

Before I begin the presentation, I would like to thank you on behalf of Daniela and Deyan for the opportunity to present to your attention some results of our 23-year work on the archaeological study of Strandzha and Sakar.

The Strandzha and Sakar region represents a unique geographical, historical and ethnocultural zone. For millennia, this has been the realm of one of the oldest and most culturally original world civilizations – the Thracian, which was in constant contact with the Hellenic world. Relics of Thracian antiquity have been preserved to this day in Strandzha and Sakar, not only through the numerous archaeological monuments and finds from that time, but also preserved in folk ideas, beliefs and rituals.

Unfortunately, at present, the Strandzha and Sakar region represents an economically underdeveloped, border region with a very high level of unemployment. The abolition in 2000 of the status of this region as a “border zone”, led to an unprecedented property intervention on numerous archaeological sites located at this territory. As a result of these vandalistic destructions, valuable information for science is irretrievably lost, and for museums - unique exhibits.

It is worth emphasizing here that thanks to the constant and selfless financial support of the STICHTING HORIZON Foundation, as a result of the work of our expedition, a large number of archaeological sites have been studied, which have thus been saved from plunder and destruction.

The Strandzha-Sakar Archaeological Expedition was established in 2002 by Daniela Agre from the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with Deputy Head Deyan Dichev from the Ethnographic and Archaeological Museum Elhovo and included students and PhD students from several Bulgarian universities.

The main goal of the expedition is the comprehensive archaeological study of the Strandzha and Sakar - an extremely poorly studied from an archaeological point of view region located in the southeastern part of Bulgaria.

During all these years, the expedition worked and continues to work in three main scientific directions:

- Archaeological study of the funerary and commemorative practices and rites
- Archaeological study of settlement sites from the Thracian era and
- Archaeological study of the Thracian sanctuaries.

***Archaeological research of the funerary and commemorative practices and rites in Strandzha and Sakar*** aims to study burial mound necropolises from a very wide time range - from the Early Bronze Age (3200 BC) to Late Antiquity (5th century AD).

A total of 59 burial mounds have been studied so far, of which:

- 8 belong to the Bronze Age (3400-1200 BC)
- 10 – to the Early Iron Age (11th - 7th century BC), 9 of which contained dolmens - the earliest Thracian tombs,
- 12 are from the Late Iron Age (6th - 1st century BC), 2 of which contained monumental tombs and
- 28 are from the Roman period (1st-5th century BC), 5 of which contained tombs.

Study of Bronze Age Mounds (3400-1200 BC)

For the first time, mounds related to all stages of the Bronze Age, located in the Elhovo municipality, were studied. The diversity of the burial facilities and the material in them (ceramic vessels, gold and silver ornaments) have made a significant contribution to the study of this era.

The results achieved were used in conjunction with the Institute of Archaeology in Berlin to trace the movement of the steppe population from Ukraine to the Elhovo region, as well as to study the diet of this population during the Bronze Age. The results of the project have been published as a separate volume in the prestigious international journal *Præhistorische Zeitschrift*.

### ***The study of monuments from the Early Iron Age (XI-VII BC)***

Two stone mounds and nine dolmens from the Early Iron Age were studied on the territory of Strandzha and Sakar. A very interesting discovery was made in a stone mound near the village of Belevren, dated to the 9th century BC.

Although the mound does not contain a human burial, a ritual not encountered at that stage in Europe was revealed in it, which probably aimed at the fertilization of the Earth and the revival of all fruitful natural forces. In the center of the mound, on a stone platform, two anthropomorphic figurines with strongly pronounced sexual attributes were "buried". Two ceramic vessels of a unique shape were found next to them: one has three spouts and a rich ornamentation of stylized plant ornaments, the second is decorated with four bunches and stylized plant ornaments.

In Strandzha and Sakar, the expedition studied 9 dolmens. It was proven archaeologically that the dolmens are the earliest Thracian family tombs. The use of the innovative methodology for studying dolmens, created and enriched by the team, allowed the discovery of archaeological evidence of the presence of commemorative rituals performed in the dromos and in front of the facade of the dolmen.

