

WORLD HERITAGE

n°108 July 2025



ISSN 1020-4202



3 059630 111089



unesco

World Heritage is a magazine published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Paris, France, and Publishing For Development Ltd., London, United Kingdom.

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World Heritage Review, n°5
September 1997

Foreword

Audrey Azoulay
Director-General of UNESCO

The 47th session of the World Heritage Committee is being held in Paris with the support of the Republic of Bulgaria, which will celebrate 70 years of membership to UNESCO next year. From the medieval frescoes of the Boyana Church and the Thracian tombs of Sveshtari and Kazanlak to the alpine landscapes of Pirin National Park, the ten Bulgarian sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List bear witness to an immensely rich historical and natural heritage.

The World Heritage Convention has been a pillar of international cooperation since its adoption over 50 years ago, and today remains an anchor in a fractured world, uniting 196 States Parties around a shared commitment: to protect, promote and pass on humanity's greatest treasures.

Each World Heritage site carries memory and inspires pride in all of humanity. Beyond this, these sites, sustained by local communities, are also a source of opportunities, meaning that protecting heritage also drives sustainable development – by supporting knowledge, creating jobs and strengthening social cohesion.

But today, we must further deepen our commitment: in particular, by working towards a more representative World Heritage List.

In particular, we must ensure continued progress in sub-Saharan Africa,

which has long been underrepresented. Since 2018, 15 new African sites have been inscribed, and several others extended. This year, four new nominations could bring the total number of listings for the region to 112. Following sustained efforts alongside States, local communities and new generations of African experts, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone are submitting their first nominations this year – and seven other countries could follow suit by 2027. Three African sites, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal and Uganda, have also been removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger.

UNESCO's commitment extends beyond this Convention to the most fragile contexts, in which protecting and passing on heritage is crucial in rebuilding community life and memory. This was at the heart of UNESCO's efforts to help restore the iconic monuments of Mosul, in Iraq, and in doing so, to revive the social and cultural life of an entire community.

In the face of tensions, crises and climate disruption, our only way forward is collective action. That is the very essence of this Convention: to establish dialogue between science, policy and society for the benefit of World Heritage, ensuring that it – like all forms of culture – can continue to unite us, inspire us and strengthen our confidence in the future.





Letter from the Editor

Each issue of the World Heritage magazine goes beyond a visual account of cultural and natural sites: it invites readers to understand their significance and their uniqueness and to take action for their long-term protection. Through its articles, images and testimonies, the magazine embodies UNESCO's commitment to making World Heritage a lever for resilience, intercultural dialogue and peace.

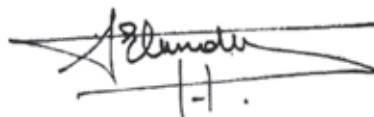
Two of UNESCO's strategic priorities are highlighted in this new issue: the revitalisation of heritage in conflict-affected areas and the improvement of Africa's representation on the World Heritage List. In Iraq, the 'Revive the Spirit of Mosul' initiative fully reflects this approach. The reconstruction of Al-Nouri Mosque, its Al-Hadba Minaret, and the churches of Al-Tahera and Al-Saa'a goes beyond restoring monuments – it contributes to the recovery of communities, strengthens the social fabric, and fosters renewed hope for peaceful coexistence and lasting reconciliation.

Guided by the same conviction, UNESCO is working to fully recognise the richness and diversity of African heritage on the World Heritage List by supporting African States in implementing sustainable management and promotion strategies,

based on the active involvement of communities. Thanks to this joint mobilisation, several States previously unrepresented have been able to submit their first nomination, while a new generation of African heritage professionals, trained by UNESCO and its partners, is helping to sustain these efforts.

UNESCO also pays special attention to Small Island Developing States, whose cultural and natural heritage is severely threatened by climate change. In this special interview, Ernesto Ottone R., Assistant Director-General for Culture, speaks with Grace Malie, a young activist from Tuvalu, about the challenges and resilience of these communities in protecting their land and heritage.

This issue is published on the occasion of the 47th session of the World Heritage Committee, held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris with the support of the Government of Bulgaria. From the refinement of the Thracian tombs to the singularity of Pirin National Park, Bulgaria's World Heritage sites offer a striking glimpse into a rich European heritage, steeped in memory and authenticity. As we continue to celebrate the world's heritage, may this issue spark awareness and inspire us to build a future where culture unites and heritage brings people together.



Lazare Eloundou Assomo
Director of World Heritage



left

Sinanitsa – also known by the names Split Peak and Blue Peak (Bulgaria)

Message

Bulgaria is honoured to co-organise the 47th session of the World Heritage Committee under the presidency of Professor Nikolay Nenov. This is a reaffirmation of our strong commitment to UNESCO and its global mission to preserve and promote cultural and natural heritage. This significant event highlights our country's active role in international heritage conservation efforts and our actions to develop global cooperation in protecting the cultural and natural treasures of humanity.

Bulgaria is a country with a rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage that spans millennia. Our historic cities, archaeological sites and nature reflect the depth of our national identity, while traditions, crafts and folklore contribute to the vitality of our intangible heritage. As a member of the World Heritage Committee, Bulgaria remains firmly committed to developing key priorities that will strengthen the protection and management of heritage sites around the world.

One of our main focuses is the impact of climate change on World Heritage sites, and it is our duty to develop sustainable conservation strategies to mitigate these risks.

Other important aspects of our programme are the promotion of a more balanced representation of different regions and heritage categories, as well as the protection of underwater cultural heritage.

In welcoming the members of the World Heritage Committee, the UNESCO Secretariat and the delegates to the session, we invite them to participate in the discussions and learn about the richness of Bulgaria's heritage. Together, we can ensure that the World Heritage Convention will continue to be a powerful tool to protect our shared heritage for generations to come.



© Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria

H. E. Mr Marian Bachev
Minister of Culture of the
Republic of Bulgaria

World Heritage is a responsibility

World Heritage is a responsibility that faces each of us who is committed to the research, preservation or presentation of this specific element of human culture. Seemingly very different, the types of heritage are similar in that they express our own vision of important places, ways of life, knowledge, cultural practices, and natural and historic sites.

Once designated as cultural heritage, these elements become an obligation that we will pass on to those who come after us. This makes us think – are we creating too many legacies, thereby increasing the responsibilities of the next generation? If for us these elements of heritage are important and valuable because they are part of our cultural specificity, of our ways of expressing ourselves to others, then will they be needed to the same extent by future generations who will probably have different values?

I think such questions should not discourage our desire to preserve diverse forms of cultural heritage and to present them to the world. Bulgaria has been involved in these global processes from the very beginning, when the first World Heritage sites were inscribed. In the beginning, these were medieval sites with paintings and messages that transcended national borders. Subsequently, Thracian sites appeared, which are still an important element of national identity and the narratives of Antiquity. Gradually, the variety of sites increased, highlighting the cultural context for the expression of Bulgarian culture. Thus, the preservation and presentation of cultural heritage is becoming a sustainable policy for our country, since through heritage and its good management we can express ourselves in a dynamic and sometimes aggressive world.



© Nikolay Nenov

Professor Nikolay Nenov
Chairperson of the 47th session
of the World Heritage Committee

Memories etched in stone and mountain

World Heritage in Bulgaria

right
Church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel







Boyana Church

**Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1979**

At the foot of the Vitosha Mountain near Sofia, the Boyana Church of St. Nicholas and St. Pantaleon is an extraordinary testimony to medieval art and architecture as are its remarkable frescoes, including the ktetor portraits that predate the artistic Renaissance in Europe.

It is composed of three buildings, constructed at different times and seamlessly connected into a single structure, making it one of the most striking examples of continuity. This site is one of the most complete and perfectly preserved monuments of Eastern European medieval art.

The first building in the eastern part is a church built in two stages in the period from the 10th to the 12th centuries. It belongs to the cruciform churches, with built-in supports forming an inscribed cross. The facade sculpture of the multi-stepped chamfered niches and arches at the openings is complemented by the so-called 'teeth of wolf' of the non-orthogonally placed ceramic masonry units at the arches. In its present form, the first church was completed in the second half of the 12th century.

Subsequently, in the 13th century, a narthex was added to the first building with a commemorative cruciform chapel on the second level above it. This extension was made by Sebastokrator Kaloyan, hence the name 'Kaloyan's Church'. It defines the temple to the type of two-storey church-tombs. During the enlargement, both buildings were painted anew, with new frescoes covering those of the 12th century.

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complete and perfectly
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Eastern European
medieval art.**

The crypt is covered with a semi-cylindrical vault with two niches of arcosolia on the north and south walls, while the chapel repeats the architectural type of the original church. The facade decoration not only features the sculpture of the blind arcaded niches at the openings but also a picturesque mixed

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Church of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki in Veliko Tarnovo

right

Sevastokrator Kaloyan.

Fresco in the eastern part of the northern wall (1258–59)

ΚΑΛΟΙΣ ΕΣΤΑΤΕ
ΠΑΤΕΡΑΣ
ΚΑΙ





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The Boyana Church is a jewel of cultural heritage that embodies the perfect combination of art, history and spirituality.

masonry of white stone and red bricks, combined with decoration of ceramic inlays of coloured glazed cups, typical of the temples of Tarnovo, Nessebar and Ohrid.

In the 19th century, the third westernmost part of the church was built to meet the growing needs of the local community. Although newer, this portion maintains the architectural harmony of the site.

The frescoes in the church date back to five periods: the 11th to 12th centuries, 1259, the 14th century, the 16th to 17th centuries and 1882. Of exceptional artistic merit are the 240 images from the year 1259, forming the second painting layer created by the so-called Boyana Master and his group of medieval artists. It is thought that Dimitriy Zograf of the Tarnovo school of painting may be one of the artists. Some of the most famous depictions are those of the Custodians of the temple, such as Sebastokrator Kaloyan and his wife Desislava, as well as those of Tsar Konstantin Asen and Tsaritsa Irina. A cryptic inscription in Bulgarian in the narthex of

the church indicates the year of its complete painting (1259), the names of the donors, and the relationship of the local feudal ktetor to the Bulgarian king and the Serbian king. Other famous frescoes are scenes from the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, distinguished by a wealth of detail and expressiveness.

Frescoes of the church itself depict unique images of local saints, reflecting the Bulgarian culture and spirituality of the time. They also include portraits of Kaloyan and Desislava; notable for their realism and elegance – rare qualities in medieval art.

To the south of the church is buried Tsaritsa Eleonora of Bulgaria. She was the second wife of Tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria and played a key role in saving the Boyana Church from destruction in the early 20th century. During that period, at the Tsar's initiative, the park around the church was created.

The Boyana Church is a jewel of cultural heritage that embodies the perfect combination of art, history and spirituality.

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Boyana Church in winter







Madara Rider

**Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1979**

The Madara Rider is one of the most iconic and recognisable landmarks in Bulgaria. The medieval relief is carved into a 100-metre-high limestone cliff within the borders of the Madara archaeological reserve, near the village of the same name.

The rock bas-relief was first described in 1872. Carved at a height of 23 metres from the base of the rock, it is dated to the beginning of the 8th century CE, during the first years of the foundation of the Bulgarian state. The composition of the relief depicts a hunting scene, in which a life-sized horseman gallops to the right, thrusting a spear into a lion that lies beneath the horse's forelegs. In front of the horseman is a flying eagle in a heraldic pose, and behind him is an image of a dog.

Around this scene, inscriptions in Greek recount significant events in the history of the Bulgarian state. The first inscription is from the time of Khan Tervel (from 701 to 717), informing of the help the Khan gave to Emperor Justinian II to regain his throne in Constantinople. The second inscription is located to the left below the equestrian and dates from the time of Khan Kormisosh (around 756). It refers to Bulgarian-Byzantine relations and the tax that Byzantium paid to Bulgaria at that time. The third inscription, located at the bottom right, is from the time of Khan Omurtag (from 814 to 831) and again refers to relations between Bulgaria and Byzantium. These texts are among the earliest written sources on Bulgarian statehood and are an important source for understanding early medieval history in the Balkans.

**The rock relief depicting
the Madara Rider is located
in an archaeological
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archaeological sites have
been recorded, some of
which date back more than
2,000 years.**

The rock relief depicting the Madara Rider is located in an archaeological reserve where a number of historical sites have been recorded, some of which date back more than 2,000 years. The bas-relief is associated with the large cult complex created by

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Landscape of the Madara Rider

left

The relief of the Madara Rider from above

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Omurtag on the terrace below the cliffs, including a sanctuary, chapels, a palace, residential buildings and other structures. At the foot of the rocks, there is a large cave called the Cave of the Nymphs, where the Thracians worshipped their deities in ancient times. Archaeological finds include prehistoric cult figurines and votive tablets dedicated to the Three Nymphs, Zeus, Heracles, Dionysus, Cybele, the Thracian hero-rider and others.

The Madara Rider is exceptional not only as a work of realistic Bulgarian sculpture but also as a

piece of historical source material from the earliest years of the Bulgarian state, because the inscriptions around the rider chronicle the events during the reign of the first Bulgarian khans.

Due to some instability of the rock in which it is carved, the relief faces ongoing conservation challenges. The combination of wind erosion and surface water runoff from heavy rains and melting snows wear away the cliff. The site has been the subject of numerous scientific studies, including geological and hydrological analyses aimed at

The Madara Rider is exceptional not only as a work of realistic Bulgarian sculpture but also as a piece of historical source material from the earliest years of the Bulgarian state.

understanding erosion processes and rock stability; physicochemical and microbiological studies investigating the influence of natural factors on the topography; and geodetic and seismographic measurements that help determine long-term risks to the site. All of these research efforts have been integrated into a large database, and the results have been used to guide urgent conservation measures. In 2007, an international project was carried out to find solutions for the conservation of the relief. In 2008, the Bulgarians designated the Madara Rider as the Global Symbol of Bulgaria.

The Madara Rider is not merely a historical monument. It is a symbol of Bulgarian statehood, heritage and cultural identity. The hunting scene symbolically embodies the power of the Bulgarian rulers and their role in European history. Today, it continues to attract tourists and explorers seeking a link to the past and inspiration from the great deeds of ancestors. As a unique historical and artistic site, the Madara Rider serves as a living testament to Bulgaria's rich and enduring legacy and an integral part of its cultural image.

right
The small cave in 'Madara'







Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1979

The Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo form the largest rock monastery in Bulgaria. They are located in the valley of the Roussenski Lom River, the last fully flowing right tributary of the Danube River. The river forms a picturesque canyon with majestic rock outcrops. The contrast with the gently undulating terrain in the surrounding plain is impressive. The Roussenski Lom River, with its tributaries, flows northwest across the Danube plain with numerous meanders in a deep canyon-like valley. Within the steep rock ledges composed of limestone and marl along the banks of the river, a number of caves were carved in the Middle Ages to house hermit monks, churches and monasteries.

The caves have been re-carved and adapted for monk life, with human presence harmoniously blending into the natural environment. The numerous monasteries give a specific, unique appearance. The monks walked their spiritual path entirely within the rock type of living. This is the totality of both the communal services in the churches and the residence in the cells and daily life outside the temple. Cave monasteries appeared in Late Antiquity, were present after the conversion to Christianity in Bulgaria and experienced a rise during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th to 14th centuries). The valley then became a common Bulgarian spiritual centre, attracting monks and scribes from different parts of the country. Some of the monasteries continued their

The caves have been
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existence after the 14th century, and the Basarbovski monastery is an example of a rock monastery still in operation today.

The St. Michael the Archangel monastery is the largest among the rock monasteries – better known as Ivanovo rock churches – located 22 kilometres from the town of Ruse at the village of Ivanovo. The monastery was founded by St. Joachim

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Well-preserved medieval frescoes of
Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo

right

Aerial view of Rock-Hewn Churches
of Ivanovo





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in the first half of the 13th century, with the gold donated by Tsar Ivan Asen II. Joachim became its first abbot, and in 1235, he was confirmed as Patriarch of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, reestablished in the capital city of Tarnovo.

There are around 15 rock churches of Ivanovo spread across separate parts of the monastery, some of which contain sections with preserved fresco decoration. The earlier frescoes have the characteristic features of the Komnin style. They are best preserved in the Church of St. Mary. After the conservation

and restoration works, the church has been made accessible to visitors. The striking frescoes from the beginning of the second half of the 14th century are marked by dynamic gestures and expressive figures of the depicted characters. They are distinguished by the realistic depictions, the abundance of Hellenistic elements, gracefulness and the appearance of naked human bodies. This painting represents a pinnacle of medieval artistic achievement for its successful compositional decisions, the dynamism of the individual scenes, the rich architectural and natural

The Ivanovo rock churches represent a magnificent heritage that combines art, spirituality and human ingenuity.

landscapes, the multitude of details, and the striving for depth and spatiality.

The Transfiguration stage is depicted in the central part of the nave. A light blue mandorla glows around the image of Christ, with the effect of the Uncreated Light amplified by four diagonal rays. The light of the Transfiguration occupies an important place in the teachings of the Isychasts, an Orthodox religious movement of the 14th century. The increased presence of subjects related to the hermit life suggests the influence of Hesychasm, whose followers sought union with God through

silence and prayer. The Betrayal of Judas is one of the most evocative scenes.

The site is under continuous monitoring to prevent damage caused by weather and tourism. Parts of the complex are restricted to experts, but hiking trails around the Roussenski Lom valley are accessible, offering panoramic views of the cliffs and rock churches. This natural setting adds to the mystical atmosphere of the site. The Ivanovo rock churches represent a magnificent heritage that combines art, spirituality and human ingenuity.

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14th century frescoes, Church of the Holy Virgin, Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo







Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1979

Nestled in the heart of the Rose Valley, the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak is an exceptional testament to the culture and artistry of ancient Thrace. The tomb is renowned for its remarkably well-preserved frescoes, which offer a unique insight into the funerary customs and beliefs of the Thracian nobility during the Early Hellenistic period.

The tomb was accidentally discovered on 19 April 1944 by soldiers digging an air-raid shelter. It dates back to the second quarter of third century BCE and is associated with the flourishing period of Seuthopolis, the capital of the Odrysian ruler Seuthes III. The newly founded capital was located a few kilometres to the southwest, now submerged beneath the waters of the Koprinka Dam.

Constructed at ground level and oriented north-south, the tomb features an entrance from the south and consists of a dromos (corridor), a rectangular antechamber and a circular burial chamber. It was originally covered by a mound measuring seven metres in height and 40 metres in diameter.

The dromos was built of rubble, likely with a wooden roof, and measured 1.84 by 2.60 metres. The chambers were constructed from bricks bonded with mortar. Their walls and floors were coated with a three-layer plaster, onto which frescoes were applied using stucco and fresco techniques.

The antechamber is rectangular, measuring 1.12 by 1.96 metres and 2.25 metres in height, and is topped with a cantilevered vault. The wall decoration

The walls and floors were coated with a three-layer plaster, onto which frescoes were applied using stucco and fresco techniques.

begins with a band of white brackets, followed by black orthostats, a white cornice, a red main wall and an Ionic entablature. The entablature includes two narrow bands, an astragal, a plant frieze, dentils, and Ionic, Lesbian and other cymatia. A second painted frieze on the chamber vault features a central scene

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Dromos of the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak

left

Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak from outside

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The harmonious integration of architecture and frescoes, the unique artistic style, and the painter's mastery make the Kazanlak Tomb one of the masterpieces of ancient Thracian cultural heritage.

of two warriors, flanked by foot soldiers and galloping horsemen.

A rectangular entrance, once closed with a wooden single-leaf door, leads to the domed chamber. This chamber has a beehive-bell shape, with a base diameter of 2.65 metres and a height of 3.25 metres. The top is sealed with a specially shaped stone plug. The wall is adorned with a black pleated band, white orthostats, black moulding, a red main wall and an Ionic entablature. The entablature features three fasciae decorated with alternating bucrania and rosettes, a Lesbian cymation, a figural frieze, dentils, a corded band, and a sima with alternating lion heads, palmettes and rosettes. A second painted frieze appears above the entablature.

The first frieze's central composition includes three figures: a noble Thracian crowned with a golden wreath, seated on a diphros (a stool with crossed, turned legs); his wife, wearing a diadem (tiara) and veil, seated on a throne; and a tall woman

approaching with a tray in her hands. The second frieze depicts a chariot race drawn by two horses.

On either side of the tomb, within the mound, two hearths were uncovered, containing traces of communal rituals such as animal bones and pottery fragments. The harmonious integration of architecture and frescoes, the unique artistic style, and the painter's mastery make the Kazanlak Tomb one of the masterpieces of ancient Thracian cultural heritage.

Extensive archaeological excavations in the Kazanlak Valley have uncovered more than 300 burial mounds, including 25 outstanding tombs, five walled graves and numerous rich burials. Seuthopolis, built in the final decades of the 4th century BCE, was thoroughly studied before being submerged by the Koprinka Dam. During this period, the most representative tombs were constructed for prominent Thracian aristocrats and their families.

right

Painted ceiling rosette from the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak







Ancient City of Nessebar

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1983

The Ancient City of Nessebar is one of the oldest cities in Europe, dating back approximately 3,000 years. Situated on a small rocky peninsula, connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus, the town boasts a multi-layered cultural heritage, the result of the development of many civilisations. The main medieval street alignments have been preserved, and the surviving outlines of the squares reveal numerous medieval churches. The town was a centre of Christian culture and literacy, as well as of remarkable architectural and artistic achievements. On the mainland, west of the isthmus, is the necropolis of Messambria, or Mesembria, which existed from the 5th century BCE to the 15th century CE. From the more than 1,000 graves excavated come remarkable examples from the Classical and Hellenistic eras.

The earliest excavated remains are from the end of the Bronze Age. The Thracians called the location Melsambria (city of Melsa), the legendary founder of the settlement. At the end of the 6th century BCE, the first Hellenic settlers of Doric origin arrived and founded a colony. During the Classical Greek and Hellenistic periods, temples, a theatre, a gymnasium, a massive wall and residential quarters were added. The settlement developed on an area almost twice the size of the peninsula today, since much of it is now in the sea. From the ancient period, an acropolis, a temple of Apollo, an agora, a necropolis, harbour structures, thermae, and fortress walls from the Thracian, Classical, Hellenistic and Early Byzantine periods have been uncovered.

