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Editorial Note: Balkan Mountains – a symbol of liberty – Part I (Eastern Balkan)

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The Balkan is the longest and largest mountain in Bulgaria. Its shares, arranged in rows, resemble several rows of fortress walls that protect the northern part of the country. Although there are many passes - as many as 20, they are not easy to cross because of the width and height of the mountain ranges that form it. For centuries, the mountain has been considered a natural protector of the local people from conquerors. As history confirms, it is well deserved. The strongest example of this is the victory of the Bulgarian Khan Krum over the troops of Byzantium (the Eastern Roman Empire) in one of the passes of the mountain in 811 AD. Another example is the use of the mountain as a refuge during military attacks and during the time when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire. But perhaps the most convincing example is the fact that Bulgaria existed for the longest time as an independent and sovereign state precisely on the territory between the Danube River and Stara Planina - protected by the great river to the north and the great mountain to the south.

The name of the mountain has changed over the centuries, during which different peoples have lived next to it. The oldest information about it is from the time of the Thracians. The Thracian name of the mountain is Haimos or Haimon. In Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and its successor Byzantium, the name was changed to Hemus (from Ancient Greek Αἴμος and Latin Haemus), as the king of Thrace was called in ancient Greek mythology. After the conquest of these lands by the Bulgarians, this name was preserved. During the Ottoman Empire, the name of the mountain was Kocha Balkan or just Balkan. According to one of the versions, the name comes from "bal khan" - a great ruler and was used even before the entry of the Turks into Europe. It was first named Stara planina in 1533. Today, it is believed that the mountain is part of the Alpo-Himalayan Mountain range and is young folded, which contradicts the last name.

I

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The peninsula on which it is located is named after the Balkan Mountains - Balkan Peninsula. The name was given by the German geographer August Zeune in 1808. The logic of the name is the same as for another of the peninsulas in Southern Europe - the Iberian Peninsula. It gets its name from the Pyrenees Mountains that separate it from the mainland. In Antiquity, the Balkan Mountains were believed to cross the Balkan Peninsula horizontally from the Black Sea to the Istrian Peninsula, thus separating it from the rest of Europe. Today it is known that this is not exactly the case: in the west it starts from the valley of the Timok River and in the east it reaches the Black Sea (Fig. 1). The greater part of the mountain is located on the territory of Bulgaria, and the westernmost parts - on the territory of Serbia.



Figure 1. Geographical position of Balkan Mountains (Map by https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balkan_topo_en.jpg)

The Balkan Mountains is the longest (530 km) and the largest mountain range in Bulgaria (11 596,4 km²). It divides Bulgaria into two parts: North and South both geographically and climatically. The northern part is characterized by a moderate continental climate, and the southern part of the country has a transitional-continental climate. The highest point of the Balkan Mountains is Mount Botev (2375.9 m above sea level). On the territory of Bulgaria, the mountain has a total of 29 peaks, higher than 2000 m above sea level, located

in its central and western parts. Due to its great length, the mountain is conditionally divided into three parts: Eastern, Middle and Western. We will cover each of them in three consecutive articles.

The eastern part of the Balkan Mountains is located between the Vratnik Pass (also known as Iron Gate, which coincides with the famous name of a section of the Danube River between Romania and Serbia) and the Black Sea. It has a length of 155 km; its width varies from 30 to 40 km and occupies an area of 3998.6 km². This is the lowest of the three parts – its average altitude is 385 m. The relief is hilly and low-mountainous. The highest peak in this part of the mountain is Bulgarka Peak (1181 m above sea level).

The climate is temperate continental, and the easternmost parts of the mountain, which are at the lowest altitude, have a transitional continental climate. Rainfall is more abundant on the northern slopes, while the southern slopes remain in a rain shadow. Among the winds, the northern foothills of the Balkan Mountains are characterized by a blowtorch, and in the region of the town of Tvarditsa and Sliven - the cold falling wind of the "bora" type, which is known as the "Sliven wind".

The largest river in the Eastern Balkan Mountains is the Luda Kamchia River. It is the only river whose catchment basin is located entirely on the territory of the mountain. Since the river divides the main ridge of the mountain lengthwise, this is the reason for the construction of the largest dam in the mountain (Kamchia Dam). Another dam, which also has large dimensions, is the Tsonevo Dam. On the bank of one of the branches of the dam, there is the Chudnite skali Natural landmark. It is a complex of several groups of sheer cliffs with a height of 15 to 50 m, which resemble the towers of a castle (Fig. 2). Three tunnels have been dug in the lower part of the rocks, through which a road passes.



Figure 2. Chudnite skali (Wonderful rocks) Natural landmark (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2022)

III

Eastern Balkan Mountains is mainly covered with deciduous forests. Coniferous forests are relatively few, and some of them are artificially afforested as forest crops. In floristic terms, this part of the mountain is known for the distribution of the endemic plant *Astracantha arnacantha* in the area of Aitos town. This is one of the strangest species of the Legume family, which in habit resembles a small coniferous shrub (Fig. 3). West of the city of Sliven is the northernmost locality of the Mediterranean species *Pistacia terebinthus*.



