

# Old Shrines, New Worshipers: Cultural Practices for Connection with Nature

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**Abstract:** There are many ancient cultural sites in Bulgaria that not only attract tourists but are also believed to facilitate a person's connection with deities and natural forces. Today, cultural practices performed at these sacred places from the period of antiquity and the early Middle Ages are often associated with neopaganism and the New Age movement, while also incorporating elements of Bulgarian traditional culture. Through 'mysterious' rituals, the participants seek to connect with a higher spirituality, which they feel is missing in their everyday lives. Interest in ancient paganism is also one of the manifestations of contemporary nationalism. The feasts, reenactments and rituals presented serve to 're-establish' man's relationship with nature, with the aim of achieving health, well-being, and spiritual growth in an uncertain world. These practices often interweave esoteric and environmentalist ideas with strategies for the development of cultural tourism.

**Keywords:** sacred sites, neo-paganism, New Age, worship, nature

## Introduction

Numerous traces of ancient cultures have been preserved on the territory of Bulgaria. Apart from being objects of tourist interest, these places are per-

ceived as facilitating contact with deities and natural forces through the use of explanatory models of esoteric teachings, para-scientific and ‘profanised’ narratives of ‘energies’ and ‘powers’ by followers of New Age and neo-pagan approaches<sup>1</sup>. There is a widespread belief among New Agers that the ancient peoples were more sensitive to the energies of the earth than we are today (see Ivakhiv 2001: 18). Neo-pagans also see nature as sacred and try to reconnect with it by incorporating elements of folk tradition, which they believe will revive ancient spirituality (Magliocco 2010: 4). The ideological roots of the phenomenon are linked to Romanticism and nationalism (Aitamurto, Simpson 2013: 5). In the era of globalisation, neo-paganism is characterised by what is known as the experiential turn (since 1980), with (inter-)subjectivity increasingly affecting the mystical experience (Gründer 2014: 263). Unlike organised religion, which plays a mediating role in the spiritual realm, New Age practitioners favour individual experience (Dubish 2016: 149). Political and economic liberalisation after 1989 in formerly socialist countries led to religious liberalisation (see Gauthier 2022). In Eastern Europe, neo-paganism emerged as one of the forms of religious pluralism after the political changes of the 1990s. Researchers associate this trend with ethnic nationalism as a particular reaction to the influence of foreign cultures (Wiensch 2013: 12). Alternative forms of spirituality in the post-socialist countries often emphasise the need for a return to nature and the restoration of the broken relationship between man and nature (see Pranskevičiūtė 2012).

Today cultural practices performed at sacred places from the period of antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Bulgaria can be associated with neopaganism and New Age and with references to elements of Bulgarian traditional culture. Such sites are usually discovered through archaeological research, and subsequently promoted as cultural and historical heritage to the public. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of mass tourism, corresponding infrastructure for these sites was developed (roads, museums, accommodation bases, establishment of archaeological reserves). However, during socialist rule, which had a strong atheist agenda in the country, and with the majority of the population being Orthodox Christians, places of cultic practice in antiquity were used only as tourist attractions.

After the political changes in 1989, there was a significant shift in the spiritual domain with the rise in expression of the traditional faiths as well as of new religious movements. Some of these have existed for decades<sup>2</sup> (such as the

White Brotherhood of Peter Danov/Beinsa Duno), while others appeared in the context of ideological rethinking in the post-socialist period. The numerous followers of New Age ideology<sup>3</sup> and the smaller number of neo-pagans in the country belong to the latter category. These esoteric activities observed in the country are in line with similar processes that were part of the movement to the post-secular phase and alternative spiritualities noted by researchers in the Western world (Possamei 2019). In the Bulgarian esotericism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of the necessary connection between man and nature is strongly expressed (see Nazarska 2020), a tradition that continues in contemporary spiritual activities.

As previously mentioned, many adherents of New Age and of neo-paganism believe that ancient people possessed special knowledge that enabled them to sense the sites of energy and construct sanctuaries in precisely those locations. Such beliefs are very popular and often motivate visits to ancient holy places in search of inspiration in the traditions of the Proto-Bulgarians and/or the Thracians (see Dimitrova 2007; Troeva 2014; Troeva 2018; Troeva 2020). Today, eco-trails have been created to a number of ancient sites, serving as a tool for their socialisation. Reenactments, holidays and festivals are organised at these locations, showing their interwoven connection with eco-ideas and strategies for the development of cultural tourism.

