

THE ANCIENT CULT OF THE STONE – THE MUSHROOM MEGALITH FROM DZHUVANTZI

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The Ancient Cult of the Stone – The Mushroom Megalith from Dzhuvantzi

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Abstract: Faith in the powers of a particular rock or stone heaping, dates back to ancient times. Neither Christianity nor Islam could eradicate this pagan concept. The same is the case with the stone “mushroom” from the village of Dzhuvantzi (at present Kotani, Greece), where one can find a cult complex of proviralo (rock arch), altar and tyulbe from a later period, all of them located around the “mushroom”.

Regardless of the fact that various religious doctrines have been worshipped on this place, a unique continuity is notable. The old-time beliefs and concepts have survived until now because they relate to a certain megalith monument, and also to certain cult and ritual practices with health-bearing character.

Keywords: Dzhuvantzi village (present Kotani), rock/stone cult, rock carved monuments, megalithic/rock mushroom, rock arch, proviralo, altar, cystic necropolis, tyulbe, ancient religious beliefs and concepts

The cult of the sun, water and stone is probably as old as humanity itself. It is spread all around the world in different religious beliefs. The deification of sun and water is entirely explicable, since without them life on earth is unthinkable.

It is more interesting to track the ancient cult of rocks and sacred stones. Mythical thought associates the rock with the mountain and the Great Goddess. This Indo-European conception gives meaning to the mountain as a cosmic symbol, because it enables the communication between the earth, the sky and the netherworld. The mountain is recognized as a place for epiphany, divine revelations and prophecies. It is the dwelling of gods. Mountains border the skies, they are between the earth and the sky and that space is sacred, because it is precisely where people contact the transcendent. The concept of the divine essence and origin of the rock and the stone has a common Indo-European roots (Fol 2007:8-10; Shalганova 2012:161-165).

Different megalithic monuments and rock-cut facilities are worshiped as parts of the cosmic mountain. They vary greatly in form – niches, tombs, solar discs, wells, channels, basins, tubs, caves, stairs, thrones, etc. In this particular case we will analyze a rock-cut megalith that has obtained in time the form of a stone mushroom.

Dzhuvantzi village (Dzhuvanishte – Bulgarian, Kushnalar – Turkish) is situated on the pathway, crossing the line of the mountain ridge, about 10 km south of Zlatograd (Figure 1). It is also 10 km south-east to the mineral baths Ladzhite (present Termes). The road goes south-east, follows the river stream and passes Memkovo (present Medousa), to finally reach Dzhuvantzi (present Kotani).

In 2013 and 2014, within the expedition “Thracian Sanctuaries in the Western Rhodopes, Pirin and Rila”, we visited this small village in Northern Greece. Its population is mainly Bulgarians who adopted Islam as their official religion during the Ottoman rule. Local residents speak the mellow and chanting dialect of Zlatograd.

Figure 1: Overall view of the villag



Figure 2: The rock mushroom



An entire complex is formed around the stone mushroom, including proviralo¹ (rock arch), altar and cystic necropolis. Later there was built tyulbe (Alevi sanctuary). It was probably the amassment of large stones with peculiar form, and the minimal human interference in their formation, that turned this place into a sanctuary in ancient times.

The cult centre *The Stone, The Red Stone* (Shishkov 1892:14) or *Tolpa*, as locals² call it, is located near the village. A steep trail leads straight to the granite stone of a height above 5 m that resembles a giant mushroom, perched on the rocky mountain slope (Figure 2).

The situation of the megalithic monument – in the middle of a steep slope, below the mountain ridge – marks one of the highest points of the relief. The rock mushroom is “high above”, where there is a wonderful panorama towards the horizon, the mountain peaks and the river valley. This situation of the sanctuary, accessible from the steep trail only, indicates a mythic-ritual comprehension. The climb, taking a position “above” is equivalent to a transformation of status, obtaining excellence and proximity to the divine. Reaching the sacred space takes efforts and overcoming of obstacles. The archaic mind gives such natural marked spaces hidden, mystical significance. According to Mircea Eliade, since ancient times they are sanctified and interpreted to be places of contacts between the supernatural and the human (Shalганova 2012:163, 174, 180).