From the more than
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In 72 BCE, the city was conquered by the Romans and became part of the Roman Empire. Then known as Mesembria, it remained an important commercial and cultural centre on the Black Sea coast of Roman Thrace with its monumental walls and large public buildings. After the capital of the Roman Empire was moved to Constantinople and

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Ruins of the Church of St. Sophia in Nessebar

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Church of Christ Pantocrator, Old Nessebar





The excavated remains of the submerged ancient part of Messambria constitute an underwater cultural heritage of undeniable quality.

Christianity was adopted as the official religion, Mesembria added basilicas, fortified walls, a new water supply system and city thermae to its features. The central church of Mesembria is named St. Sophia, mirroring the great church in Constantinople.

In the year 812, the town became part of the Bulgarian state and was named Nessebar. After the period under Byzantine rule, in 917, it was included within the Bulgarian kingdom but later became part of the Byzantine Empire once again.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the city developed active trade links with the lands of the Mediterranean and the Adriatic, as well as with the principalities north of the Danube. The medieval religious architecture is of exceptional interest. The churches of St. John the Baptist and St. Stefan, the prototype of the Nessebar churches of the 13th and 14th centuries St. Paraskeva, St. Theodore, St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel, Christ Pantocrator, and St. John Aliturgetos have direct architectural analogies with the churches in the capital.

In 1493, along with Constantinople, Nessebar was conquered and became part of the Ottoman Empire. In the following centuries, the economic

and cultural life of Nessebar slowed but did not cease. The town's port continued to be the main foreign trade centre on the Black Sea. Some of the monasteries and metos around Nessebar lasted until the 18th to 19th centuries. New churches, smaller in size but with outstanding frescoes, windmills, public baths and fountains were also built. Many houses, which represent the folk architecture of the Bulgarian Revival period, have been preserved.

The excavated remains of the submerged ancient part of Messambria constitute an underwater cultural heritage of undeniable quality and contribute to the site's Outstanding Universal Value. Some of the archaeological sites are at a distance of 170 metres from the modern shore and at a depth of up to six metres, making the submerged part of Nessebar a significant underwater ancient site in the Black Sea. This formed the basis for the Bulgarian side to propose a minor boundaries modification of the property to include part of the aquatic area, working at the intersection of the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

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Church of Christ Pantocrator, Old Nessebar







Pirin National Park

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1983

Pirin National Park is located in the highest part of the Pirin Mountains, covering an area of approximately 38,350 hectares. The park is the successor to the Vihren National Park, established in 1962 (6,736 hectares), with the aim of preserving the unique biodiversity and remarkable natural formations of the Pirin range. The park features a typical alpine landscape with steep slopes, deep river valleys, cirques, glacial lakes, waterfalls, caves and predominantly coniferous forests.

The habitats in Pirin National Park are incredibly diverse. In the lower parts of the mountains, majestic coniferous forests stretch out, crisscrossed by crystal-clear rivers and mountain streams that bring refreshing coolness during hot summer days. At greater heights, the forests give way to vast alpine meadows, which burst into vibrant colours with blooming flowers in summer, creating a picturesque landscape. Above them rise rugged, rocky peaks, including the highest summit – Vihren, reaching 2,914 metres. The mountains have a distinctly alpine character, with numerous marble and granite peaks towering above 2,500 metres. The park is dotted with more than 180 glacial lakes with pristine waters that reflect the surrounding peaks like mirrors, adding a sense of serenity and magical beauty to the landscape.

Pirin National Park is a haven for botanists, hosting a rich variety of plant species, including many endemics found nowhere else in the world, such as *Papaver Degenii* (Pirin poppy),

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Erigeron Vichrensis (Vihren fleabane) and the rare *Oxytropis* species, namely *Oxytropis Urumovii* and *Oxytropis Kozhuharovii*. The iconic edelweiss called *Leontopodium Alpinum*, a symbol of purity and resilience, blooms on high cliffs, adding to the park's allure.

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A view of the Yulen Reserve

left

Main ridge of Pirin Mountain with Koncheto shelter and peak Vihren in the background

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Some of these trees are centuries old, creating a mystical atmosphere with their twisted branches and majestic stature.

Particularly impressive are the ancient forests of *Pinus Heldreichii* (Bosnian pine) and *Pinus Peuce* (Macedonian pine). Some of these trees are centuries old, creating a mystical atmosphere with their twisted branches and majestic stature. The oldest tree in Bulgaria – *Pinus Heldreichii* (Baikushev's pine) – stands within the park, estimated to be over 1,300 years old. Named after forester Konstantin Baikushev, who discovered it in 1897, this living monument near the Banderitsa hut is a must-see for visitors.

The animal world of the Pirin Mountains is as diverse as that of the plants. *Ursus Arctos* (Brown bears), *Canis Lupus* (wolves) and *Sus Scrofa* (Wild boars) roam the forests, while smaller mammals like *Martes Martes* (European pine marten) and *Rupicapra Rupicapra Balcanica* (Balkan chamois) navigate the rugged terrain. Bird enthusiasts can spot *Aquila Chrysaetos* (Majestic golden eagles), *Falco*

Peregrinus (Peregrine falcons) and the elusive *Tetrao Urogallus* (Capercaillie).

Pirin National Park is a dream destination for hikers and outdoor lovers, offering 22 hiking trails and ten cycling routes, along with 13 mountain huts and shelters providing safe accommodations.

Beyond its natural wonders, the region surrounding the park is steeped in history and tradition. The nearby town of Bansko, with its well-preserved 18th-century architecture, cobblestone streets and vibrant festivals, offers a glimpse into Bulgaria's rich cultural heritage. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Pirin is not only a symbol of natural beauty but also a reminder of our responsibility to protect it. Responsible exploration of the park ensures that future generations can continue to marvel at its splendour.

right
Dalgoto Lake with the Vihren
and Kutelo peaks in the background







Rila Monastery

**Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1983**

Located in the heart of the majestic Rila Mountains, the Rila Monastery is one of the most precious treasures in the cultural and spiritual heritage of Bulgaria. Today, it is considered an emblematic achievement of Balkan architecture and has had a significant influence on the architecture and aesthetics of the region.

The Rila Monastery was founded in the 10th century by St. John of Rila, a hermit later canonised by the Orthodox Church. His ascetic dwelling and tomb became a sacred place and was transformed into a monastic complex that played an important role in the spiritual and social life of medieval Bulgaria. Destroyed by fire at the beginning of the 19th century, the complex was rebuilt between 1834 and 1862. A typical example of the Bulgarian Renaissance, the monument symbolises the awakening of Bulgarian cultural identity.

The Rila Monastery had strong spiritual and artistic influences on the Eastern Orthodox world in the Middle Ages. Between 1400 and 1878, the monastery inspired the development of culture and arts of all Christian nations within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. It is the most important literary centre of the Bulgarian National Revival, with an unbroken history from the Middle Ages to the present day. With its architecture and frescoes, the site represents a masterpiece of the creative genius of the Bulgarian people.

The architectural styles are preserved in the site as historical monuments of a long period. The

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current appearance is one of the best examples of the building craftsmanship of the Balkan peoples of the early 19th century.

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Courtyard of the Rila Monastery

right

Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary





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The site fully meets the criteria for authenticity in terms of location, context, concept, function and tradition, with its spirit and atmosphere carefully preserved.

The monastery's impressive architecture combines Byzantine and Bulgarian influences. The central place in the complex is occupied by the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, famous for its remarkable frescoes created by some of the greatest Bulgarian artists of the National Revival period. These murals depict biblical scenes and

figures of saints in striking detail, testifying to the artistic mastery of the period.

The monastery core also includes a defensive tower, known as the Hrelov Tower, from the 14th century, and it is the oldest preserved part of the monastery. The library contains more than 116,000 books, including dozens of medieval manuscripts, some in Glagolitic. It holds rare medieval manuscripts, icons and liturgical objects of inestimable value. Rila Monastery is the centre of the modern Bulgarian language: Neofit of Rila

The Rila Monastery is not just a religious complex; it is a living symbol of Bulgarian spirituality, sustainability and cultural heritage.

(1793-1881), one of the senior clergymen (priors) of the monastery in the 19th century, is considered the father of the modern Bulgarian language. The iconostasis richly detailed in the main church is one of the finest examples of carving in Bulgaria.

Since its establishment, the Rila Monastery has played a crucial role in preserving the Orthodox faith and Bulgarian identity. It has been a refuge for scholars and craftsmen, an educational centre and a place of pilgrimage. In addition to the tomb of St. John of Rila, the site includes St. Luke's Hermitage, the Pchelino Metochion and the Orlitsa Metochion.

The natural environment surrounding the monastery, with its lush forests and high mountains, contributes to the attractiveness of the site. Numerous hiking trails allow visitors to discover the beauty of this region while respecting its fragile ecosystem.

The monastery is not just a religious complex; it is a living symbol of Bulgarian spirituality, sustainability and cultural heritage. Today, the site is protected by Bulgarian legislation and enjoys a special status as a cultural and historical site. Preservation and restoration efforts are ongoing in order to pass it on to future generations.

left

Aerial view of the Rila Monastery complex, surrounded by dense forest







Srebarna Nature Reserve

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1983

From the earliest of ages, chroniclers have speculated about what remarkable event or experience could have inspired the name of the lake and village of Srebarna – meaning ‘made of silver’ in Bulgarian. Could it be the shiny fish which gracefully transpierces the transparent water, or the morning dew on the fine spider webs knitted across the reeds? Or perhaps a silver treasure waiting for its discovery at the bottom of the lake? The glimmers of the morning sun creating the illusion of thousands of scattered coins?

Srebarna is the largest preserved eutrophic riverside lake in Bulgaria. It is situated on the bank of the Danube River between the river waterway near the town of Silistra. The lake’s surface is approximately 1,020 hectares with a fluctuating level. Abrupt increases in the water level cause the formation of temporary floating reedbeds locally known as ‘kochki’. They are never flooded and are difficult for carnivores to reach, making them perfect nesting spots for a number of aquatic birds. In the past, during certain dramatic historical events, they also served as a secure refuge for the local residents.

As early as the middle of the 19th century, naturalists and explorers around the Middle and Lower Danube were impressed by the variety of species and number of birds in Srebarna. But at that time, gunpowder ornithology was the only way to evidence observed species and to supply the exhibitions of the large European natural history museums. Nor did Srebarna escape the fashion of aigrettes – the elegant, delicate and snow-white tail feathers of the Great and the Little Egrets used

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the lake has drawn the attention of scientific communities. Srebarna eventually became the first protected area in Bulgaria, with a list of 1,430 species of plants and 1,338 species of animals.

for decorating hats. A darker chapter in the history of Srebarna was left by Leo von Kalbermatten, a nobleman and adventurer, who killed thousands of birds from 1888 to 1890. These events prompted the beginning of the protection of birds. In 1889, Emily Williamson co-founded the Society for the Protection of Birds to fight against the fashion of

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Morning in the Srebarna Nature Reserve – flock of cormorants, terns and pelicans

left

Pelecanus Onocrotalus (Great white pelicans)
in the Srebarna Lake

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The lake provides a nesting ground for 99 bird species and is a seasonal habitat of around 80 migrating species.

exotic feathers which led to the extermination of birds including Great Crested Grebes and Birds-of-Paradise. Her effort gradually gained momentum, and it culminated in the establishment of The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). In 1921, the Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Act was passed, marking the first successful campaign of the RSPB.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the lake has drawn the attention of scientific communities. Srebarna eventually became the first protected area in Bulgaria, with a list of 1,430 species of plants and 1,338 species of animals – mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. The lake provides a nesting ground for 99 bird species and is a seasonal habitat of around 80 migrating species as well as the main nesting colony of the Dalmatian pelican in Bulgaria. The area also hosts nesting populations of other rare species like the Ferruginous duck, Pygmy cormorant and Corn crake. In late autumn and winter, the lake is a resting place for a few goose species, such as the Red-breasted goose, the White-fronted goose and a large concentration of Greylag geese. The reserve hosts the biggest mixed egret and heron nesting colony in Bulgaria, with Great egrets, Little egrets, Squacco herons and Night herons, and some of the most important

nesting areas of the Spoonbill, Glossy ibis, Pochard, Ferruginous duck, Greylag goose and Mute swan.

In 1948, Srebarna Lake was declared a nature reserve, including a protective belt of wood plantations alongside the Danube River bank, the Komluka Island, and the water channel of the river between the island and the river bank. In 1999, the reserve's status was changed from 'strict' to 'managed'. In 1965, it was included in the list of wetlands with major importance in Europe compiled by the International Waterfowl & Wetlands Research Bureau. The lake's designation as a Wetland of International Importance in accordance with the Ramsar Convention followed ten years later and as a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme in 1977.

The Srebarna Nature Reserve was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1983. A protected area covers 638 hectares of lake and its ecosystem within the borders of the World Heritage site. Additional protection is provided by a buffer zone of 673 hectares declared in 2008 by a decision of the World Heritage Committee. Today, the Srebarna Natural Reserve is a symbol of environmental protection and a source of inspiration for everyone who visits it.

right
Panoramic view of the village of Srebarna and the Srebarna Nature Reserve in winter







Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari

Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 1985

Discovered in 1982 near the village of Sveshtari, this Thracian tomb is an exceptionally rare and well-preserved example of tomb architecture in ancient Thrace.

Dating from the late first to early second quarter of the third century BCE, the tomb comprises a dromos (corridor), an anteroom, a side chamber and a central burial chamber. It was constructed using local limestone blocks. The dromos has been partially destroyed, and there is no definitive record of its original covering. The entrance frame of the anteroom is adorned with a Doric architrave and a gesso cornice. Above the architrave is a relief frieze featuring bucrania (ox skulls) connected by garlands and rosettes. The side chamber is accessed through a Doric-framed entrance adjacent to a window. The entrance to the richly decorated burial chamber is also framed in the Doric style.

Ten caryatids, supporting a Doric entablature with their hands, stand on a plinth composed of orthostats and moulding. These front-facing female figures are rendered in high relief and were originally painted. They wear long chitons, with the deep hem of the drapery below the waist shaped like an acanthus shamrock, the ends of which curve gracefully upwards. Their hair is braided into plaits, and they carry calathoi (baskets) on their heads. The two stone grave beds are decorated with reliefs and painted motifs.

In front of the central bed in the burial chamber stands a stone naiskos (a small temple-like monument), one of the tomb's most intriguing

The naiskos symbolises
the boundary between life
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interior features. The naiskos includes two pilasters ending in soffit capitals. The space between them is enclosed by a three-leaved stone door, and a small pediment crowns the short eastern side of the nave. The naiskos symbolises the boundary between life and death and represents the heroisation of the buried ruler. This theme is further developed in the unfinished figural composition in the lunette above

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Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari at Isparih

right

Caryatid from the burial chamber





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the central bed. At its centre, a goddess presents a golden wreath to the ruler on horseback. Behind the goddess, four attendants bear offerings, while two foot soldiers with armour stand behind the ruler. The composition, with its elongated female figures, flowing robes and multi-figure arrangement, closely parallels the main frieze of the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak.

The buffer zone of the mound, as defined by Bulgarian legislation, coincides with the boundaries of the Sborianovo Archaeological Reserve. The reserve

includes the fortified town where the Getae ruler who is buried in the tomb once resided, two mound necropolises and other significant tomb complexes. It also encompasses a prehistoric settlement mound, an Early Iron Age settlement and necropolis, a third-century BCE sanctuary in the courtyard of the Alian Teke Demir Baba, and other archaeological sites dating from prehistory to the early Middle Ages.

The emergence of the Getic settlement dates to around the mid-fourth century BCE. The city was destroyed by a devastating earthquake shortly

At its centre, a goddess presents a golden wreath to the ruler on horseback. Behind the goddess, four attendants bear offerings, while two foot soldiers with armour stand behind the ruler.

after the mid-third century BCE. Two main phases of development have been identified. Despite its strategic location, a massive fortress wall enclosing more than ten hectares was constructed across the plateau. The fortified area contained residential, craft and agricultural buildings, some of which were two-bayed with escharas (altars) in the main rooms. Unfortified quarters were located on terraces along the southern slope of the plateau. Including

these, the town expanded to 20 hectares, with an estimated population of 10,000 to 12,000 people. In the southwestern area, a quarter with a prominent building featuring two escharas was discovered. This structure is accessed via stone steps and a space paved with thick stone slabs, surrounded by walls.

The Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari, a UNESCO World Heritage site, stands as one of the finest examples of Bulgaria's preserved cultural heritage.

left

The facade of the Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari







Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe

**Inscribed on the UNESCO
World Heritage List in 2007**

Beech forests in the reserves of Central Balkan National Park were added to the World Heritage List in July 2017 as part of the transboundary property 'Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe', which had been inscribed on the List in 2007. The Bulgarian component covers a total area of nearly 11,000 hectares. Today, this is the most recent Bulgarian World Heritage site, notable for preserving its natural character and rich biodiversity despite the coexistence with millennia-old civilisations.

The story of this transnational property begins 12,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. At that time, large areas of Europe were covered by a thick layer of ice. Forests had survived only as small remnants in southern Europe. Starting from isolated refuge areas, the beech tree expanded to various regions of Europe. This expansion process is ongoing and still evolving.

Situated over 72,000 hectares in the central and the highest parts of the Balkan Range, the Central Balkan National Park offers various habitats such as rocks, subalpine meadows and pastures, streams and waterfalls, and – most prominently – forests. They cover over 61 per cent of the territory and display remarkable diversity. Beech forests are entirely natural and retain their original structure. In the Central Balkan National Park, beech occupies approximately 29,960 hectares, representing 71 per

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cent of the park's forested area and 5.2 per cent of Bulgaria's total beech forest area. Approximately 97 per cent of the forests in the park are of natural origin. Together with neighbouring areas, the beech forests of the Central Balkan National Park cover about 60,000 hectares, forming one of the largest, most compact and best-preserved old beech forest massifs in Europe.

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Beech forest in Steneto reserve, Central Balkan National Park

left

Peeshti Skali reserve - Component Central Balkan

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Beech forests are Europe's natural wilderness. If it was left to nature, the beech would cover the central areas of the European continent.

The average age of the beech communities is 135 years. In different areas, there are vital forests with 'tree-patriarchs' over the age of 240 years. Individual trees can reach heights of 40 to 45 metres. Many of the old beech forests fall into the category of virgin forests, remaining virtually untouched by human presence.

The specific value of the beech forests in the Central Balkan National Park lies in their size, age, rich biodiversity and endemic composition – a combination of different phytogeographical elements including sub-Mediterranean, Central European, mountainous and even Western Pontic.

Natural, age-old and highly biodiverse, these forests cover about 55 per cent of the reserve area and over 15 per cent of the total park area. The Bulgarian components of this serial site include the most representative beech forests in the nine reserves located within the territory of the Central Balkan National Park: Boatin, Tsarichina, Kozya Stena, Steneto, Sokolna, Peeshti Skali, Stara Reka, Dzhenema and Severen Dzhenem. According to national legislation, the reserves and the national

park have a strict legal status and a well-established management system that guarantees protection and conservation.

Their inclusion in the World Heritage List is a strong acknowledgement of the unique nature of Bulgaria. It also highlights the Central Balkan protected area for its wealth and opportunity for regional sustainable development.

Beech forests are Europe's natural wilderness. If it was left to nature, the beech would cover the central areas of the European continent. However, all but the smallest remnants of European primeval beech forests have disappeared. Ancient, near-natural beech forests have become very rare these days.

This site illustrates a heritage of humankind in that it connects 93 unique beech forest areas across 18 countries with a surface area of almost 100,000 hectares, adjoined like a jigsaw puzzle. The European beech does not adhere to human-made borders; it transcends borders and connects Europe in equal measure.

right
Beech forest in Severen Dzhenem reserve,
Central Balkan National Park



Revive the Spirit of Mosul

Witness our rebirth





They call it Al-Mawsil – the ‘juncture’. In northern Iraq, where the Tigris River winds through the ancient region of Mesopotamia, Mosul has long stood as a crossroads of people, cultures and religions, home to Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmens, Kurds, Yezidis, Shabaks, Sabean Mandeans and many other communities. A quick glance across the cityscape reveals the multiculturalism that defines Mosul, with mosques and churches standing side-by-side as quiet witnesses to the over 2,500 years of history.

Everything changed in June 2014 when Daesh seized the city as its capital. From the Great Al-Nouri Mosque – the centre of the city’s urban and spiritual life since the 12th century – its leader proclaimed a ‘new caliphate’ from its prayer hall, raising a black flag atop it. Religious minorities were given the choice of converting or risking death. Muslims were also forced to comply with strict rules or face persecution.

In June 2017, during the battle to liberate Mosul, Daesh blew up the mosque and its iconic Al-Hadba Minaret. The fall of the beloved minaret was particularly devastating to the Moslawis. ‘When the minaret was destroyed, I couldn’t eat for three days. I was weeping and in mourning,’ said Shaima Abdul Munaim, who lives near the site. Mahmoud Ahmad, another long-time resident, said, ‘Every time I passed by the ruins of Al-Nouri Mosque, I felt the ache of loss.’

By the time the occupation ended in July of that year, 80 per cent of Mosul’s Old City had been reduced to rubble. Monuments had crumbled, sacred sites had turned to ash and entire neighbourhoods were deserted.

A tower of hope rises

In February 2018, Kuwait hosted the Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq to mobilise international support for Iraq at a critical juncture in the country’s trajectory. UNESCO launched ‘Revive the Spirit of Mosul’, its most ambitious restoration and reconstruction programme to

‘When the minaret was destroyed, I couldn’t eat for three days. I was weeping and in mourning.’

date. ‘Rebuilding heritage in Mosul is rebuilding the soul of the city,’ said Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of UNESCO.

A few months later, the first assessment mission was dispatched to Mosul, resulting in an initial recovery and reconstruction strategy as well as the formation

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Members of Mosul’s Christian community are singing at the reconstructed Al-Tahera Church in February 2025

right

Street of Mosul, 1915





of steering and technical committees to ensure the coordination with the Iraqi authorities. Community-wide surveys were conducted so residents had a voice in the recovery of their city, down to the scale of the reconstruction and the design of the monuments. Special attention was given to the iconic Al-Hadba Minaret; an overwhelming 94 per cent of respondents said they wanted to see the minaret rebuilt ‘as it was’, with a tilt.

