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IN PIRIN MOUNTAIN AND THE FAMOUS
SANCTUARY OF DIONYSUS-SABAZIOS IN
ANCIENT THRACE**

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SACRED TERRITORY AROUND POPOVO LAKE IN PIRIN MOUNTAIN AND THE FAMOUS SANCTUARY OF DIONYSUS-SABAZIOS IN ANCIENT THRACE

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Abstract. The article proposes a new hypothesis for the localization of the ancient sanctuary of Dionysus-Sabazios from Ancient Thrace. The author cites historical, archaeological and folklore sources, as well as sources from the fine arts and results from archaeoastronomical research, for a possible localization of the sanctuary in the circus of Popovo Lake from South Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria.

Keywords: rock sanctuaries, the sanctuary of Dionysus-Sabazios, Archaeology, Ethnology, Archeoastronomy

The Satrae, as far as I know, have not been subdued by anyone ever and are the only ones among the Thracians that are still free; they live high up in the mountains which are covered by different types of forests and snow and they are excellent warriors. They possess the oracular shrine of Dionysus; the sanctuary is situated in the highest part of the mountain. The Bessi were those among the Satrae who made the prophecies in the oracular shrine; a priestess prophesied just like in Delphi – there is nothing different (Hdt. VII, 111).

More than 150 years European and, in particular, Bulgarian history and archaeology haven't been able to determine the location of the famous Dionysus Sabazios sanctuary in Thrace, where according to the ancient written tradition it was prophesied that Alexander III the Great (king of Macedonia) and Octavius Augustus would become rulers of the Old World. What exactly has eluded us from the numerously cited short witness accounts by Herodotus (Hdt. VII, 111), as well as in the reports of the other ancient authors (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I 18.11; Suetonius Tranquillus, *Augustus*, 94,6)?!

Most of the contemporary researchers have been trying to find the location of the sanctuary only on the basis of geographical and topographical data about it, which unfortunately is too general and is

repeated a lot of times due to the great number of sacralized mountain peaks – symbols of the Cosmic Mountain in Ancient Greece. Insufficient, by itself, is Macrobius's information about the circular form of the sanctuary.

Herodotus, however, left another “vestige”: “...*A priestess prophesied just like in Delphi – there is nothing different*”. This record by the father of history attains special significance in reference to the topic studied here, having in mind that the zoomorphic hypostasis of the Thracian Dionysus on behalf of whom the priestess made the prophecies in his sanctuary in Thrace “just like in Delphi”, is the serpent-dragon.

In this context it is important to mention the information that Sabazios of Anatolia makes love with his priestess in the form of a serpent (Georgieva, 1983, p. 99). Again, we can see him surrounded by entwining serpents on the silver votive tablet from Belintash sanctuary in The Central Rhodope Mountains (Boev, 2010).

Those are religious practices connected with the Master of the Underworld, where the woman has a leading role in the ritual. They should definitely be connected as genealogy with the tribal system during the era of matriarchy. Those are rituals that could be traced even in the communities during the early history times on the Balkan Peninsula and in the Eastern Mediterranean region, in the religion and mythology of Ancient Crete and Minoan culture. There “the woman with the serpents”, the Great Mother or her priestess, can frequently be seen in Minoan visual arts and later in the Hellenic mythology as a heritage of the Minoan antiquity (Thomson, 1958, pp. 246-275).

A woman – priestess, connected with a sanctuary guarded by a huge dragon, can be found in the myth of the golden fleece. Medea is the only one initiated in the cult. She is competent to use the secret knowledge and has command over the magic power of herbs. With their help she is able to put to sleep the dragon – guardian of the golden fleece (Venedikov, 1987, pp. 84-89).

In the Thracian treasure of the town of Letnitsa there is an image of a woman facing a three-headed dragon, probably its wife and priestess at the same time (Venedikov, 1992, pp. 257-264; Marazov, 1994, p. 94; Gicheva, 1997, pp. 59-67).

A priestess is meeting the Thracian Heros in the sanctuary of the Thracian Dionysus. He is presented as a huge serpent on the cosmic tree. This image is widely-spread on the votive tablets of the Thracian horseman from the Roman period in Ancient Thrace (Kazarov, 1938).

The ancient religion, mythology and cult on the Balkan Peninsula have bequeathed one image which, in my opinion, has a striking similarity with the “initiated” women in the serpent-dragon cult in Bulgarian mythology. The woman has made love with the dragon and becomes the wife of the mythological character. As soon as she has lost touch with her family and relatives with the help of the dragon, she acquires the skills to cure people and to predict the future (Georgieva, 1983, pp. 79-109; Benovska, 1992, pp. 149-156; Markov, 2009, pp. 198-208).

This mythological concept, of course, can be found also in the image of the high priestess, Pythia, who prophesied the future in the most famous in the antiquity sanctuary and seat of the oracle in Ancient Greece – Delphi. It is an oracular shrine which originally belonged to the earth – Gaia. The sacred place has a rocky terrain in its earliest stage (Fig. 1) and like the sanctuary with the Golden Fleece in Colchis it is guarded by a dragon (Giro, 2002, p. 301).

