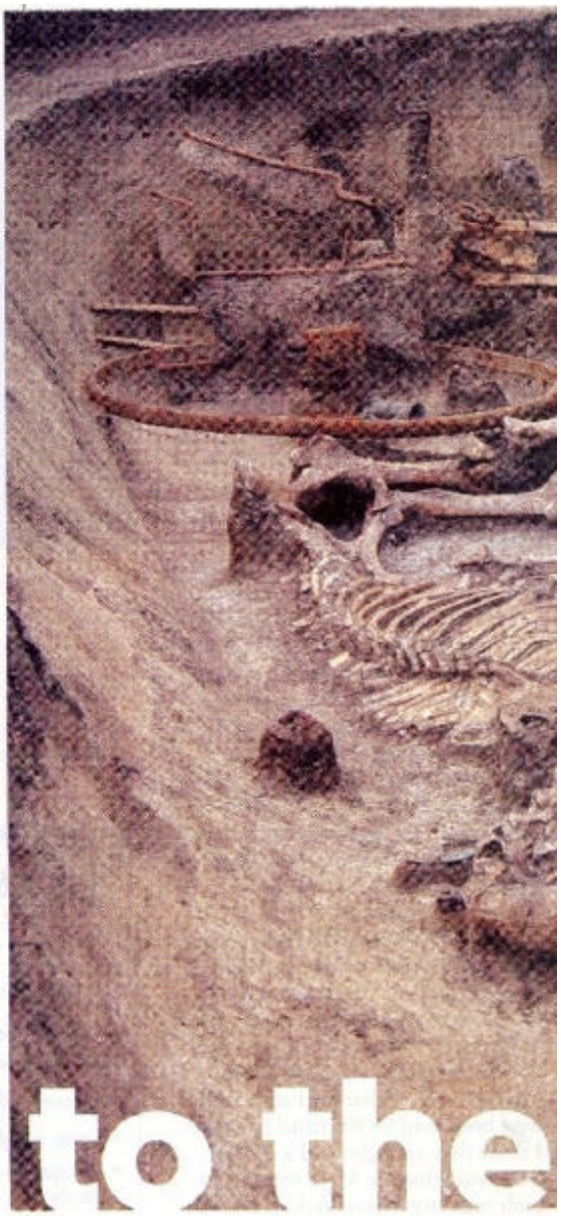

STANDING OVER AN EXCAVATED PIT in a lush field between rusting grain silos and an aging dairy, archaeologist Veselin Ignatov explains, in helpfully unscientific language, the difference between two Thracian chariots he has just uncovered.

"This one *is* a Mercedes," he says, as we look over the remains of a chariot and horses buried in Bulgaria sometime between the first and third centuries A.D. "The other one," he says, indicating a pit 10 yards away, "is more economy class."

The rusty, straight crossbars of the luxury chariot are studded with nails shaped like railroad spikes. Thin corner plates mark where wooden components were once attached. The hubs and rims of two large iron wheels lay as if they had simply fallen over. And at the front of the chariot, like loyal but macabre pets, are the intact skeletons of three horses.

The other burial, which dates to the same period, contains a similar collection of artifacts, but because the iron bars are smaller and more bent, it is not clear what went where; they appear to have been scattered in the general outline of a chariot. All the others excavated in Bulgaria so far, including the luxurious one here, had passenger platforms suspended over the axle by leather ropes for a smoother ride. This is the first chariot found with a passenger platform mounted directly on the axle—I can only imagine what kind of bone-jarring ride it provided.

Ignatov, from the Historical Museum in the town of Nova Zagora, has worked on 11 Thracian chariots in nine burial sites in the region, but these two are the first complete examples any archaeologist has found. Dozens of other such sites have been looted, leaving archaeologists with an incomplete picture of this key aspect of Thracian culture. Even with the metal components preserved at this site, reconstructing these chariots is like putting together a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. But all the pieces are roughly in place, so Ignatov expects new insights into how these vehicles were constructed, used, and eventually buried.

A Ride to the

Teasing apart the mysteries of Thracian chariot burials

by MATTHEW BRUNWASSER

photographs by ANDREY MIHAILOV

THE THRACIANS were a fractious collection of powerful but illiterate tribes who lived in parts of what are now Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Macedonia, and Turkey until the seventh century A.D., when they were assimilated by invading Slavs. Their archaeological remains are exceptionally important because the Thracians left no written records, though references to them do appear in the writings of their neighbors, the Greeks and the Romans. Ancient sources state that the Thracians were excellent fighters, advanced in metalworking and horsemanship. Archaeological finds include well-crafted gold and silver rings, vessels, helmets, and shield

This Thracian chariot, and another one found nearby, are the only complete examples that archaeologists have ever found—as many as 150 similar burials have been looted.

Afterlife

ornaments, as well as chariots for personal transport, racing, and carrying cargo, all of which point to wealth. In A.D. 45, Thrace joined the Roman Empire, which then included most of the civilizations bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

"The Thracians entered the empire voluntarily, not with the force of arms," says Ignatov. "That gave the local Thracian aristocracy the possibility to save its financial power. That's why they were able to make these pompous burials, with a chariot and three horses."

