

“ANCIENT MONUMENTS IN THE CROSS - BORDER REGION SERRES - BLAGOEVGRAD”

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We begin our journey from the **ancient city of Amphipolis**, located at the mouth of the Struma River, along the north Aegean coast.

In the area of Nine Roads opposite Amphipolis there was an important ancient settlement, an important crossroad center in antiquity since the time of the Iron Age. Appreciating the important strategic importance of this region the Athenians managed to found their colony Amphipolis in 437/436 BC after two failed attempts.

The city was built high on a hill and on both banks of the Struma River, from where it took its name. The city controlled the whole region along the Struma River, part of the ancient road, known during the Roman era as Via Egnatia which led to the interior of ancient Thrace. Amphipolis also controlled gold and silver mines in Pangaion Mountain.

Perennial archaeological research has revealed important parts of the ancient city. Among them are sections of the outer and inner fortified wall, five of the fortress gates, the ancient bridge over the Struma River, the gymnasium, the sanctuaries of Attis, Clio, Thesmophorion.



1. *The Thesmophorion*

Five spectacular early Christian basilicas were studied in the Acropolis of the town.



2. *An early Christian basilica from the Acropolis of the town.*

Residential complexes of the ancient city dating back to the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods have also been studied.

The necropolis of the town were revealed and studied outside the fortified wall and several monumental tombs of Macedonian type were found there.



Among them the monumental tomb beneath the Kasta mound shines with the greatest power. It is located east of the ancient town. A monumental staircase with sixteen steps leads to the first room where two marble sphinx are located at the entrance.

3. Sphinx from the entrance of the tomb. Photographer Katerina Peristeri.

The floor is decorated with stone geometric flooring. Two majestic caryatids on a marble pedestal can be seen in the second premise. In the third premise behind the caryatids there is an antique mosaic presenting the scene:



God Pluto abducts Kore-Persephone to the underworld. According to the mosaics and sculptural decoration the tomb dates back to the last quarter of the 4th century BC. A monumental marble gate leads to the fourth room where the main burial chamber of the monument is located.

4. A statue of the lion on the top of the mound which today is located next to the modern bridge of the Struma River

Archaeological Museum of Amphipolis



5. Archaeological Museum of Amphipolis. Exterior. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov



6. Archaeological Museum of Amphipolis. Interior. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

It is located inside the outlines of the ancient city of Amphipolis. The most important exponents in the museum are the prehistoric and Thracian pottery, gold jewellery from Amphipolis necropolis, a small ceramic sculpture from the Classical and Hellenistic period -images of Aphrodite and Eros, of Cybele and Attis. Special attention is given to the marble burial steles from the Hellenistic period, as well as the marble votive plates dedicated to the Dioscuri and the river god Strymon, the Great goddess Cybele and the Thracian horseman.

Among the epigraphic monuments, the law of the Amphipolis gymnasium, which is preserved in a very good condition, should be noted. The museum has a rich collection of red and polychrome Hellenic ceramics, terracotta figures, as well as monuments of jewelry dating from the Classical and Hellenistic epochs.

A special accent in the exposition is placed on a silver reliquary with a golden olive wreath, which probably belonged to the Spartan commander Brasidas who died here in battle with the Athenians in 422 BC, and a golden wreath coming from a male burial.



7. The silver reliquary and the golden wreath the Spartan officer Brasidas



8. A golden wreath of oak leaves.

We continue our journey to the north to the ancient and medieval city of Serres.

Serres was first mentioned as Siris by the Greek historian Herodotus, the father of history, in the 5th century BC. It is also mentioned as Siras by Titus Livius as Siras, as well as by other ancient authors. The city had an important geo-strategic location on the road along the Struma River which in ancient times was navigable up to Kerkini Lake. During the Roman era the city was mentioned in literary sources as Sirra, Sirraion. During the Byzantine era



Serres is known as a big, strong and rich city, the capital of the Theme of Strymon. The most famous monument of the Byzantine era in Serres is the tower of the Acropolis of the city. It is known as the Tower of Orestes. It served as a donjon - a place for the last defense of the fortress defenders.

9. The tower- donjon at the Acropolis of Serres. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov



The church of St. Nicholas at the Acropolis of Serres also dates from the Byzantine era (XII century AD). It functioned as a cemetery temple with a crypt.

10. St. Nicholas church at the Acropolis of Serres. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov



The church of St. Theodor Tyron and Theodore Stratelates known as the old Metropolis is very interesting as an architectural monument from the Byzantine era. It is considered to be the most important cultural and historical monument in Serres. The temple functioned as a metropolitan church throughout the Byzantine period and later.

11. Serres. The old Metropolis. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

The temple of St. Georgios Kryoneritis is also a medieval Byzantine church. In 1384 it was donated to the monastery of St. Yoan Prodromos (Ioannou Prodromou) and is still under its jurisdiction. The monumental painting and the icon in the temple refer to the Revival period.

Archaeological Museum of Serres

The Archaeological Museum "Bezisten" is located on "Eleftheria" square of Serres. The building dates back to the 15th century.



12. Serres. The Archaeological Museum "Bezisten"

After being restored and renovated, it is now functioning as an archaeological museum where the archaeological finds from Serres district of all periods are located. A special place in the exposition is dedicated to the tomb reliefs of the Roman era. They are a specific group representing the Roman portrait in the region and they show close contacts of culture from the Roman era with the region of Middle Struma (the regions of modern cities Sandanski and Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria).



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13. Tombstone reliefs. Roman age. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov



Particularly impressive are the Early Christian and Byzantine exhibits from the town of Serres, Most notably among them are the marble icon of Christ and the twelfth-century mosaic of St Andrew the Apostle. The icons come from the old cathedral of Serres.

14. St. Andrew the Apostle. A mosaic from the old cathedral. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

We continue our journey north. We cross the Greek-Bulgarian border at Promachonas / Kulata and head for the late Roman city at the modern town of Sandanski. The ancient city lies under the modern one. The earliest Thracian settlement here arose around the mineral springs in the 2nd millennium BC. The region falls into the tribal territory of the Thracian tribe Medi from which Spartak comes - the leader of the greatest slave rebellion in the Roman Empire in 73-71 BC. In the 2nd and 3rd century AD the settlement was given the status of a city. In the 3rd-4th century the Roman city at modern Sandanski occupied 20 hectares of land and was fortified with a fortress wall. Many researchers now identify it as the ancient city of Parthopolis.

In the 6th century AD the Roman town at Sandanski is one of the earliest and most significant episcopal centers in the territory of Bulgaria. Archaeological studies have revealed 7 early Christian basilicas. With its grandiose architecture and exceptionally rich artistic decoration the Episcopal Complex is the most representative ensemble in the ancient city of Parthopolis in the 5th - 6th centuries.



15. The Episcopal Basilica. A view from the south.

The Episcopal Basilica has an atrium (inner courtyard with a well) and a narthex. There is a well-preserved pulpit, an altar, and a synthronon with three rows of seats in the naos. The complex also includes a baptistery which is remarkable for its shape and size.



16. The Episcopal Basilica. Interior.

The martyrium is one of the most important discoveries in the Episcopal Complex. It is placed in the northwestern part of the complex and has a richly decorated altar table with niches for the preservation of relics and a spring with holy water. Magnificent mosaics in opus tessellatum and opus sectile style were found here.

