

THE TOPONYMS “THE BLACK ROCK” AND “THE BLACK STONE” – TWO EMBLEMATIC EXAMPLES OF OPEN-AIR SANCTUARIES FROM THE WESTERN RHODOPES

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Source: MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS AND CULT
PRACTICES, Proceedings of the Third International Symposium
Blagoevgrad, 8-9 September 2020, pages 99-109

<http://www.satrael.swu.bg>

Neofit Rilski University Press, 2020



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Abstract. This text presents two less known to science open air sanctuaries, situated in the most western part of the Rhodopes Mountain in South-Western Bulgaria. Despite the uncertain data, considering the geography of local tribes, both sanctuaries can be connected with the mountain population from the 1st millennium BC which are mentioned in ancient literature with ethnonyms Besi, Satri or as independent mountain Thracian tribes.

Keywords: open-air sanctuaries; megaliths; Thracians; Rhodopes; peak sanctuary; sacred place; rock-cut monuments

We are going to present two very interesting monuments, which are well-known to a part of our team. What prompted me to choose them is the research funded by the national scientific program “Cultural Heritage, National Memory and Social Development” (KINNPOR), which pointed a different view at these sites and revealed the importance and potential they have for the Bulgarian cultural heritage. This is the reason we are trying to draw the specialists’ attention to them because we believe they are some of the most interesting mountain sanctuaries in the region of the Dabrash ridge in Western Rhodopes mountain, which still raise more questions than answers.

This fact triggered gave us desire to present these monuments at the Third International Symposium Megalithic Monuments and Cult Practices, which brought together a significant interdisciplinary team, and we are certain that our article will gather interest among some people to at least visit these places and why not join a larger interdisciplinary study.

The first monument we are presenting is called Kara Kaya. It was visited from our team for the first time back in 2002. When visiting the monument, one is truly impressed with the dominant position of the

natural rock around which the sanctuary was formed. The site probably had a high attendance, as evidenced by the abundance of archaeological materials. The location suggests that this type of center may have had a kind of collective trade and administrative center functions for the region in ancient times.

The very first visit to the site in 2001 established a direct visual connection with the sanctuary above the village of Babyak, which is visible as a peak on the distant northern horizon.

The toponym Kara Kaya can literally be translated from Turkish as “Black Rock”. The sanctuary is a high rock at an altitude of 1761 m, dominating as the highest point above the surrounding terrain, above the springs of the Vishteritsa River – a right tributary of the Kanina River (Gotsev, 2008, p. 215; Markov, 2009, p. 56).

Markov emphasizes the shape of the rock, which resembles a rock pyramid (Markov, 2009, p. 56). Another thing that draws the attention is that the southern vertical part of the rock is higher. It is about 15-20 m (Gotsev, 2008, p. 215), while from the north the elevation of the terrain makes it more accessible. Also from the north at the foot of the rock there are considerable traces of cultural stratification, in which there are significant blocks of cut stone which could probably be the remains of a massive building attached to the rock (Markov, 2009, p. 57). The subject matter of the access to the rock can have two solutions. The first one is from the northeast, where there is a sloping approach in a naturally formed crack in the rock, in which pieces of screed, coal and bones are found (Gotsev, 2008, p. 215). The second one is from the north, after overcoming a small vertical line on the northern rock wall, in its upper part several small steps are cut (Markov, 2009, p. 56).

It is possible that some pre-existing structure provided easier access. After climbing the highest part of the rock, a cult site is revealed, in the center of which is formed a rectangular pool – a rectangular altar with a wide channel, “flowing” to the south (Fig. 1). The area of the top creates the impression of artificial alignment. In one part of it there is a configuration of several sections – one with a round shape and two with more complex outlines.

To the north are the valleys of Medeni Polyani and Pobit Kamak, to the west – northwest are the valleys formed by the rivers Matandere

and Sedrule, in which ancient settlements are also located, to the south are also the suitable for stock-raising, logging and mining lands, which go down to the Mesta river bed.



Figure 1. The rock-cut sanctuary “Kara Kaya” (Photo by Anton Genov).

Karakaya has a visual connection with another large center, the so-called Mitrovica area located just above the bed of the Mesta River. Perhaps they mark a certain road route to the valley of Mesta and the Pirin mountain and have been areas of communication between individual tribal groups, as well as places for trade, contractual and even marital relations, which are very similar to some fairs that are still held in the Rhodopes nowadays.