One such holiday, which involves visits to and rituals at ancient (holy) places is Midsummer Day. In Bulgarian traditional culture, the celebration of the summer solstice is associated with fortune telling and the picking of herbs which are believed to have particularly healing properties when harvested on this day (Ganeva-Raycheva 1990). Today, this holiday is celebrated with a variety of reenactments and festivals that aim to revive the traditions of the ancestors. Many rituals are performed at places revered as sacred in antiquity or thought to have been sacred in the past, typically on or around this date. These contemporary reenactments and rituals aim to re-establish man's relationship with nature, with the hope of attaining health, well-being, and spiritual growth in an uncertain world.

In this paper, I present my ethnographic observations of several (natural) sites that accommodated a number of cultural practices in the past and have recently been intertwined with new mythology and ritualism, transforming them into religious landscapes. The research<sup>4</sup> uses personal observations from field work at places of worship and interviews conducted in Madara, Brezovo

and Buzovgrad in Bulgaria, as well as media sources about these places. While Madara is a well-known cult site not only to the Bulgarian public but also to foreigners, the other two sanctuaries (near Brezovo and Buzovgrad respectively) were recently discovered and are newly emerging cult centres.

## Madara: between mysticism and nationalism

Madara is one of the most important places of ancient worship as well as being a contemporary destination for patriotic, cultural and mystical tourism and practices. The rock massif was used as a cult site by Thracians, Romans and Proto-Bulgarians, with the visible remains of shrines, temples and a church (Fig. 1). The complex owes its popularity to the famous Madara Rider, which was declared a UNESCO world cultural heritage site in 1979 (Unesco-bg.org 2009) and became a global symbol of Bulgaria in 2008 (News.bg 2008).



Figure 1. Madara reserve with archaeological remains, ph. E. Troeva, 2012

Efforts have been made over the last century to turn the Madara area into a nature park. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was proclaimed a national park, and later became a National Historical and Archaeological Reserve, with

a museum building, fountains, and paths to the sites. The area, which was nearly devoid of vegetation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, underwent reforestation and a road was built from the village of Madara to the rock massif (Report 1945: 11). Gradually, Madara became a nationally significant tourist site, and in the years after 1989 it began to attract seekers of alternative spirituality. The water in the antique shrine of the three nymphs, which flows down the rocks, is believed to have healing properties (Iskamdaletya.com 2020). The claim that Madara is a highly energetic place is visible on signs throughout the reserve (Fig. 2), broadcast on television (Ezoterikabg.com 2014) and popularised on social networks (Spreaker.com 2022).



Figure 2. Sign in Madara reserve, ph. E. Troeva, 2012

Since 1993, followers of Petar Danov<sup>5</sup> from the White Brotherhood have gathered on the ridge of the Madara rocks near the ancient fortress. They organised their first festival there, following the pattern of Brotherhood's gatherings at the Rila Lakes. In the Madara archaeological reserve, Danov's followers welcome the sunrise, perform the paneurythmy dance, and participate in lectures

and discussions on spiritual topics<sup>6</sup>. In 2006, a conflict situation arose when a pyramid with a base of 4 by 4 metres and a height of 2.70 metres was built on the rocky plateau above the Madara Rider and over the foundations of a medieval church that was a shrine dedicated to Mother Mary (see Krumov 2006). Although the Bulgarian White Brotherhood denied any involvement with this pyramid, some media publications associated it with Russian followers of Danov, particularly with Tatyana Mikushina, who was titled the ambassador of the great White Brotherhood. Metropolitan Kirill of Varna defined what happened as a desecration of the medieval Orthodox church (Krumov 2006).

