Bulgaria and Greece

“Hunting fresco: the wings of angels”

Photo Research with the study of fresco technique

Period: Paleochristian (Early Christian), Medieval, Late Medieval

Code: BGGR27

Session: May 30 - June 13 2027

Cost starting from: 2499 EUR/ aprox. 2745 USD







The Project and the Course

General Information

Project Type: Field School & Research Expedition

Field School Dates: May 30 - June 13, 2027

About the Project: The “Hunting fresco: the wings of angels” Photo Research Expedition with the study of fresco technique in Paleochristian (Early Christian), Medieval Balkan and Northern Greece Churches, provides a unique opportunity for participants to engage in study and training while exploring and documenting understudied and/or abandoned medieval churches and chapels, along with their frescoes. The focus will be on documenting medieval ecclesiastical heritage in western Bulgaria and northern Greece. Participants will also have the opportunity to visit significant archaeological and historical sites in the region, including two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Rila Monastery and Boyana Church in Bulgaria, St. George, as well as Panagia Chalkeon,St Demetrius,Panaghia Achiropiitos in Thessaloniki, as well as various monasteries, museums, and archaeological sites throughout Bulgaria and Greece, including the Bulgarian capital city, Sofia.

Participants will receive training in survey management, digital photography, architectural surveys, iconographic programs, technical drawing, and using a dumpy level. They will learn to develop digital image archives and will receive a theoretical introduction to Byzantine art, architecture, and religious iconography, along with photographic techniques for documenting cultural heritage, such as photogrammetry and Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI).

This field school is specifically designed for students and young specialists in heritage, archaeology, and conservation, as well as artists and art connoisseurs. However, it is open to anyone interested in medieval civilisation in Southeastern Europe, particularly Byzantine and Christian Orthodox architecture, arts, and iconography from the paleochristian and late medieval period (13th to 17th centuries), digital photography, documentation of ecclesiastical architecture and frescoes, cultural heritage preservation, and travel to significant heritage sites in Bulgaria and Northern Greece.

Project Venue and Accommodation: Participants will stay consecutively at Hotel Rila in downtown Sofia, Bulgaria and at Central Hotel in Thessaloniki, Greece. The ecclesiastical sites to be documented are situated within a radius of approximately 20 to 100 km (13 to 65 miles) from the project hotels. Travel arrangements will be coordinated by the **Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies** (EMAAHS)

Partner in This Project: Accademiy of Brera Milan city, Academy of Christian Arts

Director: Siyana Georgieva, CEO of the Field School & Expedition; started in: 2024

Application Deadline: April 30, 2027

Minimum Length of Stay: Two weeks

Minimum Age: 18

Project Language: English

Experience Required: All candidates should possess some familiarity with the basic principles of photography and DSLR cameras.

Special Considerations: This project is not recommended for individuals with health issues that may be exacerbated by intensive outdoor activities or those who have allergies to dust and mold.

Visa Note: Citizens of the EU, EEA, UK, USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand do not need entry visas for Bulgaria and Greece. Those from countries not specified should check in advance if they require entry visas for either or both countries, and any associated costs will be the responsibility of the participants.

Special Requirements:

- Participants must inform the project staff in advance of any health issues, allergies, and food preferences.
- Participants are expected to bring a laptop with at least 50 GB of free disk space, a mouse, and a USB flash drive. The recommended operating system is Windows 10 or newer. While you do not need to bring a personal DSLR camera, we recommend it to enhance your digital photography skills.
- The reimbursement payment will not cover insurance. Participants must arrange their own insurance before travelling to Bulgaria and Greece. EU citizens can access Bulgarian medical services with proof of their home-country health insurance, such as a card or certificate. Participants should pack clothing and toiletries suitable for a range of weather conditions, from warm and sunny to rainy, windy, and cold.
- Participants are expected to prepare for the expedition by reviewing the materials provided by the **Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies** (EMAAHS) before the project begins.
- All participants will be required to release copyright of all graphic materials they create and contribute during the expedition (including maps, drawings, photographic images, etc.) to the Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies for non-commercial use.

Historical Context & Period

From the Early Christian and Early Medieval eras through the Late and Post-Medieval periods (4th to 17th centuries), the Balkans served as a vital crossroads of faith, empire, and artistic exchange. In Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, the legalization of Christianity and the rise of the Byzantine Empire—alongside the First Bulgarian Empire—sparked the construction of monumental basilicas, martyria, and domed churches decorated with intricate mosaics and early fresco cycles. Nowhere is this evolution clearer than in Thessaloniki, one of the empire's foremost artistic centers, whose landmark churches—from the Rotunda, Acheiropoietos, and Hagios Demetrios to Hosios David and Hagia Sophia—preserve masterpieces of Early Christian and Middle Byzantine mosaic and architectural design.
The subsequent Late and Post-Medieval centuries (13th to 17th centuries) were marked by profound geopolitical upheaval, including the decline of Byzantium, the rise and fall of the Second Bulgarian Empire, and the Empire, culminating in the Ottoman conquest of Southeastern Europe and the height of Ottoman rule. Even amid political fragmentation, artistic innovation flourished across the region, exemplified by the expressive frescoes and mosaics of Thessaloniki's Palaeologan-era churches, such as the Holy Apostles and Saint Nicholas Orphanos. Across these eras, the Christian temples that participants in the field school will visit and study were built in a Balkan region where diverse builders, workshops, and artisan guilds converged, blending monumental Byzantine traditions with local craftsmanship to preserve sacred art through centuries of change.