The megalith above Dzhuvantzi did not always look like a rock mushroom. It has been formed to this shape gradually for millenniums. Its processing continues even today, because everyone who visits that place must handedly break a small piece of the stone. One should not use any tool like hammer, digger, knife or any device other than a stone, found near the rock (Pachilov 2013:67). Thus the initiated into the secrets of the sacred stone have been sculpturing it in time. According to the mythological thinking, every cultural act should resemble a natural one. This increases the degree of its legitimacy. That is why the megalith is picked with an unprocessed stone. Cultural acts are often portrayed as natural phenomenon, because in this way the “natural” equals the “divine” (Marazov 2012:48).

The small piece, picked out of the stone, is taken for health and luck. It is brought constantly with the utter belief that it can protect and defend the person from various illnesses and evils. In the past, when youths from the village went to do their military service, their mothers would saw those pieces in their clothes. Youths had to wear the piece of the sacred rock during their entire service in order to come back alive and healthy³.

¹ From Bulgarian “proviram” – to pass through

² Informer Dzhamil Huskov, 74 years, Kotani village, Miki municipality, 2014

³ Informer Aishe Huskova, 72 years, Kotani village, Miki Municipality, 2014.

Women would go to *The Stone* and pray God for a child. They also used to break a small piece of the rock so that their wish could come true. They carried that piece in their belts until they gave birth to a healthy child⁴.

There are also new examples, which testify to the magic power and strength of the rock mushroom. Local residents tell that in the middle of XX c., during the Civil War in Greece a group of andantes wanted to push *The Stone* down the slope. They propped their rifles like a pyramid. They strained their arms, but suddenly a rifle went off and then others, and the soldiers fled in panic⁵.

The Stone above Dzhuvantzi is consciously associated with and thought of as a rock mushroom. This comparison is not accidental. In the lands of Ancient Trace some natural rock formations were additionally processed to obtain the form of stone mushrooms and as such, they were worshiped. The mushroom cult has a pre-Olympic history. Indo-European people found this cult here when they came to Europe. Shamans say that wild mushrooms can convey their spiritual power to everyone who recognizes and possesses them (Ruck 2015:1-2).

Thracians had a very ancient tradition, maintained by the priests who know opiates. The merriment was linked to Dionysus and his personification with wild mushrooms that were later used for acquiring yeast to start fermentation. Other wild plants like ivy, bryonia and smilax resemble the vine, but they are toxic in their natural state. All of them have been often added to the wine as boosting agents. The vine is a cultivated heir of the primitive toxic plants, which preceded the art of viticulture. Those boosting agents were responsible for the strong narcotic properties of wine, even in small amounts. Therefore, wine was drunk diluted with water for many hours. After the cultivation of the vine, the pre-Olympic characteristics of Dionysus like god of wild mushrooms changed. His psychoactive avatars were gradually forgotten and he became patron of viticulture and wine (Ruck 2015:3-7).

In science there are many cases where the code or the meaning of a custom is forgotten, but not the ritual actions, associated with it. Around the rock mushroom in Dzhuvantzi, there are ancient beliefs and ideas with very strong roots, due to their linkage with certain cult-ritual practices with health-bearing character.

To the east, only 2-3 m away from the base of the Stone mushroom, there was a proviralo between two rocks that formed an arch with a narrow passage. One entrance faced north and the other – south (Figure 3). For centuries people used to pass through the rock crevice with a magical and healing purpose. At some point the proviralo – a clear remnant of the old pagan beliefs and practices – has come into conflict with the ambitions of the imams who were for orthodox confession of Islam. It was covered with stones in order to prevent its further usage from the local people. Until recently tangible evidence of formerly practiced healing practices has

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Informer Dzhamil Huskov, 74 years, Kotani village, Miki Municipality, 2014.

been found. Many old coins and small crosses were found around the arch and on the slope below⁶.

