The sheer size of the massive mound, the claustrophobic space, the cold, the smell of times past: entering a Thracian tomb is one of the must-do experiences in Bulgaria. More than 200 monumental Thracian tombs have been discovered so far, and they have proved to be more than imposing burial structures. Besides the awe they inspire, they are also an important source of information about the funeral rites and religious beliefs of the people who built them.

How the Thracians fell for monumental tombs is a question historians have yet to answer. Initially, the researchers thought that the Thracians were inspired by the much bigger and older tombs of the Mycenaean civilisation, which flourished in southern Greece between 1600 BC and 1200 BC. Other possible predecessors could be the dolmens and rock tombs in Thrace itself. But the relatively short period between the 5th and the 3rd centuries BC, when the Thracians built monumental tombs, has led to the conclusion that the idea was probably
borrowed from neighbouring areas which, too, had this type of architecture at the time. These include Anatolia, northern Greece, ancient Macedonia. The Thracians, of course, adapted what they borrowed according to their beliefs, taste and building technologies. The biggest concentration of monumental tombs is in the central part of southern Bulgaria and in the southeast, where the centre of the Odryssian kingdom was, and the lands of the Getae in the northeast. Outside of these regions, these tombs are rare.

Thracian monumental tombs are always hidden under a mound, and unlike elsewhere – in ancient Macedonia, for example – only one tomb would be built into a given tumulus.

The Thracians had a number of ways to make the huge, expensive and time-consuming mounds. Sometimes they would heap them during the building of the tomb, sometimes they would do it gradually, in several periods. But whatever the technique, no mound was formed before an elaborate set of rituals had been performed. Traces of these – piles of pottery shards, hearths, sacrificial pits, ceramic altars – keep popping up in the tumuli.

The biggest tumulus ever found is the Shushmanets Mound, near Shipka, with a diameter of 100 m and height of 20 m. Next in size are the nearby Golyama Kosmatka Mound (diameter 90 m, height 20 m), the Zhaba Mogila Mound near Srebeltsa (diameter 80-90 m, height 20 m), Ostrusha near Shipka (diameter 80 m, height 17 m) and the Mezek Mound near Svilengrad (diameter 90 m, height 14 m). Strong stone walls called crepes enclosed the bases of the mounds, protecting them from erosion. They also served as a symbolic border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The largest crepes discovered so far are the ones of the Chetinyova Mound, near Starosel; and the Mezek Mound, near Svilengrad – they are up to 3.5 m high and 5 m wide.

The Thracians built their tombs with a variety of materials: stone slabs, boulders,
rubble, mud bricks, wood, and used also the more expensive squared blocks or bricks. The earliest Thracian tombs were small and had simple designs. They would usually have a corridor, which provided the connection with the outside world; an antechamber, which served for storing burial goods or as a room for later burials; and a chamber, either rectangular or circular. Tombs became bigger and more elaborate after the middle of the 4th Century BC, when the political and economic power of the Odrysian and Getae kings was in ascendance. The tomb from Gagovo, near Popovo, in Bulgaria’s northeast, for example, had two semi-circular burial chambers, and the Ostrusha Tomb, near Shipka, had six different rooms, including a chamber cut of solid rock.

By the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd centuries BC, the Macedonian fashion of tombs with cylindrical vaults made its way into Thrace, its finest example being the UNESCO-listed Sveshtari Tomb in the Storyanovo archaeological reserve. These were the times when the two biggest tombs were built, including the Mezek Tomb (almost 30 m long and 4.3 m high) and the tomb in the Golyama Kosmatka Mound (26 m long and 4.5 m high). Two-winged doors of wood or stone kept the tombs closed, but few of these have been preserved. The stone doors are often found broken on the floor or even outside the tomb. Whether this was done by treasure-hunters or by Thracians performing a ritual for the rebirth of the deified dead is anybody’s guess. Not all doors, however, were the same: some tombs in the Storyanovo reserve have sliding doors and the door guarding the inside of the Mezek tomb was made of bronze.

Frescoes and architectural ornaments are not uncommon in the Thracian tombs. They depict scenes of sacred hunts, the deification of dead aristocrats, battles and funeral feasts. Few are preserved, in the Aleksandrovo, Kazanlak, Sveshtari, Ostrusha and Maglizh tombs. Doric and Ionic columns adorned some tombs – for example, at Sveshtari, Shushmanets and Starosel. Sculptures are extremely rare. For now we know about the 10 caryatids in the Sveshtari tomb and the two lions from the Chesinyova Mound, of which only three paws have survived. Both the bronze boar at the Mezek Tomb and the bronze head of a bearded man from the Golyama Kosmatka Tomb, identified by some to be the Odrysian king Seuthes III, once used to be parts of bigger sculptures, now lost.