The perception of the Madara Archaeological Reserve as a place of energy has led to the emergence of spiritual practices in the nearby village of Madara. In 2009, the Madara Academy of Mysteries was established there with the support of the municipality, aiming to “revive the mysteries of the Thracians, Egyptians and Bulgarians”. It organises practical workshops at the sacred sites in the area, which are declared “some of the most energetic places not only in Bulgaria but also in the world” and are seen as energy portals for communication with the spiritual world (Ezoterikabg.com 2011). The Madara Spiritual Academy advertises its aims and activities as follows:

*Establishing an energetic connection between nature and humans, re-establishing the connection of rocks, waters, plants, animals and all the energy of planet Earth with our energy system, conducting training in various mysteries and spiritual practice, achieving a state of relaxation, balance and harmony, learning visualisation and meditation practices and activating patterns of happiness, joy and success, discussions, conversations, sharing experiences, working with the energies of nature for healing, prosperity and personal ascension, uniting people with similar interests and needs in the field of spirituality (Ezoterikabg.com 2011).*

The Academy organises seminars and excursions on spiritual topics in the Madara National Park on the spring equinox and the winter solstice (Ezoterikabg.com 2020). It also publishes the electronic esoteric e-journal *Harmony and Light*, which promotes ideas about a holistic way of life, ley lines, energy places, numerology, regression, family constellations, and other New Age ideas. Every year in August, the Academy holds a summer camp in the reserve to commemorate its founding. The program for the August 2017 camp includes:

*meditations, rituals, attunements, power mantras, rejuvenation, regression sessions, past lives, general and individual numerological guidance for the year, quantum healing, ritual of power, creating a unified energy of the triple flame for self-healing, crafting orgonite, familiarisation with the basic concepts of ethereal engineering, discovery expeditions on or under the Rock Crown of Madara and the Church of Our Lady with healing energy (hiking), expedition to the 'Secret Path' and 'Secret Terrace', exploration of the rock niches (monasteries) and the lion's head (new destination), individual healing sessions and individual regressions or past rebirths.*

The participants make orgonites (amulets) from resin, crystals, seeds and herbs and work in pairs with Tibetan musical bowls to harmonise and balance the energy of the chakras and aura. They practice meditation both day and night, physical exercises, special breathing, healthy rituals, rejuvenating massages, group regression into past lives, dowsing. A thanksgiving ritual is performed at the 'rock of power' at the foot of the cliffs (Ezoterikabg.com 2017). The activities of the Madara Academy listed above suggest that it is associated with the New Age paradigm (see Timothy, Conover 2006: 142).

The area is also used for yoga weekends, advertised as being:

*... in nature, away from the big city, in harmony with ourselves. We offer you a program that combines yoga practices and meditative techniques together with walks in sacred places: the Madara reserve, the living water cave, the sequoia planted by Tsar Boris III, the Madara Rider, the Temple: a Thracian sanctuary associated with God Tangra (Yoga-hridaya.com 2022).*

Hotel St. Michael has been built in the village of Madara, in which, in addition to guest rooms, two chapels were erected, the St. Michael and Virgin temples. The complex is owned by a man who, after a tragic accident, began to prophesy the future and to whom needy people come from all over the country. In one of the chapels in the complex, there are portraits of Vanga and Venerable Stoyana, revered as great prophets<sup>7</sup> in Bulgaria. The desire of the owner to show his connection with a prophetic tradition in the country is obvious.

In 2016, the Regional History Museum in Shumen started the Magical Madara National Medieval Festival, with the key participation of the Avitohol reenactments association from Varna. The idea behind the festival is to present

reenactments of rituals and customs that “take us back to our roots and to the Bulgarian antiquity” (Yorgov 2019). The Magical Madara festival is held annually in the reserve around Midsummer Day in June<sup>8</sup>, presenting traditional summer solstice practices and beliefs. The goals that such reenactments set for themselves fall in the spectrum of patriotic and/or nostalgic messages. In the words of one of the organisers of the event:

*The place and time of the festival were not chosen by chance. Midsummer – the ancient holiday of the summer solstice, combining Christianity and paganism, and losing its traces back to prehistoric times. In connection with this time, rituals and rites will be restored and performed, Christian and pagan, returning us to our roots, to that Bulgarian antiquity lost in time in which we should look for strength and support in order not to lose ourselves as a people.*

During the festival, Bulgarian traditional rites are extrapolated to proto-Bulgarian beliefs. In 2019, reenactors demonstrated the traditional custom of Enyova Bulya, in which a little girl expressed wishes for health, fertility and well-being to the participants (Fig. 3). The participants at summer 2019’s Magical Madara festival also recharged themselves with energy touching the rock, the proto-Bulgarian Daul Tash sanctuary (Fig. 4).



