of its uncertain future.

By situating this episode within both microhistorical and urbanist frameworks, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how peripheral urban features such as wells, staircases, and foundations carry symbolic weight. It argues that cities such as Belgrade, located at the juncture of empires and ideologies, are best approached through the details most likely to be missed. In Maevsky's writing, the descent into stone becomes a descent into history itself.

I. The Urban Text as Source

To treat Vladislav Maevsky's 1913 sketch merely as travel literature is to miss its deeper function. It is not a guidebook, nor is it a typical feuilleton. Rather, it is a hybrid genre that oscillates between personal narrative and political commentary, laced with architectural observation. What Maevsky offers is an experiential mapping of Belgrade as seen through the eyes of a Russian imperial observer, a figure simultaneously sympathetic to his Slavic hosts and acutely aware of their infrastructural and cultural deficiencies. This chapter reads his sketch as a historical source: a reflective, fragmentary text shaped by its geopolitical moment and imbued with an implicit civilizational hierarchy.

Travel writing in the early twentieth century was rarely neutral. Scholars have long emphasized its role in the production of comparative judgments, between East and West, modern and backward, center and periphery. Maevsky arrives in Belgrade having crossed from Bulgaria, and his sense of movement is structured by contrast. From the moment he disembarks, he begins to catalogue the city's failings. The streets are "poorly paved and dirty" ("плохо вымощены и грязны"); the tramcars are "filthy and uncomfortable" ("грязны и неудобны"); the

populace appears sleepy, the architecture undistinguished (Maevsky 1913, p. 162). Such details, while mundane in isolation, accumulate into a portrait of Belgrade as incomplete, striving but undeveloped: a city behind its time.

Maevsky's cultural positioning is central here. As a Russian, he carries both imperial expectation and Slavic solidarity. He remarks on the linguistic inadequacy of his Serbian hosts, lamenting that "they understand Russian very poorly, but speak German fluently" ("по-русски понимают очень плохо, а по-немецки – свободно") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). The irony is not lost on him. He recounts, with biting sarcasm, how a Pan-Slavic congress ended with participants conversing in German, the only mutually intelligible language. This anecdote is not offered neutrally. It reveals Maevsky's growing suspicion of rhetorical Slavic unity when confronted with the practical realities of empire, class, and culture.

That suspicion bleeds into his urban observations. When he describes his hotel (the "Hotel de Paris"), he notes with frustration that the bell system is labelled in Russian letters but would require deciphering if printed in the local Serbian script. The Slavic world, he implies, has yet to consolidate its cultural infrastructure, remaining reliant on the linguistic tools of empire, whether Germanic bureaucracy or French cosmopolitanism. Norris identifies this as a persistent theme in travel writing about Belgrade during the late Ottoman and early Yugoslav periods: observers frequently remarked on the hybridity of the city's semiotics (its street signs, menus, and inscriptions, namely) treating them as evidence of both disorder and cross-cultural tension (Norris 2008).

Yet Maevsky is not merely a critic. There is evident affection in his wanderings, particularly as he surveys the gardens and parks that ring the city. His prose slows as he describes *Топчидер* and *Кошутняк*, noting the "ancient trees" ("вековые деревья") and the air "marvelous" ("дивный") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). His disappointment lies in the neglect of decay. He mourns that no one tends to these spaces. The statues are blackened, the paths overgrown. His lament is both aesthetic as well as political – a city that cannot care for its monuments is, by implication, a city unprepared for sovereignty.

And truly, Maevsky's text functions as a mirror of empire; not the Habsburg or Ottoman empires directly, but of Russia's own ambivalent desire to shape and protect its Slavic neighbors. He remains attuned to Serbian heroism, praising their military victories and lionizing their martyrs. At the same time, he cannot help but critique their lack of infrastructure, their superficial modernity, their dependence on foreign goods and languages. This contradiction – between admiration and frustration – is the emotional core of the sketch.

