

# Ancient City of Nessebar: Politics of (World) Heritage and Tourism in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the politics of heritage management and development in the Ancient City of Nessebar, a popular tourism destination and a UNESCO World Heritage Site located on the Black Sea coastline of Bulgaria. The study explores the interrelationship between heritage and tourism and focuses on how the role of heritage has changed over time in socialist (1944 – 1989) and post-socialist (1989-2018) eras. Taking an interpretivist, ethnographic and qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews and archival research, the paper examines the socialist state politics of heritage development, and more specifically, the relationship between cultural heritage and the development of recreational mass tourism. The study provides a comprehensive analysis about the post-1989 state politics of heritage management and development in Nessebar and illustrates the changing value of heritage as a tool for economic regeneration, tourism development, political recognition, and post-socialist identity construction.

The paper demonstrates the critical importance of heritage and tourism during the era of state-socialism and exemplifies the construction of a very politicised discourse of heritage management and development. The analysis reveals a complex and state-centralised pre-1989 model of governance characterised by secured governmental funding, a large network of public institutions, comprehensive legislative frameworks and clearly defined roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Heritage and tourism were interrelated to each other and had critical economic, socio-cultural and political roles strictly controlled by the public authorities. This model collapsed with the fall of socialism in 1989 and brought a number of issues and challenges for Nessebar such as illegal constructions, absence of appropriate legislative policies and the increasingly problematic balance between tourism development and heritage conservation. Overall, the paper argues that the current politics of management are still largely based on the pre-1989 model of governance and a new strategy is needed to find the right balance between tourism development and heritage preservation.

**Key Words:** World Heritage, Nessebar, Bulgaria, socialism, tourism, transition, policy