

MONUMENTAL ROCK IMAGES IN THE MEGALITHIC SANCTUARIES ON THE BALKANS

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Monumental Rock Images in the Megalithic Sanctuaries on the Balkans

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Abstract: Presence of monumental rock images in megalithic and rock-cut sanctuaries on the Balkans has been known for long. They are also known from different areas on the planet. The following discussion is also very long: do we deal with a game of natural elements? or Are the images made by a human? The opinions are quite polarized. All the things mentioned above give me the reason to suggest the hypothesis that the beginning of the monumental sculpture/proto sculpture on the Balkans and in Europe could be dated back to the end of fourth millennium B.C.

Keywords: archaeology, mythology, ethnology, megalithic monuments, rock cut sanctuaries

The presence of monumental rock images in megalithic and rock-hewn sanctuaries on the Balkans has been known for a long time (Радунчева 2003:75-138). They are also known from different areas on the planet (Rao 1993:664-667).

The following discussion is also very old: do we deal with a game of natural elements or were the images made by a human being? Here the opinions are quite polarized (Радунчева 2003:75-138). In order to be as correct as possible I should admit that in some cases the first group of authors is right but in others – their opponents. That is why each monument should be approached and studied individually. The main question is: Did the ancient people see in those images sacred characters and what could be our arguments in favour of this statement? Having in mind my field studies up to now I can outline three main features which are possible evidence that the image on the rocks was worshipped in ancient times:

The first and the most common one is the position of the image in the sacralized territory in ancient time. In this aspect, the image could be the reason, a natural code, because of which the sanctuary appeared.

The second one, although it is also quite uncertain evidence in my opinion, is whether there is a preserved legend, myth or folk ritual, an artefact from the ancient mythology or cult-ritual practices about the studied image. A very important role has the legends about petrified mythological characters which are a heritage of the numerous old myths about the isomorphism between a human being and a stone (Аполодор 1992:35). The presence of artefacts from the ancient myth and cult, in combination with the first type of evidence, has already strengthened the likelihood that we are dealing with a worshipped in pagan antiquity monumental image-symbol (Марков 2007:265-270).

The third and the most certain one but at the same time the least common evidence is the traces of rock hewing on the image (silhouette, author marks)- a natural code.

The combination of the three types of evidence, of course, gives us the certainty that we are dealing with an ancient monumental image in the sacralized

rocks, which was an object of cult in prehistoric or ancient time. As a classical example in this respect I would like to point out the image of a huge dragon¹ in the rock-hewn sanctuary near the village of Dobromiritsi in the region of Zlatograd, Eastern Rhodope Mountains (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The Crocodile, near the village of Dobromiritsi



The monumental rock-hewn sculpture of the dragon appears to have been the sacred centre of one of the biggest megalithic sanctuaries in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. The whole back, the head and the area where the tail of the sacred image is, are studded with round rock-hewn altars. What is more, in the area of the tail there is a rock-hewn cave-womb which still nowadays is used by diseased people to go through in order to be born anew and healthy. It is a folk cult ritual which I have already brought out as an artefact from the Thracian rituals of immortality (Марков 2007:211-265).

The presence of the cave-womb at the tail of the monumental rock sculpture makes me think that we are dealing with a female mythological character, i.e. the zoomorphic image of Mother Goddess like a female dragon. Thus I should point out that the very same image has two of her hypostases – Demeter and her daughter Persephone in the Orphic mythology (Фол 1991:171).

Now, to all this, we should add the artificial (man-made) hewing which separates the jaws of the mythological monster as well as the round hewing which was made precisely in the place where the eye is. It stores rain water for a long time and the rain water reflects the colour of the sky like a mirror. We can observe a certain finish processing of the natural phenomenon in order to complete the mythological image and make it similar in its appearance to the mythological character.

¹ Nowadays it is known among the native people as ‘The Crocodile’

It becomes clear that one of the earliest monumental sculptures or proto-sculptures in Europe closely connected with the ancient cult and which probably precedes the beginning of the monumental sculpture of the antiquity by millennia lies before us.

Can we attribute this remarkable work of the ancient monumental sculpture to a high late chalcolithic civilization that thrived in our territories? It is very likely to be true if we take into consideration the excavated archaeological material from the sanctuary at the village of Dobromiritsi, but for the time being there is only one possible hypothesis. It is essential that precise dating of the rock hewing on the image be done; dating which is possible with geo-physical methods.

The result of this analysis encouraged me to start studying all the rest of the important monumental images/symbols that I know in the megalithic sanctuaries on the Balkans. Here the monumental anthropomorphic faces will be mainly presented. Generally they can be divided into male and female mythological characters.

