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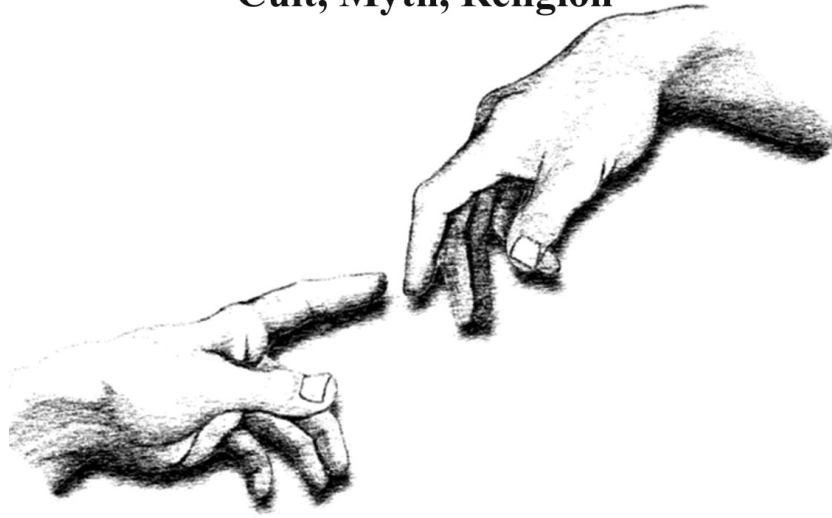
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Contents

- Dragoş Gheorghiu
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A MYTH: DECODING
GÖBEKLI TEPE'S ICONOGRAPHY
[9]
- Elena Stojanova Kanzurova
GENESIS, MODIFICATION AND SYMBOLISM
OF SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS IN THE
PREHISTORIC AND PROTOHISTORIC CULTURES
[15]
- Zoran Rujak
IMAGINATIVE CORPUS OF CHALCOLITHIC
ANTROPOMORPHIC TERRACOTTA FIGURINES
FROM "CAREVI KULI – STRUMICA"
THAT CROSSES TRADITIONAL BORDERS
BETWEEN IDEA AND RELIGION
[25]
- Adela Kovács
STYLISED BUCRANIA FROM CUCUTENI
CULTURE-MEANS OF REPRESENTATIONS AND
CONNECTIONS
[33]
- Aurel Melniciuc, Adela Kovács
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE APRON
ON THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC STATUETTES
OF THE CUCUTENI CULTURE
[51]
- Sergiu-Constantin Enea,
Dumitru Boghian, Sorin Ignătescu
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE APRON
ON THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC STATUETTES
OF THE CUCUTENI CULTURE
[63]
- Jacqueline Balen
RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE COPPER AGE
LASINJA CULTURE IN NORTHERN CROATIA
[87]
- Silvia Fogliazza
WOLVES AND GODS IN
THE ETRUSCAN WORLD
[95]
- Constanze Graml
CREATING THE THREE FIGURED HEKATE
– FROM IMAGE TO IMAGINATION
[103]
- Rostislava G. Todorova
SACRED SPACE ON DISPLAY:
THE PLACE WHERE GOD DWELLS AND
ITS VISUAL REPRESENTATION
[121]
- Vane P.Sekulov, Mitko Shterjov
THE HORSE OF PILAV TEPE
[135]
- Nikos Čausidis
LONGSTANDING SANCTUARIES IN
NORTH MACEDONIA
[151]
- Dora Kušan Špalj
ROMAN SETTLEMENT AQUAE IASAE-RECENT
DISCOVERIES IN THE SANCTUARY AREA
[171]
- Vane P.Sekulov
IS THERE ANY TEMPLE IN BANYA BANSKO?
AND IF THERE IS, WHY IT WAS DEDICATED TO
THE GOD OF HERMES?
[185]
- Svetla Petrova
CULTS AND CULT SCULPTURE FROM
NICOPOLIS AD NESTUM AND ITS VICINITY
[201]
- Meri Zornija, PhD, Goran Pajović
ON THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CAPITALS FROM
THE VILLAGE OF LASTVA GRBALJSKA
IN THE BAY OF KOTOR (MONTENEGRO)
[229]
- Nikolay Markov
FROM MYTHS TO TALES.
NOTES ON THE STORY OF
"THE GIRL WITH THE CUT OFF HANDS"
[237]
- Duško Cvetanov
THE KNIGHTS ORDER OF THE DRAGON
POSSIBLE REPRESENTATIVES OF
MIEVIAL STRUMICA
[251]

**Vth International Symposium on Archaeology
“Cult, Myth, Religion”**



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LONGSTANDING SANCTUARIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Key words:

Macedonia, cult sites, sanctuaries, religion, mythology

Abstract

The article presents several sanctuaries from the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia whose continued use as cult spaces can be followed on the basis of ethnographic facts, historical sources, archaeological finds and preserved toponymy. In the article, the transformation of cults and mythological figures i.e. deities is analyzed through the interdisciplinary and comparative method, within the frames of the six dominant chronological, ethnocultural and religious complexes present in this part of the Balkans: the Paleo-Balkan, Ancient, Pagan-Slavic, Christian, Islamic and Folkloric.

On the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia there are several active sanctuaries whose life span, on the basis of ethnographic records, historical sources, archaeological finds and preserved toponymy, can be traced back through several historical epochs. Some of them today have an emphasized Christian character represented through the presence of sacred buildings (churches, monasteries, crosses). In other cases, the cult is carried out in nature itself, according to folk traditions, without dominant Christian characteristics or with their formal i.e. peripheral presence. This article presents several examples of such kind, together with the facts that point to their use as cult spaces in past epochs. On the basis of the comparative method, an attempt was made to follow the transformation of the cults and mythological figures i.e. deities venerated at each of the specific locations within the frames of the six dominant chronological, ethnocultural and religious complexes present in this part of the Balkans: the Paleo-Balkan, Ancient, Pagan-Slavic, Christian, Islamic and Folkloric. The subjects of analysis are the following cult spaces: "Plaoshnik" (mon-

astery of St. Panteleimon) - Ohrid; Zlatovrv (monastery "Treskavec") - Prilep; caves "Mal Zmeovets" and "Golem Zmeovets" - v. Dren, Demir Kapija; monastery St. Panteleimon - v. Gorno Nerezi, Skopje; complex of churches and other buildings in the Matka Canyon, Skopje; "Kale" - Vinica. The analysis of these examples shows that, despite the ethnocultural and religious changes, the cult spaces in this part of the Balkan Peninsula did not change their essential characteristics, but only the formal aspects - the symbols of the cult, the name of the religion and the names of the venerated mythological figures or deities.