That contradiction is most evident in his remarks on Belgrade's architectural modernity. He notes the few "tall buildings over four stories" ("большие дома, высотой более четырех этажей") with near-auditorial precision, naming them in sequence: the palace (Новый Конак), the Hotel Moskva, the officers' casino,

the credit bank. Yet even this modernization feels performative to him. The city's economy, he remarks, is still saturated with Austro-Hungarian imports, and its culinary refinement must be ordered from Budapest or Fiume (Maevsky 1913, p. 166). There is, again, a sense of inauthenticity. Belgrade mimics but does not yet belong to the modern urban world.

This concern with mimicry echoes the scholarship of Spasić and Backović, who argue that Belgrade's urban identity in the early twentieth century was shaped by a paradox: the simultaneous desire for Western recognition and the rejection of Western domination (Spasić and Backović 2020). The result was a kind of "perfect chaos, imperfect balance": a city where the signs of modernity often outpaced their material supports. Maevsky, attuned to this, reads the city's ambition through its absences. His fixation on mud, unfinished pavements, and erratic tram service reflects not mere irritation, but a broader anxiety about whether the symbolic capital of the Balkans is prepared for what history is about to demand of it.

Maevsky's mode of writing, too, must be noted. His sketch resists narrative cohesion. It reads more like a stitched series of notations, structured not chronologically but atmospherically. He moves from city streets to hotel menus to political digressions without transition. This rhetorical structure mimics the city itself, at least as he experiences it: uneven, fragmented, charged with historical potential but lacking formal coherence. In this sense, Maevsky's sketch serves not only as a source on Belgrade, but as a map of imperial perception: how the empire looks at the periphery and sees both possibility and failure.

In other words, Maevsky's text is diagnostic. It measures a city against an imagined standard of modern urbanity and finds it wanting. Yet it also reveals the instability of that standard. Belgrade, in his eyes, is both backward and valiant, provincial and significant. In its parks and its pavement, in its officers and its old wells, it embodies the contradictions of a Slavic modernity still in the making.

II. Kalemegdan and the Spatial Palimpsest of Empire

In Maevsky's account, Kalemegdan appears not just as a place but as a layered structure of meaning. It is where the past becomes visible in stone, where space itself carries the weight of accumulated conquests. The fortress, perched high above the confluence of the Sava and Danube, crowns Belgrade's symbolic geography. To ascend to it (or, in Maevsky's case, to descend beneath it) is to step into a terrain where history is sedimented. Kalemegdan does not simply reflect the city's past; it orchestrates it, compressing Roman, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Serbian claims into a single vantage.

The word *Kalemegdan* itself bears imperial echo. A Turkish compound derived from *kale* (fortress) and *meydan* (field or square), it names a place where rule has historically been asserted in military terms. Its subsequent conversion into a public park, initiated during the latter half of the nineteenth century and furthered under

Serbian administration, represented a civic reinterpretation of former imperial ground.[3] As Mijatović explains, the transformation of Kalemegdan into an urban park was part of a broader campaign to construct national identity, whereby former symbols of occupation were repurposed as emblems of sovereignty and urban progress (Mijatović 2014). This transition from fortress to park did not efface the site's militarism; it displaced and re-narrated it.

Maevsky enters Kalemegdan in the late afternoon, just as the gates open to visitors. He crosses the moat, notes the sequence of gates and courtyards, and finds himself on a large parade ground, deserted but for a few figures. He is drawn not to the outer walls or the city vista (though both are present) but to what lies below. The Roman Well is introduced as a mystery and a rumour. Maevsky recounts that he had heard "a mass of various legends" ("массу всевозможных легенд") about it before even seeing it, and upon reaching the site, his anticipation is matched by a performative tourism structure: entry is granted, and a soldier lights stearin lanterns to guide visitors down into the spiral (Maevsky 1913, p. 164).

