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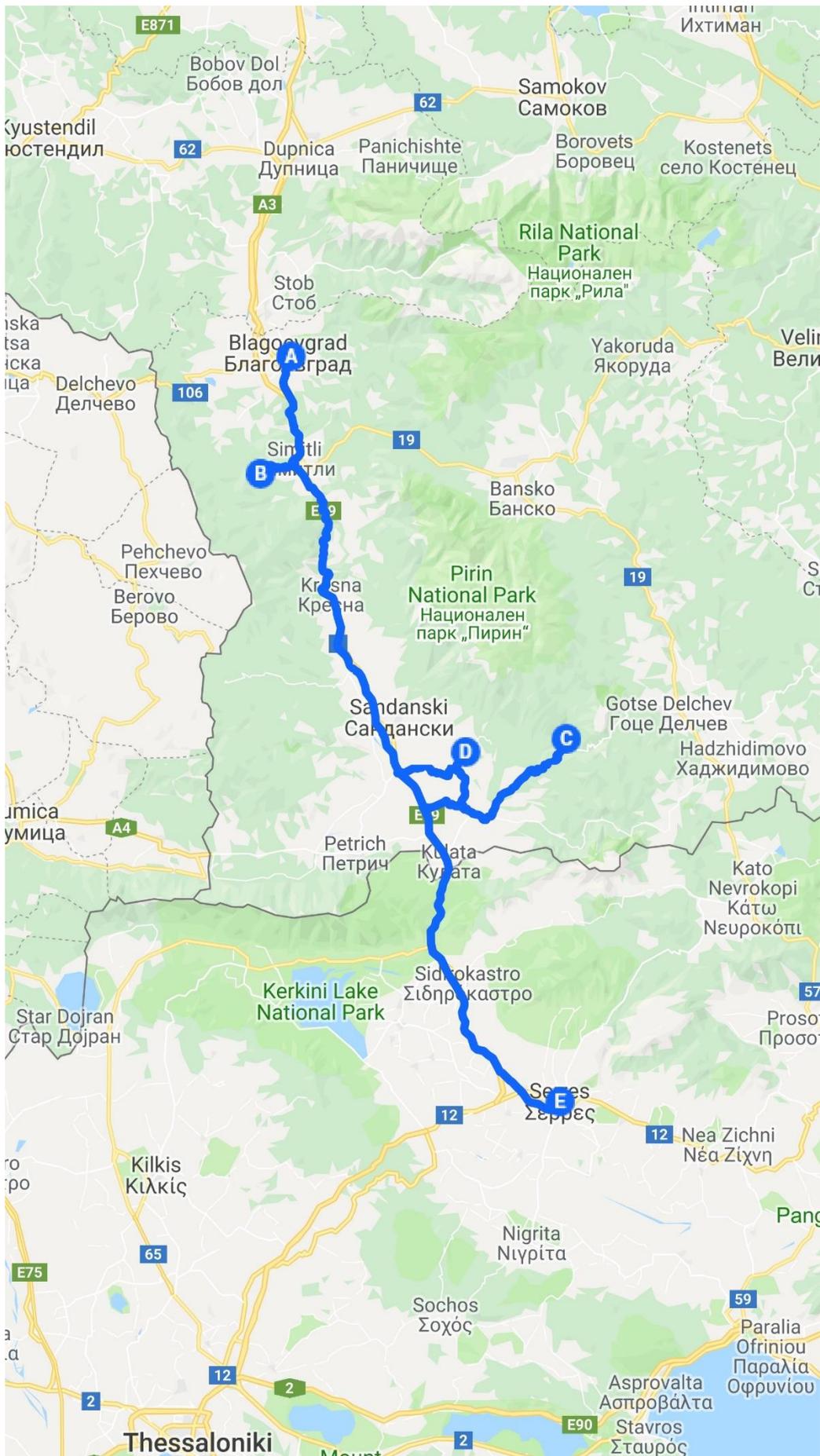
Greece-Bulgaria

BORDERLESS CULTURE

European Regional Development Fund

MODELS OF ARCHITECTURE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO PRESENT ON THE VALLEY OF STRUMA RIVER

- **Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria**
- **Brestovo Monastery “St. Archangel Michael”, Municipality of Simitly, Bulgaria**
- **Pirin village, Bulgaria**
- **Melnik, Bulgaria**
- **Serres, Greece**



Blagoevgrad is the largest city in Southwest Bulgaria, the administrative center of Blagoevgrad District and Blagoevgrad Municipality. It is situated at the foot of the southwestern slopes of the Rila Mountain, in the valley of the Struma River, 100 km south from the capital Sofia. The city is located on the two banks of the Bistritsa river, just before its inflow into the Struma River. Besides the clear waters of the river, important factors for the development of the city were the mineral springs and the favorable central location of the city, situated between Sofia and Thessaloniki, Kyustendil and Razlog. About 35 km away from the city, in the upper course of the Bistritsa River, is located the ancient **Parangalitsa forest** - one of the most valuable reserves in Bulgaria. In 1973, it was proclaimed by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve.

