



RECENT ROCK ART DISCOVERIES IN EVROS REGION IN NORTHERN GREECE

Giorgos Iliadis & Stamatis Palazis***

ABSTRACT - The current communication aims to present a preliminary review of the rock art in the region of Evros during 2012. The already known rock art site in the area is Goniko near the small village of Roussa in Soufli Prefecture. After field study and surface investigation, at least two other major archeological sites were discovered: the first one is located between the villages Mandra and Protoklisi in Soufli Prefecture and the second one in a rock shelter near the village Petrota and close to the borders with Bulgaria in Orestiada Prefecture. During the field study more sites were noted, but with single rocks. The representation of female anthropomorphic motifs and the depictions of fertility symbols (vulvas) which synthesize the decoration in almost every rock we located are characteristic. The technique of engraving varies from scratching (filiform) to direct pecking and polishing. This is the first time that rock art has been identified in northern Greece with this theme. At the sites already studied such as Philippi and Mt Pangaion, the rock art depictions are mainly warriors and horsemen. The authors support the importance of this discovery not only because it constitutes a new subject for the study of rock art in Greece but also because it testifies a recently unknown part of the cultural identity of our ancestors.

RIASSUNTO - La presente comunicazione è finalizzata a presentare una rassegna preliminare dell'arte rupestre della regione di Evros aggiornata al 2012. Il sito di arte rupestre precedentemente noto nell'area è Goniko, nei pressi del villaggio di Roussa, Prefettura di Soufli. A seguito di studi sul campo e di indagini di superficie, almeno due ulteriori siti archeologici importanti sono stati scoperti: il primo localizzato tra i villaggi di Mandra e Protoklisi, nella Prefettura di Soufli, e il secondo in un riparo roccioso nei pressi del villaggio di Petrota, vicino al confine con la Bulgaria nella Prefettura di Orestiada. Nel corso dell'indagine sul campo sono stati individuati altri siti ma con singole rocce. Caratteristiche sono la rappresentazione di motivi antropomorfi femminili e i disegni di simboli di fertilità (vulve), che sintetizzano la decorazione nella quasi totalità delle rocce che abbiamo individuato. La tecnica di incisione varia dal graffiare (filiformi) al picchiare direttamente e levigare. Si tratta della prima volta che espressioni di arte rupestre con tale tematica vengono individuate nella Grecia settentrionale, dal momento che nei siti precedentemente studiati, come Philippi e il Monte Pangeo, le immagini rupestri erano prevalentemente costituite da guerrieri e personaggi a cavallo. Gli autori affermano l'importanza di tale scoperta non solo in quanto essa costituisce un nuovo soggetto di studio dell'arte rupestre in Grecia, ma anche perché testimonia una parte dell'identità culturale dei nostri antenati ignota fino a tempi recenti.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The present paper constitutes a preliminary research of rock art sites located in the region of north-eastern Greece and specifically in Thrace, in the north of the Prefecture of Evros (Fig. 1). The best known place with rock art in this region was until today the site of Goniko¹ (Fig. 2), situated not far from Roussa village in the municipality of Soufli. The engraved motifs depicted on the schist rocks of the region date back to the Late Bronze Age or the Early Iron Age (1100–900 BC). At the same place and around Chilia hill there have also been found megalithic monuments and tombs made of schist plates dating to the early Iron Age (900–800 BC).

Starting from the site of Goniko, we carried out research tracking new rock art sites in autumn 2012. The result of the research was locating mainly two geographical zones. The first includes the region Roussa–M. Dereio–Protoklisi–Mandra, up to 5 km north of the city of Soufli, whereas the second one is focused around Petrota village in the Municipality of Orestiada on the Bulgarian border. We located three archeological sites in the first zone, and not far from the village Mandra, which is south of Agriani village. In the second zone and south of Petrota we located a rock shelter with engraved representations in woodland (Fig. 3a, b), as well as a trapeze-shaped rock with cup marks and various engravings (Fig. 4).

In the present paper we present the findings from Mandra. Our goal is to continue our research in the summer of 2013, hoping that new elements will come up to complete the picture of rock art of Evros.