Figure 3. Enyova Bulya custom, ph. E. Troeva, 22.06.2019





Figure 4. Charging with energy at Daul tash, ph. E. Troeva, 22.06.2019

Since 2017, the organisers of the Magical Madara festival have been collecting soil from so-called old Bulgarian lands, carrying it in a procession and pouring it at the foot of the Madara Rider. With this rite, soil was brought from Nagy Saint Miklos (now in Romania, a place known for an early medieval treasure associated with the proto-Bulgarians in the popular narrative), from the tomb of King Samuil (on the Island of St. Achilles, now in Greece), one of the last rulers of the medieval First Bulgarian Kingdom, and from the area of Lake Doyran (known in the national narrative for the heroic battle of the Bulgarians during the First World War, now in the Republic of North Macedonia), all places of particular importance in the national historic memory. According to one participant at the 2019 event, the idea of collecting soil from historical sites and of laying it on the foot of the Madara Rider was “to gather Bulgarians from everywhere”. The respondent herself intended to bring soil from the Danube Delta (*Ongal*), where the first Balkan settlement of the Old Bulgarian tribe of

Khan Asparukh was in the seventh century. On May 6<sup>th</sup>, part of the Shumen garrison paid homage to St George at the foot of the Madara Rider, regardless of the pre-Christian nature of the monument.

In the post-socialist period, the region of Madara and its archaeological remains became a point of attraction for people and organisations seeking spiritual experiences. Peter Danov's followers hold their gatherings in Madara in May. Reenactors revive the old days with their festival in June, and the Academy of Mysteries organises its summer camp in August. Thus, Madara gathers worshipers for cultural activities with different focuses. Among Danov's followers, these are sun worship and paneurythmy, while esotericists perform a complex of practices characteristic of the New Age. Participants in the Magical Madara festival are involved in neo-pagan rituals with patriotic messages. The archaeological reserve is included in the Energy Recharge tourist route of holy places, offered as a tourist product abroad (Brat-bg.com 2015). The region, with its numerous sacred places, could be described as having "sites within the site" (Bowman 2008: 277), which undoubtedly contributes to its popularity among various interest groups.

## **The Lyulyakovo sanctuary: neo-paganism and local festivity**

The second case presented in this paper is a contemporary festival created in an attempt to socialise a presumed Thracian cult monument the Lyulyakovo/Lilac sanctuary, located in the municipality of Brezovo in Sarnena Sredna Gora (Fol, Konstantinov 2019). The Lilac sanctuary was 'discovered' by chance by a member of the Srednogorets tourist association in Brezovo. The newly discovered Thracian sanctuary is called Lyulyakovo because of its location among lilac bushes (Dikova 2012). The sanctuary has not been investigated archaeologically so far, and its categorisation as such is made based on its external signs. According to the thracologist Valeria Fol, this is the only solar stela (in the form of a flame) in Bulgaria (Brezovo.bg 2013). The beginning of the functioning of the sanctuary is thought to have been in the third millennium BC (Youtube.com 2016). Its discovery led to the advent of the Sun Festival, a new element in the cultural calendar of Brezovo municipality. One of the main elements of the celebration is a spectacular reenactment of a Thracian worship rite for the

Great Mother Goddess and the Sun God. The emphasis in the reenactments is on the individual experience, in synchrony with the observed ‘affective turn’ in history itself (Agnew 2007). The Sun Festival has the ambition of creating a bridge between the ritual practices of the ancient inhabitants of these lands, the Thracians, and the contemporary ritual culture of the Bulgarians, by ‘reviving’ sun worship. The annual celebration of the sun on the longest day of the year (the summer solstice) started in 2012 (Dikova 2012). The organisers are the Municipality of Brezovo, the Srednogorets tourist association and the Treskeia Thracian Society with the assistance of professor Valeria Fol. The festival is financially supported by the municipality in its efforts to develop cultural tourism in the region. To facilitate access to the site, a marked eco-trail has been created. The newly built tourist centre in Brezovo provides information on the route to the site and to other megaliths in the region.