The history of Blagoevgrad dates back to 10th century BC. The Thracian settlement **Skaptopara** (Upper Market) was founded around the mineral springs around 300 BC. This settlement has been associated with the Thracian tribe Denteleti who inhabited the upper valley of the Struma River. In the 1st century AD the Thracians were conquered by the Romans. A Roman settlement from 3rd-5th century has been discovered in 2017, near the village of Pokrovnik, about 3 km from Blagoevgrad. The establishment's location did coincide with the planned route of Struma highway and it has been destroyed, with only a few of the excavated buildings being moved away from the road.

At the end of the 15th century today's city, mentioned for the first time in a Turkish document from 1502 with the name of Gorna Dzhumaya, emerged near the hot springs. During the Ottoman rule, the city acted as an important fortification, which guarded the roads along the Struma valley to the south and the Bregalnitsa river /now in Republic of North Macedonia/to the west.

During the Bulgarian National Revival, at the end of the 16th century a quarter of Bulgarian Christians was built on the eastern side of the Bistritsa river; it was named **Varosha**. The two-story houses began appearing with shops accommodated on the ground floor and living quarters - on the second floor. The ground floor was mostly built of stone masonry, and the second one - of wooden columns and beams filled with mud and straw between them, or, in rare occasions, of clay bricks. The houses were usually opened towards the patios with spacious wooden verandas.



Nowadays some of the houses in the neighborhood are used as studios for the local artists. Others are housing institutions for schooling children in a variety of subjects: music, fine arts, literature, mathematics.

One of the most interesting monuments in Varosha is the **church "Presentation of the Virgin"**. It was consecrated in 1844. The church is a three-nave basilica, with an apse on the east end. Artists from the two most famous art schools during the Bulgarian Revival - Bansko and Samokov - inscribed the walls of the temple in a traditional manner.



On 5th October 1912 Blagoevgrad was liberated from the Ottoman rule. This set the foundations of the modern development of Gorna Dzhumaya, renamed in 1950 to Blagoevgrad in the name of Dimitar Blagoev.

Blagoevgrad is a home of dozens of primary and secondary schools, libraries, a college, two universities, a drama theater, a chamber opera, a museum. Here is founded the Pirin Folk Ensemble. Nowadays visitors of the town are mostly interested and fascinated by the Varosha Revival neighborhood with its unique Bulgarian architecture, the Church “Presentation of the Virgin” and the Museum of History; the Georgi Izmirliiev's Central Square with the Municipal Buildings, the Drama theater and the American University/Southwest University as a model of contemporary Bulgarian architecture; square Macedonia with the Gotse Delchev monument and the building housing the Chitalishte and the Chamber Opera; the campus of the American University along the Bistritsa River; several preserved residential buildings from the beginning of the 20th century in the town center; park Bachinovo and park Hunting Lodge and many others. The oldest preserved buildings are those from the middle and the end of the 19th century but the city also offers good examples of modern architecture. In 1986-1987 the center of Blagoevgrad was largely renovated with major construction activities being carried out. The American University in Bulgaria was founded in 1991 and since 1996 a modern campus has been built along the Bistritsa River. The implementation of modern urban solutions resulted in the establishment of the modern city center with pedestrian streets and squares, shopping zones and green areas.





Brestovo Monastery "St. Archangel Michael" (also called Troskovski) is located 20 km southwest of Simitli, in the surrounding lands of the village Brestovo, located in the Maleshevska mountain. The monastery is one of the oldest in southwestern Bulgaria; there is written evidence that it was founded in 1149. According to the descendants of priest Popgavrailov, Ivan Rilski was devoted to service in this monastery and has lived in the area for some time before being expelled from the local population.

