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ROCK-CUT CAVES WITH TWO ENTRANCES OR THE MODEL OF THE COSMOS

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In the second half of the 19th and in the very beginning of the 20th century, on the western coast of the island of Ithaca, in the northwestern end of the Polis Bay, amateur explorations were conducted in a cave that had been examined by H. Schliemann as well. An inscription from the archaic period, discovered in it already back in the 19th century, gives the names of Hera and of Athena. In addition, 30 small terra-cotta masks of Artemis were found, but in one of the publications by the head of the regular excavations, S. Benton, which started in 1930, their number is indicated as 125.

The early entries into the cave have actually disturbed the stratigraphy of the archaeological site, the intactness of the constructions in it and even its ceiling. Later excavations have demonstrated that the cave functioned from the Early Bronze Age to the Roman Age. It was a sanctuary dedicated to Hera and to Athena, then – to the Nymphs and later it became a place for worshipping the cult of Odysseus as a hero.

The disturbed stratigraphy of the site and the incomplete publications have generated many hypotheses about the early functions of the cave. It is assumed that during the Late Helladic period votive gifts were placed on a round paved platform. There is no doubt that the cave was a sanctuary since the end of the Bronze Age. The finds comprise a large quantity of votive objects, a terra-cotta sphinx dated to the geometric period and many female figurines from the archaic and classical periods. Standing and seated female figurines, as well as many masks, continued to be offered as gifts during the Hellenistic Age. Hellenistic reliefs of the Nymphs and three broken inscriptions dedicated to them have been discovered. The ceramic fragments show that vessels for drinking and for libations were used during all periods. Many fine tripods have been found in the layers with Early Iron Age ceramics until the 4th century, which characterise every sanctuary, and suggest in the concrete case that a cult of great significance was practised in the cave.¹

¹ See Antonaccio 1995: 152–155 and the cited literature about the results of the archaeological explorations.

In my opinion, until another site with more reliable archaeological evidence of Homer's "cave of the Nymphs" is found, the described one will remain the hypothetical cave sanctuary, before which the Phaiakai laid Odysseus when he was defeated by sleep. The verses giving grounds for this hypothesis are the following:

Hom. Od. 13. 102-112 Allen/Fuchs:

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,
 ἀγγόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἠεροειδές,
 ἱρὸν Νυμφάων, αἳ Νηϊάδες καλέονται.
 ἐν δὲ κρητῆρές τε καὶ ἀμφιφορῆες ἔασι
 λάϊνοι· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσουσι μέλισσαι.
 ἐν δ' ἴστοι λίθιοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε Νύμφαι
 φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι·
 ἐν δ' ὕδατ' ἀενάοντα. δύο δέ τε οἱ θύραι εἰσίν,
 αἳ μὲν πρὸς βορέαιο καταιβαταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,
 αἳ δ' αὖ πρὸς νότου εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνη
 ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἀθανάτων ὁδὸς ἐστίν.

In the translation of A.T. Murray, Homer. *The Odyssey with an English Translation*, in two volumes. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. & London, the excerpt reads:

At the head of the harbour is a long-leaved olive tree, and near it a pleasant, shadowy cave sacred to the nymphs that are called Naiads. [105] Therein are mixing bowls and jars of stone, and there, too, the bees store honey. And in the cave are long looms of stone, at which the nymphs weave webs of purple dye, a wonder to behold; and therein are also ever-flowing springs. Two doors there are to the cave, [110] one toward the North Wind, by which men go down, but that toward the South Wind is sacred, nor do men enter thereby; it is the way of the immortals.

The analysis of the verses of Book Thirteen of Homer's *Odyssey* could start with the clearly differentiated two "doors." One of them is turned to the North Wind and the people who "are going down" pass through it. The other one that is turned to the South Wind is sacred and represents the "road of the immortal" (gods – *author's note*). This text by Homer is used as the basis on which one of the earliest neo-Platonic treatises on the Cosmos was built, that of Porphyrius,² but the notion about the passage of (the souls of) the deceased through apertures in the rocks is older.³

² **Porph.** *De antro nymphaeum. Arethusa Monographs 1*. In the annexes by Лосев 2000, кн. II: 465–479 the translation of Takho-Godi is published; the same translation is published in Takho-Godi 1999; the treatise is translated into Bulgarian with notes by V. Marinov in Порфирий 2000: 87–122.

