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THE I MILLENNIUM B.C.
SOME ASPECTS OF THEIR SURVEYS**
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THRACIAN CULT PLACES IN WEST RHODOPA MOUNTAIN DURING THE I MILLENNIUM B.C. SOME ASPECTS OF THEIR SURVEYS

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In recent years an increased interest in the problems of the Thracian cult places can be observed in the development of the Thracian archaeology on behalf of the research workers. The causes of this tendency in the development of Bulgarian archaeology can be sought in several directions. On the one hand, the available source base has considerably increased - many and various in their character cult places have been uncovered and partially studied in different regions of Ancient Thrace. The collected data pose a number of questions and its summary and systematization represent the next step before the research workers studying the Thracian cult archaeology. It seems quite natural that following the enthusiasm for the problems of the Thracian burial practices and the problems of the various kinds of settlements in Ancient Thrace, the cult places should find their due place in the archaeologists' quest. Moreover, if the situation is considered in the context of the mutual dependence and influence between settlements, necropolises and cult places within a given region.

The main goal of the present work is to present and tackle some of the problems characterizing the Thracian cult places.

The defined chronological boundaries – the I millennium BC, i.e. the period of the final consolidation of the Thracian ethnologic features and the time of the Thracians'

independent cultural, social and economic development, the climax in the development of the Thracian tribes. According to the archaeological periodization, in more general terms these are the Early and the Late Iron Age.

The study of the Thracian cult places undergoes three main stages. The first one leads to the beginning of the 70s. This is when information about various in their character holy places was collected, but without bringing their problems to the foreground. The interest in the cult places is marginal and no issues of a more general character are raised. There are no systematic archaeological surveys of this type of sites. The second stage is related to several characteristic peculiarities. This is the beginning of the systematic work in the Bulgarian archaeology regarding the collection of information about such places and what is even more important - the elaboration of a system of criteria differentiating them from the rest of the archaeological places. This is the period when some important cult places were studied, mostly in south-west Bulgaria. In scientific literature some works raising well-grounded issues about the archaeological study and systematization of the Thracian holy places started to appear¹.

The end of this second stage is determined by the appearance of a detailed paper devoted to the problems of the Thracian cult places². In a slightly more expanded version the major theses of the same author are also presented in his latest work³.

This summary of the achieved results offered the opportunity to ground the studies of the Thracian sanctuaries on a new basis. In the first place it became clear that the differentiated approach to the separate regions of Ancient Thrace related to the natural, geographic, cultural, historical and ethnic peculiarities of the various areas gained currency. This approach also determined the next step in the study of

the cult places – their rendering as a system of interrelated sacral centers. This tendency can be most clearly traced in the West Rhodopes. The reasons for this are several. In the first place a considerable number of registered cult places dated to the I millennium BC exists there. Systematic field surveys were carried out in the region with the purpose to describe completely and precisely various archaeological sites, among which cult centres, too⁴.

Some of the longest studied Thracian cult centers are located in the West Rhodopes - a fact which allows us to pose and consider also issues of a more general character. Such significant elements like the organization of the holy space, the different territories and their function in the separate periods, structures, etc. can be explained exactly while studying the sanctuaries in the region.

During the 80s and the beginning of the 90s the studies of the Thracian antiquity in the West Rhodopes and, naturally, the areas related to them, continued in several directions. In the first place, the studies of the Thracian sanctuary in the village of Babyak should be mentioned. In the course of 8 archaeological seasons excavations of the sanctuary were organized in order to elucidate separate aspects of its activities, character and significance. It is impossible within the scope of the present work to characterize thoroughly the archaeological materials and situations. They have been tackled in so far as they contribute to the construction of a model of its own kind for the analysis and interpretation of the Thracian “holy places” in this part of Ancient Thrace. The reasons to choose exactly the site in Babyak as the basis of this model are several. This is the longest studied sanctuary in the region through archaeological excavations. The archaeological materials from the site belong to an exceptionally wide chronological range - approximately 15

centuries, and this is the reason to believe that the sanctuary is an important cult centre and that a considerable part of the Thracian ritual practices took place on its territory. Numerous structures connected with the Thracian ritual practices were registered.