These are proven to be the earliest commemorative rituals attested on the territory of Bulgaria and are evidence of a fundamental change in the beliefs of the inhabitants of Strandzha and Sakar, which occurred in the 9th century BC.

The studies of the dolmen near the village of Golyam Derwent, Elhovo region, dated to the 9th century BC, have overturned everything written so far in the scientific literature about the emergence of statehood and royal ideology in Thrace, by pushing this date back about three centuries.

The entrance door to the burial chamber of the dolmen, although it was barbarically broken by treasure hunters, showed an unprecedented decoration of complex ornaments, composed of images of snakes, meanders, labyrinths and other elements.

In addition, in the dromos of the dolmen we also found part of a column decorated with similar ornaments. It should be noted that such elements – columns and decoration – have not been discovered as elements of dolmens either on the territory of modern Bulgaria or on the Balkan Peninsula as a whole.

The decorative ornaments have close parallels with the Cretan-Mycenaean culture, whose decline dates back to the 12th century BC. The dolmen provided scientists with new, indisputable evidence for the thesis that the Thracian civilization inherited many of the characteristics of the Cretan-Mycenaean one.

However, the great discoveries do not end there - on one of the fragments of the dolmen wall, an incised relief with the image of a labrys - a double-edged axe was discovered. The most probably, this symbol decorated the upper part of the door leading to the burial chamber.

The labrys is a well-known symbol of royal power in Thrace and other ancient cultures and was used as such in the Odrysian Kingdom - one of the most important state formations that existed on the territory of ancient Thrace in the 6th-3rd centuries BC. It should be noted that Golyam Derwent is located in the centre of the future Odrysian Kingdom.

All these findings, together with the facts that the dolmen from Golyam Derwent is significantly larger than other dolmens located on the territory of Strandzha, and that the remains of only one person were found in the dolmen's burial chamber (which is not typical for dolmens), allow us to suggest that this dolmen represents the earliest royal tomb found on the territory of the Balkan Peninsula.

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### ***Studies of Late Iron Age Mounds (6th-1st centuries BC)***

Despite the enormous destruction caused by treasure hunters, the tomb discovered in the mound near the village of Ruzhitsa, dated to the end of the 5th – beginning of the 4th century BC, is among the most interesting in Thrace. It stands out both with some new architectural solutions used in its construction and with the unique multi-colored frescoes applied to the sides of the door to the burial chamber.

The archaeological community has recognized the study of a grave discovered in 2005 in the “Great Mound” near the villages of Malomirovo and Zlatinitsa as one of the greatest scientific achievements in the field of Thracian archaeology in the last 60 years.

It dates back to the middle of the 4th century BC.

The grave is one of the richest Thracian burials discovered in Bulgaria and, most likely, belongs to one of the sons of the great Thracian king Kerseblept – Iolauus.

The gold and silver objects discovered in the grave are masterpieces of Thracian art.

In addition, the analyses conducted on the rescued materials have changed the existing ideas about the dates of the appearance of silk in ancient Europe and the gold rolling techniques used at that time.

One of the richest female burials from the late Hellenistic era, dated to the last quarter of the 2nd - beginning of the 1st century BC was studied by us in a mound near the village of Sinemorets. 180 gold and numerous clay cult objects were found in it.

Among the masterpieces of ancient jewelry, we should place the discovered gold earrings, showing the goddess Nike driving a biga (two-wheeled chariot).

No less exquisite is the golden head of a bull, which is the central pendant of one of the necklaces.

Among the most valuable objects from the grave is a massive gold plate, representing a clasp for the wreath, and the most important thing about this object is the inscription skillfully inserted between the decoration - “Demetrios made for Kortozuntos”. The presence of this inscription increases the value of the discovery many times over, because Inscriptions on gold objects from this period are missing from Thrace, and there are very few of them in the entire world.

### **Studies of burial mounds from the Roman era (1st-4th centuries)**

Extremely important evidence for the life, culture, worldview and creative capabilities of the Thracians during the Roman era was provided by the studies of burial mounds in the Propada area of Malko Tarnovo municipality.