Archeological museum of Sandanski

The Archaeological Museum of Sandanski was founded in 1936. Today, the museum has a 400 m² exhibition area, spread over two floors in three exhibition halls.



17. Archeological museum of Sandanski

Exhibits of prehistory and antiquity are presented in the two halls on the second floor. The first floor is situated above the foundations of the Early Christian Basilica from the 5th century, known as the Basilica of Bishop Yoan.

18. A floor mosaic from the Bishop's Basilica. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

In the museum there is a unique collection of Roman gravestone marble plastic art (1st - 3rd century) typical for the Middle Struma river valley. Real masterpieces of antique art are the steles of Julius Maximus, of Asclepius, the gift stele of Flaviana Philocratia and others. The collection has also various votive steles dedicated to Artemis, Heracles, Zeus and Hera, the local deity Teos Selenos and others, as well as statue replica of a famous copy of Aphrodite.



19. A votive stele of Artemis. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov



20. A statue of Aphrodite. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

We continue our journey north against the Struma River. A fortified late antique building was studied archeologically by the Regional Historical Museum of Blagoevgrad 16 km west of Blagoevgrad near the village of Drenkovo.



21. A fortified late antique building near the village of Drenkovo, Blagoevgrad municipality.

The region has been populated since the prehistoric age. A road linking the valleys of the rivers Struma and Vardar was passing along the Drenkovska River during the Late Antiquity. This road guarded the monumental square fortified building located south of the village of Drenkovo. It is equipped with semi-round towers in its four corners. The building was constructed in the typical of the late-Roman fortress Opus Mixtum style meaning "mixed work".

Regional History Museum of Blagoevgrad

The museum was founded in 1952 year. It has a well-established structure consisting of departments of „Archaeology“, „Ethnography“, „Bulgarian lands from the 15th to the beginning of the 20th century“, „New and Modern History“, „Nature“, „Art department“, „Funds“, „Public Relations“, modern laboratories for preservation and restoration.



22. Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad



The Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad has a big collection of early Neolithic clay stamps - pintaderi. It is the largest in Europe. The most significant clay stamps are exhibited in the „Prehistory and Antiquity“ hall.

23. A clay stamps - pintadera. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

Unique samples of Thracian weapons from the region of the Western Rhodopes are exhibited. The famous ancient inscription from Skaptopara is presented here. It testifies about the Thracian-Roman settlement near the warm mineral springs preceding Blagoevgrad. In the same hall are exhibited some of the



best samples and collections originating from the region of Southwest Bulgaria and owned by the museum - Thracian, Hellenic and Roman ceramics, metal vessels and tools of labor dating back to the antiquity, reconstructions of antique crafts and ancient Thracian funerary monuments.

24. Thracian ceramics. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

There is a rich collection of tombstones from the Roman era. In the Middle Struma valley, they form a very characteristic group which differs to a great extent from the monuments in the rest of Bulgaria, both in their size and shape, as well as in the depictions in the relief field. They find parallels in the Roman tombstones kept in the museums of Sandanski and Serres.



25. Tombstones. Thracian-Roman era. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

Unique clay colored masks of Satyr and Bacchantes (known also as maenads) who were members of the retinue of Dionysus - the god of wine and festivity are presented in the last showcase of the Prehistory and Antiquity hall.

Monuments from the Early Christian era originating from the region are also exhibited.



26. An altar barrier and mosaics from an early Christian church. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov

ORTHODOX CULTURE IN CULT MONUMENTS ALONG THE STRUMA RIVER VALLEY, BLAGOEVGRAD DISTRICT, BULGARIA AND SERRES, GREECE

The valley of the Struma River and its adjacent areas offer extremely rich opportunities for religious tourism. Starting from the mouth of the river in the Republic of Greece, the first place to visit is the Monastery of the Holy Mary Eikosifoinissa.

Monastery of the Holy Mary Eikosifoinissa in the Pangaion mountain

The Monastery of the Holy Mary Eikosifoinissa is a majestic medieval monastery. It is located 6 km northeast of Kormishta village and is reached by beautiful curves on the road through the Pangaion Mountain. According to various legends the monastery was founded in the 5th or 6th centuries. The great renovation of the monastery happened in the nineteenth century when the main church was restored and the clock tower was erected.



1. Monastery of the Holy Mary Eikosifoinissa

The frescoes in the Katholicon (the main church) are of particular value. They are painted by Matthias Ioanou and his assistant - the monk Ananias. The greatest value - object of worship is the miraculous icon of Holy Mary Eikosifoinissa.

Monastery of St. John the Forerunner (Prodromos), Serres

Traveling north along the main road we reach the town of Serres. There is another holy monastery in the city surroundings - the monastery of St. John the Forerunner (Prodromos). It is located 10 km northeast of the town of Serres, at the foot of Menikio Mountain. The monastery was founded by Ioannikios. In the period from 1457 to 1462 the holy cloister accommodated Gennadius Scholarius, the first patriarch after the fall of Constantinople who died and was buried in the monastery.



2. Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, Serres - the main church



Monastery of St. George Kryoneritis, Serres

The church frescoes are performed in different periods and by different icon-painters. The donors' portraits are painted on the outer west wall of the temple.

3. *Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, Serres - frescoed portraits of the two donors with „Deisis” („supplication „) between them*



Museum of the icon in Serres

After visiting the monastery of St. John the Forerunner you can ask the kind nuns to show you the monastery of St. George Kryoneritis in the town of Serres which is under their management. The monastery of St. George Kryoneritis is located in the eastern district of Serres - Agii Anargiri (Holy Unmercenaries). It is called Kryoneritis (Freshwater), because of the spring that was once located near it.

4. *Monastery of St. George Kryoneritis - view from northwest*



A large number of icons, altar doors and church plates from a number of temples in the region are located in Ecclesiastical Museum in Serres. Icons from the Renaissance period (18th and 19th centuries) predominate. These high-professional works are real pleasure for the visitor.

5. *Ecclesiastical Museum in Serres. Photographer Krum Ivanov*

The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou



The village of Ano Vrontou is located 20 km away from Serres. The church of St. Dimitar was built in 1835.

6. *The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou - the western facade with an open gallery*

The names of the donors are listed on it. In 1860 the school where the first teachers were monks from the Serres monastery of St. John Prodromos was built. Ten years later (1870), the bell tower was built. The church is a three-nave basilica without a dome. The interior of the temple is covered with marble slabs. Frescoes are located only in separate parts of the temple. The temple has one of the most beautiful wood-carved iconostasis.



7. *The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou - a general view of the interior decoration*

The bishop's throne and the throne in the altar are decorated with rich carving. The icons in the temple are painted with high professional skills.

The church of St. Elijah the Prophet in Achladochori

We head north after we leave Serres and continue our trip to the village of Achladochori. It is situated between Siderokastro and the Bulgarian border, located between Mount Orbelos from the north and Vrontoto from the south. The church was built during the period from 1867 to 1870 with money and material means, as well as with voluntary work and under the direction of the Bulgarian municipality. The temple impresses with its imposing architecture.