In 2001 the joint scientific programme “Thracian Cult Centres in West Rhodopes” started with the participation of the Archaeological Institute and the Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, South-west University “Neofit Rilski” and the Ethnographic Museum in Plovdiv. The major aims of this comprehensive scientific project were to visit the cult centres from the I millennium BC in this part of the mountain so as to collect new data regarding their chronology, to summarize and classify the basic elements accompanying the assimilation of the environment during the realization of ritual activities of the Thracian tribes. While working, apart from using the purely archaeological aspects of the studies, the teams also widely used the information that can be obtained from analyzing the modern cultural medium of the population - rites, customs, legends, etc.

At the moment more than 20 archaeological sites from the considered region are known and they can be determined as cult ones and be related to the I millennium BC. Most valuable are the sites which were subjected to archaeological studies via drilling or just thoroughly. The information collected in this way is reliable, the registered situations and constructions are dated with comparative precision and can be used in a comparative analysis and juxtaposition with similar contexts of other sites within or outside the region.

Such cult places from the West Rhodopes are the sites in the village of Babyak, in the village of Tsrancha, at mount Ostrets and in the locality of “St. Prophet Elijah” near the city of Velingrad⁵, in the locality Dolna Veselitsa on the land of

the village of Semchinov⁶, in the village of Debrashtitsa and in the locality “Golyam Kosoman”⁷.

With the global views about the characteristics of the Thracian cult places for larger territories an opinion has been voiced that the cult places are of several kinds according to the scope of their activities – tribal, intertribal and all-Thracian⁸. Without rejecting such a standpoint, when analyzing the situation in a region of a smaller scope and, besides, one with its own specific features, some other conclusions can be also drawn.

First of all, it is necessary to group the well-known cult places in the region according to some well-grounded criteria and to carry out a more detailed internal division of the sanctuaries. Such a division can be based on the location of the sanctuary, the characteristics of the geomorphological form it is related to, the beginning of human activities on the particular site and their duration, the presence /or absence/ of various structures, etc.

At this stage of the studies of the sanctuaries in the West Rhodopes it seems most reasonable to group the places according to their geographical location and the geomorphological forms related to the sanctuaries.

Based on this criterion we can divide the cult places from the considered territory in 3 groups. In the first place, these are the sanctuaries located on the northernmost hills bordering the Maritsa river valley. In this group attention should be paid to those cult centers located along the northern slopes of the Rhodopa Mountain - above the plain part in the north, but also below the central ridge of the mountain massif to the south. From the west and east the sites with such characteristics are Rakovitsa, the complex of ritual pits to the east of M. Belovo in the locality of Izvora, Dolna Veselitsa, Hajdushko kladenche, the site at the village of Debrashtitsa.

Apart from their similar location in the middle of the slope, they all have an excellent view over the valley to the north. According to its location and characteristics the site in the locality of Popminchin kamak can be included in this group - it is built on a hillside and has an outstanding visual connection with the valley, where the Bistritsa and the Mesta rivers flow.

It is typical for the sites of the second group that their location is on the very ridge of the hill or in the immediate proximity below the highest point. Almost all sites along the Dabrash ridge belong to this group of sacred centres. Their main characteristic is their location in an area with a rocky rising ground and a visual connection between them. For these sites an issue can be raised - whether they also indicate the direction, or even the bed of a road artery in this part of the mountain. The natural features of the terrain support such an assumption.

The third group of cult comprises the places located in the flat part of the considered territory – the Chepin valley. The sanctuary on the mount Ostrets is similar. It is located on an isolated hill and according to its characteristics it approximates the type of sanctuaries known from the neighbouring areas as such located on rocky rising ground. The best parallels are the Nebet tepe in Plovdiv and the sanctuary in the locality of Skalet in the village of Levunovo⁹.

