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Destination Eastern Rhodopes – opportunities for niche products through the development of esoteric and pilgrimage tourism**Antoaneta Petrova**

Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Geology and Geography,

15 Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria

Abstract: *Any form of tourism that deviates from the mainstream is classified as alternative tourism. In this context, esoteric and religious tourism play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive and sustainable development within the Eastern Rhodopes Destination. Religious tourism, depending on its specific purpose, can be further subdivided into several categories, including missionary tourism (specialized travel aimed at spreading Christian teachings), pilgrimage tourism (travel undertaken to visit sacred sites for spiritual purposes), educational tourism (trips with an academic or scholarly focus), and festival tourism (attending religiously motivated celebrations, often of a mass nature, such as those dedicated to saints or religious events).*

Religious tourism is commonly regarded as a subset of cultural tourism, as many religious sites attract visitors who may not necessarily adhere to the religious beliefs associated with those locations. These sites are frequently included in broader tourist itineraries and are visited not only for their religious significance but also for their cultural, aesthetic, architectural, or historical values.

Pilgrimage, in its traditional sense, refers to a journey undertaken for religious reasons, often to a holy place, driven by a deeper, inward spiritual purpose and a quest for inner understanding. Pilgrimages are typically dedicated to sacred spaces such as churches, temples, mosques, holy mountains, and sites of divine visitation. The development of these specialized forms of tourism is crucial for attracting visitors seeking distinctive or alternative travel experiences, contributing to the diversification of tourism offerings. In Bulgaria, places of religious significance, such as holy sites, monasteries, icons, relics, and healing springs, continue to be central to pilgrimage tourism. These destinations often serve as focal points for individuals whose spiritual practices intertwine Orthodox Christianity with a variety of esoteric beliefs.

Keywords: esoteric tourism, pilgrimage tourism, development, experiences

Introduction

Religion has long been a fundamental aspect of human existence, influencing both personal and collective experiences. Since antiquity, individuals have journeyed to sacred sites such as the Vatican, Mecca, Jerusalem, and Rome, driven by spiritual and religious motivations. These travels, commonly referred to as "pilgrimages," represent one of the most significant religious and cultural phenomena known to society and are an integral part of the broader spectrum of tourism. Alternative tourism refers to any form of tourism that diverges from mainstream travel practices. It is closely associated with sustainable tourism, which emphasizes a holistic approach to travel, encompassing various activities designed to meet the diverse needs of tourists. This includes alternative methods of organizing travel, accommodation, and service provisions. In alternative tourism, the focus shifts from mass tourism to more individualized experiences, with an emphasis on personalized journeys that reflect the preferences and desires of the traveler. Tourists are not passive participants but actively engage in the planning and execution of their travel experiences. A key feature of alternative tourism is its commitment to ensuring high-quality services, which are underpinned by principles of personalization, security, and universally accessible comfort. Moreover, alternative tourism is deeply intertwined with the local environment of the destination, fostering a symbiotic relationship where the natural and cultural contexts of the location are central to the overall tourist experience. This form of tourism prioritizes a more authentic, immersive, and sustainable interaction with the destination, in contrast to more conventional forms of travel [1].

Object and Subject of the Study

The **object** of this study is the Eastern Rhodopes region, specifically its religious and archaeological heritage. The region is home to a wide array of sacred sites that have played a pivotal role in both pre-Christian and Christian spiritual practices. These sites, including Thracian rock niches, megalithic sanctuaries, early Christian temples, medieval basilicas, and chapels, form the central focus of the research. These sacred places serve as key cultural, historical, and spiritual landmarks, representing the intersection of ancient and modern forms of religious devotion.

The **subject** of this study is the potential for enhancing pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes. Specifically, the study focuses on how the region's sacred sites can be integrated into the modern tourism infrastructure in a way that preserves their historical, spiritual, and cultural significance while fostering sustainable tourism practices. The research will explore how these sites can serve as focal points for spiritual journeys, offering travelers a unique blend of historical exploration and mystical engagement.

