

Dear LUTSF

Bulgarian Ritual Dance Tour
2-13 May 2006

I am writing to express my deep thanks for the funding support I received from the LUTSF which enabled me to attend this seminar. It was a fantastic experience that has enriched my teaching of Bulgarian dance and culture and I know has already enriched the experiences of my dance participants.

I was very excited to witness traditional dance in its context at the St. George's Day festival in Varvara. We participated in the festival and felt very welcomed and encouraged to join in every aspect. I also very much enjoyed the opportunity to see much of Bulgaria which is a beautiful country with a rich tradition of folklore and customs. Our contact with the Bulgarian people was moving and memorable and was very much a highlight of the experience for me. There were difficulties with the leadership of the tour but despite these, I feel I gained much. I felt very inspired by the tour and I know that will translate into my work over the coming year.

Since returning from the Tour I have been teaching much of what I learned: in a dance course on Balkan Circle Dance (June/July 2006), on a residential weekend where I concentrated on Bulgarian dance (7-9 July 2006) and in a public presentation on my trip (17 July 2006). Participants included not only dancers from the York area but included people from North, South, East and West Yorkshire, Cleveland, Scotland, Manchester, and Oxfordshire. I will also be sharing the dances at a dance workshop I am leading on Balkan dance in Glasgow on 30 September.

I have found all my contact with the LUTSF very efficient and I appreciated the arrangements and attention from John Lesirge. Everyone was very professional. My only criticism is that I could not access the website when I was first enquiring about whether this fund would be appropriate for me, even though this was in December.

My report is an article, or may be divided into a series of articles, for the Grapevine magazine, the magazine of the international circle dance network. The article will appear in the autumn issue.

Yours sincerely,

Karen Michaelsen

The Archaeology of the Dance
Ritual Dance Tour of Bulgaria

As the plane prepared to land in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, I felt like a lottery winner in managing to get here at all. Months previously, I had been inspired by a Balkan dancing workshop with Yves Moreau during which we had done a ritual dance called *Nestinarsko Horo*. The idea of ritual dance began to fascinate me and little did I know that it would be the love of this dance that would take me to Bulgaria six months later.

Soon after Yves' workshop, I received an email about *The Bulgaria Ritual Dance Tour*, which, I was amazed to discover, included a trip to Bulgari, the village where the Nestinarsko dance and ritual originates. It was serendipity! And I began a process of applying for and obtaining funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. The tour was sponsored by the Institute of Archaeomythology, founded by one of our leaders, Joan Marler, to further the interpretive study of the Neolithic civilisations. Bulgaria is rich in what is known as the 'Old European' culture, with many fantastic archaeological sites and finds. The theme of this tour was to draw a link between the Old European culture and the traditional ritual dance, that is, to show how the dance form, the ritual dances, and the festivals could have origins in the Neolithic Goddess worshipping culture.



This theme gave the tour an absorbing variety, visiting marvellous collections in archaeological museums and witnessing and participating in festivals and festival reconstructions. The tour was timed to coincide with one significant festival, *Gergiovden*, St. George's Day, a 2-3 day festival from 5-7 May. This took place mainly at Varvara, a south-central village, nestled in the lush mountains.

**Gergiovden**

St. George's Day is a major religious holiday with a complexity of different ritual practices. Particular dances, songs, foods, especially breads, blend in with Orthodox Church ceremonies. The 6 May celebrations began with a long and arduous procession up their sacred mountain. I have never hiked with 200



people before but it was an amazing cacophony of sound, the banging of the gong which led the procession, the *Babi*, the grandmothers, singing, the lively chatter, the calls of blessings by the village women as they threw wheat grains over us, the tread of feet as the way became steeper and grittier.

