

Magdalena Stancheva

# NINE WONDERS OF BULGARIA

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ZLATOSTROY



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Magdalina Stancheva ●

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# NINE

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**Magdalena Stancheva**

**WONDERS  
OF BULGARIA**



*ZLATOSTROUY*

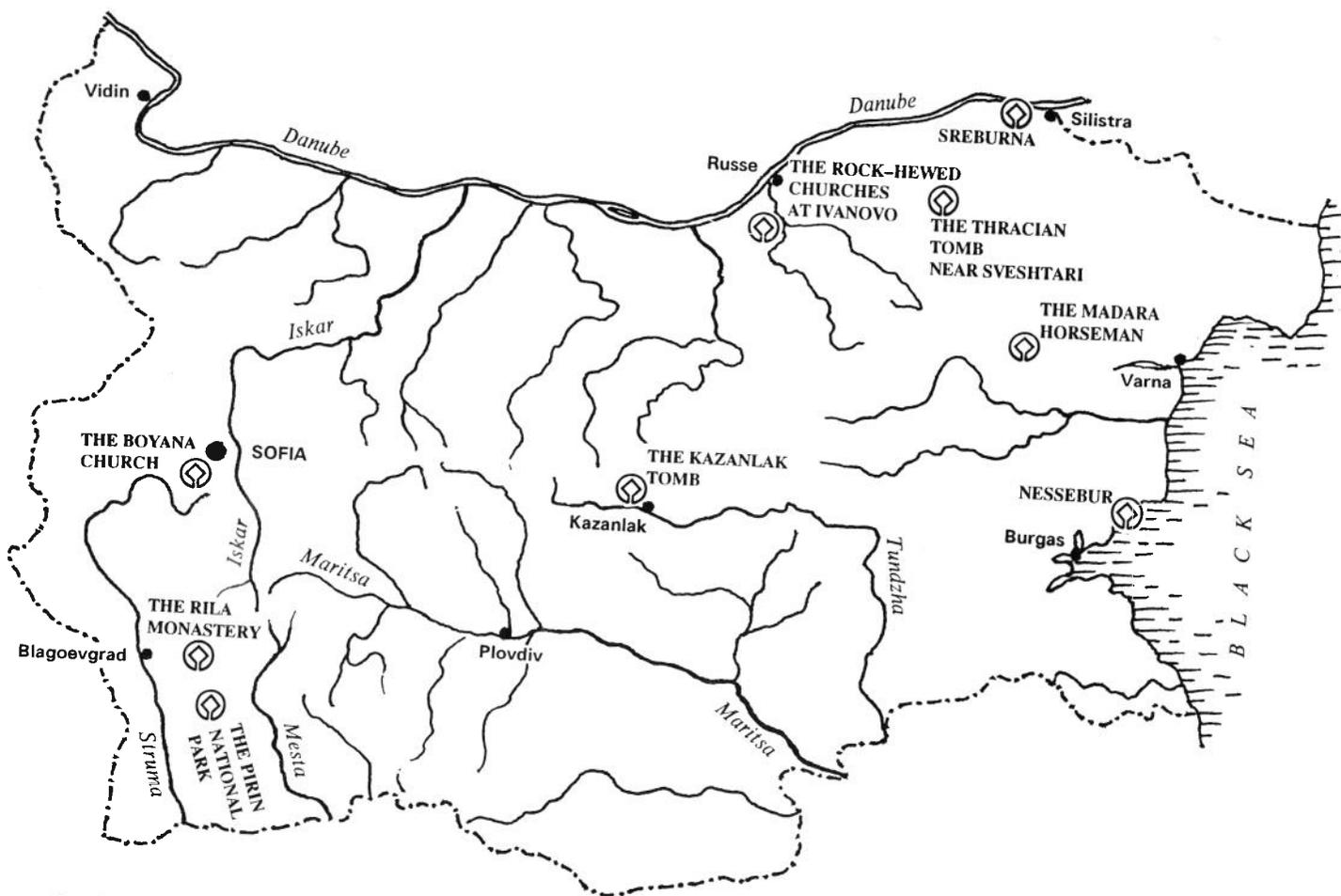
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The Kazanlak Tomb, the Madara Horseman, the Boyana Church and the rock-hewed churches at Ivanovo were included in the List of the World Heritage at the 1979 Session of the Committee for the World Heritage in Luxor, Egypt.

Old Nessebur, the Rila Monastery, the Pirin National Park and the Sreburna biosphere reserve were added to the List of the World Heritage in Florence, Italy, in 1983.

The Thracian tomb at Sveshtari was included last, in Paris, France, in 1985.



