

History

The land that gave birth to the legendary Orpheus and Spartacus, Bulgaria is a country with a long, tumultuous and fascinating history. It has been invaded, conquered and settled by Greeks, Scythians, Romans, Byzantines and Turks, all of whom left their indelible marks on the landscape. Bulgaria's medieval 'Golden Age', when the Bulgar Khans ruled over one of the largest empires in Europe, was bright but brief, while 500 years of subsequent, brutal Turkish domination isolated the country from the rest of Europe. More recently, Bulgaria spent four decades as a totalitarian Soviet satellite, again leaving this small Balkan nation in the shadows as far as the Western world was concerned. It's no wonder, then, that Bulgarians are so passionate about preserving their history and their culture, which has survived so often against the odds. In the last years of the 20th century Bulgaria began opening up, and is one of the newest members of the EU.

The Shortest History of Bulgaria by Nikolay Ovcharov runs quickly through the highpoints of Bulgaria's past, cramming a lot of interesting facts into just 70 brightly illustrated pages.

BEGINNINGS

Excavations of caves near Pleven (in the Danubian plains in northern Bulgaria) and in the Balkan Mountains have indicated human habitation as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic Period around 40,000 BC. However, archaeologists now believe that the earliest permanent settlers, arriving around 6000 BC, were Neolithic people who lived in caves, such as at Yagodina in the southern Rodopi Mountains (p162) and later, between about 5500 BC and 4500 BC, in round mud huts. The best preserved examples are on show in Stara Zagora (see p204). Burnt grain found here indicates these people were farmers. Chalcolithic (copper-using) cultures developed during the fourth millennium BC, and a superb collection of artefacts from this period, including possibly the earliest worked gold jewellery ever discovered, is on show at Varna Archaeological Museum (p240).

A Concise History of Bulgaria by RJ Crampton is a scholarly and comprehensive overview of the country's history from prehistoric times up to the present day.

TRIBAL TIMES

The Greek historian Herodotus tells us that the population of Thrace was 'greater than that of any country in the world except India', and that if the various tribes ever united under a single leader, then they would be the most powerful nation on earth; history, of course, tells us that they never did get their act together. Several tribes, who collectively came to be known as the Thracians, settled in modern-day Bulgaria, and in the early stages built settlements based around cave systems and near springs, which they considered sacred. As time went by, they built larger, more permanent villages around rudimentary fortresses, placed on elevated sites for defence.

TIMELINE

6000–5000 BC

Bulgaria's earliest permanent inhabitants establish settlements in and around caves during the Neolithic period. By around 5000 BC, the caves have been abandoned in favour of mud huts, and farming develops.

4000–1000 BC

The warlike and disparate Thracian tribes dominate the region covered by modern-day Bulgaria, creating settlements such as Mesembria on the Black Sea coast around 3000 BC and expanding into Greece and Anatolia by 2000 BC.

611 BC

Greek settlers from the city-state of Miletus establish Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol) on the Black Sea coast. It is the first classically democratic state on Bulgarian territory, with all males over the age of 18 eligible to vote for the governing assembly.

HERITAGE OF THE THRACIANS

The ancient Thracians, who once ruled over modern-day Bulgaria, are, in many ways, a mysterious and misunderstood people. Magnificent treasures such as the Varna necropolis treasure, on show in Varna's Archaeological Museum (p240) and the Panagyurishte Treasure (p108) in Sofia's National Museum of History suggest that this was a rich and sophisticated society, while major recent discoveries have cast new light on these tribes, surprising historians both in Bulgaria and overseas and forcing a rethink on their murky civilisation. In 2004, archaeologists unearthed two Thracian gravesites, both around 2400 years old, near Shipka and Kazanlák, an area which has become known as the Valley of the Thracian Kings due to the concentration of rich royal burials found there. One tomb yielded a solid gold mask, thought to represent the Thracian ruler Teres, and resembling the mask of Agamemnon from Mycenae, and a superb bronze portrait head, possibly of King Sevt III – a masterpiece of Hellenistic art – was discovered in the other. Both are now on display in Sofia's Archaeological Museum (p91).

Excavations, headed by the respected archaeologist Dr Georgi Kitov, have continued apace and several new tombs, and more fabulous artefacts, have been brought to light around the country, most recently around Sliven in 2007, where another regal golden mask was found. Perhaps even more intriguingly, archaeologists now claim to have identified the ruins of the famed Oracle of Dionysus at Perperikon, near Kárdzhali, where Alexander the Great was informed that he would become master of Asia, and the tomb of Orpheus, at Tatul near the Turkish border. Unfortunately, the archaeologists have to work fast to contend with looters once sites are discovered, but it is hoped that this amazing Thracian heritage will become a big tourist draw in years to come. See www.ancient-bulgaria.com for more information on Bulgaria's Thracian treasures.