Definitely the most interesting group is the one of female stone faces. Among them the biggest interest has been roused by the monumental female face located on the right bank of the river Mesta at the south entrance of Momin Prohod (Fig. 2). The face is situated in the eastern part of a well-defined rock structure in the area. It is about 10 m high. It faces east. If you look at it from north, you can clearly see the profile of the forehead, nose and artificially cut (man-made) eye. At the bottom, where the mouth is, the erosion has caused irreparable damage to the sedimentary rock. The head is covered with a loose kerchief which resembles very much the head-cloth of the great goddess Kubaba from her images in the Hittite-Luwic art (Венедиков 1992:85). What is specific about our monument is definitely the huge size of the image.

Figure 2: Monumental female face, Momin Prohod – South-Western Bulgaria



There is a demiurgic legend about the rock group which is kept in people's memory. It says that it was harvest time. A young woman was cradling her baby. She had to change the baby's swaddling clothes. As she didn't have what to clean the baby with, she took some wheat ears from the stack of sheaves and used them. It was a big sin. Bread was desecrated. God got angry and petrified everything. The stack of sheaves became a rock and the threshed wheat next to it turned into a large earth knoll. They can be seen now near the river on the land of the village of Bukovo². Unfortunately because of the corrections of the bed of the river Mesta the authentic terrain was destroyed here so we haven't found traces of a cultural layer. It can be definitely supposed, however, that it is an image and artefacts from the mythology dedicated to Mother Goddess. An indication for this is a whole cycle of folk legends connected with the fortress Momina Kula, which is situated nearby.

The fortress was built in the narrowest part of the mountain passage and it has succeeded an ancient Thracian rock sanctuary. According to the most widespread Bulgarian legend some Turks tried to rape the maiden who was guarding and defending the fortress perched on the high rocks. In order not to be caught by them the brave young woman threw herself into the precipice leading to the river Mesta. God petrified her and still now people point at a high solitary rock among the pinnacles and think that it is the silhouette of the petrified maiden (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Momina Kula



² Public records of the University Research Centre for Ancient European and Easterly Mediterranean Cultures at South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

A remarkable parallel in this respect is the rock “Girl” in Selecka planina (mountain) near the village of Seltse, Prilep Region in Macedonia, where there is a monumental profile of a face which finishes on the high, protruded rock over the area (Fig. 4). Here I should specially point out the head-cloth on the hair which resembles very much the one of the monumental female face in Momin Prohod, Gotse Delchev Region. According to the local legend the maiden was petrified but this time it was because of her mother’s curse.

Figure 4: Rock “Girl” in Selecka planina



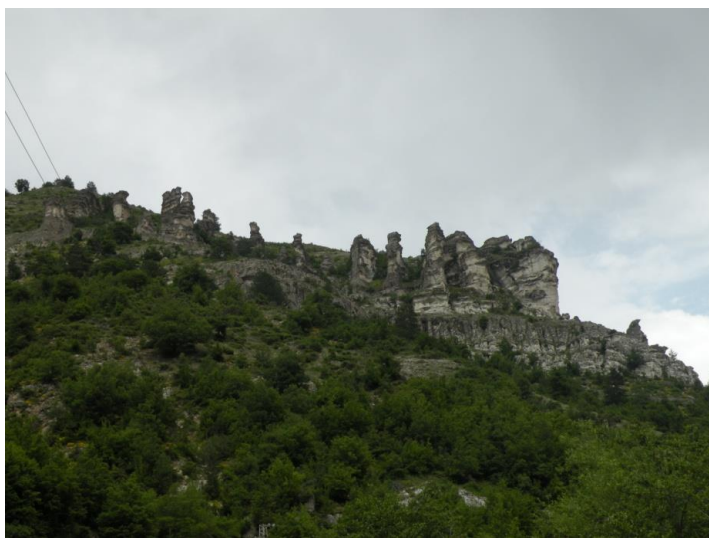
Another legend says that the maiden was big and strong and she herself built Momin Kula fortress. She brought stones from the rocky right bank of the river in the Western Rhodope Mountains by transferring them along a rope which she herself had stretched between the rocky sides of the gorge situated between the Western Rhodope Mountains and Eastern Pirin³. Our studies showed that the place from which the young woman brought the stones for the fortress, according to the legend, was also a sacralized ancient Thracian area later succeeded by the Christian sacred place called Nistoritsa (probably the Christian patron saint is St. Nistor. The female form of the toponym shows an earlier worship of a female mythological character, author marks).