1979 БУЛГАРИЯ  
МАДАРИНА СЛАВНА

*The Acropolis of Athens, The Great Wall of China, The Serengeti Park, Tadj Mahal, Venice, Old Jerusalem, The Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, Baalbek, Westminster Abbey... These are famous names. Each of them stands for a single wonder — natural or man-made. Such wonders can be found at many places all around the world. They are some of the most valuable treasures of our planet.*

*Yet they are threatened. Time is slowly destroying them through aging, decay, and disintegration — processes invisible to the naked eye. Man is also destroying them. His thoughtlessness is depriving our planet of the treasures of the living and non-living nature. However, without these treasures human life would be poorer; what is more, humanity's very existence would be threatened.*

*All too often people thoughtlessly destroy the creations of their ancestors in spite of the fact that they are landmarks of human history, works of the most talented representatives of mankind, the result of the efforts of a great many people.*

*The awareness that the most precious items of the planet's cultural and natural heritage have to be preserved for the future generations, and that to achieve this the combined efforts of all people are necessary, has led to the idea of an international agreement — The Convention for the Preservation of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. It was created and works under the auspices of UNESCO. Its work is controlled by a committee of representatives from 21 states. This committee receives the proposals of individual countries and decides whether the cultural and natural wonders presented can really be declared important to the whole world.*

*So far the World Heritage Convention has been signed by 123 states. For the 20 years of its existence 358 man-made and natural wonders have been included in the List of the World Heritage. Among them, together with the famous names mentioned in the beginning, are nine Bulgarian wonders — seven cultural and two natural.*

# THE KAZANLAK TOMB

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Thracian burial mounds are scattered all over the Bulgarian land. Some of them mark the humble graves of peasants and warriors, others guard the tombs of noblemen, chieftains and rulers.

Of those discovered so far, the most famous (and one of the most interesting) is the Kazanlak tomb. It was built towards the end of the 4th century BC, more than 2300 years ago. It has an ante-chamber, a long narrow passage and a round burial chamber. The well-preserved wall-paintings tell the tale of a Thracian ruler's departure from this world.

The tomb was discovered by chance in April 1944. A group of soldiers had to dig a bomb shelter under a hillock on the outskirts of the town of Kazanlak. Nobody had suspected this to be an artificial mound over a sepulchre, and not just an ordinary small hill. Luckily the soldiers came straight upon the entrance of the tomb and it suffered no damage whatsoever. They went along a narrow passage to discover a round chamber topped by a conically shaped vault. In the torchlight,

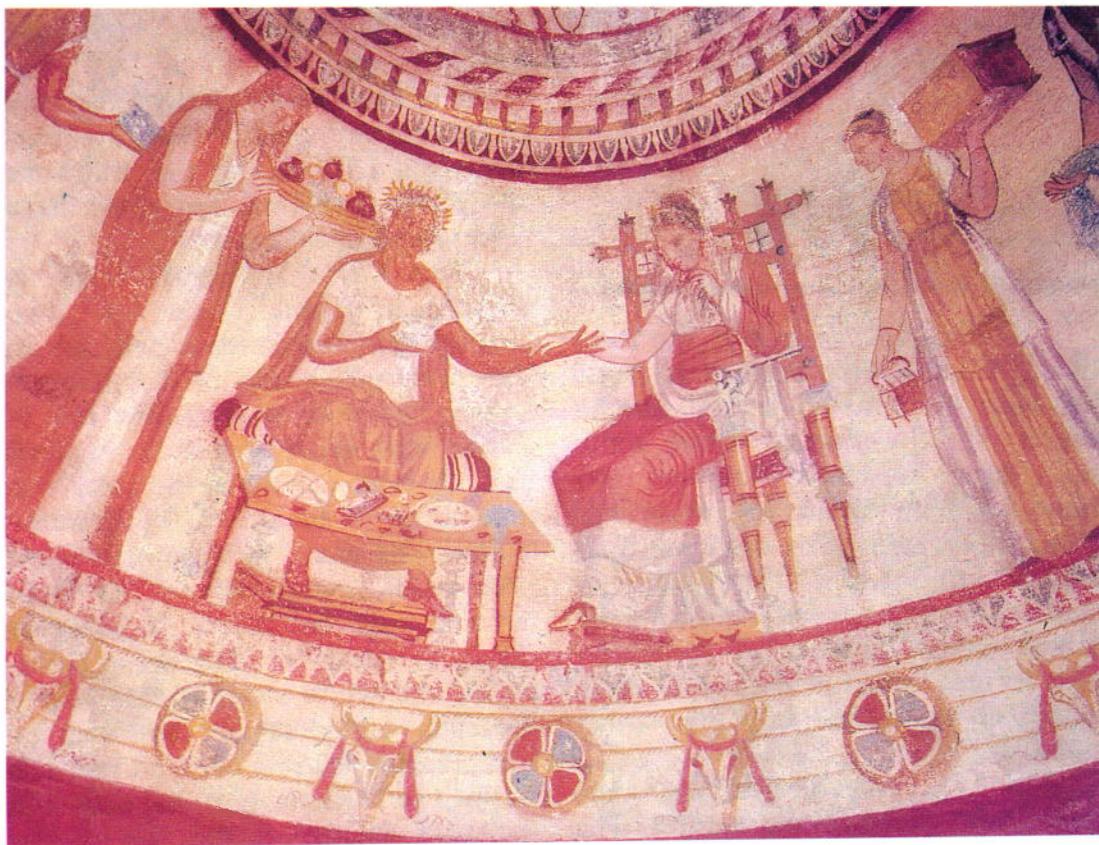
before the discoverers' astonished eyes, there appeared the pictures painted on the walls of the tomb. It was as if the long-gone Thracian world had come to life.

At the back of the tomb, right across from the entrance, the Thracian ruler and his wife are sitting at a small table, laid for the farewell funeral feast. Servants and relatives are approaching the couple on both sides. They are carrying fruit, scents, jewels, a cloak. Young women are playing long, horn-like instruments. At the end of the procession warriors and servants are bringing a chariot drawn by four horses and leading their late master's own horse as well.