Main Objective

The **main objective** of this study is to assess the potential for developing pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes. This includes understanding the unique value of the region's sacred sites and examining their appeal to tourists seeking spiritual or mystical experiences. The study aims to identify strategies for enhancing the tourism experience in the region, ensuring that tourism development aligns with principles of sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement. The study will also aim to determine how the development of pilgrimage tourism can contribute to the local economy while preserving the region's rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

Research Assignment

The **research assignment** of this study is multifaceted. The study will investigate the historical and spiritual significance of the region's sacred sites, focusing on the role of these sites in ancient and contemporary religious practices. It also provides suggestions on how the religious and esoteric significance of these sites can be integrated into a contemporary pilgrimage and tourism framework.

By addressing research questions, the study aims to contribute to the academic understanding of how pilgrimage and esoteric tourism can be developed sustainably in culturally and spiritually significant regions. Furthermore, the findings will provide practical insights into how such tourism can be promoted in a way that enhances both the traveler's experience and the well-being of the local community.

Specifics of esoteric and pilgrimage tourism

Religious tourism, encompassing both pilgrimage and esoteric forms of travel, is deeply rooted in human history, with religion serving as a driving force for travel to sacred places. Traditionally, such journeys have been undertaken for spiritual reasons, whether for devotion, personal reflection, or participation in religious events. While historically linked to ancient pilgrimages, religiously motivated travel has evolved into a significant component of the modern tourism sector. This shift can be attributed to advancements in infrastructure, which have made spiritual sites more accessible, as well as the growing interest of local and national authorities in promoting these locations as tourist attractions, capitalizing on their cultural and historical significance.

Esoteric and pilgrimage tourism represent specialized forms of religious tourism that extend beyond traditional travel to religious sites. Pilgrimage tourism involves travel to holy places with a deep spiritual or ritualistic purpose. Such journeys often include visits to sacred landmarks, shrines, temples, and monasteries, where participants seek personal enlightenment, spiritual growth, or fulfillment of religious obligations. Esoteric tourism, on the other hand, may overlap with religious pilgrimage but is more focused on the

exploration of mystical, occult, or hidden spiritual traditions that transcend mainstream religious practices. These forms of tourism often emphasize personal transformation, self-discovery, and deep engagement with the metaphysical aspects of the journey.

Scientific tourism with a religious focus shares a similar approach but is characterized by its cognitive-experiential nature, emphasizing visits to religious centers where tourists may not only view sacred sites but also actively engage in religious services, observe religious ceremonies, or participate in festivals. This form of tourism seeks to combine religious devotion with the intellectual and educational pursuit of understanding diverse belief systems, cultures, and practices [2]. The World Tourism Organization determines that religious tourism can be one of the most effective tools for promoting inclusive and sustainable development, identifying three main benefits of religious tourism – religious tourism raises awareness of the common heritage of humanity by providing resources for conservation; contributes to the development of countries and builds cultural understanding. However, while religious tourism provides these benefits, it is crucial that such activities are conducted in a manner that respects the sanctity of religious practices and traditions. The preservation of religious sites and monuments must be balanced with the need to protect local customs and cultural values, ensuring that the influx of tourists does not undermine the spiritual and cultural significance of the destination. Therefore, religious tourism must be carefully managed to support sustainable development while preserving the integrity of the religious and cultural heritage it seeks to showcase [3].

The factors affecting the growth of religious tourism are [4]:

- Search for authenticity – a desire for a more authentic experience, through different spiritual and cultural traditions associated with specific religions and places of worship.
- Diversified product offering – the emergence of a more diverse tourist product with which tourism organizations seek to attract tourists.
- Seeking the unusual – a global culture where people seek more unusual experiences or diversification within a trip.
- Cultural preservation – the recognition that religion and spirituality can help preserve cultures and traditions.
- Media – high media interest in the world's significant places of worship and religious shrines.
- Expanding market – general expansion of the global tourism market.