The descent, literal and symbolic, mirrors the fortress's own historical depth. Bojana Džalto, writing on urban memory politics, argues that Kalemegdan functions as a "symbol of life within the city," where the remains of Roman fortifications, Ottoman bastions, and nationalist monuments cohabit in uneasy proximity (Džalto 2014, p. 52). Velmar-Janković writes that it is "a temple of victory, a temple of mankind and its temporality, a temple of man and his works, a temple of man and his glory" (Velmar-Janković 1991, p. 16). The well, situated in the lower levels of this layered space, makes that simultaneity felt in spatial terms. Each step downward, as Maevsky experiences it, is a movement not only into darkness but into time.

Yet Kalemegdan's symbolic function is panoramic as much as it is vertical. As Maevsky later observes from the southern edge of the fortress, the view offers a commanding sweep of the Danube and the Hungarian city of Zemun across the river. The placement of the fortress at the edge of Serbia and Austria-Hungary lends it a dual valence: it is a bulwark and a lookout, a place to remember past sieges and anticipate future ones. Maevsky notes the visibility of Austro-Hungarian troop movements and the nervous energy among Belgrade's administrators, who, he claims, were preparing to retreat to Niš should war erupt (Maevsky 1913, p. 162). The urban vantage becomes a strategic metaphor: Belgrade looking out and backward at once. Kalemegdan's role in this period should be understood within the politics of memory that accompanied Serbia's nation-building efforts. As scholars have argued, the early-20th-century city constructed its identity through the symbolic repurposing of imperial traces. Kalemegdan exemplified this process. The fortress's ruins were not demolished. The museum within it was stocked with relics from Serbia's wars of independence. And the well, far from being sealed or filled, was transformed into a tourist spectacle in which visitors might confront Serbia's antiquity, its suffering, and its survival (Spasić and Backović 2020).

Maevsky's reflections on the Roman Well show how this civic staging affected foreign visitors. He reads the well not only as a relic but as a metaphor for historical suppression and political threat. After dropping a large stone into its depths, he waits, counting aloud, until the sound of water confirms its reach: "one… two… three… four… five… six – a deep echo of a splash" ("раз... два... три... четыре... пять... шесть – гулкое эхо плеска...") (Maevsky 1913, p. 165). The delay between action and response captures, almost too perfectly, the lag of imperial time in the Balkans; the sense that history lies buried, yet capable of sudden reverberation.

In treating Kalemegdan as an urban palimpsest, Maevsky's narrative exposes the uneven texture of Belgrade's modernity. The well's visibility from street level is minimal; one must know where to look, know what to ask, and be willing to descend. In this sense, it mirrors the city's own structure; its imperial past half-visible, half-concealed beneath parks and promenades, activated only through affective gestures. Scholars such as Norris note that sites like Kalemegdan operated as condensed spaces of historical memory, where tourists, officers, and urban planners collided with legacies too powerful to fully erase (Norris 2008). Maevsky, with his soldier's instincts and poet's anxiety, offers a witness to that collision.

III. Descent into History – The Well as Affective and Temporal Device

If Kalemegdan Fortress offered Maevsky a commanding platform from which to view Belgrade's geopolitical tensions, the Roman Well offered something stranger, darker, and more psychologically charged. The shift from surface to substructure (from panoramic to claustrophobic) is critical to understanding the symbolic power of the episode. The descent Maevsky undertakes is not only into stone and water but into time, fear, and a submerged imperial history. Through careful description and a narrative deceleration, Maevsky transforms a tourist visit into a confrontation with the uncanny. His experience dramatizes how underground space becomes a site where architecture and affect, history and dread, coalesce.

The well is introduced with a certain mythic tone. Maevsky had already heard "a mass of various legends" about it before arriving, and his anticipation is structured not by factual knowledge but by rumour and imagination. Upon reaching the entrance, he notes a printed sign in three languages (Serbian, German, and French) inviting visitors to pay for a guided descent. This gesture toward accessibility was not banal. It markedthe well as a curated relic, embedded within a tourism economy but steeped in symbolic excess. It existed to be descended, yes, but also to be interpreted and retold (Maevsky 1913, p. 164).

