

THE LARGO PROJECT IN SOFIA

MELINDA VINDUS

Year on year, new archaeological finds and ancient buildings are found in Sofia during city construction projects, whose presentation as historic monuments makes the past accessible and tangible to the general public. A few metres below the yellow cobblestones of this teeming European capital, there is another city that we can enter and encounter: the centre of the ancient town of Ulpia Serdica.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONDITIONS

Thanks to its excellent geographical features—the hot springs, its location along the shortest route connecting Europe to Asia, the fertile land and the excellent climate—the region of Sofia, the capital of present-day Bulgaria, has been inhabited since prehistoric times. The city is located on the southern edge of the Sofia Basin, which is surrounded by hills and mountains. Its natural boundaries are the Stara Planine to the north and the Bulgarian Mountain Range that extends in several directions, of which the tallest peak is the Vitosha that stands on the southwest border of the city. The basin is divided in two by the Iskar, Bulgaria's longest river. The central part of the city is crossed by four streams that arise on the slopes of the Vitosha and flow into the Iskar.

THE PAST: THE FOUNDATION OF SERDICA AND ROMAN RULE

Serdica, the first town in the present-day region of Sofia, was founded by descendants of a Thracian tribe called the Serdi. In 339 BC, it was occupied by Philip II (356–336 BC) of Macedon, then laid waste by his son, Alexander the Great (336–323 BC). The rebuilt town managed to retain its independence until 29–28 BC, when it was occupied by Marcus Licinius Crassus and attached to the Roman Empire as the province of Thracia. As a city it flourished under the rule of the Emperor Marcus Ulpius Traianus (98–117), who renamed it Ulpia Serdica to commemorate his own eternal glory; an act remembered even today in the city's present coat of arms (*Fig. 1*)¹.

Ulpia Serdica comprised of two parts surrounded by a fortified wall with four gatehouses (*Fig. 2*). The oldest remains of Roman architecture in today's city centre originate from that period (*Fig. 3*). They include the ruins of the city wall, the gatehouses, the baths, the network of sewers, public buildings, temples and the amphitheatre. The city's golden age was during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great (306–337), who made it his seat of government, ruling his empire from there for a number of years. The words “Serdica will be my Rome” are traditionally attributed to him. The emperor ordered massive construction projects to extend the city.

In 343–344, the Synod of Serdica was convened in the city, attended by the leaders of the Christian world of the day. Although it was under Roman rule, both the many immigrants from Asia Minor and the system of public administration then in place indicate that by that time, the city had taken on more of a Greek character. When the Roman Empire was divided, it became a part of the Byzantine Empire and was renamed Triaditz (meaning ‘between mountains’).

The 1944 bombing of the city centre brought ruins to light, the excavation of which became necessary during the construction of new buildings (the Sheraton Hotel, the CUM Department Store, the Cabinet Building and the Office of the President of the Republic).

¹ A lion rampant is featured at the centre of Sofia's coat of arms, a symbol of strength and power. The upper right corner (from the shield bearer's perspective) is occupied by the personified image of the ancient town of Serdica, the upper left shows an image of the Church of St. Sophia after which the city is named, the lower right quarter shows the Vitosha mountain, while the lower left shows the shrine of the god of health and well-being, Asclepius (Apollo Medicus).



Fig. 1: The coat of arms of the city of Sofia on the facade of the Market Hall (photo: Melinda Vindus, 2007)