A third legend tells the story of a maiden who was washing her clothes in a huge stone wash-tub cut in the rocky bed of the river Mesta. She had tied a rope above it to dry her clothes. The fourth legend, recorded in the region by Dimitriya

³ Public records of the University Research Centre for Ancient European and Easterly Mediterranean Cultures at South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Spasova, presents the young woman as very big and strong. She made only two or three steps to get from Momina Kula fortress near Mesta to the rock mountain top called Momin Dvor in Central Pirin Mountain. According to another big cycle of legends connected with the sacralized area in Thracian antiquity near Popovo Lake her home was there. Here the cycle of legends continues the story about the young woman presenting her as the Storm-god's sister, about her gardens near Samodivski Lakes planted with herbs that endow people with a new life. They tell about the unsuccessful attempt of god Bes to abduct the maiden and to make her his wife in the underworld. The last legend, which is about the abducted young woman, resembles very much the story about the abduction of Kore/Persephone to the underworld by god Hades in Greek mythology (Венедиков 1987: 369, Марков 2007: 78-108). We find the same legend, which is a legacy of the Mysteries, about the abducted maiden written from the folk memory in the natural phenomena Osenovo and Gostun stone weddings that are located at the north entrance of Momin Prohod gorge. Both picturesque rock phenomena, which were ancient Thracian megalithic sanctuaries, in folklore are compared to wedding ceremonies taking the young woman by force to another, not known to her village (Fig. 5). People even point out the non-iconic images of the bride and groom turned into picturesque rocks after a mother's curse.

Figure 5: Osenovo stone weddings

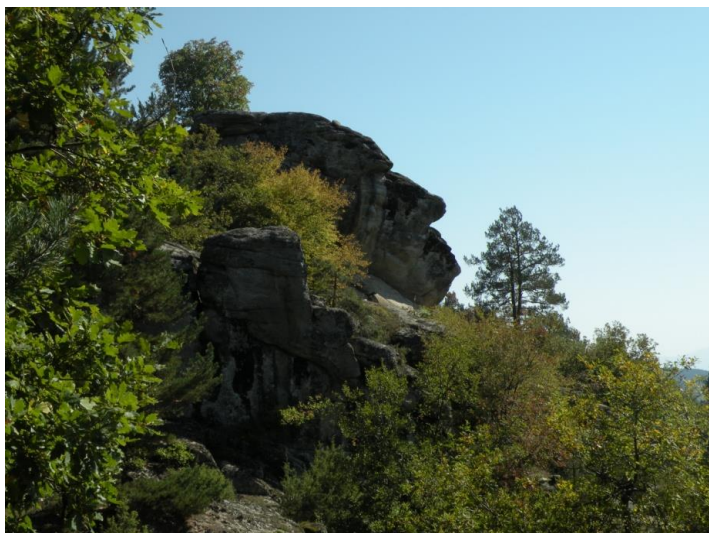


The memory of Mother Goddess can be found in the toponym “Mitrovitsa”, which is the current name of one of the biggest ancient Thracian megalithic sanctuaries in the Western Rhodope Mountains and centre of the remarkable sacred territory. It includes Osenovo stone wedding and the big cave situated on the north of the sanctuary. The church site which succeeded the ancient sacred place is dedicated to St. Dimitar, but the female form of the name and the gifts we found there like sickles, weights of a loom and weights of a spindle make me think that its

ancient Thracian prototype was dedicated to Demeter, one of the hypostases of Mother Goddess (Марков 2007:119).

In this way we can see a remarkable in its dimensions territory in the Western Rhodope Mountains and Central Pirin Mountain interspersed with important ancient Thracian holy places. In connection with this holy geography there are some impressive fragments from the myth about Mother Goddess of the Thracians, which are kept in the form of Bulgarian folk legends, and her megalithic image can be seen even today near the river Mesta in the land belonging to the village of Bukovo.

Figure 6: Megalithic sanctuary Gradishteto



Not less interesting are the male faces in the megalithic sanctuaries on the Balkans. Among them first we should point out the monumental stone face that appears as if coming out of the rock in the megalithic sanctuary Gradishteto near the village of Dolno Dryanovo, Gotse Delchev Region (Fig. 6). The method to join the monumental sacred image with the rock probably is no accident and in semantic aspect it should suggest the connection between the mythological character and the rock. It is a connection that we can find, for example, in Hittite-Hurrian mythology in the face of the giant Ulikumi (Попко 1982:133-148) and indirectly in ancient Greek mythology in the face of the giant Antaeus whose strength came from the earth (Батаклиев 1985:21). In representational aspect the same characteristic flavour to show the mythological character as coming out of the rock can be seen in the megalithic gates of the capital city of the Hittites, Hattusa, as well as in the gates of the Hittite settlement of Alacahöyük (Anatolia 2015:68, 107).