³ **Plat.** Resp. 615a-e Burnet; cp. **Porph.** *De antro nymph.* 23 about Parmenides according to note 107 in Порфирий 2000: 119; see about the fragment of Pherecydes which refers to the transition of the souls through rock doors and crevices in Fol V. 2002.

Seven not very large rock-cut caves have been documented in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains,⁴ each of which has two entrances – one for entry along the horizontal, i.e., a “door”, and a second one on the roof of the dug chamber. Defined mechanically until recently as tombs, they were cut into isolated bedrocks that rise above the terrain. Their *dromos* is not covered and is shaped more like a platform. Five of the rock-cut caves have a scaphoid shape of the chamber and two are round. The stonecutters apparently tried to dig a rounded chamber with a vaulted upper part, open to the sky. The apertures in the roof are rectangular, with rounded corners, or are ellipsoid. As can be seen from the preserved grooves, they were covered on the outside with a stone slab. The horizontal entrances, each of which has a different orientation – from southeast to southwest – were also closed with a stone slab from the outside. Libations or sacrifices were performed on the rocks with hewn caves, close or immediately next to the vertical aperture, which is evidenced by the preserved round rock-cut pits with grooves for the draining of liquids. For the time being, no such sites have been registered in Asia Minor, the Aegean Island and Hellas, although, in my opinion, they will probably be discovered by a more careful search.

Ten years ago I proposed an interpretation that is different from the funerary explanation of these seven monuments, which I characterised as rock temples for a narrow circle of individuals initiated in an early form of Thracian rituals. According to this reconstruction, the initiated in the teaching on the creation of the Cosmos saw the penetration of the sunbeam into the womb of the rock. The coupling of the rock womb, symbol of the Great Mother-Goddess, and of the beam of light, symbol of her Son-Sun, is the act of creation of the Son of the gods-*paredroi*, of the king-ruler of the *socium*.⁵ This hypothesis is based on the conclusions about the faith that has been studied and referred to by Alexander Fol as oral Thracian Orphism, which emerged in the Mediterranean region on the basis of beliefs from Western Asia and Egypt, and spread to Boeotia, Thessaly, Phocis with Delphi, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. In view of the different historical fate of Hellas and Thrace, Orphism in Hellas was transformed into a philosophical doctrine with Pythagorean roots, whereas in Thrace it was professed as oral faith-rituality. The Thracian Orphic faith-rituality functioned at two levels: popular – as mass mysterial rituals, and aristocratic – in closed societies.⁶

The archaeological excavations conducted by Dr. G. Kitov in “The Valley of the Kings” to the west of the town of Kazanluk, near the village of Starosel, Hissarya

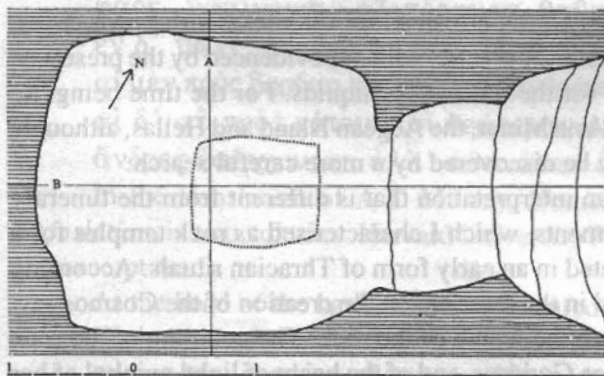
⁴ See the first publication of the sites in *Мегалитите* 1976: 83, 85, 87–89, 95–96, 98, fig. 140–143, 149–152, 154–159, 181–184, 188–189, 191–193, drawing 67–80, 99–102, 106–108, 112–114; re-interpretation in Фол В. 1993: 18–27, fig. 4–8.

⁵ Фол В. 1993: 18–27, 153–157.