The movable archaeological monuments found during excavations (ceramic and glass vessels, bronze and silver coins, bronze and gold ornaments, etc.) form the main part of the archaeological exhibition of the Historical Museum in the town of Malko Tarnovo.

During the study of the necropolis, in addition to movable archaeological monuments, four monumental tombs of different types were discovered, as well as numerous burial facilities of different typologies. In practice, the necropolis in the Propada area is the only site on the territory of Bulgaria that presents almost all possible types of burial facilities from the Roman era discovered so far.

Currently, the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo is seeking funds to turn the necropolis into an open-air museum under the name: "Museum of Thracian Tomb Architecture during the Roman Era in Strandzha".

On the other side of Strandzha, in the municipality of Elhovo, the study of Roman era burial mounds in the areas of the villages of Stroyno, Borisovo, Boyanovo and Karavelovo yielded exceptional results.

In the burial mound near the village of Stroyno, one of the largest in SE Bulgaria, a stone sarcophagus was discovered containing the cremated remains of a woman, as well as a large quantity of gold jewelry and bronze vessels.

A chariot was discovered on the periphery of the burial mound, which was also cremated - an extremely rare ritual.

The burial dates back to the first half of the 2nd century. At this stage, we assume that the buried woman performed priestly functions in the nearby temple complex.

Incredible scientific results, as well as very valuable archaeological finds, were acquired during investigating the four mounds from the Roman era near the village of Borisovo. In the largest of them, under a specially shaped stone structure, the grave of a Thracian aristocrat-warrior was discovered, buried with all his military equipment. The buried person lived in the area at the end of the 1st - beginning of the 2nd century AD, and probably led auxiliary troops in the Roman army.

Next to the grave was discovered the only fully preserved ancient chariot in Europe - a four-wheeled chariot, which was buried in a pit together with a pair of horses in harness. For the first time, a luggage-carrier full of goods - luxurious ceramics, glass and bronze vessels - was discovered with this type of chariot.

The horses were covered with cloaks, with part of the fabric preserved in places.

Behind the chariot was discovered the skeleton of the deceased's dog, tied to it with a chain.

This exceptional find makes it possible to fully reconstruct not only the ancient chariot, but also the ritual of its burial.

Right next to the pit with the chariot, a second pit was discovered, in which two riding horses were sacrificed, buried one behind the other together with iron bridles and bronze appliqués. Wooden shields with massive bronze umbos in the middle were placed on their bodies.

For the first time in Thrace, the exact shape and dimensions of the shields were archaeologically determined.

Extremely valuable finds were obtained from the rescue studies of the mound "Kral Mezar", near the village of Boyanovo. Three burial structures were discovered in the mound - a sarcophagus, a tomb and a brick tomb, as well as a commemorative column with a capital and base.

The sarcophagus weighs 6 tons. It was robbed in ancient times. The materials from it allow dating it to the 2nd century.

In the central part of the mound, a broken tomb was discovered, the walls of which were covered with frescoes with mainly floral and geometric motifs. The tomb dates back to the first quarter of the 3rd century.

An intact brick tomb with a rich inventory was also studied in the mound. The unique brass balsamarium in the shape of a boxer's head discovered in the grave aroused enormous interest in the world press after its publication in one of the most prestigious archaeological journals, American Archaeology.

***The second scientific direction in which the expedition works is the archaeological study of settlement sites from the Thracian era on the territory of Strandzha and Sakar.***

It should be noted that in contrast with the great successes associated with the study of Thracian art and funerary architecture, the existing knowledge about the everyday life of the Thracians and especially of the Thracian rulers is extremely scarce. In practice, until 20 years ago, we judged the life of the Thracian aristocracy mainly from the excavations of the ancient Thracian city of Seuthopolis – carried out in the 1950s.

A significant advance in enriching our knowledge in this direction was provided by the archaeological studies we carried out on settlement sites from the Thracian era on the territory of Strandzha and Sakar.