On the dome-shaped vault a chariot race has been painted. Two-wheeled battle chariots are rushing along, wild as the wind, barely touching the ground.

In the long passage to the round chamber there are battle scenes. On one wall the war hosts of two rival tribes, distinguished by their dress and arms, are engaged in battle. On the other wall two warriors, probably the chieftains, have stepped in front of their troops to fight each other in a one-to-one combat. It may be assumed that one of those chieftains is the ruler buried in this tomb.

The tomb had been robbed, in ancient times. The door had been broken, the ante-chamber nearly demolished. All valuables, which had



The ruler's gold wreath is a sign of divine immortality. Such wreaths have been found in many Thracian tombs and can be seen in museums. The wife has bent her head in sad thoughtfulness. According to Thracian custom she will have to share the late ruler's fate.

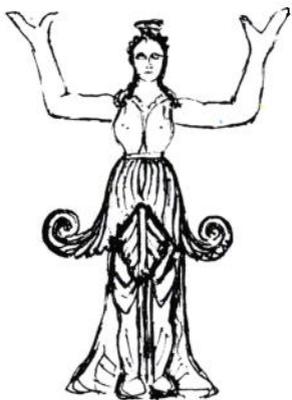
to be placed side by side with the dead man according to Thracian custom, had been stolen — gold and silver dishes, jewels, expensive adornments for horses and chariots. Only a curved Thracian knife and the iron head of a spear were found on the floor of the passage. The soil was sieved to yield a hundred and forty miniature demi-spherical buttons and small gilt flowers made of clay — probably the adornment of a costly garment belonging to a lady.

However, the way it's been

preserved, the Kazanlak tomb is a rare proof of the building skills of the Thracians and a perfect example of the picturesque art of the Hellenistic period. The artist's talent has found its ultimate expression in the presentation of the funeral feast. The feelings of the husband and wife are rendered perfectly. By painting precisely many minute details, the artist has left us a precious piece of evidence about the life and rites of the Thracian aristocracy.

# THE THRACIAN TOMB NEAR SVESHTARI

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About 2300 years ago the ruler of a Thracian tribe decided to build his eternal home while still among the living. So a great stone tomb with three separate chambers was built for him. While its inside was being decorated with wall-paintings and sculptures, the ruler died. The tomb was then sealed, with his remains and a number of wonderful gifts inside. Over it a mound of earth was piled up, as tall as a four-storey building.

In 1982 archeologists did some excavation work on the mound. The tomb turned out to be so interesting and beautiful as to be added to the List of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage – the most precious items on our planet – in 1985.

One can see from the very entrance that expert stone-hewers and sculptors have worked here. It is decorated by pillars with Ionian capitals. Rosettes, stylised bulls' heads and garlands have been cut into the soft limestone above the door.

On one side of the entrance is the chamber that must have held the gifts and sacrifices offered. All items

made of precious metals have been stolen in ancient times. Yet the bones of five horses, slaughtered here to accompany their owner in after-life, are a reminder of the multitude of other treasures that must have been sealed in that tomb.

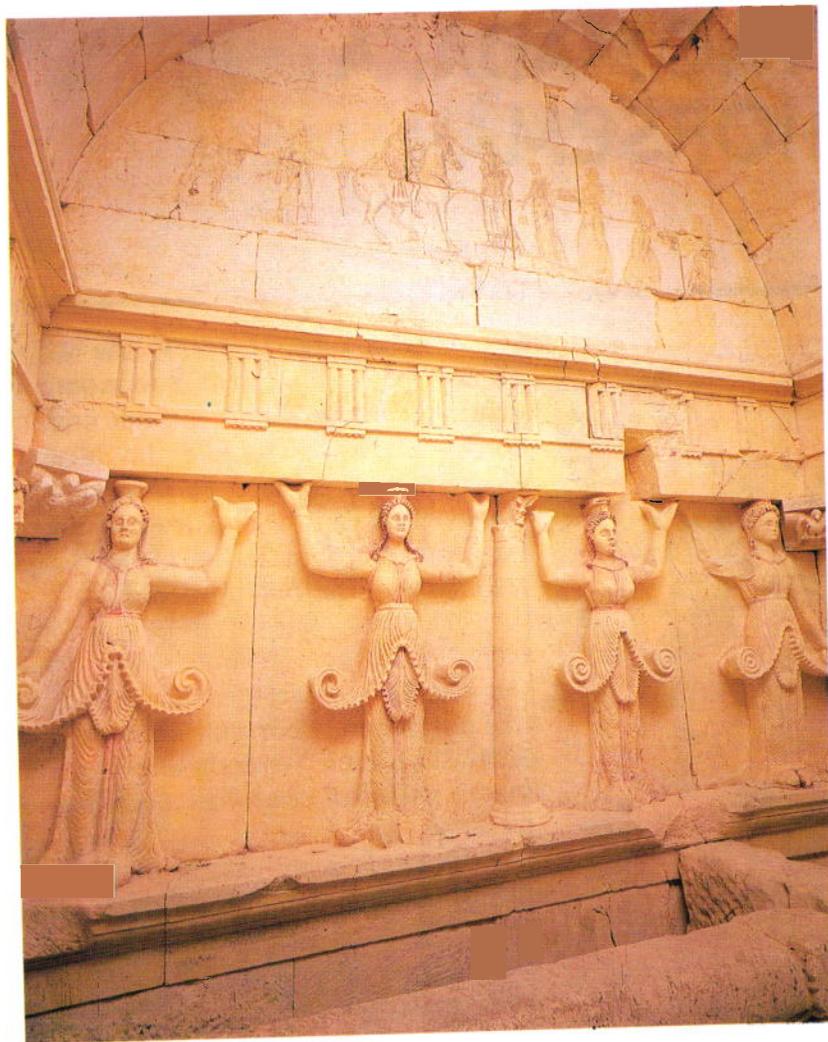
The burial chamber itself is straight in front. There are two beautifully carved stone-beds in it. The sculpted facade of a miniature temple has been erected near one of them. This relief sculpture suggests that the heroization of the ruler was impending – he was to be declared a god. The ritual of heroization has been painted high up on the semi-circular wall, just below the dome of the burial chamber. The scene painted on the white stone blocks shows the ruler on horseback, followed by two armor-bearers. A goddess has stepped in front of him, handing him the gold wreath – the sign of immortality and divinity. Behind her four women are carrying a box of scents, a jewel casket, a metal vessel and a tripod stand.

