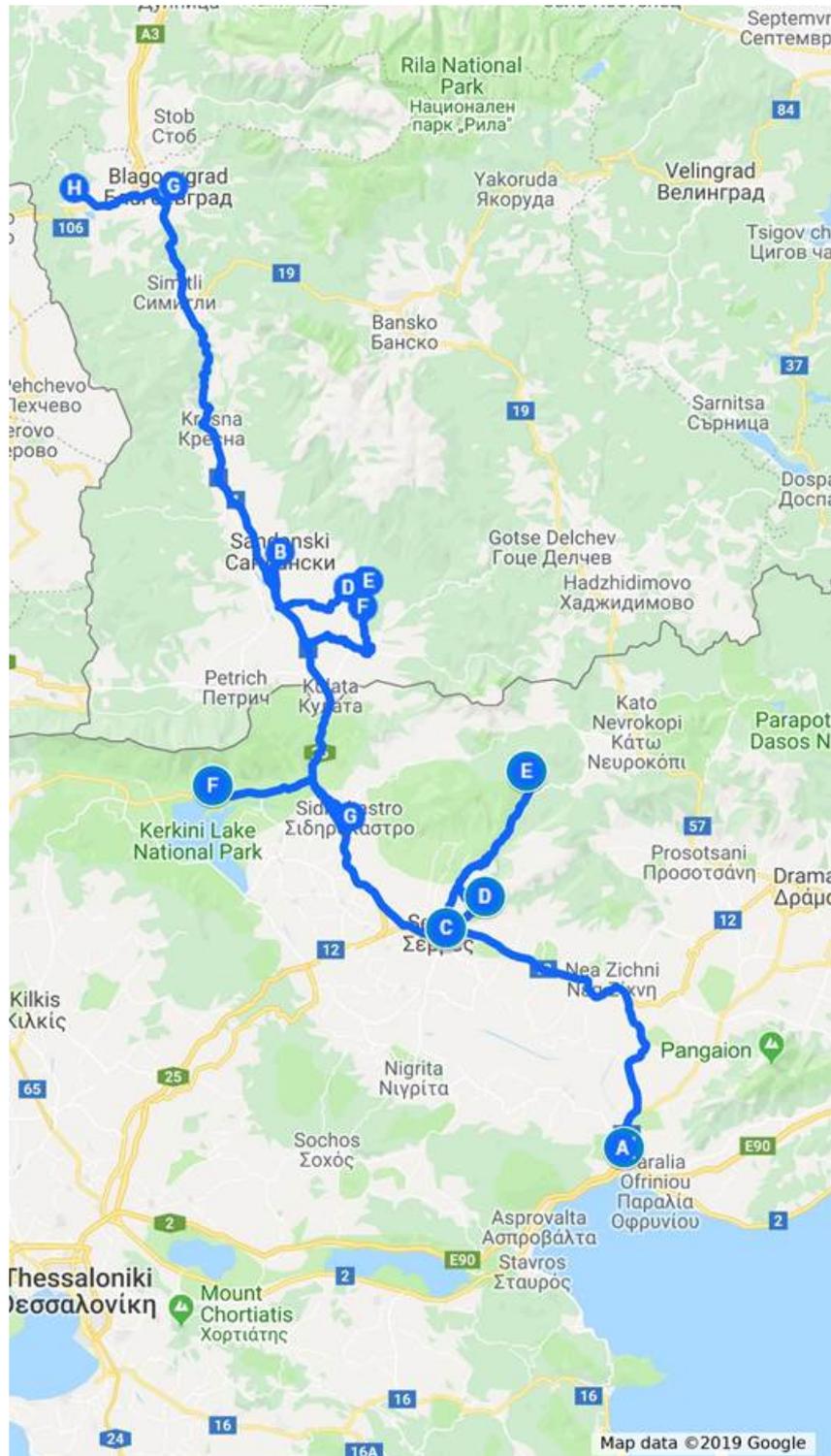




**MILLENNIAL CHRISTIANITY. ORTHODOX CULT MONUMENTS ALONG
STRUMA VALLEY IN THE TRANS-BORDER REGION OF
BLAGOEVGRAD, BULGARIA AND DISTRICT OF SERRES, GREECE**

The Struma River Valley offers the opportunity to trace the millennial development of church construction. Starting from the mouth of the river we will visit early Christian, medieval, Renaissance and contemporary cult monuments in the Republic of Greece and the Republic of Bulgaria.



Amphipolis - Acropolis with preserved early Christian basilicas

We begin our walk from the ancient city of Amphipolis. An important part of the life in Amphipolis is related to the spread of Christianity and its imposition as an official religion. The visit of Apostle Paul, who passed through the city on his way from Philippi to Thessaloniki in the year of 51, was very special. Gradually the ancient sanctuaries of the Acropolis became Christian churches. Today four three-nave basilicas from the 5th and 6th centuries have been discovered.



(Picture 1) Amphipolis. Acropolis with Early Christian basilicas



(Picture 2) Amphipolis. Acropolis - Early Christian basilicas

Some beautiful mosaic floors from these basilicas are preserved.