Later on, when Apollo becomes the patron deity of the sanctuary, Pythia is devoted to the god of the Sun and light and is obliged to lead virtuous life resembling the one of the deity’s wife. Despite the great number of discussions about the character of the ritual practices in Delphi, almost all authors support the opinion that in the cult of Apollo Pythia succeeded an earlier Cretan-Mycenaean cult in Delphi, which was devoted to Gaia and the dragon Python (Fontenrose, 1978, pp. 196-203; Parke&Wormel, 1956, pp. 1-45; Fol, 2002, p. 297). As an important proof of this is the name of the oracle, which shows whom she had served before the sanctuary became possession of the god of the Sun and light (Apollod. I,4,1). This definitely is the serpent-dragon Python. According to Homer’s hymn to Apollo (Hom. III, 300-339) this monster was female and it brought up Typhon – “Hera’s son”, the most frightening dragon-antagonist in Greek mythology.

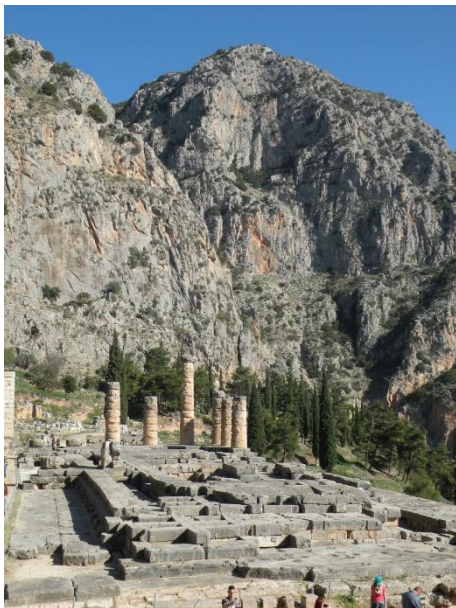


Figure 1. The ancient Hellenic sanctuary of Delphi. The Temple of Apollo in a rocky environment. Greece (Photo by Vasil Markov).

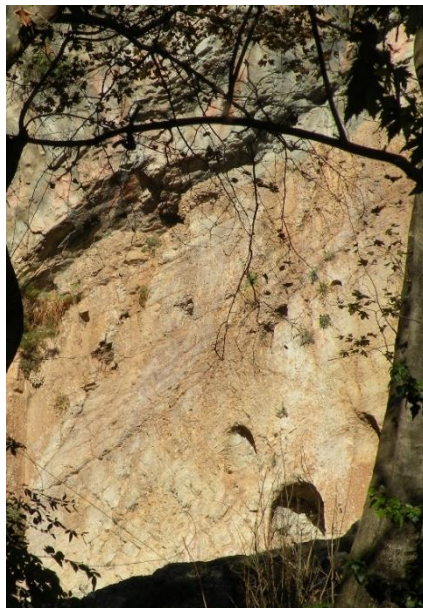


Figure 2. Rock-cut niches near the sacralized Castal Spring in Delphi. Greece (Photo by Vasil Markov).

There is another remarkable motif that shows the connection with the ancient cult of the serpent-dragon. According to the records from the antiquity Pythia made her prophecies while sitting on a tripod seat. She was holding a laurel sprig in one hand and she was chewing a bay-tree leaf, a phytomorphous code of Apollo. Moreover, at the same time the prophetess was drinking water from the Castalia spring (Fig. 2), which is connected with the dragon Python. The most important thing is that she gave her prophecies after she had been in a trance due to the vapors from a crevice in the rock above which her tripod seat was positioned. If we trust the sources which support that version, it becomes clear that the state of inspiration was achieved mainly because of the gas emissions from a geologic chasm in the earth. Obviously it is about an ancient mythological idea that the secret knowledge comes both from the personifying the sky god of the Sun and light Apollo and a chthonian character that dwells in a deep precipitous cave. In this respect maybe we should add the semantics of the name of Python in which the ancient

people believed – “decaying”, i.e. connected with stinky money (Paus. X, 6,5-6).

Basing their arguments on ancient literary sources both Parke&Wormell and Fontenrose point out that in fact Pythia's skills to foretell the future come from the earth, from a crevice, which semantically should be associated with the underground gods. In this regard it should be pointed out that according to Plutarch, who was a high priest in Delphi at the end of his life, Pythia “descended” to give prophecies. A more specific example in this direction is Strabo's account: *“The oracle – says the ancient author – is a deep cave with a small aperture. This cave emits vapors. Above the aperture there is a high tripod seat. Pythia takes her place on this seat and under the influence of the gas emissions she starts to receive the prophecy”* (Giro, 2002, p. 303). Here special attention should be paid to Fontenrose's opinion. He claims that the archaeological studies in Delphi haven't registered such a crevice or a sheer cave neither in the temple devoted to Apollo in Delphi, nor in the area one mile around the sanctuary. This evidence gives him the reason to think that actually this is only a detail of the myth about the duel between Apollo and Python, whose dwelling was a cave indeed but according to the ancient legend it was three miles away from Delphi and into Mount Parnassus. It is a myth which according to Fontenrose was later “taken down” to a lower place and applied to the sacralized territory of the sanctuary in Delphi. The opinion of the renowned explorer of Python has a big significance for us because it is becoming more and more obvious that Pythia's skills to give prophecies were connected to a great extent with an old pre-Olympian chthonic deity associated with the goddess of the earth, Gaia, the dragon Python (Parke&Wormell, 1956, pp. 17-41; Fontenrose, 1978, pp. 196-203).