Figure 3. *Astracantha arnacantha* (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2022)

At the foot of the mountain next to the village of Veselinovo is the largest Thracian rock-cult complex in the Eastern Balkan Mountains. It is dated from the 1st millennium BC. It consists of three massive rock-cut sanctuaries, individual votive stones and three caves located between two large waterfalls. According to local researchers, for one month after the autumn equinox day or one month before the spring equinox day, the rock sanctuaries are fully illuminated in the early hours of the morning. Near this complex is one of the main passes through the Balkan Mountains - Rishki Pass. It is disputed whether the battle that ended with Khan Krum's victory over the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus I in 811 AD took place here or in the neighboring Varbish Pass. This battle goes down in history for the fact that it was the second time that a Byzantine emperor was killed by "barbarians", as the Byzantines themselves called the neighboring peoples.

One century later, one of the most successful rulers in the history of Bulgaria - Knyaz Boris I - retired to the Eastern Balkan Mountains. In the centuries-long war between Byzantium and Bulgaria, he managed to

achieve peace through political means by accepting Christianity - he, his family and all the people he rules. This move was followed by a Golden Age in the development of Bulgaria. After handing over the power to his son Simeon (893 AD), it is believed that Boris I spent the last years of his life as a monk in the monastery "Saint Panteleimon" near the town of Veliki Preslav. It is assumed that the disciples of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, Saint Climent Ohridski and Saint Naum Preslavsko-Ohridski worked here. The monastery became one of the centers of the Preslav school of books known in the Middle Ages. In the ceramic and glass workshops of the monastery, unique examples of ecclesiastical art were created, of which the ceramic icon of Saint Theodore Stratilatus from around 900 AD is world famous (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The ceramic icon of Saint Theodore Stratilatus (Photo by [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St. Theodor.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St._Theodor.jpg))

The largest fortress in the Eastern Balkan Mountains is the fortress that defended the medieval city of Misionis (Fig. 5). It was created at the beginning of the 5th century as part of a fortification system along the Balkan Mountains on the territory of Byzantium. During the Second Bulgarian State, town of Misionis was a

V

well-developed economic town with an area of about 700 decares. The town of Misionis is mentioned in the book of the Arab explorer Muhammad al-Idrisi as a rich commercial city located in the mountains. The city existed until the 14th century, when it was destroyed during the conquest of these lands by the Ottoman Turks.



Figure 5. Part of the walls in the medieval town of Misionis (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2005)

During the time when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Balkan Mountains were a hiding place for rebels called "hayduti" (outlaws). The motives for their rebellion against the then government were different: from the injustice experienced and the desire for retribution to the desire to restore the freedom of the Bulgarian people. Emblematic in this respect is the city of Sliven, which became known as the "City of a Hundred Voivodes".

While in Western Europe the Renaissance began in the 15th century, the analogous period in Bulgaria, known as the Bulgarian Revival, began in the 17th century. The architecture characteristic of this period has been preserved in a number of villages and towns in the Eastern Balkan Mountains: Zheravna, Medven, Katunishte, Kotel, Elena. It is characterized by high stone walls around the houses, the use of many wooden elements, including lining the walls of the houses outside and inside, paintings on the walls, carvings on the ceiling of the guest rooms, wide eaves on the roofs, a gazebo (kiosk) that is similar on a terrace, but it is covered and open only on one side, and in Zheravna this side is also closed with wooden shutters in winter. The villages of Zheravna and Medven have been declared architectural-historical reserves, and the village of

Katunishte is an architectural reserve. The majority of the houses are of the Kamchia house type, built of stone and wood (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. A traditional house in the village of Zheravna: A. View from the outside (Photo by <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bulgaria-Zheravna-01.jpg>), B. View from the inside (Photo by https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zheravna_view_2.jpg)

The town of Kotel is the oldest center of carpet-making in Bulgaria. The Galatan School in Kotel, built in 1869, houses a museum exhibition presenting the variety of different types of carpets produced here in the 19th century. Another famous settlement with ancient crafts is the village of Zheravna. In the past there were woodcarving schools in it. Since 2008, the International Folk Costume Festival has been held there. Anyone wishing to participate must wear a Bulgarian costume and decide to break away from civilization for three days a year, making a real leap back a century and a half in time. The experience is truly unique.

Eastern Balkan Mountains is also a place of culinary traditions. For 2500 years, the autochthonous breed of East Balkan pig has been raised in the area. The animals are black in color and are raised freely under pasture conditions. Their meat has been used since the 19th century to produce the famous Smyadovska lukanka.

The city of Elena is famous for the production of salted and dried pork leg, prepared only here. and since 2013, the town of Elena has held the Feast of the Elenski but (leg from town of Elena). The town of Gorna Oryahovitsa hosts the Feast of Gorno Oryahovitsa sujuk, which is prepared only from beef. The first evidence of its mass production is a firman of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent from 1538. Gornooryakhov sujuk is the only Bulgarian meat delicacy protected in the European Union as food with a Protected Geographical Indication. This protection guarantees that it can only be produced in Gorna Oryahovitsa throughout the European Union.

If you are traveling in Bulgaria, do not miss to visit any of the mentioned places and see for yourself their uniqueness. Also ask about other places of interest in the area, because due to text volume limitations, the list here is not exhaustive.

Front Cover

A view of the eastern part of Dzhendem reserve, Central part of the Balkan Mountains

Photo by Prof. Dimcho Zahariev

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