

The Ottoman archaeology and architecture of Bulgaria

Andrew Petersen | University of Wales Trinity Saint David

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The aim of this research, funded by the BIAA, is to investigate the current state of and potential for archaeological research on the Ottoman period in Bulgaria. The first stage comprised an initial field survey of Ottoman remains and monuments throughout the country followed by a series of meetings with Bulgarian archaeologists and other academic researchers to assess the potential for further work.

Whilst Turkey is often thought of as the original heartland of the Ottoman empire, a significant part of its early territory lay within the Balkans, in the area of the modern state of Bulgaria in particular. Ottoman rule here lasted from the 14th century right up to Bulgarian independence in the 1870s: a much longer period of rule than any other Ottoman territory outside modern Turkey. Cities like Plovdiv (ancient Phillipopolis), Sophia (ancient Serdica) and Varna were major centres of the Ottoman state and functioned as bases for conquests further into the Balkans and on into central Europe. As a result, Bulgaria has some of the earliest examples of Ottoman architecture, including the late 14th-century *tekke* at Ikhtiman, between Plovdiv and Sofia, and the tomb of Kidemli Baba dated to the early 1400s. The range of surviving Ottoman-period buildings includes mosques, *zawiyas*, *tekkes*, bathhouses, bridges, tombs, clock towers and fortifications, as well as churches and synagogues. Not only do the buildings represent a wide variety of functions and architectural styles but they also testify to the Ottoman presence in all areas of Bulgaria, from the Thracian plain to the shores of the Black Sea, the banks of the Danube and the Rhodope and the Balkan mountain ranges.

However, for a variety of political and cultural reasons connected to the formation of the Bulgarian state in the mid to late 19th century, this Ottoman heritage has been largely ignored and in some cases wilfully destroyed. The Bulgarian nationalist movement of the 19th century regarded the period of Ottoman rule in an entirely negative way, referring to it as the ‘the Ottoman yoke’, and sought origins instead within the early medieval Bulgarian kingdoms which started in the seventh century and reached an apogee under Tsar Simeon (AD 893–927). Continuing conflict between the medieval Bulgarian tsars and the Byzantine empire caused serious depopulation in central Thrace to such an extent that as the

14th century ended the Ottomans were able to conquer the entire territory of modern Bulgaria. As a consequence of the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet by two Bulgarian monks and hostility to the Greek Orthodox patriarchate, the Russians were seen as natural allies for Bulgarian independence. Following the Crimean War, European demands for improved conditions for Christians living under Ottoman rule were overtaken by Russian support for Bulgarian independence. Once independence was achieved in 1876 the movement for ‘National Revival’ led to the destruction of many reminders of the Ottoman period; mosques were either destroyed or converted into churches and history was rewritten from a nationalistic perspective.

Despite the large-scale destruction of hundreds of Ottoman buildings and the negative characterisation of Ottoman rule, significant numbers of Ottoman monuments have survived as well as large quantities of buried archaeological remains. A number of foreign and Bulgarian scholars have worked against the nationalist narrative, striving for a more balanced view of the Ottoman period. The most prominent proponent of this view is Machiel Kiel who started making detailed studies of Ottoman architecture and history in Bulgaria from the late 1960s. Despite Kiel’s extensive research there is still considerable work to be carried out in terms of identifying and recording Ottoman architecture in the country. As a consequence of joining the European Union, large-scale developments are taking place throughout Bulgaria which involve extensive archaeological excavations; thus in the cities of Plovdiv and Sofia large areas of the historic centres have been uncovered, revealing significant Ottoman remains. In Plovdiv, for example, Ottoman-period kilns have been excavated. Elsewhere, renovation projects on Ottoman buildings have revealed earlier phases of Ottoman construction, such as in Razdgrad where excavators found a small 16th-century mosque beneath a larger 17th-century mosque on a different alignment.

Although there is considerable potential for Ottoman archaeology in terms of remains, extant monuments and historical sources in Bulgaria, there are still significant problems. One is the continued negative attitude towards the Ottoman past which can be seen in public presentations on history or archaeology where the Ottoman period is dismissed in a few lines. Another can be seen in major urban excavations, where the Ottoman material is quickly removed to get to the ‘more interesting’ medieval and classical periods.



The bridge of Mustafa Pasha at Svilengrad, built in 1528 and designed by the Ottoman architect Sinan