

THE ANCIENT THRACIAN MEGALITHIC SANCTUARY "MARKOV KAMAK" AT TSAREV PEAK IN RILA MOUNTAIN: SEMANTIC AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Vassil Markov

South-West University "Neofit Rilski", 2700 Blagoevgrad; ve22@abv.bg

ABSTRACT. A newly discovered rock sanctuary "Markov Kamak" ("Markov's Stone") at Tsarev Peak in the Rila Mountain is described. According to literally, archaeological, archaeoastronomical and ethnological data an attempt has been made for the reconstruction of an ancient ritual and the myth related to it.

The ancient Thracian megalithic sanctuary "Markov Kamak" ("Markov's Stone") is located near Tsarev Peak in the Southern Rila Mountain. It covers a remarkable area of 5 km in length, at the ridge of the mountain between Dobro Pole and Markov Peak. The discovery is a result of the investigations of the National complex scientific expedition "Thracian sanctuaries in the Western Rhodopes, Pirin and Rila" (2006), organized by the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad, the National Institute of Archaeology and Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia, the Regional Ethnographic Museum in Plovdiv, the People's Astronomical Observatory "Juri Gagarin" in Stara Zagora and the Central Laboratory for Earth-Sun Interactions "Acad. D. Mishev" at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Stara Zagora branch).

Numerous rocks on the top of the mountain, at the spring and along the upper course of the Blagoevgradska Bistritsa River are marked by many rock-cut sacrificial stones. The altitude of the area varies between 1800 and 2367 masl. The pottery discovered on the surface during fieldwork dates the rock monument from the second half of the I mill. BC to IV c. AD (Markov, 2007a, 167-170). The most sacred part, without doubt, is the complex composed by a rock arch (Fig. 1), a rock "egg" and rock "mushrooms" – all bearing incised sacrificial patterns. They are situated at the Southwestern foot of Tsarev Peak. Especially remarkable are the rock-cut sacrificial altars formed as two human palms on the vaulted stone of the rock arch, as well as the rock altar in a shape of a giant human footstep, known from the folk culture as the "Krali Marko footstep". The complex of signs and symbols was interpreted as a "record" of the Orphic myth for the Creation, for the birth of the luminous Orphic God Phanes from the Cosmic Egg. According to the folklore and the written sources it can be suggested that the megalithic sanctuary "Markov Kamak" was used in the ritual of immortality of the Thracian kings by the performance of the sacred marriage between the Sun and the Earth – symbolizing the male and female deity in Thrace. This sacred marriage was carried out at a place where according to the ancient mythological thinking, the sun beams penetrate into

the rock arch – symbol of the womb of the Great Goddess-Mother, identified with the Earth (Fol, 2000, 35-36; Fol, 2002, 351). Thus, by presencing at the most sacred moment of the Creation, probably by passing through the megalithic arch, the Thracian ruler was ritually born again. By such rebirth he was been imagined as a doctrinal son of the Great Goddess from her marriage with the supreme male deity – the Sun, and periodically renovating his political and divine power by this ritual (Markov, 2007a, 173-189).

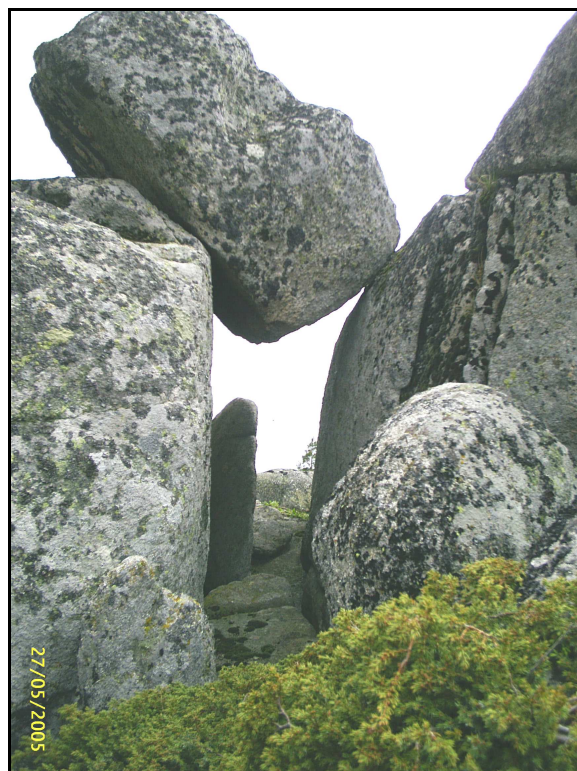


Fig. 1. The stone arch "Markov Kamak" at Tsarev Peak in the Rila Mountain; at the background under the arch – the stone "egg" with rock-cuttings