Religious and pilgrimage tourism encompasses travel undertaken for religious purposes, where the primary aim is to engage with sites, routes, festivals, and activities of religious significance. This type of tourism extends beyond professional travel, as it focuses specifically on journeys motivated by spiritual, cultural, or religious reasons. Pilgrimage tourism, in particular, refers to travel to sacred destinations or holy places, often for the purpose of devotion, spiritual growth, or fulfilling religious obligations (excluding travel

for professional purposes). This form of tourism includes international travel to visit sites renowned for their religious importance, such as temples, shrines, churches, mosques, and other sacred spaces that have historical or spiritual value. Pilgrimage routes, which trace the steps of significant religious figures or commemorate key events in religious history, are also major attractions for pilgrims. These journeys offer a means for participants to strengthen their faith, deepen their religious experience, or seek personal transformation. Religious tourism further includes travel to religious festivals, where large gatherings are held to celebrate particular saints, deities, or significant religious occasions. These festivals often involve rituals, ceremonies, and performances that attract tourists wishing to participate in or observe sacred traditions. Additionally, religious tourism also involves travel related to activities such as conferences, congresses, and academic or spiritual seminars with a religious focus. These events bring together people of various faiths to discuss theological issues, share religious experiences, and foster interfaith dialogue.

Depending on the purpose, religious tourism is divided into:

- missionary work (specialized travel to spread Christian teachings);
- pilgrimage (travel outside the place of residence to perform a pilgrimage for a religious purpose);
- educational tourism (specialized trips with an educational purpose);
- festival tourism (visits to organized celebrations with a religious motive, having a mass character, often of saints or religious events).

Pilgrimage is a journey arising from religious reasons, outwardly to a holy place and inwardly for spiritual purposes and inner understanding. Pilgrimages are dedicated to churches, temples, mosques, holy mountains and places of divine visitation [5].

Religious centres, spiritual sites and sacred destinations have been transformed into visitor attractions to bring economic benefits while generating much-needed funding for the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage and listed on the United Nations Educational World Heritage List, social and cultural activity (UNESCO). What was initially called "religious tourism" has developed from a small niche market to one of the most widely developed forms of tourism. However, the development of religious tourism has caused several complexities regarding the differences between religious tourism and pilgrimage. "Religious tourism", "spiritual tourism", and "sacred tourism" are often entirely interchangeable, and the distinction between them cannot be clearly defined, with pilgrimage being associated with religious travel to sacred places solely for the purpose of spiritual enrichment. On the other hand, religious tourism is often defined as a subset of cultural tourism, as most religious sites are visited by tourists who may or may not have a religious affiliation. Therefore, religious sites are part of the tourist tours of many tourists and are visited for their cultural, aesthetic, architectural or historical values. An example of this is the many religious sites in Rome, as well as cathedrals in Great Britain, which are cultural landmarks visited by pilgrims and tourists alike. Motivation is

the reason why people undertake a particular journey. Since ancient times, religion has been the primary motivator for domestic and international travel, being considered a significant factor influencing people's travel behaviour. It is the motivation that is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes people travelling to religious sites [6].

Although pilgrimage involves a large amount of travel, it is believed to have lost its traditional form in modern society. It has primarily diverged from its original conceptualization, with the result that the distinction between "religious tourists" and "pilgrims" has become a complex concept as both groups have the exact needs and use the same services, such as infrastructure, accommodation and transport. Undoubtedly, there are many studies and analyses devoted to the similarities and differences between pilgrims and tourists, but despite the differentiation between them, the similarities and differences remain widely contested and subject to different interpretations. There is also no set definition that identifies whether a person is a pilgrim or not. A pilgrim is not a hiker or a tourist. When visiting cult sites, the ordinary tourist satisfies his cultural and cognitive needs, but this is not a pilgrimage [7]. The pilgrim travels not for entertainment but walks the way to the Holy Places at the cost of privations, and completing this journey increases his spiritual and moral improvement. Travel and visits to Holy places promote a given religion, and visiting places of worship may not be related to the faith the tourist professes. A tourist can be a non-believer or another believer and still visit various religious sites to touch their spiritual wealth and get to know their religious life. This is precisely the difference between religious tourism and pilgrimage. Religious tourism is associated with itinerary-cognitive tourism, while pilgrimage is travel to Holy places to worship God (for Christian pilgrimage), and for a Christian believer, it is travel to places associated with holiness, reverence and worship. Thus, pilgrimage is associated with the spiritual side of the believer's life [8].

