

**MEGALITHIC AND ROCK-CUT MONUMENTS AS
RITUAL STRUCTURES RELATED TO NOTIONS
OF LIFE AND DEATH AND BELIEF IN ETERNAL
LIFE AND REBIRTH**

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Megalithic and Rock-Cut Monuments as Ritual Structures Related to Notions of Life and Death and Belief in Eternal Life and Rebirth

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Abstract: Megalithic monuments are seen as memorials, which receive the souls of ancestors and in the same time they are committed to healing practices, mainly relating to conception, suggesting that they are seen as a facility associated with the reincarnation of souls. These archaic beliefs are associated not only with dolmens and menhirs, in most cases they are associated with natural rock formations, characterized by something unusual and impressive. Significantly, in many places around the world similar rock monuments, apart of their relationship with the Beyond are associated with health related practices and practices related to fertility.

Keywords: Megaliths, Rock-cut monuments, Sanctuaries, Ritual Practices, Folklore rituals, Healing practices, Legends, Pre-Christian heritage.

An important component of the territory of a sacred space is the rock. In a deeper study of some rock sanctuaries can be seen that the above characteristics are not just local peculiarity but the universals of man's mythological thinking. As evidenced by Frazer, the rock was an extremely important component of ritual practices in many primitive societies, his research in this area provides an excellent idea of the genesis of such cults (Фрейзър 1989:240-267).

In his "Treatise on the history of religions" Mircea Eliade pays special attention to the stone, rock, and their impact on human perception, making it one of the key elements and preferred environment for performing magical rites and rituals. As he puts it: „*Nothing is more immediately obvious and independent in the fullness of its power, nothing more noble yet threatening than a majestic rock or a proudly raised granite block. Above all is the stone.*” (Елиаде 2002:262). „*People worship stones only insofar as the stones represent not themselves but something else. They worship stones or use them as tools for spiritual impact and focus of energy, particular power, called to defend themselves or their dead.*” (Елиаде 2002:263).

M. Eliade describes a number of examples which give an idea of the universal role of the megaliths and rock monuments in the life of a conventional person. Above all, they are associated with death and birth / conception (Елиаде 2002:262-282). The adduced evidence comes from different parts of the world, some of which, such as India, still (at least until recently) rise and honor megaliths (Елиаде 2002:264).

Megalithic monuments are seen as memorials, which receive the souls of ancestors and in the same time they are committed to healing practices, mainly relating to conception, suggesting that they are seen as a facility associated with the reincarnation of souls (Елиаде 2002:262-282). These archaic beliefs are associated not only with dolmens and menhirs, in most cases they are associated with natural

rock formations, characterized by something unusual and impressive. In this regard K.Tilley says that in Neolithic Britain where the majority of the megaliths were raised, is evident a desire of man to recreate unusual natural forms related to ancestors (Tilley 2010:456). Varner also reported that some alleged dolmen like structures can have a natural origin, related to erosion and melting glaciers where large stone blocks remained fixed on smaller, creating unusual shapes (Varner 2004:125).

It is an interesting notation that some places of raising megaliths in India do not conform to the grave, but rather to the place of death. Their rise is mostly in honor of leaders or soldiers or in cases of a violent death, assault of a tiger, etc. (Елиаде 2002:265). This fact determines the megaliths not so much as tombstones, but rather as monuments related to ancestral spirits (Елиаде 2002:265). Significantly, in many places around the world similar rock monuments, apart of their relationship with the Beyond are associated with health related practices and practices related to fertility. Many of the megaliths were used as a magical tool for fertilization to women who could not conceive (Елиаде 2002:265). Also some tribes in Sudan have used ancestors' stones to pray for rain (Елиаде 2002:265-266). Information exists about certain tribes from some Pacific islands which is of a particular interest. There, the central element in the sanctuary is a monolith, and around it are placed several small dolmens (Елиаде 2002:266). The described situation reminds greatly of the situation around the sanctuary Beglik Tash, near which there are small dolmen like structures. In relation with this information M. Eliade mentions that the stone can embody a deity and be a place of habitation of the ancestors' souls (Елиаде 2002:266). In the context of known characteristics of the Great Goddess in the form of a rock, as well as her connection to the Beyond and reincarnation of souls can be made the conclusions about the religion in practice. These sacred centers can be seen in the process of religious development of the European cultures as well. They were tied to many spiritual and social needs of the population and were situated mostly in areas affecting the human consciousness with its appearance and physical properties. The main shrines were situated in different areas, each of which has been dominated by the priestly class, determined on the generic-tribal principle and the principle of devoted community (Anati 2000:143). Similar are the reports of a mountain sanctuary of Dionysus, in which the role of priests was performed by the Bessians tribe (Hrdt.VII. 111). These places are seen as the most sacred centers of a given territory and in all probability there was validation and recognition of kingship performed in them. Evidence of such places exists until late in the coronation in Anglo-Saxon countries and are associated primarily with stones which have foot prints imprinted on them (Varner 2004:64). Indicative of the importance of the cult places is the fact that Alexander the Grate has sought to be recognized in the sanctuaries of nations that he conquered (Гомес 2008:208). The Romans' "experience" also showed the importance of control over the sacral centers and the priestly classes. In the conquered territories the Celtic Druids were subjected to hard persecution (Гонсовски 1982:114). According to early reports of the Celts for them of great