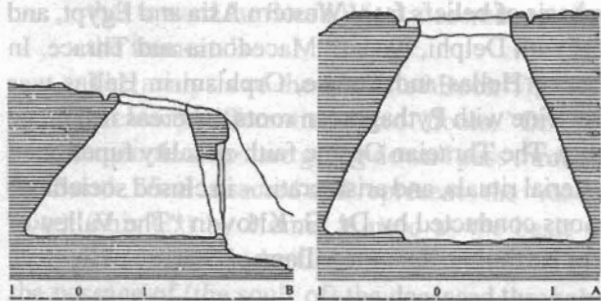
⁶ See the formulation of the oral Thracian Orphism for the first time in Фол 1986.

district, and by other archaeologists,⁷ confirmed the theory about the Thracian Orphism and, in particular, my hypothesis about the rock-cut caves-temples. Of particular significance in the concrete case is the temple below the Shoushmanets tumulus near the town of Shipka in "The Valley of the Kings", because the colossal vaulted construction repeats the plan of the rock-cut caves with aperture on the roof, the difference being that the sunbeam proposed in their interpretation is materialised by a Doric column covered with white stucco.

There is no doubt already that some of the constructions below the tumuli played the role of temples. The precise publishing of the archaeological situation in the tumular embankments in front of the entrances, in the *dromoi*, as well as in all



Plan, longitudinal-vertical section and cross-vertical section of the rock-cut cave near village of Vodenicharsko, Eastern Rhodopes



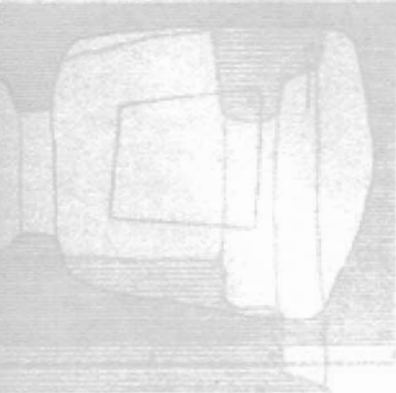
finds, will provide more opportunities to clarify the role of these monuments during the long years of their existence as places for worshipping the ancestors, *heroons*, temples for immortalisation or initiation halls.⁸

At the same time, a number of rock-cut sanctuaries have already been found on the territory of European ancient Thrace and of Paionia, some of which are very large complexes. They consist of caves, natural or hewn into rocks, stairs, platforms, thrones, altars and rock-cut sacrificial pits, niches in vertical rocks and springs.⁹ The archaeoastronomical studies of some of these sacred rock places indicate that the rituals performed in them were connected with the winter

⁷ Kitov 1995, 1997, Kitov – Dimitrova 1998–1999; Kitov 2003; see a general presentation in Kitov in: Китов – Арге 2002: 146–178.

⁸ The assumption of Tsatskhivadze 1998 that the more than ten architectural constructions below the tumuli in "The Valley of the Kings" were built by Ionian master-builders evokes doubts not only on account of their high number, but also because of the notion invested in them that differs radically from the Greek one.

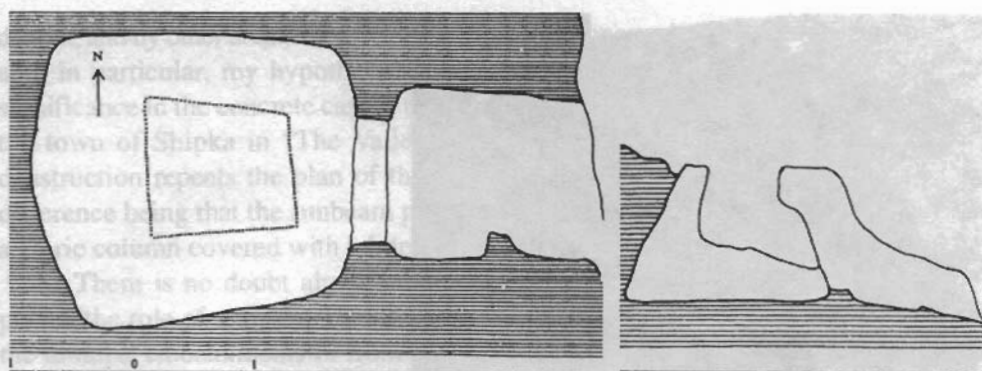
⁹ Фол В. 2000.



The horizontal entrance of the rock-cut cave near village of Vodenicharsko, Eastern Rhodopes.

The aperture of the roof (vertical entrance) of the of the rock-cut cave near village of Vodenicharsko, Eastern Rhodopes. At the left – the sacrificial rock-cut pit on the top of the bedrock.