It is the largest monumental cult building in Serres. The church is a three-nave dome basilica with a floor. To the east it ends with pentagonal conchas (five-pointed protruding arches).

8. *The church of St. Elijah the Prophet in Achladochori - View from southwest with the bell tower*

The frescos in the temple were painted in 1877 by an unknown icon-painter. There are scenes from the life and wonders of Jesus Christ. There is an image of Christ the Almighty in the dome. On the western wall on the railing, the traditional for this part of the temple scene Assumption of the Virgin is located. The composition of the „The Judgment Day” is on the southern wall but unfortunately it is in a very bad condition and needs restoration. Outside, above the southern entrance is the scene”Ascension of St. Elijah”

After enjoying the Revival architecture, frescoes and icons in the Republic of Greece, we cross the Promachonas - Kulata border check-point and head to the Revival Orthodox monuments in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Melnik

We first head towards the town of Melnik, the smallest town in Bulgaria which attracts tourists with preserved medieval and Renaissance architecture. It is located in the southwestern slopes of Pirin, 22 km southeast of town Sandanski.

Melnik- the church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker



The church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker is located in the cultural and historical reserve of the city. As we enter the temple you can see a part of the medieval masonry. The church was reconstructed into a pseudo basilica in 1756. In the nineteenth century it was renovated with an outside gallery from the north and a female ward (emporion).

9.The church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in Melnik - the western entrance

The church of St. Antonius in the town of Melnik

The church of St. Antonius is situated close to the church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. It was built in 1869 which is visible from an inscription above its western door. The decoration from 1881 was painted by Lazar Argirov - an icon-painter from Melnik. It is interesting that they used the temple as a healing place for people with mental issues. The sick people were brought and chained to a column to restore their health. They stayed overnight at certain holidays when the God’s mercy was the most significant. This way St. Antonius evicted the demons from the mentally ill. The chain around the column to which they tied them has been preserved until today.



10.The church of St. Antonius in Melnik - the column to which they tied mentally ill people

The Church of St. George in the village Zlatolist

After seeing two churches in Melnik we continue to the village of Zlatolist. It is located 16 km southeast of the town of Melnik. An inscription above the temple’s apse reveals that the church of St. George was built in 1857. The temple is a three-nave and one-apse pseudo-basilica which is deeply buried in the ground. The frescoes were from 1876 and were painted by Teofil Minov. Among the sinners is a ploughing man in harness who is punished for ploughing somebody else’s land.

Rozhen monastery “Nativity of the Virgin”

After seeing the church in Zlatolist, we head to the biggest sanctuary in the Blagoevgrad region - Rozhen Monastery „Nativity of the Virgin”. It is located 8 km east of the town of Melnik. The construction of a part of the temple and surrounding buildings dates back to the 15th century. The frescoes in the lunettes (the niches) date from 1597. They are above the two entrance gates of the temple and depict Christ sitting on a throne, surrounded by the apostles



and Holy Virgin with the Child, surrounded by prophets, foretelling her life. Two remarkable for the facade decoration compositions - „The Judgment Day” and „The ladder of St. John Climacus with the Christian virtues” are painted on the external southern wall of the covered church gallery in 1611.

11.Rozhen monastery “Nativity of the Virgin”- the western wall with the compositions „The Judgment Day” and „The ladder of St. John Climacus”

They ended with its complete repainting in the period 1727-1732 by the icon-painters Teohari and Nicola who left their signature on the picture of the Assumption.



The miraculous icon of St. Virgin Mary is the monastery's main attraction for thousands of believers and tourists. The temple feast of the Rozhen Monastery is the Nativity of St. Virgin Mary (Virgin Mary's Day) on September 8th. After the liturgy a litany procession with the icon goes around the monastery temple and blessing of holy water takes place under the old monastery vine.

12. Rozhen monastery "Nativity of the Virgin" - part of the festive liturgy and blessing of holy water

Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in the town of Blagoevgrad

After visiting Bansko, we return on E-79 road and head for the regional town of Blagoevgrad. In religious term, the Metropolitan Church Presentation of the Virgin Mary is the most precious monument in it. The church is located in the central quarter of Varosha. You can judge by the commemorative sign above the front door that the construction of the church took place from 1840 to 1844.



13. Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad - exterior view. Photographer Krum Ivanov

In the open arcade some moral-didactic scenes are located.

As we enter the church, we see its iconostasis standing before our eyes. It was probably done between 1844 and the early 1850s by the great masters of the Samokov art school Atanas Theladur and Stoycho Fandakov. More than 80 icons, painted mainly during the period 1854-1856, are preserved in the temple, most of which are located on the iconostasis and are made by representatives of Samokov and Bansko Art Schools.

The church of St. Dimitar in the village of Padesh

If we have more time, we can walk around the city to enjoy the small parish temples in the region. One of the suggested directions is to the villages of Padesh and Leshko.

The church of St. Archangel Michael in Leshko

The village of Leshko is 4 km away from its neighboring village of Padesh and

19 km southwest of Blagoevgrad. The church of St. Archangel Michael was built in 1816 with a main donor Stoyan. In 1889 the interior of the church was completely frescoed by the late representatives of Bansko Art School Mihalko Golev and Dimitar Sirleshtov. Outside on the southern wall of the open narthex, there are scenes with moral-didactic content which are one of the most commented by the representatives of the art sciences. They are: "The sorceress, who milks the Devil instead of the Moon" as well as her punishment - two devils pulling out her tongue with pliers; a scene from the Apocalypse - the seven-headed beast and the harlot; "The righteous and sinful confessions", as well as stories of „Mortal sins" and their punishments. One of the highly influential images of Death is here and it should never be missed.



14. The church of St. Archangel Michael in Leshko - "The sorceress is milking the Devil"

The church of St. John the Forerunner in the village of Bistritsa

Another interesting temple is the church of St. John the Forerunner in the village of Bistritsa. The village is located 10 km northeast of Blagoevgrad.



The church of St. John the Forerunner was built in 1872 in the Dubova neighborhood. The temple was built after the dream of grandma Dacha (Daffina), which she received when she was a little girl. The Prophetess is the main organizer of the construction, and as a courtesy her donor portrait is painted outside on the western wall, and the parishioners honor her having her grave east of the temple apse.

15. The church of St. John the Forerunner in the village of Bistritsa - a donor portrait of grandma Dacha (Daffina)

In 1882-1883 the representatives of Bansko Art School painted the interior of the temple. Along with the canonical scenes, artists paint scenes which became popular in the nineteenth-century such as The Wheel of life, parts of the Apocalypse



16. The church of St. John the Forerunner in the village of Bisritsa - The Wheel of Life , etc.

The church of St. Dimitar in the village of Marulevo

The village of Marulevo is situated near Blagoevgrad in the southwest foothills of Rila Mountain and it is 14 km southeast of Blagoevgrad. The church of St. Dimitar, located in the center of the village, was built in 1860 with the donations and voluntary work of the local population. The walls of the church were painted in 1893-1895 by Michalko Golev and Dimitar Sirleshtov, a representative of Bansko Art School. Many of the compositions typical of these icon-painters from Bansko are presented here, such as Six-Day



17. The church of St. Dimitar in the village of Marulevo- "The Eviction from paradise" scene

Women-Saints, as well as the rare scene St. Archangel Michael binding Satan.