1. "PLAOSHNIK" (MONASTERY ST. PANTELEIMON) – OHRID (T.I)

At this site, before the archaeological excavations, there was only the mosque of Sultan Mehmed from the second half of the 16th century (T.I: 4) and the türbe of Sinan Çelebi. The excavations taking place at the site since 1942 and up to today, especially intensively in the last 20 years, have shown that this location was the cult center of medieval Ohrid,



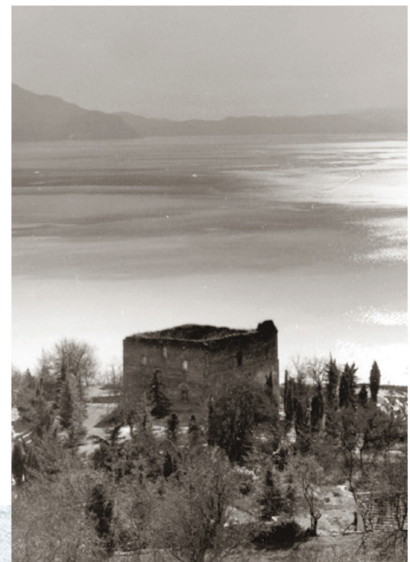
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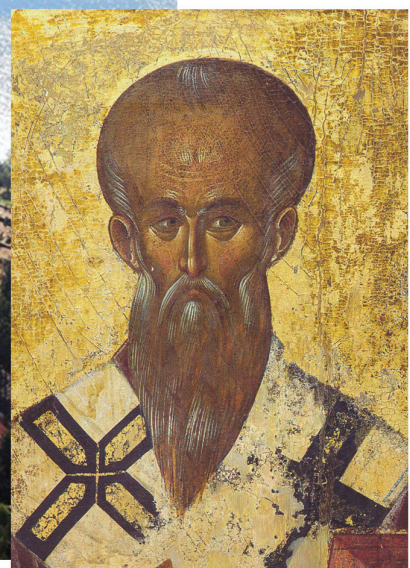
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Т.І. 1. Чаусидис 2017, 227 – 538: 7; 2. Чаусидис 2012, Т.ІІ: 3; 3. Bitrakova Grozdanova 2009, 33- Fig. 8; 4. Кузман 2016, 138 – Сл. 1; 5, 6. Кузман и Димитрова, 92-93, 186.

but also of its ancient predecessor Lychnidos (Кузман 2016). In addition to the remains of today's revived complex of medieval churches, built by St. Clement of Ohrid in the 9th and 10th centuries and up to the Ottoman period, two large Early Christian churches were also discovered, of which one is a basilica and the other has a tetraconchal plan, alongside two baptisteries and other auxiliary sacred buildings (T.I: 5). Based on the excavated buildings, the layering of the medieval churches over the ruined basilica and later the mosque over the ruined churches can be clearly seen (T.I: 2). Under all of these buildings, even older ones were discovered, from the Roman and Hellenistic period, some of which could have also had a sacral character. This is indicated by the most interesting of the movable finds - a bronze statuette from the 3rd - 2nd century BC, discovered underneath the floor of one of the side chambers of the basilica (T.I: 1, place of discovery – 2). Although the represented character was named “Daedalus from Plaoshnik” because of the artificial wings, his features connect him more to the Egyptian Bes or even more likely - to the ancient Silenus. There are indications that in this case he represents the ancient mystery cults, most probably those from the circle of the Cabeiri. Some researchers have shown very interesting overlappings of the name and function of this mythological character with some traditions preserved in Macedonian folklore (Чаусидис 2012).

Assumptions have been made that at this site, maybe not far from the place of discovery of the figurine of “Daedalus”, there was a cult building where this statuette performed its sacral function. The presence of Early Christian temples by itself indicate the existence of an older pagan building at this location, having in mind that Christian sacral buildings were often raised deliberately at older cult sites. In the cultural layers extending underneath the basilica level, older buildings have been discovered that, according to the solid building materials and techniques used, could carry the epithet of representative cult buildings from the pre-Roman or early Roman

period. We are talking about foundations of architectural buildings dated to the transitional period from late Hellenistic to the early Roman period. They are built out of large and partly worked stones funded in the natural red soil and laid with mud, while their upper zones were constructed out of mud bricks. It is especially important that besides them, in the same layer were found fragments of fresco and stucco decoration from the same period (T.I: 5). On the basis of these finds, P. Kuzman concludes that the Early Christian churches at Plaoshnik were built “on the foundations of old ancient buildings and temples” (Кузман & Димитрова 2010, 89; Чаусидис 2012, 87). A large number of ancient stone monuments were also discovered at the site (parts of statues, reliefs, inscriptions, altars, mainly used as spolia), of which a significant proportion have a clear cult character (Бабамова и Кузман 2019).

The mentioned bronze statuette was discovered in an exceptionally interesting archaeological context - underneath the fully preserved mosaic floor of the auxiliary chamber of the basilica's narthex (Чаусидис 2012, 86, 87). In that part of the mosaics there is a scene which shows two deer, drinking water from a fountain, trampling with their feet over a lion and snake. The scene is accompanied by a quote from the Old Testament (Psalm 90/91) that says: “*Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet*” (T.I: 2, 3) (Битракова Грозданова 2006, 266, 267; Bitrakova Grozdanova 2009, 32-34). We have stated the assumption that the burying of the sculpture in this chamber and the placement of this exact mosaic scene and inscription above it was done deliberately and with the knowledge of the congregation because of two completely different possible reasons. On one hand, it could be a continuation of the veneration towards the mythological figure that it represents and the investment of his sacrality into the temple of the newly accepted Christian faith. On the other, it could have been an act declaring the dominance

of Christianity over paganism, while the represented figure (possibly with the status of a once respected deity) was identified with the devil, which is also appropriately signified with the lion and dragon i.e. snake from the mentioned inscription (Чаусидис 2012, 87, 88).

