

NIKOLAY OVCHAROV



FROM THE SACRED CITY OF **PERPERIKON**  
TO THE GREAT ROYAL CITY OF **TURNOVO**  
15 MUST-SEE HISTORIC LANDMARKS IN BULGARIA



# 15 MUST-SEE HISTORIC LANDMARKS IN BULGARIA

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# AN ANCIENT EUROPEAN COUNTRY

Bulgaria is one of Europe's oldest sovereign states, situated in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, in southeast Europe. It was the cradle of the earliest proto-historic cultures on the Continent, inherited later by the Thracians, the Hellenes and the Romans, who left a lasting mark on the global civilisation.

The Bulgarian state was established in 681, espousing the traditions of all these ancient cultures. In its early days, the state bordered the lost empires of the Byzantines, the Arabs and Franks that have, nevertheless, given rise to a number of cotemporary countries. Unlike the other countries, Bulgaria's name remained unchanged throughout thirteen or so centuries. The Bulgarians converted to Christianity back in the beginning of the ninth century and the disciples of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius invented the Slavonic alphabet, the Cyrillic script in the earliest capital city, Pliska to translate the liturgical books into Old Bulgarian language and disseminate them throughout the Slavic peoples. Under the kings Simeon the Great (893–927), Kaloyan (1197–2007) and Ivan II Asen (1218–1241) Bulgaria was one of the European great powers.

In 1396, the Bulgarians lost their independence in the flames of the horrific Ottoman invasion. The medieval Bulgarian state perished, but its collapse spared Central and Western Europe the same fate. This, however, stunted the cultural and political development of the Bulgarians. Liberated in the nineteenth century, Bulgaria lost many of its lands to the neighbouring countries. That was the reason why the country was compelled by the circumstances to be, more often than not, on the losing side in the twentieth-century European conflicts. After 1944, the country was under Soviet influence that detached Bulgaria from European traditions.

That was the main reason why the world knows almost next to nothing about Bulgaria, a country steeped in history. Still, this country has a wealth to show to the world with its 43,000 archaeological monuments on the register. Owing to them, Bulgaria, together with Italy and Greece, is amongst the three richest in ancient cultural heritage countries in Europe. In the last years, Bulgaria is back to where this country traditionally belongs, the European family of nations. You will find below an account of fifteen must-see historic sites in Bulgaria.

*Prof. Nikolay Ovcharov*



Miniatures depicting moments of Bulgaria's history, *The Chronicle of Constantine Manasses* (14<sup>th</sup> c.)

# 1 THE PREHISTORIC SALTERN IN PROVADIA AND THE WORLD'S EARLIEST GOLD ARTEFACTS

NEAR VARNA



An aerial view of the saltern in Provadia with parts of the three fortifications systems, Middle to Late Chalcolithic, 4700–4350 BC

The New Stone Age (the Neolithic period) was a quantum leap in human history with the earliest Neolithic settlements within what is now Bulgaria dating to the seventh millennium BC.

Back then, the human beings were farmers and settled mainly in the vast plains and the wide river valleys, continuing almost unchanged well into the Late Chalcolithic (fifth–fourth mill. BC).



A ceramic vessel, Middle Chalcolithic, 4700–4600 BC



An anthropo-zoomorphic lid, Late Chalcolithic, 4600–4350 BC

Explorations of sites such as those at the villages of Ovcharovo, Polianitsa, Durankulak in the north-east or Karanovo in the south of Bulgaria suggest a rich spiritual life of the people at the time. Hundreds of unearthed idols and remarkably decorated pottery bear witness to that.

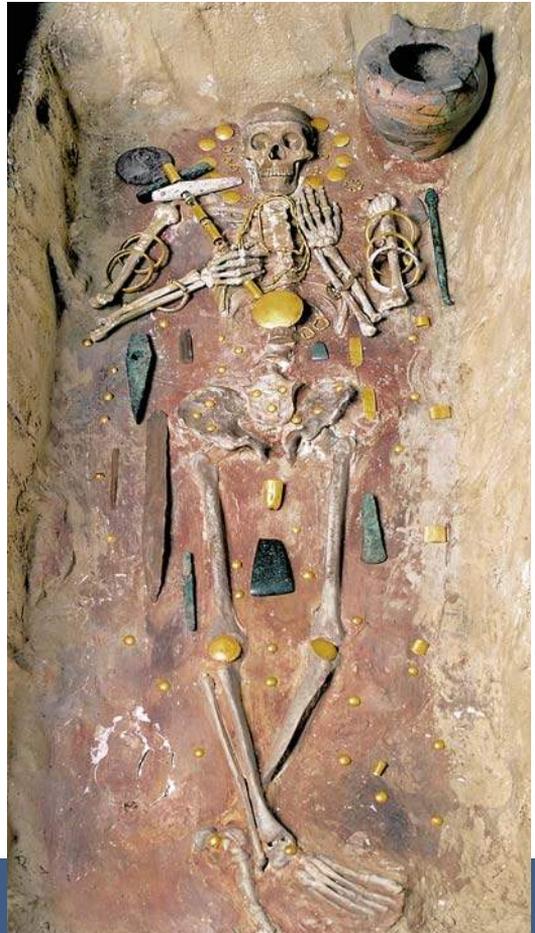
Still, there was a special settlement among those. The Neolithic farmers from what is now Thrace left their homes circa 5500 BC to cross the Balkan Mountains and settle by the brine springs near what is now the town of Provadia, seeking after a vital substance, essential for the maintenance of life, which we now call table salt. Millennia ago salt was used as the earliest money. That was the first salt production centre in Europe, applying a technology, used until now, involving a

process of brine evaporation in ceramic vessels rather than salt pans. The production was sold in the south all the way to the Aegean Sea.

An archaeological discovery near the coastal city of Varna showed what they exchanged salt for. A necropolis was unveiled there, where the graves contained a hoard of finds dated to the turn of the fourth century BC. Over 300 artefacts of pure gold feature prominently among them: sceptres, axes, massive bangles, decorative pieces, bull-shaped plaques. Even the beautiful pottery was inlaid with gold. Remarkable is the funeral of a high priest/king buried with a gold sceptre and regalia. Studies show that these are the world's earliest gold artefacts exchanged for what is referred to as 'white gold', i.e. salt.



A gold sceptre, bangles and jewels, Chalcolithic necropolis, Varna



The burial of the king priest



Gold appliques, jewellery and zoomorphic plaques, Chalcolithic necropolis, Varna

## 2 THE SACRED CITY OF PERPERIKON NEAR KARDJALI

### AND THE ROCKY PEOPLE FROM THE RHODOPES



An aerial view of Perperikon

The rock-hewn city of Perperikon is located in the Rhodopes near what is now the city of Kardjali. The place was sanctified in hoary antiquity. In the Late Bronze Age (18<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> BC), temples and palaces appeared to form a city with an acropolis, Palace Sanctuary and subtowns (suburbs). The ground floors of the buildings were carved out of the rocks to a depth of 3–4 m to support stone masonry and trimmer joists. There were rock-cut streets, yards and squares, often enclosed by beautiful colonnades. An inventive drainage system was installed for rainwater.

The multi-storey Palace Sanctuary with its more than 50 halls, rooms, underground mausoleums, hallways, roofed staircases covers an area of 10,000 sq. m. The complicated design of the complex harks back to Minoan civilisation associating the Thracian culture with that of Crete Troy and Mycenae. It includes an enor-

mous oval, non-roofed hall with a majestic ro-tund altar in its centre. The room corresponds to a description by Herodotus of a famous sanctuary dedicated to Dionysus in the Rhodopes with a prophetess as renowned as the priestess of Apollo in Delphi. Roman chronicler Suetonius wrote that Alexander the Great was told there that he would conquer the world and the Romans learned that they would build an empire. The sacred site was guarded by the Bessoï, and the rock-cut city was their capital.