Subterranean architecture has long served as a spatial metaphor in urban history and memory studies. Scholars such as Merrill and Golańska emphasize that underground spaces often operate as mnemonic chambers, where affect, sensorium, and temporality intersect. Merrill describes such spaces as "volumetric memory devices," in which the act of descent enacts emotional and historical

layering (Merrill 2019). Golańska notes that "dark memorials" create synesthetic engagements; experiences in which sound, texture, temperature, and lightlessness generate reflection not accessible on the surface (Golańska 2915). Maevsky's account reflects precisely this mode of sensuous mnemonic entry.

His descent begins in relative confidence. A soldier-guide hands him a lantern, and another follows behind. They step into the stone aperture and begin spiralling downward. At first, the air is merely cooler. The light dims, despite the lanterns. He notices water collecting on the steps. The walls, built partly of large stones and partly of brick, are wet to the touch. He stops often; he does not observe, but stops to listen, to breathe. One window opens to "thick, black mist", "густая, чёрная мгла" (Maevsky 1913, p. 165). These are invocations of mood. The space induces a sensory reprogramming; time elongates, the body reacts, and thought begins to spiral like the staircase itself.

What Maevsky confronts is architecture as a spatial metaphor of historical entrapment. The well resists temporality. It is deep, cold, unchanged. This durability becomes uncanny. Rather than reassuring, it suggests a kind of historical paralysis. The well cannot be updated as it is not part of modernity. It sits outside of progress, a material residue of ancient conquest and medieval violence. It becomes, in this sense, a vessel of imperial sediment, layered in stone and narrative.

Maevsky imbues the well with imagined violence. He speculates that "many people died during its construction" ("много людей погибло при его постройке"), and that in later centuries it was used as a site of execution or secret burial. These claims are unsupported by archival evidence, but their lack of factuality is not the point. What matters is their narrative function. The well must contain bones. It must be haunted. That haunting, in turn, becomes a projection of Maevsky's own historical anxiety. The year is 1913. War looms. The Habsburg presence across the river in Zemun feels less metaphorical than real. The well, then, becomes a chamber in which future conflict is rehearsed through the myths of past atrocity.

This connection between subterranean architecture and historical dread is well attested in theory. Linda Boyer has argued that underground urban spaces function as the city's unconscious: zones in which repressed historical experiences accumulate and reappear (Boyer 1994). Maevsky's descent mirrors this process. The further he goes, the less articulate he becomes. His syntax begins to fracture. He ceases to count the steps. He imagines an invisible figure ascending toward him. "It seems as though someone unseen is walking toward us" ("Кажется, будто кто-то незримый идёт нам навстречу") (Maevsky 1913, p. 164). The architecture triggers a form of panic, but it is a panic nested in history. What frightens Maevsky is not structural failure, but mnemonic overload; the idea that this space has seen too much, and may yet reveal more than he can bear.

With hearing of the echo (having dropped a stone into the well), the well functions as an acoustic ruin; a space where sound triggers temporal collapse, folding past

into present through reverberation (see: Edensor 2022). The experience becomes performative. Maevsky has not discovered anything new, but he has reactivated a space that had long been dormant. This activation, framed by fear, wonder, and narrative elaboration, makes the well more than a ruin. It becomes an active agent in the historical imagination, a deep stage on which imperial time is reenacted.

Emerging from the descent, Maevsky is subdued. He notes with surprise the visibility of the well's upper rim (barely "два аршина" above ground) but makes no complaint about signage or preservation. Instead, he expresses admiration. "With deep reverence for this gigantic structure, I departed" ("С глубоким почтением к этому гигантскому сооружению я удалялся") (Maevsky 1913, p. 165). The tone is markedly different from the rest of his Belgrade observations. He has complained about tramcars, hotel menus, and street dust. But the well, for all its darkness, leaves him awed. It is, paradoxically, the only part of the city he sees as whole.