As it may be compared to the preserved at similar megalithic arches traditional curative rituals from the Western Rhodopes, the participant in the ritual enters the arch from the East simultaneously with the first sunbeams. The rock-cut basins and fringes in the rock arch "Markov Kamak" point to the idea, that the ceremony included a ritual bath – a ritual purification with numerous parallels in the practices of the ancient world (Fol, 2002, 283) and the ceremonies of traditional societies from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans.

In the summer of 2007 the archaeoastronomers Dr. A. Stoev and Dr. P. Muglova discovered that the stone arch "Markov Kamak" was used in the past for determination of the day of the summer solstice. The point of the sunrise at that day is marked by a rock 'mushroom' at the near Eastern horizon, which has been cut higher with a whole set of rock-cut sacrificial holes and fringes. This fact gives the opportunity to suggest that this was the exact day to perform the basic cult and ritual practices in Antiquity.

The identification of exact days from the annual cycle of feasts, to which the studied megalithic features are related significantly broadens the possibilities for the reconstruction of rituals performed in ancient times on the basis of parallels with the traditional ritual practices at Eniovden (the longest day of the year) in Bulgarian folk culture, with the folk culture of other European peoples, belonging genealogically to the Indo-European group, as well as with the summer solstice ceremonies described by the ancient sources.

The most interesting is the widely spread among all the European peoples traditional ritual practice of ritual bath – bathing in dew, in springs, or in water basins, usually in the morning before or at sunrise (Arnaudov, 1971, 253-337). According to the traditional Bulgarian folk belief, at this day the Sun itself has a bath in a spring or in a lake with "alife" water and rejuvenates. It shakes the water off and pours the life-giving dew to the Earth. After a dance, the transition to winter begins (Marinov, 1994, 653-677; Stareva, 2005, 265-270). It is obvious, that a rite of passage has been described, including the ritual bath by the Sun. This is the ritual bath, which people repeat every year of their Earthly life, in a ritual and magical manner during the fest of Eniovden (Eliade, 1994, 32-39). This ritual has probably been repeated by the Thracian king, before his passage under the rock arch at the megalithic sanctuary "Markov Kamak". It unites him with the most sacred act in the ancient Orphic religion – the sacred conception.

Again, parallels with the Eniovden traditional rituality in Bulgaria suggest that the sacred liquid during the ritual bath at the ancient Thracian megalithic arches was water. Such water was transformed by a ritual-magical way in "alife" water, i.e. a sacred liquid, which can transfigure the person. In the traditional ritual a vessel with water is placed under the stars during night before the ritual of foretelling during the 'laduvane' at Eniovden (Marinov, 1994, 663-675). This cult practice is known since the time of magical cults of the ancient Hitites (Dukova, 1992, 47).

In this connection can be interpreted also the giant rock-cut "Krali Marko Footstep" at the right base stone of the arch (Fig. 2). The magical transforming functions of the water from a rock-cut formed footstep are known from Bulgarian folk

incantations and especially from fairy tales. A classical example in this respect is the folk tale "Brother fawn" – the child drinks water from the fawn's trace on the ground and turns into such an animal (Perkovska et al., 1994, 156-160).