The walls of the burial chamber are shaped like a colonade. Yet the stone blocks at the base of the dome are supported not only by columns, but also by ten caryatids – female figures with raised arms. They are 120 cm tall each. These caryatids are dressed in exquisite finely-pleated garments, whose rims curl like the petals of a flower. The women's curly hair falls on their shoulders, they are

carrying special baskets called „calatos“ on their heads. Some of those women are young, with calm, beautiful faces, others are old, sad and serious-looking. Their stately attitudes show that they are participating in a sacred ritual. Their hair, faces and clothes were once painted. There are still traces of dark-brown paint on the hair, and yellow, blue, red and violet paint on some fragments of the dress and faces.

One can tell by both the caryatid statues and the scene drawn in the lunette below the dome that neither the sculptors nor the painters had managed to finish their work by the time the master (for whom the tomb was built) died. The hands of some caryatids are only crudely hewn, while the drawing is just sketched in black chalk.

The Sveshtari tomb is not isolated. Within an area stretching along two kilometers 26 mounds of different sizes have been preserved. The whole area has been declared an archaeological reserve. However, only further expert research would make these tombs tell us their story and exhibit their treasures.



# THE MADARA HORSEMAN



One can travel across the whole of Europe (a continent abounding in historical monuments) without coming across a monument like the Madara Horseman. It is hard to imagine that it was created just a quarter of a century after the foundation of the Bulgarian state in the Balkan peninsula.

The very site of it is extraordinary. The Madara plateau rises above the plains. Its Western part descends like a vast stone curtain, lined by deep folds. The scene reminds one of a 100-meter waterfall that has been turned to stone.

There is a big cave at the foot of the Madara Stone Curtain. It is called „The Cave of the Nymphs“. In ancient times the Thracians worshipped their gods here. When the Proto-Bulgarians settled in this land they established their own centre of religious worship in Madara. Vast stone splinters stuck into the ground served as altars of their god Tangra – a personification of the sky itself.

A horseman in a solemn posture has been sculpted in this majestic setting, 23 meters above the ground. He is wearing a pleated cloak that

falls in folds to his knees, a pair of slack, large trousers, and has pointed shoes. In his left hand he is holding the reins, in his right a spear. The spear is stuck into the body of a lion writhing in agony at the horse's feet.

The horse is walking solemnly. A dog is running after him.

This is not an ordinary hunting scene. The Bulgarian sovereign himself has been represented as victorious. The lion stands for the defeated enemy and the dog for the faithful people that follow their sovereign.

Both the horse and the horseman have their faces turned towards the onlooker, as if to say something to the future generations. Their message is cut in the rock in front of the horseman.

The wind, rain, lichens have been eating into the surface of the Madara rocks for almost thirteen centuries. Some details of the sculpture, words or single letters of the inscriptions have been deleted, others are hard to discern. Once the relief sculpture and the letters were made prominent by red mortar. Now almost all of it has fallen off.

The inscription in front of the horse tells us briefly about a historic event. It is in Greek. In translation the preserved parts of the inscription read: „...Justinian the Emperor made a treaty and tried...the Bulgarians...and came to Tervel. My uncles in the region of Salonika and the Kissin settlements disbelieved the

Emperor-whose-nose-had-been-cut and went away. His...one...by a treaty Tervel the emperor's archont gave...five thousand...the emperor with me had a good victory“.

The Byzantine emperor Justinian was forcibly dethroned and exiled from the capital. His nose was cut, which was why he was called Rhinotmetos. Justinian managed to escape and asked the Bulgarians for help. Khan Tervel, the son of Khan Asparoukh, responding to his call, appeared before the walls of Constantinople with a strong army and forced the conspirators to surrender.

In exchange the Byzantine emperor plied the Bulgarian Khan with honours, gold and precious gifts, and recognised his right to the title of „caesar“, or „tsar“. Bulgaria received lands to the south of Hemus (the Balkan Range), and Byzantium had to pay an annual tribute to the Bulgarians. That was how the young Bulgarian state was recognised by the ancient empire. It was in the year 705.