A part from the peculiarities of the related geomorphological form, the obvious connection with the plain territory and the river flowing through it plays a role for their establishment. This undoubtedly remains a hypothetical aspect in the attempts to reconstruct the ritual practices of the Thracian tribes until publishing the results of the studies about a sufficient number of places of this kind.

The contexts and the structures discovered during the excavations of the Thracian cult centres hold an ever more

significant place in the scientists' interests. Of all attempts to systematize the most important structures registered during the archaeological studies of sanctuaries the most appropriate is the approach to look for their functional characteristics, i.e. the role they fulfilled in the cult practices¹⁰. It is possible to pay attention also to other aspects of the remains of cult activities discovered in the sanctuaries - for example, the chronological position of separate structures in order to track their evolution. Emphasis can also be placed on the construction peculiarities of the structures and the material they were built with. This manner of working would yield interesting results in the study of the Thracian altars, for instance.

In the summarizing paper on the cult centres attention is paid to the places for depositing gifts. The ways in which these ritual activities were realized are too various and respectively, the archaeological situations are too different¹¹. In this case, however, we shall cover only one of these constructions, as well as some issues related to its possible interpretations.

The case in point is about the stone heaping along the edge of the slope registered during the studies of the sanctuary in the village of Babyak. Some questions have been posed in the specialized literature about its characteristics - the manner of construction, the archaeological materials discovered in it, etc¹². This stone heaping has been tracked in recent years along the west, north and east ridge of the slope of the Small height of the sanctuary /the northern culmination of the sight/. The structure is dated to the Late Iron Age. A stone wall, at points structurally connected to the latter, which surrounded the temenos in the period around the middle of the 1 millennium BC, has been (racked near it. Moreover, its technological

characteristics definitely rule out the possibility to assume it as an element of the fortification system of this site.

During the latest studies of this site an entirely different kind of a stone heaping was discovered. Various objects were found lying on a clay platform. They had been covered up by several rows of stones, with homogeneous layers of earth between them. The uppermost layer finishing the construction is made of larger stones¹³. It becomes clear that the universal name “stone heaping”, which has gained popularity, is not precise, because obviously, one concept is meant to comprise structures of various shapes, manner of construction, and probably functions. Besides, they are located too close to each other and are synchronous in time.

The issue about the enclosure of the holy territory of the sanctuary, which has to be differentiated from the profane space, is very interesting in many aspects. This common Indo-European tradition was undoubtedly also followed by the Thracian tribes, but we cannot be always sure about the concrete form in which this differentiation took place in terms of archaeology. It is accepted that around the middle of the I millennium BC considerable changes in the cult practices occurred there, and in particular – enclosing walls appeared there. These were certainly registered in the sanctuaries in the villages of Levunovo and Babyak¹⁴. However, the latest studies of the sanctuary in Babyak provide for the assumption that the enclosure of the holy place took place earlier, during the Early Iron Age. If this assumption proves correct and the function of the uncovered wall made of large stones at the west foot of the Large culmination is not to prevent the earth sliding along the slope, but exactly to divide the space, then this fact would be a confirmation of the hypothesis about an earlier change in the Thracian cult and burial practices¹⁵.

When presenting such a complicated problem like the characteristics of the Thracian cult centres from one region in the I millennium BC it is obviously impossible to encompass all its aspects. The volume of the present work does not provide for elaborating on such important issues like the kind, characteristics and manner of depositing the gifts of the sanctuary, the peculiarities of the cultural stratification, the osteological and paleobotanical material from the sanctuaries, etc. The discovered archaeological situations during the excavations are not presented in a sufficiently concrete form as the purpose is not to publish separate aspects of the cult practices, but to make an attempt to consider them in more general terms. The presented aspects of the Thracian religious thinking reflected in particular archaeological situations that are neither the only ones we have available data for, nor ones thoroughly analyzed. The aim of the author is to highlight some of the problems facing the researchers of Thracian sanctuaries, to point out several diverse interpretation variants presented by the concrete archaeological information at this stage of the research work. The future studies on the territory of the West Rhodopes, as well as in other regions of Ancient Thrace, will prove whether the current assumptions are justified and will determine their validity for other regions.

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