Esoteric tourism refers to the history and chronology of esotericism that has accompanied humanity since the beginning of its existence. In myths and rites, the legend of the appearance of the mysterious and magical, which is identified with esoteric places, objects and practices, is transmitted and reproduced. The characteristics of esoteric tourism can be determined depending on the functions it performs and the social life of people, depending on its structural determining components, on the essence of tourism as a phenomenon and recreation, as well as on the specific features of pilgrimage as a trip with a religious purpose [9]. These characteristics are individualized through the subjectivization of perceptions, with temporal and spatial characteristics that emphasize social, spiritual, and intellectual aspects. The essence and motivation for undertaking esoteric journeys have different characteristics, which can be grouped into two main directions - religious needs and psychological motivations. The first are dictated by the duty to faith and the canon of the respective religion, and the second, above all, by the need to experience the extraordinary, the unknown and the mysterious [10].

Establishing the main characteristics of esoteric tourism requires distinguishing it from pilgrimage. Tourist demand in esoteric tourism is related to the needs of tourists, directed to a specific motivation, determined by the cultural-cognitive and entertainment accents in the different market segments. The tourist offer also has features, as the resources that define it can be both natural and anthropogenic, but some of them are esoteric (for example, religious sites) and others are the result of tourist interpretation (myths, legends, beliefs, natural objects, elements of life, the traditions and customs of the population in a specific area). Religious tourism is a specific trip motivated by cultural and religious needs, satisfied through participation in religious events and visiting sacred places. Religiosity is esoteric, i.e. internal and hidden. In this sense, religious tourism is esoteric. The difference is in the scope of esoteric tourism, the nature and diversity of its objects, which, in addition to sacred places and cult objects, include spiritual practices and phenomena - most of which have no logical explanation. Religious tourism destinations include all territories and places where sacred places, temples and cult objects related to a particular religion are located. This tourism is defined as related to the first motives and purposeful travel. The offer in religious tourism includes cult objects - temples and monasteries, and the demand is motivated by cultural needs, including religious ones. Still, unlike pilgrimage, it is more cognitive in nature. This also determines the organization of the hotel, including other types of services and tourist programs [11].

In summary, religious and pilgrimage tourism is distinct from general tourism in that its primary purpose is spiritual or religious in nature. It enables travelers to visit sacred locations, participate in religious ceremonies, and engage with religious communities and practices, enriching both their spiritual lives and their cultural understanding of global faith traditions.

Possibilities for the development of exoteric and pilgrimage tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes

Located at the confluence of Europe and Asia, the Eastern Rhodopes offer a remarkable opportunity for visitors to explore a rich tapestry of ethnicities, traditions, and religious histories. The region, shaped by the influences of the Thracians, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, and Bulgarians, boasts a diverse cultural heritage that has been passed down through the ages. This cultural melting pot provides an ideal foundation for the development of esoteric and religious tourism, with numerous sacred and historically significant sites awaiting exploration.

One such site is the **Utroba Cave**, a prime example of a location with immense potential for religious tourism. Discovered in 2001 near the village of Ilinitza, northwest of the town of Karzhdali, the cave was initially recognized as a sanctuary, potentially dating back to the 11th-10th centuries BC. The cave's entrance and interior are uniquely shaped to resemble the womb of a woman, which aligns with the widely held belief

that it was an ancient Thracian sanctuary dedicated to the Great Mother Goddess, a central figure in Thracian religious practice.

The cave is relatively small, measuring 3 meters in height and 2.5 meters in width, but its archaeological significance is profound. Within the cave, several trapezoidal niches can be found carved into the rock, further reinforcing its connection to Thracian spiritual traditions. Notably, at the base of the cave lies a carved altar that stands over a meter high. This altar, along with other features of the cave, suggests that the site was used for ritualistic purposes, with particular attention to the acoustic properties of the space.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Utroba Cave is its acoustics. In the center of the cave, a hemispherical dome amplifies sounds, creating an effect that mimics the sound of male voices, further contributing to the mystical atmosphere. This phenomenon is thought to symbolize thunder, enhancing the site's association with divine power and ritualistic practices. Moreover, the cave is notable for its alignment with the sun. At exactly 12 o'clock every day, a ray of sunlight pierces through a hole in the upper part of the cave, illuminating the space and creating a visual representation of what is interpreted as a "sacred marriage" between the Sun and the rock. This daily occurrence is regarded as a symbol of the rebirth of life, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the site.