* Ph.D candidate in Quaternary: Materials & Cultures (UTAD), Instituto Terra e Memoria, Grupo “Quaternário e Pré-Histórica” do Centro de Geociências (uID73 – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia), Thessaloniki, Greece

** Researcher – Mountain Guide, Didymoteicho, Greece

¹ The rock art of Roussa was studied and published by the archeologist Triantafyllos Diamantis. A copy of the rock art panel is kept and exhibited at the archeological museum of Komotini.



MANDRA ROCK ART: FRAGKA STREAM SITE

At a distance of 75 km north of the estuaries of the Evros River and at the spot where the river joins Potistiko stream, which is a toponym of this area, a narrow valley is formed extending at a length of 8 km towards the eastern edge of the Rodopi mountains. At the beginning of this valley is Mandra village and at the end the village of Protokklisi. In the middle we find the village of Agriani. About 2 km south of the village of Agriani and behind the hill called Arapis there extends a small valley of 50 acres, where the access is rather difficult (Fig. 5a, b). At the eastern side of the valley and on the right bank of the stream at an altitude of 72 m, we found three rocky elevations with south orientation and an east–west direction, of which two have engraved representations. This location is situated close to the stream bed, where alluvial sediments are observed due to former stream overflows. Some rocks were probably shifted due to the last overflows. However, according to the people of the region there has been no shifting of the rocks for the last 60–70 years at least.

The dominant theme of the rock art is mainly representations of fertility symbols (vulvas). The second rock is particularly interesting (Fig. 6a, b). Along with the fertility symbols, some of which are framed by beams thus referring to representations of solar motifs, we also found at its south-western part representations of scales (Fig. 7) framed with inner vertical thin engravings and anthropomorphic motifs.

At the same time and along the entire surface of the rock we found motifs referring to the labrys and asterisks. We excavated the area around the rock at a 50 cm depth in order to record and study the visible rock art. The whole procedure brought the scenes with the scales to light. At the same depth and around the rock we also found a 7 cm thick layer of coal. The southern part of the rock is missing. A possible explanation is that this part was detached due to the fire.

The engraving technique of these motifs results from direct pecking, whereas we very often come across the technique of scratching (filiform engraving). The first rock seems to have been subjected to later interventions. That is explained on one hand by the different ways of engraving, and on the other hand by the themes of the motifs. It should be noted that the representations of fertility and anthropomorphic figures are products of thin and strict engraving and are covered by representations of human hands, animal footprints and other abstract strokes, which have deep and uneven engravings.²

MANDRA ROCK ART: GRAMMENI PETRA SITE

At a distance of 3 km south-west of the village of Mandra and 1 km south-east of the location called *Fragka stream* and in a forested area with oaks, we found at the ridge of a hill called Grammeni Petra, a stone block occupying a circular area with a diameter of 5.5 m and 155 m altitude above sea level (Fig. 8). The rock has engravings on its entire surface. On the perimeter of the rock we observed rock fragments with rock art that were probably detached from the main body.³ According to the people and woodsmen of the region, this rock has been in the same state for about half a century.⁴ The biggest part of the surface of the rock is covered by moss and lichen, thus hindering the observation of many shapes. However, in order to record, imprint and collect the data, we cleaned the south-western part of the rock that was covered only by alluvium due to the construction of the forest road in the 1970s. After the cleaning, a panel with representations on a clean patina came to light. The themes of the rock art are similar to those of the sites Petrota–Fragka. Among all the themes those that are most distinguished are the female anthropomorphic figure followed by another smaller one, the oval shapes, the anthropomorphic motifs with compositions of fertility symbols and tree bodies, the representations of plants and abstract thin engravings (Fig. 9a, b). The engraving technique varies from elaborate deep pecking and polishing (especially on the spots where the fertility symbols are depicted) to thin surface engravings (in the representations of plants and anthropomorphic motifs).

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In order to formulate the first safe conclusions concerning the rock art of Thrace, we must first define the concepts of place, time and cause in the region before Homer's time. We must also approach subjects that refer to myths and worship in that region. Furthermore, we will be able to generate significant information by studying the recorded representations and understanding maybe a small part of their symbolic extensions.