In this train of thought, there is a remarkable evidence that in the sanctuary the high priestess fed with small honey loaves the snakes which, according to the myth, descended from the dragon Python, which was killed by Apollo (Georgieva, 1983, p. 93). In ancient times the dragon Erechtheus, which was considered the guardian of Athens and a forefather, was also fed with small honey loaves at the Acropolis of Athens (Thomson, 1958, pp. 246-275). This is an ancient cult which is

attached to agriculture, honey and the bee, one of the oldest zoomorphic symbols of the Mother Goddess (Marazov, 1992, pp. 246-275). A legacy of this ancient Cretan-Mycenaean cult in its genealogical form can be considered the second temple in Delphi, which according to the mythological concepts was made of wax and wings (Fol, 2002, pp. 298-295).

Here is the place to go back to our studies of the ethnological and archaeological monuments in the lands of the Thracian Satrae. There is just an identical precipitous cave – altar of a Thracian sanctuary where even nowadays the peasants from the village of Lyaski, Gotse Delchev Region, worship the dragon like the Holy Spirit by offering gifts in the form of small wheat loaves and an oblation – a black ram. Until recently in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and in Strandzha Mountain in front of the dolmens, which in Bulgarian folklore were considered as “dragons’ dens or dragons’ dwellings”, people offered to the Holy Spirit gifts in the form of small honey loaves. What is remarkable about these megalithic monuments is that they date back as early as to the epoch of Mycenaean Thrace.

At this point I would like to add one more detail of similarity between Pythia and the women initiated in the cult of the serpent-dragon in the beliefs of the people in Bulgaria. Special women were selected to become Pythia. They were from the region of Delphi and were known to have unstable mentality. They had to be chaste, i.e. not to have contacts with men after they became priestesses, probably because they were already thought of as wives of God (Giro, 2002, p. 303). Those are facts that in their structural aspect correspond completely to the behavior of the maidens and women loved by the dragon in Bulgarian folklore. They show symptoms which modern medicine defines as mental diseases – they were introvert, had scruffy appearance and were reticent to communicate, because according to Bulgarian folk beliefs the dragon had forbidden them to meet other men (Georgieva, 1980, pp. 473-474; Marinov, 1994, pp. 299-302; Georgieva, 1983, p. 301). Once he was in love with them, he is assumed to be their only husband.

It is very likely that we are talking about artefacts of a very old agricultural cult, which is pre-historical in its genealogy. It was fixed in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and on the Balkan Peninsula as early

as Cretan-Mycenaean culture and has existed for millennia. In Delphi during the Archaic and Classical era it was adapted to the cult of the radiant Olympic god Apollo. This is a cult in which the prophesying skills of the initiated priestesses come from the earth and the dragon – ruler of the Underworld and all secrets that are hidden in it (Golan, 1992, pp. 74-83). It is really amazing that artefacts of this mythological concept and cult have been kept as late as possible in Bulgarian folk culture. Moreover, in that area they are connected with the ancient Thracian and Paleo-Balkan sanctuaries (Markov, 2007, pp. 17-109).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 3. The Decorated altar cave with the icon of St. Christopher, with “dragon flowers” and with gifts. Folklore Feast “St. Spirit”. Rock sanctuary “Lyaski Peak”. Southern Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

Figure 4. Ritual dance around the altar cave. Folklore feast “St. Spirit”. Rock sanctuary “Lyaski Peak”. Southern Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

What is remarkable in this aspect is the archaeological and ethnological evidence of the cult of the sacred serpent – dragon both as a type of worship at home (Host’s Dish, author’s note) and in the legends and religious practices at the megalithic sanctuaries in the central and southern parts of Pirin Mountain, which were originally territories of the Thracian Satrae and Thracian Bessi, who according to Herodotus were the owners of the oracular shrine of Dionysus Sabazios. Those are the sanctuaries of Popovo Lake, Lyaski Peak, Pilentseto (The Chicken) and the site of a former church “Holy Spirit” near the village of Pirin. All of

them are connected with the legend about “The Dragon’s wedding”. Traditional rituals that were practiced until recently in the sacred territory of the Thracian sanctuary of Lyaski Peak have led us to an ancient cult dedicated to the mythical dragon – protector of fertility as well as to some initiating cult practices connected with the dragon and the maiden that he loved (Fig. 3; Fig. 4) (Yankov & Markov, 2004, pp. 45-60).