The phenomenon defined as a sacred marriage between the Sun and the rock can also be referred to the rebirth of life [12]. The Utroba Cave exemplifies the rich potential of the Eastern Rhodopes for the development of esoteric and religious tourism. With its deep historical roots, sacred connections, and unique natural phenomena, it offers a compelling destination for those seeking to explore the spiritual heritage of the region.

Perperikon is undoubtedly the biggest cultural-historical phenomenon in the Eastern Rhodopes. Perperikon is a huge rock massif in the eastern Rhodopes that is believed to have originated around 8,000 years ago. The stone monument rises 15 kilometers from Kardzhali, near the Perpereshka River, from which ancient people are said to have mined gold. The ancient inhabitants of these lands believed in the Sun God from time immemorial. This is one of the reasons why they settled on the big rock, because of the lack of vegetation and the convenient location, from where one can easily watch the rising sun every morning. A little less, with the development of tools, the refinement of cutting tools, highly developed during the Bronze Age, people were given the opportunity to work with stone. They began to carve out various cult niches, sanctuaries, tombs. Thus, Perperikon began to change his natural appearance. In some of the niches, numerous votive vessels, spigots, antique objects related to the cult of the Sun God were found. The sanctuary developed its importance during the late Bronze Age as well. The great flowering took place in the XVIII-XII centuries BC. This is the period of development of the first European civilization, in the form of the Creto-Mycenaean culture. The cult complex was improved and acquired a drainage system for removing the water. One of the

vessels from this period impressed archaeologists with the images of their God and six human figures. People are shaped symbolically as flowers; their heads are represented as small suns. A little less, the cult of the Sun developed and during the Early Iron Age, 9th - 6th centuries BC, many other gods also appeared. Thracian religion, for example, was strongly oriented towards the cult of Orpheus and Dionysus, and Perperikon became a kind of center of these beliefs and customs. During the Late Bronze Age, Perperikon became a spectacular sanctuary. Many facts lead us to think that it was in Perperikon that the famous sanctuary of the god Dionysus was located. In Antiquity, the oracle (pagan sanctuary where divination) of Dionysus was as well-known as the oracle at Delphi, but there is still no irrefutable evidence that it was found there. According to legend, two fateful prophecies were made from the altar of Perperikon. The first predestined the great conquests and glory of Alexander the Great, and the second, made several centuries later, heralded the power of the first Roman emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus. Perperikon is a unique complex dedicated to the cult of the Sun God. It is a symbol of one of the earliest cultures on our lands. Religion was born there, which was the basis of the development of culture, architecture and knowledge [13].

In the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, situated above the village of Tatul in the Momchilgrad region, an exceptional megalithic structure stands prominently. Recent archaeological investigations have revealed that this monument, due to its significant historical and cultural features, is widely recognized as the Sanctuary of Orpheus. The site has garnered considerable scholarly attention following extensive excavations that have unearthed a complex of stone constructions, ritualistic artifacts, and inscriptions, all of which suggest its role in ancient religious practices. The monument's association with Orpheus, a central figure in Greek mythology renowned for his musical and poetic prowess, adds a layer of mythological significance, suggesting that the site may have served as a center for religious or initiatory rites dedicated to this legendary figure. The archaeological discoveries at the megalithic sanctuary above the village of Tatul in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains provide compelling evidence of the site's continuous use from the late Eneolithic through the entirety of the Bronze Age. The sanctuary's first significant phase of development occurred during the 19th to 11th centuries BCE, marked by the construction of cultic structures and over 30 clay hearths-altars, which were utilized for sacrificial offerings and ritual libations associated with the worship of the Sun God and the solar cult. These findings suggest that the site held a central place in the religious and ceremonial practices of the ancient inhabitants of the region, with reverence for the Sun as a pivotal aspect of their spiritual worldview.