The territorial boundaries of Thrace before Homer

The south boundaries of ancient Thrace, as described by the historian Kourtidis, were the Pineios River, the Aegean Sea and the Hellespont. On the west side they extended up to Mount Vermio, whereas on the east was

2 Rock 1 of Fragka has not yet been recorded. Some parts of the rock have been subjected to interventions of illegal excavations.

3 Those fragments are decorated with labrys, fertility symbols and anthropomorphic motifs like the rest of the surfaces.

4 The older people of the region have described to us that already during 1960(60s) they were coming across fragments when passing through that area. Most detachments were due to natural causes and not human intervention.

Euxeinos Pontos. The north boundaries were defined by the Danube and its estuaries. Evros is the principal river of Thrace and comprises two big branches, the main Evros river and Arda river. According to the ancient geographer Strabo, the largest river of ancient Thrace was Istros, that is today's Danube, that springs from the western countries of Europe.

Myth and worship in ancient Thrace

The religion of the Thracians and the worship of their gods was during the time of Homer (800 BC) similar to that of the Greeks. Actually during the Trojan war the Olympian gods took either the side of the Greeks or the side of the Trojans, who belonged to tribes relative to the Thracians. The prevailing worship in Thrace was that of Dionysus, god of wine and fertility. Homer is aware of the worship of Dionysus in Thrace and actually mentions that the king of the land of the Hedones,⁵ Lycurgus, chases the god away to the sea and to the goddess Thetis. A second reason that relates to the region and the myth of Dionysus is the fertile land of Thrace, extending from its coasts to the inland areas. According to the myth, Dionysus introduced the grapevine to Thrace and gave to the people his greatest gift, wine.

According to the myth, Thrace was the place of birth of the mythical musician, poet and mystic Orpheus (Orpheus). We meet Orphism, a system of ideas and practices, in ancient Greece and Thrace already from the sixth century BC. According to Orphism, the soul is described as immortal and divine, doomed, however, in eternal circles through metempsychosis. The mystic of Orphism can assure his release from this eternal circle and come into touch with the gods by adopting an ascetic way of life and by passing through the initiation stages.

First approach: interpretation of rock art of the region

In the area from Soufli to Petrota and at a range of 90 square km, the sort of rocks we found during our research belong to the category of schist impurities. This rock is easy to engrave, unlike the rock art on hard marble found in eastern Macedonia 200 km west of today's research location.

The theme of the motifs' art examined in North Evros constitutes a thematic unit where fertility and symbolic representations are the main themes, in contrast to the themes that one comes across in the rock art of eastern Macedonia (Pangaion Mountain, Philippi and the Aggitis gorge), where the theme of a warrior-horse-rider prevails.

Furthermore, we observed no representation of animals or other elements characterizing rock art. Finally, it must be noted that in these locations (Fragka stream, Grammeni Petra) no ceramic or other archeological find was revealed.⁶

Decoding religious myths and beliefs through rock art: weighing of souls

The following observations arise from the study of the rock art at Fragka stream and Grammeni Petra, which will help us in the chronological and conceptual approach of the representations:

1. The relation of the anthropomorphic motifs to the scales and fertility symbols (Fragka site, rock 2) indicates the eschatological dimension of the narration. The scene leads us to the supposition that it concerns a belief in the term 'weighing of souls' or *psychostasia* (in Greek: ψυχοστασία). This belief has to do with the weighing of souls on scales after death. The idea of weighing souls was already known from the 16th century BC in the Mycenaean world and this arises from the findings in the arched tombs exhibited at the National Archeological Museum⁷ (Fig. 10). It should also be noted that Mycenaean trade extended from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and the Carpathian Mountains⁸ already from the Middle to Late Bronze Age (1400–1100 BC).
2. The representations of labrys, fertility symbols, anthropomorphic motifs of women in phallus form and trees (Fragka, rocks 1–2 and Grammeni Petra) lead us to the conclusion that the rock art possibly relates to the beliefs in the mother goddess and that it worked as an open-air place of worship. After all, the worship of the mother goddess dates back to the 2nd millennium BC in the Balkans as well as around the Aegean Sea.
3. The anthropomorphic figures (extended hands and triangular base) on rock 2 at the site of Fragka have similarities to those found in Piemonte Italy in the region of Traversella and date back to the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (1200–900 BC).⁹

5 Thracian tribe that resided in the region around the estuaries of the Strymonas River.

6 During surface investigation we discovered Bronze Age pottery on the hill called Vigla, 1 km east of the site of Grammeni Petra. We must also note that the local people of Mandra refer to this place as Vigla's Vulva because it dominates the landscape where two small valleys concentrate into one, resembling a V.