Today, what remains of Early Christian and medieval art in the area includes small chapels and churches that withstood the Ottoman invasions of the 14th and 15th centuries, as well as subsequent wars and social and political upheavals. Many of these monuments display modest architectural styles, often hiding exquisite frescoes and mosaics behind their unassuming exteriors. However, numerous sites have been abandoned for extended periods, suffering visible damage from past vandalism alongside ongoing decay caused by weather exposure and a lack of maintenance.

The “Hunting fresco: the wings of angels” Photo Research Expedition, with the study of fresco technique in Early and Medieval Balkan Churches and Chapels, organised by the **Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies** (EMAAHS), began in 2024 as a combination of an international field school and a research expedition aimed at studying and documenting medieval ecclesiastical wall paintings in the Balkans, Greece, Cyprus and Italy. By 2024, the project's scope expanded to include the study and documentation (textual, graphic, photographic, and video) of not only the churches' wall paintings but also their architecture, historical and archaeological context, and the cultural values associated with them. Advocacy for the preservation of these monuments among local stakeholders became an integral part of the project, yet the team chose to retain the original project title.

Since its inception, the Expedition has been conducted annually for two to three weeks. Its focus has primarily centered on understudied and abandoned Early Christian, medieval, and post-medieval (4th–17th centuries) Christian temples—spanning landmark centers such as Thessaloniki alongside rural monuments in the Nišava River Basin in Bulgaria and Serbia and the Iskar River Gorge in Bulgaria. In recent years, specialists from Bulgaria, Italy, Cyprus, and Greece, working alongside students from around the globe, have contributed to enhancing and expanding an existing database of architectural drawings and photographic records for over 30 monuments. The Expedition's ultimate goal is to publish a comprehensive corpus encompassing more than 50 sites and to develop follow-up initiatives dedicated to supporting the most endangered among them through conservation, restoration, site management, and fundraising.

The project's foundation is based on education, research, and historic preservation, fostering a symbiotic relationship among researchers, conservators, students, and local communities.

The Team

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Dr. Siyana Georgieva - archaeologist, history of art CEO of the **Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies** (EMAAHS) and professor of art of history and digital workflows to document architecture, frescoes, and mosaics with scientific accuracy and minimal distortion. Early Cristian and Byzantine architecture.

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Dr. Yana Georgieva – Art historical and heritage photography relies on specialised optical, lighting, Academy of Brera, Milan

Dr. Fabio Vasquez - Teacher of Drone photogrammetry involves capturing overlapping aerial photographs to create 3D models, orthomosaics, and topographic maps and Energy Psychology Coaching

The Field School

In 2027, the project envisions expanding the database established during previous seasons by creating new records through the documentation of the architecture and frescoes (along with their condition) of at least six medieval Christian Orthodox chapels or small churches in Western Bulgaria and Northern Greece. Additionally, the project will focus on collecting new data regarding their history, artifacts, and surrounding environment.

All participants will receive:

- **Access to project readings**
- **Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology, Art and Heritage Studies (EMAAHS) Field School Certificate**

  specifying the fieldwork hours, educational modules, and sites visited
- **T-shirt**

The fieldwork activities include:

- Practicing fundamental survey and documentation techniques such as visual inspection, sketching, and taking measurements using laser devices, tapes, and dumpy levels.
- Creating technical drawings through both manual and digital methods.

- Capturing digital photographs, including orthophotography, for accurate documentation.

- Developing comprehensive records of ecclesiastical sites, incorporating textual descriptions, graphic illustrations, and photographic evidence.

- Conducting preliminary interpretation and identification of architectural styles, construction techniques, fresco iconography, and artistic styles related to the sites.

Lectures:

- Brief History of the Balkans: Covers the early Christian, late medieval and postmedieval periods

- Introduction to Bulgarian History: On-site at the National History Museum.

- Introduction to Orthodox Church Architecture

- Window to Heaven: The Orthodox Icon between Art and Theology -- onsite at the Museum of Christian Art, Sofia

- Shaping the Holy Space: Impact of the Liturgy on Orthodox Church Architecture, Interior Design and Arts

- Kingdom of Heaven on Earth: Who is Who in the Iconographic Program of the Late/Post Medieval Orthodox Churches in the Balkans

- Graphic & Photographic Documentation: Fieldwork practices.

- Advanced Photogrammetry & Imaging: Introduction to photogrammetry, RTI, and other digital documentation methods.

- History of Sofia: Onsite in Sofia.

- History & Art of Boyana Church: Onsite at Boyana Church.

- Life in Orthodox Monasteries: On-site at Rila Monastery.

- History of Rila Monastery: Onsite at Rila Monastery.

- Basic Field Methods: Survey and documentation techniques for architecture and frescoes.

- The architecture of Byzantine Greece: an introduction
- Holy Apostles Church: Late Byzantine architecture and monastic patronage
- Church of Saint Demetrios: cult, pilgrimage, and urban identity
- Panagia Acheiropoietos: Early Byzantine architecture and liturgical space
- Agia Sophia metro station: archaeology and the modern city
- Hagia Sophia: monumentality and religious continuity
- Rotunda and Arch of Galerius: imperial transformation and Christian appropriation.

Workshops:

- Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) for advanced digital documentation.

- Technical drawing techniques for architectural, conservation, and art history records.

- Post-expedition work, including digital archiving of collected data.

On-site instructions:

- Maintaining and elaborating a Field Journal.

- Creating sketches and taking measurements.

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Digital photography for heritage documentation — techniques, timing, and best practices.

- Health and Safety guidelines during fieldwork.

Selection of two topics on which participants will have the opportunity to give a short talk during the various visits