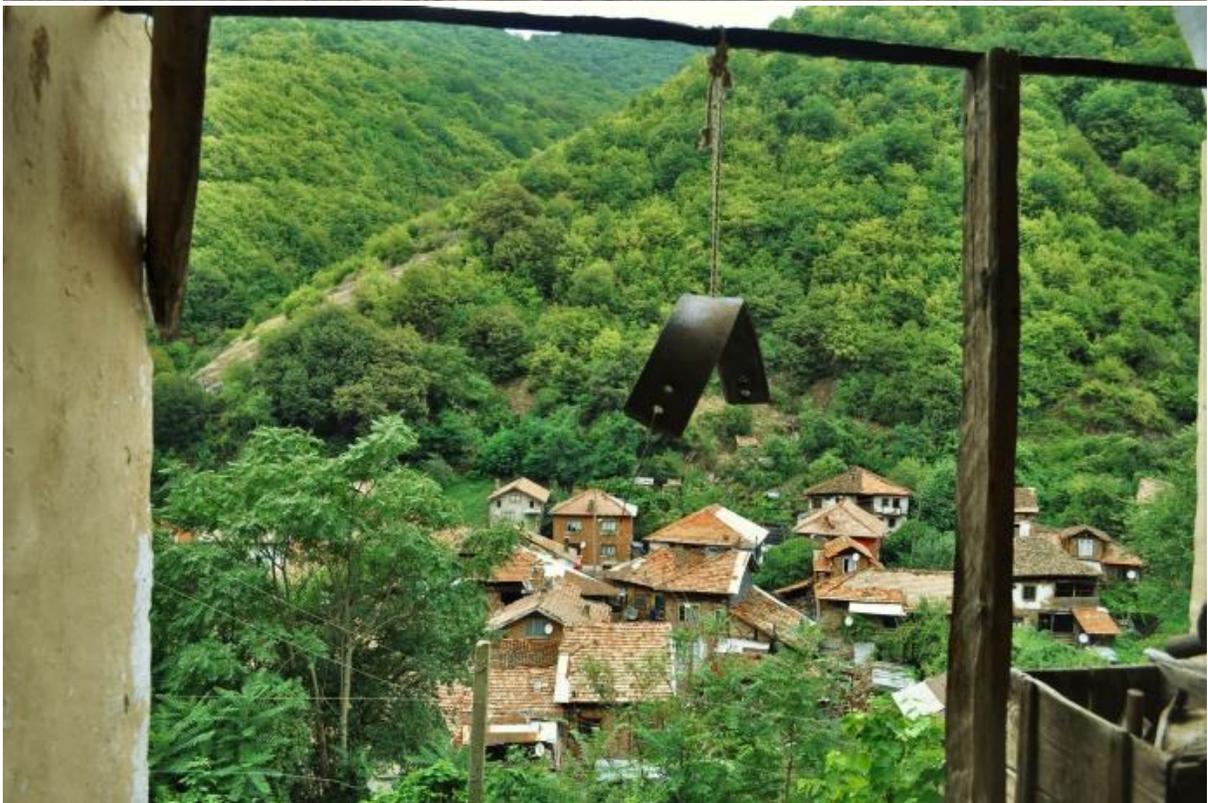
During the Kropnitsa earthquake in 1904 the monastery was completely demolished. Soon after it was entirely restored for two years solely by volunteers and donations from the peasants. The iconostasis is preserved in its authentic form. Today the monastery is in possession of about 40 icons

and church relics. The only surviving part of the former monastery complex - the church, was renovated externally in 2007 but its interior has not been restored yet. At present, the monastery is not active - the church is open only on major Christian holidays. Near the monastery (only 3 km away) there is an interesting natural landmark - the rock massif "Komatinica".



The village of Pirin is situated in a mountainous region between the middle and south parts of the Pirin mountain. It is situated in the historical and geographical area of Murvashko, in a scenic field along the Pirin Bistritsa River. The village is about 2 km away from the main road, which connects the town of Gotse Delchev with the valley of Struma and the Kulata border checkpoint. In the 19th century the Pirin village was one of the major centers of medieval black metallurgy in Murvashko region. In these troubled times the poet Peyo Yavorov, was hiding from the Ottomans in a nearby cave, where he wrote his collection of "Hajduk's yearnings".

In the village of Pirin there are preserved houses from the Bulgarian National Revival period (19th century), but unfortunately, they are in poor condition. The main landmark is **St. Nicholas Church** from 1885 with its beautiful façade and remarkable interior.



Melnik is the smallest town in Bulgaria with a population of only 385 inhabitants. According to archaeologists, the first inhabitants of these lands are the Thracian tribe Medi. Centuries later the Romans settled there, followed by the Slavs who called their village Melnik. It is supposed that

Melnik originated as a fortress for the protection of the Bulgarian-Byzantine border after the signing of the treaty between the two states in 864. Melnik has often changed its sovereignty due to its border location. In the period 11th-14th centuries Melnik has been under the jurisdiction of Bulgaria, the Byzantine Empire, the Nicaean Empire and even Serbia. At the beginning of the 13th century the history of Melnik was associated with the name of Despot Alexius Slav, who became an independent ruler and chose Melnik for his capital. The city was surrounded by fortified walls.

In 1395, Melnik fell under Ottoman rule. In the end of the 18th and early 19th century with the development of wine and tobacco production and the export of Melnik wine all over Europe began the development of the town. The most famous and rich family of merchants were the Greek family Kordopulou, whose house has been preserved to this day and has been converted into a museum. **The Kordopulov House** is the largest preserved house from the Revival period on the Balkan Peninsula. At that time the town started flourishing and became more populated. 70 churches, 3 all-male and 1 all-female schools were a sign of the prosperity of the population. There were 4 monasteries in the vicinity. In the second half of the 19th century Melnik's affluence started declining due to the fact that the main road shifted to the west following the valley of the Struma River. The inhabitants of the town moved to Serres, Blagoevgrad and other cities in the region.