Among the more powerful tribes were the Serdi, who settled around modern Sofia; the Getae, who lived along the Danube in northeastern Bulgaria; and the Odrysi, from the eastern Rodopi region. Despite their constant quarrels, the Thracian tribes shared much in common, and were feared and respected by outsiders as great warriors and horsemen: the fierce Thracian weaponry displayed at archaeological museums around the country will give you an inkling of what potential invaders were up against. The Greek historian Polybius wrote in the 2nd century BC of the 'insoluble state of war' between the Thracians and the Greeks of the city-state of Byzantium. It was impossible, he says, to gain a decisive victory over these 'barbarians', or to end the fighting, due to their sheer numbers: 'If the Byzantines overcome one chieftain, three others still more formidable invade his territory'.

They worshipped many gods, but were particularly devoted to Dionysus, whom they celebrated in orgiastic rites, and believed in an afterlife. Greek chroniclers regarded the Thracians' customs with disdain, though were not averse to reporting the racier aspects of their lives. We are told that they practised polygamy and that their young women were encouraged to be sexually promiscuous before marriage, while the historian Strabo comments on one

tribe's use of inhaled intoxicants (probably burning hemp seeds). Tales of their lurid tattoos also wrinkled many an Athenian nose.

Far from being the bloodthirsty savages portrayed by classical authors, though, the Thracians were accomplished artists and farmers, and grew wealthy from trading jewellery, copper and gold. Recent archaeological excavations around Shipka in central Bulgaria have unearthed some astounding works of art, including the gold mask and bronze head of a Thracian king, now on show at Sofia's Archaeological Museum (p91).

The Thracians significantly influenced the religion, architecture and culture of the subsequent Roman and Greek rulers. Some geographical names used today, such as 'rila' (for Rila Monastery) and 'yantra' (the name of the river through Veliko Tárnovo) probably originate from Thracian words.

Thracian Reminders

Remains of Thracian settlements can be found along the Black Sea coast near Burgas and at the town of Mesembria (Nesebár), while other remnants can be found on Nebet Tepe in Plovdiv, where the Thracians built the fortress of Eumolpias in about 5000 BC (see p141). Other Thracian settlements grew into the modern-day towns of Stara Zagora, Sandanski, Melnik, Bansko, Smolyan, Shumen and Madara.

By the first millennium BC the Thracians had spread as far north as Cherven, near the Danube, and as far west as Sofia. One tribe known as the Serdi created Sardonopolis, which was later renamed Serdica, and subsequently became Sofia, today's capital city.

The most famous Thracian remains are the tombs dating from about 4000 BC, which are displayed in the excellent Archaeological Museum in Varna (see p240) and the tomb at Kazanlák built in the 4th century BC (see p200). Close by, the area around Shipka has been termed the Valley of the Thracian Kings due to its high concentration of Thracian burial mounds. Other Thracian artefacts can be seen in museums in Haskovo, Smolyan, Sofia and Sliven.

Legend tells that Orpheus, the semimythical musician and underworld explorer, was born in Thrace, near the modern-day village of Gela (see the boxed text, p34), while Spartacus, his famous fellow Thracian who led a slave revolt against the Romans in Sicily, came from the vicinity of modern Sandanski.

ARRIVAL OF THE GREEKS...

From the 7th century BC onwards, enterprising Greeks sailed up the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria seeking out good harbours and trade opportunities, and founded settlements including Apollonia Pontica (modern-day Sozopol), Odessos (Varna), Mesembria (Nesebár), Krounoi (Balchik) and Pirgos (Burgas). They established large ports for exporting wheat, fish and salt, and traded Greek pottery for Thracian metalwork and jewellery.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Thracian Getae tribe would send 'messengers' to their god, Salmoxis, by hurling them onto a row of upturned spears.

Bulgarians: Civilisers of the Slavs by Bojidar Dimitrov is a small and readable, but somewhat biased, telling of the country's religious and cultural history. It's also available in French and German.

The Valley of the Thracian Rulers by Georgi Kitov is an up-to-date account of the fascinating archaeological discoveries made in central Bulgaria in recent years, with some beautiful colour photographs.

335 BC

Macedonian king Alexander the Great extends the Thracian holdings of his father Philip II by marching to the Danube River, securing it as the northernmost border of his massive empire.

AD 46

Thrace falls under the sway of the Roman Empire and is carved up into the administrative provinces of Thrace (in the south) and Moesia (in the north), with Ulpia Serdica (modern-day Sofia) becoming capital of Inner Dacia.

293

Roman Emperor Diocletian establishes the 'Tetrarchy' (rule of four), radically reorganising Imperial administration. Regional 'capitals' are established, including Serdica (Sofia), which flourishes as a centre of government and trade.

443–47

Attila the Hun and his army cross the Danube, sweeping into Roman territory and sacking the cities of Serdica (Sofia) and Philipopolis (Plovdiv) before being paid off with gold by the emperor.

681

The First Bulgarian Empire is founded by Khan Asparuh, with its capital at Pliska. Expanded under Khan Tervel (701–18), it reaches its largest extent under the rule of Tsar Simeon (893–927) before settling into a slow decline.

855

Saints Kiril and Metodii create the Glagolitic alphabet to help promote Christianity through the Bulgarian lands and beyond. It subsequently develops into the Cyrillic script.