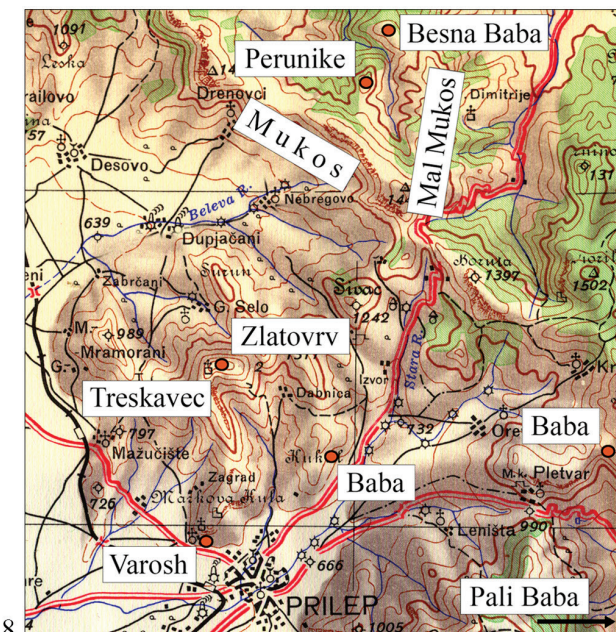
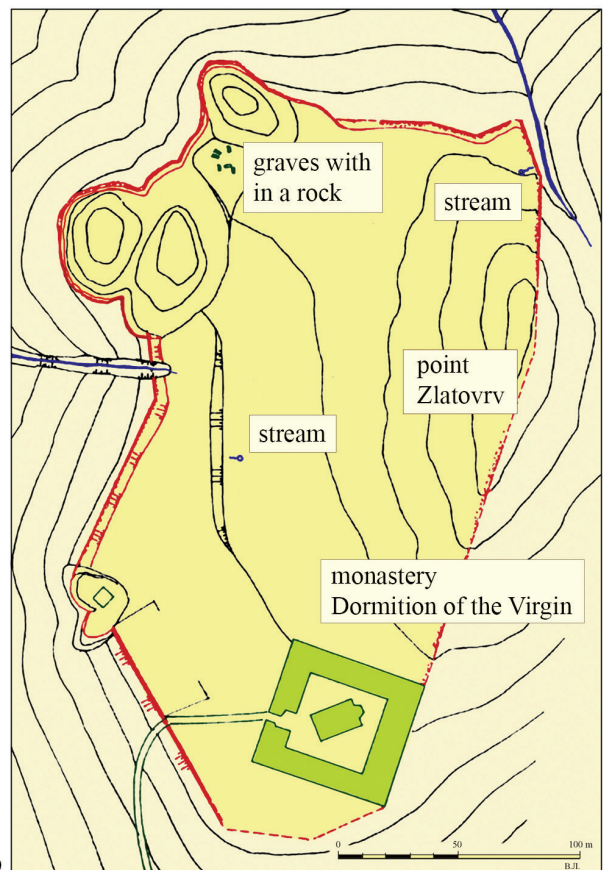
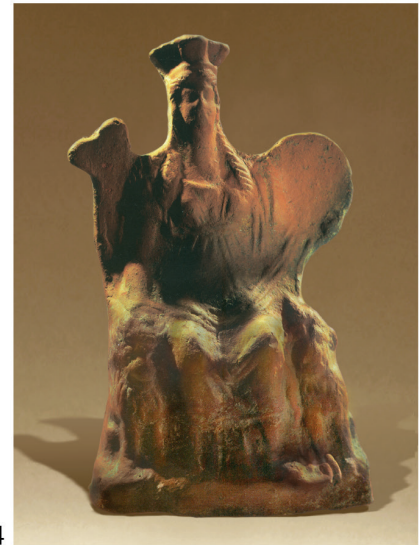
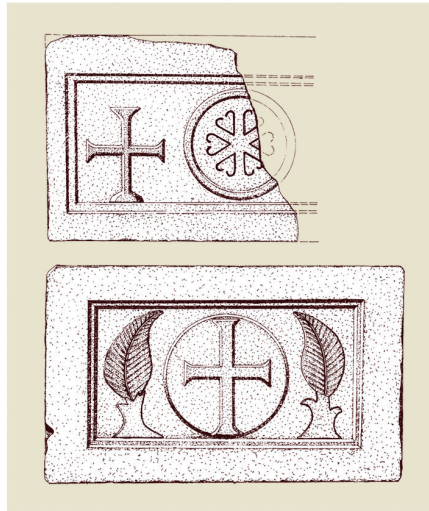
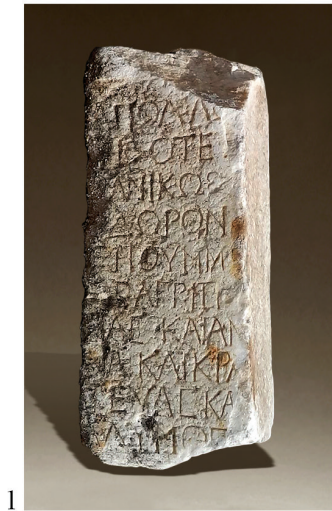
This bronze statuette, whether it represents Daedalus or Silenus, interferes with St. Clement of Ohrid - the medieval builder and patron of this cult space (T.I: 6). Silenus is known in mythology as an ecstatic wise man, tutor of Dionysus and teacher of King Midas, while a similar character is also Daedalus, who in actuality is an ancient paradigm for the wise inventor. We think that it is quite possible that one of these figures served as a paradigm in the constitution of the cult of this saint who is known in the whole Slavic world as a teacher-saint and a wise enlightener who did not just baptize and literate people, but also taught them in various other spiritual and practical skills (Чаусидис 2012, 79, 80).

2. ZLATOVRV (MONASTERY "TRESKAVEC") - PRILEP (T.II)

Northwest of the modern-day city of Prilep, on the Baba Mountain, there is a dominant sharp peak named Zlatovrv (in literal translation "Golden Peak", 1400 meters above sea level) below which "Treskavec" is built - one of the best-known monasteries in this part of the Balkans (T.I: 8, 9). This space, fascinating in its geomorphologic characteristics, is also shrouded in different traditions that also speak of its strong mythological and religious character. There are preserved tales about the golden apple on top of Zlatovrv that reflected the sun's rays as far as Thessaloniki; about the evil queen that killed a hundred monks in the monastery; about the dragon that ate their dead bodies and about the lightning strike that killed him by striking the monastery (Џаусидис 2008, 265, 274-284; Чаусидис 2008, 175, 188-195). Preserved is even a song that sings about the building of the Christian temple at the site of the pagan one. It speaks of how the angels and saints, upon the recommendation

of the Virgin Mary, descend from heaven to this peak, expel the Ellimes (Greeks) out of their "non-Christian church" (=pagan temple) and in its place build a church for the Mother of God (Смолчић - Макуљевић 2005, 298). The high degree of sacrality of this hill is best represented by the large monastery built on the high and hardly accessible terrace underneath the peak itself, with a church dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God, built in several phases during the 13th and 14th centuries (Касапова 2009) (T.II: 9).

But, inside the monastery there are also numerous carved stone elements that belonged to older public buildings from the early Roman period (2 - 3 century). Given the high altitude and inaccessibility, it is certainly a matter of objects that weren't brought here from some other place, but are found in their original location. Standing out from them are several altars or pedestals, cornices, columns and statues that evidently belonged to a temple from the Roman period (Лилчиќ 2001, 392-395) (T.II: 6, 7). Some of them have carved inscriptions from which we learn that at this location there was a settlement by the name of Kolobaisa (Κολοβαϊσα), possibly with the character of a mountain sanctuary. The inscriptions carved on the stone monuments mention the god Apollon Eteudaniskos/Oteudanos ("The Thunder Striker") and Artemis Ephesia, to which the believers are expressing their gratitude for healing (Düll 1977, 282, 283, 291) (T.II: 1). Deserving of special attention is a regularly carved stone block with a representation of a snake (Димитриоски 2018), in relation to the aforementioned legends about the dragon, as well as because of its rustic treatment which might also point to the pre-Roman period (T.II: 5). Several elements of Early Christian stone plastics indicate the continuation of life at the sanctuary in this period as well. We are talking about a colonette and parts of templon slabs that were part of an Early Christian basilica whose exact location has still not been determined (Ристески 2002; Лилчиќ 2002, 936, 937) (T.II: 2, 3). The topographic measurements have



T.II. 1, 5. Димитриоски 2018; 2, 3. Лилчиќ, 2002, 936 – 1, 2; 4. Битракова Грозданова 1999, cover page; 6, 7. Богданоска 2019; 8. Čausidis 2008, 194 – T.VI: 3; 9. Микулчиќ 1996, 267 – Сл. 15.

shown the presence of a surrounding wall that encompassed the entire terrace (an area of 4 hectares), together with the medieval monastery, the local water spring and the graves carved into the rock (Микулчиќ 1996, 266-268; Микулчиќ 1999, 89, 90) (T.II: 9). Recent excavations have confirmed the existence of this surrounding wall, as well as the presence of different interior buildings from the Roman period.