The minaret was built in 1172 by the Seljuk ruler Nur al-Din Zangi, towering over the city with its impressive 45-metre height and intricate ornamental brickwork. It quickly became a symbol of Mosul and a prominent landmark of Iraq, appearing on the 10,000 dinar bill. Over the centuries, the structure began to lean noticeably, earning it the name Al-Hadba, or ‘the hunchback’. ‘The minaret is important not only to Moslawis but to all Iraqis. Al-Nouri Mosque connects us to the roots of our fathers and ancestors,’ said 52-year-old Noor al-Din Nadeem, a father of three boys and a girl.

The project began in 2018 with the demining and removal of hazardous materials. The teams sifted through the rubble and identified as many as 45,000 original bricks from Al-Nouri Mosque and the minaret, which were cleaned and catalogued to take on a new life as part of the rebuilt tower. In 2021, experts conducted on-site structural, geotechnical, archaeological and damage assessments. A reconstruction plan was developed in consultation with local authorities and inhabitants. ‘When I saw the scaffolding rise, I felt like I could breathe again,’ recalled Ahmad.

The reconstruction began in February 2022 with the support of the United Arab Emirates. This team was confronted with a unique architectural challenge: to recreate the lean with bricks and a technique that had not been used for centuries. ‘We did this on top of the original bases, already affected by severe structural problems before

the intentional destruction and left significantly weakened by the massive impact of the explosion,’ said Maria Rita Acetoso, UNESCO project manager of the reconstruction of Mosul. ‘The approved angle, with the tower extending as far as 1.6 metres horizontally, was achieved through a special positioning of the bricks rows. We mobilised



© UNESCO

above

Reconstruction work conducted by local team of experts and workers

left

Al-Nouri Mosque before the reconstruction

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Al-Hadba Minaret before and after the reconstruction







the best international experts, including those from the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy.’

The unprecedented project concluded at the end of 2024, providing a sense of immense relief and healing to the inhabitants of Mosul. ‘History is coming back. The identity of this city is coming back,’ said Azoulay, standing in front of the reborn minaret during her recent visit. ‘Why Mosul? Because Nineveh is the history of civilisation. It is the memory of the world.’

The reconstruction also unearthed a historical treasure. In 2021, archaeologists discovered the remains of a 12-century mosque buried beneath the Prayer Hall of Al-Nouri Mosque. A total of four rooms built of stone and plaster were exhumed. ‘I was overwhelmed with happiness when I heard about the discoveries. Having this heritage, preserved for so many years underground, having it escape the intentional destruction that the rest of the city endured – it’s a miracle. It is true that we lost a lot, but hopefully what is coming is better,’ said Mohamed Salah, a local resident.

From sound of silence to chimes of peace

The story of Al-Saa’a, or the Convent of Our Lady of the Hour, dates back to 1866. Conceived as a place of worship, social gathering and cultural activities in one, the convent hosted the first school for girls in Mesopotamia and a hospital. It was also here that the Dominicans printed the Bible in Arabic. Al-Saa’a is the first site in Iraq to feature a bell tower, helping busy Moslawis mark the passing of each hour since 1881.

The bells fell silent during the fall of Mosul when the convent was damaged, looted and ransacked. The Convent of Our Lady of the Hour became a training ground for Jihadists, and its adjacent Prayer House was used to imprison people.

Just one kilometre west of the convent stands the Al-Tahera Church. The church suffered even greater structural damage, with its roof and external walls collapsed and large parts of the arcades destroyed.

‘Having this heritage, preserved for so many years underground, having it escape the intentional destruction that the rest of the city endured – it’s a miracle.’

Years of intensive reconstruction work followed under the coordination of UNESCO, involving local communities as stakeholders as well as technical experts. During the restoration of the internal alabaster surfaces of Al-Tahera, the original painted floral decorations were uncovered. Students from the Fine Arts Department of the University of Mosul, many of them women, received hands-on training in surface conservation. ‘I am proud to be a Muslim working in the church,’ said a young woman who learned artisanal techniques. ‘It is the heritage of the entire city.’

left

Inside decorations of Al-Tahera Church

‘One day, in 2019, I got a call from my neighbour saying that my house would be rebuilt by UNESCO. I couldn’t believe my ears.’

New bells – their names Gabriel, Michael and Raphael – arrived at Al-Saa’a in early 2023, cast at the artisanal foundry Cornille Havard in Normandy, France. Al-Tahera Church also received two bells from Pontificia Fonderia Marinelli in Agnone, Italy.

‘I feel safe now that the bells are back to life,’ said one Moslawi. ‘It a city of peaceful coexistence. This city has been a city of peace since eternity,’ said another resident, reflecting on the return of the chimes.

Home is where the heart is

During the war, countless houses were reduced to rubbles, causing massive displacement. ‘All the rooms of my house collapsed. We didn’t have access to basic services like electricity and water. There were only hills of rubble and destroyed houses,’ recalled Ahmad Waad, a resident of the Old City.

With the support of the European Union, UNESCO began the restoration of close to 130 heritage houses. Some 2,107 tons of rubble were removed, along with 21 items of unexploded ordnance. ‘Mosul was liberated in 2017, but I couldn’t come back. The city was destroyed, and there was no work here. But one day, in 2019, I got a call from my neighbour saying that my house would be rebuilt by UNESCO. I couldn’t believe my ears,’ said Waad. ‘My house was rebuilt in one year. It’s a new life that has begun. There is nothing better than the smell of my neighbourhood.’

Najat Abdel Aziz, an 82-year-old woman whose historic house was restored by UNESCO, agrees. ‘Returning to live in this house is like a dream. Every corner holds precious memories.’ Before the displacement, she lived in the home with her nine brothers and sisters. ‘The restoration of these houses is a catalyst that inspires people to return to the area. It fosters a sense of hope among the residents.’

The houses were rebuilt using traditional methods, which helped to preserve their historical value and the identity of the Old City. Along the way, it generated over 3,500 local jobs in reconstruction and restoration. UNESCO also launched a youth apprenticeship programme in the fields of bricklaying, masonry, electrical installation and carpentry, counting close to 950 young men and women as beneficiaries. This dedication to craftsmanship passed on vital skills and renewed belief in the city’s future. ‘When they brought back our houses, we knew they could bring back the minaret,’ said one Moslawi.

Free to create, again

During the occupation by ISIL/Daesh, cultural life came to a standstill. Artists were persecuted and thousands of books were destroyed. The city’s numerous cafés, crucibles of ideas and cultural exchange, were forced to close. When the city was liberated and the dust finally settled, Mosul’s once-vibrant creative scene was left unrecognisable.

right

Mosul has been known for its vibrant cultural life

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Residents of rebuilt heritage houses meet Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of UNESCO







FEATURE

‘Rebuilding monuments and infrastructure is one thing, but we must think about rebuilding minds,’ said Harith Yaseen Abdulqader, co-founder of the Mosul Book Forum. UNESCO, together with its partners, launched a comprehensive plan to support the city’s cinema, music, literature and fine arts sectors.

In the autumn of 2019, Mosul hosted its first cultural festival since the occupation, bringing joy and a sense of normalcy to the streets. The Spring Festival made its long-awaited return in 2023 after a 20-year hiatus, drawing nearly a million attendees. ‘This is a very strong message that Nineveh is the cradle of civilisations,’ said a local resident who attended the festival.

The sound of music once again echoed through Mosul, thanks to musicians like Ehsan Akram Al Habib. ‘By bringing back music to Mosul, we are bringing back life,’ said the 39-year-old string musician. ‘We are a people of love, of beauty, of civilisation, of music. Music is a world of beauty for all of humanity, and it is a major part of Mosul and of Iraq.’

Open-air screenings are also starting to take place. A FilmLab was established at the Institute of Fine Arts of Mosul, in partnership with UNESCO and the City Theatre of Ghent, Belgium. Twenty students received hands-on training in film production, resulting in nine original short films. ‘I had my mother take part in a movie,’ says Faryal

‘We are a people of love, of beauty, of civilisation, of music. Music is a world of beauty for all of humanity, and it is a major part of Mosul and of Iraq.’

Ahmad, a film student. ‘My film is called Faslya, a word to imply paying an amount of money or giving away girls to another family to solve a conflict. I wish I could work more in film, as being behind the camera is my true passion.’

In June 2021, UNESCO inaugurated The Station, a creative space where young creators can meet, learn, exchange ideas and sell their work. The space also hosts events like concerts, workshops and exhibitions. ‘It’s intended for anyone who has an idea in the field of creativity and arts,’ said Khalid Al-Rawi, the programme specialist. ‘This is for all the artists.’

The world unites for Mosul

Mosul is not the first major heritage reconstruction orchestrated by UNESCO. In the 1960s, the Nubia Campaign saved ancient Egyptian monuments from the waters of the Aswan Dam. The temples of Abu Simbel were cut with wire saws, transported block by block, and reconstructed 64 metres above the old site in the same orientation – an unprecedented feat of engineering and architecture. This started a ripple effect for cultural heritage protection, culminating in the creation of the World Heritage Convention in 1972.

right
Young men and women in traditional dress perform a cultural dance in Mosul’s Old City





Global efforts converged once more in 1991 to restore Angkor, a World Heritage site in a state of neglect. More recently, in 1998, UNESCO spearheaded the rebuilding of the Stari Most (Old Bridge) in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, destroyed due to shelling. Following its rebuilding, the bridge became a World Heritage site in recognition of ‘human solidarity for peace and powerful cooperation in the face of overwhelming catastrophes.’

In early 2012, Timbuktu, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988 as the African intellectual and spiritual capital of the 15th to 16th centuries, was deliberately destroyed by armed groups that occupied Northern Mali. UNESCO rapidly mobilised to reconstruct 14 of the 16 mausoleums on the List, rehabilitate three iconic mosques, and safeguard over 300,000 ancient manuscripts. The mausoleums were reconstructed using traditional knowledge and methods, revitalising ancestral construction practices and sparking opportunities for the local economy along the way.

Today, Revive the Spirit of Mosul joins this illustrious list, as the largest reconstruction campaign led directly by UNESCO. The initiative showcases UNESCO’s evolving expertise in post-conflict recovery and global cultural cooperation. A total of US\$115 million was raised from 15 partners, notably the United Arab Emirates and the European Union with substantial contributions of US\$50.4 million and US\$48.2 million respectively.

It also mirrors the shifting approach in heritage safeguarding towards more community centricity and empowerment of the local population through skills transfer. Around 2,800 locals benefited from UNESCO Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) training in construction. Eighty per cent of graduates joined on-site training to rehabilitate historic buildings. By the end, Revive the Spirit of Mosul generated more than 7,000 jobs. A sense of pride returned to local craftspeople, engineers and workers, confident that they would preserve their heritage, as custodians.



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Our tomorrow

In the narrow streets of Mosul, the scent of spices once again mingles with the call to prayer, punctuated by the chimes of church bells. The enduring legacy of the project will be the *spirit* of it all, the complex yet harmonious interplay between the tangible and the intangible.

Mustafa Khalid, a site engineer, said, ‘In the revival of our city’s spirit, we witnessed a rewriting of our narratives not solely with bricks but with the essence of unity and steadfast resilience. We are forging a future that honours our rich past.’

A new chapter is being written in this ancient city of Mesopotamia, and the Moslawis hold the pen.

above

Workers installing the new bell at Al-Saa'a Church

left

Al-Hadba Minaret by night



**Vassil Nikolov,
prehistoric
archaeologist**

**Unearthing pieces of
the past**

INTERVIEW

Vassil Nikolov is a prehistoric archaeologist and a full member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Over the years, his extensive field experience has enabled him to develop methodologies for studying prehistoric settlements and mounds. He has identified and researched a new category of sites in the Balkans: Neolithic and Chalcolithic pit sanctuaries. He is currently leading the study of Provadia–Solnitsata – the earliest known prehistoric urban and salt production centre in Europe – and its surrounding stone fortifications, which are also among the continent’s oldest.

Nikolov’s research spans various aspects of late prehistory: the origins of Neolithic culture in the Balkans, Neolithic ceramics, prehistoric architecture, specialised production and the emergence of complex societies. For the first time in the Balkans, he uncovered remains of two- and three-story prehistoric structures, revealing sophisticated building techniques that existed far earlier than previously believed.

You have dedicated nearly 50 years to researching prehistoric sites. Could you share how your journey in archaeology began?

My fascination with late prehistory in the Bulgarian lands started in my student years, a time when little was known about this period in the Central and Eastern Balkans. Just after university, I joined a Bulgarian–Dutch archaeological expedition at a settlement mound in Thrace. This was the first collaborative project between countries on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. Working in the rich academic libraries of Amsterdam gave me invaluable access to international scholarship, which played a major role in my career development as a researcher.

In the 1980s, I began rescue excavations at the early Neolithic settlement of Slatina, in present-day Sofia. There, I discovered the remains of a remarkably

‘My fascination with late prehistory in the Bulgarian lands started in my student years, a time when little was known about this period in the Central and Eastern Balkans.’

large house dating to the early 6th millennium BCE – the biggest known in Europe at the time. That moment was unforgettable. Shortly afterwards, I was invited to contribute to a major prehistoric exhibition for West Germany. It featured the Varna ‘gold’ necropolis, which is the world’s oldest worked gold, dating to the mid-5th millennium BCE. During a site visit, the exhibition’s German curator and I came up with the idea of calling the display ‘The Oldest Gold in the World – The First

previous page
Vassil Nikolov

right
Settlement mound Provadia–Solnitsata





INTERVIEW

European Civilization'. The exhibition was a huge success during its two-year run in Germany.

While travelling with the exhibit, I used every opportunity to conduct research in museum libraries. This allowed me to compile literature from across Europe on Neolithic architecture and prepare my first book – a monograph on the Great House from Slatina.

In my thesis, I argued that the earliest European civilisation originated in the Central and Eastern Balkans in the second half of the 7th millennium BCE, flourishing over the next two millennia. Today, this idea is widely accepted, confirmed by annual excavations across the region from the Aegean to the Carpathians.

This area saw Europe's first pitched-roof homes, followed soon after by complex wooden and clay buildings with multiple stories. It also saw the emergence of specialised flint tool production, salt extraction, copper metallurgy, the earliest known processed gold, long-distance trade, enclosed stone fortresses and the first complex societies.

Many archaeologists have contributed to this collective understanding. Additional inspiration came from the Bulgarian–French expedition at Kozarnika Cave in northwestern Bulgaria, where evidence of early human habitation dating back 1.4 million years was discovered.

You led the Bulgarian–Austrian excavations at the Karanovo settlement mound in Thrace. Could you walk us through your experience in this internationally recognised site?

After the sudden loss of my mentor in 1988, I took over leadership of this significant international project. Before the widespread use of radiocarbon dating, the 12-metre stratigraphy of the Karanovo mound served as a chronological benchmark for the late prehistory of southeastern Europe. Researchers used it to align and compare other sites across the region.

During 20 years of meticulous work, our international team produced five major volumes of



© Provadia-Solnitsata

above
Vassil Nikolov excavating Europe's oldest urban settlement in Provadia

left
Kozarnika cave entrance

INTERVIEW

‘In two decades of research, we’ve uncovered the oldest known techniques for boiling saltwater in ceramic vessels to produce industrial quantities of salt.’

findings, which were published in German in Austria. I see this as a vital contribution to the understanding of southeast European prehistory. This work later helped me secure a Humboldt Fellowship, allowing me to continue my research at Saarland University in Saarbrücken, Germany. There, I completed much of my habilitation degree. In 1999, I became a professor at the National Institute of Archaeology with Museum in Sofia, later serving as its director.

Despite administrative responsibilities, you continued with fieldwork.

Yes, and it was a fortunate time. Major infrastructure projects in Bulgaria led to numerous rescue excavations, creating opportunities for funded fieldwork and enriching museum collections. During this period, I excavated a Neolithic site in the Maritsa Valley in southeastern Bulgaria. Initially, we believed it was a typical Late Neolithic settlement. However, we soon realised we had uncovered something previously unrecognised: a long-used pit sanctuary. It was the first of its kind identified in the Balkans. Discovering something entirely new is one of the greatest thrills of prehistoric archaeology. It makes you wonder how many more types of sites remain hidden and unexplored.

But your primary focus for the last two decades has been a unique site, namely the salt production and urban centre near Provadia.

That’s right. I could speak for hours about the Provadia–Solnitsata site, but I’ll keep it brief. When we began excavations near Provadia in northeastern Bulgaria, the crucial role of salt in ancient societies was largely overlooked in local archaeological discourse. Sodium chloride formed the foundation of a unique prehistoric economy and was essential to both human and animal life.

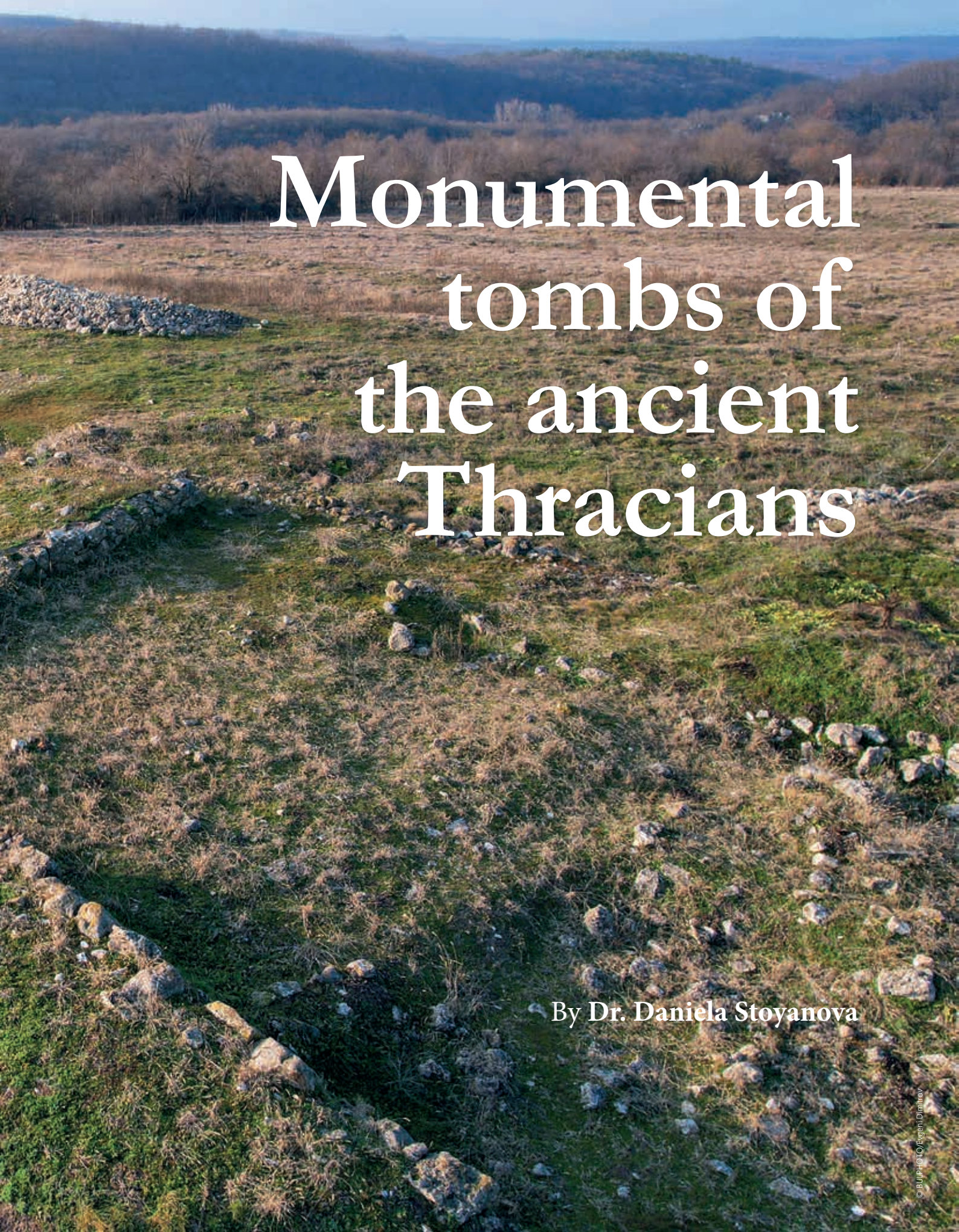
In two decades of research, we’ve uncovered the oldest known techniques for boiling saltwater in ceramic vessels to produce industrial quantities of salt. This commodity was traded over great distances, and the wealth it generated led to the construction of formidable stone fortresses – the oldest known in Europe – to protect the settlement.

We’ve also documented the earliest known examples of multi-story residential buildings, which illustrate the advanced architectural skills of these communities. For me and my team, working at Solnitsata has been a deeply rewarding challenge. We feel like pioneers, pulling back the curtain on the mechanisms that powered one of Europe’s earliest civilisations.

right
Archaeological excavation of the
Provadia-Solnitsata settlement mound





The background image is a landscape photograph showing a grassy field with scattered stone ruins, likely ancient tombs. In the distance, there are rolling hills and a line of trees. The sky is clear and blue. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

Monumental tombs of the ancient Thracians

By Dr. Daniela Stoyanova



Tomb architecture flourished in ancient Thrace, the lands of which covered a large territory: in the north along the Danube River, in the east to the Black Sea, in the south to the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea, and along the valleys of the Morava and Struma rivers in the west. Today, over 200 are known, primarily concentrated in northeastern and southern parts of Northern Thrace in Bulgaria. These tombs are typically situated at the level of the ancient terrain, including examples carved directly into the ground, with layouts that mirror those of constructed tombs.

The burial structures used by the ancient Thracians during the second half of the first millennium BCE include a variety of forms – pits dug into the earth, rubble-stone constructions, masonry graves, clay and stone sarcophagi, and monumental chamber tombs. All were covered by mounds of earth or stones. These mounds, whether isolated or grouped, are iconic features of the ancient Thracian landscape.

Typically, tombs consist of a burial chamber, one or more antechambers, a corridor with or without an open anteroom, and occasionally a side chamber. These components vary in shape, size and volume. The remains of the deceased were placed in the burial chamber along with personal belongings and offerings. Horse remains were often found in ante-burial chambers and vestibules.