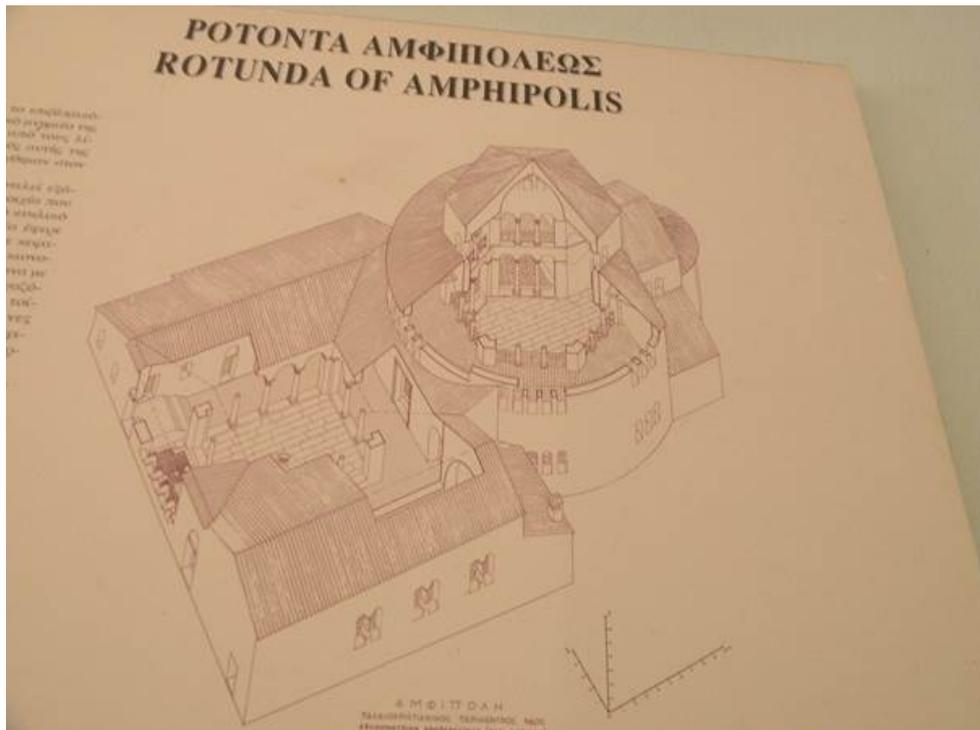


(Picture 3) Amphipolis. Acropolis - mosaics

The most interesting is the Rotunda (the polygonal church) from the 6th century which is one of the few early Christian churches of this type preserved in Greece during this period.



(Picture 4) Amphipolis. Acropolis – the Rotunda



(Picture 5) Amphipolis. Museum - Reconstruction of Rotunda

The Museum of Amphipolis features a number of findings: inscriptions, tombstones, reliefs, etc.



(Picture 6) Amphipolis. Museum - a capital of a column

Serres - The Old Metropolis of St. Theodore Tyron and St. Theodore Stratelates

Traveling north along the main road we arrive in the district town of Serres. The Old Metropolis dedicated to two saints - St. Theodore Tyron and St. Theodore Stratelates is in the center of the city of Serres, about 4 meters below the level of the road. It is built over an early and ancient temple dating from the 5th -6th century. There is information of its existence from the 10th century. Theodore Komnenos renovates it in 1224 after his glorious victory over the Franks in the surroundings of the city. Later, it is mentioned by the Byzantine emperor Andronicus the Elder and the Serbian ruler Stefan Dushan (1321) in the chrysobulls (decrees). A preserved inscription testifies its restoration in 1725.

Architecturally, the temple is a three-nave rectangular basilica. It is separated by 2 rows of columns, namely the famous six color columns of green marble. The altar barrier and bishop's throne are also made of marble.

Ruins of a building, which was probably a baptistery, are preserved in the southeast corner of the courtyard.



(Picture 7) Serres. The Old Metropolis from the southwest. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 8) Serres. The Old Metropolis - the apse. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 9) Serres. The Old Metropolis - interior. Photographer Krum Ivanov

The only remaining mosaic is the figure of the Apostle Andrew which can be seen today at the Archaeological Museum of Serres.



(Picture 10) Serres. Archaeological Museum - St. Andrew (a mosaic of the old metropolis). Photographer Krum Ivanov

Theodore II Lascaris renewed the icons in 1255 by covering them with silver. The church went through a number of reconstructions during the late Middle Ages, Revival and New Age.

The icons of Christ the Blessing and the Virgin Mary Polyalthia are especially known.



(Picture 11) Serres. The Old Metropolis - an icon of the Virgin Mary. Photographer Krum Ivanov

The temple is lit by three silver chandeliers; the largest one is with 33 candles and is located in the center of the naos.

The temple feast shifts and is celebrated on the first Saturday of the Lent. The relics of the two military saints are kept in the temple.



(Picture 12) Serres. The Old Metropolis - the relics of St. Theodore. Photographer Krum Ivanov

Serres - The church of St. Nicholas

The church of St. Nicholas is located at the northeastern end of the medieval town of Serres. The church was built in the 12th century and was used by the soldiers from the Serres garrison to attend a church service and receive the sacrament.



(Picture 13) Serres. The church of St. Nicholas

It contains a crypt that was used as a garrison cemetery. The entrance is on the eastern wall under the apse window.



(Picture 14) Serres. The church of St. Nicholas – an apse

Architecturally, the church is a two-story cross-domed building.

Remains of frescoes from the age of Paleologues are preserved here.