Several facts indicate that in antiquity, a local mountain goddess was venerated here, whose cult on the Balkans and the Mediterranean can be traced back to prehistory. The strongest argument for this is the discovery of a building with several terracotta figurines of Cybele (archetype of a mountain goddess in Asia Minor) in the locality of Varosh, about 4 kilometers from Treskavec (Битракова Грозданова 1999, 123-146) (T.II: 4, 8). Adding to that are the Roman inscriptions discovered in the circle of the monastery that mention Artemis Ephesia - another very popular goddess from Asia Minor, which, in a certain sense, can be considered as an equivalent of Cybele. We think that the dedication of the monastery church to the Mother of God, together with several of her frescoes painted on surrounding rocks, legitimize the thesis that the choice of this saint is the result of the aspiration to adapt the new Christian cult to the pagan traditions connected to this landscape i.e. continuation of the established religious practices in a new Christian format (Čausidis 2008, 275-284; Чаусидис 2008, 186-195). This continuity and connection to the mountain is also shown in a breviary from the XIV century in which "Theotokos of Treskavec", together with "Theotokos of Ephesus", is symbolically connected to the holy mountain and is represented as protector of high mountains („Holy Mother of God of the high mountains“) and of mountain monasteries (Смолчић - Макулъевић 2005, 293-295, for the surrounding cult objects in the rocks: 307-312).

The Pagan-Slavic phase of these traditions can be followed through the toponymy and the legends connected to the wider region around

Zlatovrv. It is represented through numerous toponyms with the base word Baba (literally *grandmother*), which, besides the meaning of *woman* and *old woman*, in Old Slavic also signified the name of an ambivalent goddess connected to fertility, childbirth, but also with death. The demonic side of this figure can be recognized in the toponyms Besna Baba (literally *furious grandmother*) and Pali Baba (literally *grandmother that sets on fire or is on fire*), but also in the evil queen from the abovementioned legend (T.II: 8). The same functions are also represented by the name of Mount Mukos (a ridge of Mount Babuna) located north of Zaltovrv that coincides with the name of the Slavic goddess Mokosh recorded in medieval written sources. The enduring traditions of the ancient thunderer Apollon Oteudanos i.e. Apollo the Thunder Striker can be followed through the Slavic name of the monastery Treskavec which contains the meaning *treska = thunder*, the legend of the lightning strike which struck the monastery and killed the dragon living there, and the name of the hill Perunike, located between the hills Mal Mukos and Golem Mukos, which contains the name of the Slavic thunder-god Perun (Čausidis 2008, 282, 283; Чаусидис 2008, 193, 194) (T.II: 8).

3. MONASTERY ST. PANTELEIMON - V. GORNO NEREZI, SKOPJE (T.III)

The monastery is located in the village of Gorno Nerezi, on the hill of Vodno which rises at the southern edge of the Skopje Valley. It is built on a relatively high terrace with an altitude of 600 meters above sea level. It is known for the monastery church of St. Panteleimon, famous in the world for its exceptional fresco paintings from 1164 (T.III: 7, 8). Based on the preserved founder's inscription and architecture, there have been hypotheses which propose that in that year, under the patronage of the Byzantine prince Alexios Angelos, only a renovation of an older temple located at the site had been carried out, probably built at the end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th century (T.III: 6). This renovation included

the upgrading to the existing crossed-dome church with the addition of four corner domes, a narthex and its complete fresco painting carried out by superb Constantinople painters (Петров 1982). There is a legend that tells us about the building of the church over an older cult site with healing water, according to which some great ruler built the church out of gratitude for the healing of his son because of the healing water that runs from the monastery fountain even to this day. A result of this legend may also be the name of the strong water spring "Tsareva Voda" ("Tsar's water") located above the monastery, under the hill Foja (Хаџи Васиљевић 1930, 258). About the important role of water in the former functioning of the temple speaks to us the existence of a well in one of its side chambers in which there is no water today. The locality "Bigor", located below the monastery, was until recently treated as a cult site. It was believed that the sick who would sleep on the rocks located here or would throw a coin would be cured. The water that sinks here is also taught to be magical, for treatment of fear, asphyxiation and for protection against lightning strike (Поповска 2012, 203). These activities completely correspond to St. Panteleimon as the patron of the temple who in Christianity is known as a physician saint.

Originating from this site are several stone monuments that indicate the existence of cult objects from the Roman period at the same location. In the floor of the narthex of the monastery church there is an early Roman tombstone with a relief image and inscription (Петров 1981, 154-159) (Т.ІІІ: 5). The second object is an early Roman statue of Zeus i.e. Jupiter, accompanied by an eagle, found in the "village of Nerezi" (Вулић 1933, 74-75, бр. 214).¹ Considering the high location, it is hard to believe that it was brought here from some more distant place, especially not from one with lower altitude. It seems plausi-

¹ Although there is no mention of more detailed information about the finding location of the monument, it is most probably the territory of today's Gorno Nerezi, because in all other publication from the same time the name Nerezi denotes this settlement, while Sredno Nerezi and Dolno Nerezi were formed later, by emigrants from this village, in the peripheral zones of its area (Хаџи Васиљевић 1930, 258, 259).

ble to us that it indicates the existence of a sanctuary or temple of the represented god at this place which, given the high position, would fully correspond to his celestial character. Stone plastics usual for church buildings from the Early Christian period have also been found in the circle of the monastery. We are talking about templon fragments, an Ionic impost-capital supplemented with a cross and part of a column which corresponds to it based on the diameter (Т.ІІІ: 2, 3, reconstruction - 1). These could be indicators for the existence of an Early Christian temple in the circle of the monastery or its more immediate surroundings (Петров 1981; Лилчиќ 2002, 636, 637).

Even F. Mesesnel has stated the assumption that at the location of the medieval monastery there was an older pagan cult site. K. Petrov further developed this theory, believing that the older stone monuments indicate the presence of an Early Christian and older pagan building under today's church or on the wider plateau of the monastery (Петров 1981, 157, 172, 184, 186, 187) (Т.ІІІ: 7). Pointing to activities during the Roman and early Byzantine period in this landscape are two nearby Late Antique and early Byzantine forts - the first one smaller, at the site of "Gradishte", about 1 kilometer east of the monastery and the second - larger and especially strongly fortified, at "Markovi Kuli", on the same isohypse as the monastery, at a distance of about 5 kilometers by air. Judging by the numerous towers and two huge cisterns, it is believed that the second one was an exceptionally important fortress that continued to exist into the Middle Ages, as the mediaeval town of Chrnche (Микулчиќ 1982, 48-53, 76-78, 129-133).