It is precisely that event which is mentioned in the inscription in front of the horseman. The relief itself represents the Bulgarian sovereign's triumph.

That was how in those ancient times from the Madara Rocks the message of Khan Tervel about the recognition of the Bulgarian state was conveyed to all generations.

Later on two more inscriptions were carved around the horseman.



They tell of other important historical events. One is from the time of Khan Kroumesis, Tervel's heir, who ruled in 721. It is also about the relations with Byzantium. Bulgaria, it seems, helped Byzantium once again, this time against the Arabs. The third inscription is from Khan Omurtag's time (814-831) and deals with a treaty with another country. Unfortunately many words have been made illegible by the passage of time.

The Madara relief and the inscriptions around it are a proof that the rulers from the early period of the Bulgarian state were aware that the great victories in Bulgarian history had to be commemorated as events of utmost importance.

The design of this monument was really grand. It must have been very difficult to carry out in reality. Yet the unknown artist has succeeded superbly. Mounted on a 20-meter-high scaffold, he must have cut deep into the stone around the figures, then chiselled their contours, and finally sculpted all the details.

# THE BOYANA CHURCH

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The Boyana church owes its fame mostly to its frescoes. Even today, more than 800 years later, they are moving with their unique beauty, expressiveness and profound humanism. The Boyana frescoes are recognised as one of the chef d'oeuvres of European medieval art.

The church consists of three consecutively built and interconnected parts. The first one dates from the 10th or 11th century – a small church with only one nave and a dome. The second was built in the 13th century (1259). It has two storeys and a dome. On the ground floor are two recesses, where the ktitors or donors (sponsors) of the church – Sebastocrator Caloyan and his wife Dessislava were to be buried. The upper floor was connected directly to the Sebastocrator's house by a wooden bridge – one can still see the walled-up door in the outside wall. The two old churches of exquisite but simple shapes represent a single whole. They form the so-called Caloyan's church. The third part is from the mid-nineteenth century and is now used as an antechamber (narthex) to Caloyan's church.

According to the custom, the insides of the walls of the church are painted. Only a small part has been preserved from the frescoes of the first church – some of them can be seen in the altar. After the second church was built, the connected buildings were wholly repainted. The church painting tells the Scriptures in scenes and pictures, devoted mainly to the life of Christ. Saints and Christian martyrs have also been painted, together with the donors who paid for the building and painting of the church.

The artist's name is unknown – he did not sign it anywhere. He probably had an assistant, but all major works were created by him – he was known as just the Boyana Master. He was a very well-trained painter who knew the works of other masters and adhered to the canons of church painting, but had the audacity to make a major step ahead, to the times of Renaissance humanism. His portraits each express a different inner life and have their own individuality.

The portraits of the sebastocrator family and the royal couple can be seen immediately after entering the church. All of them are painted in full length. The portraits of Sebastocrator Caloyan and his wife Dessislava are the oldest preserved portraits in Bulgarian art painted from life. Caloyan's features are refined and noble; Dessislava is considered to be the most beautiful



The artist has managed to combine the impact of the spirituality in the expressions of Caloyan and Dessislava with a precise rendering of the details of their dress and jewellery.

painting of a lady of the time. Both are dressed up. Caloyan is handing a model of the church to St Nicholas who is painted next to him and to whom the church is dedicated. Next to the portraits of Caloyan and Dessislava there is an inscription which says: „The purest temple of the Holy Christian Hierarch Nicola and the Holy Great and Famous Christian Martyr Panteleymon was erected from the very foundations and established with the means, care and great love of Caloyan Sebastocrator, cousin to the King, grandson of St Stephan, King of Serbia. Written in the Bulgarian Kingdom under the rule of the pious, devout and Christian-loving King Constantine Assen. Indict 7 in year 6767“. That is how

the year 1259 used to be written in the calendar of the time.

King Constantine Assen himself, Caloyan's cousin, together with his wife – Queen Irina – a Byzantine princess by birth, is painted on the opposite wall. They wear crowns and garments lined with gold. The king is holding a gold sceptre. In the long years of Turkish yoke the portraits of the Bulgarian king and of the Bulgarian nobleman were a reminder of the times of the independence of Bulgaria.



# THE ROCK-HEWED CHURCHES AT IVANOVO

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Not far from the village of Ivanovo there are high, steep and rocky cliffs that shore up the Russenski Lom river and its tributaries Beli Lom, Cherni Lom and Malki Lom. These rivers have cut into the huge mass of stone. Together with the wind and rain, they have sculpted the impassable ridges and the towering peaks of the cliffs. In the Middle Ages, as if to get nearer to God, hermits cut small cells into these cliffs, and then churches and chapels. There was a whole hermit colony there — the traces of more than 300 cells have been discovered. Yet their exile did not last long. Hundreds of Christians came here to ennoble their souls and cure their bodies, and to pay their respects to the hermits. Kings and noblemen sent their stone-cutters to cut new churches in the cliffs, and talented artists to paint frescoes of holy men.

That was how between the 11th and 14th century the greatest group of rock-hewed monasteries in Bulgaria came into being. They became the place where the Bulgarian patriarch Jochim retired from the capital city

of Turnovo. Probably this was the reason why King Ivan Assen II (1218–1241) had a monastery built there, and a church devoted to the archangels cut in the stone. The portrait of the king himself was painted there — as a donor, holding a model of the church in his hands.