importance was the center of a particular tribal territory, which they perceived as the center of the world (Гонсовски 1982:120). The Sanctuary at Delphi was also perceived as a symbolic center of the world and was marked by a stone omphalos (Varner 2004:42). Logically this idea existed in many tribes and each in its tribal territory had a center of the world. Usually they were located in a sacred mountain or forest (Гонсовски 1982:120-122). Although notorious for their religious syncretism, the Romans exhibited amazing perseverance in the search and conquering of such centers and the destruction of existing priestly class associated with them. This is evident both in the treatment of Celtic sanctuaries (Гонсовски 1982:123), and the reports about the capture of the mountain sanctuary of Dionysus in the territory of the Bessians. Subsequently, this led to considerable unrest of the Bessians (Делев 2013:174). Of course, sometimes entering into such sacred territory played a trick to the Romans, as is the case with the destruction of the two legions of Varus in entering the Teutonic forests. In the vicinity of the battle field is situated Externsteine sanctuary, which is defined as the center of the region and Saxon pagan cults up to the VIII century. The Sanctuary is an impressive natural rock carved with different structures. Some of them have a clear focus and represent astronomical cut openings where the heavenly bodies were observed during the summer solstice (Varner 2004:119). Based on the common semantic foundation of the sanctuaries, we can obtain information on their function. According to Strabo, one of the shrines of the Celts of Galatia in Asia Minor have met representatives of three tribes for holding trials (Гонсовски 1982:112, 122). This speaks about the role of sanctuaries as a place for negotiation, trial and contracting (Гонсовски 1982:112, 122; Гомес 2008:100). This information characterizes a part of the sanctuaries as important tribal and regional centers. In these centers every decision was dictated by god and each concluded agreement had the power of a sworn responsibility to ancestral spirits seen as inhabiting the sacred grove, cave or rock. Any harm to the the sacred territory has been severely punished. This is evident from reports describing wars of some Greek cities against their neighbors who dared to encroach on land and tangible property of sanctuaries (Petsas 2008:16).

Other important information provided by Greco-Roman authors in connection with the barbarians are their perceptions of immortality. In contact with the people, described as barbaric, Greco-Roman culture comes in touch with a pattern of beliefs, ideas and rituals that it had long outlived. Most vividly these concepts differ in some rituals such as human sacrifice, which in Greece and Rome had long been rejected, while in other Indo-European communities continue to exist as the key to the dedication and knowledge (Фол 2007:183). Also pragmatic thinking appears as opposition to the magical and esoteric teachings. Not accidentally, the origin of the teachings of soul's immortality in closed societies of the Celts (Гонсовски 1982:135), and the Thracians can be seen in Pythagoreanism (Hrdt. IV, 95). These concepts can also be differentiated in the perception of architectural and pre-architectural versions of sacred spaces and temples. It seems to archaic societies outside the Greco-Roman world death was

the way to rebirth. Probably this doctrine has been encoded in the structure of the cult facilities. The megalithic monuments are discussed in this aspect by Svetlozar Popov (Попов. 2008:33-34).