Two and a half hours later, over the mountain's peak, we arrived at the sacred meadow and oak groves, to be joined by another 200-300 hundred

people. Ritual breads were blessed, the lambs we had seen blessed the previous day, were cooking on spits, beds of oak branches were spread for our picnic blanket and the *Babi* led the dancing! There was a poignant moment when the *Babi* were trying to teach the young girls how to do the *Pravo*. Each year, fewer of the *Babi* can make the journey up the mountain and unless the younger women can learn to appreciate the significance of the dance, a time will come when it will no longer be done. The *Horo* is done in three sacred places, in the meadow at the top of the mountain, at the first rest on the way back and in the village square. The dance is done to invoke the rain! As their saying goes, "Every drop of rain on St. George's day is a drop of gold." This too relates to ensuring fertility and is symbolic of the ancient concept of the 'sacred marriage,' Father Sky fertilising Mother Earth.

Oak, as their sacred tree, was present in a variety of ways: the dancers carried oak branches, men wore oak 'buttonholes' and even the packhorses were adorned with oak. We made wreaths from oak leaves and many people, men and women wore these. It reminded me of the folk traditions in Derbyshire, particularly the Castleton Garland at the end of May, where everyone also wears a sprig of oak.

Wherever we travelled in Bulgaria, we were greeted by the older women of the village, the *Babi*, the grandmothers, as they are the women who still maintain the traditions of singing and dancing. We were served ritual bread, herbs and wine, a ceremony that was repeated at several villages. As these women age and die, the traditions too will die, as few of the young women are interested in continuing them. All over Bulgaria, there is a strong desire to 'catch-up' and be part of the western world. Bulgaria's economy is fragile and has suffered badly since the collapse of the USSR. The economic need to grow and thrive has a direct and visible effect on the traditions. Over a million young Bulgarians have left the country in order to find work. In many villages, we saw few young people and sometimes, no children!



Our meeting with the *Babi* of Varvara was deep and intense. Perhaps it was our love and appreciation of their folklore which bound us together. But, for many of us, meeting these women was like meeting our ancestors, a brief and intense glimpse into the past, how ancient communities survived, thrived, were self-supporting and enjoyed a richness of culture.

In the many villages we visited, it was to see dance as an affirmation of life, not separate from life, but part and parcel with it. These ritual dances were a vital ingredient of the celebrations for spring and summer, when the fertility of the land returns. It was moving to see, even now, how the village people are connected to the land, the animals and to each other. This interrelationship with the fertility of life all around them was the very lifeline which has assured the continuation of the community for several millennia. The dance is an obvious manifestation of that interconnectedness.

Symbolism

There is much symbolism around the dance. The word, dance, has only been in the Bulgarian language for the last 150 years or so. Prior to that time, 'dance' was expressed by a word like 'play' or something similar. The *Horo*, a common dance form in traditional Bulgarian folkdance, is seen as a snake, significant for the goddess worshipping cultures as a symbol of transformation. When closed, it's a snake biting its tail: when open, a spiral, or other snake-like form. The front of the *Horo* chain is known as the 'head of the horo' with the end known as 'the tail'. This was very evident when at times, I saw the 'tail' decide to take the dance in a different direction! The dance is seen as a living thing, a form that is created by the dancers moving together. How often have we as circle dancers tried to articulate what circle dance is, what it means to us and what happens to us when we dance? It strikes me as noteworthy that the Bulgarians seem to have an inherent understanding of this miracle that happens when we dance together!

The symbolism is carried too to the significance of the belts worn by all the women dancers. The 'closed' snake corresponds to the belief that heaven encircles the neck, the earth encircles the waist and below the earth encircles

the knees. ^[1] Wearing a belt signifies a readiness for life on earth, a maturity. It is an important and well-used component of Bulgarian traditional costume and is the most common dance hold for the *Horo*. I really enjoyed using the belt hold. It felt very secure and reassuring and I have begun to explore using this hold with my dancers.

It was very exciting to combine the tour with visits to archaeological museums and sites and I was able to see the most fantastic Neolithic and Thracian artefacts. Many of the designs on vases, bowls and other pieces of pottery were symbols that could be directly correlated to the symbols in the dance: spirals, tree of life, double headed snakes. Other Neolithic designs also were found in the prolific embroidery of costumes, wall hangings, rugs and other cloth. These included hearts, crosses, lozenges and zigzag meanders.