The statue of Zeus i.e. Jupiter (Т.ІІІ: 4) and St. Panteleimon as the patron of the monastery in Gorno Nerezi (Т.ІІІ: 8) raise the question whether there is a mutual functional connection between these sacred characters. The non-canonical folk traditions of the Balkans and among the Eastern Slavs show that their common component is the atmospheric

phenomena (thunder, lightning and storms). Although the main thunderer in folk culture is St. Elijah, such a function was also given to St. Panteleimon who is represented as his younger brother. On one hand, he belongs to the category of “fiery saints” with wildfires in his domain (mainly those caused by lightning), but, on the other hand, under his patronage are also the winds, torrential rainfall and hail („Watery Pantelej“) (Белова 2004b; Попов 2012). The relatively high location of the monastery and the presence of a statue (and cult) of the ancient Zeus i.e. Jupiter, give us arguments that in the choice as patron of the monastery the mentioned atmospheric domains of the saint tipped the scale. A strong argument in favor of this is the church of St. Elijah in Gorno Nerezi, recently revived at the site of the old village church dedicated to the same saint (Хаџи Васиљевић 1930, 259).

These Pagan-Christian relations at first sight do not correspond to the basic canonical function of St. Panteleimon as a physician-saint, at least not in relation to Zeus i.e. Jupiter. But, this incompatibility is overcome if we take into consideration that among the Paeonians, and more widely among the other ancient peoples of the Central Balkans, there was an autochthonous god, later identified with Apollo, in whose domains the sun was not dominant, but thunder and healing (Чаусидис 2017, 269, 271, 775, 827). In fact, the best evidence for this is the mentioned Apollon Oteudanos from the sanctuary of Kolobaisa, who holds both functions. There are indications that an analogous cult (of Apollo and Artemis) existed at another similar mountain sanctuary, at the peak of Klepa near Stobi (Микулчиќ 1983; Čausidis 2008, 272-275; Чаусидис, 2008, 183-186).

In the proposed mythological paradigms, the name of the locality (today village) Nerezi could also tie in, if we take into account that its basic meaning is wild boar. The sacral character of the location and the presence of mythological figures with highlighted celestial and thunderer functions give us reason for making the assumption that its occurrence

was not the product of the real presence of these animals at the given place, but of some mythological-religious context. In doing so, we consider the character of the wild boar as a paradigmatic mythological opponent of celestial gods and thunderers i.e. as a zoomorphic hypostasis of the chthonic god with whom they are in constant battle (other interpretations of the toponym: Evans 1985, 95). As the closest illustrations for this we could take into account some of the coins of the Paeonian kings whose obverses often depict Apollo, while the reverses show a wild boar (examples Павловска 2008, 22, 23, 54, 56, 59).

4. CAVES “MAL ZMEOVETS” AND “GOLEM ZMEOVETS” - V. DREN, DEMIR KAPIJA (T.IV)

The two caves are located in a hardly accessible wooded area, about ten kilometers southwest from the village of Dren, located on the opposite sides of a densely overgrown ravine.²

The cave “Mal Zmeovets” to this day is used as a cult space by the inhabitants of the surrounding settlements. During our exploration, it was most often visited by women and because of curing childlessness and illnesses specific to the female population and to children. In doing so, clothes, underwear and money were left on the stalagmites and besides them, and there is also a recorded custom of women sitting on the stalagmites in order to get pregnant. There was a custom, while visiting the cave, to take smaller pieces of stalactites (grouped by several), which the villagers call “boski” (with the meaning of breasts, tits, udders) and to which magical power was attributed (protection from evil, illnesses and storms). We received this information from a female resident of Demir Kapija, in which house the expedition team stayed during one of the campaigns. Similar information was also collected by V. Dimitrovska in a survey with the inhabitants of the village

² We have participated in the exploration of the caves on two occasions, as a member of the team within the project “Old towns and forts in the Middle Vardar Valley”, under the direction of I. Mikulčić (Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje). Our first findings on the cult aspects of this cave: Чаусидис 1986.



T.IV. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Drawing: N. Čausidis; 7, 8, 9, 10. Битракова Грозданова 1987, 108, T.I: 6, 9; 49, T.XIII: 4, 5; 11, 12, 13. Photo: A. Ivkova; 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. Соколовска 2014, 89 – Сл. 55; 19. Photo: M. Jovanov.

of Dren (Димитровска 2019).

During our visit, we concluded that it was a small and shallow cave with one chamber. In its center there was a group of smaller pillar stalagmites that evidently represented the “altar” of the cult space where the mentioned ritual activities took place, and in that context the offering of certain items. In the cave sediment formed around them we found and collected several material traces that indicate the longevity and character of these activities. The oldest finds were about ten bronze coins from the Roman period dated to the 3rd - 4th century AD. After a hiatus of over 1000 years, the coin finds continue with two very worn out silver coins of Dubrovnik from the middle of the 17th to the beginning of the 18th century (T.IV: 1). Furthermore, subsequently following in the chronological order came the Ottoman denominations: one silver akçe of Ahmed III (1703-1730) (T.IV: 2), two silver akçe of Abdul Hamid I (1775-1789) (T.IV: 3) and two silver akçe of Mahmud II (1808-1839) (T.IV: 5); two copper coins of “5 para” and one copper coin of “10 para” of Abdulmejid I (1839-1861) (T.IV: 6). From the coins of the 20th century we found: one coin of 10 para from the Kingdom of Serbia (1912) and one coin each of 2 and 5 dinars from SFR Yugoslavia (6th-7th decades of the 20th century). Besides the abovementioned, we also collected 5 coins from silver and bronze without possibilities for identification. From the other finds, deserving of special attention are one strongly corroded iron thimble and completely oxidized remains of thin iron needles for sewing. Particular attention should be given to a bronze pendant of circular shape with a preserved loop at one end, decorated with pseudo-granulation from the front (T.IV: 4). It is a piece of jewelry i.e. element of a folk costume which, based on analogies from the so-called “Bijelo Brdo culture”, could be dated to the Middle Ages (Demo 1983). Some of these finds are currently located in the archaeological collection of the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje.

The cave “Golem Zmeovets” is very deep, with multiple chambers and corridors, rich in

rock formations. During the 1980s (as part of the mentioned project), as well as in 2013, field surveys and smaller excavations were carried out at its entrance and in the first chamber, which revealed various finds from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.³ From the multitude of animal bones, noticeable is the large presence of astragalus bones, some of them perforated, obviously used in some cult practices (T.IV: 11-13). The zoological analysis of 19 astragalus bones collected from this cave, performed in 2018 by A. Ivkowska from the Archaeological Museum in Skopje, revealed their belonging to sheep (12 specimens), goat (4) and sheep or goat (3). There were also a lot of pottery fragments, probably left in the cave together with the offerings of food and drinks, some of them with engraved names of the donors (T.IV: 9, 10). Discovered were also lead or tin plates with engraved names, which were probably tied to the offerings or to sacrificed animals to denote the identity of the donor (T.IV: 7, 8). Particularly striking is the huge amount of fragments of terracotta figurines (around 300), mostly from the 3 - 2 century BC, which were apparently left, thrown or deliberately broken in the cave. They mainly represent female deities such as Aphrodite, Artemis and Athena, as well as Eros in the role of a companion of the first one (T.IV: 14 – 18). The finds also included numerous coins, this time from the pre-Roman and Roman period.⁴

Particularly indicative is the chronological differentiation between the two caves which points to their use in phases i.e. “Golem Zmeovets” from Early Antiquity to the Roman period and “Mal Zmeovets” in the Roman period,

³ We received the information about the second campaign from M. Jovanov, Faculty of Philosophy- Skopje, as a participant in the project.