Figure 5. The rock arch from the megalithic sanctuary “Skribina”, near the village of Kribul. Western Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

In the rock sanctuary of Skribina in the Western Rhodope Mountains, a mythological serpent, which is the host of the place, is healing the diseased people. The serpent itself chooses the woman who is initiated in the cult and who performs the ritual of exchanging the diseased with the healthy essence. It is a ritual that imitates the annual change of the skin of a snake (Fig. 5). In a special magic ritual (being in a “down” position, author’s note), the initiated in the healing practices woman/sorceress acting in the function of an ancient priestess

ceremonially summons a big black snake, the host of the sacred place, by pounding on the sacralized in Ancient Thrace rock arch with a stone or a piece of wood and uttering the magic verbal formula: "If you are asleep, wake up; if you are away, come here in order to give health to those people" (Markov, 2009, pp. 82-97; Spasova, 2016, pp. 307-314).

In its semantic and functional aspect this ritual scene can be compared with both the ritual in the sanctuary of Dionysus Sabazios in Thrace, which Herodotus gave evidence about, and the rituals at the Hellenic sanctuary in Delphi in its early Cretan-Mycenaean period of existence: a woman who is devoted to the old master of the sanctuary, the serpent-dragon Python, and who performs the ritual practices.

I think that the ritual of ceremonially summoning Dionysus Sabazios in the form of a huge serpent-dragon, which was fixed in an ethnological way in the region of the Middle Mesta River as an ancient Thracian legacy in Bulgarian folk culture, can be observed the earliest here in the scene on a votive tablet found at the sanctuary of Babyaska Chuka in the Western Rhodope Mountains. It was found in the 50s of the 20th century. On it there is a woman, most likely a high priestess of Dionysus, who is summoning him by a ritual libation on an altar with a pine cone. The God appears like a huge serpent-dragon that is winding around the altar in his own sanctuary (Ogdenova, 1959, pp. 81-95, Gotsev, 2003, pp. 7-46, Gotsev, 2008, pp. 194-235).

There are several large-scale Thracian sanctuaries in the region of the Middle and Upper Mesta River where the famous sanctuary and oracular shrine of Dionysus Sabazios can be localised in Thrace. Among them there should especially be mentioned Babyaska chuka, Mitrovitsa and Tsarev Peak in the western part of Rila Mountain.

There is a religious place among the Thracian megalithic sanctuaries in the region of the Middle Mesta River, from the territories of the Thracian Satrae and Thracian Bessi, connected with the cult of the sacralized serpent-dragon, which in my opinion stands out as the most remarkable in its significance supra-regional sacred center in the south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. It partially preserved, even though they are in a folklorized version, its functions of an "eternal" sacred place as late as the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. What I have in mind is the rock sanctuary at Popovo Lake, which is

situated on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain, at an altitude of more than 2200-2400 m. It not only corresponds to Herodotus's account that the oracular shrine of Dionysus Sabazios is in "the highest part of the mountain/on top of the mountain" (Hdt. VII, 111), but it is also the highest rock sanctuary in Ancient Thrace (known so far, author's note).

The sanctuary was found by the team of the University Research Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean Cultures at South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in 2002. We have been studying it for years by field work, archaeological drilling, ethnological and archaeoastronomical studies. It is situated on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain, in the circus of Popovo Lake. There is a sacralized natural code which consists of three inscribed concentric circles with a diameter of maximum about three kilometers (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. The Cirque of Popovo Lake. Central Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

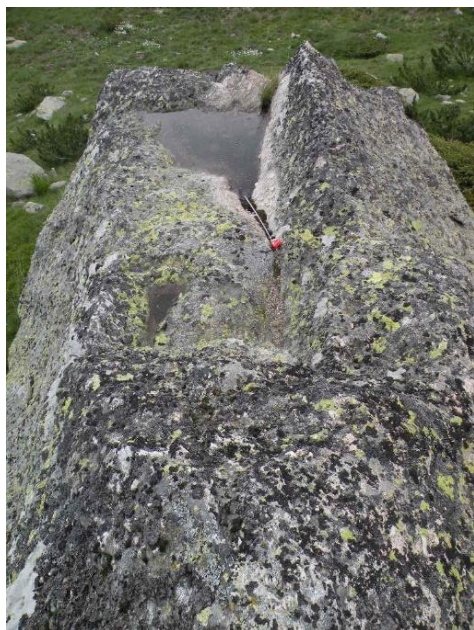


Figure 7. Rock-cut throne. The Cirque of Popovo Lake.
Central Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

The outermost circle consists of imposing rock mountain peaks, which in the local legends are presented as petrified deities and heroes. This sacralized circle is in an “upper” position and is marked with an extraordinary monumental throne/altar (Fig. 7), precisely facing west – the place of the sunset on the local horizon on the day of summer solstice. In front of it were found a lot of ritual fireplaces and fragmented ceramics dating from 1st century BC. The second circle is outlined by the shores of Popovo Lake. It is in a “down” position and is marked with a monumental rock-hewn altar which has the shape of a trough. It is hewn on an imposing rock block in the form of a truncated pyramid (Fig. 8). The ceramics which was found in the vicinity dates the monument back to 1st century BC. The innermost inscribed circle is delineated by the island of Popova Kapa. It is marked with a small semi-destroyed dolmen. Here we can see a huge sacred territory – a natural code which consists of three inscribed circles with the top of the sacred Pirin

Mountain in the center, which semantically should be interpreted as the center of the world (Kupar, 1993, p. 104).