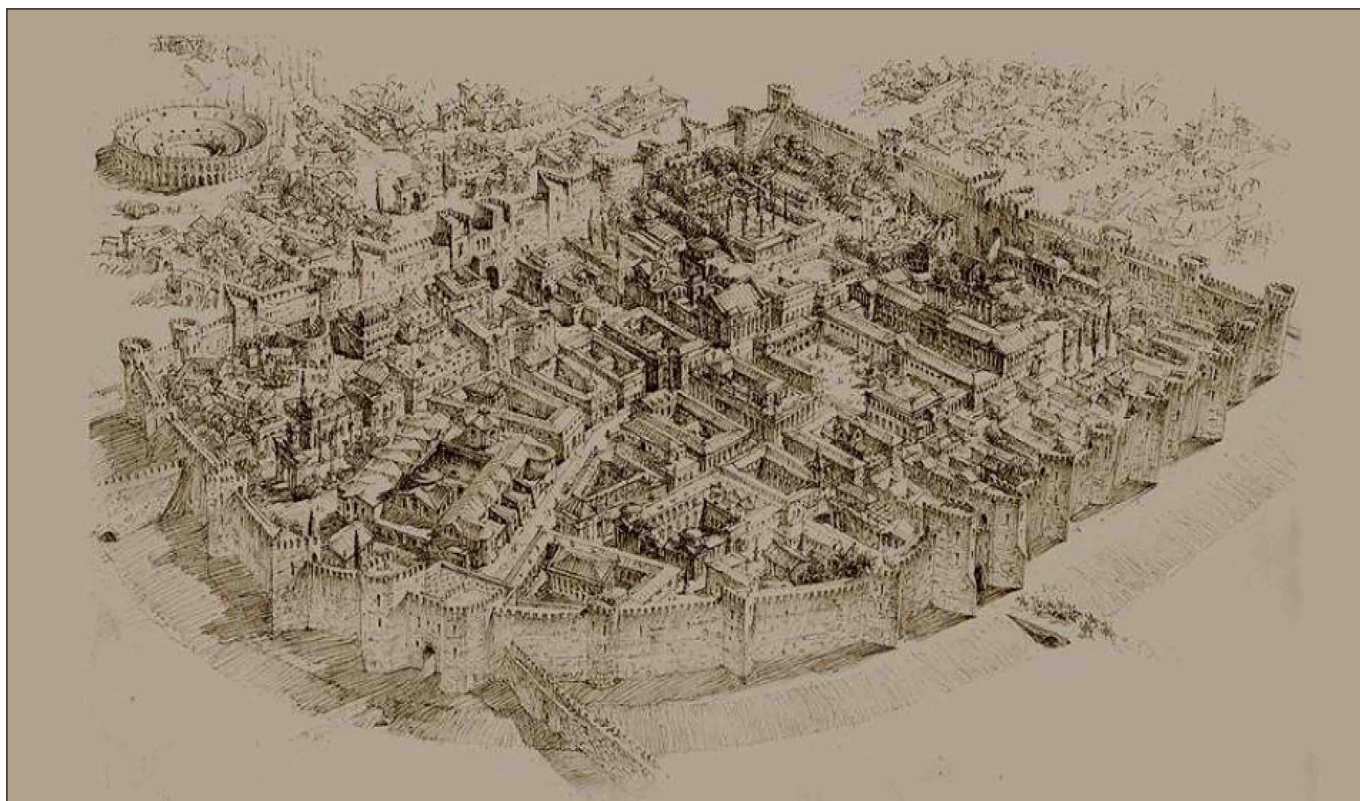


Fig. 2: A reconstruction of the Roman city of Ulpia Serdica (source: <http://ulpiaserdica.com>)