The city developed throughout antiquity and the Romans, who came in 45, fortified the Acropolis and added further glamour to Perperikon. Monumental public buildings and new temples of pagan gods were built. Here, in the beginning of the fifth century, the earliest in the Rhodopes conversion to Christianity was made and beautiful monumental churches were erected. In the



The Palace Sanctuary



A bronze statuette of Apollo, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.

A bronze statuette of Dionysus, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.



Christian crosses from Perperikon

twelfth throughout the fourteenth century, the city was the centre of Achridos. In the gold mines in the immediate vicinity large amounts of gold were extracted. Bulgaria and Byzantium would often wage wars over Perperikon that eventually fell to the Ottomans in 1362 after a long siege.

Hundreds of sanctuaries and royal tombs have been carved out of the numerous rock

masses of the Eastern Rhodopes. Two of them stand out: the Thracian womb-like Temple of the Great Mother Goddess and the only known for now sanctuary of legendary Orpheus in the vicinities of the village of Tatul, in the region of Momchilgrad. His symbolic grave is hewn in the massif and next to it a magnificent Hellenistic temple was built in the fourth or third century BC.



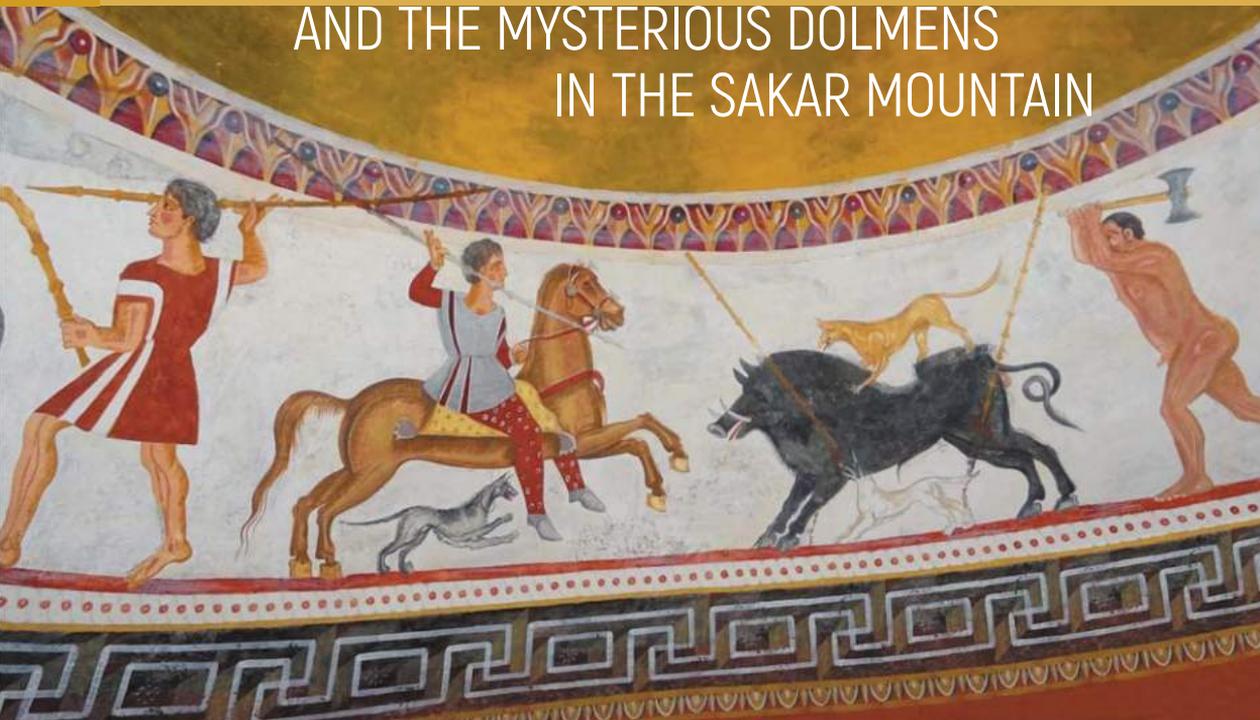
The temple of the Great Mother Goddess



The temple of Orpheus, Tatul

### 3 THE ROYAL HUNT FROM

## THE TUMULUS OF ALEXANDROVO NEAR HASKOVO AND THE MYSTERIOUS DOLMENS IN THE SAKAR MOUNTAIN



*The Royal Hunt, the tumulus of Alexandrovo*

Thracians have from times immemorial lived in the low Sakar Mountain located between Bulgaria and Turkey. They have left for posterity impressive stone structures, dolmens. Such structures, always associated with the cult of the sun and burial practices, are widespread in Europe, Asia and Africa. The Thracian dolmens in the Sakar Mountain were built in the Early Iron Age (twelfth–sixth cc. BC). Each of the large stones usually weighs more than a tonne. They form a table-like chamber of upright stones, horizontally roofed with a large capstone (trilithon). Sometimes an entrance is cut into one of the upright stones. Dolmens have one or more chambers and have or have not a passageway (dromos). The chambers are either in line with each other or next to each other with individual entrances to them. Bulgaria is believed to have about 750 such stone structures and there are about 600

in the Sakar Mountain alone. The most numerous and best-preserved dolmens were found in the region of Topolovgrad.

The Thracian culture developed in the following centuries to reach its heyday during the Hellenistic period. Thus was how the magnificent tomb of the fourth century BC at the village of Alexandrovo in the vicinities of Haskovo happened to be commissioned by a Thracian king or a high-ranking nobleman. Unfortunately, the tomb was plundered and all rich objects of the funeral relating to the Thracian religious beliefs in an afterlife were lost. Still, unique frescoes are extant depicting mostly scenes of boar and deer hunting as well as a composition of a lavish funeral wake. Like all murals in Thracian burial mounds, these frescoes also deal with the king's afterlife. It is common knowledge that the Thracian aristocratic teaching of an afterlife pro-



The Museum of Thracian Art in the Eastern Rhodopes showcasing the replica of the Alexandrovo burial mound



Murals at the tumulus of Alexandrovo, detail



The signature and the profile of the painter of the tumulus

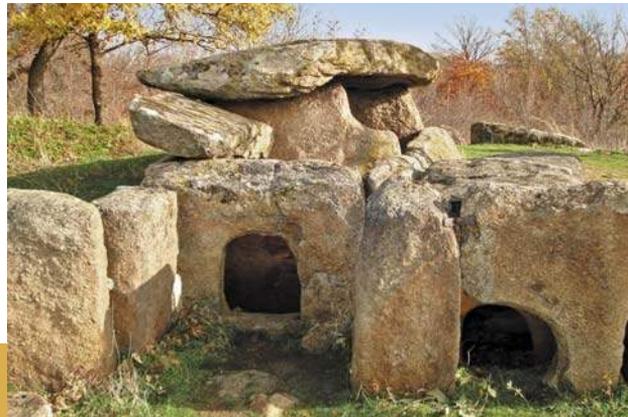
pounded the idea of an 'eternal hunt' and 'eternal feasting and drinking'.

Over the scene of a funeral wake in the round chamber across from the antechamber, a young man in profile facing left is incised with an inscrip-

tion above in Greek letters deciphered as Κοζιμασης χρηστός (Kozimases master). The former word is undoubtedly the name of the painter, while the latter might be translated as 'skilful', 'gifted', certainly referring to his consummate artistry.