In 2007, the expedition discovered a settlement site near the village of Sinemorets, Tsarevo municipality. The subsequent archaeological research, partially funded by the foundation, proved that the site is a fortified residence of a local Thracian ruler who ruled this territory in the last quarter of the 2nd - first quarter of the 1st century BC.

In 2012, a coin treasure of 199 silver tetradrachms was discovered at the site, of which 36 were minted by one of the most mysterious Thracian kings – King Mostis. Until this discovery, only 12 tetradrachms from this ruler were known in the world.

In 2016, the results of the research on the site were published in a monographic work "Sinemorets - Volume I", funded by the Foundation.

In 2013, not far from the village of Brodilovo, Tsarevo Municipality, the expedition found a site that turned out to be a fortified residence of a Thracian ruler from the time of the Asteian Kingdom – the end of the 2nd – middle of the 1st century BC. Excavations of the site continued until 2020 under the leadership of Deyan Dichev.

The extraordinarily rich material discovered during the research (bronze and silver coins and adornments, various ceramic imported and local luxury vessels, a large number of metal objects and tools) served as the basis for the archaeological exhibition of the newly established Historical Museum in the town of Tsarevo.

In 2011, during a rescue excavation of a mound destroyed by treasure hunters near the village of Knyazhevo, Topolovgrad region, the expedition discovered a building covered with a mound embankment. The Foundation has been financing the study of this site since 2012. The archaeological research of the site, which continued until 2020, showed that it was the residence of a Macedonian strategist who ruled this region of Thrace in the period from the middle of the third quarter of the 4th century BC until the death of Lysimachus (ruler of entire Thrace) in 281 BC. The huge amount of amphorae, luxury ceramics and coins discovered at the site shows the strong trade contacts with Continental and Island Greece, Asia Minor, as well as with the Greek policies on the Western Black Sea coast.

The study of this site is of great importance for science. In fact, this is the best-preserved complex of residential buildings and fortifications from the late classical and Hellenistic eras, discovered and studied on the territory of Bulgaria.

The study of this site was recognized by the archaeological community in Bulgaria as one of the most significant achievements in the field of studying settlement sites from the Thracian era on the territory of Bulgaria over the past 25 years.

The leadership of the Topolovgrad municipality, together with us, prepared a project for the restoration and socialization of the site, which is currently submitted to the Ministry of Culture for funding.

The expedition's studies of fortified residences of Thracian rulers located at the territory of Strandzha and Sakar marked the beginning of a new direction in Bulgarian archaeology - the study of the residences, lifestyle and everyday life of the Thracian rulers.

***The third direction in the expedition's research is the issues related to the Thracian sanctuaries.***

In the period from 2022 to 2024, near the village of Malomirovo, the largest complex of ritual pits in SE Bulgaria, located on an area of about 30 decares, was studied. The sanctuary is located next to the "Goliamata Mogiala" mound, in which we studied a very rich burial of one of the sons of the Thracian king Kerseblept.

112 cult pits from the Classical and Hellenistic eras have been registered and studied on the territory of the sanctuary. In the thoughts of the ancients, ritual pits are considered as a symbol of the transition between the two worlds - from the world of the living to the world of the dead. They are an element through which communication between the living and the dead took place, as an element of the cult of the dead and the deities associated with it.

Among the finds from the pits, the most interesting ones are fragments of richly decorated cult portable hearths, fragments of bronze bracelets decorated with snake heads, metal rings, iron and bronze arrows and silver coins of Thracian Chersonese minted during the reign of the Thracian king Kerseblept.

Among the most important materials for the chronology of the pits are imported amphorae with seals from such ancient centres as Thasos, Heraclea, Enos, Rhodes and Acanthus. The analysis of the found materials shows that the pit sanctuary functioned during the period of the strongest development of the Odrysian kingdom - from the 2nd quarter of the 4th century BC - until the

conquest of this region of Thrace by Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander (3rd quarter of the 4th century BC).