The sanctuary, carved into a massive monolithic stone block, is believed to be linked to the cult of Orpheus, a central figure in Thracian mythos, who was regarded as both a musician and a prophet. The stone structure is marked by a truncated pyramid-shaped summit, atop which rests a quadrangular sarcophagus, oriented eastward. This sarcophagus is thought to have housed the body of Orpheus, potentially suggesting

that the figure was venerated as a deified king-priest. The site is further distinguished by a solemn staircase with eight steps leading to the grave, a feature that highlights the ceremonial significance of the tomb. Additionally, the rock surface is punctuated with niches designed for offerings and channels for draining ritual liquids, underscoring the sanctity of the space and its role in sacred rites.

According to Thracian beliefs, the king-priest, upon death, assumed the role of a mediator between the divine and the human realms, with the site of his burial transformed into a revered space of worship. This reverence persisted for centuries, even as the historical figure became enshrined in myth. The sanctuary near Tatul thus remained a focal point of spiritual and communal life for approximately four millennia, reflecting the enduring nature of the sacred practices associated with it.

The region surrounding Tatul is steeped in a rich tradition of spiritual significance, and the site continues to be regarded as sacred even to the present day. The sanctuary's strategic placement high in the mountains, near the sun's rays and in proximity to the legendary figure of Orpheus, underscores the connection between the site and solar worship, central to the beliefs of the ancient Thracians. The preservation and further study of this extraordinary megalithic complex are crucial, both for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Eastern Rhodopes and for increasing public awareness of the ancient, sophisticated megalithic traditions that once flourished in the region [14].

The monastery complex "St. Ioan Predtecha" is a Bulgarian Orthodox monastery, located on the right bank of the Arda River in the town of Kardjali (Veselchane district). It was part of a medieval episcopal complex "St. John Prodrome". It was founded in the 6th - 7th centuries. From the archaeological excavations, it is known that there are 4 consecutively built churches. They have a typical Byzantine style and a strong Athonian influence. The monastery was the spiritual centre of one of the great medieval dioceses - Ahridos. The ruins of the monastery were discovered already in the 1930s by local lovers of the historical past. For many years, the remains remained unexplored until 1962, when other parts of the monastery's buildings were discovered. Historical information and the preserved remains of buildings give reason to claim that it became already at the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century in episcopal, and later in a metropolitan centre. This is evidenced by the unique findings found in and around the temple - five brick tombs. One of the tombs, which is in the church, was hermetically sealed. After careful opening, the relics of a high Christian cleric from the end of the XI and the beginning of the XII century were discovered. Also found in the grave were a completely preserved epitachyl (church vestment), woven with gold and with unusual decoration, as well as church relics sewn into a cloth cross. Only 4 places in the world have preserved such finds. This confirms that in the Middle Ages today's Kardzhali was an important Christian centre. The epitachyl is believed to be extremely expensive and was made in Constantinople. In 2000, the restored church of the

monastery was re-consecrated. Due to the high artistic and architectural value, the remains of the medieval monastery and church "St. Ioan Prodrom" have been declared cultural monuments of national importance.

Monyak fortress (Mneakos) near Kardjali is one of the largest preserved Bulgarian medieval fortresses. The remains of the fortress, the fortress wall, the eight-walled tower and the water tanks were built in the 12th century. The preserved part of the outer fortress wall is more than 270 meters long and reaches 8 meters in places. There are two water tanks in the fort. The tower is over 3 meters high; the area of the fortress is 18,000 square meters. The Monyak fortress is located on a rocky hill called the Sixth Fortress, not far from Kardzhali on the shore of the Studen Kladenets dam. It rises quite high compared to the surrounding terrain - the peak of the Sixth Fortress is over 586 meters high. This ranks it among the highest fortresses in the Rhodopes.

Another fortress is Visegrad - the ruins of the Visegrad fortress are located on a rocky plateau on the right bank of the Studen Kladenets dam on the outskirts of the village of Visegrad.