Plan and longitudinal-vertical section of the second rock-cut cave near village of Vodenicharsko, Eastern Rhodopes

and summer solstice and equinoxes, hence they probably played the role of observatories as well.¹⁰ According to the ceramic material discovered in some archaeological drilling excavations, it is assumed that some of the sanctuaries functioned from the Late Chalcolithic Age onward. The hiatuses of life in them are not yet clear, although rituals have been attested in these places both during the Late Antiquity and during the Early Middle Ages, when churches or chapels were built in some places.

It is interesting in the concrete case that many of the rock-cut archaeological sites and caves correspond to a high degree with the Neo-Platonic construction of the Cosmos. The Orphic-Pythagorean interpretation of its symbols, in the words of A. F. Losev,¹¹ is literally breathing from the entire work *The Cave of the Nymphs* by Porphyrius. In his analysis on that treatise, A. F. Losev¹² reaches the conclusion that the mythology of Porphyrius is a magnificent illustration of the ancient mythological and artistic traditions. They are typical of the archaic Greek thinking, they operate with the most ancient symbols of early Greek culture, outlining typically Greek phenomena, but mysterious and esoteric.¹³ A. F. Losev points out that Porphyrius is not an exception in his attempts to restore the antiquity, conversely – the phenomenon is typical of scholars, writers and poets of that epoch, who were striving to oppose the growing role of Christianity by reviving the pagan antiquity. Although that antiquity was irrevocably gone and could never come back, according to A. F. Losev, the system of images underlying the earlier mythopoietic thinking never died in the Greek tradition.¹⁴

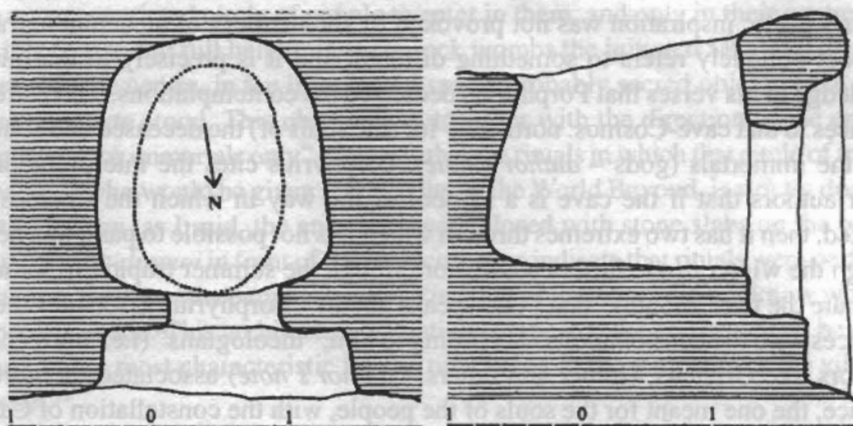
¹⁰ Radoslavova – Stoev 1989; Stoev – Varbanova 1994, 1996; Muglova – Stoev 1996; Croeb et al. 2001.

¹¹ Losev 2000, кн. I: 118.

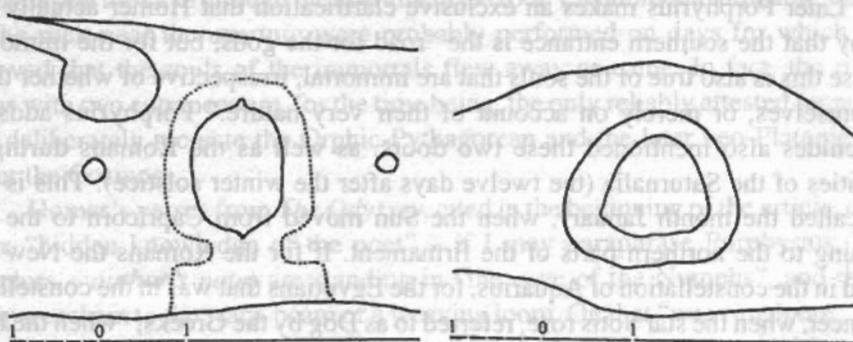
¹² Losev 2000, кн. I: 115–135.

¹³ Losev 2000, кн. I: 134–135.

¹⁴ Losev 2000, кн. I: 134; by Greek tradition Losev means in the concrete case the folkloric tradition of the contemporary Greeks.