The interior of a dolmen



A marvellous dolmen in the Sakar Mountain

# THE VALLEY OF THE THRACIAN KINGS NEAR KAZANLUK

## AND THE ROYAL MAUSOLEUMS IN STAROSEL



Murals, the tumulus of Kazanluk

There are thousands of Thracian tumuli across the Bulgarian lands. The region between the Balkan Mountains and the Sredna Gora Mountains excels in this. Long ago, this was the land of the great kingdom of the Odrysae, a Thracian tribe, who under the kings Teres (490–464) and Sitalces (464–424), evolved into a serious power. A fourth-century BC tumulus was unearthed in the twentieth century near Kazanluk with murals reaching the zenith of Thracian art. The deceased king and his wife are depicted sitting at a table piled high with dishes. Slaves serve wine and food, while a young man leads the chariot horses to take the king to the afterworld. Charioteers compete to pay their final tributes to their deceased king.

Other Odrysian burial mounds are located in the vicinities of Kazanluk, in the so-called Valley of the Thracian Kings. Original is the mausoleum carved out of a single block of stone in the form

of an ancient temple. The roof is topped with gables and the interior is decorated with frescoes. Priestly sceptres, gold rings and necklaces, silver and bronze vessels were unearthed in the mounds. The biggest of the known tumuli belonged perhaps to King Seuthes III (330–301), who built the capital of the Odrysae, Seuthopolis, where the gold funeral wreath of the king was found along with other gold artefacts. A bronze head of a man was found, portraying probably Seuthes III himself, made from life by a great Greek sculptor in the fourth century BC. There is a unrobbed mound next to that of Seuthes III, where royal bronze suits of armour, finely painted pottery and a number of objects made of precious metals laid untouched. The apogee is a death mask of a man's face with realistic features, made of pure gold and weighing almost 700 g.

Just tens of kilometres east of Kazanluk, in the vicinities of the village of Starosel, yet another

Thracian underground temple complex is located including splendid mausoleums with beautiful principal fronts, colonnades and grand staircases. The main tumulus in Chetiniova Mogila is believed to be the final resting place of Cotys I, the great king of the Odrysae.

In addition to their monumental tumuli, Thracians were famous across the ancient world for

their gold treasures. The Vulchitrun incredible royal gold tableware weighing 12,5 kg dates as far back as the fifteenth or fourteenth century BC. Of the Hellenistic Age (fourth-third cc. BC) are the well-known gold Thracian treasures such as that of Panagyurishte (nine solid gold vessels weighing 6,164 kg), the Rogozen collection of 165 silver gilt vessels, etc.



A bronze head of Seuthes III



A gold wreath from the Thracian tumuli near Kazanluk



A gold cylix from the Thracian tumuli near Kazanluk



Chetiniova Mogila near Starosel

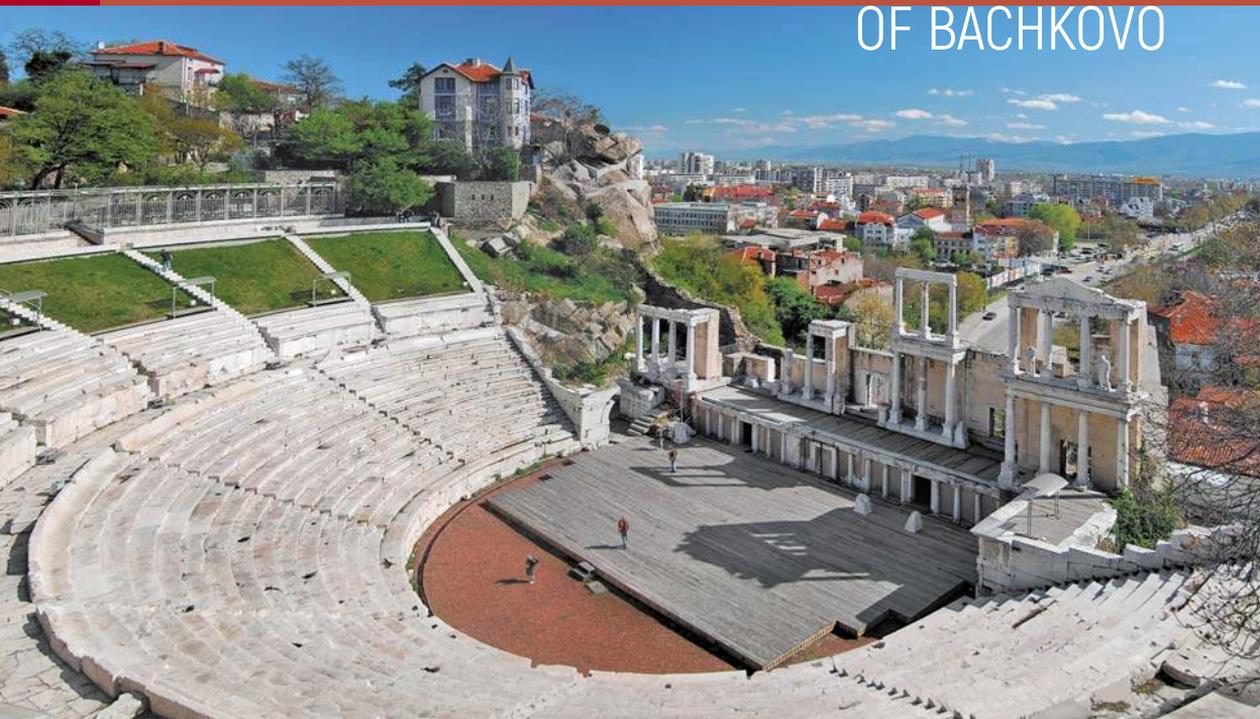


A tumulus near Starosel

## 5 PHILIP'S CITY IN PLOVDIV

### AND THE SILENCE OF THE MONASTERY

### OF BACHKOVO



The Roman theatre, Plovdiv

Plovdiv, one of the most beautiful Bulgarian cities, is steeped in history. The place name of the earliest fortified settlement built there as far back as the days of the Trojan War was Eumolpia [Sweet-sounding], based on the myth of Orpheus, a legendary Thracian poet, singer and lyre-player. The place was initially inhabited by the Thracian tribe of the Bessoi to then become part of the Odrysian kingdom to be captured by Philip II of Macedon in 342 BC. He developed the city in the same vein as the Hellenistic urban planning and gave it his name. Varro Lucullus Terentius seized Philippopolis in 72 BC, and the city was renamed Trimontium (or Trium Montium – three hills). Within the Roman Empire the city was autonomous and granted the right to mint its own coins. There was a senate and an assembly hall for the citizens to set the tax rates and duties.

The prosperity of Trimontium came to an end in the third throughout the fifth century, when barbarians sacked the Balkan Provinces of the Roman Empire. Centuries after its establishing in the seventh century, the Bulgarian state waged wars against Byzantium for the city named Plovdiv. The Ottomans captured the city in the late fourteenth century and gave it the name Filibe.

One becomes mesmerised by the unique archaeological monuments that have survived in Plovdiv. The ancient amphitheatre, seating up to 3,500, built under Emperor Trajan (98–117), is the city's gem. It is a semicircle with an outer diameter of 82 m and 28 rows of marble seats providing stunning views of the Rhodopes dimly visible in the distance. No less imposing is the ancient stadium, which had a seating capacity of 30,000; 240 m in length and 50 m in width. The forum (143/136 m, 11 ha), a place for politi-



The Roman stadium, Plovdiv



Hisar Kapı, Plovdiv



Mosaics, the ancient Eirene mansion, the Great Episcopal Basilica and the Small Early Christian Basilica, Plovdiv

cal meetings, rallies and public feasts, was the centre of Philippopolis, enclosed on all sides by public buildings and shops.