Other donors' names can also be read next to portraits obliterated by time. In one of the churches the following inscription may be found: „I, Ivo Gramatik, wrote these words when King Georgi was priest“. In all probability the king mentioned here is Georgi Terter, whose reign ended with the Tartars' invasion of Bulgaria (1291). He must have spent the rest of his life here.

Grammarians, scholars, a patriarch, even a king became monks in the Ivanovo hermit community. However, today it is chiefly valued for the frescoes preserved on the stone walls. The destruction of the capital city of Turnovgrad by the Turks had been the end of most paintings that adorned the palace and the churches of Turnovgrad. What survived were some of the more remote stone churches. Indeed earthquakes, rain and ice, and the scorching rays of the sun have been at work for centuries demolishing the walls, cracking the plaster and obliterating the paints — until the time when restorers took charge of that precious art heritage.

The names of the surviving churches of Ivanovo were forgotten in the

course of centuries. The local population named these places as it saw fit – it called them various names: God's Valley, because one could see a portrait of Christ through a hole in one of the churches, or The Writings, because of the preserved signs and inscriptions. One of the churches was named The Buried Church, another – simply The Church.

Wall-painting, when done by a talented artist, seems to deprive the walls of their constraining quality and to open a new vista of portraits, scenes and landscapes to the admirer's eyes. The painters that worked in the Ivanovo churches had to face not walls but masses of stone. The Ivanovo churches are small – not more than 20 or 30 square meters. Yet the painters' brushes seem to have moved aside the rocks to present a clear view of a panorama of scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Most interesting among these are the paintings in The Church, whose donor was Ivan Alexander (1331–1371). They are characterized by a power of expression and a dramatic quality in rendering Christ's suffering. All characters in the multicharacter scenes are dynamic. Their gestures and movements evoke a sense of tragic doom in the spectator. In the background are rocky landscapes, as if inspired by the close surroundings, or buildings of an extraordinary richness, with a great deal of ancient elements in their structure.



The Ivanovo rock-hewn churches are a precious reminder of a time of elevated spirituality, a time of anxiety and forebodings of the impending threat from the East to all Balkan nations.

Detail from the scene „The Washing of the Feet“ – Christ is preparing to part with his disciples.

# NESSEBUR



It is the forces of Nature aided by Man's skill and labor that have created the great yet tiny wonder of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast — the old town of Nessebur. Here the sea has wrung out of the mainland a stony mass, but the shore has tied it to itself by a narrow strip of land. People came to live here as early as the Bronze Age. They used the natural bridge to get to the fertile mainland; in case of danger they blocked the passage. Several epochs have been at work here to build a fairyland town on this tiny piece of earth. The remains are a collection of relics from different ages, virtually a monument of human history itself.

Today the peninsula is 850 meters long and about 300 meters wide. For centuries the waves have eaten into its shores. In the sea both to the North and South of it the outlines of the oldest ports and battlements have been discovered. To the East the waves have submerged the Acropolis, where the oldest temples used to be.

The old name of the town is Messambria, and that is not the only proof of its Thracian origin. How-

ever, from the 6th century A.D. on, Greek colonists began to settle here as well. Sea trade and the rich land steadily increased the prosperity of its citizens. The hundreds of anchors found at the bottom of the sea near the shore are a token of Messambria's importance as a harbor. The costly and exquisite objects uncovered in the excavation works tell us about the luxury of everyday life here; inscriptions, sculptures and architectural decorations reveal the town's layout, and indicate the places of cultural institutions and temples.

Roman rule, followed by Byzantine domination, did not diminish the town's importance. The newcomers built their edifices over the ruins of the past, but accepted the valuable traditions and the useful experience of the generations before. The town's look changed radically with the advent of Christianity as the official religion in the 4th century. The walls of the largest early Christian church, called the Old Mitropolia (The Old Bishopric), still rise majestically in the center of Nessebur. And this church is not the only one from that period.

Since Khan Kroum's reign Slavonic began to be spoken here. Throughout the Middle Ages the Bulgarian kings and noblemen took care to perpetuate the prosperity of this wonderful town. Nevertheless, in the constant conflicts and rivalry between Bulgaria and the Byzantine

Empire, Bulgarian Nessebur often passed into Byzantine hands. Both states built more beautiful churches, donated more icons by famous painters and strengthened the town walls.

The town's riches attracted conquerors and plunderers. In 1366 it was invaded by crusaders from the West, led by prince Amedeus VI of Savoy. Their short stay was marked by fires and plunder. The chroniclers of that invasion, however, express astonishment at the storehouses of Nessebur, overflowing with goods – rice, salt, flour, spices, expensive imported cloth and all kinds of manufactured goods.

Nessebur was captured by the Turks in 1453. Town life then became less dynamic but did not die out altogether. Trade and fishing remained the basic occupations of the citizens. Some medieval churches lost their beauty; Time slowly destroyed the unnecessary fortress. The citizens of Nessebur, however, gradually built a new architectural wonder – a lot of beautiful houses made of wood and stone, their upper floors overhanging the narrow streets, their heavy gates hiding lush gardens of boxwood, fig trees and plenty of flowers.