Before the mid-4th century BCE, tomb construction in Thrace was sporadic. Slightly earlier or contemporary with these early tombs were masonry graves. Some of the known tombs contain exceptionally rich grave goods, reflecting the high social status of the aristocrats buried within. The true flourishing of tomb architecture in Northern Thrace occurred between the mid-4th and early third centuries BCE. After this period, either tombs were reused or, only occasionally, new ones were constructed.

Some of the known tombs contain exceptionally rich grave goods, reflecting the high social status of the aristocrats buried within.

Thracian tombs display a wide variety of structural features. Stone rings at the base of burial mounds are uncommon, though notable examples exist, such as those at the Mal Tepe mounds near the village of Mezek and at Chetinyovata Mogila near Starosel. Typically, a single tomb is found within a mound, with

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The southern gate of the Getic capital

left

Relief depiction of Helios from the marble door of the tomb in the Golyama Kosmatka mound, Thracian Kings' Valley

The facades of Thracian tombs exhibit remarkable diversity. The simplest designs feature smooth walls and a basic entrance. More elaborate facades incorporate Doric or Ionic frames, entablature elements, inset or free-standing columns, and pediments.

multiple tombs being rare. The tomb's position within the mound determines how it is accessed: tombs located near the centre are reached via a dromos (corridor), while those near the periphery often feature visible facades of ante-burial chambers or antechambers. A particularly striking example includes a staircase – likely designed as a monumental propylon – that begins at the base of the mound and leads to an open area ending in an imposing facade, behind which lie the antechamber and burial chamber.

The facades of Thracian tombs exhibit remarkable diversity. The simplest designs feature smooth walls and a basic entrance. More elaborate facades incorporate Doric or Ionic frames, entablature elements, inset or free-standing columns, and pediments. Unlike the tombs of Ancient Macedonia, where decorative elements are often rendered in relief using painted plaster, Thracian tomb facades are carved entirely from stone. Only select elements, such as cymatia and astragals, were painted. Some facades also include sculptural imagery, such as symmetrically placed panthers flanking an Ionic door frame that occupies the upper half of the facade.

The walls of Thracian tombs were often constructed using highly precise block masonry, primarily employing variations of the pseudo-isodome technique and, more rarely, the isodome technique. Both the use of Greek architectural elements and the meticulous stonework reflect the exceptional craftsmanship of the

Thracian stonemasons. The pseudo-isodome method, characterised by alternating low and high courses of stone blocks, was the most commonly applied.

To secure the blocks, wooden or metal staples cast in lead were used. In rubble-stone masonry, clay solder served as the binding material. In the Kazanlak Valley, sector-shaped and rectangular bricks were also employed – a construction innovation that, centuries later, enabled Roman architects to achieve new levels of structural sophistication. The bricks were joined with mortar or clay, while adobe masonry was rarely used.

Tomb entrances typically featured a moulded sill, sides and lintel, often without decorative elements. The most distinguished examples include Doric frames from the tombs at Sveshtari and Borovo and Ionic frames from the tombs at the Chetinyova and Zhaba mounds. Entrances were sealed with single or double-winged stone doors and, less frequently, with wooden or metal ones. These stone doors could be plain or coffered, with or without additional relief or painted decoration. A unique example is a marble door from the interior of Thrace, adorned with reliefs of Medusa and Helios and a painted Lesbian cymation.

Tomb coverings were constructed from wood, stone or brick. Stone coverings comprised flat slabs, dressed quadrangular or pentagonal slabs (used in masonry graves), combinations of transverse beams and slabs, gabled and trapezoidal slabs, cantilevered vaults

right
Arched red bricks from a ruined building

next page
Fragment of the fresco in the burial chamber of the Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari







FEATURE

of various profiles, lantern-shaped vaults, and semi-cylindrical wedge vaults. Additionally, several types of cantilevered domes were used, including hive-shaped and hive-bell-shaped, as well as domes on pendentives or monolithic covers over sarcophagus-like chambers.

Console vaults and domes were widely used in Southern Thrace, while semi-cylindrical vaults were more common in Northeastern Thrace. One of the most remarkable examples of a domed tomb in Northeastern Thrace features two circular burial chambers with beehive-shaped domes, a shared pre-burial chamber and a side chamber. The latter two are located behind a monumental facade adorned with Ionic door frames and an Ionic entablature.

In most cases, while the exterior of the tombs is decorated, the interior remains unadorned. However, some tombs – such as the royal tomb with caryatids in the village of Sveshtari – feature not only elaborately sculpted facades but also richly decorated interiors. Behind the modest facade of the Kazanlak tomb lies an interior where architectural elements are rendered through detailed wall paintings.

The floors of these tombs were constructed using various techniques. Stone slabs, often laid in irregular patterns, were the most common, though circular compositions also appear. Additional materials included clay mortar, coloured mosaics made from river stones and coloured mortar plasters, as seen in the Kazanlak tomb.

The most iconic Thracian tombs are distinguished by their colourful decoration, murals and funerary furnishings.

Walls were generally flat but sometimes displayed a toechobate at the base or a cornice at the transition to the ceiling. Ceilings were typically unpainted unless the tomb was decorated. A notable exception is the coffered ceiling of the sarcophagus-shaped chamber in the Ostrusha mound. This monolithic chamber, with a gabled roof set on a three-stepped stylobate, features cassettes depicting female faces – likely personifications of the Pleiades – alongside mythological scenes and rosettes. In a later phase, four additional masonry burial chambers were added, connected by a fifth chamber that served as a passage.

The most iconic Thracian tombs are distinguished by their colourful decoration, murals and funerary furnishings. When plastered, the walls were painted either white or in coloured bands, typically including a base of plinth, orthostats and cornice, followed by a main wall decorated with vegetal friezes or figural compositions. Painted scenes highlight battles, aristocratic hunts, chariot races, funerary banquets, symposia and heroisation rituals.

In the burial chambers of the most prominent tombs, constructed, composite and monolithic beds have been documented. Diphroi (stools) made of wood

right
Aerial photo of the ancient Tatul sanctuary





FEATURE

or stone are less common, and no thrones have been found, although they appear in the painted scenes of the Kazanlak and the Alexandrovo tombs. Special steps were sometimes built in front of the beds. Only in the royal tomb with caryatids has a stone naiskos (a small temple-like monument) been discovered, enclosing the space in front of the central wedge.

The political, economic and cultural prosperity of key centres associated with the Odrysian dynasty and the Getae led to the construction of remarkable tomb monuments in Thrace. The most significant of these centres include the Sredna Gora region near Panagyurishte, the Kazanlak Valley and the village of Sveshtari (the capital of the Getae). In Sveshtari, both monumental masonry and rock-cut tombs were constructed simultaneously. In the lands of the Triballi (Northwestern Thrace), tombs are rare and built using primitive techniques.

In the most intact tomb complexes, grave goods comprise a wide range of metal vessels – crafted in gold, silver and bronze – as well as pottery. Other significant items include defensive and offensive weapons, wine-drinking sets, and personal insignia such as gold and silver rings and breastplates. Local workshops also produced luxury horse gear in a distinctive Thracian style. From the second half of the 4th century BCE, gold wreaths began to appear. The Thracian aristocracy played a crucial role in shaping local variations in tomb planning, structure, facade design and ornamentation.

Although the peak of Thracian tomb architecture was relatively brief, making it difficult to trace clear developmental stages, the study of individual architectural elements reveals influences from Asia Minor, Ancient Macedonia, and both Continental and Insular Greece.

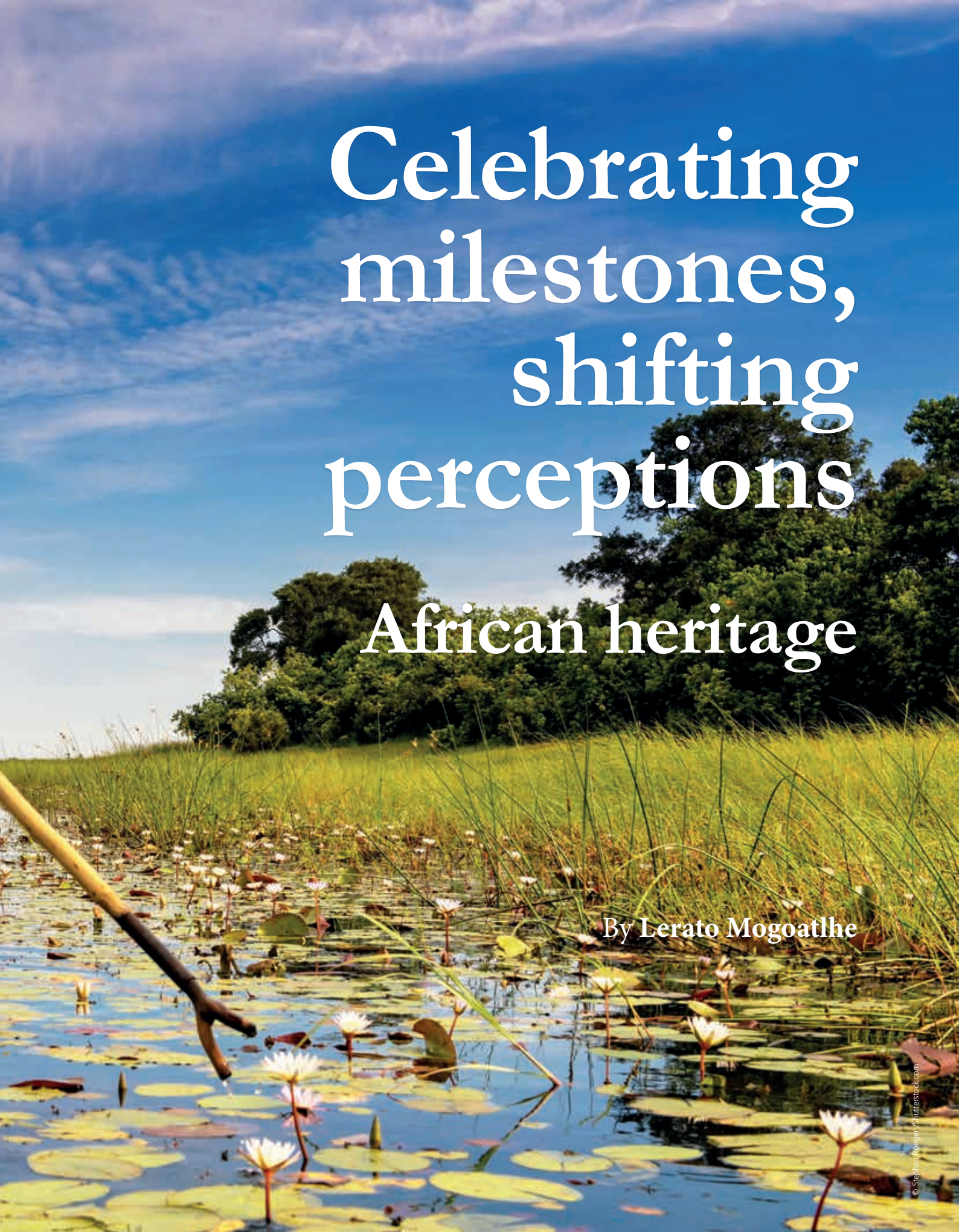


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above
Replica of the Bronze Head of Seuthes III, the
King of the Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace

left
The interior of the burial chamber





Celebrating milestones, shifting perceptions

African heritage

By Lerato Mogoatlhe



‘Africa is the continent that has the origins of humanity, whether you are talking about the Cradle of Humanity in South Africa, Olduvai in Tanzania, Omo Valley in Ethiopia or Turkana Boy in Kenya,’ says George Abungu, Founding Professor of Heritage Studies, University of Mauritius and Honorary Professor of Museum and Heritage Studies, Australian National University. ‘Africa has contributed immensely to the world in terms of human development, technology, buildings and kinship. The list goes on and on.’

Yet the continent is currently under-represented on the UNESCO World Heritage List – a far cry from the inaugural list in 1978 when three out of the 12 properties were African (Ethiopia’s Simien National Park and Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela, as well as Senegal’s Island of Gorée). On the other hand, today 13 out of 56 properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger are in sub-Saharan Africa.

But the tide is turning. Africa now boasts 108 properties, with 17 added since 2018. UNESCO is supporting all 11 countries with no site on the World Heritage List to prepare their first nominations by 2027. Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe, and Sierra Leone already submitted their nomination dossiers.

There is also a growing presence of African heritage experts, professionals and academics in addition to regional and global collaborations that promote African heritage. Abungu says a notable change has been putting communities and people at the heart of African heritage. ‘Today we talk about community archaeology, heritage and sustainability, as well as heritage and community benefits. Heritage is no longer about song and dance; it is about community. Community is the language of Africa.’

Giving communities ownership of cultural and sacred sites leads to better protection. ‘The safeguarding efforts of many sites inscribed on the Danger List have

**‘Africa has contributed
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In the dugout canoe through the Okavango Delta (Botswana)

left

Coptic Orthodox priest at Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela (Ethiopia)

FEATURE

significantly improved since communities – in particular those living around the sites – began to be involved,’ says Charles Akibodé, Technical Advisor to the President of the Republic of Cabo Verde. ‘Thanks to the communities, their knowledge, and the inventory work, they were able to reconstruct the Tomb of Askia in Mali.’

Catalysing international cooperation

Léonce Ki is a Burkinabé lecturer and researcher in tangible and intangible heritage management in the country. He believes that, while community involvement is essential, it’s equally important to adopt a more systematic and collaborative international approach to increase the recognition of Africa’s heritage on the global stage.

‘Years ago, when a country wanted to inscribe a site, the World Heritage Committee requested the support

of another country to prepare the file. That experience showed us that, ultimately, collaboration is key.’

He expands: ‘In Burkina Faso for instance, Royal Court of Tiébélé was inscribed not just because of its individual value but as part of a broader African strategy. Similarly, communities in Indonesia discovered commonalities in their intangible heritage and began a joint process of inscription. This approach – rooted in shared values and collective action – is what will allow us to truly strengthen the representativity.’

It also encourages a shift in mindset among countries, sites and heritage professionals ‘to drop the possessive singular: my heritage, your heritage, his heritage,’ Ki explains. ‘If we really want to protect a shared heritage, we need to put aside our differences, our individualities, so that we can work together.’

below

View of the mountain massif of Maloti-Drakensberg Park (Lesotho and South Africa)

right

Statue of Liberation of Slaves in Island of Gorée (Senegal)



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More than a plan

These milestones reached in the heritage sector across Africa are not accidental. On the contrary, they are a result of decades of actions by key actors and institutions. In 2022, UNESCO rolled out Priority Africa that includes a flagship programme titled 'Fostering Cultural Heritage and Capacity Development'. It aims to increase the representation of Africa on the World Heritage List as well as support African governments to remove properties from the List of World Heritage in Danger. It also vows to strengthen the role of African experts in the World Heritage system.

'Priority Africa set the base for what UNESCO and other stakeholders should work on to make sure that Africa is well-represented on the World Heritage List,' says Alyssa Khadidiatou Barry, Architect and Urbanist specialising in African cultural heritage. Barry's agency, AKB Heritage, recently supported Sao Tome and Principe's first dossier.

She notes that one of the keys to the successes of African heritage is the empowerment of young people. With more than 400 million people between the ages of 15 and 35 years, they are the future custodians of Africa's heritage. 'We're seeing more African experts involved

'If we really want to protect a shared heritage, we need to put aside our differences, our individualities, so that we can work together.'

in World Heritage matters, especially the youth.' So far, UNESCO's Mentorship Programme has benefited 60 mentees – 30 women and 30 men – with 46 African countries having at least one mentee who went through the training. The goal is to ensure that each African State has at least two mentees that are engaged in the World Heritage system by 2029.

Samson Faboye from Nigeria is one such young professional. 'The UNESCO Mentorship Programme for African heritage professionals has given me deeper insights into the intrigues of nominating heritage sites.'

This proactive spirit of African youth has been crucial to the rebirth of the Dja Faunal Reserve in Cameroon, one of the largest rainforests in Africa, which was facing threats from poaching and deforestation. December 2024 brought a new dawn for the rainforest and the communities around it when 30 women and young people participated in training led by local artisans, laying the foundation for sustainable economic growth and in the process promoting local craftsmanship and cultural tourism.

previous page

Kilimanjaro National Park (United Republic of Tanzania)

left

Lamu Old Town (Kenya)

‘Our cultural heritage is about our identity, our history and our pride as Africans... For centuries, we were told that our cultures were not good enough. We’re now embracing who we are.’

Africa reclaiming its narrative

Heritage does not exist in a vacuum; it is constantly shaped by political and social events. Enslavement and colonisation shaped life across the continent, including its cultural heritage. ‘Our cultural heritage is about our identity, our history and our pride as Africans. It’s particularly important because for centuries, we have been erased from the maps and our cultures were also erased. For centuries, we were told that our cultures were not good enough. We’re now embracing who we are,’ says Barry.

This progress has enabled Africa to set its own agenda for what qualifies as heritage, who it belongs to, how it is passed down, and how it should benefit and empower communities. In other words, heritage on the continent – its preservation and promotion – is finally becoming African-led and community-centred.

Sibongile Masuku, senior lecturer in Culture and Heritage Studies at the University of Mpumalanga, says: ‘In South Africa, when we speak about communities,

it is not just about those that are living – spirits are part of our community. We have this relationship with the ancestors and rituals to deal with them.’ Masuku cites spiritual repatriation as an example, observed for political prisoners who perished on Robben Island. To bring their spirits home, one would ‘hold a piece of ziziphus mucronate, or buffalo thorn tree, call out their name and tell them we are going home.’

In May 2025, around 400 heritage experts from across Africa and the world gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, for a UNESCO conference titled Cultural Heritage in Africa: A Dialogue on the Concept of Authenticity. ‘Some of the sites in the Danger List are there because of how authenticity has been defined’, says Abungu.

African concepts of authenticity are deeply rooted in oral traditions, ritual practices, and the interconnectedness of sacred landscapes with communal values and social function, states the Nairobi Outcome on Heritage and Authenticity, launched at the end of the conference. It is therefore crucial for the heritage

right

Saline Ouniaga Kebir in the Lakes of Ounianga (Chad)

next page

Panorama of the palace Mahandrihono and tombs on the Royal Hill of Ambohimanga (Madagascar)









ecosystem to recognise the inseparable links between natural and cultural heritage in defining authenticity in Africa.

His Excellency Dr William Samoei Ruto, President of Kenya, said in his remarks: ‘African heritage is plural, dynamic and community-centred. In fact, its authenticity is derived from both the tangible and intangible, the movable and immovable, within places of cultural continuity, and with community custodianship at its heart.’

Receiving the Outcome Document, he said, ‘This call, this conversation, did not begin today. But today, we have achieved what those who came before us envisioned. We must remain dedicated and focused to pursue this path for the continent, for our heritage, for our culture and for our contribution to the implementation of the World Heritage Convention.’

Africa’s heritage in all its complexity

Beyond increasing inscriptions, the programmes that UNESCO has put in place are bringing greater visibility and protection to African sites. It is starting to reflect African heritage beyond nature and culture, to memory – the bad and the good. Léonce Ki agrees: ‘It is important to underline the human aspect, the aspect of memory. African heritage is changing.’

Africa has history and heritage beyond its pre-colonial existence. There is also modern heritage rooted in liberation movements against oppression. In 2023, the Memorial sites of the Genocide: Nyamata, Murambi, Gisozi and Bisesero in Rwanda were added to the World Heritage List.

Memory is also about celebrating resilience. It can inspire humanity to embrace reconciliation, as demonstrated in 2024 when South Africa inscribed Human Rights, Liberation and Reconciliation: Nelson Mandela Legacy Sites.

As Abungu puts it: ‘Each inscription is a celebration, a source of national pride.’



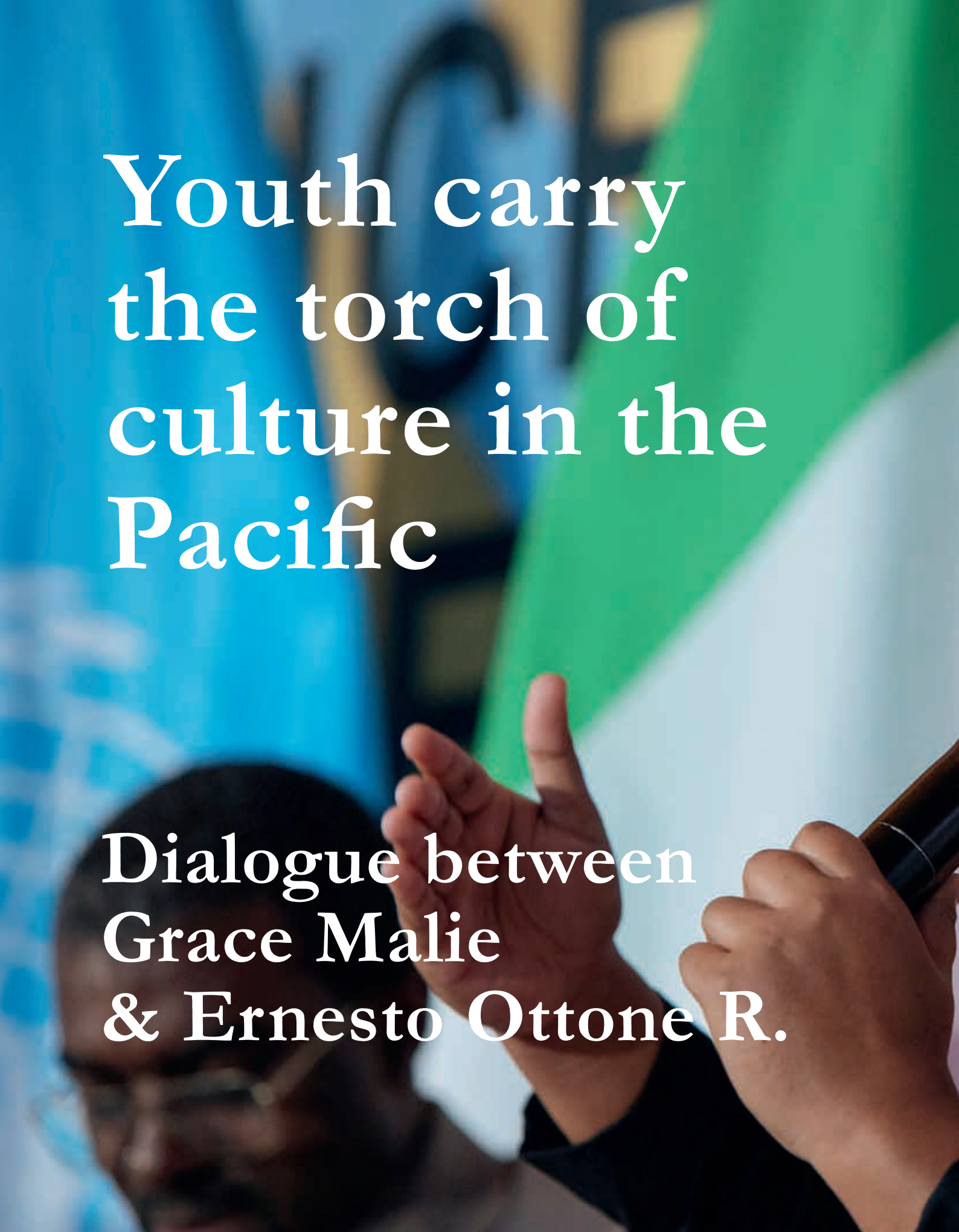
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above

Aldabra Giant Tortoise, Aldabra Atoll (Seychelles)

left

Mud structure in Timbuktu (Mali)



Youth carry the torch of culture in the Pacific

Dialogue between
Grace Malie
& Ernesto Ottone R.