Monastery of St. John the Forerunner (Prodromos), Serres

Traveling north along the main road we reach the town of Serres. There is another holy monastery in the city surroundings - the monastery of St. John the

Forerunner (Prodromos). It is located 10 km northeast of the town of Serres, at the foot of Menikio Mountain. It is reached by an asphalt road. The preserved huge cypresses around the monastery strengthen the tourist's sense of being in a divine place.

The monastery was founded by Ioannikios after he stayed in Mount Athos and in a desert cell in Mountain Menikio (Menikion). In 1270 he decided to found the monastery of St. John the Forerunner (Prodromos) ". His nephew Joakim extended the monastery. In 1332 the monastery acquired a statuopical status and was owned by Mount Athos.

After the fall of the region under Ottoman rule many of its privileges have been destroyed but the local population continues to maintain and protect it. In the period from 1457 to 1462 the holy cloister accommodated Gennadius Scholarius, the first patriarch after the fall of Constantinople who died and was buried in the monastery.

We see the portraits of the two great donors Ioannikios and Joakim right at the entrance of the monastery.

The monastery's gate is massive and strong, typical of the Ottoman period, due to the uncertain life of Christians.

The center of the monastery courtyard is occupied by the church (Katholicon), to the west of which is the phiala built in 1854. It was used for the blessing of the waters during the Epiphany feast and the first day of each month.



(Picture 15) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, Serres – the phiala in the courtyard

The monastery church dates from the beginning of the 14th century and has been reconstructed many times over the centuries.

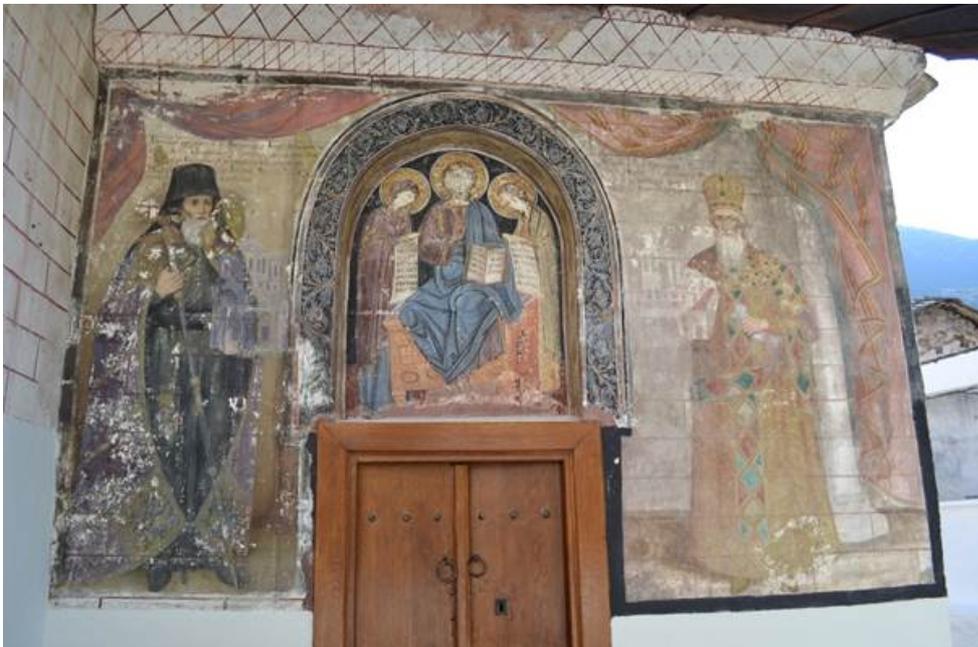


(Picture 16) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, Serres – the main church

The church frescoes are performed in different periods and by different icon-painters. The oldest of them dates back to the time of the second donor Joakim and they are in the naos of the temple. The image of the patron St. John the Forerunner is traditionally depicted over the entrance of the temple.

The frescoes in the open western gallery are of a didactic character such as the composition "The Judgment Day"

The donors' portraits are painted on the outer west wall of the temple.



(Picture 17) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, Serres - frescoed portraits of the two donors with "Deisis"("supplication ") between them

Ano Vrontou, the church of St. Dimitar – a revival church

The village of Ano Vrontou is located 20 km away from Serres.

The church of St. Dimitar was built in 1835 which is visible from a preserved marble slab. The names of the donors are listed on it. In 1860 the school where the first teachers were monks from the Serres monastery of St. John Prodromos was built. Ten years later (1870), the bell tower was built.

The church is a three-nave basilica without a dome. The interior of the temple is covered with marble slabs.