Transportation was more developed in ancient Roman times than most people think, Ignatov says. According to wall paintings, texts, and coins, Rome had 15 categories of chariots, as well as traffic laws, streets closed to vehicular traffic, taxi regulations, rental chariots, and even a "chariot wash." But Greece and Rome had no consistent tradition of burying their chariots, although some of them have been unearthed in the ancient region of Pannonia in modern Hungary.

There are fewer records, however, of transport in the Empire's distant corners. Drawings found in Thracian tombs 30 miles away depict chariot races, which used a smaller, sleeker kind of vehicle, during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. The rest of what we know of Thracian chariots, especially personal ones, comes from excavations.

The tradition of burying chariots near their dead owners

Archaeologists were tipped off to the chariot burial site in Nova Zagora when a local security guard saw looters digging in a wheat field and notified authorities.

was common in this part of Thrace. While each Thracian chariot is unique, Ignatov says, identical versions of certain iron parts, such as rings used in the horses' bridles, have been found in different regions of Bulgaria, indicating some level of mass production or standardization. The biggest known chariot, he says, had four wheels, each 50 inches in diameter. All the burials had at least two horses, and some as many as eight.

According to Greek and Roman sources, horses played a vital role in Thracian society; a man was not a man without this essential companion for hunting and war. Whereas the Romans preferred mule-power for chariots—even Agrippina, the mother of the emperor Nero, rode a chariot pulled by mules—the Thracians only used horses. And as their horses were prized in life, so they were needed in the afterlife. The animals are also found without chariots in many Thracian graves.

Chariots were ritually "sacrificed" prior to burial—this bronze eagle head was knocked clear to the other side of the grave. Such items are among the most tempting targets for looters.

BEYOND THE CHALLENGE of reconstructing 2,000-year-old chariots based on archaeological remains, Ignatov's latest finds pose an intriguing mystery: Why were these beloved vehicles symbolically "slaughtered" during burial?

Ignatov points to one of the thick iron bars on the frame of a seat in the luxury chariot, and says it could only have been bent with a powerful blow from a heavy object, such as a sword. A bronze eagle head—the equivalent of a Mercedes hood ornament—was chopped off the carriage, he says, and sent flying to the other side of the grave.

"Look how it was hit!" he says. "SHTRAK!" (the Bulgarian equivalent of "WHACK!"). He follows the arc of the projectile with his finger. "It was hit once and hit with force. It was a symbolic killing or destruction of the chariot, most likely to make it easier to bring it to the afterworld. The person is dead and so is his object," Ignatov explains. "They could have destroyed them so they wouldn't be used by contemporaries. A car is an expensive thing. And so is a horse."

It was reasonably common for Thracians to own chariots, but not everyone had the means to take one with them to the afterlife. The owners of these personal vehicles, who, based on patterns observed at other sites, probably lie in an unexcavated mound nearby, were likely to have been aristocrats with economic or political influence. Wealth did not determine who owned a chariot, Ignatov says, but who could be buried

with one—creating such a tomb and constructing a burial mound were more expensive than simply owning a chariot. It is not clear why the examples at this site are so different from one another, but high-ranking Thracians had different tastes, and may have been buried with either a favorite chariot or a spare.

The current excavations are helping illuminate rituals surrounding the burials. The Thracians dug a pit corresponding to the size of the chariot and the number of horses. Archaeologists have found fragments of vessels used for liquids or animal bones under the chariots, but never beneath the horses, suggesting the animals were slaughtered in the pit first. The horses in the smaller chariot's pit have similar fatal skull fractures between the eyes, but no broken ribs that would indicate stabbing—tantalizing clues about ritual sacrifice. Ignatov determined that two of the horses in each burial were draft animals, while one, the lead horse, was a personal mount. Silver and bronze fastener covers and a silver ornament on the forehead of the personal mount indicate the animals were richly bridled and decorated.

Thracian chariots were buried with up to eight horses, often decorated with elaborate bridles. Mounts were essential and revered in Thracian culture.

With the sacrificed horses in the pit, the chariot was taken apart, sometimes carefully and sometimes roughly, and placed behind the horses. All the buried chariots found so far had been used, as indicated by visible wear and repair. A grave-side feast may have followed—roasted boar bones and broken clay and glass vessels have been found at other Thracian burial sites in the area.

After the chariot and the team of horses were buried and the ground leveled, the owners were cremated, placed on the ground nearby, and covered with a mound of earth. Because of their proximity, Ignatov is convinced that these chariots are related, and that the owners' burial mounds may contain two brothers or a father and son.

"Ninety percent of the chariots [in this region] are located southeast of the mounds containing the owner," he says. "Usually these graves are comparatively rich." For the moment, however, Ignatov doesn't allow himself to think about excavating the owners' burials. There is more urgent work. His small team—an artist and two assistants—must finish digging and remove the chariots and horses, as well as conserve and study the finds.