⁴ The finds are not completely and comprehensively published. General information: Соколовска 2014, 49, 50; separate finds from the Hellenistic period were published by V. Bitrakova Grozdanova (Битракова Грозданова 1987): 48, 49, T.XIII: 4, 5 (ceramic vessels); 108, T.I: 6, 9, T.III: 2, 4, 5 (inscriptions on tin plates and on ceramic vessels); 138, 139, T.XI: 1-8 (terracotta figurines). One part of the finds are located in the archaeological collection of the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, another in the Archaeological Museum in Skopje, a third in the Speleological association “Peoni” (in the meantime transferred to the museum collection of the Municipality of Demir Kapija).

Middle Ages and later from the 17th to the 20th century. The complete absence of coins and other finds from the late Roman i.e. early Byzantine period and during the Middle Ages (with the exception of only one find) could be due to the prohibitions imposed by the Christian institutions for the use of these caves for cult needs. The start of their use once again in the 18th century could be connected to the weakening control of the Christian church, and perhaps specifically with the abolition of the Ohrid Archbishopric in 1767 that coincides with the reappearance of the oldest post-Antiquity coin finds in "Mal Zmeovets". The greatly worn out Dubrovnik coins (T.IV: 1) suggest that they were deposited a considerable time, maybe even a whole century after their minting.

5. COMPLEX OF CHURCHES AND OTHER OBJECTS IN THE MATKA CANYON, SKOPJE (T.V)

The Matka Canyon is located in the lower part of the river Treska, southwest of Skopje. The cult character of this area is indicated by the name itself which in Slavic languages has three meanings: *mother*, *uterus* and *whirlpool*. Its picturesque and mythical natural ambient is complemented by several Christian churches (most of them from the 14th century) in which and besides them there are preserved remains of older cult objects from the Early Christian and early Roman period (T.V: 6).⁵

The first object, located even before the entrance to the canyon, is the monastery St. Virgin Mary Matka (T.V: 6) (Димитрова et al 2011, 183-200). The question remains open whether the epithet "Matka" of this monastery is due to it being taken over from the name of the canyon or in opposite - the canyon is named after the monastery. In the construction of the monastery church (probably in the 14th century, with a renovation in the 15th century) have been used numerous marble elements from an Early Christian temple: colo-

nettes, an altar column, templon slab and an altar capital (T.V: 2) (Лилчиќ 2002, 627, 628). Embedded in its walls are also elements from early Roman cult buildings: an architrave, Corinthian capital, ceiling panels and other. In the monastery quarters there is an embedded fragment with a representation of a ram, probably from a Roman altar or sarcophagus (T.V: 7) (Лилчиќ 2001, 137-139). In the lower zone of the western wall, on the north side of the main entrance, there is an embedded stone block with engraved graffiti of horsemen and other figures which, based on its position and typology of the drawings, is most probably older than the church (T.V: 5) (Чаусидис 1994, 293, T.LXXII: 8, LXXIII: 6, 9). Similar medieval examples are also found in other cult spaces on the Balkans (Овчаров 1982). Besides the monastery there is a spacious cave, known under the name "Mechkina Dupka" ("Bear Hole") that with its name and character fits well in the accented female aspects of the monastery and the whole canyon (see further).

On the slopes above this monastery is the locality "Sveti Spas" ("Holy Salvation") with a church from a newer date, and near it is the locality "Sveta Trojca" ("Holy Trinity") with ruins from an older church (T.V: 6). Inside these objects and in their immediate vicinity there are carved stone elements from cult buildings. Standing out from the numerous materials are parts of an early Roman temple (from the 2nd or the early 3rd century) such as: Ionic capitals and bases, architraves, a cornice, crepidoma and others (Лилчиќ 2001, 133-137; Микулчиќ 1982, 95-98, Т. 23), as well as elements from an Early Christian church: colonettes, impostes for colonettes, columns and pilasters, templon slabs, columns with grooves for templon slabs and column bases (T.V: 1) (Лилчиќ 2001, 629-635; Микулчиќ 1982, 95-97, Т. 22). There are also two relief representations of deities. The first one is sculpted on a more massive stone block (probably an altar) embedded into the remains of the Holy Trinity church. It is carved in a rough provincial manner, and is identified as Diana i.e. Artemis, probably portrayed as a hunter with a bow (T.V: 8) (Георгиев 1980,

⁵ Two monographs about the cult objects and other traditions connected to the Matka Canyon have been published (Лилчиќ 1995; Димитрова et al 2011); for our first research on the cult aspects of this region: Чаусидис 1986.



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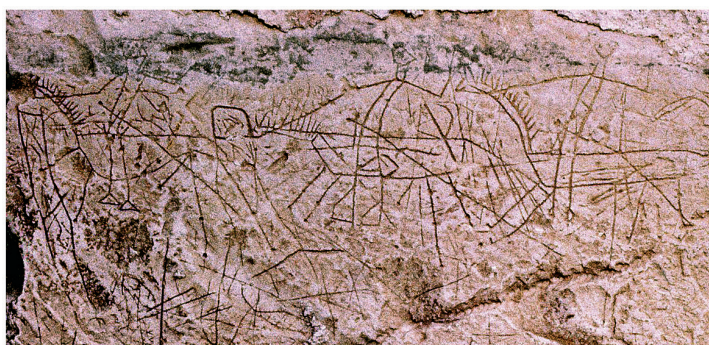
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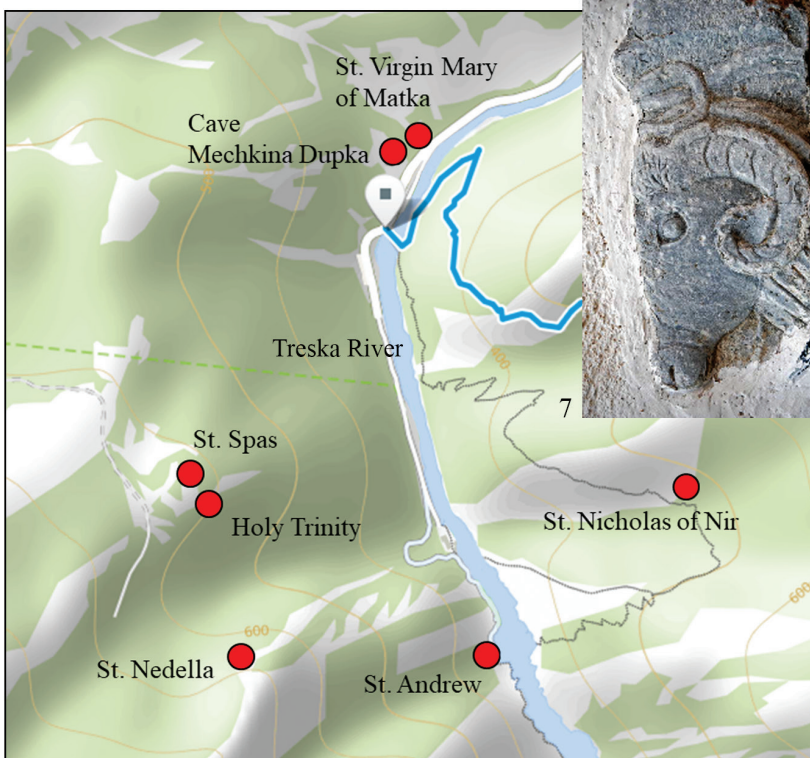
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T.V. 1, 2, 3, 7, 9. Димитрова и др. 2011, 37, 36, 221, 30, 251; 4, 5. Photo: N. Čausidis; 6. Map: N. Čausidis; 8. Микулчиќ 1982, T. 22.