The identity of the painters and sculptors who decorated the tombs is a matter of debate. Some are thought to have been Greeks – as, for example, the man who painted the exquisite murals in the Kazanlak Tomb. Others, like the author of the Aleksandrovo Tomb frescoes, were more likely Thracians. How to save a tomb? When the excavations at a tomb end, the site is often left without proper covering and the elements take over, bringing along rapid deterioration. To avoid this, some tombs have been moved from their original locations to more protected environments. The tomb from the town of Borovo, near Ruse, for example, initially stood in a field about 5 km outside the town. Now it is in the town centre.

The same goes for the tomb of Gonimasedze, wife of Seuthes, which used to lie near Smadovo. It is now exhibited in the Shumen Museum of History.

Left: The dromos, or corridor, of Kazanlak Tomb is a fine example of the ancient Thracian tradition of covering rectangular rooms with ceilings of overstepping bricks or stone slabs. This is one of the oldest building techniques in the world. The heads of Helios (pictured) and Medusa are carved on the marble doors of the Golyama Kosmatka Tomb, as guardians of the afterlife.

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Thracian tombs were furnished with stone funerary beds, sometimes with pillows sculpted on them, and with a bunch of other furniture: stone and wooden benches, seats, altars. Expensive and time-consuming, tombs were used continuously by later generations, sometimes for centuries. Still, some tombs seem to have been destroyed deliberately or left unfinished.

In most cases, ancient and modern-day treasure-hunters hit upon the tombs before the archaeologists, emptying the monuments and breaking them. The examples of tombs untouched by intruders are too few, most notably the ones in the Mezek, Sashova Mogila and Golyama Kosmatka mounds. But the finds from the tombs still speak volumes about the life and death of the ancient Thracians. Expensive ceramic and metal vessels, made locally or imported from Greece, were buried along with weapons and lavish jewellery of silver and gold, to serve their owners in the afterlife. These objects were often ritually broken, as if they should “die” too.

The remains of the deceased present another enigma. Complete skeletons are practically nonexistent, archaeologists usually discover only parts of them – for example, the skull, the femurs or odd bones. These often belong to different people.

Actually, the Thracians had been doing this since the beginning of the 1st Millennium BC. The explanation for this strange ritual could be the Thracian Orphic rites of immortalisation and deification of priests, kings and distinguished persons. In order to achieve divinity, they were dismembered just like Orpheus, the supposed founder of this religion, was torn to pieces by the mad maenads. Ritualistically slain horses and dogs are often found at the Thracian tombs, buried separately or along with the deceased. Animal skeletons are usually found in anatomical order, but this has not always been the case – the horses and dogs found in the tombs of Sveshtari, for example, were decapitated. The people buried in these tombs with such pomp and ceremony were obviously men and women of high rank, including kings and their families. Only one of them has been positively identified so far – Gonimasedze, the wife of Suses. She was buried in a tomb with a decorative façade near the city of Smyadovo, in Bulgaria’s northeast, and a funeral inscription over the entrance of the tomb tells us her name. The Sveshtari Tomb was definitely a royal one, yet the man it belonged to has been identified only on indirect evidence.

As with so many other questions about the life and death of the ancient Thracians, this one lacks a definitive answer. For now the secrets of the Thracian monumental tombs remain unexplained.

Entering a tomb

The late Dr Georgi Kitov discovered more monumental Thracian tombs than any of his colleagues. How did he feel? In his 2008 book, Mounds, Temples, Tombs, he left a vivid description of his first steps in the Sashova Mogla tomb, in 1955.

In the euphoria that set upon us, we cleared the upper part of the entrance. A second after I had forbidden anyone to follow me, I stood in front of a sight beyond description. A relatively big chamber with semi-cylindrical vault, a floor covered with sand and scattered pottery. To the left, a bed with the remains of a human skeleton, to the right a horse skeleton. A variety of metal vessels on the floor... The tomb hadn’t been robbed, and hadn’t been untouched since it was closed more than 20 centuries ago... I crawled back outside, raised my hands and cried: ‘A thing unseen by a living man!’