The passing through the proviralo has been done in ritual silence, top-down (north to south) – from the top of the sacred ancient rock to the position below. This ritual action can be associated with the katabasis, i.e. a descent into the underworld. The abandonment of old clothes and staying in new attire is to be interpreted similarly. In semantic term, this can be thought of as an abandonment of the old sick self in the underworld, and ascent into the human world again. The ill person is reborn as a “new – healthy person”. The ritual magic descent into the womb of the Great Mother Goddess, identified with the ground, is performed thrice. Here we have an initiation or rite of passage derived probably from the Thracian Antiquity (Markov 2002:72-73; Markov 2012:68-69, 72).

Figure 3: The buried proviralo



Nowadays, Christians and Muslims continue to seek health and healing by practicing this ancient custom elsewhere in the region⁷. It is believed to cure illnesses and infertility. Regardless of dogmas or customs of the official religion treatment by proviralos persists among other things performed: a special prayer in the church or an amulet from the imam, but also a touch to the power of Mother Nature in the form of rock. Everything is done in order to achieve a favourable result.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For example, currently there is a proviralo in the near village Termes. – informer Rozalin Hadzhiev, 50 years, Zlatograd, 2014.

Under the buried proviralo there is a cliff sloping to the south. Three consecutive round cut-outs, which are connected with narrow furrows, are clearly outlined on it (Figure 4). Their total length is about four meters, and the bottom basin has the largest diameter – about a meter and a half (Pachilov 2013: 66). Although erosion has changed the original appearance of the rock, their artificial origin is noticeable. They are undoubtedly an evidence of ancient people’s efforts to structure space in accordance with their religious doctrine.

There are different assumptions about the purpose and the ritual role of these basins. According to the locals “*the saint used to bathe on this rock that is why there is a large basin*”⁸. We can definitely assume that rock cut-outs served to collect and store rainwater. In Indo-European beliefs celestial water is sacred by origin, because it is sent by the supreme deity, Thunderer. It is a divine gift that people prayed for. It is a source of life and a necessary condition for prosperity and fertility. In the grooves of the sacred stone, water retains its original purity. The belief in the powerful healing force of rainwater that has been preserved on carved rock is typical of many nations. Bulgarian folklore tradition is no exception, since it gives significance to this water as sacred, having strong curative effect against various diseases (Markov 2003:57-58; Shalganova 2012:168-170).

Figure 4: The rock altar



Figure 5: Remains of cystic grave



It is possible that the rock played the role of an altar on which the blood of the doomed animal was collected. Its streaming down the grooves and rock altars was used for divination and foretelling the future (Fol 2007:295-296). In Ancient Thrace the sacrificial animal’s head was turned to the east, so that when it was killed, its blood ran in the tracks to the south and gathered in the sacrificial pit (Markov 2002:87-88; Markov 2012:75). The tradition at the Stone above Dzhuvantzi village is still preserved. For this purpose, people slaughter bulls or cows, and goats from which they make kurban (votive offering). We cannot ignore the fact that exactly these animals were sacrificed in ancient times in honour of the Thracian Dionysus. Kurban must be performed at some time in summer, but

⁸ Informer Dzhamil Huskov, 74 years, Kotani village, Miki Municipality, 2014.

informers could not identify to us an exact date, probably because it is not associated with a specific celebration of the calendar cycle. It still remembered that one year they neglected giving Kurban and there was a disastrous hail⁹. This explains the preservation of an ancient ritual to the present day. For this purpose, many people gather – they come from all the surrounding villages, even from further away.

Down the ridge a few hundred meters below the stone mushroom was discovered a cystic necropolis. Unfortunately, a few years ago, during the construction of a path to the new water reservoir above the village, the construction machines obliterated most of it¹⁰. Still one of the graves, built with vertical stone slabs can be seen (Figure 5). It has a rectangular shape and a length of about two meters.

According to the beliefs of the ancient people, the foot of the mountain is populated with negative characters and otherworldly supernatural beings. It is regarded as dwelling of the dead, of anthropodemon, and ranks in the same semantic field with death and afterlife. Therefore, as a rule in the foot of the mountain are discovered burial monuments (Shalganova 2012:170-171).