Contemporary construction has destroyed many of Plovdiv's medieval monuments. But on the upside, just 15 km away, in the foothills of the Rhodopes, towers a unique medieval castle, the Asen's Fortress (Gr. Stenimachos). Its history is closely associated with that of the Monastery of Bachkovo, nestling 5 km away, deeper into the

mountains. The cloister was founded in 1083 by Gregory Pakourianos, a prominent statesman and military commander of Alexius I Comnenus. Many Byzantine emperors and Bulgarian kings made donations to the monastery and a painted portrait of King Ivan Alexander (1331–1371) is still extant. The marvellous eleventh-century murals at the ossuary and the beautiful Churches of the Dormition of the Theotokos and of the Holy Archangels have also survived to this day.



The Asen's Fortress near Asenovgrad



The Monastery of Bachkovo



Murals, Monastery of Bachkovo

# 6 ANCIENT MESSAMBRIA

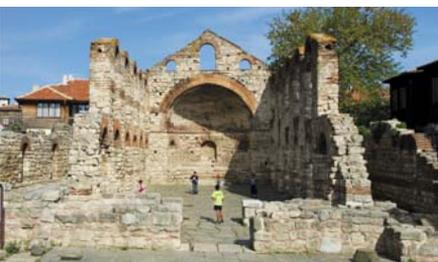
## AND ITS ETERNAL RIVAL SOZOPOLIS



An aerial view of Nessebur

One of the most scenic places in Bulgaria is a peninsula protruding into the Black Sea, where the ancient city of Messambria (now Nessebur) is situated. Between the eighth and sixth centuries BC, this corner of paradise was colonised by citizens coming from the large Hellenic polis Megara. Over the years, they built a beautiful fortified city with all the elements of a city state in ancient Greece:

gymnasia, palaestrae (sports facilities), bouleuteria (building which housed the council of citizens in Ancient Greece; an assembly hall). In Messambria there was a theatre, where festivities were held celebrating god Dionysus, and a big temple of the Greek sun god Apollo. The city existed in the Hellenistic and Roman Ages and as early as the fifth century AD the city's diocese was elevated to a



The Old Metropolitan Church, Nessebur



The Fortress Gates, Nessebur



The Church of Christ Pantocrator

metropolitan see. Of those days is the earliest extant Christian church on the peninsula, the 25,5 m long Old Metropolitan Basilica. In the Middle Ages, tens of churches were built showcasing the splendour of Orthodox architecture.

A walk on ancient Messambria is a real journey to the past. Passing through the remarkably well-preserved gateway to the fortress, one gets into a network of narrow cobbled streets leading through tightly packed old houses lined with wooden planks against the high sea winds. There are ancient churches of Christ Pantocrator, of St John Aliturgetus, of St John the Baptist, of St Stephen, etc., in the small squares. The brickwork with marble elements of their fronts combines in matchless perfection with representations of suns, human figures and fantastic animals; bands of multicoloured ceramic pottery in quatrefoil shape and discs; fine Lombard bands of white stone. A sought-after for centuries blend of architecture

and monumental decoration is fully achieved here.

On another beautiful peninsula on the Black Sea coast, 65 km south of Messambria, the latter's millennial rival, Sozopol (Sozopolis) is located. Founded ca. 620 BC by Greek colonists from Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor, the new city took its name Apollonia from the cult of the sun god and a 13 m high bronze statue of Apollo by the renowned sculptor Calamis was erected in the second quarter of the fifth century BC.

With the place name Sozopol the city, together with Messambria (Nessebur), was permanently incorporated into the Bulgarian Kingdom in the thirteenth–fourteenth century. Archaeological excavations uncovered walls of a fortress and Christian churches bearing witness to the city's ancient past. Of special value is the explored medieval monastery on the nearby island of St John, where an ancient reliquary was found containing particles of St John the Forerunner's relics.



A replica of the statue of Apollo from the island of St John

A silver coin from Sozopol

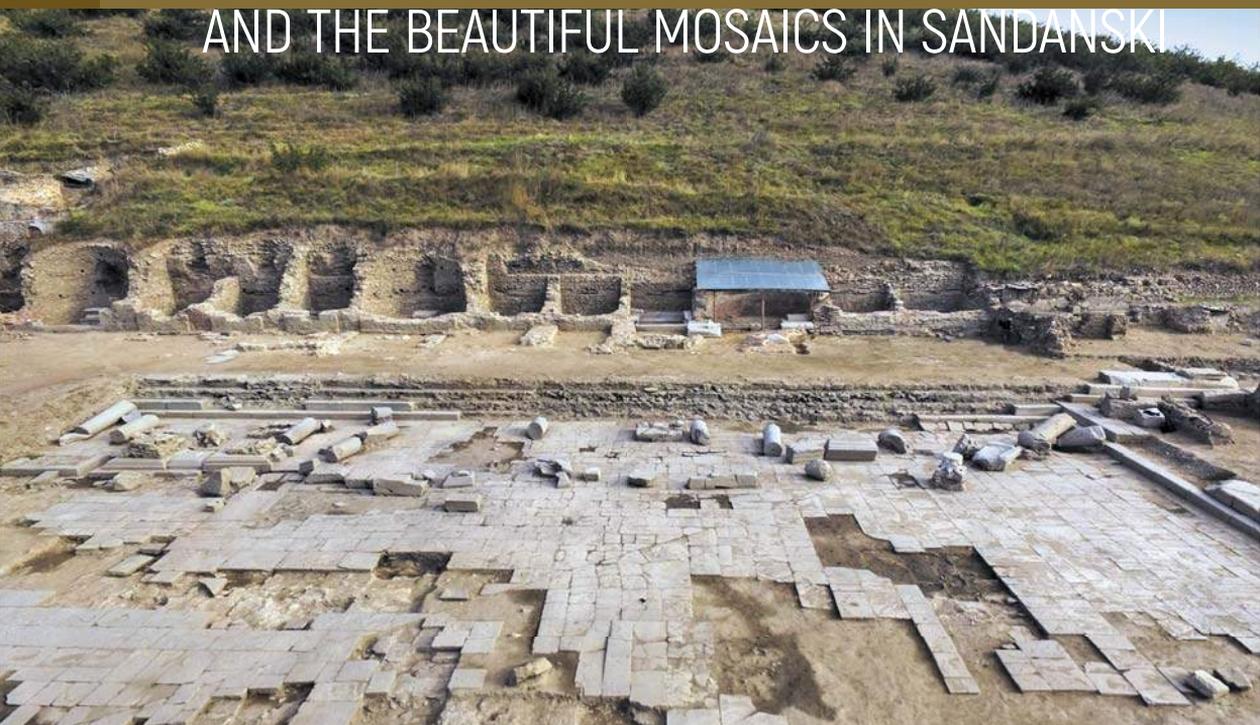
A red-figure vase, 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC



The monastery on the island of St John near Sozopol



An aerial view of Sozopol



The forum, Heraclea Sintica

In antiquity Heraclea Sintica was known as the great city of the Macedonian kings, mentioned by eminent ancient authors such as Titus Livius and Pliny the Elder. It was great Bulgarian clairvoyant Vanga that showed where its ruins were. Her house, grave and church are just one kilometre away, in the village of Rupite. She predicted that an ancient city, where a king's son was killed, was buried in Mount Kozhuh. An inscription, discovered in 2002, conclusively showed that it was Heraclea Sintica.

The city was presumably founded in the second half of the fourth century BC by Philip II of Macedon or his son Alexander the Great. The place took its name Heraclea from Heracles, as the kings of the Macedonian dynasty believed that they were descendents of the mythical Greek hero, and Sintica, because the new settlement was within the province of the Thracian

tribe of the Sintians. It was a cosmopolitan city of 40,000 or 50,000 inhabitants, home to different peoples: Thracians, Hellenes, Macedons, Romans, Celts and perhaps even Illyrians, ancestors of the Albanians.