IT IS AN IMPORTANT DAY at the site. While the weather has been warm, a wind is kicking up and there have been scattered showers that could damage exposed iron. The team needs to remove all the iron pieces, from structural bars to tiny nails, of the less ostentatious chariot. Ignatov says he is under enormous pressure to finish today. Not only are there always extreme shortages of time, money, and manpower, and wet weather looming, but he is constantly racing Bulgarian archaeology's greatest threat: looters.

Chariots make easy targets, even for the unskilled. In this flat landscape, the raised burial mounds are clearly visible, and the iron in the chariots can be pinpointed by the most basic metal detectors. Five men with shovels can remove a chariot in one day, though they are usually interested only in brass ornaments and other objects with market value. Ignatov estimates that 150 Thracian graves with chariots have been robbed in the last seven years.

If it weren't for looters, however, Ignatov wouldn't be working at this site at all. In April, he was excavating a looted grave a couple of miles away. "The pit was already open and the chariot was completely gone," he says. "I have no words." Then he got a call from a watchman at a nearby factory who had seen men digging a mound in the field. "I immediately

Archaeologist Veselin Ignatov has excavated the sites of 11 chariot burials. The intact site in Nova Zagora attracted nationwide attention, which he hopes will lead to greater funds, resources, and security.

called the police and came here," Ignatov says. The looters had dug a hole about a yard deep before they were chased away.

Now, to keep the chariots safe from thieves and the elements, Ignatov and his team must remove them from the ground. Before they can do that, they will need styrofoam beds to place the artifacts in for transportation and storage, and a soldering iron to melt grooves of the right size. So Ignatov and I get in the Historical Museum's battered yellow van and head to the hardware store.

"We are a very rich country in archaeological sites, especially Nova Zagora," he tells me as we bounce over the streets, slaloming around potholes the size of bathtubs. The van smells of dirt, diesel, and cigarette butts.

No matter where the conversation begins, it usually turns to money. Ignatov says he started digging with a single donation from an architecture company of 5,000 levs, about $3,500. But that was not enough even to start the removal. "I don't receive any pay and my expenses aren't covered. I'm a form of sponsor," he says. His salary from the museum is 250 levs, or about $172, a month; most of the museum's budget goes to storage and security. But Ignatov's latest discoveries attracted attention from the national media. In response, the city council announced it would help fund the work. As a stopgap, the museum is covering expenses until the Nova Zagora city council decides how much it will offer.

Silvia Borisova, the artist on Ignatov's excavation team, covers the exposed horse bones. The team contends with critical shortages of money, time, and manpower.

BACK IN THE FIELD, the team measures each iron fastener, plate, bar, and ring and melts corresponding grooves into the styrofoam. As each piece is then removed from the ground, Ignatov makes detailed notes and marks where it was found on a large, complex diagram.

The assistants remove the dirt between the remaining pieces, squeezing each clump to find smaller metal fragments. When a long, bent, rusty nail surfaces, Ignatov gets excited and stands up: the end of the nail is bent 90 degrees, showing the exact width of the wooden plank through which it was once nailed.

"Each piece is a source of information, so we need to be able to reconstruct exactly where it was," he says.

He points to the bluish bronze plates and corner brackets. "I think they used plates for ornamentation," he says. "The way today someone buys a car of a certain mark, back then it was the same thing."

I ask if it's similar to the time in the 1980s when car phones were still very expensive and men put them in their vehicles without really installing them, just to impress women.

"It has always been that way," Ignatov says with a smile.

"Women aren't stupid," retorts Silvia Borisova, the team's artist, from the bottom of the pit, where she is covering the last exposed pieces of bone with gauze and a protective solution. She has recently worked at three other sites in the area, and is exhausted. "I don't even remember how long we've been working without any breaks," she says.

A local couple wanders down the dirt road. They shyly watch Borisova at work. The man, Stoyan Dimitrov, who cleans the smokestack filters at a local coal-burning power plant, says townspeople have been talking about the chariots. They saw the story on television and decided to take a look for themselves.

"It's very beautiful," says his partner Tsvetelina Tsvetkova, a seamstress in a textile factory. "It's not something found every day. We're most glad they got it before the looters did."

Inspector Lyubomir Vasev from the local police stops by to speak with Ignatov. He has arranged 24-hour security for the site, but says the police force is so underfunded that officers often have to pitch in from their own pockets to buy gas. With a little more money, he says, he could conduct regular patrols of local sites. "Even if the law isn't working at the moment, it would have an effect," he says. "If one group of looters was convicted, the others wouldn't risk digging."

BASED ON THE PARTIAL REMAINS Ignatov excavated in other burials, the Historical Museum created an exhibition in 2004 of chariot reconstructions that Ignatov now says were not very accurate. His dream is to create more precise reconstructions for a traveling exhibit, while the director of the museum, Krasimir Velkov, would like to house a permanent chariot exhibition in a 60-foot-high burial mound where Ignatov found the partial remains of the Rolls Royce of chariots—one buried with eight horses.

Ignatov says that accurate chariot reconstructions would offer visitors a new vehicle through which they could relate to the ancient world. "The car was not discovered 100 years ago," says Ignatov. "And the Thracians were not so different than contemporary people." We all love our cars. ■

Matthew Brunwasser *is a freelance journalist based in Sofia, Bulgaria.*