Plan and longitudinal-vertical section of the rock-cut cave near village of Gorni Veslec, Eastern Rhodopes



Drawings of the aperture of the roof (vertical entrance) and sacrificial pit on the top of the bedrock and horizontal entrance of the rock-cut cave near village of Gorni Veslec, Eastern Rhodopes

The numerous rock-cut and cave sanctuaries in Thrace and Paionia did not undergo the architectural changes found in the Greek sanctuaries usually in the second half of the 8th and the beginning of the 7th century BC, when the phenomena of *synoikismos* were manifested and the formation of the *poleis* started. The general finding for Thrace and Paionia is valid even for Kabyle, where the rock sanctuary on the top of the hill¹⁵ seems to have played the role of an integration centre, where the Acropolis was built and subsequently below it the city as well.

The cave, as Porphyrus points out, was associated since the remotest antiquity with the Cosmos,¹⁶ and our ancestors dedicated caves to the gods before the temples. Porphyrus does not refer to a concrete cave. He starts his analysis by declaring that

¹⁵ Stoev – Varbanova 1994.

¹⁶ Йоцев 2000, кн. I: 125 sq. complements with sources the interpretations of Porph. *De antro nymph.* 20–27, adduced in the text.

Homer's poetic inspiration was not provoked by the memory of an actual narrative. The poet obliquely refers to something different and it is precisely to that hidden knowledge in his verses that Porphyrius dedicated his contemplations. There are two entrances to that cave-Cosmos: northern – for (the souls of) the deceased and southern – for the immortals (gods – *author's note*). Porphyrius cites the interpretations of earlier authors that if the cave is a symbol of the way in which the Cosmos was depicted, then it has two extremes through which it is not possible to pass, i.e., neither through the winter tropic further south, nor through the summer tropic further north. These are the two “mouths” that Plato speaks about.¹⁷ Porphyrius associates the two entrances with the constellations. According to him, “theologians” (i.e., the teachers-initiators like Orpheus, Homer and others – *author's note*) associated the northern entrance, the one meant for the souls of the people, with the constellation of Cancer, which is “descending downwards, and the southern one – with the constellation of Capricorn that is leading upwards and through which the souls are coming back.”

Later Porphyrius makes an exclusive clarification that Homer actually does not say that the southern entrance is the “road for the gods, but for the immortals, because this is also true of the souls that are immortal, irrespective of whether that is in themselves, or merely on account of their very nature.” Porphyrius adds that Parmenides also mentioned these two doors, as well as the Romans during the festivities of the Saturnalia (the twelve days after the winter solstice). This is why, they called the month January, when the Sun moved from Capricorn to the east, returning to the northern parts of the firmament. If for the Romans the New Year started in the constellation of Aquarius, for the Egyptians that was in the constellation of Cancer, when the star Sotis rose, referred to as Dog by the Greeks, “when the being in the Cosmos started.” Therefore, Porphyrius claims, Homer indicated these doors in the southern and northern directions in the sky, and not east and west, nor in the area of the equinoxes (i.e., the constellations of Aries and Libra), which were preferred by the god Mithra. The South was reserved for the gods, Porphyrius says, and when noon comes, curtains are dropped at the entrances of the temples and no one enters in the sanctuaries until the Sun-God is inclined to the south, because that is the entrance for the immortals. According to Porphyrius, the South and the noon are symbolically linked with the entrance and hence the Pythagorean and Egyptian sages forbade any talking at the doorstep. The door was sacred.

Let us recall that the horizontal entry into the rock-cut caves with two entrances is always turned to the south, with a possible deviation to the east or west. The entrances to all constructions below the tumuli, irrespective of whether they are tombs, heroons or temples, have the same direction.¹⁸ The dimensions of the rock-cut chambers allow

¹⁷ See note 3.