Archaeologists recently unearthed the central square, comparable with that in Philippopolis, surrounded by a Roman basilica housing the court of law and the chamber of commerce; a sanctuary and a long row of shops. The uncovered parts show that the marble-clad buildings have been lavishly decorated with columns, cornices and beautiful statues.

Heraclea Sintica survived into the Roman period, until the sixth century, when it was mentioned for the last time in the tax lists in the days of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I the Great. The earliest Christian church in the region was discovered there. The city was badly hit in a devastating

earthquake 400 years later and never recovered. Still, Parthicopolis was built 20 or so kilometres away in the fifth-sixth century, buried underneath the modern-day Sandanski.

This is yet another unique landmark in this sunny part of the Bulgarian lands. The Thracian towns Maedius and Desudaba were buried un-

derneath the modern-day Sandanski before Parthicopolis had its heyday. Fifth-sixth century archaeological remains reveal many public buildings and early Christian basilicas, including an early Christian episcopal complex. The mosaic floorings found during the excavations are of huge historical interest. Some of them are displayed in situ.



A statue of the Roman period



A female head, sculpture



A lion's head fountain spout, Heraclea Sintica



An aerial view of the forum, Heraclea Sintica



The Episcopal Basilica, Sandanski



Early Christian mosaics, Sandanski

# THE ROMAN COLONY OF RATIARIA AND KING IVAN SRATSIMIR'S CAPITAL IN VIDIN



The residence of the provincial governor, Ratiaria

Ratiaria was a very important Roman city on the Danube; its remains are 27 km south-east of Vidin and 2 km away from what is now the village of Archar. The very place name bespeaks its significance to the river navigation, as in Latin *ratīs* was a vessel or boat made of logs fastened together like a raft. The Romans under Vespasian (69–79) founded Ratiaria in the second half of the first century. Celebrating the successful end of the second Dacian War of 106, Emperor Trajan raised the status of the city to that of a Roman colony, i. e. the Ratiarians enjoyed the same privileges as the Roman citizens. There is evidence that the famous Legio IV Flavia Felix was relocated to the city for a while. In the wake of Diocletian's administrative reform of the late third century, Ratiaria became the capital of the province Dacia Ripensis ('riparian Dacia') until 586, when it was sacked by the Avars.

The most important archaeological discovery for now is the thoroughly studied residence of the governor of the province Dacia Ripensis dating from the fourth throughout six centuries. Very well studied are also the numerous architectural fragments, sculptures, inscribed grave-stones, sarcophagi. The Ratiarian statuary was exquisite and of high artistic quality.

A comprehensive aerial survey of the city was conducted in the 1970s, providing information about the extant underground archaeological monuments, including the impressive public baths (thermae) comparable only to the bath complexes in Rome. It is these sites that will be explored after the archaeological works were resumed lately.

Following the seventh century, Ratiaria never revived, but in the Middle Ages the powers that be in the region moved to where the city of



A Roman stela, Ratiaria



A Roman sarcophagus, Ratiaria

Vidin is now. There was also a roman city, Bononia, over the remains of which a mighty Bulgarian stronghold was raised in the ninth and the tenth centuries. Ancient historians wrote that Bdin has always guarded the kingdom against the western invaders. And in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, a magnificent castle, of-

ten called Baba Vida, was erected by the Danube that had survived by a miracle. In the late fourteenth century it was the capital city of the Kingdom of Vidin under King Ivan Sratsimir. According to recent studies, the kingdom survived several decades after the Kingdom of Turnovo fell to the Ottomans in 1395.



The medieval Baba Vida castle

# MISSIONIS, THE CITY OF ST ANDREW PROTOKLETOS NEAR TARGOVISHTE, AND THE STRONGHOLD OF SHUMEN



The boyar quarter, Missionis

Until recently, few people knew about the ancient and medieval Bulgarian city of Missionis, whose ruins are located 7 km west of Targovishte, in the foothills at the base of the Balkan Mountains. The city was identified by referring to the information provided by the twentieth-century Arabian geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi. In his work, he mentions in three instances the affluent, populous and prosperous city of Missionis. The citizens became extremely wealthy thorough trading with the entire world.

The Arabian scholar provided exceptionally precise for his time measures of distance, used by the archaeologists to locate this ancient city, flourishing in the fifth and sixth centuries. Decades of excavations unearthed a stronghold with a fortified subtown (suburb) covering an area of 20 ha. Three early-Christian basilicas have been uncovered by now with the one in the inner bai-

ley being an episcopal basilica. A building next to it served as a residence of the local bishops whose see was within the city. And there was good reason to do so for St Andrew Protokletos (First Called) was carrying out in the first century his mission here to Christianise the people from what is now the northeast of Bulgaria.

Like most of the Early Byzantine cities in this part of the country, Missionis was abandoned following the Slavic invasions of the seventh century. Still, as early as the ninth and tenth centuries, the city was brought to life anew as a proto-Bulgarian town named Kosovo. The city's proximity to Bulgaria's old capitals, Preslav and Turnovo, was crucial. That was the reason why the ancient fortress was completely rebuilt between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Now this stronghold of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom heroically repelled the Ottoman invasion in the late fourteenth century.



The episcopal residence, Missionis



A lead cross in relief portraying St Andrew the First Called, Missionis

Ottoman historian Mehmed Neşri respectfully tells how the governor of the fortress responded with dignity to the ultimatum of the invaders: *'We shall not give up on our lord to knuckle under to the Turks!'* The excavations showed traces of a relentless siege, after which the fortress was reduced to rubble in a devastating fire and the surviving defenders were sold into slavery.

At the time the ancient city near Targovishte was closely connected with another stronghold, 40 km north of and above what is now the city of Shumen. The fortress of Shumen is now one of the most well archaeologically uncovered fortified places in Bulgaria. Founded far back in antiquity, in the medieval period it was one of the bastions of the Bulgarian Kingdom.



The fortress main gateway, Shumen



The fortress of Shumen



The restored keep of the fortress of Shumen

# 10 PLISKA AND PRESLAV, THE MAJESTIC CAPITAL CITIES

## OF THE FIRST BULGARIAN EMPIRE



The Great Basilica, Pliska

The Bulgarian state, one of the earliest in Europe, was established in 681. Its first capital city was Pliska, initially an enormous camp covering an area of 23 sq. km to suit the semi-nomadic life of the proto-Bulgarians. Still, in the beginning of the ninth centuries, stone constructions emerged. Khan Omourtag (814–831) built a forti-

fied stronghold, where the palaces of Bulgaria's supreme sovereigns were erected, with baths, cisterns, pagan temples, secret passageways and tunnels hidden beneath the city's surface, water and sewer systems, nothing short of a miracle at the time. Not far from Pliska, near the village of Madara, the Madara Rider is carved in bas-relief



The Madara Rider



A gold treasure, jewels, Pliska, 8<sup>th</sup> c.

in a rock face, depicting Tangra/Tengri, the principal god of the Proto-Bulgarians.

The Christianisation in 865 radically changed the skyline of the city. Tens of churches were erected; of them the Great Basilica is the most famous. Almost 100 m in length, the building was among the most majestic constructions in medieval Europe. From the palaces of Prince Boris-Michael, the Baptiser of Bulgaria, to the basilica led a road paved with stone slabs, on which the primates of Bulgaria headed spectacular processions.

In the late nineteenth century, under Simeon the Great (893–927) Bulgaria grew into an enormous empire bordering to the west what is now Budapest, to the northeast the Dnieper, and to the south, on the Aegean Sea. It was, therefore, necessary to move the capital city to Preslav, which would rival the Queen of Cities, Constantinople. The entire inner city and tens of kilometres in the vicinities were interspersed by

hundreds of splendid aristocratic estates and rich monasteries.