In a similar line of thoughts V. Markov examines monuments defined as rock arches (Марков 2007:211-236). At present folklore and rituals associated with these monuments are recognized semantic reminiscences talking about cultural deposits in various rituals performed there. It is determining that this type of structures have been found very often in the territory of sanctuaries. In most cases they are completely pristinely formed and the utmost come close to natural forms. However, their importance is evidenced by found nearby archaeological materials, by their role of astronomical facilities and not least by the rituals and beliefs of folk culture associated with them. This type of objects finds significant parallels in different parts of the world, which again speaks of the existence of universal archetypes in the perceptions and structuring of the sacred cult space and facilities associated with it. The essence of the so-called rock arches is a hole formed in the rock or a slit through which one passes. In some cases, the facility may have a megalithic character and resembles a trillith or a rough dolmen. Passing through an opening in the rock is a ritual known in traditional healing practices from around the world. In Greece and Scotland women wanting to have children are immersed in the sea and then pass through large openings in the nearby rocks. Such practices are also presented in the Middle East, Asia and even in some traditional societies in America (Varner 2004:14). In favour of the proposed by V. Markov hypotheses is Varner's assertion that squeezing through stone is seen as an act of moving from one dimension to another and an attempt of the person to get rid of the diseases and to generate energy and health from the stone (Varner 2004:14). Varner tells about a ceremony in France, where women squeeze their newborn in a dolmen to give them a better future (Varner 2004:15). Eliade identifies the information about passing of a newborn through stone as a ritual of rebirth (Елиаде 2002:272). Similar rituals was studied in detail by Frazer as associated with initiations and change the status of the person's status (Фрейзър 1989:222-240). Another attested ritual from some parts of Europe, was the practice the groom and bride to hold hands through a hole in the stone¹ as a sign of marriage (Varner 2004:14-15). Varner reports of alleged rituals of prehistoric people like passing bones through drilled blocks in megalithic tombs. There are also menhirs in Ethiopia which have an opening that marked the places for funeral rites (Varner 2004:14-15). One of the most famous stones to squeeze through in Kronual /England/ is called MenAnTol (the hole stone- local dialect). People with different diseases crawl through it in the direction of the sun, hoping to receive healing. This healing rituals also find their analogues on the territory of Bulgaria (Spasova 2012:292-301). There is evidence that by 1749 on the stone were left gifts. Some of those gifts find their parallels with the offerings left at sacred springs, which are believed to be for the fairy guardian (Varner 2004:16).

¹ <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/monuments.html#odin> D. L. Ashliman; The Stone of Odin Orkney Islands. Stone Monument Legends (27.10.2016)

This information corresponds to the studied by Markov legend that one of the arches in the area Skribina has a host guardian -a black snake, which can heal (Марков 2009:82-98). The two mythological creatures undoubtedly find their parallels in pre-Christian mythological perceptions of the local people in the areas that were studied. An interesting fact is that in different parts of the world the magical power of the stones was used in the same way. Most often they were used for the treatment of infertility. This is evidenced for much of the megaliths around Carnac - France (Елиаде 2002:264-285).

In some cultures dolmens has seen as the Great Mother of the family, and the menhirs as the Great Father (Елиаде 2002:266), but this is not always indicative because in some cases the image of the goddess is also seen in a simple boulder (Berndt-Ersöz 2006:199). To some extent the symbolism of dolmens and rock arches covers with this of the cave, they can also be used for astronomical observations. An interesting parallel illustrating the mythological link between death and birth is an ethnographic information on the perceptions of the people of Central Australia. Eliade reported about a huge rock called Eratipa, it has an opening where the souls of babes stand lurking to passing women to dwell in them and be born again (Елиаде 2002:267). This belief related to the role of the megaliths and rock tombs as home to the souls of dead ancestors, brings to the fore the idea of reincarnation of souls in a very early animistic version.

Varner says that the stone circles or cromlechs can also be connected to the Great Goddess. He cites Mackenzie, who reported that a range of rough stone blocks were used to honor Demeter, in the circle were carried out its rituals. The author draws a parallel with the Cretan goddess mother (MacKenzie 1995, xlv.; Varner 2004:107).

Round megalithic structures identified as cromlechs are also known on the territory of Bulgaria, some of them were covered with a mound. Their semantics must not by all means be sought in cultural influences, but rather in a common mythological basis and in particular in the semantics of the circle.