135-139, Сл.1, 2; Микулчиќ 1982, 97, Т.22). The other relief (votive slab) is found as a movable object in front of the entrance to the church of Holy Salvation. It shows a rider in motion to the right and most likely represents the so-called "Thracian Horseman" (Т.В: 4) (Георгиев 1980, 139-142, Сл. 3).

At the rocky peak rising above these two sites, which also dominates over the whole canyon, there are the remains of the half-ruined church of St. Nedella that, based on its architecture and preserved fragments of fresco painting, can be dated to the 14th century (Т.В: 6) (Димитрова et al 2011, 170-182). The location of the temples dedicated to this female saint on dominant high grounds or inaccessible rocks is common (another example is in Veles). They are the result of layering over the figure of this saint the traditions of some pagan goddess connected to mountain tops and the sky, in opposition to another goddess connected to the lower zones of the cosmos (earth, caves, ground waters). There are indications that it was the ancient Persephone (which symbolizes resurrection, also comprised in the figure of St. Nedella i.e. St. Voskresija and St. Anastasia) or the Slavic Leda/Lada, and in opposition to Demeter and the Slavic Mokosh (Чаусидис 1994, 250-256). In the Matka Canyon, her earthly opponent would be the Virgin Mary from the monastery Matka located near the cave "Mechkina Dupka". Given the high location susceptible to lightning strikes (which allegedly destroyed the church itself), we should also mention the folk figure Ognena Marija (Fiery Marija) - sister of the thunderer St. Elijah and patron of lightning i.e. the fiery aspect of thunder. Her canonic version is St. Marina which, in churches is represented as killing the devil with a hammer or axe (symbols of lightning) (Чаусидис 2017, 708, 709, 768-772).

Located in the foot of the canyon is the church dedicated to St. Andrew, built and fresco painted in the 14th century (Т.В: 6) (Димитрова et al 2011, 103-161). In its narthex (probably added in the 16th century) there are two embedded relief carved stone blocks

that, judging by the material and style, are not ancient but more probably early medieval. On one of them there is a simple representation of a human contour to the waist, while the other shows a human hand (Т.В: 9). Our research has shown that the widespread hand had an important symbolic and religious significance in the early medieval Pagan-Slavic traditions, and even before that - in ancient Balkan culture. There are indications that it retained its high status even within the symbolic system of the Bogomils (Чаусидис 2003a; Чаусидис 2003b, 333-342). The presence of St. Andrew is highly indicative in this ambient, if we take into consideration the folk traditions according to which this saint is considered the protector of bears (somewhere even of wolves). On his holiday, also called "Bear Day", it was forbidden to hunt this animal, while in some areas a ritual meal (with corn, beans and other) or a special bread was prepared and offered to the bear, in order for it to not attack people, livestock and field crops (Виноградова 1995). In our case, pointing to this relation would be the mentioned cave "Mechkina Dupka" ("Bear Hole") and the relief of Artemis which, among other, was also represented as a bear (with the epithet Brauronia).

On the other side of the canyon, high in the rocks is the monastery St. Nicholas of Shishevo or of Nir, named such after the nearby village of Shishevo i.e. the locality of Nir/Nira where it is located (Т.В: 6). It originates from the 14th century, with a very probable earlier phase (Серафимова 2008, 127-131; Лилчиќ 1995, 99-108; Димитрова et al 2011, 200-231). Deserving of attention is a relief stone slab, with an oculus, embedded in the façade of the church, in the southern underdome lunette of the naos (Т.В: 3). It shows several animals, mainly grouped in symmetrical pairs and complemented with several palmettes. Their tails are also transformed into plants, some of which end up in the mouths of the animals. There is a corresponding slab in the northern lunette, but its relief is entirely destroyed. The slabs have been dated differently, from the 11th to the 14th century, while

their motifs are treated as products of Eastern and above all, Western (Romanesque) influences (Димитрова et al 2011, 210-213; Филипова 1999, 17; Лилчиќ 1995, 100-102). The central figure in the relief is a hybrid creature composed of two animal bodies facing one another which have a common head - a male one, with a moustache and crowned (T.V: 3). It is a motif which appears in the Near East from the 2 millennium BC, while in the following centuries it also becomes popular in the Mediterranean. In the Middle Ages it can be traced throughout all of Europe, from the Romanesque church plastics to the West, to the decorative reliefs of the medieval Russian churches in the East. Our analyses show that it originally was a triple chthonic figure composed out of two zoomorphic components (the pair of animal bodies) and one central anthropomorphic that reconciles their opposing character. It is not excluded that this and the other motifs were represented on this reliefs not just as a decorative element, but also because of some of their primeval meanings, perhaps reminiscing the Slavic chthonic god (Veles or Trojan) adapted to the Christian symbolic system (Чаусидис 2005, 248, 249). In this interpretation we are encouraged by the patron of the church St. Nicholas who in Slavic folk culture counts as the Christian substitute of the pagan chthonic god (Белова 2004b). In this case, contributing to it would also be the name of the former village of Nira founded around the spring of drinking water located under the church (Серафимова 2008, 127), taking into account, on one hand, the meaning of *water* probably contained therein (Nira from Greek *nero*), and on the other - water as one of the domains of St. Nicholas.

From the above it is clear that the Matka Canyon is a large cult complex with specific geomorphologic features, composed of several sacral localities and buildings whose existence can be confirmed in four diachronically distributed cultural complexes: the ancient (2nd - 3rd century), Early Christian (5th - 6th century), medieval Christian (14th - 16th century) and folkloric which can in fact be

traced from nowadays back to antiquity, also including the Pagan-Slavic, which although not manifested explicitly through material finds, essentially functions as a basic mythological matrix according to which the specific cult buildings with their mythological patrons are distributed in space.