The festival gained popularity due to its attractive reenactment of a rite of bloodless sacrifices in honour of the Thracian gods, which is performed by members of Treskeia. Its chairman Georgi Mishev authored a book on ancient magic and its remnants in Bulgarian traditional culture, which was defended as a dissertation work supervised by professor Fol. At the June 2016 event<sup>9</sup>, the professor gave a short lecture on the upcoming ritual. She explained that this was the best preserved shrine to the Sun God and showed the present rock-hewn altar “with the most sacred liquid of the gods – rainwater”. The priest and the priestess had made a wreath of herbs and wheat around it, and there was a stone altar with bread on it, a gift to the Great Goddess. The youths from Treskeia were barefoot and dressed in white shirts with ancient patterns with wreaths of herbs on their heads. The rite began with the burning of incense over the food and drink prepared for the gods, which were placed on a tablecloth with national embroidery. The priest and priestess mixed honey with olive oil, wine and milk and made a libation in the sacrificial fire (Fig. 5). They then climbed the rock to a pool filled with rainwater and raised a flat bread and a vessel of drink toward the sun. The priest burned incense before the bread and took it in his hands, and the priestess poured some of the liquid onto the ground. They then returned to the sacrificial fire and said prayers to the Mother Goddess, the Sun God, and the ancestors, with each sentence being first spoken by the priest and then repeated by the priestess:

*God of the Sun, who with your eye eternally illuminates the world above us and the world below us, who bestows warmth, who bestows life, for whom there are no secrets, but whose heart is veiled with secrets for us mortals, grant us your blessing, bless our lands, bless our souls. May all impurity, all disease, all evil, all that afflicts body and soul depart from your rays, so that we may be worthy children of the gods. God, graciously accept this offering. Through it may the connection between immortals and mortals be preserved and remain holy for the future. May those who roamed these lands, our ancestors who left their blood and bodies, may they also bestow their blessings on us. Let them fill our homes with life, fill our lives with joy, fill our joy with valour, so that we may be their worthy heirs. Goddess and God, take this offering with favour. May the bond between immortals and mortals be preserved through it and be holy forever. Let us raise [this offering] for fruit, let us raise for life, let us raise for joy.*



Figure 5. Libation in the sacrificial fire, Lilac sanctuary, ph. E. Troeva, 25.06.2016

During the prayer, honey and fruit were offered to the gods. The priest and the priestess broke a loaf of flat bread high above their heads and the priestess distributed it to those present. The pipers were the first to go to the stela in

the procession, with the explanation of professor Fol that “they open up the way with their music“. They were followed by the priests, then professor Fol with flat bread in her hand, and then the event guests. The priest stood first on the rock stela and laid down the offerings. He turned to the sun with his arms raised, followed by the priestess. This ritual is inspired by the (supposed) ritual of the ancient Thracians and can be referred to as part of the spiritual sphere of neo-paganism (see Timothy, Conover 2006: 140). Following professor Fol’s instructions, each person present rested palms on the stela with fingers spread, then leaned back on the stela and turned palms to the sun, mentally forming a wish or a prayer “for good things” (Fig. 6). Eyes closed, one relaxed and was “filled with energy” when the sun was most powerful: “you will feel the energy entering you”, said professor Fol. The participants left gifts such as flowers, herbs, and pieces of bread. Visitors took photos as souvenirs, and a representative of the municipality helped people to cross the rocks and explained that the stela was man-made. Then the pilgrims returned to the shrine by another route to form a sacred circle and danced (*horo*). On the way back to the parking lot, in the forest, the culinary school in Brezovo presented an exhibition related to Thracian food. At the opening, the students briefly introduced the guests to the history, lifestyle, livelihood and food of the Thracians. Teachers and students prepared a rich table on which they displayed food and drink typical of the Thracian era, including sourdough bread, cheese, yogurt, apple pie, spinach and cheese pie, chicken with mushrooms and onions, trout, honey with walnuts, pancakes with spinach, cottage cheese with garlic and walnuts, wine. Food and drink were displayed in clay vessels. The participants at the celebration were invited to taste the Thracian specialties prepared by the students. Signs with information about plants used in antiquity, prepared by Treskeia, were hung on the surrounding trees.

In recent years, the Lilac sanctuary has been popularised and has been included in the programs of various tourist agencies. A number of individual, family and group excursions are organised to the megaliths in the area, and reports, accompanied by travelogues and photos, can be found on the Internet.