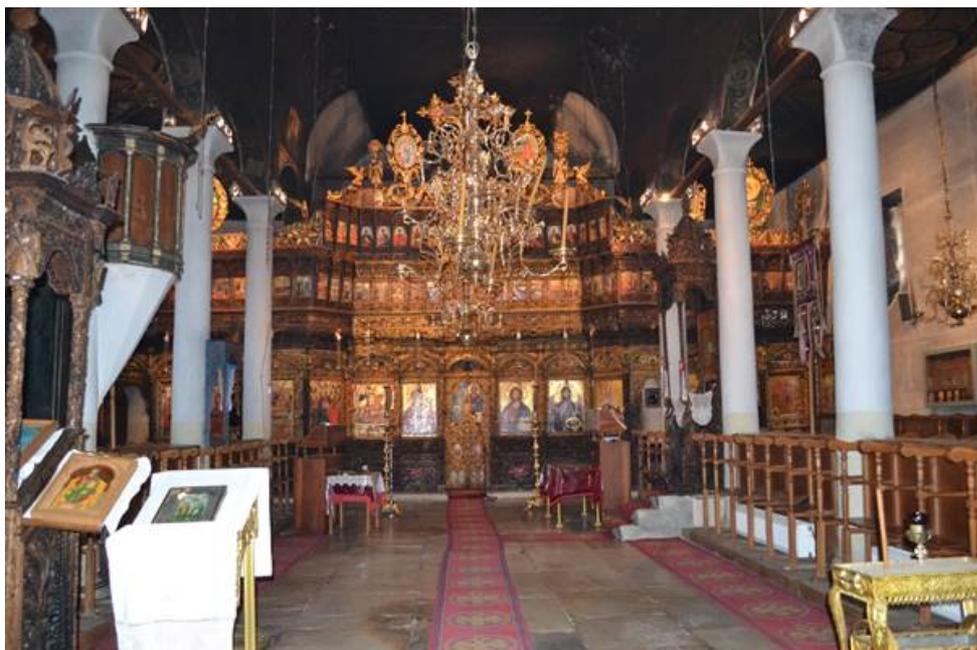
(Picture 18) The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou – the western facade with an open gallery.

Frescoes are located only in separate parts of the temple.



(Picture 19) The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou – a railing of the emporia with the scene "The Assumption of the Virgin"

The temple has one of the most beautiful wood-carved iconostasis. The bishop's throne and the throne in the altar are decorated with rich carving.



(Picture 20) The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou – a general view of the interior decoration



(Picture 21) The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou - altar doors

The icons in the temple are painted with high professional skills.



(Picture 22) The church of St. Dimitar in Ano Vrontou – an icon of Christ Pantocrator

Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, near the village of Akritochori

The village of Akritochori (Ακριτοχώρι, Ακριτοχορι, Ακριτοχώριον) is located 12 km northwest of the city of Sidirokastro. The monastery of St. John the Forerunner is located on a hill above the village. This holy cloister was opened in 1981. Every visitor is impressed by the large-scale construction and the rich decoration of the two churches.



(Picture 23) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, near the village of Akritochori - the main church. Photographer Krum Ivanov

In the church are kept copies of the miraculous icons of Virgin Mary with the child Jesus and St. John the Forerunner.



(Picture 24) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, near the village of Akritochori - an icon of the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 25) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, near the village of Akritochori - an icon of St. John the Forerunner. Photographer Krum Ivanov

Today, around 40 nuns live in the monastery, and they are extremely friendly and hospitable.



(Picture 26) Monastery of St. John the Forerunner, near the village of Akritochori, the second temple. Photographer Krum Ivanov

The church of St. Dimitar (St. Zona) in Sidirokastrro

Traveling to the Greek-Bulgarian border, we turn to Sidirokastrro.

The church of St. Dimitar is built on a rock-cut tomb of the Hellenistic era. Today, the ancient, carved temple (tomb) is an altar of the church.



(Picture 27) The church of St. Dimitar (St. Zona) in Sidirokastrro - the western part



(Picture 28) The church of St. Dimitar (St. Zona) in Sidirokastru – interior

In 1915, a local resident named Theopemptou Pasoni sees light in this place every night. Christians went to the site, dug a temple in the rock (tomb), and they found the icon of St. Dimitar and St. Panteleimon, as well as relics. After visiting the site, bishop Parteniy ordered the construction of a temple on that place and in 1939 today's chapel was build.

After the Balkan wars in 1913 about 12,000 people, identifying themselves as Greeks, left the town of Melnik and settled in Sidirokastru and the surrounding settlements on Greek territory. These immigrants took the icon of Virgin Mary (St. Zona) and brought it to Sidirokastru. The icon dates from the 18th century and was made in Mount Athos. Once there was an epidemic in the village. A lithologic procession with the icon took place and miraculously the disease passed away. Since then, traditionally, on 31st August every year, a procession is held with the icon, archbishop service and water blessing. This holiday attracts many pilgrims from nearby and more remote settlements.



(Picture 29) The church of St. Dimitar (St. Zona) in Sidirokastro – the icon of St. Zona

Sandanski. The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica

After visiting the preserved Christian monuments in Greece, we cross the border at the Promachonas/Kulata checkpoint and head for the town of Sandanski. The most precious monument in it is the Episcopal Early Christian Basilica. It is located in the center of the town. This is the most representative building from the late antiquity and one of the most interesting archaeological sites in Southwestern Bulgaria. The Basilica is part of the Episcopal complex, including circular baptistry, atrium (inner courtyard), martyrium with a source with holy water and other buildings.



(Picture 30) Sandanski. The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 31) Sandanski. The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica – an altar. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 32) Sandanski. The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica – the baptistery. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 33) Sandanski. The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica – the martyrion. Photographer Krum Ivanov

According to an inscription, the temple was built by Antim (probably a bishop of the eparchy).



(Picture 34) The Episcopal Early Christian Basilica – a marble fragment of Antim's inscription. Photographer Krum Ivanov

The preserved fragments give us an idea of the magnificence of the floor and wall decorations of the basilica.

The Basilica was probably destroyed by a fire during the barbaric attacks in the second half of the 6th century.