That wholeness comes from sedimentation. The well is heavy with time, layered with stories, resistant to erasure. In its descent and its echo, Maevsky experiences not linear history but Balkan temporality: thick, recursive, vertical, imbued with history that he himself not entirely knows. As a Russian in Serbia, he senses kinship and distance. As a traveller, he seeks knowledge but finds myth. The well accommodates both. It is a space of unknowability: a material embodiment of what could be called an "urban palimpsest," with "the process of creating and reconstructing identity, transmitting institutionalized heritage of a society and thus reconstructing the past in the present" (Mijatović 2014, p. 93). This proximity is what gives the Roman Well its symbolic power. In it, Roman conquest meets Ottoman cruelty, which meets Serbian survival, which then meets Russian projection. The walls contain no inscriptions. There are no plaques. But the meanings accumulate nonetheless. Maevsky's descent (like his narrative) is structured by return. Each loop of the spiral, each echo of the splash, re-inscribes the past onto the present.

By placing the well at the emotional and narrative centre of his sketch, Maevsky reveals the central thesis of his urban experience: that cities speak not through grandeur, but through depth. What makes Belgrade powerful is its capacity to hold memory within stone. The well becomes a negative monument (one without a statue or inscription) whose emptiness makes it generative. It invites projection, speculation, reverence, and fear. In its silence, it speaks.

IV. Museum, Memory, and the Urban Stage of Nationalism

Maevsky's encounter with Belgrade's National Museum, modest in scale but dense in symbolic import, marks the narrative's final turn inward; from imperial fears beneath the city to the curation of national memory above it. This upper layer of the urban palimpsest is architectural as much as it is ideological. In his depiction of portraits, relics, and conversations with a museum custodian, Maevsky captures the mechanisms through which Serbia, in the years before the Great War, articu-

lated a selective history to itself and to outsiders. This space, though far from the grandeur of Vienna or St. Petersburg, operates as a condensed theatre of national identity, displaying a particular version of Serbia's past at a moment when sovereignty was still precarious and under negotiation.

The very entrance to the museum is telling: "The National Museum is located next to the university, in two simple stone two-story buildings" ("Народный музей помещается рядом с университетом, в двух простых каменных двухэтажных домах") (Maevsky 1913, p. 159). This spatial modesty belies the ideological ambition of the displays within. Maevsky first encounters the archaeological section, with its "statues, vases, utensils, tools, coins" ("Статуи, вазы, утварь, инструменты, монеты") (Maevsky 1913, p. 159), a nod to the Roman and Byzantine legacies that Belgrade could claim as its own. These objects, though labelled as antiquities, are part of a broader narrative of continuity and survival, vital to national self-fashioning. The upper floor contains paintings, "copies of old masters and originals by Serbian painters" ("в верхнем этаже – картины: копии старых мастеров и оригиналы сербских художников") (Maevsky 1913, p. 159), but more significantly, works that "immortalize episodes of Turkish rule and the struggle for liberation" ("На многих картинах увековечены эпизоды турецкого владычества и борьбы за освобождение") (Maevsky 1913, p. 159). The shift from archaeology to visual nationalism, from stone fragments to romanticized battles, reflects what Sharon Macdonald describes as the "identity work" of museums: how institutions display as well as produce collective memory through selective emphasis and omission (MacDonald 2013).

What stands out most vividly in this section of Maevsky's account, however, is his interaction with a museum guard concerning the portraits of Serbian royalty. The Russian notes the absence of certain figures: "There were no portraits of Milan, Alexander, or Draga" ("Не видно было только Милана, Александра и Драги") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). On inquiring why, he receives a response not merely dismissive but almost ritualistic in its performative disdain: "the custodian spat and swore," before reluctantly retrieving the hidden images from a storeroom ("На мой вопрос, почему же их нет, надзиратель заплевал и выругался.") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). The act of hiding and revealing these portraits enacts in miniature what Aleida Assmann calls the distinction between "canon and archive" in cultural memory; the museum displays what it wishes to remember and conceals what it chooses to forget, yet the archive remains, waiting to be reaccessed when memory regimes change (Assmann 2011). These selective silences are not neutral. The exclusion of Milan Obrenović, Alexander, and Queen Draga reflects the ideological line drawn between legitimate and illegitimate sovereignty, heroism and betrayal. In the turbulent aftermath of the 1903 coup, which saw the assassination of Alexander and Draga and the ascendancy of the rival Karađorđević dynasty, institutions like the National Museum became instruments in stabilising a new narrative of

dynastic legitimacy.[3] As scholars of Balkan nationalism have noted, the symbolic ordering of royal iconography in public space – whether in statues, portraits, street names, or whatever is deemed relevant – plays a crucial role in shaping collective memory and projecting state authority (Asavei 2018).