In this line of thought we can present an interesting ethnographic parallel from the traditional way of life of the Vlach ethnic group who were engaged until recently in mobile livestock breeding. Such a fair was held annually on St. Peter's Day in the area of Petrov Kamak – Pazardzhik region, where different families gathered after returning from the Aegean Sea area, to exchange information, settle trade, family-

administrative and marriage arrangements¹. After this gathering, each clan turned to its mountain pastures and homes, which, according to the study of Thompson and Weiss, were considered by the Vlachs themselves as their true home despite their nomadic way of life (Wase & Thompson, 1914, p. 2).

This can be a good starting point showing what the large rock sanctuaries in the high mountain areas were used for. In the life of a mountain population whose livelihood is above all migratory stock-breeding they held an important place. Probably the imposing rocks from prehistory had the role of important landmarks, markers of road routes, starting points for migrations, marketplaces, tribal gatherings, places of exchange, i.e. they were forerunners of social institutions in that era. In a sea of coniferous forest, nothing else would be as effective and perform a similar function better than the soaring dominating rocks of some high hills. This information can be supplemented by the traditional gathering of the Karakachans ethnic group in the area of Karandila near the city of Sliven. The name of the place is again derived from the Turkish word for black – Kara.

This concept is also suggested by another place similar to Kara Kaya, a rock sanctuary in the area of Karatash or Karatash Rock. It turns out that the rock group visited and documented as Kara Tash by the archaeological team of the Western Rhodope Expedition 2000 is another rock carved topos, and not the actual area with that name. To the place Kara Tash – in a literal translation from Turkish Black Stone – called by the locals Karatashka rock we were directed by forest workers from the Skrebatsko area who know the region well. The area is located northeast of the valley of Skrebatsko.

The Skrebatsko area itself is extremely interesting. It is a habitable mountain valley, and as shown by the remains of ancient settlements, a necropolis and current huts and summer pastures, has been used by the herdsman population in the region since antiquity. Probably the family, in whose territory the sanctuary fell, lived there.

¹ Inf. Kostadin Yanakiev, village of Dorkovo. The information is inherited in the family of the informant, who has Vlachian origin.

The valley is surrounded by high ridges and peaks, most of which end in rocks marked with carvings, i.e. they were used for the cult practices of the locals. To the west of it is a sanctuary in the area of Salakov (Salaov) Buk (Markov, 2007, p. 302). But perhaps what deserves the most attention in the region is the already mentioned “Karatash” – a rocky plateau with a massive pronounced western part dominated by a huge rock with a height of about 15 m (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The rock-cut sanctuary “Karatash” (Photo by Anton Genov).

The rock is located on the east of the Skrebatsko area at a height in the southernmost part of a protruding ridge, descending along the northwest, the southern part of which slopes down to the gorge of the Vishteritsa River, and the northern part leads inwards to the central part of the Beslet ridge.

The rock sanctuary Karatash, at the time when we visited it, was rummaged by a bulldozer, the cultural layer around the rock was destroyed for the most part, in places where it is preserved, a stratification (layering) about 1 m thick can be seen (Fig. 3).

It was registered an extremely high concentration of ceramics, most of which with a grey-black color, rough, not well fired, with many silicate impurities (Fig. 4). There are fragments with buckle decoration.



Figure 3. The rock-cut sanctuary “Karatash” – cultural layer around the main rock destroyed by treasure hunters (Photo by Anton Genov).



Figure 4. The rock-cut sanctuary “Karatash”. Findings: pottery, iron objects (Photo by Anton Genov).

In the eastern part of the plateau were found fragments of clay plaster, probably parts of a ritual hearth, several metal objects, a fragment of a knife, a metal plate and a cylindrical object, probably a tip or a handle. On the high western rock is located a fragment of a vessel, which was repaired with a lead seal, on the rock itself there is also a significant cultural layering, in places up to 60 cm, which is also not spared by the looters (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. The rock-cut sanctuary “Karatash” – cultural layering up on the rock surface (Photo by Anton Genov).

The rock from the west is vertical and the approach is from NE where the slope is accessible. From there several “cult” sites can be reached. The first, which is the lowest one, reveals a view of the West – NW and is marked by a slight irregular digging around the NW edge.