Melnik - The Church of Virgin Mary Spilotissa

The town of Melnik is located 22 km south-east from the town of Sandanski. There we will see two medieval Christian monuments, situated on the hill of St. Nicholas, located south of the modern city.

The Church of Virgin Mary Spilotissa or St. Zona (the Holy Girdle) is located in the eastern part of the hill of St. Nicholas, in the outer city south of the city.

The monastery was founded by Despot Alexius Slav, independent ruler in the first decades of the 13th century in the region. Later in 1365, the monastery was given as a convent to the Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. At the beginning of the 20th century the monastery gradually lost its cultural meaning, its popularity was declined and the building began to collapse. Later in the 40s of the 20th century, the chapel of St. Zona was build. The built eco-path makes getting to this monastery easier.

Today, the icon of Virgin Mary (St. Zona) is kept in the church of St. Yane (John) in the town of Melnik. The iconography also includes the Assumption of Virgin Mary and giving her Holy Girdle. After the original icon was brought to Sidirokastro, a copy was reproduced from the original image to replace the original icon.

The icon of St. Zona is venerated as miraculous. It helps mainly with health issues, illness, epidemics and misfortunes and it is used for litany processions to protect the territory by St. Zona. A contemporary local practice around the icon is the use of white and red threads to help childless young brides to conceive. Each year on 31 August, with a litany procession, the icon is taken to the monastery of St. Zona and thus the Holy Girdle of Virgin Mary is honored. After the holiday, the icon is returned to the church of St. Yane.

For more information and photos of the monastery, please visit the following website: <https://opoznai.bg/view/manastirat-sveta-bogoroditza-spilotisa-melnik>

Melnik – the church of St. Nicholas

The church lies on the hill of St. Nicholas, south of the town of Melnik. It was built on a Thracian sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Bendis. A basilica was built on it in the 5th century, which was destroyed a century later. In the 9th -10th or the end of the 12th century, the medieval church was built here, part of which is preserved today. Initially, it was a parish church of Melnik Fortress. In the second half of the 12th or the first half of the 13th century, the church was transformed into the seat of the Melnik Bishop. Saint Nicholas serves as a cathedral temple until the construction of St. Nicholas in the 18th century. The medieval church was used as a monastery church until the Balkan War in 1912.

The church of St. Nicholas is a three-nave basilica, constructed out of rows of stones which alternate with rows of bricks. There are three entrances from the west and three semicircular apses in the easternmost part.

For more information and photos of the monastery, please visit the following website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_St_Nicholas,_Melnik

Rozhen monastery “Nativity of the Virgin”



(Picture 35) Rozhen monastery "Nativity of the Virgin" – panoramic photo

After seeing the church in Zlatolist, we head to the biggest sanctuary in the Blagoevgrad region - Rozhen Monastery "Nativity of the Virgin". It is located 8 km east of the town of Melnik. There is no written information about the founding of the monastery. The first objects that show life in the cloister are from the 13th century. The construction of a part of the temple and the surrounding buildings dates back to the 15th century.

Fragments of the decoration of the Rozhen monastery main church naos and the narthex date from the third quarter of the 16th century. It is in the spirit of Athos art. The frescoes in the lunettes (the niches) date from 1597. They are above the two entrance gates of the temple and depict Christ sitting on a throne, surrounded by the apostles (above the western door) and Holy Virgin with the Child, surrounded by prophets, foretelling her life (above the south door).



(Picture 36) Rozhen monastery "Nativity of the Virgin" – Christ blessing the apostles over the north entrance of the temple

Two remarkable for the facade decoration compositions - "The Judgment Day" and "The ladder of St. John Climacus with the Christian virtues" are painted on the external southern wall of the covered church gallery in 1611.

