

## **Sofia - the antique Serdica**

Ancient Neolithic settlements occupied the place of the capitol of today, traces of these were found in several places. Some records of the past were more definite about the presence of a B.C. Thracian settlement known as Serdopolis (or the town of the Serdi tribe) but there was demolished, then rebuilt Roman fashion and named Ulpia Serdica after the emperor Mark Ulpius Trajan (98-117). During the 3rd century the town became the administrative centre of the Roman province of Inner Dacia.

The place of Serdica is just below the present centre of Sofia, in the rectangle formed by the streets Alabin, Lavele, Legue and Ekzarh Josif. Since the end of the 2nd century the town had been surrounded by a fortified wall of mixed masonry (a layer of stone, followed by a layer of bricks), which was renovated and completed during the following centuries. The wall had a lot of turrets and four fortified doors linked north-south and east-west through the two main streets. Traces of this wall can still be found today in the subway in front of the building of the Council of Ministers and behind the central public mineral bath.

Streets were wide, covered with flag stones hemming in the rectangle quarters. The main square (the Forum) was at the crossing of the two main streets and there were a lot of imposing administrative buildings and temples. The town had water-supply and sewerage systems.

In the 3rd century Serdica had been demolished by the Goths, then by the Huns but its citizens always had it rebuilt afterwards. The town flourished for the last time during the rule of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (the 5th century) when a lot of Christian basilicas were built, and part of the heathen temples were reconstructed for the needs of the new religion. In the 7th century the Bulgarian state was founded in the north-east and kept spreading its borders until they included Serdica in the year 809.

The most interesting monuments left from Roman and Byzantine times are the temples of St. George and St. Sophia. The rotunda of St. George was built in the 4th century and was part of a big Roman religious complex turned into a church in the Middle Ages. The domed building and the foundations of other buildings can be seen in the courtyard of the Sheraton hotel. The basilica St. Sophia (6th century) has been restored and acquired its supposed initial appearance that was lost as a result of a big earthquake in the past.

## **The middle-aged town of Sredec**

At the time of the Bulgarian ruler khan Krum (803-814) the former Roman town Serdica became the Bulgarian Sredec or as the Byzantine authors called it Triadica (this probably being the Greek version of the Slavonic name). The fortifications, street network and part of the buildings were preserved but the town lost its former glamour. New quarters were established beyond the fortress walls and the centre of the town was moved somewhere around the place of the present church St. Sophia.

During the 10th century the attacks of Byzantium became more frequent and Sredec was turned into a strong fortress capable to resist prolonged sieges. New fortified walls were erected and the population increased at the expense of the surrounding settlements. After several attempts however, the Byzantines finally conquered the town (the beginning of the 11th century) but instead of demolishing it, they made it the centre of one of their administrative provinces.

During the 11th-12th centuries, Sredec was made the subject of several severe attacks by northern nomadic tribes, Serbs, Magyars and has been partially destroyed by the knights of the Third Crusade. Bulgaria was liberated from the power of Byzantium by the end of the 12th century and Sredec was restored to the Bulgarians (1194).

During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1186-1396) Sredec became an important economic, commercial and cultural centre. Craftsmanship was flourishing, there were a lot of workshops belonging to blacksmiths, potters, goldsmiths, curriers. In the outskirts of the town, a number of monasteries were built, which, apart from their religious function, were also important literary centres - Dragalevci, Kremikovci, Buhovo, etc.

The most remarkable monument of that time is the church in Bojana. A small building, the construction of which lasted through the 10th till the 13th century. There is nothing remarkable about the building itself but the frescoes in it, dating back since 1259, are the excellent performance of an unknown author in a typical Renaissance style, half a century before Giotto whom the experts point out as the first painter of the Renaissance.

The frescoes and the building were placed under the protection of UNESCO and are declared a monument of world wide importance. There is a museum nearby in which are stored the documents and exponents related to its history.

In 1382 Sredec fell under the Turks. At that time it must have been already called Sofia - after the name of the biggest church in the town. The Turks demolished the fortified walls, most of the temples and administrative buildings and built mosques and administrative buildings of their own.

Chavdar Angelov

### **Sofia - the capital of Bulgaria**

The liberation of Bulgaria from five centuries Turkish yoke (1878) found Sofia a small, ill-planned town, with one-storied tumble-down buildings and muddy streets. One could only see the outlines of the half-destroyed basilica St. Sophia, the minarets of the mosques and the clock tower. Still Sofia was a busy cultural

and economic centre, with modern schools and other educational institutions, well-developed trade relations and handicrafts.