About 15-20 meters further down, there was a low stone wall. Separate fragments of it are being found on the field even today (Pachilov 2013:66-67). It is very likely that the enclosure marks the sacred space. Nothing is random here. Everything is appropriate and any action here is subordinated to the ritual prescriptions and is under the direct influence of the divine. This is a very ancient practice. Early as the middle of the first millennium BC, the territory of Thracian sanctuaries started to be bordered by stone walls. They were additionally altered and marked the landscape, thus separating and distinguishing the world of the profane from world of the sacred (Gotsev 2003:35-37; Shalganova 2012:176-177).

The fate of the old sanctuaries is different. Cult activity in some of them is terminated, others are revered long after the demise of the Thracian religious doctrine, including in the Middle Ages. Christianity preserved some pagan beliefs and practices, giving them new meaning and importance. We do not know whether next to the Stone sponge there was Christian church or churchyard at least, but there is no doubt that the new religion had to put up with reverence of the old cult centre. That is what Muslim preachers did. They built a small Tyulbe (Alevi pilgrims sanctuary) near the holy stone (Figure 6).

According to the legend, an important event for the local community happened exactly where the tyulbe is built. A wounded warrior passed through those places and blood was dripping from his wounds. A woman saw him and, following the blood traces, found him by the Stone. She brought food and water to him. She continued to take care of him, but he died, and she buried him there (Pachilov 2013:67). Perhaps this myth comes from ancient times, because very often in the sanctuaries of the Great Goddess, there is also a war hero who is

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

worshiped as patron (Marazov 2012:53). New believers however falsify and interpret the story in their favour, considering that the wounded soldier was “a fighter for the true faith”.

The tyulbe faces south-southeast, i.e. points to the holy for all the Muslims city of Mecca. Its dimensions are 3.50 to 3.30 meters, and its height is of about two meters. There is no grave in it. The floor is covered with prayer rugs and there is a small niche on the wall, in which women light mums (candles) (Figure 7). On the south side there is a shelter, which is now used for the kurban offering (Pachilov 2013:65).

Figure 6: The tyulbe and its shelter from the south



Previously only women were allowed to enter the tyulbe. Inside they bow and light candles in the hope that they would receive salvation and healing especially for infertility. In order to have their wish fulfilled, they believe that they have to go backwards from the house of prayer¹¹. It was also visited by people from more distant places. It is still remembered that women from Zlatograd used to come here to spend the night and find a cure. That was before the Balkan wars, and at the time when these lands were in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1941-1944)¹².

Some of the Thracian sanctuaries have best healing strength and powers on a specific day on the calendar; while others, as is our case, have no fixed holiday. The Stone mushroom is visited all year round, with prophylactic and therapeutic purpose, according to people’s necessities. A number of the characteristics of the megalithic monument are common and repeatable, and other features are

¹¹ Informer Ayshe Huskova, 72 years, Kotani village, Miki Municipality, 2014.

¹² Informer Rozalin Hadzhiev, 50 years, Zlatograd, 2014.

individual, which is a result of its naturalness. Mythology and rituals in it are related to notions of life and death, the transition to a new status, the ritual communication with the afterlife, the past which has adopted the eternal image of the stone (Shalганova 2012a:45).

Figure 6: Inside the tyulbe



Most curious to us is the fact that the rock complex above the village Dzhuvantzi continues to be worshiped to the present day. In time there were different religions, but we observe a unique continuity. The place is sacred to everyone, irrespective of religion and nationality. Human aspiration to materialize God and manifestations of the divine is eternal. The rock is a material thing – large, natural, eternal – like the aspirations of people. And old rites are ineradicable also because of the fear that man himself can hinder prosperity, unless he performs a certain ritual. Therefore, the megalithic mushroom has preserved not only the material artefacts, but also the traces of ancient myth and folklorized pagan religious practices, coming from antiquity

Informers:

Ayshe Huskova, 72 years, Kotani village, Miki municipality, 2014.

Dzhamil Huskov, 74 years, Kotani village, Miki municipality, 2014.

Rozalin Hadzhiev, 50 years, Zlatograd, 2014.

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