But what of the meaning of these symbols? As well as being related to the snake, the Spiral is considered to be a symbol of connectedness, a visual reminder that polarities can be harmonised, that differences can be incorporated. For the Neolithic civilisation, the survival of the community depended on the harmonisation of conflict.

The Tree of Life is a symbol of interconnectedness. We talk today of the 'Family Tree' when we are thinking about our genealogy and even that is a symbol of our connections to generations before and after us. I think too, it is a symbol of our connection to Nature, to our dependence on her and our relationship with her. The Tree of Life motif is well recognised as being manifest in the dance as the *Pravo*, three steps: R, Lxf, R (the trunk) then do something to the right, followed by do something to the left: a cross, a lift or a step, (the branches). The *Pravo* was the main dance of Gergiovden, St. George's Day festival in Varvara.

Grain too was a recurrent symbol in the festivals we attended. As a symbol of fertility, grain was thrown at us as we began our climb up the sacred mountain of Varvara, to bless us and to wish us good health. As we came back down the mountain, we met one of the Babi, standing outside her house with a bowl of grains, which she invited us to eat. Grain in the form of bread was also ever present. A ritual of blessing included large loaves of bread to be dipped in herbs followed by a good swig of wonderful red Bulgarian wine! Bread, the staff of life and wine – what more do you need?

Finally, the table itself is a powerful symbol. The Bulgarians and indeed the Balkan countries as a whole, are renowned for their hospitality. However, I saw miniature representations of tables in the archaeological collections and it is thought that these are symbols of the table as an altar. The table too, is the heart of the home, the place of sharing, eating, and singing in the tradition of 'table' songs. The table is therefore a setting of celebration, an obvious manifestation of fertility and nurture. We experienced the 'table' many times, with feasts prepared for us wherever we went. Their hospitality was genuine and humbling.

The study of folklore in Bulgaria is a monumental subject, as I began to appreciate during the tour. There is huge variety and complexity to Bulgarian dance culture, which is also, in its traditional form, inseparable from the wider culture and belief system. One of our leaders, Anna Shtarbanova, has been studying folklore for 25 years, working with her mother, Anna Ilieva, who has been studying it for nearly 50 years!

Nestinarki

The final part of our journey in Bulgaria was to visit a small, remote village, high in the Strandza mountains, to learn about the fire walking ritual which happens here each year on the 3 & 4 June, the feast days of St. Constantine and St. Elena. We travelled up through the forest, seeing wild rhododendrons and passing a Turkish checkpoint, even though we were still in Bulgaria. Our destination, Bulgari, is only one mountain away from Turkey.

We met the *Nestinarski*, Visilina, who took us around the village to follow the steps of the procession and the journey of the icons. We were told that the origin of the ritual dates from the time of the Christianisation of the area but there is also a theory that it originated much earlier in ancient Anatolia. I am also aware that there have been other fire walking rituals in Greece and other parts of the Balkans.



During the festival, the people dance as the village icons are carried from the church to a small chapel used only for this purpose. In the evening, a fire is made and the *Nestinarski*, the initiated, usually women but can be men, walk over the coals of the fire. The *Nestinarski* walk straight in, then swivel and go out on a diagonal. This 'meander' is recognised as a symbol of energy and the life giving force. The dance I had learned several months before from Yves Moreau, was, I understood, a dance that was done prior to the fire walking, to build up the atmosphere and create the intention prior to the ritual, very much the feeling you get when doing the dance. The icons are 'rested' in the chapel overnight and the next day, are taken to St. Elena's well and blessed with sacred water, while the people dance the *Horo* in the meadow nearby.

The initiation of the *Nestinarski* is unknown and may well have been lost but there are several qualities about them that are known. They must have been married and they must have been very ill and have suffered but have come through this. They are considered wise women and are consulted for advice, giving them a measure of authority and respect in the community.