¹⁸ Probably if it would be possible to conduct archaeoastronomical studies of these sites, very interesting results would be obtained.

only a very restricted circle of people to enter in them, and only in their centre it was possible to stand in full height. In these rock wombs the initiated sat along the walls, whereas in the centre, in the illuminated space, probably sacred objects were placed or the neophyte stood. This observation, together with the direction of the entrance designated "for immortals only", suggests that the rituals in which that circle of initiated individuals who would be given immortality in the World Beyond, is strictly doctrinal. For this reason, as I said, the entrances were closed with stone slabs on the outside. The platforms-*dromoi* in front of the rock-cut caves indicate that rituals were performed on them as well, but the people standing "in front of the door" did not know what was happening inside. This architectural situation is repeated the constructions below the tumuli, being most characteristic for the time being in the temple near the village of Starosel.¹⁹

Bearing in mind the analysis of Porphyrius, it would be important to find out with archaeoastronomical studies what constellation could be observed by the people sitting inside the cave through the aperture in the roof. Libations and probable sacrifices on the rock near the aperture were probably performed on days for which it was believed that the souls of the immortals flew away or came. In fact, the rock-cut caves with two entrances are, for the time being, the only reliably attested monuments that deliberately recreate the Orphic-Pythagorean and the later neo-Platonic vision about the Cosmos.

Homer's verses from *The Odyssey*, cited in the beginning of the article, contain more "hidden knowledge of the poet" – if I may paraphrase Porphyrius. Stones (menhirs – *author's note*) are standing in "the cave of the Nymphs", and the poet compares them to the warp-beam of a weaving loom. On that "weaving loom", i.e., in the purely rock-megalithic sacred environment, the Nymphs wove a cloak/cover/veil of sea purple, i.e., dyed with a dye extracted from the purple sea-shells. The red head-cover/shroud/cloak was the typical Orphic ritual garment. It has been attested in the Samothracian mysteries as one of the two key attributes of the Great Mother-Goddess. Odysseus himself, his head covered with a red veil, walked into the Samothracian sanctuary. The veil/shroud/cloak is also known from the Orphic *Argonautica*, in which Orpheus, wearing such a garment, performed the purifying ritual to mollify Artemis who had to let the Argonauts into the sacred part of the oak-tree with the Golden Fleece. Homer's excerpt contains yet another exceptional point of clarification: the Nymphs inhabited the cave together with the bees gathering honey in the rock pits. The bees were the priestesses of the Great Mother-Goddess already in Pindar's mythology of Delphi.²⁰ The Nymphs, the bees and the priestesses are different names

¹⁹ Китов 2003; Фол В. 2003.

²⁰ The data on the beehive-like temple in Delphi, the priestesses-bees of the Great Goddess, the colour of the cloak and its function in the Orphic rituals, see with their interpretation in Фол 2002: 104–226.

of the same image of the Great Mother-Goddess. All this suggests that “the cave of the Nymphs” is with beehive-like shape.

The temples in the tumuli Shoushmanets near the town of Shipka and Chetinyovo near the village of Starosel, Hissarya district, are a pure abstraction of the Cosmos-womb in the Orphic-Pythagorean vision about the seventh order. This order is architecturally coded in the seven pseudo-columns in the round beehive-like chamber in the Shoushmanets tumulus and reveals the hierogamy of the Great Mother-Goddess with the Son-Sun. The doctrinal ruler-priest-Teacher was born from the sacred marriage symbolised by the beehive-like cave womb and by the white column piercing it in the centre. Ten pseudo-columns were shaped along each wall in the beehive-like chamber of the temple near Starosel. This is the architectural coding of the tenth order, in which the doctrinal king-priest-Teacher crossed to the world Beyond, i.e., became immortal.²¹

These “beehive-like caves” from the middle of the 1st millennium BC onward were closed with “Sun doors”²² in the literal sense of the word, because Suns are depicted in relief on the cassetted stone doors of the temples. According to Porphyrius, these doors designated the constellations of Cancer and Capricorn, because the Sun in its journey came and stopped by them. The two constellations are the limits of the Milky Way, in which, he says, citing Pythagoras, the souls gathered. Hence libations with milk and honey were performed for the deceased. Alexander Fol spoke metaphorically of the transition from the mountain rock-cut cave temples to the constructions below the tumuli as “descent of Sabazios from the mountain.”²³ Probably that transition took place in the 6th-5th century BC, because many of the constructions below the tumuli have been dated to the late 5th – beginning of the 4th century BC.

²¹ Фол 2002: 217–218, 229–231.

²² *Hom. Od.* 24.11–14 about the White Cliff, Leukas, in the ocean, through whose “Sun gates” the souls passed on their way to the nether world.

²³ Фол 1994: 256–264.

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