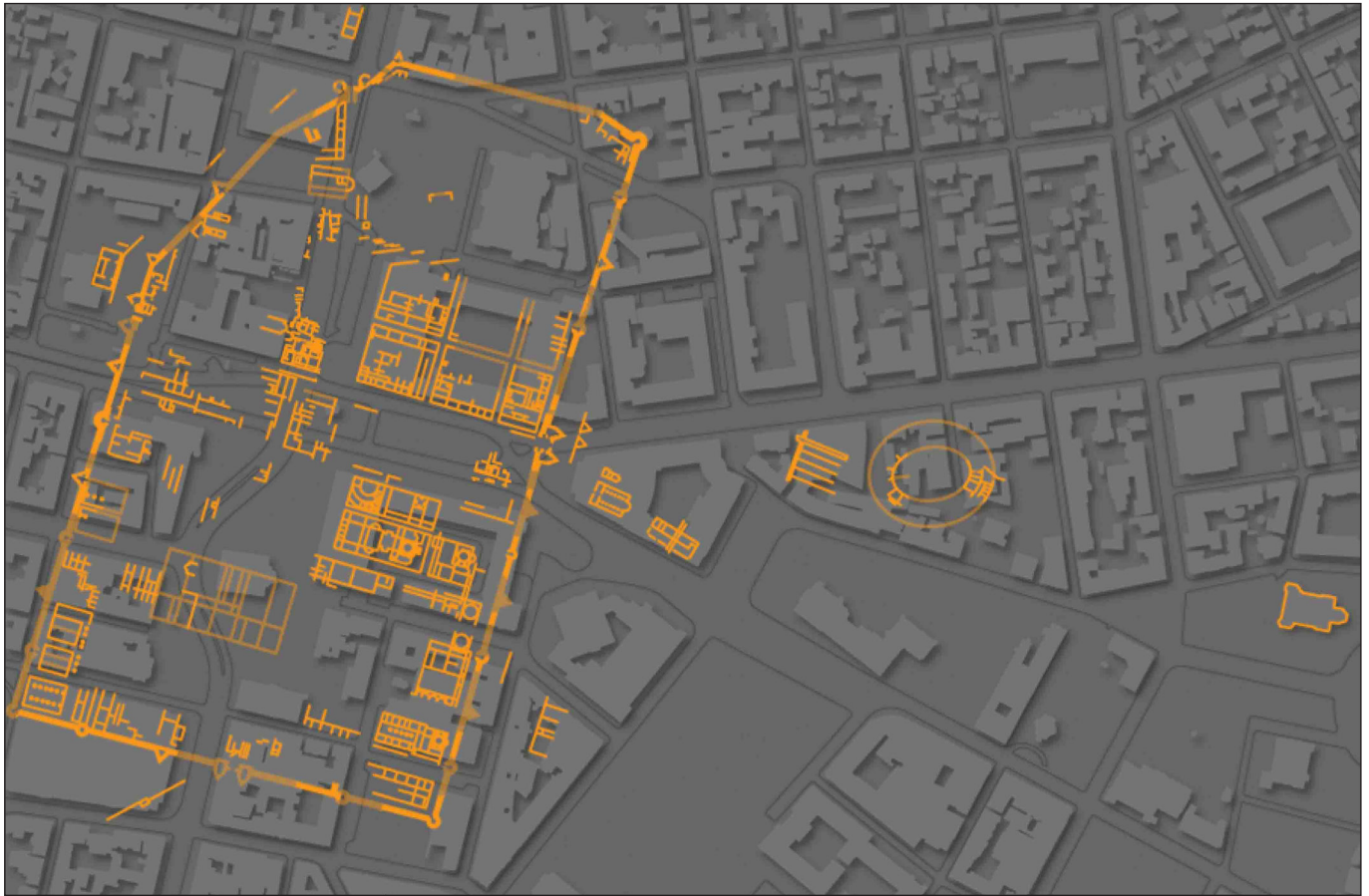


Fig. 3: The known remains of Ulpia Serdica with today's road network and buildings (source: <http://ulpiaserdica.com>)²

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

In 2007, the Ulpia Serdica Foundation³ was established in response to a dispute that had arisen concerning the Roman amphitheatre discovered during a hotel construction project in the centre of Sofia in 2004, not only among national heritage professionals, archaeologists and architects, but also among jurists and politicians. The amphitheatre itself has a number of special features: researchers were able to determine two different construction phases and, with regard to its dimensions, that it is the largest amphitheatre discovered so far in the Eastern Roman Empire. Finally, as an outcome of this professional conflict, one sixth of the arena was preserved and made available to the interested public on the ground floor of the newly built Arena di Serdica Hotel.