INTERVIEW

Ernesto Ottone R. (UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture): Grace, we are in Naples for the second UNESCO Conference on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century. You have brought the voice of the Pacific to this international meeting and called for action to protect heritage belonging to all of humanity. You sang a beautiful song in Tuvaluan and mesmerised the entire room – such a powerful embodiment of the link between tangible and intangible cultural expressions. Let me begin by asking what ‘cultural rights’ mean to young people in the Pacific today. What can we do to make sure that your rights to culture are respected?

Grace Malie: The issue of rights to culture matters so much to Tuvalu and the Pacific to be represented here. I come from an island that is predicted to be submerged in the next 25 years. As young people from Tuvalu, we want the same rights that everybody else has.

We know that we may no longer be able to practise the same cultural freedom that we have on our lands, to sit by the beaches and talk to our elders, to come together as a community in our hall and pass on ideas from one generation to the other. If we move to another country, if we do relocate, then we will no longer be able to express our culture in the way we did over countless generations.

Ernesto Ottone R.: During the conference, you repeatedly said that the impact of climate change is here, now. The sea is rising, and we can see it. You mentioned a beautiful practice where, when a baby is born, their umbilical cord is cut into two pieces. One is buried in the earth, and the other is released into the ocean. So many of your cultural expressions are tied to your land and the sea.

The physical relocation of people is one issue, but the relocation of spiritual and cultural practices held by a community is entirely another matter. How would rich

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same rights that
everybody else has.’

heritage of your island find a new home? How can we ensure a sense of ‘belonging’ to and for heritage that was accumulated over centuries?

Grace Malie: That is an extremely challenging and sensitive question. To an older generation, this notion is so unimaginable that we don’t openly talk about it. But I know a few Tuvaluans who moved to Australia

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Grace Malie speaking at the second edition of the Naples Conference on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century

right

Rock Islands Southern Lagoon (Palau)





INTERVIEW

‘One day, I want to be recognised as a great ancestor.’

and New Zealand. They are doing a marvellous job of keeping cultural lives there, even if they are in different environments, different circumstances. My family outside of Tuvalu are doing the same thing. They find a moment to see each other, speak the Tuvaluan language, and practise Tuvaluan customs and traditions. So, even if we lose our land, we become living museums. We pass down our culture to our kids or our nephews and nieces. That's all that we can do. Heritage is alive because of us. We continue practising, and we continue teaching.

Right now, with my friends, we are trying to absorb our culture as much as possible. We are talking to our elders and learning the Tuvaluan language. There is still so much to discover. We have also been saving our culture to the cloud to create digital repositories. These actions may seem small to some, but to me, as a young person from the Pacific, that is my ground of resilience, perseverance. If you are not ready, no one will be ready for you.

Ernesto Ottone R.: This seems like an enormous responsibility. Do you feel overwhelmed by the weight of carrying your culture?

Grace Malie: I always imagine my ancestors standing behind me. My grandparents behind me, my great-grandparents behind them and their ancestors behind them... This gives me so much strength. I am just a young vessel for them. One day, I want to be recognised as a great ancestor.

Ernesto Ottone R.: Thank you for sharing this, Grace. You are representing the voice of a Pacific island today. We often use the term ‘Small Island Developing States (SIDS)’, which includes countries across the globe including in the Caribbean, Africa and of course your region, the Pacific. But these countries are all so unique, a world in itself.

UNESCO just concluded a major programme called Transcultura, with a focus on Cuba and its cultural and creative industries. We would not be able to just ‘copy and paste’ this flagship programme to the Pacific because the context, the size of the islands and the culture are so vastly different.

What does it mean for you to be part of the SIDS group? Do you identify with this concept?

Grace Malie: To be honest, I've never really liked the ‘Small Island Developing States’ label. It was made in the eyes of the economy-evolving world, and we have been categorised under that term. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth whenever I say that. It regards us as ‘small’ in the eyes of the globalised world. We are labelled as small in terms of geography. They do not see what's big about us.

Ernesto Ottone R.: Do your friends and other young people share this same sense of discomfort?

Grace Malie: Absolutely. With the group of friends that I have back home, whenever we would have this chat, we would tell ourselves, ‘Hey, we've got to stop thinking that way.’

left

Levuka Historical Port Town (Fiji)

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Grace Malie and young community members from Tuvalu





INTERVIEW

Today, whenever I hear SIDS, I automatically change it to 'Big Ocean States' in my mind. We are all connected through this one Pacific Ocean, and when you hear ['the Pacific Ocean'], you know exactly where my island is. When I was first introduced to this new term, I asked myself, 'Why didn't I think of it this way? Why didn't I see this way?' We are taught in such a structured way that makes us small. So today, I visualise my own island as a Big Ocean State. It's about time we shifted this mindset. And I think it's something that our ministers and government should really look into.

Ernesto Ottone R.: In my country, Chile, we have nine recognised communities including the Rapa Nui, on Easter Island. There, I had the honour of working with the elders, who are the custodians of the island, to build a community theatre. When we arrived from the continent and began speaking with them and other community members, they challenged the most basic idea we had about constructing the space. They told us that there is no need for a back wall, for example, because the ocean is part of the scenography. It was a major learning moment, especially in terms of my relationship with nature. In Rapa Nui, nature is present in everything they do. There is nothing in their culture that is not related to nature because you're in the middle of the ocean.

So when we build new infrastructure, it has to be led by the local culture, down to the very necessity of such a project. The community will not come if they do not feel that the space reflects who they are. They will only come if they consider it 'their place'. I believe this is the biggest takeaway of the Naples conferences. Communities must be in the driving seat, whether it be public or private spaces. It's up to them to decide. And their involvement must be real, not just a survey.

Grace Malie: Where I come from, we do not have museums to keep our culture. Culture is a living thing. It's

'Where I come from, we
do not have museums
to keep our culture.
Culture is a living thing.
It's us. It's the people. It's
the community.'

us. It's the people. It's the community. We have gatherings where we have the elders coming in and teaching our young generation how to dance, how to do storytelling in our own way.

Ernesto Ottone R.: In 2023, Tuvalu became the 195th state to ratify the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. You were part of your country's delegation, at the UNESCO Headquarters, to deposit the ratification document!

right
East Rennell (Solomon Islands)





INTERVIEW

As you know, the World Heritage sites possess what we call Outstanding Universal Value, meaning they are so exceptional that they require preservation by the international community. Do you already have some sites that you believe should be part of this List? Listening to you, I have a sense that the conventional definition of heritage may not necessarily reflect the heritage of your communities.

Grace Malie: Exactly. We don't have many stones or much physical, tangible cultural heritage. What one of the panellists said resonated with me: 'It is not set in stone but in the daily practices.'

Our heritage represents a spiritual connection between the people and the land. And it also signifies and represents the old traditions. In Tuvalu, we have nine islands, and each of them has its own calendar of special community events. They also have their own sacred sites, but people don't normally talk about them. They are meant to be kept within families, families who are given the responsibility to hold onto this tradition. That's why sometimes there is a gap during community engagement efforts, because they don't want to share this publicly. It should only be passed down among them.

So yes, there are sites that we are currently looking at because they carry so much knowledge and

‘We are here to show you that Tuvalu exists.
We, the Pacific, exist.’

history of our people and they possess so much weight. But we're still trying to overcome this, because not all things have to be shared.

Ernesto Ottone R.: Thank you, Grace, for this perspective. You continue to bring these valuable insights to meetings and youth conferences around the world, including the COPs and the World Heritage Young Professionals Forum. How can we make young voices count where it counts, at the decision-making level? Are youth forums given the weight they deserve, seeing that it is your future that is at stake?

Grace Malie: That's a very good question. We often draft a statement and present it during big conferences.

My question is, 'Were they listening? Were they really listening to our reality and what we witness?' I have yet to see a follow-up to these statements. So perhaps, after every conference, we should begin by asking 'How can we go about it? What is the plan?'

I felt very privileged for the opportunity to speak at this conference, though I also did not assume the audience was going to listen. But I saw so many people who were eagerly following our discussions. This is what young people need. We need these opportunities because [otherwise] we would need to grow up in order to be taken seriously.

Showing up and making our stand in every conference matters. We are here to show you that Tuvalu exists. We, the Pacific, exist.

left

Rom dancer in Olal, Ambrym Island (Vanuatu)



An underwater photograph showing a diver on the left side of the frame, wearing a black wetsuit and a yellow BCD. The diver is holding a white measuring tape. In the foreground and middle ground, there are large, weathered stone blocks and structures, likely ancient ruins. The water is a deep teal color, and the lighting is soft, creating a serene and mysterious atmosphere.

Stories of Bulgaria beneath the waves

By Dr Nayden Prahov and Dr Kalin Dimitrov



Bulgaria's territory has been inhabited since prehistoric times. Traces of some of the earliest known humans in Eurasia – dating back 1.4 million years – have been discovered here. The region was home to Europe's first agricultural societies and early producers and traders of gold, copper and bronze. Over the centuries, it became a crossroads for major civilisations: the Ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine Empires, the medieval Bulgarian kingdoms, and the Ottoman Empire. Each left behind a rich cultural heritage, both on land and underwater. Bulgaria's underwater cultural heritage includes a wide range of sites: sunken prehistoric settlements, ancient towns, historic harbours and shipwrecks.

Diving into the past

Interest in Bulgaria's submerged past began more than a century ago. In 1908, Czech brothers Herman and Karel Škorpil – pioneers of Bulgarian archaeology – noted that fortress walls at Nessebar (ancient Messambria) extended beneath the sea. In 1921, they reported the discovery of a prehistoric settlement under the waters of Varna Lake.

The first archaeological diving surveys in Bulgaria took place in the late 1950s, led by Professor Ivan Galabov and a group of volunteer divers. Their work revealed many significant finds and demonstrated the potential of underwater archaeology in the region.

In 1960, archaeologist Lyuba Ognenova launched a long-term project in the waters around Nessebar. Her 15 years of work played a key role in raising awareness of the area's underwater cultural heritage. At the same time, Goranka Toncheva, an archaeologist from Varna, explored underwater sites along the northern Black Sea coast. Both Ognenova and Toncheva were pioneers – not only in Bulgaria but also internationally – highlighting the important role of women in the early development of underwater archaeology.

During the 1960s and 1970s, several major expeditions were launched along the Black Sea coast. These efforts laid the foundation for underwater archaeology in

Bulgaria's underwater cultural heritage includes a wide range of sites: sunken prehistoric settlements, ancient towns, historic harbours and shipwrecks.

Bulgaria. In 1978, the country established the Centre for Underwater Archaeology (CUA), the first organisation of its kind in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. Today, the CUA operates under the Ministry of Culture and leads national efforts to study, protect and promote Bulgaria's underwater heritage.

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Exploring a Classical Period wall of submerged Messambria

left

Remains of the defence system of Ancient City of Nessebar

Bulgaria's first underwater prehistoric site was discovered by chance in 1921, when workers dredging Varna Lake uncovered the remains of a pile-dwelling settlement.

Over the years, the CUA has hosted major events, including the International Symposium Thracia Pontica, which brought experts from around the world to Bulgaria – even during the Cold War. Research presented at these gatherings has been published in collected volumes. The CUA has also conducted advanced research using underwater excavations and geophysical and remote-sensing technologies, leading to important discoveries.

Bulgaria was the second country in the world – and the first in Europe – to ratify the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, reaffirming its commitment to preserving submerged heritage according to international standards.

Around 12,000 years ago, as the last Ice Age ended, rising sea levels in the Black Sea flooded large areas of the coastline, submerging prehistoric settlements and burial grounds.

One notable discovery comes from Lake Durankulak on Bulgaria's northern coast, where archaeologists found underwater graves dating to the 5th millennium BCE. Another burial from the same period was found nearby, 3.5 metres below sea level.

Bulgaria's first underwater prehistoric site was discovered by chance in 1921, when workers dredging Varna Lake uncovered the remains of a pile-dwelling settlement – homes built on stilts over water. Archaeologists recovered wooden piles, pottery, and tools made of stone and antler.

Later research identified 15 submerged settlement sites in Varna Lake, dating from the Late Copper Age to the Bronze Age (mid-5th to third millennia BCE). On nearby

dry land, four burial grounds from the same period were found. Among them, the Varna Chalcolithic Necropolis is especially renowned for its gold artefacts – the oldest known examples of advanced gold craftsmanship in the world.

Farther south along the Black Sea coast, underwater archaeologists have discovered prehistoric remains at a minimum of seven sites. The earliest date to the Early Neolithic period (6th millennium BCE), while others are from the Middle Bronze Age (third millennium BCE). These sites now lie beneath 4.5 to 9 metres of water.

The people who lived in these settlements survived through hunting, fishing, farming and animal husbandry. Their homes – pile-and-platform dwellings – were built along ancient riverbanks and lakeshores. Archaeologists have also found strong evidence of early metalworking, including moulds, slag, and copper or bronze tools and objects. These finds point to a long-standing tradition of metal production and trade in the region.

Historic harbours: Gateways to the ancient world

All major ancient towns along the Black Sea coast shared a key feature: natural harbours. These sheltered bays made them ideal hubs for travel, trade and settlement. Across the centuries, countless ships docked, traded and sometimes sank there, leaving behind layers of history preserved on the sea floor. Today, these submerged sites are recognised as rich archaeological zones, filled with ancient structures and artefacts that help tell the story of the region's past.

right
A Classical Period tower of submerged Messambria





Recent excavations by the Centre for Underwater Archaeology (CUA) have shed light on life and trade in ancient times, when these major trade centres connected the Black Sea with the wider Mediterranean world. Archaeologists have uncovered luxury goods, everyday pottery and amphorae used for transporting wine and olive oil – all arriving by sea. Ships departing from these ports exported copper, grain, timber, shipbuilding materials such as pitch and resin, salt, and fish.

During the region's golden ages, imported goods from across the Mediterranean flowed into coastal cities and the mainland. In the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period, trade increasingly focused on Constantinople (later Istanbul), the region's largest and most powerful city.

To protect their valuable harbours, ancient builders constructed breakwaters – massive stone barriers designed to block waves and safeguard ships. The remains of these structures are among the largest underwater constructions found in the Black Sea. These harbours were not just commercial centres; they were dynamic crossroads where cultures met, goods flowed and history was made.

Rising sea levels did not only submerge prehistoric villages – they also engulfed coastal towns from Antiquity. One of the most striking examples is the ancient city of Nessebar. Underwater research has revealed parts of the city's fortification walls, towers and breakwaters, now resting beneath the waves. Structures built during the Classical and Hellenistic periods (5th to third centuries BCE) are now located up to 180 metres from the present shoreline, at depths reaching 5.5 metres. Buildings from the Late Antiquity period (5th to 6th centuries CE) are found closer to shore, at around 2.5 metres deep.

The placement and condition of these ruins tell a compelling story – not only of changing sea levels but also of how communities adapted, building further inland as the sea gradually claimed more of the shore.

During the region's golden ages, imported goods from across the Mediterranean flowed into coastal cities and the mainland.

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Remains of Copper age pile-dwelling site in the harbour of Sozopol

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Aerial view of the Ancient City of Nessebar





Further north, in the Bay of Kavarna at the site of the ancient city of Bizone, archaeologists have discovered remains of grand structures, including gate thresholds, column sections and finely cut stone blocks, now lying at depths of up to 3.5 metres.

These submerged ruins offer a unique window into life in ancient coastal cities and illustrate how nature and human history are deeply intertwined.

Shipwrecks: Time capsules of the past

From 2015 to 2018, the largest underwater archaeology project ever undertaken – the Black Sea Maritime Archaeology Project (MAP) – was carried out in Bulgarian waters. Funded by the Julia and Hans Rausing Trust,

this international expedition used remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) to explore 55 remarkably well-preserved shipwrecks resting deep beneath the sea. The result was a breathtaking panorama of maritime history spanning 2,500 years.

One of the most extraordinary discoveries was an Ancient Greek ship from the 4th century BCE, found over 2,000 metres below the surface. Measuring around 20 metres long and 6 metres wide, this single-masted vessel with both sails and oars is considered the world's oldest known intact ship of its kind.

The Roman period is represented by six merchant ships, all with similar design features: pointed ends, large square sails with horizontal yards and pairs of rudder

One of the most extraordinary discoveries was an
Ancient Greek ship from the 4th century BCE, found
over 2,000 metres below the surface.

oars. Some still contained amphorae, revealing trade routes that connected the Black Sea to markets across the Mediterranean.

The project also uncovered two notable medieval vessels. One, likely Byzantine and dating to the 9th or 10th century, was built using an advanced method involving a frame over which planking was applied. The second, a Mediterranean 'round ship' from the 13th to 14th centuries, is the first of its kind discovered in the region. It measured 18 metres long and 6 metres wide, with two masts and two side rudders. It was likely built in one of the powerful maritime republics such as Dubrovnik, Genoa or Venice.

Ottoman-era shipwrecks also make up a significant portion of the MAP project's findings. At least

38 vessels have been identified, including sailing ships and open boats that could also be rowed. Most had one mast, though a few had two. Since no Ottoman shipbuilding manuals have survived, these wrecks are a primary source of information about construction techniques and rigging from the period. They complement earlier discoveries made by the CUA and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (United States of America) during excavations of two Black Sea merchant shipwrecks (18th to 19th century): the Kitten and the Urdoviza.

Among the most impressive finds were seven massive vessels built in Western Europe. Each over 25 metres long, they represent a leap in naval technology, far surpassing the smaller designs used in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. A Western Mediterranean

right
Exploration of ancient column elements
in the waters of Nessebar



FEATURE

barquentine from the 19th century, excavated by the CUA in the Port of Chernomorets in 2015, further illustrates the growing connection between the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and Western Europe.

These large Western ships began appearing in the Black Sea after the Crimean War ended in 1856, when the region was officially opened to international commerce. Their presence marks a turning point in maritime history, linking the Black Sea more directly to global trade networks.

Bulgaria's underwater cultural heritage is not only a source of national pride – it is part of humanity's shared legacy. From ancient shipwrecks to sunken cities, these underwater treasures tell stories that belong to all of us.

Through the dedicated work of the CUA, along with national museums and research institutions,

Bulgaria is actively preserving, studying and sharing these discoveries with the global community. These efforts align with the principles of the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which promotes international cooperation, scientific research and the safeguarding of heritage for future generations.

This ongoing mission also contributes to broader global goals, from advancing sustainable development and education to fostering peace, cultural dialogue and resilience. By ensuring that the secrets of the deep are not lost to time, Bulgaria is helping to build a future where the past continues to inform, inspire and unite.

In memory of Hristina Angelova (1955–2016), our friend and colleague who devotedly led the CUA from 1992 to 2016.

below

Accumulations of pottery at the bottom of Sozopol harbour, testifying to mooring over the centuries



© Centre of Underwater Archaeology/ Dr. Kalin Dimitrov

The Archive

World Heritage Review, n°5 September 1997

‘The benefit to both traveller and resident of cultural tourism is the possibilities it provides for bringing into contact people from different walks of life. Exchange can occur, making us aware of cultural differences and similarities.’



The fifth issue of the *World Heritage Review*, published in September 1997, explored the increase in tourism on World Heritage sites and its effect. While tourism can spark curiosity in these places and help promote intercultural understanding and appreciation, its impact can also become overwhelming. The issue called for responsible management of visitors to ensure the long-lasting preservation of heritage sites.

Natural sites such as Sagarmatha National Park (Nepal) were featured not only for their striking landscapes but also for their deep connection to local communities and their customs. The park is

home to the Sherpa community, whose traditions, spiritual beliefs and knowledge of high mountains form an integral part of the site's identity. An article on Old Havana and its Fortification System (Cuba) highlighted the importance of community engagement and a sense of ownership in sustaining conservation efforts.

The magazine took readers on a deep dive beneath the waves, showing the remarkable biodiversity of coral reef systems in Australia, Belize, the Philippines and Seychelles. Through the pages, marine and underwater cultural heritage was explored, revealing its archaeological significance.



At-Turaif, UNESCO World Heritage Site

The birthplace of the Kingdom
A 300-year-old legacy

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World Heritage site

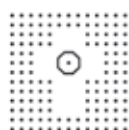
*At-Turaif District in Diriyah
inscribed on the World Heritage
List in 2010*



Only in
Saudi

THE MOSQUE-CATHEDRAL OF CÓRDOBA

THE CONSERVATION OF THE DOOR OF SAN SEBASTIÁN



CABILDO
CATEDRAL
DE CÓRDOBA

mezquita-catedraldecordoba.es

In 2014, during the 38th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba was recognised as being a “unique artistic achievement” which has “exercised a considerable influence on western Muslim art”, where the “juxtaposition of styles” is what stands out. It was deemed to have “fully maintained its authenticity in terms of its shape, design, materials, use and function”.

Restoration works on one of the monument's most important doors, the Door of Saint Sebastian, have recently been completed by the Cathedral Chapter. The restoration of this doorway highlights the commitment of the Chapter to the conservation of all that makes the Mosque-Cathedral a monument of outstanding universal value.