7 According to ancient Egyptian religion the weighing of souls is seen as the judgement of the dead. Even the future bliss of the soul depended on the result of the weighing of the soul. In the Book of the Dead we find a description of the scene of weighing the soul, where the value of the soul of someone is weighed exactly, after his death, before the King of the Dead.

8 This arises from the Mycenaean findings of excavations in central Romania.

9 See http://www.rupestre.net/western_alps_records/valchiusella_pera_cros.htm

4. After a first assessment and taking the archeological context of the rock art of North Evros as well as the themes of the representations into account, the rock art at the sites of Fragka stream and Grammeni Petra should be chronologically placed between 1400 BC and 900 BC (Middle–Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our warmest thanks to the people of the villages of Agriani and Mandra for helping us locate several rocks in the area and also giving us information about the toponyms of the places. Some of those toponyms also present ethnographic interest in our research. Our thanks also to Mpampis Kontogiannis from the city of Soufli for his support and company.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANATI E.

2000 The rock sanctuaries of Europe, in Gods and heroes of Bronze Age Europe, 25th Council of Europe Art Exhibition, Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Athens, pp. 142-144

BARBER R.L.N.

1994 Cyclades during Bronze Age, London, Gerald Duckworth & Co

COIMBRA F.A. & ILIADIS G.

2011 The hunting scene on rock 3 from Mana, in Landscape with rock art, Arkeos 29, Tomar, pp. 83-92

DIMITRIADIS G. & ILIADIS G.

2007 An ethnological flashback on horse rider cult in open air sanctuaries in Eastern Macedonia, Greece, in Rock art in the frame of cultural heritage of humankind, XXII Valcamonica Symposium proceedings, CCSP/Unesco, Capo di Ponte, pp. 107-113

EYSTATIOU G.

1966 Thrace from the ancient times until Romans, Thessaloniki, Thrakiki Estia

GIMBUTAS M.

2001 The language of the Goddess, London, Thames & Hudson

ILIADIS G.

2007 The figure of the horseman in Philippi rock art, Master Thesis, IPT/UTAD, repositorio.utad.pt/10348/171/1/msc_giiliadis.pdf

KAKRIDIS I.

1986 Greek mythology: The Gods, Athens, Ekdotiki Athinwn

KOROMILA M.

1991 The Greeks in the Black Sea from the Bronze Age to the early twentieth century, Athens, Panorama

KOURTIDIS K.

1932 The history of Thrace from the ancient times until 46 a.D., Athens, Aleyropoulos & Sia

TRIANTAPHYLLOS D.

1980 Les monuments megalithiques en Thrace occidentale, Pul-pudera 4, pp. 145-163

THRACE

1994 General Secretariat of Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, Athens, Idea Marketing

VERMELUE E.

1972 Greece in the Bronze Age, University of Chicago



Fig. 1. Map of Greece and North Evros. The spots indicate the rock art sites of the area. A) Goniko B) Fragkas Stream C) Grammeni Petra and D) Petrota.