In this imposing sacred territory one could enter through seven “gates” (passages, author’s note) five of which still have the indicative



name “gates”. In some of them rock-hewn altars can be seen, in others – a peribolos or fragmented Thracian ceramics, artefacts from ancient religious practices. Along the valley of the Retidje River, which takes its source from Popovo Lake, we localized the traces of a sacred road connecting the valley of the Mesta River and the circus of Popovo Lake, which is also marked with several Thracian sanctuaries/altars (Markov, 2007).

Figure 8. Central altar of the megalithic sanctuary in the Cirque of Popovo Lake. Central Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

In 2013, during an interdisciplinary scientific expedition called “Megalithic Culture in Ancient Thrace”, organized by the Research Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean Cultures, some archaeoastronomical studies were carried out by Al. Stoev and P. Maglova about the movement of the sun along the local horizon followed by the central altar on the eastern shore of Popovo Lake. The results from them were remarkable and they were the reason to reinforce the arguments of the proposition that it is a very important sanctuary dedicated to the Thracian god of the Sun, Dionysus Sabazios, which is situated on top of the sacred for the ancient Thracians Pirin Mountain.

It turned out that on the day of winter solstice if you watch from the place of the altar, which is situated on the shore of the lake, the sun rises in the east and then disappears/sets behind the sacralized in the

local legends Dzhengal and Dzheno rock peaks that surround the circus to south-east and south. Exactly at noon, in its apogee on the local horizon, the sun appears again in the south gate, Demir Kapia (touching the earth, author's note), which is one of the seven entrances to the sacralized in ancient times area of Popovo circus (Fig. 9). From a mythological point of view, it is a situation where the sun "has descended" on the earth and enters the sacralized circular area of its own sanctuary through the south gate – "Demir Kapia". It is indicative that 100 m away to the north under the rock gate there are the ruins of a long wall which can be interpreted as a peribolos separating the most sacred area of the Sanctuary adjoining Demir Kapia, which probably is the place where the king-priest meets the Sun deity.



Figure 9. Passage Demir Kapia. The Cirque of Popovo Lake.
Central Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

In my opinion this particular mythological scene is depicted on the big stele in the Thracian sanctuary at Stolovatets, Razlog Region, which is situated at the foot of the mountain. In the central scene one can see the descending sun-dragon (identified in Ancient Thrace with Dionysus Sabazios, author's note) on the earth and his meeting with the

Thracian king-priest and forefather (Fig. 8) (Markov, 2009, pp. 165-178). This is a meeting where the king receives the secret knowledge from the god, in the same way as the king of the Thracian tribe Getae meets the king-priest and god Zalmoxis in the sacred Kogaionon Mountain or king Minos meets the Cretan Zeus in Mount Ida in order to ask them for their wise divine advice (Venedikov, 1992, pp. 157-159). According to Suetonius's account this is repeated by two other kings – Alexander the Great and Gaius Octavius. They visited the sanctuary – home to Dionysus Sabazios, which is situated high in the mountain in Thrace, to learn about god's will in the form of a prophecy (Suetonius Tranquillus, 94, 6).

The dragon itself is a central mythological character in a lot of legends connected with the sacralized in Ancient Thrace area of Popovo circus as well as with some more Thracian sanctuaries in Central and Southern Pirin Mountain. The young dragon of Pirin Mountain (third generation mythological character, author's note) is the winner in the main myth about the duel. In the waters of Popovo Lake he defeated and tore apart the dragon-antagonist that killed his father – the old dragon of Pirin Mountain. In a magical way he absorbed the strength of the defeated dragon-antagonist. The young dragon of Pirin Mountain is the new master of the mountain and according to the legend he has lived in Popovo Lake till "nowadays" (Dinchev, 1993, pp. 13-17). What is more, (in the folk legends about Popovo Lake, author's note) he is the original character of the abductor of the most beautiful maiden at the foot of the mountain, who he took to the circus of Popovo Lake and made her his wife (Markov, 2007, pp. 78-108). It is a legend that in semantic aspect is reminiscent of the myth about Dionysus Sabazios in Anatolia, who in the form of a serpent-dragon makes love with his own priestess. It reminds of Pythia in Delphi as a priestess-wife of the god who owns the sanctuary, as well as the incestuous marriage of Zeus, who under the disguise of a dragon marries his daughter Kore Persephone from the Orphic myth (Venedikov, 1992, p. 142).