In order to reach the next higher level, a natural gap between the rocks can be used, which leads to the next significantly higher SW site. Similar to the first one, it is well levelled and there are three clearly formed cup marks with a diameter of about 15-20 cm. Their depth is about 8 cm (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. The rock-cut sanctuary “Karatash” rock carvings – “cup-marks” (Photo by Anton Genov).

From the natural gap there is a transition to the southern highest site which is also flat but there is no evidence of carving on it. We must mention that the observation was not thorough due to the rain and thunder storm at the time, but in general no altars were noticed. What should be noted here is that to this highest part of the rock, parallel to the gap leading to the SW, along a low platform, ascends a monumental staircase, which looks like a man-finished natural step structure of the rock with the purpose to obtain the equalization of the stairs.

At the foot of this approach, the treasure hunters have uncovered a small cave or rock shelter which was originally buried. The secondary observation shows a relatively poorer presence of material in the soil removed from the shelter in contrast to the surrounding levels and sites on the ridge of the rock, where a layer with a high concentration of ceramic fragments is visible.

As already mentioned, the study of Kara Tash was extremely difficult due to bad weather conditions. It definitely deserves long and detailed observations. What is seen leaves no doubt that the rock plateau

can be attributed to the large rock shrines, tribal or rather intertribal centers of the Kara Kaya type.

The huge amount of ceramic material accumulated around the rock speaks of a high concentration of human masses and worshipers. It must not be underestimated the presence in the toponyms of both large sanctuaries of a word from Turkish denoting the black color (from Turkish *kara* – black). In the context of ancient sources and famous mythological references from Asia Minor it can be related to the symbolism of the female mythological beginning, known as the Great Goddess. According to the sources it was also worshiped as a piece of black rock.

Of course, ethnographic legendary material concerning the toponymy of the two localities would give more clarity about the genesis of the name, but at the moment such is not known. Also, the two topos, despite the looting intervention, can still be important starting points in collecting archaeological data on open-air sanctuaries.

It can be said, without hesitation, that the two sanctuaries are of a similar type due to their alike vision and geographical location. Last but not least the toponyms also hint at similarity. Toponyms should not be unvalued because, as has been repeatedly proven by scientists from various sciences, the legendary material and toponyms from such places often contain residual information.

The matter about the duration of the functioning of the sanctuaries and their role is very intriguing. Were they just council centers of the surrounding clans and tribes, did they trace certain road routes? Their political function also raises questions. Is it similar to the model of the sanctuary from Kozi Gramadi peak (Hristov, 2014, pp. 274-275) with some centralized royal ideology gravitating around the two Rhodope topos, or do we have a political organization of another type in which separate tribal communities rule and maintain their topos which have different significance according to the power of the clan that rules them?

The nature of the cult is not specified either, but using the data accumulated so far for such objects from the Balkan-Anatolian region, we can assume that the rock is thought of as a mythological topos of divine appearance. The main attested anthropomorphic images of deities

from such rock objects come from relatively later dated votive tablets which most often represent a pair of deities interpreted as Zeus and Hera with the corresponding local epithets. The presence of the Thracian horseman is also emphasized, but the parallels of rock sanctuaries from Asia Minor show that rock topos are most often thought of as places of epiphany and the Great Goddess (Berndt-Ersöz, 2006, p. 199; Markov, 2007, pp. 120-121; Markov, 2012, p. 60).

That is, we have the presence of both masculine and feminine. Regarding this we can think that rock sanctuaries are the places where the sacred marriage takes place, which can be seen in the form of some meteorological or astronomical phenomenon, as shown by some data from the Middle East. This assumption is also in line with the already given ethnographic parallel about the customs of the Vlachs, in which marriage contracts were made in such places. Anthropomorphic images are a relatively late manifestation. Initially mythological notions were nurtured by natural phenomena, the elements, and unusual natural forms, such as the high bizarre rocks that we often find in the center of the cult with the appropriate refinements and archaeological materials.

In fact, we can conclude this article by saying that its purpose is to once again draw the attention of the scientific community to these two sites. We believe they are of a great significance to revealing the way of life and faith of the Western Rhodopes Thracian tribes. We believe that their research and inclusion in the maps with tourist routes not only as a natural attraction, but also as important monuments of cultural value would significantly enrich the Bulgarian cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by the national scientific program “Cultural Heritage, National Memory and Social Development”. This research was carried out by University Research Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean Cultures, at South-West University “Neofit Rilski”.

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