The primary objective of the Ulpia Serdica Foundation is to promote integration of both newly and previously discovered archaeological remains that are suitable for restoration into the modern urban context. In order to achieve that aim, it has established a wide-ranging network of partnerships with both Bulgarian and foreign cultural organisations. The network provides assistance in the exploration and public presentation of the city's cultural heritage, something that symbolises not only Bulgarian national identity, but also joint European heritage. As a part of their cultural management activities they communicate continuously with cooperating foreign colleagues and, with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture, the city municipality, the Museum of Archaeology and the Bulgarian Academy of Science, they hold presentations on archaeological findings, opportunities for reconstruction, and the integration of ancient monuments into tourism, as well as organising public debates with scientists and journalists and developing projects so as to

² With the support of the Municipality of Sofia, a team of urban planners and architects have created an excellent website that presents the preserved remains of the ancient Roman town (<http://ulpiaserdica.com>). Historical descriptions, photos of excavations and layout plans, as well as ancient and modern maps can be used to find our way around the town in space and time.

³ <http://www.ulpiaserdica.org>

Melinda Vindus • *The Largo Project in Sofia*

secure national and international funding. In order to place the work of the foundation in context, they have joined both the ‘Lifelong Learning’ and the ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ programmes supported by the European Union. In 2009, they organised a joint project with the National Council of Towns and Districts of Art and History (*Le conseil national des Villes et Pays d’Art et d’Histoire*) established in 1995, which supervises and assists the urban planning policies of the towns concerned.

In 2010, during an underground railway construction project in the centre of the city, the junction of Decomanus and Cargo, the two main routes through Ulpia Serdica, was uncovered. The Sofia Largo Project was initiated to preserve that archaeological site. A government-level decision was achieved to save, restore and present the ruins *in situ*. After that, the programme “Ancient Cultural and Communication Complex Serdica” was announced, and plans were made for an open-air museum⁴ in the underpass serving the underground and in its direct vicinity, with the Sofia Municipality budgeting 6 million Bulgarian levas—approximately 3 million euros—for the project (Fig. 4).

According to the original plans, the area was to be opened to the public in 2012, but the project suffered a number of setbacks. Totko Stoyanov, professor of archaeology at the Faculty of History of the University of Sofia expressed doubts about the Sofia Largo Project and also the authenticity of other archaeological restorations in recent years, and even Dr Mario Ivanov, an archaeologist with the Bulgarian Academy of the Science and the director of the project, noted in an interview that things didn’t always go in accordance with his views.⁵ The reconstruction and the fate of the area has been the subject of disputes for many years, and the plan for the extension of Sofia’s underground network had to be rescheduled repeatedly due to the archaeological excavation. The authorities made no secret of the motivation behind their decision to retain the ruins: they had hoped for increased cultural tourism generating extra revenue. The project has been under acute public scrutiny from the outset.⁶ The new outdoor visitor centre was finally opened with several years of delay, in 2016.

Visitors enter the centre of ancient Sofia along the reconstructed Roman road. Some of the area has been left exposed, while the remains on the side towards the ministry are covered by three glass domes of impressive size. In the underpass and at the underground station, exhibition cases present finds from the excavations, with extensive explanations for the public provided in the form of a great many maps and information



Fig. 4: The Roman road and partially reconstructed Roman walls in the area of the future outdoor museum (photo: Melinda Vindus, 2014)

⁴ <http://archaeologyinbulgaria.com/2015/04/08/bulgaria-to-complete-sofia-largo-open-air-museum-of-ancient-serdica-by-fall-2015/>

⁵ <http://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2015/10/14/tuhlite-na-largoto-ne-sa-problem-rimski-standart-sa.279695>

⁶ Drone videos of the excavations and the construction were also made available: <http://www.nhlvtv.net/playlist/ulpia-serdica-antichna-serdika/PLHc-fdhVvPeojlXea-rROJjxL5V2d5-T7>.