The largest ensemble was the majestic palace of the Bulgarian kings modelled on that in Constantinople. The curtain wall enclosed a number of monumental ceremonial buildings and Christian churches. Each of them was used in the incredibly complicated set of everyday court rituals performed by the royal court. The buildings were clad entirely in marble and decorated with columns, capitals and cornices. Ancient historians likened the multicoloured marble mosaic floorings to meadows with blooming flowers.

Built to survive for millennia, Bulgaria's capital Preslav fell in less than a century, in 971, to the Byzantines after a relentless siege. The city lost its grandeur forever, but even the Ottomans, who came here centuries later, learned about its former glory and named it Eski Stambul (the Old Istanbul).



The Golden Church, Preslav



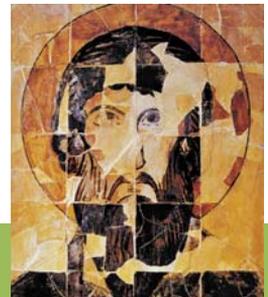
A reconstruction of the Palace Centre, Preslav



A monumental decoration, Preslav



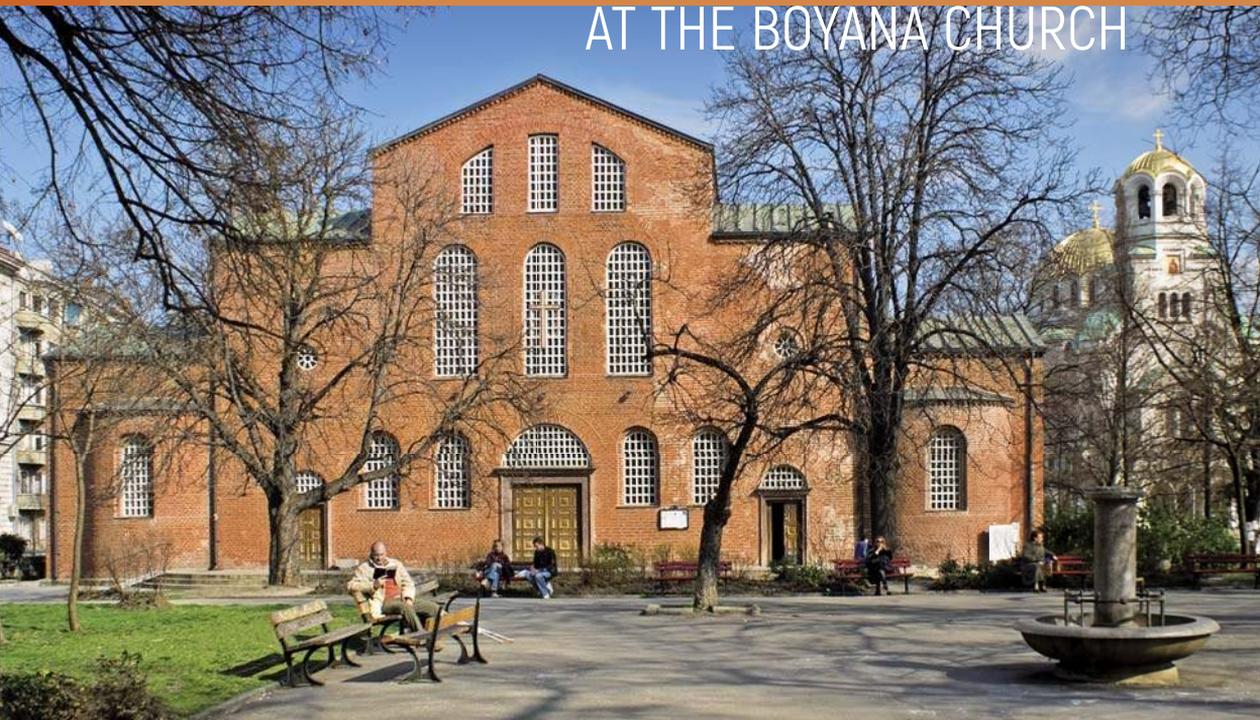
Mosaic floorings, Preslav



A ceramic icon, Preslav

# 11 MILLENNIA-OLD SOFIA AND THE UNIQUE FRESCOES

## AT THE BOYANA CHURCH



The Basilica of St Sophia, Sofia

Sofia, the capital city of what is now Bulgaria is steeped in history. The Thracian tribe of the Serdi (Sardi) lived here in the past and gave the name of the earliest settlement, Serdica/Sardica, which evolved into an important city in the Roman period. Under Emperor Constantine I the Great (324–337), who moved the capital from Rome, Serdica was named as an alternative capital. The Council of Sardica (Serdica) was held here in 343, attended

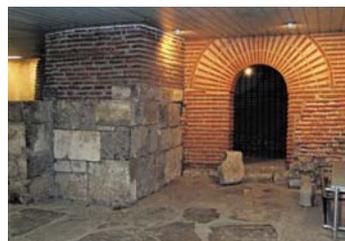
by all the hierarchs in the country and supposed to settle the controversy between the Orthodox Christians and the Arians. The major archaeological monuments in Sofia such as the ruins of the Largo, the Churches of St Sophia and St George, etc., have also survived from the Roman and the Early Christian periods. Archaeologists uncovered lately Serdica's Roman amphitheatre, which hosted gladiatorial combats and stage performances.



The Rotunda of St George, Sofia



The Church of St Parasceve of Iconium, Sofia



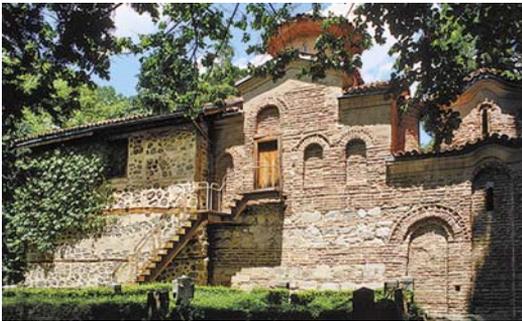
The East Gate to Serdica

In the ninth century, the Bulgarians, seizing the city from the Byzantines, called it Sredets. As the major city of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, Sofia resisted an Ottoman siege of ten years. Of the numerous medieval churches, the small Church of St Parasceve of Iconium (Bulg. St Petka Samardjiska, as the neighbourhood of the packsaddle makers, *semerci* in Turkish, took care of the church) is all that has survived and the rest are in ruins. But on the upside, a church with unique murals has survived in the foothills of Vitosha.

The Boyana Church was built in the eighteenth and the twelfth centuries, the time of the earliest extant frescoed fragments. The church was extended and painted in the mid-thirteenth century, its murals were unanimously recognised as a masterpiece of Orthodox art and it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The unknown by name master

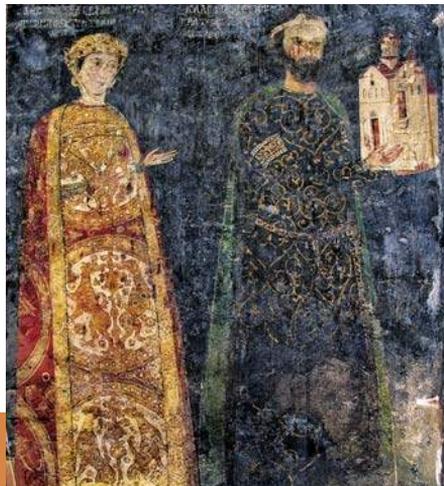
painter of the Boyana Church depicted the entire history of Christianity: the Nativity and Passion of Christ; the lives of the Theotokos and of the patron saint of the church, St Nicholas. Some of the representations have unique individuality as those of Christ Euergetēs, St Eustatius, etc.