The church of St. Elijah in the village of Selishte

Going west to the nearby border with the Republic of Northern Macedonia, we can visit three churches in the villages of Selishte, Drenkovo and Logodash.

The village of Selishte is located 9 km west of Blagoevgrad. The church of St. Elijah was built here in 1862-1864. It is a spacious three-nave pseudo-basilica with a gallery and an over-arched middle nave supported by 4 columns. The temple was painted entirely in 1889. The iconographic program includes traditional scenes. The Judgment Day composition is located inside the naos.



18. The Church of St. Elijah in the village of Selishte - the Judgment Day composition

The theme is continued (behind the southern entrance) by an illustration of a chapter of Revelation of Saint John the Theologian and 16 scenes of the torture of sinners in Hell.

The church of St. Dimitar in the village of Drenkovo

To the northwest of the road to the Republic of Northern Macedonia, we turn to the village of Drenkovo. It is located 13 km west of Blagoevgrad. The church of St. Dimitar was built in 1890 in the Markovska area. The ceilings, the mural paintings, the iconostasis, the pulpit, the bishop's throne, the balcony railing, and the proskynetarion have a real artistic value.

The church of St. Archangel Michael in the village of Logodazh

Continuing from Selishte to the border with the Republic of Northern Macedonia, we reach the village of Lagodazh. It is located 3 km away from Selishte and 12 km west of Blagoevgrad. The church of St. Archangel Michael was built in 1860 in one of its neighborhoods.



The walls of the church were painted in 1893-1895 by Michalko Golev and Dimitar Sirleshtov, a representative of Bansko Art School. On the western facade is painted the scene „Christ kills the Antichrist” which is rarely seen in the Orthodox iconography.

19. The church of St. Archangel Michael in the village of Logodazh - Christ kills the Antichrist

Rila Monastery of St. John Rilski

If you have enough time and desire to worship, you can also visit the largest monastery on the Balkan Peninsula - Rila Monastery of St. John Rilski. In this Bulgarian holy place, one of the most significant examples of folk genius in architecture, painting, wood-carving, and applied arts are preserved.

“MODELS OF ARCHITECTURE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO PRESENT ON THE VALLEY OF STRUMA RIVER”

- Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
- Brestovo Monastery “St. Archangel Michael”, Municipality of Simitly, Bulgaria
- Pirin village, Bulgaria
- Melnik, Bulgaria
- Serres, Greece

Blagoevgrad is the largest city in Southwest Bulgaria, the administrative center of Blagoevgrad District and Blagoevgrad Municipality. It is situated at the foot of the southwestern slopes of the Rila Mountain, in the valley of the Struma River, 100 km south from the capital Sofia. The city is located on the two banks of the Bistritsa river, just before its inflow into the Struma River. Besides the clear waters of the river, important factors for the development of the city were the mineral springs and the favourable central location of the city, situated between Sofia and Thessaloniki, Kyustendil and Razlog. About 35 km away from the city, in the upper course of the Bistritsa River, is located the ancient **Parangalitsa forest** - one of the most valuable reserves in Bulgaria. In 1973, it was proclaimed by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve.

The history of Blagoevgrad dates back to 10th century BC. The Thracian settlement Skaptopara (Upper Market) was founded around the mineral springs around 300 BC. This settlement has been associated with the Thracian tribe Denteleti who inhabited the upper valley of the Struma River. In the 1st century AD the Thracians were conquered by the Romans. A Roman settlement from 3rd-5th century has been discovered in 2017, near the village of Pokrovnik, about 3 km from Blagoevgrad. The establishment’s location did coincide with the planned route of Struma highway and it has been destroyed, with only a few of the excavated buildings being moved away from the road.

At the end of the 15th century today’s city, mentioned for the first time in a Turkish document from 1502 with the name of Gorna Dzhumaya, emerged near the hot springs. During the Ottoman rule, the city acted as an important fortification, which guarded the roads along the Struma valley to the south and the Bregalnitsa river /now in Republik of North Macedonia/to the west.

During the Bulgarian National Revival, at the end of the 16th century a quarter of Bulgarian christians was built on the eastern side of the Bistritsa river; it was named **Varosha**. The two-storey houses began appearing with shops accomodated on the ground floor and living quarters - on the second floor. The ground floor was mostly built of stone masonry, and the second one - of wood-



en columns and beams filled with mud and straw between them, or, in rare occasions, of clay bricks. The houses were usually opened towards the patios with spacious wooden verandas.

1. Varosha- Blagoevgrad
Photo: Katia Simeonova

Nowadays some of the houses in the neighborhood are used as studios for the local artists. Others are housing institutions for schooling children in a variety of subjects: music, fine arts, literature, mathematics.

One of the most interesting monuments in Varosha is the church „**Presentation of the Virgin**”. It was consecrated in 1844. The church is a three-nave basilica, with an apse on the east end. Artists from the two most famous art schools during the Bulgarian Revival - Bansko and Samokov - inscribed the walls of the temple in a traditional manner.



2. The Church “Presentation of the Virgin” - Blagoevgrad-
Photo: Katia Simeonova

On 5th October 1912 Blagoevgrad was liberated from the Ottoman rule. This set the foundations of the modern development of Gorna Dzhumaya, renamed in 1950 to Blagoevgrad in the name of Dimitar Blagoev.

Blagoevgrad is a home of dozens of primary and secondary schools, libraries, a college, two universities, a drama theater, a chamber opera, a museum. Here is founded the Pirin Folk Ensemble. Nowadays visitors of the town are mostly interested and fascinated by the Varosha Revival neighborhood with its unique Bulgarian architecture, the Church “Presentation of the Virgin” and the Museum of History; the Georgi Izmirliiev’s Central Square with the Municipal Buildings, the Drama theater and the American University/South-west University as a model of contemporary Bulgarian architecture; square Macedonia with the Gotse Delchev monument and the building housing the Chitalishte and the Chamber Opera; the campus of the American University along the Bistritsa River; several preserved residential buildings from the beginning of the 20th century in the town center; park Bachinovo and park Hunting Lodge and many others. The oldest preserved buildings are those from the middle and the end of the 19th century but the city also offers good examples of modern architecture. In 1986-1987 the center of Blagoevgrad was largely renovated with

major construction activities being carried out. The American University in Bulgaria was founded in 1991 and since 1996 a modern campus has been built



along the Bistritsa River. The implementation of modern urban solutions resulted in the establishment of the modern city center with pedestrian streets and squares, shopping zones and green areas.

3. Regional History Museum - Blagoevgrad Photo: Katia Simeonova



4. The building housing the Chitalishte and Chamber Opera- Blagoevgrad Photo: Katia Simeonova



5. The central square in Blagoevgrad Photo: Katia Simeonova

Brestovski Monastery „St. Archangel Michael” (also called Troskovski) is located 20 km southwest of Simitli, in the surrounding lands of the village Brestovo, located in the Maleshevska mountain. The monastery is one of the oldest in southwestern Bulgaria; there is written evidence that it was founded in 1149. According to the descendants of priest Poggavrailov, Ivan Rilski was devoted to service in this monastery and has lived in the area for some time before being expelled from the local population.