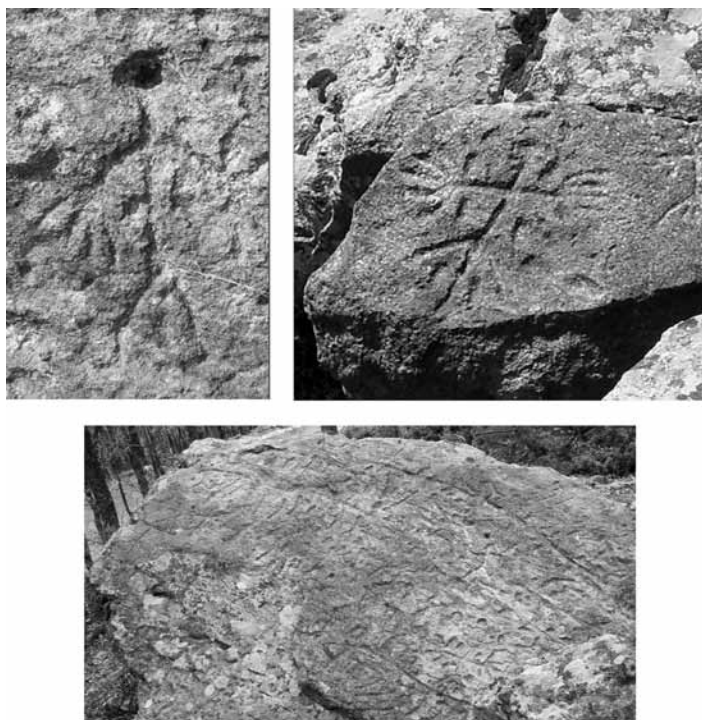


Fig. 2. Site of Goniko. Anthropomorphic figures. Photo - Stamatis Palazis.



Fig. 3a-b. A) Rock shelter near Petrota. Photo - Stamatis Palazis.
B) Theme from Petrota rock shelter. Photo - Giorgos Iliadis.



Fig. 4. Engraved surface from a hill near the rock shelter of Petrota. Photo - Stamatis Palazis.



Fig. 5a-b. A) Fragkas Stream. Panoramic view. B) Anthropomorphic figure on rock 1 associated with vulva figure on the right. Photo Stamatis Palazis.



Fig. 6a. Rock 2. Fragkas Stream. Photo - Giorgos Iliadis.

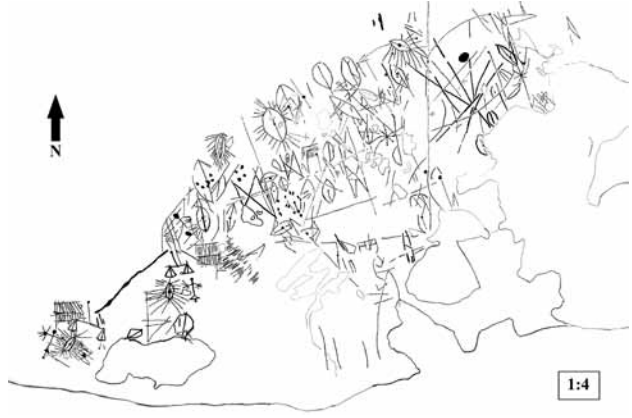


Fig. 6b. Rock 2 documentation at Fragkas Stream. Tracing - Giorgos Iliadis.



Fig. 7. Close up on scales. Rock 2, Fragkas Stream. Photo - Giorgos Iliadis.



Fig. 8. Grammeni Petra. Photo - Giorgos Iliadis.



Fig. 9a. Themes of Grammeni Petra. Photo - Giorgos Iliadis.

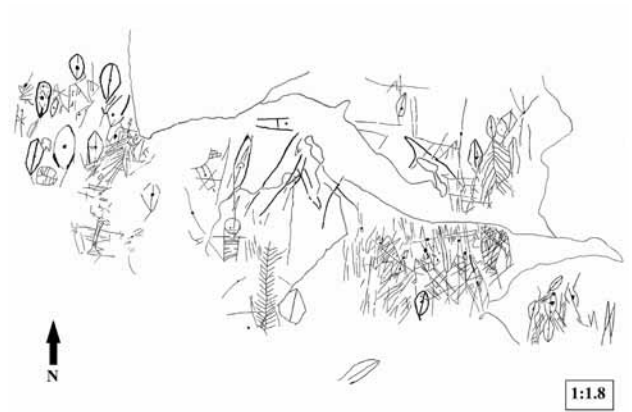


Fig. 9b. Documentation of southwestern part of Grammeni Petra. Tracing - Giorgos Iliadis.

Fig. 10. Golden scale of psychostasia from arched tomb III from Mycenae. National Museum of Archaeology.