Finally, I have to attract your attention to the fact that the rock sanctuary at Popovo Lake is a typical eternal sacred space as Mircea Eliade defines it (Eliade, 1995, pp. 408-429). It is one of the numerous pieces of evidence of the statement which I have made that there is not

any important ancient Thracian megalithic sacred place on our lands which has not left any traces in the folk beliefs (Markov, 2007, pp. 265-270). According to the ethnological record of Pavel Deliradev (BNPP, 1983, pp. 47-48), until the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century not only local people from Pirin Mountain, Western Rhodope Mountains and Rila Mountain but also Christians and Muslims from the whole south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula – from Thessaloniki, Serres, Drama, Kavala and even Istanbul – went there to give sacrificial offerings. They came on horses or mules along the valley of the Mesta River to the sacralized in Ancient Thrace circus of Popovo Lake. *In their words their fathers and ancestors did so. They came here on a pilgrimage to offer a sacrifice of rams in ritual fireplaces at Mangar Tepe (Polezhan Peak) and as a result they became Hajji.*

It is obvious that we are talking about a special large-scale supra-regional sacred place closely connected with the cult of the ancestors. This cult can be deciphered also in the scene on the big stele in Stolovatets: the forefather and ancestor of the Thracian king dynasty receives the secret knowledge personally from the Sun deity, i.e. Dionysus Sabazios depicted both as the sun and as a dragon. The dragon, in turn, is a zoomorphic hypostasis of the Thunder God with the Indo-Europeans. In this context we shouldn't forget that according to the folk tales the God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains lives on Kravev Dvor, which is one of the peaks delineating Popovo circus, and he shoots fire arrows and sends water disasters from there (Markov, 2007).

Archaeological evidence shows that the Thracian rock sanctuary at Popovo Lake in Central Pirin Mountain is closely connected with the cult of the sun, fire and sacralized water from the top of the cosmic mountain. Despite being made part of the folklore, the Ancient Thracian myths and religious practices have outlived their time, and the people's memory in the folk culture compares the sanctuary with Jesus's Empty Tomb and/or Mecca – the places where Christian or Muslim pilgrims become hajji after having visited them.

Two local toponyms – names of high imposing mountain peaks in the studied area of the Middle Mesta River region, in my opinion, contain the ethnonym of the Thracian Bessi and bespeak, even though in an indirect way, that they relate to an imposing megalithic sanctuary

which is situated on top of the covered with snow Pirin Mountain, in the tribal territory of the Bessi. Those are Besled and Besbog Peaks. Besled is the highest peak on Dabrash summit in the Western Rhodope Mountains. Its foot and slopes are marked with numerous huge in their areas and important in their functions Thracian rock sanctuaries and it has the characteristics of a sacred mountain (Markov, 2012, pp. 265-273). Besbog is an enormous natural stone pyramid which is situated near the northern part of the sacralized in Ancient Thrace Popovo circus. In the local folk tales God Bes is the antagonist to the God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains, who also lives in Popovo circus, on top of Kralev Dvor. Bes abducted the daughter of the supreme heavenly god while she was bathing in Samodivski Lakes at the foot of her peak, Momin Dvor. At the order of the God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains the two genies Dzhengal and Dzhano caught up with God Bes, rescued the young woman and killed him. Then they buried him under a pile of huge stones. In this way the enormous stone pyramid on Besbog Peak appeared. Two imposing rock peaks at the southern part of the sacralized in Ancient Thrace Popovo circus still have the names of the genies Dzhengal and Dzhano. Thus the legend, which definitely is a version (probably the Thracian one, author's note) of the Hellenic myth about the abducted maiden Kore Persephone by God Hades, who took her to the underworld, was "written" on the relief which is formed by awesome rock peaks that delineate the outer circle of the sacralized Popovo circus in Central Pirin Mountain. This legend has lived for centuries.

In the same way another legend about the God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains was written on the sacralized area on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain, in the circus of Popovo Lake. It is about the following story: when Christianity appeared, a priest went to the circus carrying a copper vessel with holy water inside. He waved at Kralev Dvor to sprinkle holy water on it in order to expel the pagan God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains from the place. The god became furious and threw at the priest winds, storms and tons of water. The water formed a lake and the priest drowned. In the middle of the lake only his hat remained floating. Then the hat petrified and thus Popova

Kapa island appeared. After that the God of lightning, thunder, storms and rains left this place forever (Markov, 2007).

I would like to direct your attention especially to the location of the round island of Popova Kapa, which is situated in the center of Popovo lake, as a symbol of the underworld. In the folk beliefs recorded by Petar Deliradev, the island is inaccessible to the ordinary people i.e. the ones who are not initiated (BNPP, 1983, 47-48). We could assume that to swim in the dangerous waters of the lake (where a frightening monster lives – a black ram that drags away the herds of the shepherds to the bottom of the lake, as well as the dragon of Pirin Mountain – master of the mountain, author's note) to the island and coming back in semantic and functional aspect can be interpreted as going to and back the Underworld (Kupar, 1993, p. 153; Gonsovski, 1982; Markov, 2011, pp. 27-36). This is a ritual with a shamanistic character, which in many cases is connected with prophesying functions to predict the future (Eliade, 2000, pp. 310-349).