6. "KALE" – VINICA (T.VI)

The site is located on the southwestern edge of the modern town of Vinica, on a hill rising along the riverbed of the Grdechka River. It is a fortified settlement from the Late Antique and early Byzantine period, where there have also been discovered archaeological finds from almost all other periods (TVI: 10). The clearest indicators for the cult activities taking place at this site are the two modest buildings which, because of the apses oriented eastwards, can be defined as Christian sacral buildings. The larger one, despite its poor preservation, can be recognized by its characteristics as a smaller three-nave basilica with a narthex, completely surrounded by lateral rooms (T.V: 10). No decorative elements were found in its interior except several fragments of the so-called "terracotta icons" (Балабанов 2011, 43-45). The second building is smaller, with a simple one-nave naos, for which there have been expressed assumptions that it originally functioned as a baptistery (T.VI:10). Taken as an argument in favor of this is the trough in the middle of the building, carved into the bedrock. By natural means or through some kind of installation, it was filled with water that could have been used for the ritual of baptism, and in pre-Christian times also as healing water (Балабанов 2011, 50, 51). Found at the site were a larger number of elements of Early Christian marble plastics that could have belonged to the mentioned buildings, of course if we assume that there were no other such buildings at the site or its immediate surroundings. We are talking about two capitals, two pairs of impost-capitals, several columns and fragments of templon slabs (T.VI: 4, 5). The fact that these elements have different profiles and style of decoration may

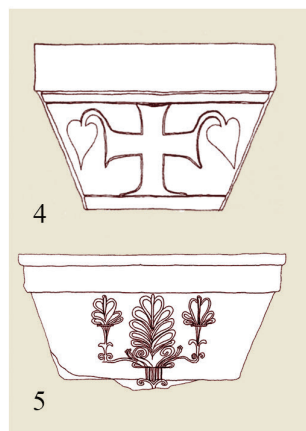


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T.VI. Балабанов 2011: 1. 27 – Сл. 10; 2. 121 – Сл. 30; 3. 124 – Сл. 34; 4. 48 – Сл. 27; 5. 47 – Сл. 25; 6. 137 – Сл. 1; 7. 72 – Сл. 1; 11. 111 – 19; 12. 105 – Сл. 16; 8, 9. Димитрова 2013, 36, 32; 10. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/VINICA.CITY.MUSEUM/posts/>

indicate their secondary use within the mentioned buildings and taken from various older buildings (mainly Early Christian), located in the same settlement or the wider surroundings (Балабанов 2011, 45-50).

The most interesting movable cult finds from the site are of course the so-called "Vinica icons" - ceramic plaques from the Early Christian period made by molding, with reliefs showing Christian scenes, symbols and inscriptions (T.VI: 8, 9). Apart from the several hypotheses about the character and function of these objects, there are assumptions that, by applying a mortar layer on the back (well preserved in some examples), they were fixed on the walls of the mentioned or some other undiscovered Early Christian sacral buildings in the settlement (Балабанов 2011, 44-45). According to other hypotheses they were applied over the interior face of Early Christian tombs which would be in accordance to the funeral aspects of their iconography (Димитрова 2013, 31, 33). Newer observations suggest a more precise dating of the plaques - their emergence in the 6th century, and their destruction at the beginning of the 8th century (Ѓорѓиевски 2012).

In the area of the larger Early Christian church, a necropolis was formed during the 11th - 12th centuries from which over 80 graves have been excavated. The fact that no graves have been found in the area covering the smaller apsidal building suggests that it was visible in this period, and probably renovated and used as a graveyard church (T.VI: 10) (Балабанов 2011, 56-59).

In the lower archaeological layers of the site there have been discovered traces of religious activities from periods predating Christianity. Of them we should first mention the ceramic plaques, similar to the Early Christian ones, whose iconography indicates their belonging to the ancient pagan cults. One of them, which may have been used as a metope in some cult or other public buildings, shows a bearded rider (T.VI: 7). K. Balabanov connected it to the culture of the Paeonians (5th - 4th century BC), believing that it is a rep-

resentation of one of their kings, maybe shown as a participant in the Trojan War (Балабанов 2011, 71-94). Discovered were also fragments of a different kind of ceramic plaques (probably friezes from one same building) with relief representations of zoomorphic figures. One of them shows a gryphon with another animal in its beak (probably a rabbit), preserved from another is only the rear end of a lion's body (maybe a gryphon again), while the remaining two show hybrid animals with tails transformed into snakes (T.VI: 11, 12). K. Balabanov identified the last two reliefs with Chimera, while the first two - with the gryphons and the myth of the Arimaspi, putting them in context of metallurgy which, according to him, was intensively practiced on the site and in the wider region. He believes that the reliefs belonged to a building with the function of a treasury that could be connected to the only building on the site constructed out of large nicely carved stone blocks, located at the highest point - at the large semicircular tower (Балабанов 2011, 95-116). Although we believe that these interpretations are not sufficiently substantiated, that does not mean our denial of the cult character of the mentioned finds and the buildings which they relate to. Indicating them is also the discovered antefix which stood at the roof of such a building (T.VI: 1) (closest analogy: Микулчиќ 1982, 33, Сл. 14).

In the western part of the town square another building was discovered that could have had a cult purpose. Preserved from it are several massive quadrilateral slabs that formed its base in the shape of a square with dimensions of 5 meters (T.VI: 2). Preserved in situ are also blocks that form channels which could have served a cult purpose or for drainage of water. Assumptions have been made that it is a sacrificial altar whose roof may have rested on stone columns. The first Early Christian temple is located near this object, but not above it, which on one side suggests the aspiration for some kind of transfer of sacrality from the older cult building towards it, but on the other, the clear distancing of the

new temple from the previous pagan traditions. Speaking about the sacral character of this building is also the fact that no other buildings were constructed above it in the following periods, as well as the discovery (as an accidental find) of a part of votive slab from the Roman period with a relief of Hera and Zeus, of which the figure of the second one is not preserved (T.VI: 3) (Балабанов 2011, 117-124). Belonging to the same period is another of the ceramic relief plaques with a deep imprint of a diagonal cross showing an arrangement of various animals on its arms (fish, shells, peacock, lamb, dog and others) as well as two rectangular fields between the arms, also with imprints of animals (T.VI: 6). K. Balabanov dates this find to the end of the 3rd or the first decades of the 4th century, while also stating that it is an "icon dedicated to the First-Called Apostle St. Andrew" (Балабанов 2011, 135-151). Not excluding the mentioned interpretation, we have also pointed out the possibility of this object belonging to some non-Christian cult, having in mind that the cross in general, including the diagonal one,

was an important symbol within the pagan traditions of the Balkan Peninsula and the Near East (Чаусидис 2017, 461). We conclude this overview of pre-Christian cult objects with a recently discovered and still unpublished sculpture that most probably depicts Aphrodite with Eros (*Презентирани* 2019).

This article covered only a few of the most remarkable examples of longstanding sanctuaries from North Macedonia on whose territory many more such examples can be identified. The continued duration of cult sites through several epochs can be also noticed in the neighboring Balkan regions. One of the most illustrative of such examples is certainly the Athenian "Acropolis" where cult activities can be observed in the Mycenaean period (a palace in which usually there were also cult objects), in Ancient Greece and Rome (temple of Athena and of other deities), in the Early Christian and Byzantine period (adaptation of the "Parthenon" as a basilica i.e. temple of the Virgin Mary), as well as in the Ottoman period (a mosque at the site of the Byzantine church built in the naos of the "Parthenon").

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