

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN BULGARIA

A short history of Bulgarian monument protection

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Cultural heritage protection in various countries is often cited as an example in the discussion about Hungarian regulation and practice. However, countries on the Balkans are rarely mentioned. This paper focuses on the archaeological monument protection in Bulgaria and summarizes the key points in its history.¹

The first attempts to research and protect Bulgarian cultural heritage were made as early as in the mid-19th century; later in 1888 and 1890, legal regulation was also adopted. The law on cultural heritage, issued on February 18, 1911, is the foundation of Bulgarian monument protection. In this piece of legislation, the responsibility of the state in the preservation of cultural heritage was emphasized, and the framework of its administrative structure was outlined. The law concerned with the protection of historical parts of towns, town centres, and settlements, issued in 1936, complemented this legislation. After WWII, Bulgaria became part of the ‘Eastern bloc’ and came under the control of the Soviet Union. The Bulgarian People’s Republic adopted a law on monument protection on September 23, 1952, which ensured the legal protection of public properties. Between 1957 and 1985, monument protection counted as one of the well-organized sectors of the socialist state (PICKARD, 2008, p. 48), and it enjoyed a special status in a number of ways: Ljudmilla Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov who presided the state for decades, became a leading figure in cultural heritage protection, and she paid special attention to the artistic and archaeological heritage.

When the Soviet bloc fell apart, it meant that the institutions’ efficiency was in decline as their governing structures collapsed. Research into cultural heritage and its protection was now hampered by political instability and austerity measures; the hardly sufficient budget intended for renovation and maintenance was spent on the restoration of the most endangered monuments. By the end of the 1980s, monument documentation and the possibilities of their conservation were reconsidered. The constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted in 1991, included passages on the preservation of cultural and historical heritage, and declared that natural and archaeological sites defined by the law are exclusively in state ownership. Later, in 1999, municipalities also started to play a role in this process.

Economic and social hardship in 2000–2007 had a negative impact on monument protection. Changes were made to the law on regional development in 2004–2009, but an older piece of legislation introduced in 1969, which gave no priority to concepts of sustainable development, also remained in force. This was abandoned only when the 2009 law on cultural heritage was adopted; this introduced new categories of heritage, such as tangible and intangible, moveable and immovable heritage, industrial heritage, underwater heritage, audio-visual heritage, as well as landscapes. Moreover, it regulated how cultural heritage is managed; it created a decentralized heritage protection system that was transparent; and it has fostered the founding and maintenance of private collections and museums through a variety of concessions. The new legislation also introduced sanctions for crimes against cultural heritage; illegal excavations and artefact smuggling had become more and more frequent since 2000 and caused severe damage at thousands of archaeological sites. Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, and so the issue of cultural heritage came to the limelight. In late 2008 a working group was launched whose task has been to digitize cultural heritage. One year later another working group, involved in cultural statistics, and responsible for safeguarding the transparency of state-funded heritage projects, was initiated; this group coordinates the whole heritage sector and ensures that the public has access to data. A 2011 change made to the 2009 law on cul-

¹ The article is based on my MA thesis titled “Monument Protection in Bulgaria,” defended at the Department of History of Architecture and Monument Preservation of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

tural heritage emphasized the strategic importance of heritage management and protection, and supported projects such as data collection and long-term development plans. In order to facilitate these efforts, public consultations were organized, in which researchers, academic and cultural institutions, as well as NGOs participated.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN BULGARIA

Like other academic fields in Bulgaria, archaeology started to flourish after the end of the Ottoman rule. In the previous centuries, travelers' accounts and military surveys reported about fortifications and "artifacts" in the country (BESHEVLIEV, 1982, pp. 42-54).

The late 19th-century legislation and state funding helped archaeological heritage protection immensely. The regulations ensured that the National Ministry of Education had a key role in archaeological excavations and in the export of antiquities, and the law also encouraged educational institutions and museums to start popularizing cultural heritage.