The portals of the Mosque-Cathedral are not only physical entrances to the building but also doorways to history, art and spirituality. We will explore how the essence of one of these architectural jewels has been maintained, and its legacy preserved for future generations.

The Door of Saint Sebastian, also known as the Door of the Viziers or of Saint Steven (*Esteban*), is located on the western wall of the Mosque-Cathedral and opens into the eighth-century prayer hall from *Torrijos Street*.

The entranceway is a rectangular opening with a buttress on either side. The lintel is made up of a number of voussoirs, which form a flat arch, and is protected by a horseshoe-shaped discharging arch, which protrudes from the façade. The upper section of this arch is comprised of alternating stone and brick voussoirs. The springers, which are laid horizontally, are made of ashlar and are connected by a line of imposts with cyma reversa moulding.

Incorporated into the masonry of the doorway are two inscriptions. Carved into pieces of fine-grained limestone, the first is located on a horizontal band between the tympanum and the lintel, while the second separates the tympanum and the intrados of the horseshoe arch. Above the doorway are two rectangular windows, one on either side. Each window is covered with marble latticework and sheltered by an arch.

This doorway represents one of the oldest vestiges not only of the monument, but of the decorative architectural structure developed by Islamic art in Al-Andalus. The profound interest in this door is due to the amount of original material that has survived from the Emirate period, in spite of the vicissitudes of time.

The main objective of the restoration works, therefore, was to conserve and enhance the original material in order to provide a clear view of the portal's decorative elements and the details in the masonry, eliminating those materials that interfered with its appreciation and preservation, and halting the deterioration of the doorway. With this in mind, the idea of replacing pieces or completely rehabilitating the doorway was rejected, as

these actions would dilute the authenticity of the originals and without necessarily providing further information or adding coherence to the understanding of it.

The restoration project was launched in December 2021. An analysis of all the constituent materials was carried out, and any existing documentation that could provide data and clarify doubts about previous restoration works was compiled. With this information in hand, the Cathedral Chapter commissioned the project, and, in 2023, work began. Decisions regarding irreversible actions were made in coordination with the archaeology team; actions such as the removal of mortar from previous restorations in order to uncover the original masonry, while preserving those that enable the study of the doorway's material history were discussed.

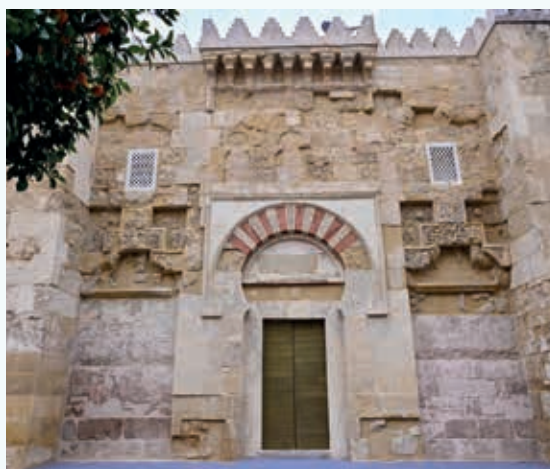
The Cathedral's restoration team, made up of experts in heritage conservation and restoration, carried out this process with the utmost respect for the door's historical and artistic values, and for its original materials.

Within this framework, the different phases of the project have been addressed in order of priority and in a generalized manner.

The overall objective of the project was to strengthen, clean and protect the portal to ensure its durability. We would like to stress that all the materials that were used in the restoration are characterised by their compatibility with the property's original materials, as well as by their reversibility, which may be required in any restoration.

Thanks to this project, not only has the deterioration caused by the passage of time and by external factors been halted, but the beauty and functionality of a key architectural element of the monumental complex has been restored. In addition to fully funding the project, the Cathedral Chapter has also reaffirmed its commitment to heritage conservation and to showcasing every corner of this exceptional monument, a reflection of the history and the identity of our city.

Annabel Barrena Herrera, Art restorer





THE WORLD KNOWS MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

MANY PEOPLE LED THE MOVEMENT

The world knows more about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. than about the dozens of other people he joined in leading the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Everyday people became leaders—such as Barbara Johns, a 16-year-old Black student in Farmville, Virginia. In 1951, she convinced her classmates to walk out in protest over the racially segregated and inadequately supported Robert Russa Moton High School that they had to attend rather than the better funded white school across town. The protest led to a lawsuit filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that, once combined with affiliated cases challenging racial segregation in public schools, resulted in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, which overturned 50 years of “separate but equal” legal white supremacy.



Barbara Johns saw her struggle for racial equality as “reaching for the moon”, captured in a statue of her prominently featured on the grounds of the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond.



BETHEL BAPTIST CHURCH, BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

When the Ku Klux Klan dynamited Bethel Baptist Church in an assassination attempt, the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth survived, emerging out of the rubble of the collapsed parsonage adjacent to the damaged church. He had been targeted because of his efforts to integrate Birmingham's buses in 1956. The head of the local movement and secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Shuttlesworth convinced King to join him in the massive demonstrations of spring 1963 that, with the Children's Crusade, forced the nation to end racial discrimination in public accommodations.



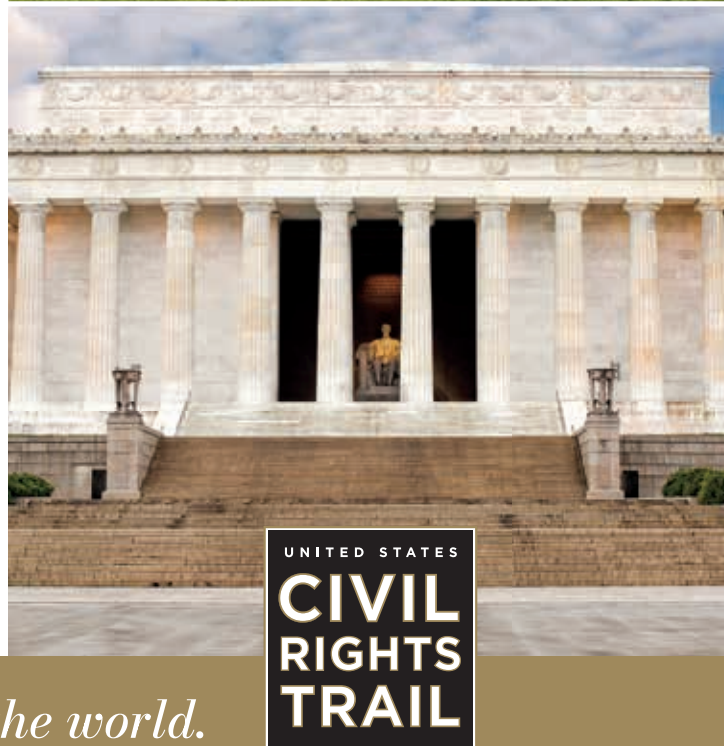
MEDGAR AND MYRLIE EVERS HOME JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

Despite the *Brown* desegregation decision, the University of Mississippi denied African American Medgar Evers admission to its law school. Noting the bravery of the post D-Day veteran, the NAACP hired Evers as its first Mississippi field secretary. Assisted by his wife, Myrlie, Evers traversed the state organizing NAACP chapters, assisting grassroots protests and supporting James Meredith's integration of Ole Miss. On the night of President John F. Kennedy's televised address calling for congressional civil rights reform, Evers conducted a mass meeting, buoyed by the promise of racial equality, only to be shot dead by an assassin upon his return home.



LINCOLN MEMORIAL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

With his "I Have a Dream" speech, King might be the most famous of the civil rights leaders who spoke in front of the statue at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington. But he was by no means the only one to address the more than a quarter-million who were present and the millions more who were watching on television and listening by radio around the world. Others spoke too, including the young John Lewis, who, as head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, delivered a fiery speech, calling out: "We want our freedom and we want it now!" Already, Lewis had participated in the sit-in movement in Nashville, been beaten during the Freedom Rides by Klansmen in Montgomery and would be beaten again by Alabama state troopers at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Twenty years later, he won election to the U.S. Congress and served until 2020.



What happened here changed the world.

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Historic Centre of Macao

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Macao was a lucrative port of strategic importance in the development of international trade in Chinese territory. It became a Portuguese settlement in the mid-16th century and was under Portuguese administration until 1999, when it returned to Chinese sovereignty.

The Historic Centre of Macao preserves to this day the structure of the old trading port city, with its historic streets and its residential, religious and public Portuguese and Chinese buildings. It provides a unique testimony to the meeting of aesthetic, cultural, religious, architectural and technological influences from East and West.

Most importantly, the Historic Centre of Macao bears witness to the first and most enduring encounter between China and the West, based on the vibrancy of international trade. As a gateway between China and the western world, Macao played a strategic role in world trade. Different nationalities settled here, in what was the hub of a complex maritime trading network, as did missionaries who brought with them religious and cultural influences. These influences were

illustrated by the introduction of foreign building types, among which were China's first western-style theatre, a university and a hospital. Many of these buildings are still in use today.

Macao's unique multicultural identity is visible in the dynamic presence of Western and Chinese architectural heritage, which stand side by side in the city. The same dynamics often exist in individual building designs, with Chinese design features having been adapted to western style buildings and vice versa. An example of this can be seen on the baroque-mannerist church façade of St. Paul's Ruins, where Chinese characters were incorporated as decorative ornaments. Typical European port city characteristics can also be seen in the urban fabric structure of the settlement, with public squares blending into the densely packed lots along narrow, meandering streets. Similarities with other Portuguese settlements are apparent in the concept of Rua Direita, the road that links the port with old citadel. Visual connections between the property

and seascape are attributes that reflect Macao's origin as a trading port city; the Inner Harbour used over centuries and still functioning today adds to that testimony.

Intangible influences of the historic encounter have permeated the lifestyles of the local people, affecting religion, education, medicine, charities, language and cuisine. The core value of the historic centre is not solely its architecture, the urban structure, the people or their customs, but a mixture of all of these. The coexistence of cultural sediments of eastern and western origin, along with their living traditions, defines the essence of the historic centre.

20th Anniversary of Inscription

The *Historic Centre of Macao* was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 29th Session of the World Heritage Committee in July 2005, upon the unanimous approval of 21 State Parties, making it the 31st World Heritage site in

China. The property is comprised of twenty-two residential, religious and public buildings, both Portuguese and Chinese, and eight squares.

The inscription of the *Historic Centre of Macao* on the World Heritage List has not only opened Macao's door to the rest of the world, but has also supported and reinforced the cultural foundation of Macao to steadily build on the past and present and to look into the future. Time flies and the Historic Centre of Macao is now embracing the 20th anniversary of its inscription on the World Heritage List, which marks a new milestone in Macao's cultural heritage protection and legacy.

www.icm.gov.mo/en

www.wh.mo/en/

www.culturalheritage.mo/en/



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Saudi Arabia strengthens nature conservation with bold steps toward 30x30

As the international community advances toward the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet's land and marine environments by 2030, Saudi Arabia is making steady and meaningful progress. Long underrepresented in global conservation dialogue, the Kingdom is now demonstrating proactive and innovative efforts—particularly in desert regions where conventional approaches often fall short. The National Center for Wildlife (NCW) is leading these initiatives and is not only on track to meet the 30x30 target, but also laying the groundwork to surpass it.

Saudi Arabia has adopted a national 30x30 target, aligned with global biodiversity goals, to protect 30 percent of its terrestrial and marine areas by 2030. Much of the momentum toward this goal stems from the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), a key pillar of the broader Vision 2030 agenda. The SGI aims to safeguard over 650,000 square kilometers of land and sea, covering habitats that are ecologically critical, culturally rich, and economically viable. To support this vision, NCW is working in close collaboration with the Royal Reserves and other partners to develop a comprehensive network of protected areas.

As of 2023, Saudi Arabia had formally designated 36 protected sites—covering approximately 18 percent of its landmass, an

area comparable to the size of Japan. These range from small offshore islands to vast desert ecosystems. Among them is Uruq Bani Ma'arid, a nearly 13,000-square-kilometer expanse recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2023. It stands as one of the last largely undisturbed desert ecosystems on Earth—underscoring the scale and ecological value of the Kingdom's natural heritage.

Also notable are the Farasan Islands, a Red Sea archipelago rich in coral reefs, mangroves, and gazelle populations, which were recently added to UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme. These international recognitions reflect growing acknowledgment of Saudi Arabia's leadership in conservation—an approach that combines scientific rigor with long-term strategic planning.

The Kingdom's conservation model treats biodiversity protection not only as an environmental priority but as a catalyst for social and economic development. By linking habitat preservation with community engagement and sustainable growth, Saudi Arabia offers a forward-looking example of how the 30x30 target can be achieved in practice.



Early Christian Necropolis of Pécs (Sopianae)

This year, 2025, marks the 25th anniversary of the inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List of part of the late Roman-early Christian cemetery of Sopianae. Known today as Pécs, the town of Sopianae was one of the most significant settlements in the Roman province of Pannonia. During the 4th century AD, it became the administrative centre of the newly-formed province of Valeria, as well as an important religious, economic and cultural centre. The more than a thousand known graves, several burial chambers, a variety of other cemetery buildings and the mausoleum all indicate the presence of a flourishing Christian community. The sepulchres of Pécs are regarded as being the largest single early Christian cemetery complex outside Italy.

The heritage site has earned the title of cultural-historical treasure due to its complexly illustrated murals. The northern part of the cemetery complex, the so-called Peter and Paul burial chamber, was discovered 243 years ago, in 1782 (fig.1). In the years following the site's inscription on the World Heritage List, further archaeological research was carried out. The already known tombs were excavated and many unknown burial chambers came to light. Some of the sepulchral buildings have painted walls which are decorated with biblical scenes and symbols. The murals are early Christian art works, modelled on Italian and Balkan patterns. The monogram of Christ (fig. 2), the most widely used symbol of early Christians, was a favourite element of decoration.

Since the year 2007, a significant portion of the excavated findings have been concentrated within a single complex at the Cella Septichora



Visitor Centre. The Early Christian Mausoleum (fig. 3) and the monuments of Apáca Street can be seen separately as small islands at several points of the World Heritage Site.

In the past few years, numerous changes have been implemented which make it easier for visitors to understand the multi-level buildings and their functions, in their Roman-era context. These changes include the addition of VR content which allows visitors to virtually participate in the construction of one of the largest cemetery buildings, take part in a funeral ceremony or walk around buildings in their 4th-5th century setting.

Cemeteries are reflections of the society of the archaeological eras, so they prove to be an excellent location for the presentation and interpretation of everyday life. Educational workshops which are carried out at World Heritage Sites are unusual, not only because they are in real historical places, but also because we can evoke the given historical age, both in terms of clothing and activities. With this 'time travel', we make history lessons truly experiential (fig. 4). One of the great advantages of heritage education over school education lies in the historical space itself, in the possibility of creating a more relaxed atmosphere. The various heritage pedagogical methods offer a variety of ways and means to create activity and experiential knowledge transfer.

Fig. 1: Painted walls of burial edifice No. 1 (Peter-Paul burial chamber); Fig. 2: This bronze Christogram was placed next to one of the burial chambers in 2000 and was likely used as a decorative lamp hanger; Fig. 3: The Early Christian Mausoleum; Fig. 4: Heritage pedagogy program at the Cella Septichora Visitor Center

LIFE IN THE DEEP: DISCOVERING THE WONDERS OF THE MARIANA TRENCH

The Mariana Trench Marine National Monument is like no other place on Earth in its undersea remoteness. More people have walked on the moon than have descended to the depths of the Mariana Trench. Reaching almost 11 kilometers below sea level, it is the deepest point on Earth, making it one of the most extreme and inaccessible places on the planet. Crushing pressure, near-freezing temperatures and total darkness create an environment unlike any other on the planet.



The Marianas
[Islands] [States] [Archipelago]

mymarianas.com

Image courtesy of NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research,
2016 Deepwater Exploration of the Marianas

A Window Into Planet Earth and Beyond

Formed by the collision of the Pacific and Mariana tectonic plates, the trench features some of the largest mud volcanoes on Earth and offers a window into the inner workings of the planet. Some of its unique features are usually only found off-planet; among these features are a pool of liquid sulfur that is similar to a pool of molten sulfur on Io, one of Jupiter's moons.



Breathtaking Biodiversity

The trench's ecosystems are some of the most alien-like environments on Earth. It is home to remarkable species, such as hadal organisms (species which live in the trench's deepest regions) and extremophiles (organisms that thrive in extreme environments), that have adapted to survive in extreme conditions. Known for its bizarre and unique life forms, the trench hosts species that are found nowhere else in the world. These include the hadal snailfish, giant amoebas and unique crustaceans. Despite its harsh conditions, the trench supports a range of different ecosystems, including those around hydrothermal vents which are rich in minerals and provide the basis for diverse biological communities. Scientists say microbes found here may be similar to the first life on Earth or even to the microbes that could exist in the ice-covered ocean of Jupiter's moon, Europa.

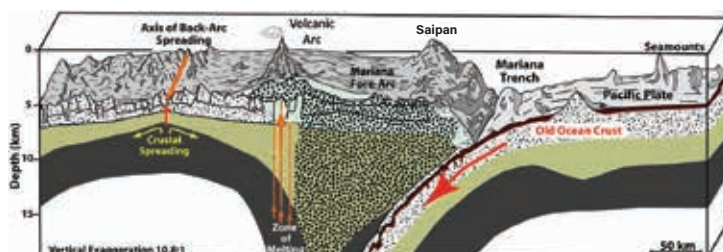
Indigenous Maritime Markers

In the Pacific waters surrounding the Mariana Islands, the art of open-ocean seafaring lives on. This method of maritime navigation, used by the indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian cultures, is lost to most of the modern world. Free of modern instruments, it is based solely on natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, stars, planets, wind, waves, ocean swells, sea creatures and way-finding markers found at the Mariana Trench. In this system of knowledge, passed down through the generations by oral tradition, paluw (navigators) guide outrigger canoes along memorized sea routes traversing the trench. Navigational aids of the monument include its extreme depth, which results in a particular and recognizable color of blue water on the surface. A resurgence of this nearly lost maritime knowledge among a new generation of navigators and explorers across the Pacific underscores the importance of preserving, protecting and celebrating the monument, both for its historic cultural value in trans-oceanic voyaging and for the indigenous worldview that oceans and the trench do not separate peoples, but rather connect us.



Cutting-Edge Exploration

The Mariana Trench has been the site of groundbreaking exploration, with pioneering submersible expeditions, such as James Cameron's solo dive to the Challenger Deep in 2012, pushing the limits of human exploration and technology. Each expedition continues to uncover new species, geological phenomena and insights into how life can exist in one of the harshest environments on Earth. These discoveries help expand our understanding of biodiversity, the resilience of life and the potential of life beyond our planet.





Flemington Melbourne, Samuel Charles Brees, c.1856. State Library Victoria

GOLD, GOLD, GOLD!

Setting the world in motion

The gold rushes which occurred across the globe over the course of the nineteenth century played a role in shaping the modern world. Australia's Victorian Goldfields is recognised as being at the heart of this transformational period of history as, during the second half of the century, spontaneous, overlapping mass-migrations of gold-seekers – men, women and children – led to an unprecedented increase in global gold production, with the same quantity of gold being mined in just fifty years as in the previous three millennia. Gold was a democratic mineral, the possession of the legitimate finder. It led to the rapid development in a short space of time of 'instant' cities, sophisticated towns, and

infrastructure in remote territory. Gold rushes were also directly associated with a young and often radical immigrant population who wanted a democratic way of life. Most of the gold from the Victorian Goldfields found its way as bullion to London, a leading centre in an increasingly globalised world based on a truly international gold standard. This gold not only helped to sustain the British Empire but also bankrolled a spectacular period of world trade and industrial and commercial expansion. Consistent with the global gold rush phenomenon, however, associated negative consequences included the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples, racial discrimination, and devastating environmental impacts.

On all sides the sole topic of conversation is Gold, Gold, Gold. – Geelong Advertiser 4 October 1851



Chinese men fossicking for gold near Beechworth, Victoria, ca.1880 - ca.1910, State Library of Victoria

Extraordinary Landscapes of the Nineteenth-Century Gold Rush

Australia's Victorian Goldfields

The Victorian Goldfields represent the most extensive, coherent and best-surviving nineteenth-century gold rush landscape in the world. It encompasses central and eastern Victoria, and features a mix of rural and urban settings. Over thirty-five years ago, local communities came together to pursue recognition of the Victorian Goldfields, gaining the support of fifteen local governments (2019), the Victorian Government (2022) and the Australian Government (2025). Traditional Owners play a key role in nominating Country and maintaining ongoing cultural custodianship of the landscape.

Diverse geological riches

Gold is widely distributed across an extensive area of Victoria as a result of tectonic events hundreds of millions of years ago. Subsequent erosion revealed easily worked outcrops and alluvial deposits. The distinctive ancient channels of gold known as “deep leads” and the gold veins in the deep quartz rocks were uncovered through mining.

Profound impacts on Traditional Owners

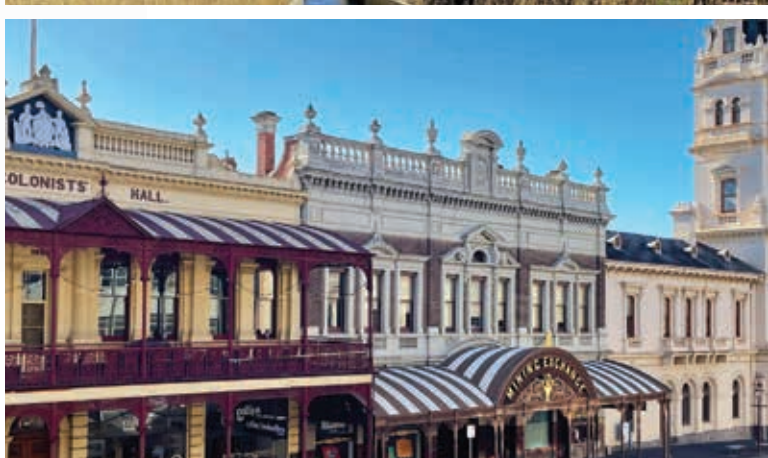
The losses, dispossessions and displacement of Traditional Owners started with the arrival of the first Europeans; due to the gold rush, colonial processes were accelerated in speed and scale. The First Peoples called the land “Upside-down Country”. However, their skills and deep knowledge of Country were vital to the migrant gold-seekers.