Maevsky's own reaction oscillates between bemused ethnographic curiosity and latent political commentary. His guide, having verified that he is "truly a Slav," explains an allegorical painting: a mother weeping over her drowned child ("Надзиратель музея, удостоверившись, что я – действительно славянин") (Maevsky 1913, p. 159), as "the mother is Slavdom; the child – Bosnia and Herzegovina, which fell into Austrian hands," ("Мать–славянство; дитя – Босния и Герцеговина, попавшие в австрийские руки") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). The interpretation is thick with the anxieties of 1908, when the Austro-Hungarian annexation of these provinces inflamed pan-Slavic sentiment and alarmed both Serbia and its Russian patron. That Maevsky is offered this allegory unprompted suggests a shared semiotic grammar between Slavic visitors and local curators; a form of transnational nationalism communicated through museum objects.

This episode underscores what Maria Popović and Nadine Jagdhuhn have described as the transformation of Serbian museums in the post-Ottoman, pre-Yugoslav period: from imperial repositories into national laboratories, where history was distilled into moral exempla and national trauma repackaged as sacrifice (Popović 2024). The curatorial choices within the Belgrade museum mirror the broader politics of space outside it, where new statues and renamed streets were reconfiguring the city as a stage for national sovereignty.

The portraiture Maevsky describes – "large portraits of all the Serbian princes and kings" – functions not simply as genealogical record but as a visual pedagogy of power ("В одном из зал висели большие портреты всех сербских князей и королей") (Maevsky 1913, p. 160). In the context of Serbian nationalism, portraits had a didactic role: they were meant to inspire continuity with the medieval past and sacralize the present struggle against Austria-Hungary. The absence of the Obrenović figures, who had been associated with submission to Austro-Hungarian influence, marked an erasure of politically inconvenient elements. As Maja Asavei notes in her study of Balkan exhibition practices, nationalist curating is less about displaying the past than disciplining it: constructing a memory that conforms to the needs of present legitimacy (Asavei 2018).

Outside the museum, Maevsky notes other symbolic elements of Belgrade's urban grammar. He observes the statue of Prince Mihailo Obrenović in the main square, acknowledging it as "the best monument in Belgrade" ("лучший памятник Белграда князю Михаилу Обреновичу") (Maevsky 1913, p. 164). Despite belonging to the same dynastic line later disavowed inside the museum, Mihailo's image is allowed to remain because his assassination in 1868 marked him as a martyr for national unification.[5] His statue thus serves a purpose not unlike that of the

allegorical painting within: transforming death into political meaning, rendering violence a legitimate prelude to national rebirth.

If the National Museum constructs memory through curation, the city streets and parks do so through their own visual rhetoric. The contrast Maevsky draws between Kalemegdan and Topčider (a well-kept park of memory versus a decaying aristocratic garden) maps neatly onto the symbolic distinctions between ordered history and forgotten heritage. His reference to Kalemegdan's statues of poets and scholars implies an urban investment in intellectual nationalism: history remembered and monumentalized in stone.

Taken together, these moments in Maevsky's account illuminate how Belgrade in 1913 functioned as a city of layered symbols. The urban landscape, much like the museum's interior, was curated to present an image of national coherence at a moment of extreme geopolitical volatility. Just months before the assassination in Sarajevo, Maevsky's observations read, in hindsight, as a calm before the storm, an attempt to freeze a national image just before history once again intervened.