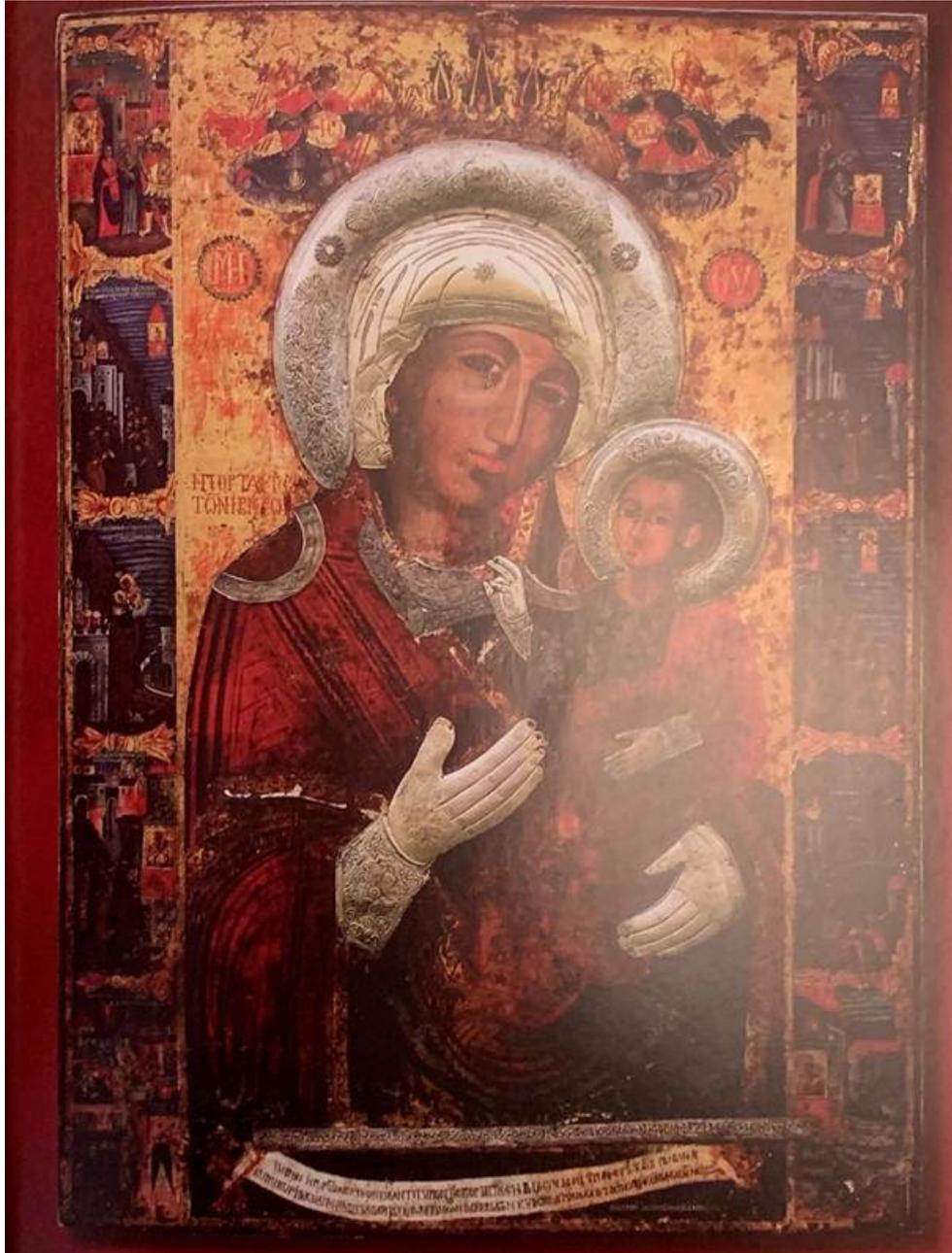


(Picture 37) Rozhen monastery "Nativity of the Virgin"– the western wall with the compositions "The Judgment Day" and "The ladder of St. John Climacus"

Between 1662 and 1674 after a big fire in the Katholicon (the main temple) half- century repairs, extensions and new decoration of the temple began. They ended with its complete repainting in the period 1727-1732 by the icon-painters Teohari and Nicola who left their signature on the picture of the Assumption in 1727. After that the brothers Anastasius and Alexei the priest from Ioannina decorated the entire Katholicon with murals. Especially valuable are the only preserved stained glass windows in the Bulgarian lands from 1715 which represent the Garden of Eden.

At the end of the 18th century a chapel dedicated to the holy unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian was formed in the south part. It is decorated with a wood-carved iconostasis with many biblical scenes.

The miraculous icon of St. Virgin Mary is the monastery's main attraction for thousands of believers and tourists. In 1762 the monastery was converted into a convent of the monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos. Traditionally the Athon holy monastery gives a copy of its miraculous icon. Unlike the original icon, ten scenes with its miracles were added to the copy painted for the Rozhen Monastery.



(Picture 38) Rozhen monastery “Nativity of the Virgin” – the miraculous icon of Virgin Mary Portaitissa (Gatekeeper)

The temple feast of the Rozhen Monastery is the Nativity of St. Virgin Mary (Virgin Mary’s Day) on September 8th. It is visited by the local population and hundreds of pilgrims. After the liturgy a litany procession with the icon goes around the monastery temple and blessing of holy water takes place under the old monastery vine.

Zlatolist - the Church of St. George – contemporary practices

After seeing Melnik and Rozhen monastery we continue to the village of Zlatolist. It is located 16 km southeast of the town of Melnik.

The church of St. Georgi was built and decorated with frescoes, icons and iconostasis during the Renaissance.



(Picture 39) The Church of St. George in the village of Zlatolist

This church is remarkable by the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century a prophetess reverend Stoyana lived there. According to the legend, when she was seven years old, she was severely ill with smallpox and became blind due to that illness. Then St. George appeared before her and ordered her to go to the village of Zlatolist (Sushitsa). After her birth place was burnt, she arrived at a Zlatolist (Gold leaf), settled in the church and began her life as a nun. Here she became famous for curing sick people.

The contemporary religious practices there arouse a great interest.

This church abounds in modern practices related to superstition about health, well-being and success. Many of the pilgrims are standing in a line in the center of the temple to step barefoot on the main marble slab with the two-headed eagle - a symbol of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. According to the belief, the one who stepped and prayed, he would be cured of diseases. It is believed that everyone should step on the slab, look at the icon of Jesus Christ for about thirty seconds, and if the eyes of the Son of God open, that person's soul is purified.