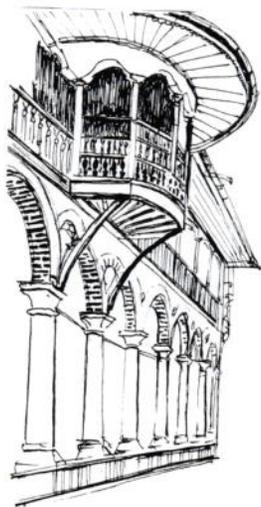
Today Old Nessebur can be entered through the same gateway that was the entrance to the most ancient fortress. Each step on its streets opens before the onlooker extraordinary sights. One can see side by side



the majestic remains of the fortress and quaint small houses with strings of fish hung to dry on the walls. At almost every turn one encounters some of the surviving medieval churches, famous for their decorations – ceramic circles and clover leaves built in the walls and covered with glittering yellow and green enamel. Each one of these churches seems to try and outdo the others in the complexity of its stone and brick decorations, looking like embroidery on the walls. The frescoes in St Stephan's church take the visitor back to the 16th century. And then again one is in the small streets, every one of them leading to the sea...

**The facades of the Nessebur churches remind one of multicolored embroidery.**

# THE RILA MONASTERY



The monastery was founded more than 1000 years ago by followers of the hermit Ivan Rilski (Ivan of Rila). In the days of the independent Bulgarian kingdom, kings and noblemen donated generously all kinds of valuables to the monastery. In the centuries of Turkish yoke the whole people collected money to keep this center of Bulgarian culture, a treasure of knowledge and education, a pillar of faith and national consciousness.

The Rila Monastery consists of a number of buildings erected at different times between the 14th and mid-19th centuries. Some of them are scattered in the mountain. From the outside the central monastery building is like an impregnable oblong fortress with stone walls. It encloses a large courtyard which can be reached by two vaulted passageways with heavy gates — the Doupnitsa and Samokov gates.

Inside everything looks quite different — joyful, festive and richly decorated. Wooden balconies connected by stairs make a full circle round the four- and five-storey

buildings. The whitewashed walls are covered with colorful garland patterns. The semi-circular extensions of the balconies with parapets of carved wood can be seen overhanging the courtyard like nests.

From the balconies one can enter the various rooms. They are more than 800: monastic cells, guest chambers, the abbot's quarters, the dining room, the hospital, the library, the treasury, the room for keeping kitchenware, the bakery, the mill, four winter chapels covered with frescoes, and many more, all necessary for life in the monastery.

The ten big guest chambers have been furnished by different towns and cities — Koprivshtitsa, Chirpan, Samokov, Sofia, Pazardzhik, Panagyurishte. Each is arranged and decorated in a different way, with sofas and chests, beautiful carpets and covers, with carved wooden ceilings and frescoed walls.

Once upon a time thousands of pilgrims came from all parts of Bulgaria to participate in the monastery festival. The food for them was cooked in the „magernitsa“ — an enormous kitchen, over which a 22-meter-high chimney rose.

The oldest building in the monastery is Hrelyo's Tower. It was built in 1334 with the money of the lord of Strouma Hrelyo Dragovol. It is 23 meters high and has five storeys and an underground dungeon. A narrow staircase, built in the



thick stone walls, links the floors. There is a small church on the top floor. Some of the 14th century frescoes have been preserved.

There once was another church from the time of Hrelyo in the courtyard by the tower. However, it burnt to the ground in one of the great fires in the monastery. The door and a throne decorated with fine wood carving are the only remainders of it. The big and richly decorated church of Virgin Mary rises in its place. It was built in 1837. Here is where the relics of St Ivan Rilski are kept. 1200 scenes and portraits have been painted on the walls. The altar screen's tracery of carved wood is gilt all over.

Here, as everywhere else in the monastery, the best Bulgarian masters

have used their talent and labor in the monastery's decoration, to increase its glory. Prominent Bulgarian scholars of the Bulgarian Revival Period like Neofit Rilski have contributed to its fame as a great center of learning. In the many centuries of its existence priceless historical evidence, rare works of ancient art and crafts have been collected in its vaults.

**By painting musicians and the „horo“ folk dance the artist has illustrated a psalm of King David – to praise God, the Maker of this world, with joy.**

# THE PIRIN NATIONAL PARK

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The periods of great frosts, the „ice ages“, have played an important role in the geological history of our planet. Their scientific name is pleistocene and they lasted about half a million years each. The alternating periods of frosts and warming changed the earth's surface and greatly influenced the development of plant and animal life. In Bulgaria this can be best seen in the Rila and Pirin mountains.

Many folk songs have been devoted to Pirin's extraordinary beauty. This mountain, so difficult to access, has always attracted and fascinated man. However, researchers of Pirin have shown that it is extremely interesting to science as evidence of the complex processes that went on here long before the dawn of civilization.

These processes are evident in the very structure of the mountain relief. It rises between the low valleys of the Strouma and Mesta rivers that have cut deeply into the mountainous area. The middle and northern part of Pirin are marked by their Alpine character, great heights and rare specimens of the flora and fauna,

often unique and preserved only here. A reserve covering nearly 25 000 hectares has been created there – the Pirin National Park.

The peaks in this part of the mountain are sharply pointed, rocky and steep. The highest among them – Vihren – rises 2914 meters above sea level and is the second highest peak in Bulgaria. But there are 60 more peaks above 2 500 meters high.