Fortunately, an extant building inscription at the Boyana Church shows that the painting of the church was commissioned by Sebastokrator Kaloyan in 1259. Next to the text, the Sebastokrator and the Sebastokratorissa, his wife Desislava, are portrayed, as well as the royal couple, King Constantine Asen and Queen Eirene. Apart from the incredibly for that time consummate artistry in portraiture, the representations provide ample opportunities to gain some insight into the everyday life, details of the clothing and regalia worn by the medieval rulers and the nobleman.



The Boyana Church

The west wall of the Boyana Church



The patron saint of the church, *St Nicholas of Myra*, a mural of 1259

*King Constantine Tych Asen and Queen Eirene*, a mural of 1259

*Sebastokrator Kaloyan and his wife, Sebastokratorissa Desislava*, a mural of 1259

# 12 VISHEGRAD CASTLE NEAR KARDJALI AND THE STONE GUARDS OF THE EASTERN RHODOPES



The Vishegrad castle

The mysterious Vishegrad castle near Kardjali is a new promising archaeological project of cultural heritage tourism in this country. Its ruins standing up to 10 m have enticed investigators for quite a while now. It had a typical medieval castle layout with a several-storey inner keep with a solar (the lord's own room), a banqueting hall and a small chapel. According to our information, in the twelfth throughout the fourteenth century it was the private residence of the governors of Achridos, the name of the Eastern Rhodopes at that time. Even Henri de Hainaut (Henry of Flanders), the second emperor of the Latin Empire, which the army of the Fourth Crusade set up on the ruins of the Byzantine Empire, was really impressed with the castle. Chronicler Geoffroi de Villehardouin recounts how during his military campaign in the mountains in 1206, the heir of the counts of Flanders and his army

found themselves at a the 'beautiful Vishegrad castle' on the Arda River bank. Here he was told about the death of his brother, the first Latin Emperor Baldwin I, taken prisoner by Bulgarian King Kaloyan, and that a council of six Venetians and six Franks had met to elect him as the new Latin emperor.

Vishegrad is by no means the only well-preserved fortress in the Eastern Rhodopes. Historical records contain evidence of several well-fortified towns in Achridos of that time. These were Perperikon, Mneakos, Ustra, Ephraim, Krivus and Patmos. Most of them have been localised and impress with very well preserved fortifications. Along with these strongholds, there were many smaller fortified places in the region, now discovered archaeologically. The latter are not mentioned in the sources, because these were not cities, but rather observation posts and strongpoints.



The Ustra Fortress



The Mneakos Fortress

One of the strongholds in the Eastern Rhodopes is, however, somewhat different. Like Vishegrad, it is situated on the left bank of the Arda River; presently within the city of Kardjali. This is the monumental Monastery of St John the Baptist (Prodromos), founded as early as the eighth or ninth century. In the eighteenth and twelfth centuries it became the episcopal see of

Achridos and a new, even more beautiful church with wonderful frescoes was erected. Next to it are the remains of the episcopal palace, the refectory and the residential wings. During archaeological excavations tombs of bishops were unearthed, some of them dressed in richly embroidered brocaded garments, made by the best bespoke tailors in Constantinople.



The Monastery of St John the Forerunner in Kardjali with the castle walls



Fragments of the embroidered brocaded garments found in the Monastery of St John the Forerunner

# THE BLESSED GREAT ROYAL CITY OF TURNOVO

## AND THE AMAZING VILLAGE OF ARBANASSI



The royal city of Turnovo

These epithets are not an over-elaborate wordage, but rather a late fourteenth-century description of the capital city of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by Euthymius, Patriarch of Bulgaria. The Byzantines also treated the city with respect, dignifying it as 'the largest', 'the most sightworthy' and 'the most impregnable' beyond the Haemus [the Balkan Mountains]. Callistus I, Patriarch of Constantinople ranked it second in the world behind only Constantinople.

The remains of Bulgaria's medieval capital are situated on the naturally defended hills Tsarevets, Trapezitsa, Momina Krepost shaped by the scenic meanders of the Yantra River. A mighty Byzantine fortress was built on Tsarevets after the fourth century; still, the successful uprising against the Romaioi in 1185 gave a strong impetus for construction. The Asen dynasty arduously constructed their capital city. Tsarevets

was the heart of the fortification with its set of walls covering an area of more than 100,000 sq. m. Within the walls were the temporal and spiritual authorities: the king and the patriarch lived in the two inner castles. The royal church and the Throne Room were decorated with magnificent mosaics and murals, and the principal church of the Bulgarian Kingdom, the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Ascension of Christ towered over everything else.

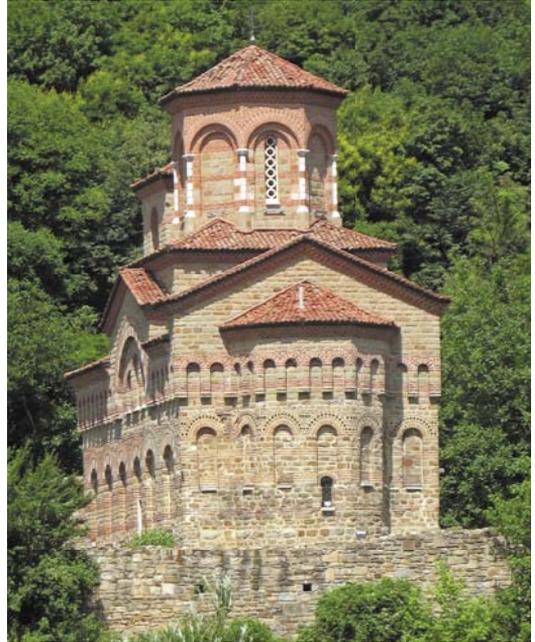
The estates and the manor houses of Bulgarian highest-ranking nobility were supposedly on the Trapezitsa fortified hill. The quarters Nov Grad [the New City], Frank Hisar [the hub of the West-European merchants with their own catholic church in Gothic style], huge Jewish and Armenian colonies were located in the foothills around the fast-flowing Yantra. Nov Grad was the largest one with still extant beautiful churches of the



An earthenware bowl, Turnovo



A ring with precious gemstones and a gold coin of King Ivan Asen II, Turnovo

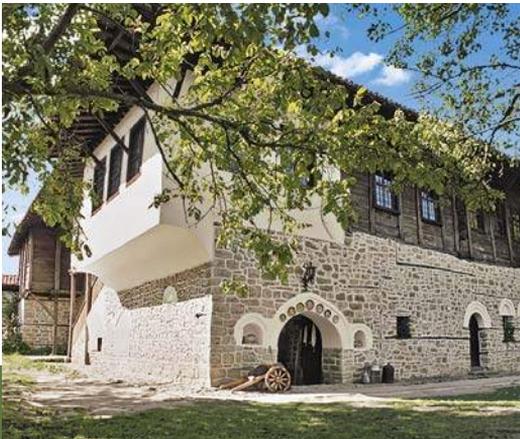


The Church of St Demetrius, Veliko Turnovo

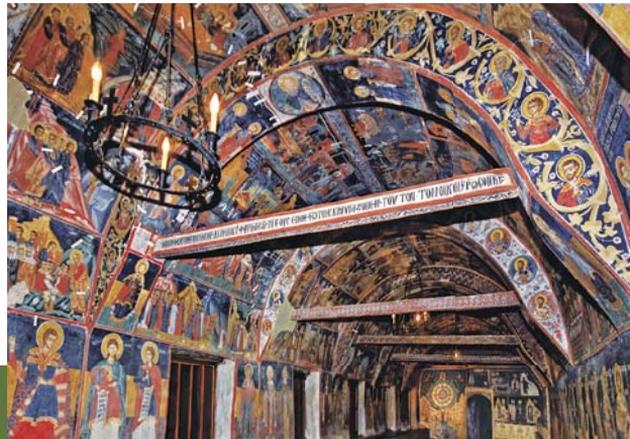
Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, Sts Peter and Paul and St Demetrius.