On April 4, 1878, the city council of Sofia founded a public library, which was built in the same year. In 1879, the National Museum came into being as the "Department of Values" of this public library (VELKOV, 1943). In the same year, 1879, the first Archaeological Society was initiated in Veliko Tarnovo. It is important to note that Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo both had a role, as the latter became the temporary capital of the new Bulgarian state in 1878. This had a symbolic meaning, as Veliko Tarnovo used to be the center of the Second Bulgarian Empire at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries, and the city has a number of medieval monuments. In 1879, Sofia was chosen as the actual capital of the new state, and this brought a turning point for archaeology: the monuments of this city date back as far as the Late Antique period, and therefore, research into Roman period remains gained more emphasis than the study of the Middle Ages.

The new cultural leadership inaugurated reconstruction projects and allocated new functions to the monuments that survived the Ottoman times. For example, in 1892 the National Museum became a separate entity and moved to the building formerly known as the *Büyük Mosque* (Fig. 1).² The basic collection of the museum featured 343 archaeological and ethnographic items, as well as 237 coins; therefore, one of the first tasks was to collect more artifacts. To be able to accumulate more relics, the museum received a considerable aid from the state administration, the military, as well as from schools and ecclesiastical institutions. In 1892, an amount of 65,000 levas was spent on the transformation of the mosque, while two years later an extra sum of 40,000 levas was allocated for the same purpose, because the building was still unsuitable for housing exhibitions or receiving visitors. Finally,



Fig. 1. The opening ceremony of the Archaeology Museum, May 18, 1905 (Ivanova, 2017).

² *Büyük*, also called the Great Mosque, is one of the oldest buildings in Sofia, and according to some sources it served as the mosque of Mahmud Pasha. After the Ottoman Wars it was used as a hospital, then as a library, and it also housed the State Printing Works for a while.



Fig. 2. The Archaeology Museum in Sofia (photo by Melinda Vindus, 2007).

three new buildings were erected adjoining the walls of the former mosque. The museum was opened in the presence of Grand Prince Ferdinand on May 18, 1905, although it had operated since January 1, 1893, as an official, independent institution with its own budget (Fig. 2). The law on public education adopted in 1909 accepted the separation of the National Museum of Archaeology, as well as its temporary regulation. Article 374 ordered the Bulgarian antiquities to be sent home from abroad, while Article 379 regulated the structure of the Museum of Archaeology and established four main departments: that of Prehistory, the Middle Ages, Numismatics, and the Department of Art.

Václav Dobruský was appointed as the new museum's director (1893-1910). He started to follow collection management protocols that were already in use in Vienna and Prague, and he launched the first archaeological research projects in the country. Under the directorship of Bogdan Filov (1910-1920) the museum turned into a center of Bulgarian archaeological research, and a strong cooperation was established with the Bulgarian Archaeological Society. The latter was founded on December 16, 1901, and developed into a separate academic institution in 1920, headed by Filov as its first director (PETROV, 1991, pp. 57-60).

The network of museums was gradually expanded in the early 20th century. Museums were founded all over the country, among which there were state-funded ones as well as local initiatives. WWI interrupted ongoing excavations, but between WWI and WWII several excavation projects started again (such as the ones in Madara, Veliki Preslav, or Pliska) (Fig. 3). The Archaeology Muse-



Fig. 3. Medieval finds from Veliki Preslav, exhibited in the Archaeology Museum in Sofia (photo by Melinda Vindus, 2014).

um's building was heavily damaged in the 1944 bombings, and it partly burned down. When it was restored, it was also structurally transformed: in 1948 the Department of Art became a separate institution known as the Art Gallery, while the Archaeological Society became part of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. From the end of WWII, excavations and surveys have become more intensive, and the number of studies published as a result of research projects has also been on the rise.

THE LJUBLJANA PROCESS

The Ljubljana process is a strategic plan for integrated rehabilitation, initiated in 2003 by the EU and the European Council, aiming to assess the architectural and archaeological heritage in the southeastern region of Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo). Its main goal is to enhance the capacity of institutions, and focuses on heritage rehabilitation and regional development (KOLEVA, 2014). Its basic task is to conserve historical sites according to the highest possible standards, and to develop a funding system that maximizes the added value of cultural heritage in the local economy, while preserving the mainly cultural function of the monuments. In addition, this regional program served as a basis for an exchange of international experience between neighbouring countries concerning the preservation, rehabilitation and development of cultural as well as natural heritage. The program initially focused on the challenges South-East Europe faced after the Balkan War, but later the attention turned to the possibilities of further development. The ultimate challenge is to coordinate between individuals and communities on the long run, which is a precondition of sustainable regional cooperation. Since 2011 the Regional Cooperation Council has supervised the process and has ensured that the governing structures are politically and financially stable. A budget of several thousand euros was allocated to finance the creation of plans to manage cultural heritage sites, and to maintain the already existing rehabilitation projects (Fig. 4).