On April 3, 1879, the Grand National Assembly chose Sofia to be the capital of the country. The choice was influenced not so much by the city's importance than by its location - in the very heart of the Balkan peninsula and closer to the neighbouring states than say, the old capital Veliko Tarnovo or Plovdiv - actually the only economically well-developed city at the time.

The arrangements for transforming Sofia into a modern European city were made right away and the results became apparent shortly afterwards. The first town plan has been approved in 1880 and provided for wide, well-regulated streets, residential and green areas, administrative buildings. Public works went parallel with it - pavements, sidewalks, the water-supply network, sewerage system, electrification. The first tram appeared on the streets of Sofia on 1 January 1901 and the first buses in 1903. The foundations were laid of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (1881), the National Theatre (1904), the National Opera (1908). Until 1915 the central part of Sofia assumed an European appearance. The new buildings followed the fashion in Europe - classicism, the new Renaissance, new baroque, secession, constructivism ... Bulgaria liquidated its age-old lag behind with comparative ease and joined the family of the European countries. The most interesting buildings of the initial construction period are: the National Assembly (1884), the old National Bank (1895) on Batenberg Str., the Military Club (1900) on Tsar Osvooboditel Str. followed by remarkable examples of architecture like: the St. Alexander Nevski cathedral (1904-1912) - an imposing monument of the Orthodox Christianity with gilt domes which became the symbol of the city, the National Theatre (1907) built after the design of two architects from Vienna; several attempts to establish an original national architecture - the buildings of the synodical house (1908), the covered market (1910), the mineral bath (1910) and many other buildings in modern style.

The year 1925 marked another stage in the construction works with buildings like the Court of Justice (1929-1936), the new National Bank (1939), the National Library (1939-1953). The Second World War however, put an end to the process and the air-raids caused considerable damages to the city.

### **Mineral springs in Sofia**

Bulgaria is rich in mineral springs: some 88 veins with 470 springs are in exploitation. Total capacity of mineral water is 1600 litres per second or about 140 million litres per day! It is interesting to note that almost all mineral springs are located in the southern part of Bulgaria and only one vein is located north of the Balkans.

There are many mineral springs around Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. They have been known and used in the old Roman days and even earlier. Excavations made in Sofia established remnants from ancient Roman (I-IV c.) and Byzantine (V-VI c.) baths.

Sofia public mineral water bath is situated near by them. It has been built in the beginning of this century in pseudo-Byzantine style and has been enlarged several times (nowadays the bath is closed due to reconstruction). The water has 1100 l/min. capacity with temperature 46.7°C, hydrocarbonate-sulphate-sodium composition and low mineralisation (0.30 g/l). The water cures illnesses of the nervous and digestive, and supporting and moving systems, it recovers disturbances in body metabolism.

The mineral spring in Ovtcha kupel (a district of Sofia) has appeared in 1858 after an earthquake. The water has 480 l/min. capacity, temperature 29-30°C and is slightly radioactive (34 Ems), with sulphate-hydrocarbonate-calcium-sodium composition (1.15 g/l). Suitable to cure hypertension, rheumatism, chronic diseases of peripheral nervous system.

In another district of Sofia, one can find the mineral spring of Gorna banya. The water is hydrocarbonate-sodium with low content of salts and temperature of 41.6°C. It treats kidney, urethra, gall-bladder and digestion diseases. There is a specialised sanatorium nearby as well as a mineral water bottling factory.

Some more far away from the city centre are the mineral springs of Knyazhevo with temperature 22-31.5°C, 280 l/min. capacity and hydrocarbonate-sodium composition. The water cures diseases of the central nervous system. Knyazhevo is situated at 700 m altitude a.s.l., amongst pine forests and is a famous health resort since the 17th century. Chronic bronchitis and bronchial asthma are cured there.

The national resort Bankya (8000 inhabitants) is only 17 km from Sofia. There are two balneoclinics, many sanatoria and rest houses, a polyclinic. The spring's water is hydrocarbonate-sulphate-sodium (0.27 g/l), with temperature 36.5°C and high capacity - 1400 l/min. It is suitable for treatment of cardiac diseases, nervous and women's diseases, as well as hypertonia and supporting and moving system diseases. The resort is located amidst beautiful pine forests. The town is connected with Sofia by electric railway.

Mineral waters are easy to find in other districts of our capital, too.

Chavdar Angelov