As we were there too early for the festival, we saw an enactment of it at our hotel. Although the accompanying folk group's performance and the opportunity to dance with them was enjoyable, the ritual itself lacked passion as it was done out of context. Of course, many aspects of the ritual were changed and some may have been deliberately left out in order to 'protect' the ritual.

The Tour

There are many layers to any experience and a tour highlights those layers. There are the basic, practical arrangements: accommodation, food, travel, information. Then there is the leadership: the teaching, imparting of skills, preparing for the experiences to come. There is you, the participant: your needs, your expectations. There is the group: the dynamics, the friendships, the conflicts, the group bonding. And finally, there is the 'other': the meeting people, the observations and participations in experiences, the contacts.

I have always been interested in the relationship between leadership and group dynamics, and how this interplay, managed well, can 'hold' a group and facilitate a satisfying experience. I believe that anyone who calls themselves a leader of a group has an obligation to take on this responsibility, to think through the 'aims,' and how those aims attempt to meet the differing needs of any given group of people.

On a practical level, the tour was a great success. We enjoyed wonderful hospitality, care and attention from the tour guides, *Balkan Connections, Inc.* But the dance leadership missed many opportunities to strengthen our experience and understanding of our numerous, daily meetings with Bulgarian people. In my experience, it is a common mistake to assume that every moment must be filled. Time and attention is needed to assimilate, digest, question and discuss. The value of any experience is not just the 'how much' but is, more importantly, for me anyway, the quality. And, it seems to me, that quantity and quality are not necessarily compatible.

In Conclusion

The archaeology of the dance is an 'uncovering', and an interpretive work, finding meaning and significance in dance, music and folk customs by recognising their interplay and connectedness. It is not an absolute science so a certain amount of supposition and belief is involved. There must also be a recognition and appreciation that customs and folklore evolve and that evolution is layered, much like the layering of civilisations evident in an archaeological dig. Some traditions will be effected by more recent influences such as political or religious impositions and others will be from ancient traditions. Also, in Bulgaria it can be a confusing investigation to weed out the traditional dance from those that are more recent choreographies.

I have attempted to penetrate the surface of what was an intense and packed tour, which also included dances for the day after St. George's Day, marked as his sister's day, and reconstructions of Midsummer dances. There certainly was evidence all around us of those associations with a culture that honoured the feminine principle. It does not take much of an imagination to see how the power of the feminine is revered, sung, danced, woven in cloth, baked in ritual bread, dressed, and venerated through numerous seasonal rituals. (See Laura Shannon's articles in Grapevines Winter 04 and Spring 05 for more information.) However, the women we met throughout Bulgaria, were Christian and did not identify the significance of these links in the same way as perhaps those of us on the tour.

It was an emotional journey, and I felt privileged to witness traditional dance in its context. We were so warmly welcomed by the villages' *Babi*. But the realisation that these traditions will in many cases die with these women was overwhelmingly sad. Bulgaria is a country on the brink of change. It is inevitable and unstoppable. The Bulgarians want it and need it. The challenge remains how they can retain the richness of their song and dance in a way that also retains its meaning and ritual.

Karen Michaelsen
July 2006

For more information and reading:

www.archaeomythology.org

Gimbutas, Maria. 'The Living Goddesses.' University of California Press. 2001.

'The Goddess Lives! Sacred Dance in Bulgaria, Parts 1 & 2' Laura Shannon, Grapevine issues Winter 2004 and Spring 2005.

The travel cost of this project was support by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. For more information see:

www.ullmann-trav.fsnet.co.uk (between 1 Sept and 24 January each year)

The tour cost of this project was funded by the Arts Council through my regional office. For more information see:

www.artscouncil.org.uk

[1] Ilieva, Anna and Shtarbanova, Anna "Zoomorphic Images in Bulgarian Women's Ritual Dances in the Context of Old European Symbolism", The Journal of Archaeomythology, Summer 2005, Vol 1 Number 1.