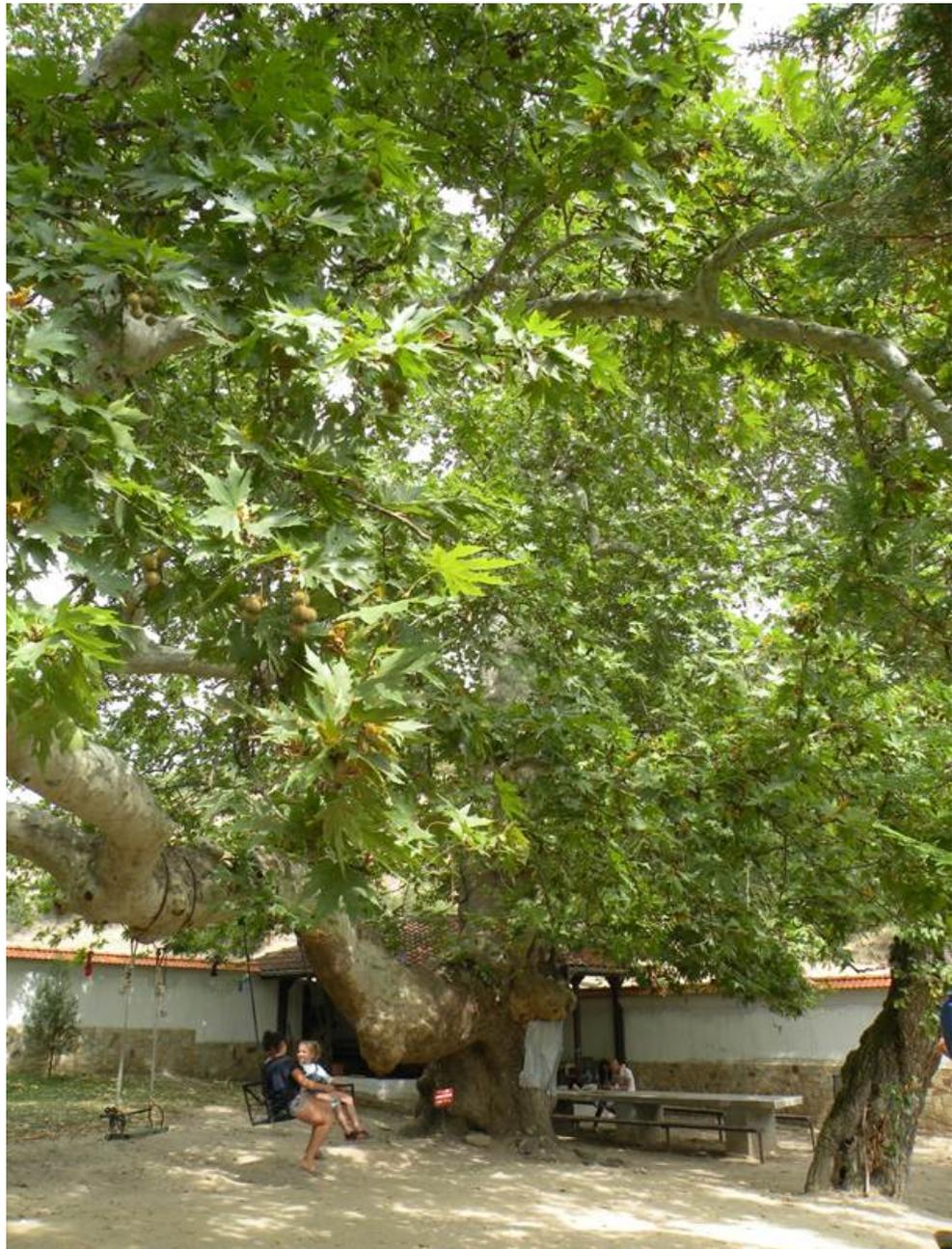


(Picture 40) The Church of St. George in the village of Zlatolist

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(Picture 41) The Church of St. George in the village of Zlatolist – the centuries-old sycamore with the swing.

Blagoevgrad - Renaissance Church “Presentation of the Virgin Mary”

After visiting Bansko, we return on E-79 road and head for the regional town of Blagoevgrad. In religious term, the Metropolitan Church Presentation of the Virgin Mary is the most precious monument in it. The church is located in the central quarter of Varosha.