This artistic solution in the religious art of the Hittites was achieved when the sculptors were skilled enough in making relief, high relief and round sculpture. It is obvious to me that the images of lions and sphinxes shown as coming out of

the monumental rock is an intended device to suggest a definite link between those mythological characters and the deified rock. It is a tradition which probably preceded the indoeuropeanization in the Balkan-Anatolia region and it should be connected with the Hattians in Anatolia and with the pre-Thracian period on the Balkans marked by the high late chalcolithic civilization in the eastern part of the peninsula known mainly as the archaeological culture Varna (Радунчева 2003:75-138). Such is the earliest dating of the archaeological materials from the megalithic sanctuary in Dolno Dryanovo.

Here I should mention that the monumental male face in Dolno Dryanovo is part of a whole gallery of proto sculptures including some more human faces, silhouettes of water birds and turtles, etc., which should be regarded as a complex. It is also part of a complicated ritual complex that includes two rock arches located to the north and west, some round altars hewn in the rock, sacralized platforms with cult fireplaces in which there has been registered ritually-smashed pottery that dates back to the late chalcolithic period and the Thracian era – 1st millennium B.C. (Божкова-Тодорова: 2008:200-204). All this makes me think that we are dealing with an open-air megalithic temple dedicated to the Thracian Dionysus⁴. The god was thought of as a chthonic character born by the deified earth/rock (his mother is Semele/Zemele/earth, author marks) and with regard to this he is presented as if he was coming out of the rock. Moreover, he was considered to be a sky character, which can be seen in the fire cult practiced with connection with and near the monumental male face.

What is more, the Thracian Dionysus and in particular his hypostasis, Dionysus-Zagreus, can be associated with the rock mask shown as a stone relief in the Thracian sanctuary called Markov Kamak (Marko's Stone) at the foot of Tsarev Peak in Rila Mountain (Марков, Янков 2009:41-50). The image is sculptured on a small rock group in one of the lowest spots of the sacralized area of the sanctuary (Fig. 7). There is a big human face. One can clearly see the eyes, nose and eyebrows. In the place where the mouth is the relief has been badly damaged because of erosion. In the upper part of the head there are two big curved horns. On the whole the image resembles very much a kuker's mask from the Bulgarian folk culture. The relief is deep and the different parts of the face are separated by deep chutes which probably had ritual functions, too, at possible libation of ritual liquid. With regard to this I should mention that the embossed mask delineates better against the rock when liquid is poured on it. This is an effect which in antiquity could be used successfully as a demonstration of divine epiphany as a result of cult-ritual practices here (Елиаде 1995:48-49). Veneration of the sun hypostasis of the Thracian Dionysus, Dionysus-Sabazious, in this sanctuary is definitely connected with the rock arch Markov Kamak (Marko's Stone) near Tsarev Peak, where the huge footprint of God and the sign of Sabazious – two large human palms, one next to the other, are hewn in the stone (Марков 2009:39-46).

⁴ A remarkable counterpart of the studied image is the male head placed on a model of a prehistoric temple – Velush settlement knoll, Bitola region. 5500 B.C. Bitola Museum display, Macedonia.

Figure 7: Human face - Thracian sanctuary Markov at the foot of Tsarev Peak in Rila Mountain



The numerous images of male faces in the sacralized rock canyon near the village of Raven, from the village of Glava and from the village of Zhenda, Kardzhali Region, from the megalithic sanctuary of Belintash in the central part of the Rhodope Mountains, from the area of the town of Strelcha and Kozi Gramadi Peak in Sredna Gora Mountain, from the cave sanctuary “Tsareva Tsarkva” in the region of Tran and a lot more monuments just complete and enrich the semantics and the functional specific character of the above mentioned anthropomorphic images.

They are evidence that in most cases we deal with natural rock silhouettes which were sacralized and finished by people in prehistoric time and antiquity and which were included in the rock sanctuaries as important features or centres. It is very likely that they were the natural code and the reason for the choice of the sacred place in antiquity. Those are images that in the mythological-based way of thinking of the ancient people were divine epiphanies. They were a sign-symbol that Mother Goddess, or her male counterpart, was here in mythological time. Based on the logics of the cyclic calendar of the year they come back to their celebration at the sacred place which is regarded as their home.

All the things mentioned above give me the reason to suggest the hypothesis that the beginning of the monumental sculpture/proto sculpture on the Balkans and in Europe can be dated back to the end of fourth millennium B.C. and its advent should definitely be connected with religious-cult practices in rock-hewn sanctuaries.

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