The splendid capital city of Bulgaria was captured, sacked and plundered by the Ottomans on 17 July 1393. Some of the quarters survived in the following centuries, yet Christians opted for a hill four kilometres away from Tsarevets to build the village of Arbanassi. Many multi-storey stone

houses were constructed between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the splendid churches of the Nativity, the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, St Demetrius, St George, St Athanasius, St Nicholas and of the Theotokos. They were reconstructed, overpainted and decorated on many occasions over the years to become a real treasure trove of ancient art.



The Constantsaliev's mansion, Arbanassi, 12<sup>th</sup> c.



The Church of the Nativity, murals, Arbanassi



The medieval town of Cherven

There is a scenic spot in the northeast of the vast expanse of the Danubian Plain: the canyons sculpted over the course of the millennia by the Rusenski Lom River and its tributaries. One of these, the Cherni Lom, makes an almost complete U-turn and the horseshoe-shaped meander closes off a steep hill on all sides. Impregnable Cherven, one of the most important Bulgarian towns in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is perched on it. It was built over the ruins of an earlier Byzantine



One of the main towers in Cherven



A church in Cherven

fortress and the remains of its battlements and turrets were directly incorporated into the medieval stronghold. A castle was constructed atop the hill within the walls and fortified subtowns (sub-urbs) mushroomed outside of the walls.

The city has been through many vicissitudes: in the early fifteenth century, it fell to and was reduced to ashes by the Tatars, the curse of that time. Later, however, Bulgarian kings completely rebuilt it even more beautiful and majestic. The Ottomans brought an end to the history of the town by seizing it in the late fourteenth century.

Cherven offers perfect opportunities for sightseeing a Bulgarian medieval town of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With its many beautiful churches, residential buildings and complex fortified facilities the town was just like any other city in Western and Central Europe. Stone two-, three- or more-storey houses stood on either side of dead-end narrow streets

closed at one end by the castle walls. Big public buildings with stone benches for the noblemen and the elders along the walls were unearthed in the central square.

The unbelievably river canyons attracted also hermit monks in the Middle Ages. Tens of rock monasteries in caves, natural or hewn in the steep rock faces, are seen as far as the Danube. The most famous of them is the Ivanovo Rock Monastery on the Rusenski Lom River, one of the Bulgarian UNESCO World Heritage Sites. With its stunning and perfectly preserved frescoes its catholicon is a classical example of the sublime style of the fourteenth-century Orthodox art. Presently, Ivanovo is a historic and nature reserve, where beside the cultural landmarks, the unique flora and fauna is preserved. There one feels taken as if by magic back to the past of the Bulgarian lands, breaking away from the twenty-first century for a while.



The Monastery of Basarbovo near Ruse on the Danube



Ivanovo Rock-hewn churches



*The Last Supper*, the rock-hewn Church of the Theotokos



Murals, 14<sup>th</sup> c., Ivanovo Rock-hewn churches

# 15 THE HOLY MONASTERY OF RILA AND THE GOD-BUILT MELNIK



Rila Monastery with the Khrellyo's keep

St John of Rila is Bulgaria's main saint, who after living for years as a hermit moved to a cave in the depths of the luxuriant forests of the Rila Mountains. It was where a monastery was founded as early as the tenth century, which grew much larger after the fourteenth century. Presently, extant is the five-storey Khrellyo's keep (23 m in height), erected in 1334–1335 and remarkable for its fourteenth-century magnificent frescoes at the Chapel of the Transfiguration on the upper floor.

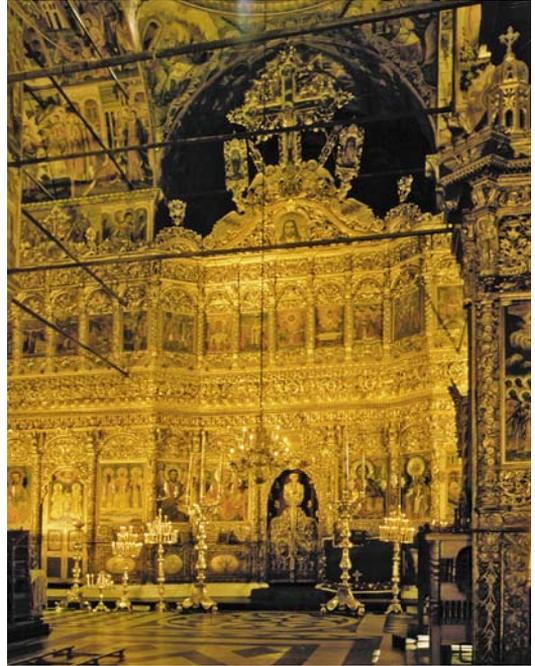
In the nineteenth century, master builders, flocked from across Bulgaria and three decades constructed the Rila Monastery to give it its present-day appearance. Two gates, that of Samokov and that of Dupnitsa, connect the monastic cloister with the outside world. The cells and guest rooms occupy four storeys, beautifully decorated with stairways, columns and loggias. The centre of the monastery undoubtedly is the three-nave five-

domed Church of the Theotokos, built in 1837, the apotheosis of the Bulgarian National Revival period and the incipient national upsurge. It was painted by the best icon painters of the period, including 1,200 scenes and individual images. The gilded wooden fretwork iconostasis is an exquisite piece of woodcarving.

If there is still time for more impressions after the visit to the Rila Monastery, one should pop along to the ruins of a medieval town, which was closely associated with the cloister in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, reaching it by Strouma Motorway. In a charter of the time, the smallest of all the Bulgarian contemporary towns is referred to as *'God-built'*. At the time the town was nothing short of a miracle of the art of fortification. Despotes Alexis Slav, a cousin of King Kalyoyan, contributed extensively to the development of the town.



Murals, the Church of the Theotokos



The iconostasis of the Church of the Theotokos



Murals, 14<sup>th</sup> c., Chapel of the Khrellyo's keep

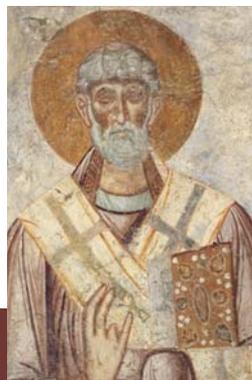
Due to its impregnability the castle counted on the sheer rock walls, rather than being enclosed within built walls. Still, there was an area entirely protected by strong walls, i.e. the inner keep in the southwestern part of the plateau. It was the place of last refuge when defending the inner stronghold. Yet, Despotēs Alexis had another, much more comfortable residence, the so-called boyar's mansion, relatively well-preserved at the foot of the fortress; some parts of its walls have

survived, still standing up to 10-12 m high. It is in fact a manor, where beside the apartments there was a chapel, outbuildings and even a wine cellar, where the popular wine of Melnik was stored.

Tens of churches towered over the medieval Melnik with the Church of St Nicholas and the Monastery of the Most Holy Mother of God of the Cave (Spileotissa) shining among them. The excavations uncovered even their bells, the earliest across Europe.



The boyar's mansion, Melnik



The Church of St Nicholas, murals, Melnik



A church bell, 13<sup>th</sup> c., Melnik

# MAP

## 15 MUST-SEE HISTORIC LANDMARKS

IN BULGARIA





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