During the Kropnitsa earthquake in 1904 the monastery was completely demolished. Soon after it was entirely restored for two years solely by volunteers and donations from the peasants. The iconostasis is preserved in its authentic form. Today the monastery is in possession of about 40 icons and church relics. The only surviving part of the former monastery complex - the church, was renovated externally in 2007 but its interior has not been restored yet. At present, the monastery is not active - the church is open only on major Christian holidays. Near the monastery (only 3 km away) there is an interesting natural landmark - the rock massif „Komatinica”.



Today the monastery is in possession of about 40 icons and church relics. The only surviving part of the former monastery complex - the church, was renovated externally in 2007 but its interior has not been restored yet. At present, the monastery is not active - the church is open only on major Christian holidays. Near the monastery (only 3 km away) there is an interesting natural landmark - the rock massif „Komatinica”.

6. Brestovski Monastery „St. Archangel Michael” Photo: pochivka.bg

The village of Pirin is situated in a mountainous region between the middle and south parts of the Pirin mountain. It is situated in the historical and geographical area of Murvashko, in a scenic field along the Pirin Bistritsa River. The village is about 2 km away from the main road, which connects the town of Gotse Delchev with the valley of Struma and the Kulata border checkpoint. In the 19th century the Pirin village was one of the major centers of medieval black metallurgy in Murvashko region. In these troubled times the poet Peyo Yavorov, was hiding from the Ottomans in a nearby cave, where he wrote his collection of „Hajduk’s yearnings”.



In the village of Pirin there are preserved houses from the Bulgarian National Revival period (19th century), but unfortunately, they are in poor condition. The main landmark is **St. Nicholas Church** from 1885 with its beautiful façade and remarkable interior.

7. The St Nicholas church

Melnik is the smallest town in Bulgaria with a population of only 385 inhabitants. According to archaeologists, the first inhabitants of these lands are the Thracian tribe Medi. Centuries later the Romans settled there, followed by

the Slavs who called their village Melnik. It is supposed that Melnik originated as a fortress for the protection of the Bulgarian-Byzantine border after the signing of the treaty between the two states in 864. Melnik has often changed its sovereignty due to its border location. In the period 11th-14th centuries Melnik has been under the jurisdiction of Bulgaria, the Byzantine Empire, the Nicaean Empire and even Serbia. At the beginning of the 13th century the history of Melnik was associated with the name of Despot Alexius Slav, who became an independent ruler and chose Melnik for his capital. The city was surrounded by fortified walls.

In 1395, Melnik fell under Ottoman rule. In the end of the 18th and early 19th century with the development of wine and tobacco production and the export of Melnik wine all over Europe began the development of the town. The most famous and rich family of merchants were the Greek family Kordopulov, whose house has been preserved to this day and has been converted into a museum. **The Kordopulov House** is the largest preserved house from the Revival period on the Balkan Peninsula. At that time the town started flourishing and became more populated. 70 churches, 3 all-male and 1 all-female schools were a sign of the prosperity of the population. There were 4 monasteries in the vicinity. In the second half of the 19th century Melnik's affluence started declining due to the fact that the main road shifted to the west following the valley of the Struma River. The inhabitants of the town moved to Serres, Blagoevgrad and other cities in the region.

On 17th October 1912, the town was liberated from the Ottomans, but a large part of the town was burned down. In 1968 Melnik was declared a town-museum and an architectural reserve. Nowadays, wine production is developed in each house, but tourism is the main means of livelihood.



8. Melnik Photo: Katia Simeonova

The Kordopulov House is the largest building from the Revival period in Bulgaria. It was built in 1754 and belonged to the rich Melnik Kordopulov family, who were working in wine production. The cellars carved in the rock under and behind the house, with their constant temperature and ventilation, were used for the preparation and aging of the famous Melnik wine. Located on a high cliff, it is visible from across the town, dominating the view with its beautiful proportions, extensive glasswork and impressive dimensions.



9. The Kordopulov house - Melnik Photo: Katia Simeonova

10. The Kordopulov house - interior Photo: Katia Simeonova

The Church of St. Nicholas is the largest and oldest church in Melnik. It is located in the central part of the St. Nicholas plateau. The eastern part of the church is preserved together with several elements of the interior. It was a three-nave basilica with three apses and three narthexes. The church was abundantly illustrated. The main frescoes were removed during the 30s and 40s of the 20th century, restored and exhibited in the Archaeological Museum in Sofia; separate panels are located in the crypt of the „St. Alexander Nevski” cathedral as well as in the Regional Museum in Blagoevgrad.



11. The Church of St. Nicholas, east façade - Melnik Photo: Katia Simeonova

The Church of Saint Anthony was built in 1765. They call it the „Church of Wonders” as according to the beliefs, if mentally ill people stay in the church overnight, they would be healed.

The church is a one-nave basilica built entirely of stone masonry topped with a wooden roof. The frescoes are quite interesting as they are not made ac-



According to the traditional canon. Instead of icons, the frescoes depict windows; the ceiling is also richly decorated. The church preserves valuable icons from the 19th century.

12. *The Church of St. Nicholas, east façade - Melnik*
Photo: Katia Simeonova

The town of Serres, the capital of the prefecture of the same name, is the second largest city in Central Macedonia region in Greece after Thessaloniki. Serres is a trendy, busy city and serves as the trading center of the region. Its wide streets and squares are dotted with many cafes, taverns and shops for a variety of goods; and the new and old town fuse in a delightful symbiosis. Founded in the 12th century BC, it is one of the oldest cities in Macedonia. Nowadays, there are over 40 churches and monasteries in Serres and its provinces.

The **Byzantine fortress and the ancient acropolis** are situated in the northern part of Serres, among the coniferous forest of Koulas. The acropolis was established in the 9th century, when, according to historical sources, a fort was built on the order of Emperor Nikifor Phoka in Serres. The ruins of the Serres acropolis are of great historical significance as they include one of the most remarkable protective structures in northern Greece - **the Tower of Orestes**. According to the clay inscriptions on its western wall, the tower was built in 1370 by Orestes, the guardian of the Serres fortress, at the command of Serbian King Stefan Dusan. At the northeastern end of the fortress, near the fortress wall, is the church „St. Nicholas „. It is a three-nave church with a single dome and an underground crypt and dates back to the first half of the 14th century. The old cathedral of St. Theodoroi / built in 1224 by the



ruler of Epirus - Theodor Angel Comminus/ is located at the foot of the Acropolis. It has a basilica-styled rectangular plan and magnificent mosaics, only a small part of which remain today. Another remarkable church is the Church of Agios Georgios Kryoneritis. It was built in the 13th century and houses several rare icons.

13. *The Byzantium fortress in Serres* Photo: Katia Simeonova



14. *The old cathedral of St. Theodoroi in Serres* Photo: Katia Simeonova

Serres was conquered by the Turks in 1383. During the Ottoman rule, the city experienced great economic growth and became a major trading center mainly for silk and cotton. The Turkish monuments in Serres are the Bezesten (Ancient Market), built in the 14th century, the mosque of Ahmed Pasha, built in 1492 near the stream of Saint Anargyri, the Zincirli Mosque, with the most beautiful marble pulpit, and the Serres Konak.