Everything stated so far gives me the reason to consider that the place of the famous sanctuary and oracular shrine of Dionysus Sabazios should be in the circus of Popovo Lake. The sanctuary is situated in an area which is high in Pirin Mountain covered with snow, in the lands of the Thracian Satrae and Thracian Bessi, as it is presented in Herodotus's accounts. The regional toponymy and the artefacts from the ancient myths in the local folk tales show it to us as an original Mount Olympus for the local Thracian tribes. The monumental character of the sanctuary, which is set in the natural code of the circus – the circle, with its structure containing three inscribed circles marked with Thracian religious centers symbolizes the center of the world located on top of the cosmic mountain. The structure and the semantics of the sanctuary show that a mythological character who is the master of the whole universe of heaven, earth and underworld was worshipped there. The folk memory has preserved it as a mythological character that lives on top of the mountain, i.e. in heavenly regions, and in the waters of Popovo Lake, i.e. in the underworld at the same time.

This, of course, is the dragon of Pirin Mountain, the folklore successor of the Thracian Dionysus. The Thracian Dionysus, who is simultaneously Zagreus, Sabazios, a dragon and the sun, is the same as

we know him from the big stele in the Thracian sanctuary at Stolovatets, near the town of Razlog, from its reconstructed image in the monumental rock sanctuary at Popovo Lake and from the mythological image of the dragon-sun in the folk songs in Pirin Mountain. Artefacts from its cult, highly defiled, folkorized and Christianized, can be found as late as the end of 20th century in the traditional folk celebrations in the Thracian megalithic sanctuaries of Lyaski Peak and Pilentseto in Southern Pirin Mountain and in the small monastery near the village of Pirin in Central Pirin Mountain, which are dedicated to The Holy Spirit as well as in the home celebration “The Host’s Dish” in the area of the Middle Mesta River (Markov, 2009, pp. 98-164).



Figure 10. “Mitrovica” megalithic sanctuary.
Western Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

I have the reason to think that the structure of the sanctuary in the circus of Popovo Lake was repeated in a considerably smaller scale in the structure of Mitrovitsa sanctuary in the Western Rhodope Mountains. In the same way, in the western part of the sacred area of this sanctuary there are high rock peaks that are included in the cult. The

highest among them was probably dedicated to Demeter and in semantic aspect it corresponds to both Momin Dvor and Mangar Tepe in the circus of Popovo Lake, which are dedicated to the Great Goddess.

At the lowest part of Mitrovitsa sanctuary known as “Padala”, which is comparable to the position of Popovo Lake, there is an imposing circular rock-hewn altar whose diameter is 25 m (Fig. 10). In Ancient Thrace it was covered with offerings (Markov, 2007, pp. 119-122). In my opinion in semantic aspect it corresponds to the sacred island of Popovo Kapa on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain.

There is not only a direct visual link between the two sanctuaries but also in ancient times they were connected with a sacred road that went along the valley of the Retizhe River. The river takes its source from Popovo Lake and flows into the Mesta River at the western foothills of Mitrovitsa rock sanctuary. The road is sacred and is marked with several Thracian sacred places that we have found on both banks

of the river (Markov, 2007). All this area, which is situated between the circus of Popovo Lake in Central Pirin Mountain, and the site of Mitrovitsa rock sanctuary in The Western Rhodope Mountains on the eastern bank of the Mesta River, is strewn with a great number of legends. They tell the story of a huge maiden who built Momina Kula (Tower), (which is another rock sanctuary preceding the late ancient and medieval fortress, author’s note), in Momin Pass on the Mesta River (Fig. 11). She brought stones



Figure 11. The petrified girl. Rock silhouette of the megalithic sanctuary “Momina Kula”. Eastern foothills of Central Pirin Mountain, Bulgaria (Photo by Vasil Markov).

for the building across the Mesta River with the help of a rope stretched between Momina Kula in Pirin Mountain and Nistoritsa sanctuary in the Western Rhodope Mountains. According to the folk beliefs the young woman used to wash her clothes in the trough hewn in the rock at the bottom of the river. She used to hang the clothes on the same rope. This young lady was so big and full of mettle that in only three steps she was able to get from Momina Kula near the Mesta River to Momin Dvor in the circus of Popovo Lake on the summit of Pirin Mountain (Markov, 2016, pp. 74-83).

It is not difficult to assume that we are talking about the same maiden known from the legends of the circus of Popovo Lake. She is the folklore successor of the virginal hypostasis of Mother Goddess in Ancient Thrace.

A significant cultural layer that can be seen in particular parts of the area of Mitrovitsa rock sanctuary, in comparison with the one at Popovo Lake, makes me suppose that we are talking about an imposing sacred structure in the sacrosanct geography of this part of the Western Rhodope Mountains and the eastern slopes of Central Pirin Mountain. It contains the circular sanctuary on top of the sacred Pirin Mountain with the pantheon of stone (or petrified as it is in the folk tales, author's note) aniconic deities (Michel, 2015, pp. 53-66; Genov, 2016), which is located in the circus of Popovo Lake and probably was accessible only to a limited number of initiated people. And another, more accessible part of the sacralized territory, which is situated on the impressive rock peak of Mitrovitsa, and in the region to the south and west that is in a considerably lower position on the vertical structure of the cosmic mountain.