The Harman Kaya rock sanctuary represents another remarkable testament to the ancient religious practices of the Eastern Rhodopes. Located near the village of Bivoljane in the Momchilgrad region, Harman Kaya is a prehistoric, rock-hewn cult complex that stands on par with other significant archaeological sites in the area, such as Perperikon and Tatul. Despite its historical and cultural importance, the sanctuary remains relatively obscure, not due to its lack of significance but rather due to the limited research and insufficient promotion.

The complex dates back to the 2nd millennium BCE, a period during which it served as a key religious and ceremonial center for the ancient inhabitants of the region. The site features a combination of carved tombs and caves, with one cave specifically modified to function symbolically as a "womb," suggesting its connection to fertility and rebirth rituals. The sanctuary's design reflects the deep spiritual and mystical beliefs of the time, as well as the use of natural rock formations for sacred purposes.

The tomb near the cult space further reinforces the idea that Harman Kaya was a site of profound ritual importance, possibly connected to ancestor worship or the veneration of deified figures. Despite its somewhat underexplored status, Harman Kaya is a site of immense beauty and spiritual resonance. Its haunting presence and the awe it evokes in visitors speak to its ancient power to shape mystical perceptions of the world, continuing to captivate those who encounter it. The lack of extensive study and recognition, however, has kept it somewhat hidden from the broader public, preventing it from receiving the attention it rightfully deserves as a vital part of the megalithic heritage of the Eastern Rhodopes.

Situated near the Studen Kladenets dam, within the territory of the village of Pchelari, rises the striking White Rock, a site of significant archaeological interest. The rock is distinguished by several carved tombs, with the most notable located in the Kara Inn area. The entrance of this particular tomb is oriented

towards the southeast, a feature that suggests a symbolic or ritualistic alignment with celestial events. There is a prevailing hypothesis that the tomb's entrance was once sealed by a large stone slab, further emphasizing the sanctity and security of the burial site.

The tombs at the White Rock are believed to date from the Early Iron Age, spanning the 2nd to 1st millennium BCE. This period is marked by complex societal developments and the increasing prominence of burial rituals, with these rock-hewn tombs serving as significant markers of ancient funerary practices and possibly as centers for cultic activities. The sanctuary as a whole presents a captivating glimpse into the religious and burial customs of the time.

Despite its archaeological importance, the site remains relatively inaccessible to the general public. The lack of clearly marked paths and official signage contributes to the sanctuary's obscurity. Visitors typically approach the site via a dirt road, which can be accessed from either the iron bridge over the Arda River to the west or from the nearby villages of Golobradovo and Rabovo to the east. This limited access underscores the site's hidden nature, yet it's fascinating presence continues to evoke interest and intrigue among those who seek to explore the megalithic heritage of the region [15].

The Deaf Stones rock sanctuary is among the largest Thracian cult sites. It encompasses several huge rock massifs cut by deep gorges. At the foot of one of them is a rock-cut tomb. In the eastern part of the burial chamber, a bed and a small niche are formed. To the side there are traces of a second, unfinished tomb. A staircase has been cut into the massif in the East, which leads to the top, where a basin has been formed. The remaining three rock teeth are dotted with over 200 cult rock niches.

The place of the sanctuary was chosen carefully - extremely beautiful, respectful nature and excellent visibility to all directions of the world. Standing out above the surrounding terrain, the rock massifs were sacred in the minds of the ancient inhabitants of the Rhodopes. For the Thracians, the height of the rock represented the rite of passage from the everyday to the sacred.

In the Eastern Rhodopes are some of the best-preserved medieval forts in the Bulgarian lands. Except for Perperikon and some other earlier strongholds, most of the fortresses were built in the second half of the 12th century. Then, a central administrative reform took place, according to which the Eastern Rhodopes, or as they were known in the Middle Ages, Ahridos, were separated into an independent area.

Discussion Questions and Recommendations for the Enhancement of Pilgrimage and Esoteric Tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes

A series of key questions and recommendations aimed at fostering the development of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism within the Eastern Rhodopes. By addressing both theoretical and practical aspects of tourism,

these inquiries are designed to stimulate further academic discussion and guide future strategies for sustainable tourism development in the region.

1. How can the spiritual and esoteric significance of the Thracian rock niches and megalithic sanctuaries be more effectively integrated into pilgrimage tourism offerings?

