

FRESCO HUNTING: PHOTO RESEARCH EXPEDITION TO MEDIEVAL BALKAN CHURCHES, BULGARIA & SERBIA

Course ID: HIS 489

May 25-June 7, 2026

Academic Credits: 4 Semester Credit Units (Equivalent to 6 Quarter Units)

School of Record: Culver Stockton College

DIRECTORS:

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INTRODUCTION

Between the 14th & 17th centuries CE, the Balkans experienced troubling, violent times. The Byzantine Empire, the Second Bulgarian Empire and the Serbian Empire collapsed in the 15th century, and the Ottoman Empire conquered Southeastern Europe. The many wars, and the accompanying social and political upheavals, had a direct impact on the expression of Christian Orthodox practice and iconography. During this Late Medieval period, Christian Orthodox structures were built to attract the least attention, with humble architecture on the outside, but with exquisite frescos inside.

In the past 100 years, many of these structures were abandoned and fell into misuse and disrepair. Some have been looted – first during the Ottoman Empire by either Muslim Turks or superstitious local Christians – and then by modern looters and vandals. Many structures are collapsing due to the impact of weather and lack of maintenance. These important cultural heritage monuments are disappearing. This program is part of a long term project to document these Christian Orthodox

structures and preserve their heritage for future generations – in photographic and digital format at a minimum and raise public awareness of state recognition and legal preservation when possible.

The Fresco-Hunting Photo Research Expedition systematically documents abandoned medieval churches and chapels – and their frescos – in western Bulgaria and Serbia. Students will take part in this process and will gain context and understanding of Christian Orthodox iconography through visitation to several churches, monasteries, museums, and archaeological sites in these two countries. Thus far, the Fresco-Hunting Photo Research Expedition has been successful in raising public awareness and three sites have now been formally designated as official state monuments and protected under the law – Balsha, Kalotina, and Zimevitsa. In 2017, the Balkan Heritage Foundation issued the [first e-book dedicated to one of the churches](#) – the 17th century church St. Theodore Tyro in Zimevitsa. We are now working, and students in this program will take part in collecting more data for the publication of more of these churches and chapels.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER

The Anthropocene Research Center was established to support field training in a range of sciences at sites within the U.S. & across the world. Traveling and conducting field work involves risk. Students interested in participating in any ARC program must weigh the potential risk against the value of education provided by the program of their choosing.

Risk is inherent in everything we do, and the ARC takes risks seriously. A committee of leading scholars review each field school location prior to approval. Once a program is accepted, the ARC continually monitors conditions at the program's site and so we can provide an experience that is as safe as possible.

The ARC does not provide trip or travel cancellation insurance. Students are encouraged to explore such insurance policies on their own. Post Covid 19, most basic policies do not cover trip cancellation due to pandemics. If you wish to purchase an insurance policy that covers such contingencies, explore Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) plans. [Insuremytrip.com](#), [Squaremouth.com](#) or [Travelguard.com](#) are possible websites where students may explore different insurance policies.

Students should be aware that conditions in the field are different than those experienced at home, dorms or college towns. Students will be exposed to the elements, live in rustic accommodation, and expect to engage in daily physical activity.

We do our best to follow schedule and activities as outlined in this syllabus. Yet local permitting agencies, political, environmental, personal, and/or weather conditions may force changes. This syllabus, therefore, is only a general commitment. Students should allow flexibility and adaptability as research work is frequently subject to modification.

All students must consult medical professionals to ensure they are fit to participate in an ARC field program. ARC is not qualified to provide medical advice. For all other concerns, please consult with ARC staff members or program director(s) – as appropriate.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of the program the participants will know:

- How to practice basic survey and documentation techniques based on postmedieval ecclesiastical monuments and their frescoes: Visual inspection, measurement using laser/tape

and dumpy level, scale-drawing, sketching, digital photography, rendering and interpretation of data.

- Creating textual, graphic and photographic records
- (Preliminary) interpretation and identification of architectural styles and construction techniques, as well as fresco iconography, techniques and styles

LEARNT SKILLS

We strongly support students who seek employment in the Cultural Resource Management sector – whether with private CRM companies or in government compliance agencies. CRM employers seek to understand the skills students learn at the field school, so listing (and ranking) those should help students secure CRM employment. To that end, we are listing all the skills students will learn during this program. At the end of the field school, students will get a Certificate of Completion, where each skill will be ranked at one of three levels:

- ✓ **Basic:** Can perform the skill/task with some supervision.
- ✓ **Competent:** Can perform the skill/task without any supervision.
- ✓ **Advanced:** Can perform the skill/task and teach others how to do it.