A global influx of immigrants

Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children from Great Britain, Ireland, China, Europe, the Americas and the Pacific Islands flocked to the Victorian Goldfields. Most stayed and established new lives.

Technological innovation and remarkable urban development

Preserved mining landscapes include shallow alluvial sites, deep lead mining areas, quartz mines and major infrastructure crucial for supporting mining and population growth. The significant presence of women and families shaped settlement patterns. The flow of wealth led to the rapid transformation of the landscape and the creation of architecturally distinguished cities.



THE VICTORIAN
GOLDFIELDS

goldfieldsworldheritage.com.au

HERITAGE OF ASTURIAS

ADVERTISEMENT



Located in northwest Spain, on the Cantabrian Sea, the Principality of Asturias is known for its lush green spaces and stunning scenery. Occupying an area of 10,000 square kilometres, it is home to a population of a million people. The region's coastline, which extends for some 400 kilometres, is the best preserved in Spain. Mountainous formations reaching up to 2,600 metres in height tower over its two hundred beaches, forming a landscape which is defined by both the contrast and the harmony between the mountains and the sea.

In terms of its rich natural heritage, Asturias is truly blessed. Not only is the region home to seven UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, but the *Picos de Europa*, which was the first area to be declared a National Park in Spain over a hundred years ago, can also be found here, as can the country's first Protected Marine Area, *El Cachucho*. In fact, a

third of the whole area of Asturias has some level of environmental protection, a true reflection of its natural value.

The region is equally proud of its cultural treasures and boasts a number of UNESCO World Heritage properties: the *Monuments of Oviedo and the Kingdom of the Asturias* are a representative ensemble of pre-Romanesque churches and buildings from the early medieval period; the Cave of Tito Bustillo, along with four other of the region's caves, are included in the serial property, the *Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain*; and one of the routes which form part of the *Routes of Santiago de Compostela: Camino Francés and Routes of Northern Spain* begins in the Asturian capital of Oviedo, and is said to have been the route which was followed by the King of Asturias, Alfonso II, early in the 9th century, when he heard of the discovery of the tomb of the apostle, St. James.



www.turismoasturias.es



**Principado de
Asturias**

The UNESCO designations of Asturias, however, do not end here: in December 2024, the *Asturian cider culture* was included on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This longed-for recognition reaches far beyond the existence of cider as a simple drink; it also encompasses the traditions, knowledge and rituals that surround it and highlights the role that cider plays in the formation and the preservation of the Asturian identity. From the theatrical rituals involved in the pouring of the drink to the fiestas at which cider plays a central role, this drink is not only a gastronomic product, but also a vital element of the social and cultural life of the region.

Among the apple trees is where the magic begins. The first steps in the cider-making process take place in the *pomaradas* (orchards), which are a characteristic feature of the Asturian countryside. The varieties of apples that are selected, and the soil and the climatic conditions of each particular plot of land are all important factors in cider production. Visitors to the orchards in spring will be met by the sight of the trees in blossom, while in autumn, farmers are busy gathering in the ripe apples, ready for the next stage of the process.

At the heart of cider production is the *llagar*, which is the name given to both the place where the drink is made and the machine which is used to press the apples. The drink is created in a traditional process which involves fermenting the must of the selected native apple varieties.

Expertise and skills related to apple cultivation and cider production are passed down within families. The inherited knowledge includes details of different types of soil, the climate, which apple varieties to plant, and the milling, pressing and fermenting of the apple must.



The next stage of the process is to enjoy the final product. At the end of the fermentation period, the first barrels will be opened for tasting. Known as an *espicha*, this informal event takes place in the *llagar*, usually with large groups of family and friends. This is a traditional celebration at which cider flows directly from the barrel. On all other occasions, the cider is served in the traditional Asturian way – the drink is poured from a height, with the bottle held high above the server's head. This flamboyant method of serving the drink is specific to this region and considered to be an art.

Specialised premises which are dedicated to the sale of cider are known as *sidrerías* or, more locally, as *chigres*. The cider is carefully stored in optimal conditions, and is served correctly and at an adequate temperature, often being consumed with the best of the region's gastronomy, which includes cheese, cold meats, fish, seafood and a special bean stew called *fabada*.

A special mark of quality – *Sidrerías de Asturias* – is awarded to the establishments who meet the highest standards and are committed to preserving and promoting cider and all its associated traditions, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the Asturian cider culture for many generations to come.

Photos: **1. Picu Urriellu, the Picos de Europa** © Turismo Asturias /Manuel S. Calvo; **2. Church Santa María del Naranco, Monuments of Oviedo and the Kingdom of Asturias** © Benedicto Santos; **3. Tito Bustillo Cave, Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain** © Turismo Asturias / Centro de Arte Rupestre Tito Bustillo; **4. San Martín Beach, Routes of Santiago de Compostela: Camino Francés and Routes of Northern Spain** © Turismo Asturias / Gonzalo Azumendi; **5. Pomarada with flowering apple trees** © Turismo Asturias / Juan de Tury; **6. Press - llagar - Cider Museum** © Turismo Asturias / Juanjo Arrojo; **7. Cleaning of apples for cider at the village fountain Camilo Alonso** © Turismo Asturias / Les Fartures

CURONIAN SPIT

A LIVING LANDSCAPE OF SAND, WIND AND MEMORY

Granted World Heritage status in 2000, the Curonian Spit is a fragile and remarkable cultural landscape of shifting dunes, coastal forests and fishing villages, nestled between the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon. Shaped over a period of 5,000 years by the sea, wind and human hands, it is a unique place where natural and cultural processes are inseparably intertwined.

Towering white dunes – some rising as high as 50 meters – are iconic features of the Curonian Spit, and rank among the tallest in Northern Europe. Large-scale reforestation and dune stabilization efforts in the 19th century came after entire villages were buried by these majestic, migrating forms. Still today, these efforts continue to safeguard the Spit and those who live on it. The dramatic history of the Curonian Spit offers a powerful lesson for all of humanity, as it reveals our dependence on the forces of nature, the fragility of life, and the enduring need to live in harmony with the natural world.

The *Kuršininkai*, a coastal ethnic group that once populated the Spit, left a lasting cultural imprint through their language, customs and way

of life, all of which were closely tied to the rhythms of nature. For more than a century, this landscape has drawn artists, writers and thinkers from around the world, captivated by its elemental beauty and solitude. At the same time, the Curonian Spit offers exceptional opportunities for interdisciplinary scientific research. Its rich mosaic of ecosystems, compressed into a narrow stretch of land, allows scientists to study dune dynamics, forest ecology, heritage preservation and climate impacts in one uniquely accessible setting.

In 2025, Lithuania celebrates 25 years since the Curonian Spit was inscribed on the World Heritage List, a significant milestone which is being marked by broad public attention and ambitious initiatives. One such initiative is the Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI) project which, developed in partnership with Australia's James Cook University, has identified rising temperature trends that pose growing risks to both the natural and cultural heritage of the area. This year also marks the finalization of a new Management Plan for the Lithuanian part of the Spit. These are crucial steps toward ensuring the long-term resilience of this dynamic, ever-changing cultural landscape.



Curonian Spit



unesco

World Heritage site

www.nerija.lt





SAINTS CONSTANTINE AND HELENA:

A TIMELESS SANCTUARY OF HISTORY, NATURE AND HEALING TRADITIONS

Sitting on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, Saints Constantine and Helena is a timeless sanctuary where history, nature, healing traditions and modern development intertwine to create a fairy tale experience. As the country's oldest seaside resort, founded in the early 20th century, it attracts travelers seeking tranquility and rejuvenation. Named after the medieval monastery which can be found at its heart, this coastal retreat has both an aristocratic and a spiritual energy, which make it a preferred destination for connoisseurs of quality relaxation.

Long before it became a haven for tourists from near and far, the region was known for its curative springs. The mineral-rich waters, bubbling from deep beneath the earth, have been revered for their healing properties for centuries. What began as a secluded monastic refuge has evolved into a distinguished spa destination, where the Bulgarian royal family once sought solace. The former sanatoriums, now transformed into luxurious wellness centers, continue the tradition of balneotherapy, offering restorative treatments.

Beyond its premium accommodation and therapeutic waters, Saints Constantine and Helena is a place of natural splendor. Evergreen trees and a meticulously maintained park provide a glorious setting for the resort's buildings. The whispering waves of the Black Sea meet the healing mineral pools for a perfect curative blend. The air carries a crisp saltiness which mingles with the scent of blooming flowers and centuries-old pines - a blissful harmony of land and sea. Visitors can breathe in the timeless serenity of this coastal retreat and find themselves immersed in a place where history, nature and modernity come together.

A hidden gem on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, Saints Constantine and Helena invites you to step into a world of magic - with accommodation fit for royalty, excellent service, mouth-watering food and an overwhelming promise of renewal.



VARNA

A Crossroads of History,
Culture and Tourism



A history spanning 26 centuries

Home to the world's oldest processed gold

An ancient Hellenic port with Thracian, Roman, Greek and medieval heritage

A renowned festival city

A thriving center of contemporary art and culture



Varna is the third-largest city in Bulgaria and the largest on the country's Black Sea coast. A perfect harmony of golden beaches, lush greenery and healing mineral springs, combined with a rich historical and cultural legacy, make Varna a truly unique and captivating destination.

The World's Oldest Gold – A Legacy of Timeless Brilliance

Fifty years ago, archaeologists made an extraordinary discovery in Varna – the world's oldest known processed gold, dating back over 6,000 years. This unparalleled treasure, found in the Chalcolithic Necropolis, reveals the advanced expertise and spiritual beliefs of a long-lost civilization that buried its leaders with weapons and ornaments, including astounding quantities of gold. For the members of this ancient civilization, the earliest processed gold articles had a sacred-symbolic meaning and marked the social status of their owners.

Taking into account the variety of burial practices and the vast number of finds, Varna Chalcolithic Necropolis is a most remarkable monument of prehistory not only in the Balkans and Europe, but also over the world.

Today, this exceptional collection of gold is the crown jewel of the Varna Archaeological Museum, where it draws visitors from around the world to marvel at its brilliance, revealing to them the mysteries of the past.



Madhya Pradesh: A Living Canvas of India's Glorious Past



The heart of
Incredible India

Nestled at "The Heart of Incredible India", Madhya Pradesh is a vibrant tapestry of ancient civilizations, architectural marvels and rich cultural traditions. From prehistoric rock art to majestic forts and sacred temples, the state offers a timeless journey through India's diverse heritage. With a wealth of fascinating natural and cultural sites, three of which are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Madhya Pradesh stands as a proud guardian of the nation's multifaceted legacy.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

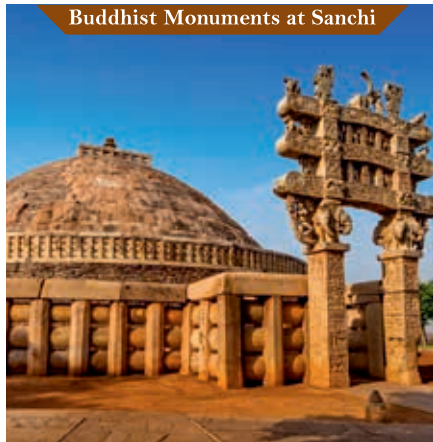
Khajuraho Group of Monuments



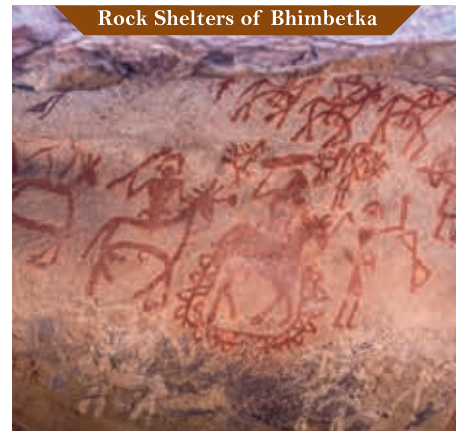
Constructed between 950 and 1050 CE, during the Chandela dynasty, the Khajuraho temples epitomize the zenith of Indian temple architecture. Adorned with intricate sculptures, they embody cosmic, philosophical and artistic ideals. The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple, in particular, is renowned for its exquisite carvings, which celebrate divine, mortal and sensual forms.

Among the oldest Buddhist sanctuaries in the world, Sanchi's monuments date back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Commissioned by Emperor Ashoka, the Great Stupa and its elaborately carved *toranas* vividly narrate tales from the Jataka, marking a significant chapter in Buddhist and architectural history.

Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi



Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka



Set amidst the Vindhyan Mountains, this property features over 700 rock shelters which are adorned with vivid paintings spanning from the Mesolithic to the historical period. These artworks - depict hunting scenes, rituals and daily life, and - offer rare insights into the cognitive and cultural development of early human societies in India.

Other Cultural and Natural Highlights

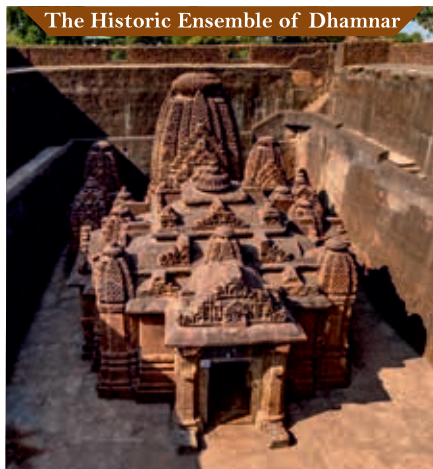
Bhedaghat-Lametaghat, Narmada Valley



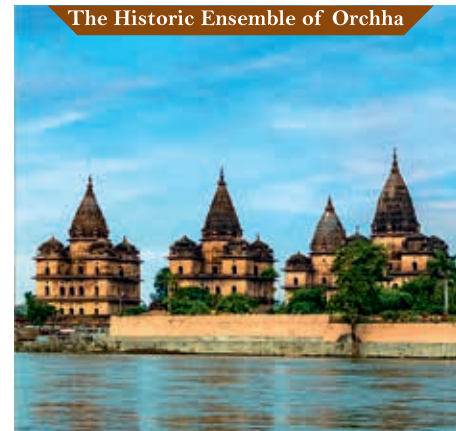
Home to towering marble cliffs and the spectacular Dhuandhar Waterfall, Bhedaghat is not only a visual marvel but also a site of immense geological and paleontological importance, with dinosaur fossil beds located nearby.

This 5th-7th century Buddhist site features fifty-one rock-cut caves, ancient chaityas, and monastic dwellings, showcasing early Buddhist architecture and spiritual life.

The Historic Ensemble of Dhamnar



The Historic Ensemble of Orchha



Founded in the 16th century, Orchha boasts grand palaces, temples and cenotaphs. Its unique blend of Mughal and local styles reflects the opulence and artistic vision of the Bundela rulers.

Group of Monuments at Mandu



Mandu's sixty-one structures, including the famed Jahaz Mahal and Hindola Mahal, highlight the Malwa region's synthesis of Islamic and Hindu architectural traditions.

Chanderi's centuries-old weaving tradition produces lightweight, intricately designed sarees crafted from silk and cotton, celebrated for their fine craftsmanship and elegant zari work.

Iconic Saree Weaving Clusters Chanderi



Rock Art Sites of the Chambal Valley



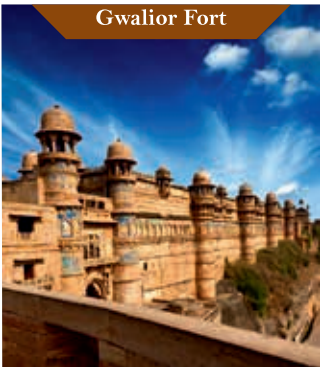
The prehistoric petroglyphs here, dating from 10,000 BCE to 2,000 BCE, vividly depict scenes of daily life, offering critical glimpses into early human expression.

An extraordinary Mughal-era water management system, Khooni Bhandara features underground *qanats*, highlighting ancient engineering ingenuity in sustainable water conservation.

Khooni Bhandara of Burhanpur



Gwalior Fort



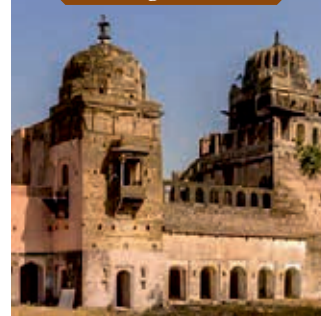
An imposing 8th-century citadel, Gwalior Fort houses the ornate Man Mandir Palace and ancient Jain rock sculptures, standing as a symbol of India's military and artistic prowess.

This vast biodiversity hotspot shelters Bengal tigers, leopards, and countless other species across a rich mosaic of forest ecosystems.

Satpura Tiger Reserve



Gond Monuments of Ramnagar, Mandla



The temples, palaces and fortifications that can be found here illustrate the architectural and cultural achievements of the Gond dynasty from the 11th century onward.

Known for its colossal unfinished Shiva lingam, this 11th-century temple exemplifies the monumental vision and skill of the Paramara dynasty.

Bhojeshwar Mahadev Temple, Bhojpur



Ashokan Edict Sites



Sites like Saru Maru preserve inscriptions and *stupas* from the 3rd century BCE, highlighting Emperor Ashoka's profound influence on Indian history.

Dating from the 9th to 12th centuries, these circular open-air temples, dedicated to sixty-four Yoginis, reveal a fascinating blend of spirituality and early temple architecture.

Chausath Yogini Temple Mitaoli



Gupta Temple, Sanchi



This 5th-century sandstone temple reflects the elegant simplicity and architectural advancements of the Gupta era, often hailed as the Golden Age of India.

Built during the reign of Madhukar Shah, the Raja Mahal is a striking example of Bundela architecture, characterized by its symmetrical, courtyard-centered design. Seamlessly blending Rajput and Mughal styles, the palace features ornate *chhatris*, graceful domes, elegant ogee arches, and vibrant murals portraying religious and royal themes.

Raja Mahal, Orchha



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PALAU'S LIVING LEGACY: THE ROCK ISLANDS SOUTHERN LAGOON

Tucked away in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, the Rock Islands Southern Lagoon (RISL) is more than a destination — it's a revelation. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2012, this exceptional area is one of only 40 sites worldwide recognized for both their natural and cultural significance, a rare distinction among the 1,223 World Heritage sites globally. And for good reason.

The RISL, located in Koror State in the Republic of Palau, is a spectacular showcase of biodiversity, geological artistry and enduring cultural heritage. A mosaic of more than 400 limestone islands, this labyrinthine lagoon is a natural masterpiece sculpted by time and tide. The islands rise dramatically from the turquoise waters, forming an otherworldly seascape of marine lakes, hidden caves, natural arches and lush forests — all framed by brilliant white sand beaches, verdant mangroves and vibrant coral reefs.

This enchanting marine environment is protected by an expansive barrier reef that shelters a remarkably rich and complex ecosystem. The reef's deep channels and dynamic currents contribute to a thriving underwater world, earning the RISL a reputation as one of the most biologically diverse marine habitats on the planet, especially for its size. Coral gardens, patch reefs and seagrass beds provide sanctuary for an astonishing array of life — from rare invertebrates to pelagic species — creating an underwater metropolis unlike any other.

Beyond its natural splendour, the Rock Islands Southern Lagoon holds deep cultural significance. For thousands of years, the people of Palau have lived in harmony with this environment, guided by customary laws that continue to shape conservation practices today. This unique fusion of tradition and modern stewardship has made RISL one of the best-managed marine protected areas in the world.



Ulong Island is home to the most significant collection of cultural remains in Palau's Rock Islands. The island features four major archaeological sites that trace Palau's history from the arrival of its earliest settlers over 3,000 years ago to the era of early European contact in the 18th century. Among these cultural landmarks is a stunning rock art gallery — a vivid visual legacy of the archipelago's ancient past.

More than 150 painted images, spread across ten known rock art sites, decorate the coastal cliffs of the Chelebacheb (Rock Islands). These images, mostly in bright red pigment, likely represent only a fraction of what remains hidden behind the dense vegetation that cloaks the region's hundreds of limestone islands stretching from Babeldaob to Peleliu. Thought to be thousands of years old, these ancestral expressions feature a variety of geometric patterns and abstract forms. Individual figures range in size from just an inch to over three feet tall; some stand alone, while others cluster together. At Olechukl Ears Ulong, the designs are so densely packed they form a large, continuous mural.

As the Rock Islands' most important archaeological site, Ulong Island reveals a rich human history that spans more than 4,000 years. Evidence of defensive walls and terraced villages still lies beneath the forest canopy, attesting to the long-term settlement of the Rock Islands people. Scattered pottery shards and shell tools offer glimpses into the lives of these early Micronesians and their connection to the land and sea.

Today, Palau remains one of the world's premier diving destinations, a true paradise for those seeking adventure and a deeper connection with nature and history.



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International
Centre for Heritage

Evidencing the value of heritage

The International Centre for Heritage, based at the University of Birmingham, specialises in supporting cultural heritage sites, groups and organisations to holistically and robustly evaluate their programmes and projects.

We've worked with UNESCO World Heritage sites around the world, helping provide the research-based evidence they need to prove their impact and secure their future.