The **Bezesten** (The Medeval Market) was built in the 14th century as an enclosed and covered market. The building is a rectangular single-storey structure built from a mixed masonry of stone and ceramic tiles. It is topped by six spherical domes which were covered in lead years ago. The planning scheme and construction are remarkable for their strength and harmonic proportions. In 1970 the building was restored and turned into a museum. At present, it houses the Archeological museum of Serres.



15. *The Archeological Museum in Serres, interior* Photo: Katia Simeonova



16. The Archeological Museum in Serres Photo: Katia Simeonova

The Prefecture of Serres is a public building, one of the architectural sights of the Greek city of Serres. The building is located in the center of the city, on Merarchias Street. A decision to build a new structure was taken on 4th October 1891; it had to be funded by local donations and the state treasury. Hence, a request for funding was made to various state institutions and charitable foundations. The construction was completed on 24th May 1898. The Prefecture is a symmetrical two-storey building in neoclassic style and is used for administrative functions. Situated on one of Serres' city squares, it impresses the citizens and visitors with its neoclassical façade and its notable dimensions. Today the two-storey building is the seat of the administration (nomarchy) of the district unit of Serres.



17. The Prefecture of Serres Photo: Katia Simeonova

“FOLK CUSTOMS IN BULGARIAN-GREEK CROSS-BORDER REGION”

Masquerade games are one of the most traditional customs on the Balkans. In southwest Bulgaria and northern Greece these customs are mainly related to the New Year, which of course coincides with the beginning of the astronomical year and the increase of daylight after the winter solstice marked in the calendar with the holidays between Ignazden and Yordanovden.

Kukeri in Strumsko - Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

One of the places in southwest Bulgaria where you can see Kukeri ritual is Blagoevgrad. In Old Strumsko the Kukeri group walks around the neighborhood three times a year - on December 8, on Vassilyovden and on January 14, New Year's Eve in old style.

The most important walk is on Vassilyovden when all the participants in the carnival gather in the square in front of St. Dimitar church at a predetermined time and depart on the usual route. The procession is led by the musicians, priest, bride and groom.



Around them, the babugeri (another word for kukeri) dance, followed by the other personages. Their goal is to walk around all the houses in Old Strumsko to wish for health and prosperity in the New Year.

1. Kukeri, Strumsko. The usual road trough Strumsko

Finally they return to the square again to play their final dance in front of their waiting spectators.

The kukeri group consists of masked participants wearing several types of masks.



2-3. Kukeri, Strumsko, The Final dance

The most interesting and at the same time extremely expensive to make and to keep are the masks and costumes made of long hair goat fur. The color of the costumes varies from gray-white, dark brown to black.

An important part of the participants in the carnival procession are also the personages who re-create the image of an old man. Most often they are wearing a traditional costume. The men wear breeches, a shirt, a belt, and they must have an artificial hump on their back, they walk bent over and lame, leaning on curved long rods. The female personages are dressed in a traditional costume. They also walk bent over, but unlike men, they carry on their back a baby sling in which they have a baby (usually a doll) or agricultural products.



The faces of old men today are hiding behind comic rubber masks.

Among the main ritual personages in the masquerade group are also the bride and groom, as the re-creation of the idea of a wedding is an important part of the carnival. Their zoomorphic version is one or two bears led by a bear handler; they often mimic sexual poses and sexual acts.

4. Kukeri, Strumsko. The wedding procession

Another important participant in the Kukeri group is the priest, dressed in a priestly garment and a kalimavkion. In his hands he is holding a copper full of water and a bunch of box shrub or wild geranium, with which he blesses people.



5. Bears led by a bear handler



6. Gypsy belly dancers and other personages

Along with the personages mentioned above, the Kukeri group often includes gypsy belly dancers, masks from the modern reality such as nurses, doctors, singers, etc. Last but not least, we should mention that animals bred in Strumsko, usually donkeys, sometimes cocks, goats and others, are still part

of the carnival procession. Donkeys are usually pulling a plough, with which they are ploughing symbolically or the donkeys are harnessed to carts decorated with agricultural equipment and products.

Araps in Volakas, Greece

The New Year's celebrations in Greek village Volakas culminate on the 6th, 7th and 8th January, when Saint Jordan's day, Saint John's day and the Day of the midwife are celebrated.

People are in a cheerful mood on Ivanovden since the morning, because the Araps will come out on that day. By lunchtime, everyone gathers in the square where a meal of donated goat kid meat is traditionally prepared. Since the weather is cold and the streets are covered with snow, locals prepare wild bonfires and a big pot of hot tea for the frozen tourists who come from all over Greece and neighboring Bulgaria to watch the carnival.



If you prefer to look for the Araps rather than stay in the square, you have to go along the streets of Volakas. You will surely find them, gathered in a garage where they are preparing feverishly, because the preparation is not an easy job - it takes hours.

7. Araps, Volakas, Preparation for the masquerade

The masquerade group consists of two types of ritual personages - Araps and a bride with a groom. The Araps are men, bachelors and little boys dressed in a specific clothing - several layers of blankets are wrapped around their waists to look thick, an artificial hump is made on their back; they wear a long to the knees or ankles sleeveless jacket of woolen fabric, traditional shoes made of wild pig skin, the head and shoulders are covered with goat skin, and massive bells hang on the waist. The hands are bare, but painted in black. The face is also painted in black. To finish their appearance, the Araps put a wooden hammer at the front of the belt and a massive wooden sword, which they use as support while dancing. The bride and the groom (Tsaousis) are also men, but dressed in a traditional male and female costume.



8. Araps, Volakas, The bride and the groom dance with araps



9. Araps, Volakas

The Araps are ready at about 2-3 o'clock in the afternoon and they go to the center. Gathered in one place, they jangle, and the bride and groom dance between them. The main goal of Tsaousis is to protect the bride, but as she is provocative, and touching her brings luck and fertility throughout the year, everyone is trying to get closer to her. However, if someone reaches her, she grabs him with a kneading cloth, and the Araps approach and press the neck of the daredevil with their swords, then blacken his face. If you look closely at the photos, you will see black spots on the faces of all spectators.



The biggest challenge for spectators is to grab the small Araps. This is also the most risky action because it causes a raging anger in adults. If you hear a jangle, you should know that a daredevil has tried his luck, but shortly after that, the whole company has gathered around to punish him and expel him.

10. Araps, Volakas, spectator grabs the small Arap



11-12. Araps, Volakas, Araps punish the spectator who has tried to snatch the small Araps

Another important moment is when the bride disappears unnoticed. Immediately, there is someone to abduct her and to show her on the balcony of a pre-determined house, grabbing demonstratively the string of gold coins hanging on her chest. The groom gets angry and tries to get her back, and the Araps jangle threateningly and do not calm down until the culprit is brought and punished with the typical push of the swords on his neck.

Carnival Wedding, Volakas, Greece

On the 8th of January in Volakas a traditional wedding with all the accompanying rituals is performed; it is continuation of the masquerade that takes place on Ivanovden. In the past, the wedding was "sterile", i.e. the wedding couple consisted of two men. Nowadays, the ritual is updated and women are

actively involved. The biggest change is that a woman, not a man, is chosen for a bride. Today, the bride and the groom are selected beforehand and often are not residents of Volakas but are traditions fans coming from other settlements in Greece.