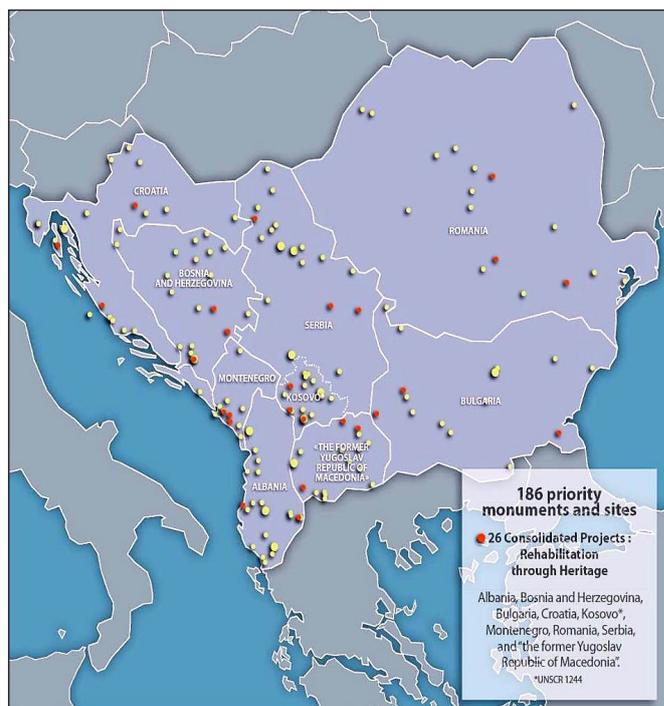


Fig. 4. Priority sites and monuments of the Ljubljana process (Lobkowicz, 2012).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN PRESENT-DAY BULGARIA

The legal mandate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is still not sufficient to control organized crime and the illegal smuggling of artifacts, and to keep a register of all finds stored in private collections. Thanks to the EU-funded projects in the last ten years, many archaeological sites have been preserved and presented throughout the country. The field of cultural heritage has expanded in terms of geographic coverage, typology, and involved specialists alike, and international cooperation is more and more frequent.

It is noteworthy that Bulgaria, as the youngest member, had the honor to host the 19th EAC Symposium on Cultural Heritage Protection in Sofia, titled “Development-led Archaeology in Europe. Meeting the Needs of Archaeologists, Developers and the Public.” A dozen member states sent representatives to the meeting to discuss the norms and tested practices of cultural heritage management (KREITER & STIBRÁNYI, 2018).³

The 2009 law of heritage protection that is still in force, has undergone several changes in the past few years. According to an interview recorded in February, 2018 (DIKOV, 2018), a new piece of legislation was

³ For a summary of the presentations, see: <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue51/index.html>.

tabled on heritage protection, which would allow a “privatization” of Bulgarian archaeology, and an outsourcing of the coordination of excavations to private institutions and companies. Prof. Lyudmil Vagalinski, director of the National Museum and Institute of Archaeology, warns that such a move would put Bulgarian archaeology in grave danger. Illegal excavations and treasure hunting has already caused irreversible damages to the cultural heritage of Bulgaria. Many are obviously unhappy with the current regulation that obliges investors and developers to cover the excavations’ costs; however, involving private companies in the excavation management would lead to corruption rather than to solutions, Vagalinski says.

The greatest challenge for the future is to share responsibility effectively between interested parties, in a decentralized model of cultural heritage management. However, much improvement is needed in terms of communication between the national and regional levels of cultural heritage management as well, although rehabilitation projects have been on the rise in Bulgaria in the past few years. This success is partly due to the Ljubljana process and its methods, but it also heralds an overarching change of trends.

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Melinda Vindus • *Archaeological Heritage Protection in Bulgaria. A short history of Bulgarian monument protection*

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