They are connected by jagged ridges looking like saws. There are steep cliffs and deep crevices. The snow never melts in the circusses, and in the highest parts there is snow for some six months.

Scores of lakes were formed in the ice age of glaciers. On the whole there are 176 of them in Pirin. They are poetically referred to as „the eyes of the mountain“. Their clear and transparent waters reflect the sky with the moving clouds on it. Streams connect some of them before plunging off the rocks into small waterfalls.

The forests of Pirin take up more than half of its area. All species of coniferous trees that are found in Bulgaria grow here as well as some of the deciduous ones. The Pirin forest is famous for its white fir. The oldest tree known in Bulgaria is the White Fir of Baikushev, named after the forester who discovered it. It is about 1300 years old. Its height is 16 meters, and its circumference – 5,72 meters. This tree and a lot of other white firs aged from 280 to 1000 years are pro-



**The interesting and varied ecosystem of Pirin is a real treasure that has to be protected from outside interference. If one of its components were to disappear, no one could ever restore the system to its original state.**



tected by law. The tallest one is 35 meters high.

The smaller flora is equally interesting and valuable. 97 rare species of plants have been listed here; they often have specific and rather poetic folklore names. They bloom for a short time, but in bright colors. All this treasure of plants has been saved in Pirin during the last ice periods because of the mountain's rather Southern location.

Rare animal species have also found shelter in Pirin – wild goats,

wild cats, rare birds like the almost extinct cock of the wood. There are also deer, roes, boars, wolves, foxes, martens, various species of squirrels. There is an abundance of butterflies – some species are to be found only here.

# SREBURNA

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Our civilization with its factories, trains, automobiles, noisy airplanes and radios has driven the wonderful wildlife world far away from the cities: birds that have never known cages, animals that you cannot put on a leash, fish that do not swim in aquariums. In the densely populated Europe it is extremely hard to find a nook where they could live undisturbed. Thus the area of Sreburna Lake has become a small paradise for creatures who fly, crawl, swim and run.

It is situated 18 kilometers away from the town of Silistra, on the bank of the Danube. Its name means Silver Lake; it has been called so after the silver glitter of the moonlight on its surface at night, when all living things in the lake are asleep. There is a small village, also called Sreburna, perched on a hill above the lake shore. That is where the nearest lake inhabitants' human neighbours live. You should see those inhabitants! Some 80 couples of curly-headed pelicans (and there are altogether only 800 couples in the whole wide world!) build their nests here, in these calm waters, among

reeds thick as forests. They come here in early spring to lay their eggs, hatch and rear their young and fly to warmer (but just as marshy) places for the winter. That is what 98 other species of birds do too. For them Sreburna is a kind of maternity ward, kindergarten and primary school for their young. More species, rare and threatened with extinction, are to be found among these – cormorants, ibises, mute swans, herons, egrets, fallow deer.

It has been established that the sea eagle and the beautiful pink pelican also built nests here earlier. Now Sreburna is just a stop for them, a resting point on their long seasonal flights from North to South and vice versa.

On the whole, 179 species of birds have been listed around the lake. In the liveliest seasons their total number may rise to tens of thousands.

The surface of Sreburna is about 80 hectares (198 acres). However, it is only about 1.5 meters deep. Underground Karst sources flow into it. At high water, the Danube overflows into the lake too, and then withdraws, carrying away the decayed matter and impurities from the waters of Sreburna.

Most parts of the lake look like a thick forest of reeds and other water plants. They can grow up to 6-7 meters in height and are impassable in some places. There are also parts where the tender light green

carpet of water lentils spreads over the lake's surface. It is a favourite food for many species of birds. Other species, however, prefer to dive and hunt for fish — there is also a diversity of aquatic life here.

Twenty-one amphibian and reptile species have made themselves comfortable in the lake as well — turtles, water snakes, grass snakes, tritons, several kinds of frogs. Miraculously, among them is the green frog — a species threatened with worldwide extinction — which has managed to survive here. Nevertheless, if it is not taken care of and protected, we soon shall not be able to see that agile, joyful creature anywhere but in picture books.

And these are by no means all inhabitants — 39 mammal species live in Sreburna, on its shores and on the small isles — ferrets, various mice, moles and even jackals.

The incredible abundance of life in Sreburna impressed the well-known traveller Felix Kanitz as early as the 19th century and he described it in his book entitled „Danubian Bulgaria and the Balkan“. Unfortunately, after him there came greedy dealers trading in exquisite feathers, who exterminated the greater part of the beautiful egrets. Many European scholars have studied this place and its inhabitants. In 1942, a great Bulgarian natural scientist — Alexi Petrov — succeeded in securing strict protection for Sreburna, mainly as a breeding place for many already



rare species of birds. The struggle to preserve Sreburna goes on year after year. It has been declared a biosphere reserve.

БИБЛИОТЕКА  
МАДАЛИНА СТАНЧЕВА



*Magdalina Stancheva* ● *NINE WONDERS OF BULGARIA*

*ZLATOSTROUY*

# NINE WONDERS OF BULGARIA

*This book tells the most important facts about nine precious Bulgarian wonders included in the List of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Some of them were created by Nature long before humanity came into existence. Most of them, however, are the works of the best talents that have ever lived in this land.*