Professor Valeria Fol and Treskeia play a major role in the construction of the festival. The use of ancient texts in the rite gives reason to consider it as a manifestation of so-called reconstructionist paganism (Magliocco 2015: 653). The desire to restore elements of the Thracian faith and rites was realised at the sun-honouring festival thanks to the support of the municipality and the

desire to develop cultural and historical tourism in the region. The Sun Festival gives participants the opportunity to escape from the usual rhythm of everyday life into nature and to observe and participate in a spectacular rite for health and well-being. The holiday carries the elements of both historical reenactments and so-called living history, as well as neo-pagan rites. Thus, the boundary between scientific expertise and cultural management is blurred, a phenomenon characteristic of our time. In the rituals reflecting on Thracian antiquity, researchers turn into priests, tourists into pilgrims, and local people become aware of themselves as heirs of Thracian cultural heritage. Thus, the Sun Festival allows for changing social roles, reconsideration of personal and group identities, and the relationship between man and nature.



Figure 6. Charging with energy at the solar stela, ph. E. Troeva, 25.06.2016

## The Buzovgrad Megalith: neo-paganism and folk festivals

The last example of a cult centre with references to the religion and rituals of the ancient Thracians is the so-called Megalith located on a rocky peak south

of the village of Buzovgrad, in Kazanlak region. The area of Kazanlak is known for its numerous monuments (mounds) from the time of the Thracians. According to local history research in the village of Buzovgrad, a team of scientists from Russia visited the megalith in 1991, and the measurements they made showed a strong geomagnetic field, positively affecting human psychophysiology (Stoyanov et al. 2010: 16). In the 1990s, the rock complex near Buzovgrad was recognised as an archaeo-astronomical site by archaeo-astronomers (Stoev, Maglova and Yotova 2008: 128). Thracologists popularised it as a cult place, functioning from the end of the Eneolithic and into the early Bronze Age (Stoev, Maglova and Fol 2005). The popular name Gate of the Goddess was given to the complex during the implementation of the eco-trail construction project in 2004–2005, with the name coming from ‘Solar/Sun Gate’ by analogy with a cult facility described by Homer in the *Odyssey* (Stoev, Maglova and Yotova 2008: 132).

On March 19, 2006, after the death of the famous thracologist professor Aleksandar Fol, some of his ashes were scattered through the opening of the megalith (see Hristova 2006). The ritual was performed by his wife Valeria Fol in the presence of his friends and students. The professor was sent on his last journey according to a rite described by ancient authors, the border between the worlds being opened and subsequently closed with incantations and libations of water and wine. A dark red woollen thread was stretched through the rock opening, symbolising the boundaries between the world of the living and that of the dead. According to Valeria Fol, the place could be identified as Homer’s Sun doors, from where the souls of the dead pass into the afterlife.

A children’s and youth’s theatre group was formed at the community cultural centre in Buzovgrad, performing reenactments of Thracian rituals at the megalith on the summer solstice. Since 2007, the reenactment has also been performed on the autumnal equinox, and in certain years the event merges with the traditional village festival on St Petka Day when a celebration called Honouring the Mother Goddess is held. Local youths present the heroisation of the priest king by the Mother Goddess, bacchanals give the audience flowers and fruit, wine is poured into the rock crevice in memory of the dead and as a sign of gratitude to the goddess (Stoyanov et al. 2010: 16). These activities cause a reaction in some Orthodox circles, for example Pravoslavie.bg published material critical of the manifestations of new Bulgarian paganism, among which the sacrifices at the megalith were listed (Pravoslavie.bg 2009).

On the summer equinox in 2012, Sila (Strength), the Plovdiv Association for Ancient and Medieval Reconstructions, recreated a ritual “in honour of light, brilliance, power and its ancient gods, celebrated by the ancient world in its various incarnations” (Fakti.bg 2012). Due to a lack of evidence of ancient worship (probably only in the late Iron age, see Dimitrova 2007: 117–119; Uzunov 2011: 153–155), the site was officially declared in 2012 a natural landmark bearing the name Megalith (Kazanlak.com 2012). Nevertheless, the local authorities continue to organise reenactments of Thracian rituals at the “cult site” with the purpose of developing cultural tourism.