The surprising discovery carried out at the site is a system of three parallel ditches, dated to the Early Bronze Age (2900-2100 BC). Their width is up to 2.80 m, and their depth is up to 3.0 m. These ditches are an extremely important monument for science, since at this stage they are the only registered ditches from this period on the territory of Bulgaria that are not circular in shape. Similar monuments are extremely rare to find outside the territory of Bulgaria. The study of the ditches represents a significant contribution to the study of the Early Bronze Age in this region of Bulgaria, where data on such facilities have been lacking so far.

In 2025, with funding from the Ministry of Culture, geophysical and Lidar surveys will be carried out at the site, which will allow for clarification of the entire area of the pit sanctuary, as well as the direction of development of the ditches.

One of the largest projects carried out by the expedition is the archaeological research of the temple complex near the village of Stroyno. The excavations began as rescue in 2014 and were triggered by a huge treasure hunters' intervention on the site.

In 2018, a geomagnetic survey was carried out on the site, which showed that a large architectural complex is developing underground on an area of over 35 decares, with the main peristyle building alone occupying about 25 decares. The complex is built of chain rooms located in front of the inner face of the fence wall. Inside it, a courtyard with an area of about 15 decares is formed, with the entire courtyard surrounded by a colonnade.

In the center of the courtyard is located an impressive round temple - tholos, built of two concentric circles inscribed in each other. The outer diameter of the temple is 36 m. It consists of two parts - an inner circular building and an outer tiled corridor.

Most likely, the inner building was partially covered and the rituals in it were performed under the open sky.

At this stage of the research, the site with a similar plan has not been registered on the territory of Bulgaria and the Balkans - its only analogue is from the Taman Peninsula, interpreted as a royal residence and sanctuary.

Regular archaeological excavations of the site, partially funded by the Foundation, began in 2020 and continue to this day. In total, 25 rooms of different nature and sizes have been studied or are in the process of being studied at the site. In some of the rooms, large areas of polychrome plaster on the walls have been revealed - geometric ornaments colored in red, black, yellow and gray have been applied to the white background. Similar decoration, both technologically and in color, is found in the wealthy homes of Pompeii, as well as in the richest villas of the Greco-Roman period.

The materials found during the excavations (votive tablets, cult objects, etc.) allowed the clarification of some aspects related to the cults practiced on the territory of the temple complex, namely the cult of the Thracian Horseman, the Goddess Tyche and the Goddess Minerva.

The large amount of medical instruments discovered at the site suggest another of its functions - probably at a certain period it also functioned as an "Asclepion" - i.e. a place where surgical and other medical manipulations were performed.

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The huge amount of coins discovered at the site allows for a very precise chronology to be established. The site was built at the end of the 1st century and existed as a temple complex in the

2nd century. The second period of its occupation was until the middle of the 3rd century when it was burned down, probably during the Gothic invasions.

And finally, I would like to briefly introduce you to our latest major discovery, made in August 2024. Near the ruler's house near the village of Knyazhevo, on the land of the village of Kapitan Petko Voivoda, during rescue excavations related to the implementation of an investment project, our expedition discovered and studied the richest grave from the late Hellenistic era ever discovered in Bulgaria.

The ritual is cremation, and around the body of the deceased are placed his weapons - swords, spears, a shield, as well as exceptional gold jewellery - a necklace, a fibula, two bracelets and a ring. These adornments are masterpieces of ancient jewellery and some of them have no any parallels in the world.

Next to the grave of the ruler is his horse cremated, on which three harnesses are placed: one is made of gold beads, gold applications and a gold headpiece, the other - of silver beads and silver applications, and the third - with bronze applications.

This ruler ruled during the time of Mostis – the last quarter of the 2nd, beginning of the 1st century BC.

A few words about our new project...

Over the past few years, our expedition, funded by the municipality of Elhovo and the municipality of Topolovgrad, has undertaken total field surveys in the lands of the municipalities of Elhovo, Bolyarovo and Topolovgrad. This is a territory through which the Tundzha River flows, which is one of the “gates” to the interior of Thrace, as well as an area through which some of the most important trade and cultural routes extend from the Greek colonies along the Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts to the centre of the powerful Odrysian kingdom and continue westward.