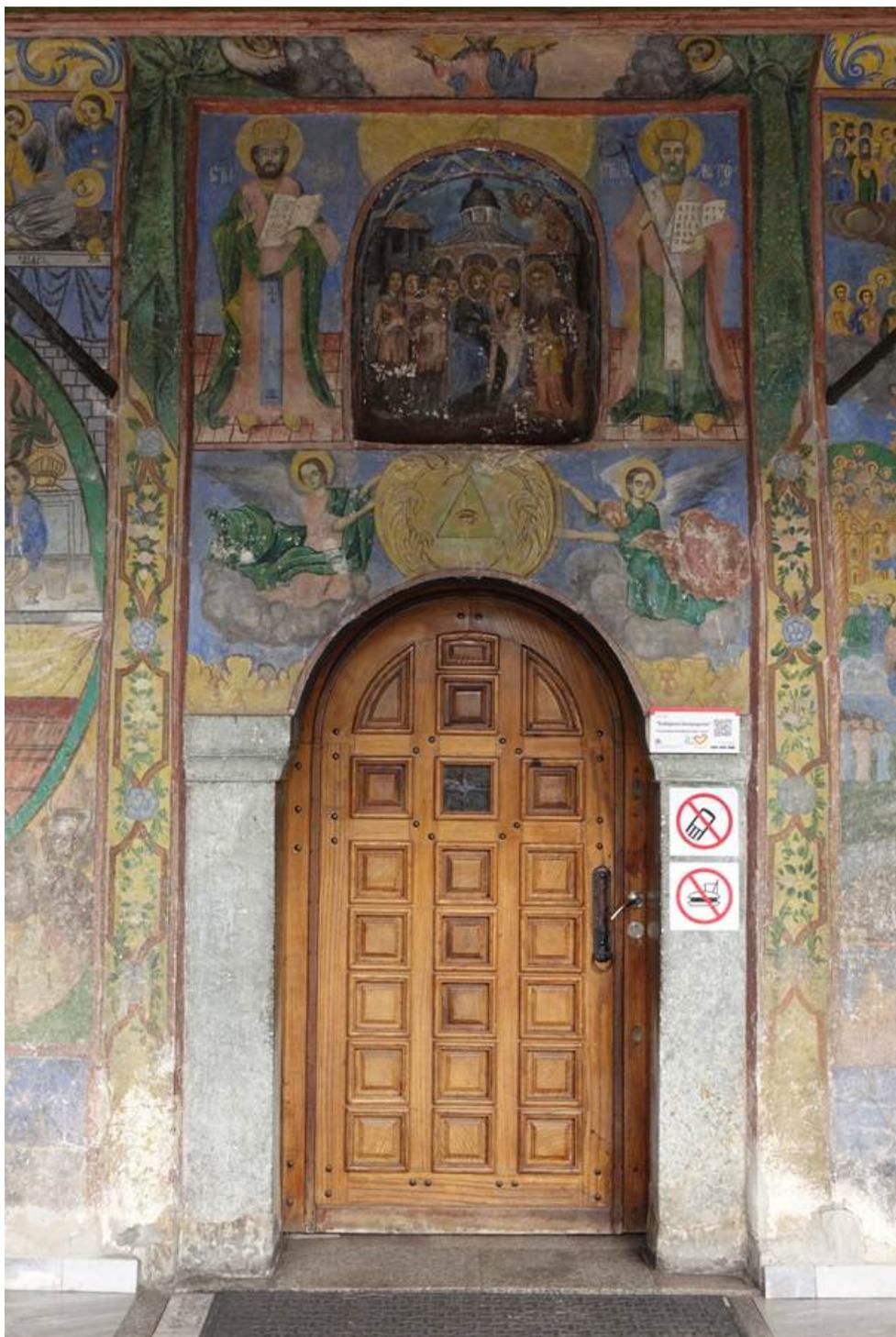
The temple was built on the site of an older cult building by the masters Donne and Hristo from the village of Stoymirovo, Malashevsko. You can judge by the commemorative sign above the front door that the construction of the church took place from 1840 to 1844.

Architecturally the church is a three-nave basilica with naos and narthex. In 1882 an open narthex was built on the north side of the temple. The interior of the temple is divided by two rows of six wooden columns.



*(Picture 42) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – exterior view.
Photographer Krum Ivanov*

As we enter the courtyard of the church and look at the building, we can see some very impressive frescoes. The scene *Presentation of the Virgin Mary* is in the patronal niche.



(Picture 43) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – the patronal icon. Photographer Krum Ivanov

In the open arcade some moral-didactic scenes are located. Among them are the "The Judgment Day", "The Wheel of Life", the images of the Slavic enlighteners the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius. They were frescoed in 1882 and 1888 by some of the last representatives of the Bansko Art School Mihalko Golev, Dimitar Sirleshtov and Kostadin Marunchev.



(Picture 44) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – The Wheel of Life scene. Photographer Krum Ivanov

As we enter the church, we see its iconostasis standing before our eyes. It was probably done between 1844 and the early 1850s by the great masters of the Samokov art school Atanas Theladur and Stoycho Fandakov. The northern wing is probably a work of Debar school carvers.



(Picture 45) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – interior. Photographer Krum Ivanov



*(Picture 46) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – altar doors.
Photographer Krum Ivanov*

More than 80 icons, painted mainly during the period 1854-1856, are preserved in the temple, most of which are located on the iconostasis and are made by representatives of Samokov and Bansko Art Schools. Several icons by the founder of the Samokov Art School Hristo Dimitrov from 1812 are also preserved here.



(Picture 47) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – an icon of Virgin Mary with the child Jesus. Photographer Krum Ivanov



(Picture 48) Presentation of the Virgin Mary Church in Blagoevgrad – an icon of St. Ivan Rilski (St. John of Rila). Photographer Krum Ivanov

The Medieval church in the village of Drenkovo, Blagoevgrad.

The medieval church is located in the cemetery of the village of Drenkovo, about 800m northwest of the town hall. For the time being, there is no information about when the church was built or when it was destroyed. The locals have remembered it like that, with no roof and in ruins, since immemorial times. According to the legend, the temple was not finished and sanctified even at its construction.

According to its plan, the building belongs to the one-nave, one-apse three-conch churches. The entrance is from the western wall and the eastern part of the building is half-dug into the ground. It is made of limestone stones, bonded with mortar, and the vault was made of freestone. The external plastic decoration of the church is very impressive. At the top of the western facade, two double arched shallow niches are formed, one on both sides above the entrance, and the left one has survived in half. Based on architectural features, the church can be dated not later than the 15th - 16th centuries.



(Picture 49) The Medieval church in the village of Drenkovo



(Picture 50) The Medieval church in the village of Drenkovo

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Author:

Dr. Zhana Pencheva
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Translated by:

Dr. Ruska Krasteva
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Images:

Dr. Krum Ivanov, Dr. Zhana Pencheva, Prof. Dr. Sc. Vasil Markov
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

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