The Eastern Rhodopes are home to unique spiritual and esoteric landmarks, such as the Thracian rock niches and sanctuaries, which could serve as key components in the development of pilgrimage tourism. To enhance the integration of these sites into pilgrimage routes, it is essential to conduct further interdisciplinary research into their spiritual and symbolic significance. This research should be used to develop thematic itineraries that align with both historical scholarship and spiritual practices, thus offering pilgrims a more profound and reflective experience of the region's sacred geography.

2. What methodologies can be employed to ensure the preservation of sacred sites while promoting increased visitation for spiritual and esoteric tourism?

While pilgrimage tourism offers significant economic potential, it also poses challenges related to the preservation of sacred sites. It is crucial to establish sustainable tourism management practices that ensure the safeguarding of the region's cultural and religious heritage. Strategies could include implementing visitor capacity limits, establishing guided tours that emphasize the sanctity of the sites, and utilizing digital technologies such as virtual reality to provide remote access. Additionally, developing educational materials and programs that inform visitors of the cultural significance of these sites can promote respectful engagement and reduce the risk of cultural degradation.

3. How can local communities be more effectively involved in the development and promotion of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism?

The success of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes depends not only on the preservation of sacred sites but also on the involvement of local communities. It is essential to engage local residents in the tourism development process, ensuring that they benefit both economically and culturally. This can be achieved by fostering community-based tourism initiatives, where locals act as guides, storytellers, and stewards of the region's cultural heritage. Furthermore, training programs can be implemented to equip local populations with the necessary skills to manage and promote these niche tourism forms while maintaining the cultural integrity of the sites.

4. In what ways can interdisciplinary research enhance the development of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes?

The development of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the region would benefit from the integration of interdisciplinary research that combines archaeological, historical, religious, and cultural studies. In-depth investigations into the spiritual practices associated with the region's ancient sanctuaries and rock niches

could provide valuable insights into the historical and symbolic meanings of these sites. This research could be used to develop a comprehensive framework for interpreting the spiritual and esoteric aspects of the sites, allowing for the creation of educational content, guided tours, and scholarly publications that enrich the visitor experience.

5. How can modern technology be leveraged to enhance the experience of pilgrims and those seeking esoteric encounters with the sacred sites of the Eastern Rhodopes?

The integration of modern technology, including augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), could significantly enhance the experience of pilgrims and visitors interested in esoteric tourism. By providing interactive, immersive experiences that allow individuals to engage with the sites in innovative ways, technology can bridge the gap between ancient practices and contemporary forms of spiritual exploration. Additionally, digital platforms could facilitate remote engagement with the region’s sacred sites, allowing individuals who are unable to visit in person to connect with the spiritual essence of the Eastern Rhodopes.

6. What role can regional and national tourism organizations play in promoting pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in a manner that respects the cultural and spiritual significance of the Eastern Rhodopes?

Regional and national tourism organizations have a critical role to play in promoting pilgrimage and esoteric tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes. By developing comprehensive marketing strategies that highlight the region’s unique spiritual heritage, these organizations can attract a diverse range of visitors while ensuring that the promotion of the sites respects their cultural and sacred importance. Collaborative efforts between tourism authorities, academic institutions, and local communities will be essential to ensure that tourism development is aligned with the principles of cultural preservation and sustainability.

Conclusion

The Eastern Rhodopes represent a unique and underutilized resource for the development of pilgrimage and esoteric tourism. With its rich blend of pre-Christian and Christian sacred sites, the region offers unparalleled opportunities for tourism that is both spiritually enriching and culturally significant. However, the successful development of these forms of tourism requires a balanced approach that prioritizes the preservation of sacred sites, the integration of interdisciplinary research, and the active involvement of local communities. By adopting sustainable practices, promoting academic engagement, and fostering respectful tourism development, the Eastern Rhodopes can become a leading destination for pilgrimage and esoteric tourism, offering a model for the responsible integration of tourism with cultural and spiritual heritage.

The thoughtful implementation of these recommendations, grounded in a framework of sustainability, cultural respect, and academic research, will ensure the long-term preservation of the region's invaluable heritage while fostering responsible tourism growth.

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