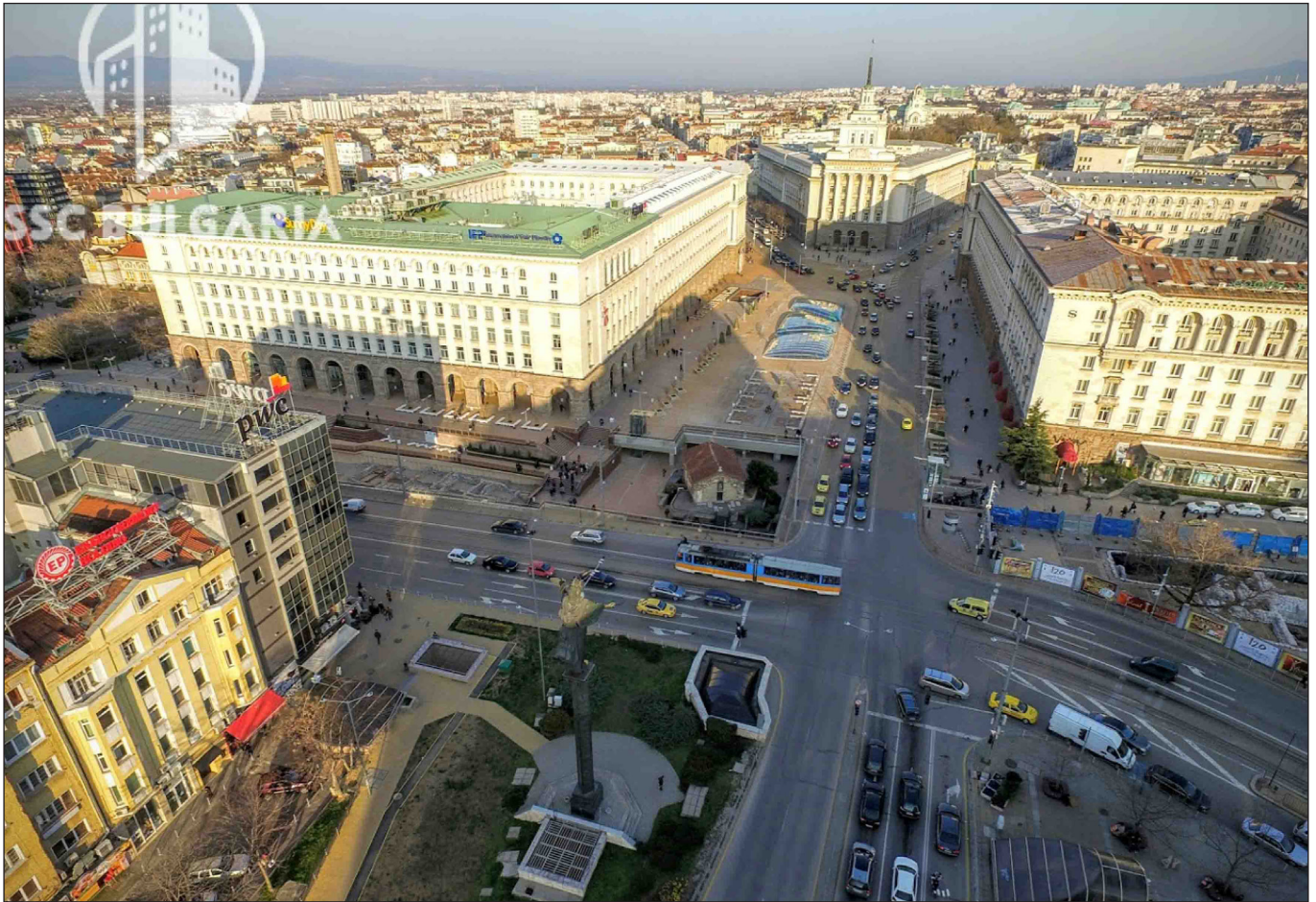


Fig. 5: The visitor centre (source: <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/>)⁷

boards in both English and Bulgarian. Coming up from the underground, perhaps the most impressive components of the station are the curved wall of the apse of the early Christian cathedral on the northern side and to the right of that, the remains of the wooden walls of a dwelling, visible through a glass floor.

According to the speeches at the opening ceremony, the cost of the partial reconstruction reached 16 million leva (8 million euros), partly financed by the European Union. A statement issued by the mayor has also revealed that further excavations are planned in the near future in which the city intends to extend and develop the visitor complex further.⁸

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE:

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⁷ <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1390954&page=7>

⁸ <http://archaeologyinbulgaria.com/2016/04/21/bulgarias-capital-sofia-opens-much-criticized-open-air-museum-of-ancient-roman-city-serdica/>