In the years following, the site gained popularity both among locals and visitors from distant areas. According to an interviewed resident of Buzovgrad, the Thracians did not choose the location by chance. Locals come to the megalith to charge themselves with energy and bring their guests and friends to the rocks “so that their lives go well“, as they say. A female respondent who visits the site every week, claims to radiate the positive energy she has received even while talking on the phone.

In 2015, the eco-path leading to the megalith was renovated with support from Eagle’s Nest, a local tourist association that also organised a hike along the newly opened eco-trail, called Buzovgrad: A Path through the Ages (Tdorlovognezdo.com 2015). Since 2015 the Municipality of Kazanlak has also been organising eco-hikes to the megalith as a part of the In the Valley of the Thracian Kings festival. At the top, next to the rock complex, children and youth from the community cultural centre in Buzovgrad perform rites of bloodless sacrifice with wine, bread and fruit (Fig. 7). The head of the community centre in Buzovgrad explains to march participants that this is:

*a holy place both for our Thracian ancestors and for us.... These megaliths were made and studied by the Thracians precisely in such highly energetic places. And that goes on, we feel it when we go to these energy places, we feel this energy.*

The August 27, 2016, march to the megalith during the In the Valley of the Thracian Kings festival took on the form of a pilgrimage<sup>10</sup>. In the organised eco-hike, the goal was to give the reenactments a ritualistic character in which tourists could participate. The theatre group from Kazanlak played a central role, with a significantly expanded performance compared to the previous years. Near the top, the leader of the theatre group warned participants to be



careful as “the procession entered a sacred ritual” and people could awaken mysterious forces. The priests led the way and no one was to cross their path. At the foot of the megalith and next to it, actors performed sacrificial rites in gratitude to the Mother Goddess, and recited Orphic incantations (Fig. 8). At the end of the reenactment, those present were invited to make a sacrifice to the gods by throwing a piece of fruit through the rock opening. Afterwards, all participants and guests received a certificate for walking the Path of Light and being initiated into the ancient Thracian sacraments; they then enjoyed a glass of wine and some dancing.



Figure 7. Reenactment of Thracient ritual, ph. E. Troeva, 29.08.2015

Dozens of people gather at the megalith near Buzovgrad to perform similar reenactments during the summer solstice, while the reenactments of the autumnal equinox mainly involve residents from the surrounding villages. The megalith has gained popularity as the most energetic place in Bulgaria, thanks in part to coverage in the mass media and social networks. Group meditations and other spiritual practices are held at the site, and various events are organised nearby, such as the Sacred and Energetic Places travelling seminar held on the

summer solstice (June 21) 2015 (E-bulgaria.org 2015). The Kailash Yoga Club also organises meditations and pranayama sessions at the site (Yoga-kaylash.com 2016). A visitor to the megalith meditated nearby and reported experiencing a vision of energy beings who, supposedly, also contacted the local shamans 6,000 years ago. The pilgrim explained:

*such an energy passed through me that after that it was as if I had passed into another dimension... I was not stepping on the ground... I collected some pebbles. Later, my mother also joined the gathering. Of course, I always ask the permission of the place and the entities there, so that I know that these are gifts and not theft. With these stones I then made a mandala in my father's garden and also made some energy seals to test my new skills after the meditation at the Gate* (Akashic-records.eu 2013).

The definitions of the rock complex, introduced by thracologists, are freely employed by visitors who narrate their experiences. The case of the megalith near Buzovgrad is emblematic of the construction of a cult centre in our times. Regardless of whether the rock complex had religious or astronomical functions in ancient times, it can be seen as a new cult site that has been functional for the past dozen years. Its construction was inspired by physicists, astronomers and thracologists, while its socialisation was supported by the local authorities, aiming to promote cultural tourism. Reenactments are organised next to the megalith during particular moments of the solar calendar (equinox and solstice) to showcase the Thracian mysteries as an attraction and to spark interest in them.

The local community of Buzovgrad and the surrounding villages is mainly involved in the Honour of the Mother Goddess festival, celebrated on the autumnal equinox and advertised as a fertility festival. The Solar Gate near Buzovgrad is becoming a popular destination for both tourists and followers of the New Age and neo-paganism.

The megalith in Buzovgrad has become an emblematic neo-pagan cult site in Bulgaria, where spiritual and ritual practices are carried out throughout the solar calendar. These practices aim to restore Thracian rituals related to fertility, connection with the deceased, and promoting health and well-being for the living. The megalith's growing popularity due to its exposure through electronic media has attracted seekers of alternative religiosity and experiences.