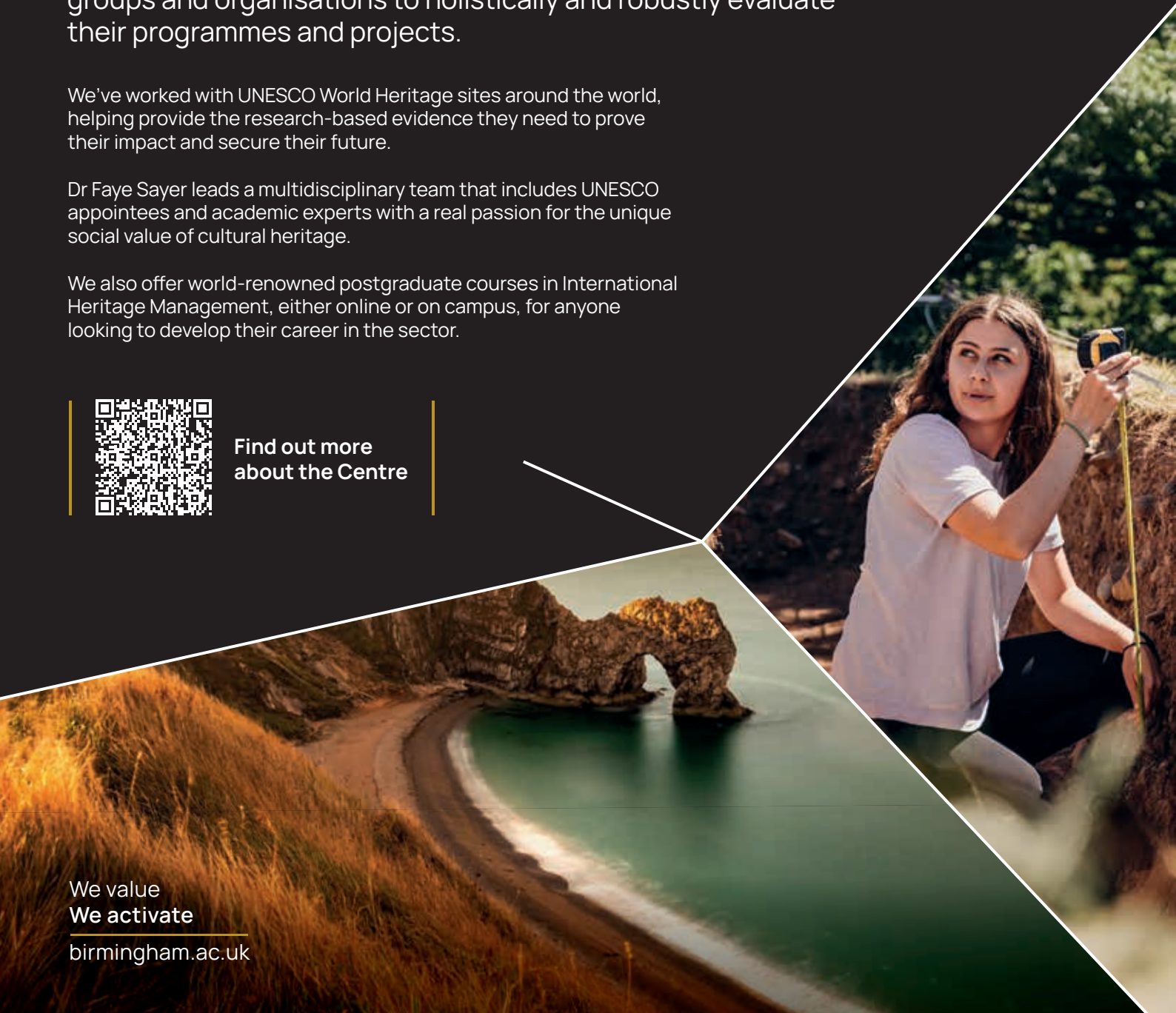
Dr Faye Sayer leads a multidisciplinary team that includes UNESCO appointees and academic experts with a real passion for the unique social value of cultural heritage.

We also offer world-renowned postgraduate courses in International Heritage Management, either online or on campus, for anyone looking to develop their career in the sector.



Find out more
about the Centre

We value
We activate
birmingham.ac.uk





Qatar Museums: Twenty Years of Contributing to National and Global Cultural Heritage

Qatar is home to an abundance of outstanding museums, including the National Museum of Qatar (NMQ), the Museum of Islamic Art, the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, and the Mathaf, among others, which provide a structure for the country's cultural and touristic attractions. While overseeing the management of these signature museums, Qatar Museums (QM), as the national lead authority, is also committed to researching, conserving and safeguarding archaeological and heritage sites (A&H sites) across the country, fostering an appreciation and understanding of the history and culture they represent. Recent initiatives have focused on translating the expert research of archaeologists, historians and conservators into compelling narratives that engage and resonate with visitors. In alignment with QM's vision for Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals in parallel, the objective is to make the significance of each site clear, accessible and engaging, encouraging visitors to feel a sense of

ownership, pride, and responsibility for their preservation. This ensures these sites are protected for future generations and maintained as a vital part of global heritage.

As the nation advances on its dynamic cultural journey, it boasts of hundreds of documented locations, including prehistoric sites, pre-Islamic cemeteries, Abbasid settlements, stone fish traps, and examples of distinctive heritage architecture. To enhance the visitor experience, QM has introduced educational self-guided signage at six exceptional sites: Barzan Towers, Al Rekayat Fort, Al Ruwaida Archaeological Site, Al Jassasiya Rock Art Site, Zekreet Fort, and Qatar's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Al Zubarah Archaeological Site.

Heritage buildings are restored using the same traditional materials employed in their original construction, reflecting the authentic character of Qatari architectural engineering. The heritage conservation standards applied during restoration reflect QM's efforts

to maintain the architectural identity of historical heritage structures.

On the twentieth anniversary of its founding, QM is proud to announce the official inscription of the NMQ and the Old Palace on UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List in April 2025. This milestone reflects Qatar's ongoing commitment to preserving its cultural heritage and achieving global recognition of its iconic national landmarks.

QM plays a vital role in global archaeological and World Heritage conservation through international research collaborations, joint excavations, and support for heritage missions abroad. It leads Qatar's UNESCO World Heritage nominations and actively contributes to global heritage debates. QM also invests in capacity building through training, education, and knowledge exchange while ensuring the conservation of local sites in line with international standards. QM's efforts are supported through collaborations with various government entities, civil society organizations, academia and international partners.

Photos: National Museum of Qatar

Celebrate inclusion, community, and faith

Moravian Church



Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA



Christiansfeld, Denmark

Welcome to Moravian Church Settlements, a transnational UNESCO World Heritage site featuring four congregation towns established during the eighteenth century. These communities—Bethlehem (USA), Christiansfeld (Denmark), Gracehill (UK), and Herrnhut (Germany)—represent extraordinary examples of the Moravian vision of an ideal city and its global influence.

The Moravian Church, or Unitas Fratrum (Unity of Brethren), originated in 1457 in Central Europe and stands as one of the earliest Protestant denominations. The settlements in Bethlehem, Gracehill, and Herrnhut were recognized in 2024 as extensions of Christiansfeld, which earned its World Heritage status in 2015.

All are invited to journey through our historic communities and witness our architectural harmony, innovative social structures, and spiritual heritage. Our Moravian settlements showcase pioneering achievements in education, craftsmanship, music, and community that continue to resonate today.

Our living heritage offers profound insights into inclusive community development, progressive social values, and faith-centered living—principles that remain remarkably relevant in our contemporary world.



Bethlehem, USA was established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1741. This highlights the early transatlantic dimension of the Moravian Church phenomenon during a prolific settlement-building decade and added the cultural dimension of the Moravians' outreach to Native Americans.

moravianchurchsettlements.org

Settlements



Gracehill, Northern Ireland, UK



Herrnhut, Germany



Christiansfeld, Denmark, founded in 1773 in South Jutland, is an exceptional example of a Moravian Church colony settlement. Built around a central Church Square with buildings arranged along two east-west streets, it represents the best-preserved northern European model of such settlements, reflecting Moravian societal and ethical ideals.



Gracehill, UK, founded in 1759 in the north of Ireland has a distinctive 'ideal' urban plan that is significant in the development of Moravian town planning. It has a grid plan with central square and uniquely demonstrates the fundamental structure of Moravian society through its gender-based division into sisters' and brothers' sides.



Herrnhut, Germany is considered the 'mother' or 'founding town' of the Renewed Moravian Church. It was established in 1722 in Saxony and evolved in line with the development of Moravian theology and societal ideals. This town defined the principles of all Moravian Church settlements.

Sarawak's Living Legacy

Heritage Leadership in the Heart of Borneo

On the island of Borneo, where ancient rainforests cloak jagged limestone spires and stories of humanity echo through cathedral-like caves, Sarawak stands at the confluence of deep time, living culture and conservation foresight. As the first Malaysian state with two UNESCO World Heritage Sites—Gunung Mulu National Park (2000) and the Archaeological Heritage of Niah National Park's Cave Complex (2024)—and home to the Sarawak Delta Geopark, it is shaping a heritage future that is rooted, resilient and remarkably global.

This triad of sites forms a cohesive conservation vision, linking the geological origins of Southeast Asia with the biodiversity of its rainforests and the migration stories of early humans. Sarawak's model of heritage leadership—anchored in Indigenous stewardship, scientific research and community-based protection—offers a blueprint for safeguarding humanity's shared legacy in the age of climate crisis and cultural transformation.

Gunung Mulu National Park, A Vertical Archive of Earth and Life

Celebrating 25 years on the World Heritage List, Gunung Mulu National Park is a masterpiece of stone and forest. Its extensive tropical karst system, shaped over 1.5 million years, reveals tectonic uplift, climate cycles and the evolution of life.

Mulu is both a scientific wonder and a sacred home to Indigenous Penan and Berawan communities who live in harmony with the land.

Towering limestone pinnacles, the colossal Sarawak Chamber and the subterranean Clearwater Cave are iconic landmarks. Mulu's ecosystems, ranging across seventeen vegetation zones, shelter rare species like Hose's civet, Sunda pangolins, and

immense bat colonies whose evening exodus from Deer Cave is a marvel of nature.

With over 90% of the park closed to tourism, Mulu prioritises ecosystem protection and scientific study, earning global recognition as one of the world's best-researched tropical karst systems.

Niah National Park, Echoes of Humanity in the Rainforest

Across the lowland jungles of northern Sarawak, Niah National Park offers a quieter yet equally profound heritage. Inscribed in 2024, the Archaeological Heritage of Niah tells a 65,000-year story of human resilience, migration and ingenuity.

The Great Cave's West Mouth yielded the "Deep Skull", the oldest known remains of anatomically modern humans in Island Southeast Asia. Artefacts—stone tools, pottery, hearths and ancient art—paint a vivid picture of life from the Pleistocene to the Metal Age.

Niah is not only a site of ancient heritage but of living tradition. The Penan, Iban and Malay communities who inhabit the region continue the sustainable practices of their ancestors, from guano and bird's nest harvesting to molong—the philosophy of taking only what is needed. Co-management structures ensure these Indigenous rights and practices remain central to site governance.

Niah stands as a rare testament to both ancient human presence and vibrant living traditions within a protected natural setting.

Sarawak Delta Geopark, Where Earth's Story Meets Cultural Diversity

Anchored by the iconic Mount Santubong, near the city of Kuching, the Sarawak Delta Geopark connects the state's geological history, cultural diversity and early maritime trade.

Covering 3,112 km² of land, river and sea, the geopark's landscapes range from ancient volcanic rocks and limestone hills to deltaic wetlands. It offers a unique window into plate tectonics, biodiversity patterns near the Wallace Line, and Borneo's evolving landscapes.

The Sarawak Delta has witnessed over 300 million years of geological formation, rainforest evolution and cultural continuity. Beyond geology, the Sarawak Delta celebrates living heritage. Bidayuh rituals on hilltops, Chinese mining legacies in Bau, and Iban riverine traditions are woven into the landscape. Festivals like the Tasik Biru Festival and Padawan Raft Safari show how communities continue to honour their connection to the land and rivers.

Education, community empowerment, and sustainability are pillars of the geopark's approach, aligning closely with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. With a Discovery Centre underway and collaborative governance models in place, the Sarawak Delta Geopark exemplifies how heritage can drive inclusive, future-facing development.

From Borneo to the World, A Model of Conservation Diplomacy

Sarawak's heritage efforts are more than local triumphs—they are global contributions. Its three sites reflect the interconnectedness of biodiversity, geology and human civilisation, offering insights into issues as diverse as climate adaptation, ancient migration and the ethics of ecological stewardship.

These sites fill critical gaps related to tropical karst systems, Island Southeast Asian archaeology and Indigenous-led conservation. Its governance approach, where Indigenous

knowledge is foundational, sets a benchmark for heritage management globally.

Sarawak also supports regional and cross-border conservation, with collaborations across Borneo which remind us that natural and cultural heritage transcends political boundaries.

A Heritage of Continuity, A Future of Connection

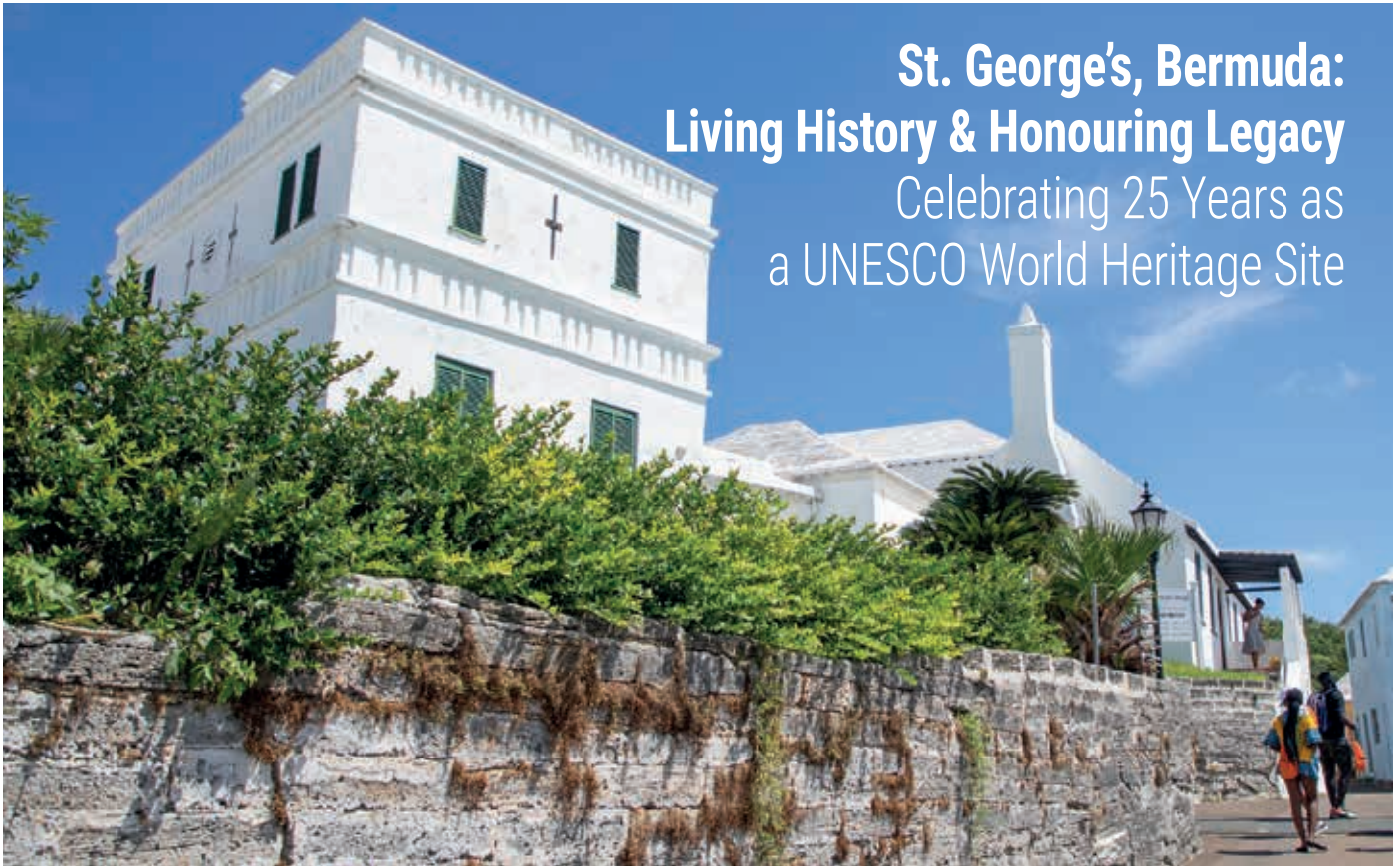
From Niah's ancient burial grounds to Mulu's soaring limestone towers and the dynamic landscapes of the Sarawak Delta, Sarawak offers a living vision of heritage—one not frozen in the past, but vibrantly carried forward by communities, ecosystems and cultures.

Here, conservation is about nurturing enduring relationships: between land and people, science and tradition, past and future. It is a model rooted not only in preservation, but in continuity and connection.

As the world faces climate challenges and cultural fragmentation, Sarawak's leadership offers hope: a reminder that our most lasting legacies are those built on connection, stewardship and shared responsibility.

In Sarawak, heritage is not only preserved. It is lived.

www.sarawaktourism.com



St. George's, Bermuda: Living History & Honouring Legacy Celebrating 25 Years as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

For most visitors to Bermuda, their first glimpse of the island is a postcard-perfect vision: a verdant landscape dotted with iconic white rooftops, embraced by an endless sweep of cerulean and emerald waters. This is the Town of St. George's — or simply St. George's, as locals lovingly call it — and while its beauty will draw you in, the town's rich history truly leaves an indelible mark. Settled in 1612, St. George's remains the oldest continuously occupied English town in the New World. Today, it is a living, breathing UNESCO World Heritage Site, home to just over 1,500 proud Bermudians who welcome visitors to explore the enduring legacy of their remarkable home. The site was inscribed in 2000 and is celebrating its 25th year as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Origins: Shipwreck and Settlement (1609–1615)

The story of St. George's is as dramatic as any adventure tale. In 1609, the English flagship *Sea Venture*, bound for the Jamestown colony in Virginia, wrecked upon Bermuda's reefs during a fierce storm. Though unplanned, the shipwreck proved serendipitous: the survivors found Bermuda's shores abundant and hospitable. In 1610, after constructing two smaller vessels, most castaways sailed on to Jamestown. However, the memory of Bermuda's lush promise lingered. In 1612, 60 settlers arrived, dispatched by the Virginia Company under a new charter from King James I. After briefly landing on Smith's Island, they relocated to a safer, more strategic harbour, founding what would become the Town of St. George's — named for England's patron saint.

Richard Moore was appointed Bermuda's first governor. Under his stewardship, settlers constructed early fortifications and essential structures to safeguard the fledgling colony. By 1615, Bermuda's prosperity and self-sufficiency were apparent, leading to the formation of the **Somers Isles Company** to govern the territory. **Daniel Tucker**, a survivor of Jamestown's brutal "Starving Time," succeeded Moore as governor. Tucker shifted focus from defense to survival, introducing

crops such as sugar cane, pawpaw (papaya), pineapples, and figs. It was during Tucker's tenure that Bermuda's first enslaved individuals, of African and Native American descent, arrived, marking a somber chapter in the island's history.

Building a Capital and a Fortress (1615–1815)

Governor Tucker's successor, the privateer **Captain Nathaniel Butler**, reinvigorated St. George's construction efforts. Butler oversaw the completion of key fortifications and civic buildings, including the **State House** (Bermuda's first parliament building) and **St. Peter's Church**, which still stands today as the oldest Anglican church in continuous use outside Britain.

St. George's served as Bermuda's **capital for nearly two centuries**, the heart of governance, commerce, and culture (until Hamilton assumed the title in 1815). Around the town, a defensive necklace of **forts** rose on Castle Island, Paget Island, Governor's Island, and beyond, evolving steadily alongside advancements in military engineering. St. George's became not merely a town but a stronghold: a bulwark against foreign ambitions and a symbol of England's expanding colonial reach. The surrounding fortifications, spanning from the 17th to the 20th centuries, today tell the layered story of English artillery's evolution in the New World. St. George's stands alone in offering such a brilliant, continuous record of British military strategy across centuries.

A Town Frozen in Time — Yet Full of Life

St. George's architectural landscape remains remarkably **unaltered**. Many of its 17th- and 18th-century stone buildings endure, hewn from soft local limestone and crowned with Bermuda's iconic **white stepped roofs**, ingeniously designed to harvest rainwater — a vital adaptation in an island without natural freshwater sources. The buildings' white-washed exteriors and pastel facades, punctuated by cobblestone



lanes and charming public squares, give the town an irresistible, timeless allure.

Unlike many New World colonial towns that prioritised trade, St. George's grew first as a military garrison. Early construction centered on barracks, officers' messes, a garrison chapel, and magazines, all executed in classic British style but adapted to Bermuda's unique environment. Today, visitors can still see remnants of this martial past in the sturdy stone structures that pepper the island's hills and waterfronts.

Britain's 'Gibraltar of the West' (19th Century)

Following American independence, Bermuda's strategic importance surged. Britain, deprived of mainland ports, designated Bermuda its **Western Atlantic naval stronghold**. By the early 19th century, the island housed a substantial Royal Navy fleet and army garrison, earning its reputation as the 'Gibraltar of the West'.

Fortifications around St. George's underwent extensive modernization. The newly built **Fort Cunningham** on Paget Island (completed in 1875) epitomized Victorian military engineering, armed with seven massive 38-ton Rifled Muzzle-Loading guns protected by iron shields and surrounded by a defensive moat. These were among the largest coastal guns of their time, a testament to Bermuda's strategic gravity.

Ironically, rapid technological advances — including steel-hulled warships and aerial warfare — soon rendered many of Bermuda's mighty fortresses **obsolete**. Yet their imposing presence endures, offering modern visitors an extraordinary window into the age of empire.

Legacy and Living Heritage

Today, the Town of St. George's is a **living museum** — and a lively community. It offers an extraordinary window into the early English colonial experience.

The surrounding forts each whisper their own stories. **King's Castle**

on Castle Island, built by Governor Moore in 1612, is the **oldest surviving English stone fort** in the Americas and, in 1614, repelled a Spanish attack. **Fort Cunningham**, with its Victorian guns and crumbling moat, looms across the harbour on Paget Island. Closer to town, **Fort St. Catherine** stands proudly as a restored museum and lookout point.

Yet St. George's is no mere relic — it is vibrantly alive. In **King's Square**, visitors often witness lively reenactments of colonial-era ceremonies, including playful demonstrations of the infamous "ducking stool." Adding a fresh, contemporary spirit to the historic town, visitors can admire **mosaic art murals by acclaimed Bermudian artist Shanna Hollis**. These colourful, evocative mosaics, nestled within the town square, beautifully weave Bermuda's past, present, and future through vibrant storytelling and artistic expression.

A walk through St. George's is a walk through **living history**. It is a place where cobblestones whisper secrets, limestone walls stand as witnesses to four centuries of triumph and struggle, and the warm welcome of the present-day townspeople completes the experience. Whether you are a curious traveler, a student of history, or simply a lover of beauty, St. George's invites you to step back in time while basking in the timeless magic of Bermuda.





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