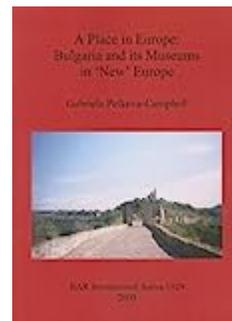




**Gabriela Petkova-Campbell.** *A Place in Europe: Bulgaria and Its Museums in 'New' Europe.* Oxford: Archaeopress, 2009. 157 S. ISBN 978-1-4073-0411-3.



**Reviewed by** Maximilian Hartmuth

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## G. Petkova-Campbell: A Place in Europe

An increased attentiveness to collecting and exhibiting as cultural and political practices has given great impetus to the historical study of museums in recent decades. The often fascinating stories of such institutions in the countries of Southeast Europe remain understudied, however. Considering that the study of nationalisms has long been a mainstay of Balkan Studies, and given the role museums have played as instruments for the broadcasting of the ideology of the ruling to the ruled, this is all the more surprising. Petkova-Campbell's book, which engages with the (proto-)history of museums in what in 1878/1885 became Bulgaria, thus raises considerable hopes. Unfortunately, it falls somewhat short of expectations.

The book, which is based on a 2007 dissertation written at Newcastle University, is divided into three parts, subsequent to an introduction. They cover developments in the period up to WWII, the post-war period, and the post-communist period. The author is very critical not only of communist-period museum management (p. 85ff.), but also of today's: "local communities," she asserts, "have completely lost interest in them. There

is no connection and no dialogue between society and museums" (p. 70). The findings drawn from questionnaires distributed among museum staff are qualified as "disturbing" (p. 78). Moreover, according to Petkova-Campbell, it is in museums that contemporary Bulgaria's "lack of cultural strategy is observed in the most acute manner" (p. 92).

Much more favourable, and less critical, is the discussion of the development of museum-like institutions until 1944. This period is portrayed as a heroic phase characterized by "the attempts of Bulgarian intellectuals to achieve in a short period what other nations had achieved in centuries" (p. 1). Development, it is claimed, had been hampered during Ottoman rule, when Bulgarians, fearing persecution by the Muslim authorities and Greek religious propagandists alike, had had to hide "objects, information and ideas" in monasteries (p. 11). The author is also convinced that the Ottoman authorities were "crueller to the Bulgarians than to other Balkan nations, and that the Bulgarians were "subjected to national and religious discrimination unheard of in the annals of all European history" (p. 12).

While the parts on the communist and post-communist periods offer few surprises, that dealing with the Ottoman and post-Ottoman period until WWII is of considerable interest, despite the aforementioned methodological shortcomings. Petkova-Campbell presents us with a few fascinating cases of private collectors – usually entrepreneurs with ties abroad – and, less convincingly, monastery collections. Unfortunately, the discussion of the collectors’ pursuits is cloaked in a nationalist rhetoric – the early collector Stefan Penev Ahtar, for instance, is introduced as “[a]nother patriot who worked hard in the name of Bulgaria” (p. 21) – that allows their activities to be represented only as part of an altruistic patriotic project.

Petkova-Campbell’s failure to question the anachronistic assertions and the tendentious language of the sources and the secondary literature that she has perused is regrettable in light of the considerable interest of the subject. Although she appears from her introduction to be acquainted with recent decades’ critical research on museums, she neglects to apply its methods and findings to her own material and to her analysis of the often chauvinistic older literature. But the outcome also demonstrates negligence on the parts of the degree-awarding institution and the publisher. Had the text been read and edited more carefully before it was printed, slips like the “Greek Patriarchate” becoming a “Geek Patriarchy” (p. 14) could have been prevented as well.

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