For them the (supposed) Thracian sanctuary is a place to reconnect humans with nature and its energies. The highest attendance occurs on the summer solstice, also known as *Enyovden*.

## Conclusions

There are many other Thracian sanctuaries in Bulgaria that attract neopagan or New Age pilgrims, such as Begliktash (near Primorsko), Kabile (near Yambol), and old shrines in the mountains of Rodopi and Strandza. According to followers of New Age ideology in Bulgaria, the Thracians and Proto-Bulgarians, like other ancient peoples, were sensitive to energy sites and built sanctuaries at those locations.

The three case studies presented in the article have both similarities and differences. Madara is a cult site with a thousand-year history which assumed a top position in the pantheon of national shrines in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rock sites near Brezovo and Buzovgrad have been recognised as ancient cult places relatively recently and are in the process of being developed as contemporary cult sites.

The area of the archaeological sites in Madara is designated a national reserve, which provides some institutional control over the activities carried out there. The municipality, museum, reenactment clubs and cultural managers organise official events there, including the main Magical Madara festival, which bears the characteristics of living history with some reconstructions of rituals from Bulgarian traditional culture. Rites with nationalistic messages related to cultural memory are also observed within the festival.

Followers of New Age and new religious movements perform their practices in Madara in smaller groups, or individually. In the cases of the megalith near Buzovgrad and the Lyulyakovo sanctuary near Brezovo, the organisers of the new holidays are the municipalities and tourist associations, due to their location in nature, in mountainous areas. Organised visits are defined as hikes, and eco-paths are created to the objects. Reenactments of ancient rituals carried out within the framework of official events in Buzovgrad have the character of artistic reconstructions, while those next to the Brezovo stela can be defined as neo-pagan rites.

The events organised in the three locations are called *sabor* (congregation), festival, or holiday. They are of a complex nature and include various cultural activities such as seminars, reenactments of ancient rituals, traditional music and dance (*horo*), reenactments of Bulgarian folk customs, meditation, lectures on spiritual topics and hikes.

In the observed neo-pagan rituals many people participate out of curiosity, without sharing deeper knowledge of the essence of the performed rituals or about their possible ancient prototypes. Tourists hike to the sun stela and megalith, and the participation in health and wellness rites is an additional attraction when spending free time with family or friends in nature. In contrast, the more specialised practical workshops held by New Age followers consist mainly of people with similar interests. The most popular points in time for cultic activity are connected with the solar cycle, with the greatest frequency at the summer solstice and autumn equinox.

The increased interest in such cult places observed in recent decades is motivated by spiritual searches, the problematic present and attempts to make sense of reality. Through 'mysterious' rituals, participants desire to join a higher spirituality, which they lack in everyday life. The new ritual practices are perceived by the participants as actual reenactments of past rituals, with only a few questioning their authenticity. The practice of neo-pagan and New Age rituals for achieving health, spiritual growth, and being in harmony with the universe is completely in tune with New Age ideas in many countries around the world. The interweaving of esoteric ideas with pseudoscientific hypotheses is one of the main characteristics of this type of spiritual activity. The interest in ancient paganism is also one of the manifestations of contemporary nationalism. The presented cultural activities show the interweaving of esoteric and environmentalist ideas with economic strategies for the development of cultural tourism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> About the differences and similarities between New Age and neo-paganism, see Zwissler 2018.

<sup>2</sup> About the esoteric traditions in Bulgarian society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Nazarska 2020.

<sup>3</sup> About the differences between the followers of the New Age and the new religious movements, see Hanegraaff 1998. About followers of the New Age in Bulgaria, see Manova 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The article is a result from the Religious Notions, Traditional Beliefs and the Nature – Culture Opposition (New Realities, Theoretical Approaches and Interpretations) joint research project between the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Estonian Literary Museum and the Estonian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>5</sup> For the teaching of Petar Danov, the Danovism, see Toncheva 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the schedule of the gathering in 2022 (Beinsadouno.org 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Personal ethnographic observation in 2019 and 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Personal ethnographic observation of the festival in June 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Personal ethnographic observation of the event on June, 25, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Personal ethnographic observation of the march to the megalith in August 2015 and in August 2016.

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