Fig. 2. The "Krali Marko footstep" at the top of the stone arch "Markov Kamak" at Tsarev Peak

An important aspect in the clarification of the transformation rituals performed at the investigated rock arch are the parallels with the traditional folk passages at Eniovden, usually through a wreath of herbs and rarely though an arch of cornel-tree branches. The ritual is for good health throughout the year (Marinov, 1994, 653-677; Stavreva, 2005, 265-270). In a semantic and functional plan it is similar to the ritual passage under the rock arches – considered as parts of ancient Thracian sanctuaries (for curing some sort of illness). Such ritual survives among the Bulgarian-Muslims that explains, to some extent, the cause for separation between the ritual and the calendar celebrations which are characteristic for the Bulgarians-Christians (Markov, 2007b, 211-264). It is therefore remarkable, that the ritual passage under rock arches inherited from the Thracian sanctuaries are consistently related to the Gergiovden (Hudrez) fest – a traditional folk fest related to the ancient New Year (Teodorov, 1999, 14) and also strictly linked to the new birth and to the rebirth of Nature.

A special attention in connection to the thesis, that in the day of the summer solstice at the rock arch the sacred marriage between the Sun and Earth was fulfilled, as representations of the natural codes of the supreme male and female deities in Ancient Thrace can be paid to parallels with traces of the sacred marriage in the mythology and folk cult practices among a number of contemporary and ancient European societies. Attention has to be paid to the traces of mass orgiastic rituals among the Esti and the Eastern Slavs in the day of the summer solstice, which may be interpreted as a repetition of the sacred marriage on this day (Arnaudov, 1971, 284-288). Some evidence by West European Medieval Christian authors may be added, that at this day, excited from the hot day, a lot of dragons fly in the air and intercourse with each other. Their semen has fallen in the springs and has poisoned them (Frazer, 1984, 770). It is obvious a thesis of the Medieval Christian apologists, according to which the numerous followers of the old pagan practice all over Europe must have to give up going into different water basins (presumably curable). With similar meaning are the Bulgarian folk songs of the type "Zmei lyubi moma" ("Dragon loves a

maiden”), which accompany the ‘Eniova bulya’ to the field in the vicinity of the village at this day (Marinov, 1994, 655-656). This is a fertility ritual with vivid marital character, deeply linked semantically to the sacred marriage as. Such ritual has been probably brought from the Greek-Roman antiquity (Arnaudov, 1971, 250-255; 329-337).

A special attention should be paid to the supporting ritual songs, which praises the magical state of pregnancy of the queen Domna by a herb, given to her by the Sun, or the marriage of the Sun to the maiden Marina, born in the same magical way (Venedikov, 1992, 92-104).

Also in connection to the Eniovdn rites can be interpreted the numerous stone-cut pits around the springs and the upper courses of the numerous right tributaries of the Blagoevgradska Bistritsa River, that starts from the sacred territory of the “Markov Kamak” sanctuary in the Southern Rila Mountain. The rituals in foretelling the future husband, known in Bulgarian folk culture as ‘laduvane’, started at Eniovdn after the passage through the wreath (Marinov, 1994, 664), which in semantic plan is comparable to the passage through the rock arches. Very often the ‘laduvane’ ritual took place along a river, or a fountain, in all cases related to a water source – with the assistance of a cauldron in which the rings with the maidens’ bunch of flowers have been placed. Again, along the river at Eniovdn the ritual in foretelling fertility throughout the year takes place by asking questions to the ‘Eniova bula’. The ‘Eniova bula’, who stays always at the opposite bank of the river (semantically she is in the outer world) foretells what is going to happen in our world (Marinov, 1994, 661-663). Remarkable is the fact, that in some variants of the rite from Bulgaria she carries branches in her hands. This is a phytomorphic code, which to a certain degree makes her close to the image of the Great Goddess-Mother in the art of Ancient Thrace and the whole Eastern Mediterranean as a protector of vegetation and fertility.

In this respect not only the ancient Thracian megalithic arch, but the rock cuttings at the springs and along the upper courses of the right tributaries of the Blagoevgrad Bistritsa River can be related to the performances in the day of the summer solstice foretelling practices, part of the cult to the Great Goddess, which is permanently related to natural codes

as water and rock. It is not a coincidence, that the most Western tributary in the study area was named Bendishka River, and one of its broader sections – Bendishka Luka. The field survey revealed that the area is marked by numerous rock-cut sacrificial places, and can be evolved better from the name of the Thracian Goddess Bendida.

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