That he concludes this portion of his journey with a meal at the Hotel de Paris, watching a crowd of civilians and soldiers drink beer, listen to music, and watch projected films reinforces the civic dimension of these symbolic acts. Nationhood, in Maevsky's Belgrade, is performed; in museums and on monuments, in cafés and tramcars, in uniforms and shop signs. Nationalism is not merely stated; it is ambient.

The Roman well offered an affective descent into the unconscious of history; the museum offered its conscious articulation. But both are theatrical spaces. One buries memory in stone and water; the other lifts it onto pedestals and frames. And both, in Maevsky's telling, are utterly human in their contradictions.

Conclusion – Empire in a Stairwell

The Roman Bunar, half-forgotten beneath Belgrade's Kalemegdan fortress, is more than merely a well. In Maevsky's account, it becomes an aperture, an opening through which the psychological pressures of empire, memory, and geography bleed into one another. His narrative, concerned less with the site's factual history than with the experience of moving through it, exemplifies the microhistorical promise of urban forms. What appears to be a mundane tourist attraction (a dark hole in the ground with unclear origins) is reanimated as a political allegory, a sensory test, and a symbolic descent into Balkan time.

The virtue of this moment lies in its scale. Microhistory, as Giovanni Levi argued, derives its analytical power not from the spectacular but from the ordinary, where broader social and political structures are refracted through minute interactions and specific sites (Levi 2012). Maevsky's descent into the Roman well, narrated with an almost cinematic attention to echo, damp, and fear, stages precisely this kind of encounter. As he steps onto each worn stone, counts his paces into the dark, and

imagines how many human bones might lie at the bottom, the reader is drawn into a layered historical consciousness. Serbia, on the verge of modern nationhood and yet haunted by the Ottomans, the Romans, and the Habsburgs, appears here not as a line on a map, but as a sensation: cold, echoing, unstable.

It is this affective geography that marks Maevsky's sketch as something more than travel reportage. The emotions conjured in the Roman Bunar scene such as claustrophobia, dread, and fascination are not incidental. They perform the anxieties of the time, when Belgrade stood not just as a capital, but as a frontier city pressed between empires. As recent scholarship in urban memory studies has shown, subterranean architecture (tunnels, bunkers, crypts, passageways) frequently serves as a repository for the fears a city cannot express on the surface (Till 2005). In Maevsky's case, the well becomes a cipher for Russia's own ambivalence about Serbia: admiration, kinship, and unease.

That Maevsky emerges from the well exhausted is emblematic. He has not been enlightened. His description of the experience is laced with irony and unresolved fear. There is no interpretive epiphany at the bottom, no triumphant claim of historical knowledge. Instead, he throws a stone into the abyss and listens for the splash; a futile gesture that encapsulates the uncertainty of Balkan historicity, where each layer of the past is so entangled with others that clarity is impossible. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in a different context, certain histories resist full domestication into coherent national narratives; they remain fractured, subterranean (Chakrabarty 2009).

Yet it is precisely this incoherence that makes such minor urban sites so valuable. The Roman Bunar, unlike the triumphant statue or monumental boulevard, lacks a clear didactic function. It cannot be easily conscripted into a patriotic myth. Instead, it stands ambiguously (Roman, Ottoman, Serbian, combined), its origins contested, its use reimagined over centuries. In this, it is a perfect metaphor for Belgrade itself: a city built atop its own ruins, repurposing imperial legacies for new nationalist ends.

Maevsky's sketch, then, offers more than a quaint Slavic travelogue. It models how urban forms can be read as archives of affect and ideology. The stairwell down into the Roman well mirrors the downward pressure of imperial memory; the museum's hidden portraits dramatize the politics of forgetting; even the labels on hotel buttons become exercises in linguistic hierarchy. The narrative's richness stems from its very narrowness, its refusal to abstract. The city is not surveyed from above but stumbled through, room by room, tunnel by tunnel.