In some nations there is the archaic idea of the stones to have human qualities ascribed as well as the notion that people could be petrified. This idea apparently left traces in the folklore of the Western Europe where cromlechs and menhirs are seen as petrified fairies and other folk story characters (Varner 2004:51-53) or being created by giants (Фол 2000:8). A similar picture exists about the "Devshlari" stones near Pliska, where they are associated with women Giants (Kaloianov 2002). Similar folklore information exists about one of the megalithic temples in Malta, in particular on the island of Gozo, the temple is called Ġigantija. Legend has it that it was built by a female giant. While constructing the impressive building, she carried her baby on her back and managed to carry huge stones while eating beans with her hands in the same time. Along the way, she dropped one of the stones, which is there to this day and is called Sansuna (Giant lady in Maltese language). The study underlines that not far from this temple is situated a cave called the Cave of Calypso, which is associated with one of the adventures of the mythical hero Odysseus. It is believed that this is the place where he landed and

was held captive by the goddess eight years in order to become her husband (Albrecht 2007:96-97). It is impossible not to associate this ethnographic evidence about the giant woman, with the massive figurines of the goddess found in the megalith temples of Malta. It is very likely that the possible finding of the above mentioned figurines in earlier times may have caused the birth of this legend. Possibly the epic story of the arrest of Odysseus was born by the arrival on the island of the peoples of classical antiquity (probably Romans or early invasive settlers) and the discovery of some traces connected with the Neolithic cult to the goddess.

Other monuments can be also addressed in this regard, ones which are associated with the legends in the spirit of folk mythology.

This is especially clearly perceptible in some legends, such as the brave maiden from the village of Dolen, Gotse Delchev that lifted and carried a huge stone cross (Jankov, 2003:51), or the girl from the village of Momina Klisura, Pazardzhik, who was the leader of a fortress and controlled the whole gorge.² In this context can also be viewed the legend of the seven girls who built a mosque in the village of Podkova, again associated with ancient relics and rituals including going through a rock hole (Yankov, Georgieva 2015:20-30). The legend of the Seven girls was located in Angel Voyvoda village. In the eastern foot of the Hisar locality there is an old "cemetery" with large, rough standing stones . In the minds of local people it is associated with the mysterious legend of the seven girls who are believed to be buried there.³ According to an informer from Angel Voivoda village the place was magical and haunted by jinns. The stage of research does not clarify what is the dating of the standing stones near Hisar, whether it is an old Muslim cemetery or a monument which can be attributed to an earlier era in the context of located in the immediate vicinity rock sanctuary.⁴ Similar relics can be connected with a legend from the village Valche Pole, called Kurtulen before and the located above it Mount "Kurt Kale" or literally translated from Turkish Wolf Castle. The toponym can be connected to the number of authors' hypothesis on the existing in ancient cultures dedication practices of the military class whose members are identified as wolves (Фол 2000 а:143-153; Ruck 2015:1-7; Байраков 2015:264-265). Kurt Kale could be connected to the majority of the Thracian burial objects in the region, which is a fact established as early as 1938 by professor B. Filov (Филов 1938:7). It is also significant that the village in the valley south of Kurt Kale is named Valche Pole (Wolf field or old Kurtulen). The origin of the village name comes from a legend that can be connected with the plot of the myth

² Personal archive. Inf. Stefan Kotev, MominaKlisura village, Belovo municipality

³ Inf. Shaban Ramadan Halil, 74years old Angel Voivoda village. Archive of the expedition Thracian sanctuaries in the Rhodopi, Pirin and Rila mountains 2015.

⁴ Special thanks to my colleague L. Tsonev for the information of those problematic aspects of some standing stones.

about the brave maiden.⁵ According to the legend, it was named after the strongest maiden in the village - Kurtova Elena, who lifted a stone so heavy that no man has been able even to move it.

The above mentioned data make us wonder if the image of these maidens is not a folklorized version of a female deity with protective features - like the Phrygian goddess-mother who also attributed protective functions. Some of her later images have reached us in which she is shown with a crown resembling a city wall (Berndt-Ersöz 2006:152). This in turn connects the places where we find these stories with some of the most ancient layers of faith and reverence for nature as a cult of one all-powerful goddess and her various manifestations.

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