Basing my argument on partly-reconstructed scene of the ritual practices at Kara Kaya megalithic sanctuary (Markov, 2019, pp. 10-13), I would like to propose the hypothesis that it is likely that only those who had passed the sacred procedure of the mystical initiation in Mitrovitsa megalithic sanctuary gained the right of access via the sacred road, marked in the valley of Retizhe River, to the peculiar Thracian Mount Olympus on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain.

Last but not least, I would like to present one more argument to support my hypothesis of the location of the oracular shrine of Dionysus

Sabazios in Thrace on the summit of Pirin Mountain. This is the account given by Arrianus about the route of the well-known war campaign of the Macedonian king Alexander III in Thrace in 335 BC (Arrianus, *Anabasis*, I,1). It is very likely that it was a war campaign during which Alexander of Macedon visited the oracular shrine of Dionysus Sabazios where, according to Suetonius (Suetonius Tranquillus, *Augustus*, 94,6), it was prophesied that he would become the ruler of the world.

The war campaign was a reaction to the audacious raid of the Thracian tribe Triballi on the Ancient Hellenic city-colony Abdera (already a Macedonian protectorate, author's note), which situated at the mouth of the Mesta River at the Thracian Sea (the Aegean Sea, author's note). Using the shortest way, the Triballi went down from their lands in north-west Thrace across Sofia Plain and the Upper Struma River region, then along the valley of the Mesta River. They devastated and plundered the area around Abdera without being able to conquer the city itself (Fol, 1975, pp. 12-13).

According to Arrianus, Alexander started his punitive campaign against the Triballi from Amphipolis leaving the ancient city of Philippi and Orbel Mountain (the Hellenic name of Pirin Mountain, author's note) on his left. According to the ancient author, after Alexander crossed the Mesta River, on the tenth day the king of Macedon found himself in one of the narrow passes of the Haemus Mountains, which was blocked by the Thracians (Arrianus I,1).

Here the keywords, in my opinion, are "crossed Nest" (Mesta, author's note). The route of the war campaign of Alexander the Great in Thrace is still debatable. Some authors tend to interpret the expression like "crossed Mesta" and that the Ancient Macedonian army set out from Nevrokop Plain in the east through the Western and Central Rhodope Mountains, which part of the mountain is very difficult to cross, towards Philippopolis. The main argument of these authors is that Alexander wanted to consolidate his position over the Macedonian colony of Philippopolis, which his father Philip II had established, and then to start his war campaign against the Triballi (Danov, 1979, pp. 207-208).

From a military strategic point of view, however, this hypothesis about the beginning of the campaign of Alexander in Thrace is illogical as far, as I am concerned. At least it is because of the fact that it would

have delayed the instantaneous character of the war campaign of the young Macedonian ruler, a delay that didn't happen. On the tenth day he was already on the summit of the Haemus Mountains.

Firstly, the valley of the Mesta River is the biggest natural and easily accessible pass that crosses Rila-Rhodope massif from north to south, which opens up towards the Aegean Sea. That is why, in my opinion, the Triballi used this particular pass in their march against Abdera. In this regard it is natural to assume that Alexander also used it as the shortest route on his way back, to the lands of the Triballi, which he reached very quickly. Personally, I believe that it is what Arrianus told us by using the phrase about Alexander's route "crossed Mesta" in the sense that he crossed the lands along the river from south to north like the Triballi did, across the lands of the Bessi leaving Orbel Mountain on his left (i.e. on the west, author's note).

What does the archaeological picture in the field work at the area of the Middle Mesta region that we have studied show:

Two ancient roads go along the valley of the Middle Mesta River and connect Nevrokop Plain and Razlog Plain. One of them, which was probably made in the late antiquity because of the difficult terrain, goes along the valley of the Mesta River almost in the same way as the modern asphalt road from the village of Eleshnitsa to the town of Gotse Delchev does.

The other one, which probably was made earlier, starts from the region of the village of Breznitsa, Gotse Delchev Region, avoids the narrow parts of Momin Pass and goes higher in the middle of the slopes of Central Pirin Mountain, then descends in the area of the modern town of Dobrinishte. There has been evidence about parts of this road with Roman pavement preserved until recently (Delev & Popov, 2002, p. 28). Right from there to the west against the stream of the Retizhe River, an ancient road starts with partly preserved pavement, which leads to the sacralized circular territory of Popovo circus on the summit of Central Pirin Mountain. Even only in this part the road is marked with four rock sanctuaries before it enters the valley of the Retizhe River in the region of Popovo Lake (Markov, 2007, pp. 73-74). It is a sacred road, which until the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century, is used by Christian and Muslim pilgrims from the whole area of the south-eastern

part of the Balkan Peninsula in order to give offerings on top of the mountain following the tradition of their ancestors and to become hajji.

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