What this suggests for future scholarship is significant. Balkan cities, often analyzed through the macro lenses of nationalism, war, or empire, remain underexplored as microhistorical terrain. Their built environments, particularly minor forms (public fountains, neglected parks, disused staircases, old facades) are dense with ideological sediment. As scholars such as Vlad Naumović and Maja

Asavei have shown, the production of national identity in Southeastern Europe has always depended on spatialized memory practices, whether in grand avenues and cathedrals or in the shadows and margins (Naumović 1999; Asavei 2018).

This article has attempted to show how one such margin – the "Roman" well of Kalemegdan – offers an entire mode of reading. By following a Russian traveller through this space, and attending closely to the affective, spatial, and political registers of his movement, we gain access to a historical moment otherwise hidden from diplomatic records or official chronicles. The value of microhistory lies in both scale and method: to restore to seemingly small episodes the fullness of historical consequence.

There is still much to be done. Subterranean Belgrade, like subterranean Europe, awaits excavation; be it by archaeologists or by historians attentive to atmosphere, mood, and narrative structure. Future work might trace how similar structures functioned in Sofia, Sarajevo, or Lviv; how civic memory was built not only above ground but also beneath it; and how empire continues to echo in wells, stairwells, and tunnels.

Maevsky's well is still there. Tourists descend, lanterns in hand. The stairwell spirals as it did a century ago. But what they hear – or fail to hear – may depend on how closely they are willing to listen, and what histories they carry with them into the dark.

NOTES

1. Digital tools used in the creation of this manuscript are as follows: sources were looked for via Google Scholar and its novel AI tool, SciSpace. The text was edited for style, clarity, and grammar via Chat GPT 4o. References were formatted by Claude Sonnet 3.5.
2. It would be prudent to emphasize that the so-called "Roman Well" (*Rimski bunar*) in Belgrade's Kalemegdan Fortress is a misnomer rooted in 19th-century folklore that attributed many ancient-looking structures to Roman origins. It was constructed by Austrian forces during their occupation and reconstruction of the fortress in the early 18th century (specifically between 1717 and 1732, following their capture of Belgrade from the Ottomans in 1717), initially as a deep-water reservoir to supply the garrison during sieges. It, however, remained known simply as the "Roman Well", and so we use that designation consistently.
3. For the sake of perspective, a loaf of bread in the early 20th century cost around 10-15 para, so 20 para could buy roughly 1-2 loaves. A day's wage for an unskilled worker in the Balkans was about 1-2 dinars, meaning 20 para was roughly 10-20% of a daily wage.
4. The term *Kalemegdan* indeed carries an imperial resonance, rooted in its Ottoman Turkish etymology – *kale* (fortress) and *meydan* (square or field) – signi-

fying a space historically tied to military and administrative power. During the Ottoman period, such toponymic designations frequently marked loci of authority and control (Vuksanović-Macura and Ćorović 2016)

5 . After the 1903 coup in Serbia, which resulted in the assassination of King Alexander Obrenović and Queen Draga and the installment of the Karađorđević dynasty, cultural institutions like the National Museum played a pivotal role in the reconstitution of national identity and dynastic legitimacy. This violent regime change marked not only a political upheaval but also a deliberate reorientation of cultural memory and public history. The Karađorđević dynasty utilized the National Museum and other heritage institutions to distance itself from the Obrenović past and to craft a vision of national continuity rooted in aristocratic and popular traditions. Exhibitions and acquisitions were mobilized to reflect a narrative aligned with the new ruling family's historical claims and political values (Ignjatović and Manojlović Pintar 2011).

6. Prince Mihailo Obrenović's assassination in 1868 became a foundational moment in Serbian national memory, framing him as a martyr for the cause of national unification. His death was quickly memorialized and utilized to promote a narrative of sacrifice tied to the broader movement of South Slavic solidarity and liberation from Ottoman control. This transformation of Mihailo into a national martyr was not incidental. As Serbia increasingly aligned its political rhetoric with ideas of unification and national identity (mirroring Italy's Risorgimento) Mihailo's image was deliberately preserved and venerated (Malešević 2016). See also (Jackson 2006). The site of his assassination even became symbolically loaded, helping cement his role as a unifier posthumously (Trifunović 2014).

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