The wedding begins around noon and ends 3-4 later. Since the ritual is not recreated on a stage, traditionally there are three houses scattered around the village where the participants are getting prepared and the rituals related to the best man, the groom and the bride are performed. Thus the whole village becomes a stage of the wedding ceremony.

The wedding ritual begins at the groom's house where he gets dressed up in a traditional man's costume. All the members of his entourage - the brother-in-law, the musicians, etc., are also wearing traditional costumes. They walk around the houses in the form of a festive procession to invite to the wedding. You will recognize the invited by the piece of cotton in their hat.

At the same time, girls and women have gathered at the bride's house. They are part of the bride's entourage, so are the present tourists. Everyone is treated as a dear guest and enjoys "blaga rakiya" (hot and sweet brandy). At the bride's house you can see what the traditional wedding costume in Volakas looked like, and especially how the "veiling" of the bride is done. When she is ready, the participants gather around a table with ritual bread. The oldest woman blesses the bread, breaks it over the head of the future bride and then distributes it to the people.



13-14-15. Carnival Wedding, Volakas. Veiling the bride

The most important person in the wedding rituals in the past is the best man. Inviting the best man to the wedding is a very hard process - a procession by the groom invites him twice but he agrees and leaves when asked for the third time.

How is a best man invited to the wedding? An chain dance is danced in front of the groom's house, which grows into a festive procession - the musicians are walking in front, followed by the groom's brother-in-law carrying the wedding bann

er, followed by the parents, relatives and close friends. When they reach the best man's house and notify about the reason for their visit, the best man does not agree - the tradition requires him to refuse. That is why the procession goes back and after a short break they dance horo once more and go on the familiar route. The best man does not agree again and sends them away.



16. Carnival Wedding, Volakas. Wedding procession



He agrees when he is asked for the third time and then he invites the wedding procession to his house to treat and bless the attendees; then he leads a horo to the bride's home. However, when they arrive there, it turns out they cannot get in - the bride's girlfriends have locked the door and they do not let anyone in. Traditionally, the best man and the best woman have to go through this obstacle by paying the requested amount of money. Only then the bride can be taken out.

17. Carnival Wedding, Volakas. Best man and best woman have to go through the bride's door

Now the wedding procession continues to the church. When they arrive in the center of the village, a priest is waiting for them to perform a marriage ceremony. The priest has prepared a special Bible in which there are pictures of naked men and women instead of evangelical texts. To entertain the spectators, when he passes the Bible to the groom, he opens the picture of a naked man and when he approaches the bride he opens a picture of a naked woman. After the marriage, the guests go to greet the newlyweds, to give them gifts and to be blessed by the priest with the same illustrated Bible.



18. Carnival Wedding, Volakas. The marriage ceremony



19. Carnival Wedding, Volakas. Wild dances in front of groom's house

The final part of the ritual is related to the introduction of the young bride in the groom's house and wild dances.

Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa, Gotse Delchev district, Bulgaria

St. George's Day (Gergyovden) is one of the best spring holidays, coinciding with the beginning of the new agricultural and cattle-breeding year. The traditional man in the recent past honored it more than Easter, saying: Easter is a nice day, but St. George's Day is a lot nicer. In the past, and even today at some places, along with the Kurban (the sacrifice of a male lamb), which is obligatory on this day, special St. George's dances are playing, young people are swaying on swings, specially set up for the day, various rituals related to the herds are performed, etc.

St. George's Day marks the beginning of a new nature cycle, and as at any beginning, it is possible to predict what is going to happen during the year. In Breznitsa, a village in Gotse Delchev region, located at the foot of Pirin by singing over bunches on St. George's Day, it is intended to predict in a ritual-magical way what is to come next - whether you will be healthy, whether you will marry, whether you will travel a lot, and so on. For this purpose, women, especially girls, prepare bunches for themselves and for their relatives the day before the feast.

The bunches (small bouquets) consist of flowers which blossom on St. George Day, wild geranium and a specially picked and dried for that day flower, which the locals call small balls. It is necessary to add a mark to the bunch. The mark is an object entitled to a particular person. In the past, the marks were buttons, rings, necklaces and other household items. Today their variety is large and modern, ranging from various toys to objects that somehow characterize the one for whom the bunch is prepared.



20. Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa. Woman prepares bunches

21. Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa. Bunches are ready for the ritual

At nightfall, bunches are taken to a place, selected beforehand. They are put on a large rug and mingled to ensure randomness of the choice the next day. Mingled bunches are placed in a container with silent (malchana) water. The container is covered with a woolen apron and a mirror and is locked with a padlock. According to the tradition, it should be put under a rose bush for the night.



22. Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa. Young girl unlocks the padlock

23. Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa. The mirror ritual

Early the next morning, even before the sunrise, the women get together again. They sit around the vessel with bunches. The singers are in the front row and they sit in pairs because the singing of the songs is in two-parts. The girl who will be pulling out bunches sits on a low chair across them. The other women and children sit around. The girl covers her legs with a colorful rug, unlocks the padlock, pulls off the chains, takes the mirror and looks in it, and then she turns it around so that everyone can also look in the mirror. When the ground is lit by the sun, the singers start singing in two parts, and the girl pulls out the first bunch, lifts it up so that the mark can be seen and thus to recognize whose bunch it is.

This action is repeated again and again until all the bunches are pulled out.



24-25. Gergyovden in the Village of Breznitsa. Pulling out the bunches

“THE MUSICAL AND DANCE HERITAGE OF THE VILLAGES ACROSS THE STRUMA RIVER”

Musical heritage conveys a system of sacral meanings encoded in the image of music as a means of thinking and behaviour. The folklore heritage of different nationalities across Southeast Europe consists of similar melodic specifics, regardless of the historical transformations that are imposed on every nation. Is it possible that these musical elements are so common due to the conservatism of music and its origins? What is the global contribution of the population living in the border region of the country to the songs, to the instrumentarium, to the pulsation and the tonalities? The answers to these questions lead to the realization of numerous expeditions and scientific developments that would demonstrate the musical achievements of the local population.

For each and every person who would like to be touched by the magic of this everlasting art from the region we have made a selection of performers. All of them hold and preserve the authentic musical and dance traditions in the cross-border region of Bulgaria and Greece, situated along the Struma and Mesta rivers, from the region of Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria to the region of Serres, Greece.

Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dancing „Pirin” Blagoevgrad

The Pirin Folk Ensemble is emblematic for the Bulgarian folklore art. It unites musicians, singers, dancers who successfully recreate the folklore heritage and promote the beauty of the Pirin song, the variety of the costumes, the diversity of dance movements and rhythms not only from the region but also from all over Bulgaria. Each of their performances is an aesthetic „explosion” of folk art presented at concert venues around the world.



1. Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dancing „Pirin”, Blagoevgrad.

Ensemble Pirin's fairy scenes of music, songs, dancing and colour have been conquering prestigious halls around the world, such as Carnegie Hall (New York), Kennedy Center (Washington), halls in Chicago, Denver, San Francisco (USA), the Queen Elizabeth Theater (Toronto), Tchaikovsky Hall (Russia), Teatro Presidente Alvear (Buenos Aires, Argentina), and over 60 other countries around the world with over 6 million viewers and admirers of their art.



2. Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dancing „Pirin”, Blagoevgrad.

The ensemble has won dozens of international awards, including the Golden Plate (Nashville, USA) in 1982 and a Grammy in 1990 together with Marcel Sellier's „Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices”



3. Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dancing „Pirin”, Blagoevgrad.

South-West University „Neofit Rilski” - Student Folklore Ensemble

The Student folklore ensemble is a great combination of youth, professionalism and rich performance potential. For the past 25 years /established in 1994/ the ensemble „Neofit Rilski” has had more than 350 concerts both in Bulgaria and overseas. Furthermore, the ensemble has participated in a num-

ber of international festivals such as: World Student Folklore Festival „Golden Horn” (Istanbul, Turkey); International folklore kukeri festival, (Naoussa, Greece); International Student Arts Festival (Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria) as well as in festivals in France, Spain, Russia, Italy, Germany, etc.



4. South-West University „Neofit Rilski” - Student Folklore Ensemble. Photographer Krum Ivanovq PhD.

The vibrant picture of the Bulgarian folklore heritage of musical intonations, peculiar movements, colourful costumes and stunning emotion are skilfully recreated by the young performers. Ensemble „Neofit Rilski” translates

the heritage of traditional folklore into an influential contemporary art and is an ambassador of Bulgarian folklore art both in Bulgaria and around the world.



5. South-West University „Neofit Rilski” - Student Folklore Ensemble. Photographer Krum Ivanov, PhD.

The young performers have made a number of recordings for the Bulgarian National Television and are frequent guests in folklore shows and musical programs.



6. South-West University „Neofit Rilski” - Student Folklore Ensemble. Photographer Krum Ivanov, PhD.

Ensemble for folk songs and dancing „Nikola Vaptsarov”, Sandanski

The town of Sandanski maintains rich historical heritage and cultural traditions. The town is situated 60 km south from Blagoevgrad and offers its guests a pleasant climate, mineral springs, and opportunities for a satisfying and effective rest. The settlement dates back to the 2nd millennium BC and has archaeological sites from various historical periods - early Christian basilicas, an episcopal complex, decorative mosaic carpets and others. A leading institution for the preservation of the song and dance heritage is the Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dancing ‘Nikola Vaptsarov’, founded in 1948.



7. Ensemble for folk songs and dancing „Nikola Vaptsarov”, Sandanski.

The ensemble’s performers are amateurs who share the love for folklore songs; all of them possess delightful, beautiful voices. The intonation diversity, characteristic for this region, gives the singers great opportunities to express themselves. It also allows for a rich and meaningful repertoire which in itself provides the audience with an emotional and aesthetic experience.



8. Ensemble for folk songs and dancing „Nikola Vaptsarov”, Sandanski.

The ensemble participates in numerous international festivals and tours all around Europe: Macedonia, Greece, France (2009), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010), Turkey (2012), Czech Republic (2013), Italy (2017), etc. If one encounters the inspiring performances of the amateurs from Sandanski, one would come back for sure, listen to them again, and each time the performances will fill one’s soul with excitement and beauty.



9. Ensemble for folk songs and dancing „Nikola Vaptsarov”, Sandanski.



9a. Ensemble for folk songs and dancing „Nikola Vaptsarov”, Sandanski.

Choir VAMVAKOFYTO

The choir of Vamvakofyto in the village of Vamvakofyto, Serres was founded by Georgios Kaligas in 1999 within the framework of the Association of Cultural Activities. As a purpose of people’s activity within the choir can be identified the collection, recording, preservation and promotion of the traditional village songs with which many generations of the village have grown up. On the tunes of these songs the local people have danced in the neighbourhoods and on the squares of the village for many decades. These activities ceased in 2001 when the choir temporarily discontinued their events until 2013 when the choir re-established its function. However, this time the purpose of the choir is the entertainment of the audiences through singing and dancing, as well as the spread of comprehension of the musical culture of various regions of Greece and also of the neighbouring countries.



The choir collaborates successfully with the local authorities of the village and participates in its cultural calendar every year. The members of the choir currently count at 25 people.

10. Choir VAMVAKOFYTO.
Photographer Krum Ivanov, PhD.

The Association for the Cultural Heritage in Vamvakofytowas established in 1982 and its main direction has always been related to the dances, traditions and cultural characteristics of the area. Additionally to the choir, there is an adult dance ensemble currently part of the association, which performs in different cities around Greece as well as abroad.

A very interesting project is the organization of the local Carnival „Babugeri” which occurs yearly on the Sunday of SirniZagovezni.

The association Startsovites& friends „St. Mina”

The Startsovites association aims at spreading the traditions of the intangible cultural heritage of the region - local songs and dances, rituals and their practices. The association also engages in the cultural education of young people in order for them to study and preserve the cultural heritage of the region. Folklore allows us to understand the folk psychology of different societies and to enter into the world which would otherwise remain hidden and mysterious without the knowledge of people’s everyday life. The songs, legends, customs, feasts and costumes are the source of knowledge about the Being of people, about their faith and their stories. This knowledge possesses the capability of showing us a different angle and a whole unknown world of local people’s life.



11. The association Startsovites& friends „St. Mina”. Photographer Dr. Krum Ivanov, PhD.

In 1988 the association was also the home of a Byzantium choir. At present, the association holds dance classes for children and teenagers of all age groups as well as for adults with different levels of experience (from beginners to advanced). A cast of actors was also part of the association from 2011 to 2015.

The association’s dancing groups mainly perform on two-toned accompaniment. The accompaniment is performed by zurna musicians - from 2 to 4 people and 1 or 2 drum performers. Besides the authentic melodies, characteristic of their repertoire are also urban melodies, which are adapted to the instrumentation of the accompanying musicians.

The main activities of the association are the organization of the St. Mina’s Fair, which is celebrated on 11th November, as well as the so called summer bridal market „Niphopazaro”, which takes place at the Barbatanassi Square.

ProtiProodos’ Friends of Music Association

ProtiProodos’ Friends of Music Association was founded on 1st January 1925 during a historically difficult period for the Hellenic Republic, when the state was trying to recover after a number of national catastrophes.

Despite all the difficulties the Proti village, which administratively sits within the Serres municipal region, was a vital and numerous central settlement in the region. Its inhabitants were interested not only in securing their livelihood through tobacco cultivation but also in the spiritual and cultural development of the area.



12. ProtiProodos’ Friends of Music Association. Photographer Krum Ivanov, PhD.

Thus, a group of people highly devoted to the idea of cultural development in the area set up the ProtiProodos association for the purpose of musical education of the local community. Ever since the ProtiProodos’ Friends of Music Association has been active without any cease of function. The association is the home of a brass band and offers free music education to the young people from Proti (with classes in music theory and practice of various musical instruments). The Association also includes three dance ensembles and one choir. Its activities have been extremely important, influential and long-lasting due to its performances in the region, wider Greece and abroad.



13. ProtiProodos' Friends of Music Association. Photographer Krum Ivanov, PhD.

After numerous years of active performances, the ProtiProodos' Friends of Music Association is widely related to the village of Proti and has become a symbol of its local history.