On 17th October 1912, the town was liberated from the Ottomans, but a large part of the town was burned down. In 1968 Melnik was declared a town-museum and an architectural reserve. Nowadays, wine production is developed in each house, but tourism is the main means of livelihood.



The Kordopulov House is the largest building from the Revival period in Bulgaria. It was built in 1754 and belonged to the rich Melnik Kordopulov family, who were working in wine production. The cellars carved in the rock under and behind the house, with their constant temperature and ventilation, were used for the preparation and aging of the famous Melnik wine. Located on a high cliff, it is visible from across the town, dominating the view with its beautiful proportions, extensive glasswork and impressive dimensions.



The Church of St. Nicholas is the largest and oldest church in Melnik. It is located in the central part of the St. Nicholas plateau. The eastern part of the church is preserved together with several elements of the interior. It was a three-nave basilica with three apses and three narthexes. The church was abundantly illustrated. The main frescoes were removed during the 30s and 40s of the 20th century, restored and exhibited in the Archaeological Museum in Sofia; separate panels are located in the crypt of the "St. Alexander Nevski" cathedral as well as in the Regional Museum in Blagoevgrad.



The Church of Saint Anthony was built in 1765. They call it the "Church of Wonders" as according to the believing, if mentally ill people stay in the church overnight, they would be healed.

The church is a one-nave basilica built entirely of stone masonry topped with a wooden roof. The frescoes are quite interesting as they are not made according to the traditional canon. Instead of icons, the frescoes depict windows; the ceiling is also richly decorated. The church preserves valuable icons from the 19th century.



The town of Serres, the capital of the prefecture of the same name, is the second largest city in Central Macedonia region in Greece after Thessaloniki. Serres is a trendy, busy city and serves as the trading center of the region. Its wide streets and squares are dotted with many cafes, taverns and

shops for a variety of goods; and the new and old town fuse in a delightful symbiosis. Founded in the 12th century BC, it is one of the oldest cities in Macedonia. Nowadays, there are over 40 churches and monasteries in Serres and its provinces.

The Byzantine fortress and the ancient acropolis are situated in the northern part of Serres, among the coniferous forest of Koulas. The acropolis was established in the 9th century, when, according to historical sources, a fort was built on the order of Emperor Nikifor Phoka in Serres. The ruins of the Serres acropolis are of great historical significance as they include one of the most remarkable protective structures in northern Greece - **the Tower of Orestes**. According to the clay inscriptions on its western wall, the tower was built in 1370 by Orestes, the guardian of the Serres fortress, at the command of Serbian King Stefan Dusan. At the northeastern end of the fortress, near the fortress wall, is the **church "St. Nicholas"**. It is a three-nave church with a single dome and an underground crypt and dates back to the first half of the 14th century. The old cathedral of St. Theodoroi /built in 1224 by the ruler of Epirus - Theodor Angel Comminus/ is located at the foot of the Acropolis. It has a basilica-styled rectangular plan and magnificent mosaics, only a small part of which remain today. Another remarkable church is the Church of Agios Georgios Kryoneritis. It was built in the 13th century and houses several rare icons.





Serres was conquered by the Turks in 1383. During the Ottoman rule, the city experienced great economic growth and became a major trading center mainly for silk and cotton. The Turkish monuments in Serres are the Bezesten (Ancient Market), built in the 14th century, the mosque of Ahmed Pasha, built in 1492 near the stream of Saint Anargyri, the Zincirli Mosque, with the most beautiful marble pulpit, and the Serres Konak.

The Bezesten (The Medieval Market) was built in the 14th century as an enclosed and covered market. The building is a rectangular single-story structure built from a mixed masonry of stone and ceramic tiles. It is topped by six spherical domes which were covered in lead years ago. The planning scheme and construction are remarkable for their strength and harmonic proportions. In 1970 the building was restored and turned into a museum. At present, it houses the Archeological museum of Serres.



The Prefecture of Serres is a public building, one of the architectural sights of the Greek city of Serres. The building is located in the center of the city, on Merarchias Street. A decision to build a new structure was taken on 4th October 1891; it had to be funded by local donations and the state treasury. Hence, a request for funding was made to various state institutions and charitable foundations. The construction was completed on 24th May 1898. The Prefecture is a symmetrical two-story building in neoclassic style and is used for administrative functions. Situated on one of Serres' city squares, it impresses the citizens and visitors with its neoclassical façade and its notable dimensions. Today the two-story building is the seat of the administration (nomarchy) of the district unit of Serres.



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