Students will be trained in the following skills:

Skill	Skill Definition
Field-Data Recording	Ability to use printed or digital sheets to document & record field data
Geodesy	Ability to understand and create products taking into effect earth's figure, orientation and space and how it changes over time
Photography	Ability to take clear images of various feature, artifact & soil colors at various light and field depth conditions
Image Editing software	Ability to display, create & edit images/graphics in graphic software, such as Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, etc.
Public Interpretation	Ability to understand site history and provide clear and coherent interpretation for the public
Report Writing	Ability to write technical reports in coherent language that follow both federal and state regulations and law
Map/Plan Making	Ability to use dumpy level & measuring tape to produce maps and plans of a site

COURSE SCHEDULE

Date	Activity
May 25	Arrival and check-in by 7:00pm 8:00pm: Welcome dinner
May 26	9.30 am - Introduction, Orientation 1:30 pm - Lunch 3.00 pm - On-site lectures and walking tour in Sofia Downtown 7.30 - 8.30 pm - Dinner
May 27	Morning: Lectures Afternoon: Lecture & Workshop
May 28	Morning: Lectures Afternoon: Visit to the National Historical Museum of Bulgaria and the Boyana Church
May 29	Morning: Check out from Sofia downtown hotel Guided visit: Rila Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site) -This is the largest and oldest surviving Orthodox monastery in Bulgaria. It was established in the 10th century by St. Ivan Rilski (St. John of Rila). Afternoon: Trip to Serbia. Hotel check-in in the evening.
May 30	Morning: Lectures

	Guided visit: Pirot and Poganovo Monastery, Serbia in the afternoon.
May 31	Day Off
Jun 1-5	Working Days: Fieldwork at the sites (approx. 7-8 hours per day, including travel).
Jun 6	Morning: Time for processing, archiving and reporting Afternoon: Presentation of the project results Evening: Farewell dinner
Jun 7	Departure day: Check-out and departure by 9:30 AM Complimentary drop-off at Sofia airport by 1:00 PM

** Course structure may be subject to change upon directors' discretion.*

TYPICAL WORKDAY

Students will follow this daily schedule during the three weeks of lab work.

Time	Activity
8:00-9:00am	Breakfast
9:00am-12:00pm	Site visits & data collection and/or processing
1:00-2:00pm	Lunch
2:00-5:00pm	Site visits & data collection and/or processing
7:30-8:30pm	Dinner

ACADEMIC GRADING MATRIX

Students are required to participate in all components of the field school. Grades are determined as follows:

- ❖ **70% - Field work:** Effectively use of equipment to produce actionable photographic and spatial data.
- ❖ **20% - Workshops:** Ability to organize data into accurate digital databases suitable for analysis and interpretation.
- ❖ **10% - Attendance, Demonstrated diligence and Active participation**

ATTENDANCE POLICY

The required minimum attendance for the successful completion of the field school is 95% of the course hours. Any significant delay or early departure from an activity will be calculated as an absence from the activity.

An acceptable number of absences for medical or other personal reasons will not be considered if the student catches up on the field school study plan through additional readings, homework, or tutorials with program staff members.

PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites for participation in this field school. Note that this program requires long walks and long periods of documentation where students stand on their feet. You must be physically fit to move around in the heat and humidity throughout the day. Students will be taught how to use a variety of photography procedures and equipment -- work is slow and may be tedious. It requires patience and focus.

PROGRAM ETIQUETTE

Bulgaria, one of Europe's oldest countries, boasts a diverse and extensive history spanning many centuries, influenced by various dynamic civilizations. From the ancient Thracians to the Roman Empire and the Byzantine era, Bulgaria's past reflects its resilience and cultural richness. Its

strategic location as a crossroads between East and West has shaped its identity, evident in its architecture, cuisine, and traditions. Today, Bulgaria stands as a vibrant nation blending its storied past with modern aspirations, welcoming visitors to explore its timeless landscapes and captivating history. Bulgarians take pride in their heritage and achievements, and we kindly ask for your respect towards their customs, traditions and culture.

TRAVEL & MEETING POINT

We suggest you hold purchasing your airline ticket until six (6) weeks prior to departure date. Natural disasters, political changes, weather conditions and a range of other factors may require the cancelation of a program. The ARC typically takes a close look at local conditions 6-7 weeks prior to program beginning and makes a Go/No Go decision by then. Such time frame still allows for the purchase deeply discounted airline tickets while protecting students from potential loss of airline ticket costs if the ARC is forced to cancel a program.

Students should fly to Sofia International Airport (SOF). The meeting point is on the first day of the program (Sunday) at 7:00pm. We will meet at [Hotel Central](#), Sofia. Transfer from Sofia Airport to the hotel may be arranged and will be discussed during the online orientation (see date on the program web page).



Figure 1: Sofia Airport Terminal 2



Figure 2: Hotel Central, Sofia

VISA REQUIREMENTS

There are no special visa requirements for U.S. citizens traveling to Bulgaria and Serbia, if they do not stay longer than 3 months. Passport's expiration date should exceed the stay by at least 3 months.