The surveys show that around the lower reaches of the Tundzha a special microdistrict has been established, in which there is a concentration of the richest mound burials associated with the heyday of the Odrysian kingdom – 5th-3rd centuries BC, with the Asteian kingdom 2nd-1st centuries BC, as well as the beginning of the Roman expansion 1st-2nd centuries AD.

Based on the field surveys, natural and geographical features, as well as the archaeological excavations conducted so far in Western Strandzha and Eastern Sakar, we have located the places with the greatest concentration of archaeological monuments, covering the period from the 3rd millennium BC to the end of the Roman era.

After their analysis, we decided that continuing the study of the Thracian funerary culture in this region is of particular importance. For this reason, in November 2024, we sent to the esteemed Project Committee of the Foundation a proposal for a new project for the archaeological study of the most representative mounds in this region, which was approved.

The work on the project will begin this year.

At the end of the presentation, I would like to answer the so-called “paradox”, very well formulated by Nils – *how is it that Southern Bulgaria is full of treasures of archaeological importance, but there is little interest from the government or other charitable organizations to provide financial support.*

State assistance is provided through the Ministry of Culture, which organizes a session every year to allocate funds for excavations. Funds are allocated as a priority for the old Bulgarian capitals, and



between 120-150 sites apply for the remaining amount, with funding usually insufficient and the same for all approved proposals.

The settlement sites we studied near the villages of Knyazhevo, Sinemorets and Stroyno received funding that was sufficient only for 15 days of work and the purchase and laying of a special coating (annually) on all discovered structures. The local museum provides year-round security for the site and its maintenance outside the excavation season.

**Requests for funding for mounds are not considered at all** - any funds are allocated only after a tomb is discovered in the given mound or, as in the case of Sinemorets, Borisovo and Kapitan Petko Voivoda, treasures or unique finds are discovered. However, even in such cases, the funding is mainly for the restoration of the finds and does not fully cover the needs of the expedition for conducting excavations. For this reason, where possible, assistance is provided by the local municipality or sponsors.

However, as we have repeatedly emphasized, the Strandzha and Sakar region is one of the poorest and least developed regions in Bulgaria. It is no coincidence that back in the 1970s, the state created the Strandzha-Sakar program to stimulate this region - people who settled here received a much higher salary than the rest of the country, could study without entrance exams at universities, etc. (of course, there were not many of them). However, after the democratic changes in 1989, everything was stopped.

The depopulation of the region is huge; there is no industry, the local people rely on tourism, which is extremely poorly developed, and there are no local sponsors.

**For this reason, the financial assistance that the Foundation provides to our expedition is extremely important and practically irreplaceable, and thanks to it, Bulgaria and our archaeology are enriched with incredible monuments of global importance.**

And in conclusion, I must note that the scientific results obtained during these 23 years of archaeological research on the territory of Strandzha and Sakar have been published in two monographs in Bulgarian and English, as well as in dozens of renowned scientific journals and collections in Bulgaria and abroad.

With the hundreds of gold, silver, bronze, metal, glass and ceramic objects found during the excavations - jewelry, vessels, weapons, household items, etc., 4 archaeological museums have been established - in the towns of Elhovo, Tsarevo, Malko Tarnovo and Topolovgrad, as well as two archaeological exhibitions in the museums in the towns of Karnobat and Sredets.

The most representative archaeological values are presented in the exhibitions of the National Archaeological Museum, Sofia and the National Museum of History, Sofia.

The most unique finds representing objects of world cultural heritage, have participated in dozens of international exhibitions devoted to the Thracian art and heritage: in Rome, Tokyo, San Francisco, Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, London, Moscow, Bergen, Basel, Warsaw, Skopje, etc.

**The enormous credit for all this also goes to the STICHTING HORIZON Foundation, whose selfless and constant financial support allowed our expedition to make all these discoveries.**

**We thank you for this with all our hearts and sincerely hope that our fruitful cooperation will continue in the future!**