Citizens of other countries are asked to check the embassy website page at their home country for specific visa requirements.

MEALS & ACCOMMODATIONS

We will stay at various hotels throughout Bulgaria and Serbia. Rooms will be shared, two to three beds each, with bathrooms, showers, TV, and free Wi-Fi.

Three meals per day are provided by the program. Meals usually take place in the hotel restaurant, except the brown-bag lunches, when we are visiting sites across western Bulgaria and Serbia. This program can accommodate vegetarian diets.

EQUIPMENT LIST

- Work shoes and clothes that will suit outdoor work -- keeping in mind the diverse weather conditions (from rainy and cool, to sunny and warm.) Don't forget both your raincoats and sunscreen. A pair of comfortable hiking shoes are required. Long pants are recommended because of the potentially irritating plants, insects, and reptiles. You will also be asked to help carry some of the project equipment.
- Medication -- Please bring only the prescription medicines needed. It is not necessary to bring non-prescription medicine since you can easily buy all basic non-prescription drugs in Bulgaria.
- Equipment and tools: The participants are encouraged to bring a laptop having at least 20 GB free disk space, a mouse and a USB flash drive. Operating system recommended: Windows 8 or newer. Participants will not need to bring drawing or measuring supplies, nor any other tools. These will be provided by the field school.
- For participants who want to bring their own cameras, we recommend a high-resolution digital photo camera, with a higher ISO and optical stabilization. Bear in mind that working conditions are frequently challenging: low to no light, humid and moldy environments. The Balkan Heritage Field School has flood lights, but these are only usable if there is electricity. Don't forget to bring your camera, a USB connecting cable (esp. in case you cannot bring your laptop).
- Wide brim hat.
- Small backpack (for your water bottle, snacks, camera, etc.)
- A converter to EU-type electrical sockets if needed.

A good attitude for work, fun, study, and discoveries!

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

International dialing code: The Bulgaria international phone code is +359.

Money/Banks/Credit Cards: Bulgaria's currency is the Lev.

ATM Availability: there are several ATMs in the vicinity of the hotel

Local Language: The native language is Bulgarian. Bulgaria sees many international tourists and many Bulgarians, especially young folks, speak at least some English.

Measurement units: degree Celsius (°C), meter (m.), gram (gr.), liter (l)

ACADEMIC CREDITS & TRANSCRIPT

Attending students will be awarded 4 semester credit units (equivalent to 6 quarter credit units). Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school based on the assessment matrix (above). This program provides a minimum of 200 direct instructional hours. Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and the registrar at their home institutions prior to attending this program.

Students will be able to access their transcripts through our School of Record – Culver-Stockton College. C-SC has authorized the National Student Clearinghouse to provide enrollment and degree verification (at <https://tsorder.studentclearinghouse.org/school/select>). Upon completion of a program, students will get an email from C-SC with a student ID that may be used to retrieve transcripts. The first set of transcripts will be provided at no cost; additional transcripts may require payment. If you have questions about ordering a transcript, contact the C-SC office of the registrar at registrar@culver.edu.

REQUIRED READINGS

Cormack, Robin. Byzantine Art (Oxford History of Art). Oxford University Press. 2018, pp. 171 – 201.

Huntington, John C. [Photography for Art Historical Field Research and Documentation](#).

Hupchick, D., Cox, Harold. Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Balkans. Saint Martin's Press Inc. 2001; maps 11- 22.

Raykovska, M., G. Bevan and I. Vasilev. The Integration of Different Computational Photographic Modalities in High-Accuracy 3D Building Models: The Case of the Church of St. Petka, Bulgaria – In: Virtual Archaeology (Methods and Benefits) Proceedings of the Second International Conference held at the State Hermitage Museum 1-3 June, 2015, Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Publishers, 2015; pp. 139-157.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Chavrukov, G. Bulgarian monasteries. Septemvri Publishing House, Sofia. 1978

Crampton, R. J. A Concise History of Bulgaria (Cambridge Concise Histories) - Cambridge University Press; 2 edition (2006)

Dorrell, P.G. Photography in Archaeology and Conservation. Cambridge University Press. 1994

Langford, Michael. Basic Photography. Focal Press, Oxford, 2 edition (2000)

Mango, Cyril. History of World Architecture: Byzantine Architecture. Rizzoli International Publishing, New York. 1978.

Mora. P., Laura Mora. Examination and Documentation. In: Conservation of Wall Paintings (Butterworth - Heinemann Series in Conservation and Museology). Butterworth-Heinemann. 1984

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Safran, L (Editor). Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium. Pennsylvania State University Press. 1998

Tragido, Alfredo. Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Guide to Imagery Series). 2006.

Warda Jeffrey (Editor). The AIC Guide to Digital Photography and Conservation Documentation, AIC 2011