

## GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE MAIN MEGALITHIC AND OTHER ANCIENT ROCKY CULT MONUMENTS IN BULGARIA

**Abstract:** The proposed article presents the distribution of the most important and most attractive megalithic and rock monuments in Bulgaria. It is part of a study devoted to the geographic (territorial) distribution of the main immovable cultural and historical objects of this type, which are of interest for the development of tourism in Bulgaria. Depending on their relative spatial proximity, they are grouped into territorial entities defined by the author, called cultural and historical tourist localizations.

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## Introduction

As a result of its crossroad geographic situation, as a shortest way and “bridge” between Europe and Asia, the Balkan Peninsula has been inhabited since antiquity. In prehistoric times, the first centers of culture have arisen here, and later we have the brilliant examples of Ancient Greece and the Thracian civilization.

As one of the oldest settled parts of the European continent, on the territory of present-day Bulgaria have emerged cultures and civilizations that have made a significant contribution to the development of European and world civilization. All of them, regardless of their today's assessment, have objectively left numerous and varied traces, which are of interest not only to specialists but also attract many tourists. However, the time has been merciless to the created millennia ago, but nevertheless numerous of valuable cultural and historical monuments and artefacts preserved to one degree or another have remained until today. A number of them are already included in tourist turnover, and among other types of tourism, the exploration of these monuments and historical sites should be given higher priority, but already offered as cultural and historical packages of services. This can be done both through cultural and historical tourism and in combination with other types of tourism.

## Materials and Methods

At historical times, when the cultural and historical remains of the different civilizations were discovered and documented and relatively accurate dated, it is already possible to relate them to each of the historical epochs, as well as to trace the influences on the later created monuments of individual peoples and cultures. These monuments represent a tremendous cultural and historical heritage, whereby historians, archaeologists and other specialists reconstruct long

gone ages. This allows us to build basic ideas for different aspects of the life of the respective societies. The past historical reality represents an indisputable interest for a considerable number of contemporaries, forming the contingent of lovers of cultural and historical tourism. In a sense, this type of tourism is elite tourism, as it attracts people with higher education and more specific interests. The satisfaction of certain cultural and historical interests is part of the cultural horizon of these tourists. Therefore, the science of tourism is closely connected with the historical science, which is also due to the fact that apart from the results of the archaeological researches, it is also necessary to consider the geographical parameters of the location of the historical sites - both now and in the age they were created. Hence, the relationship between tourism science and historical geography, which, according to Japanese scholar A. Kinda (2004) "is closely related to what we call culture"[1]. Cultural-historical tourism, as a phenomenon, reproduces to a certain extent a past geographic reality and has a connection with the view of the cited author that "by reconstructing the specific cultural and geographic situation in different historical sections of places and areas and explaining the essence of past geographies, historian geographers make their rich contribution to the understanding of contemporary cultural geography"[2]. Exactly this past or "reconstructed" historical-geographic reality is attractive to a large part of the tourist contingent and forms the cultural-historical resources.

In the article is proposed a concept called by the author *cultural-historical tourist localization*. It represents a group of relatively close together objects of one historical epoch. Their grouping was done using two main interconnected criteria – *territorial (geographic)* and *historical-archaeological*, i.e. according to the age in which they were created. In practice, the separated cultural-historical tourist formations can be represented as spatial structures that unite the respective objects of an era. This is a comparatively large concentration of cultural- historical objects on a defined area with small distances between them.

Apart from the conditionally separated groups of one epoch, objects from other historical periods are often found in the same place. The distinction is made for research purposes, but for their use as a tourist resource they should often be considered as a complex [3].

Examining these sites, besides the mandatory archaeological and historical approach, should also include an assessment of their attractiveness and cognitive nature with a view to their presentation and inclusion in tourist turnover. Some authors try to formulate a concept of tourist attractiveness, such as Golembki, which gives a term whose structure is not complete enough but still includes its essential elements and can be referred to immovable cultural-historical monuments. Tourist attractiveness, according to this author, includes the tourist significance of the object, the state of the environment, its protection and infrastructure accessibility to the site [4]. The objects of cultural-historical tourism are also an essential element of the cultural and historical heritage to which it draws attention (Krastev, 2003), who assumes that "the cultural heritage, according to the Council of Europe forecasts, will have an extraordinary role in the information society of 21st century" [5].

*Methodological approaches* that are used in the study are: historical-archaeological, comparative geographic and cartographic.

*The historical-archaeological approach* is among the main ones used in the study because it identifies the main sights forming the cultural and historical localizations. It enables the objects of the immovable cultural and historical heritage of tourist interest to be systematized according to the age in which they were created.

*Comparative geographic analysis* is a classic geographic approach. It makes it possible to make comparisons between the basic features and qualities of the territorial configurations and the objects included in them, depending on their geographic location with respect to each other.

## Results

**Classic megaliths.** The oldest archaeological findings discovered so far in Bulgaria, containing remains of life, economic and cultural activity, are from the prehistoric age. Among the material carriers of these traces are the megalithic facilities. Some of them retain some uncertainty concerning their accurate dating given the great remoteness over time.



**Figure 1.** Territorial distribution of the main ancient megalithic objects (three localizations).

The distribution of the most important and significant for cultural-historical tourism objects of this type is concentrated only in separate parts of the country and is presented by the author as three localizations in Fig.1. These territorial formations are in the southeastern mountainous parts of the country and are distributed as follows:

- I. Sakar Mountains;*
- II. The eastern part of the Rhodope Mountains,*
- III. Strandzha Mountain*

All three types of megaliths, called with names from still existing in Bretagne (France) Breton language (which is of Celtic origin) - menhirs, cromlechs and dolmens, are found in Bulgaria. The first species - the menhir is an elongated, roughly worked stone that is attached to the ground and resembles a column (Fig.2). The cromlech is a set of menhirs in the shape of some figures such as a circle, a rectangle, and others (Fig.3, Fig.4). The Thracian temples, for example, have always been in a "sacred space," which usually has a circular plan. The Cromlech near the village of Dolni Glavanak, Madzharovo municipality, (Fig. 3) has the shape of a circle with a diameter of about 10 m and is composed of 0.5 to 1.20 m and 1.50 m in height stone columns spaced approximately 0.9 m from each other [6]. The Cromlech near the village of Staro Zhelezare in the Eastern Rhodopes (Fig.4) has a diameter of 6.5 to 7

m. It consists of 24 stone columns (menhirs) with a height of 0.5 to 2 meters. **It has been a sanctuary and according to archaeologist Prof. G. Kitov, it has been created by the Thracian tribe Odryssae.**



**Figure 2.** Menhir at village of Ovcharovo (Sakar Mountain).



**Figure 3.** Cromlech near the village of Dolni Glavanak in the Eastern Rhodopes.



**Figure 4.** Cromlech near the village of Staro Zhelezare (Eastern Rhodopes).  
Photo: G. Kitov.

The Dolmens resemble something like a premise (a building) formed most often by four monolithic slabs covered with a fifth slab. One-chambered and two-chambered dolmens have been discovered. There are also more simple dolmens of only four slabs, including the roof [7, 8]. (Fig.5).



**Figure 5.** The largest dolmen in Bulgaria, near the village of Hlyabovo (Sakar Mountain).

Until now, science has certainly not determined what these stone structures have served for, although the most common understanding is that they have a cult function. Some of them have probably

been used for other purposes too. There are authors such as Gyurov and Rangelov (2002), who consider "that these places were facilities of a productive and economic nature", but they also assume that they are probably "places of a religious-ritual character" [9]. Their other peculiarity is that due to the remoteness in the time we cannot determine with certainty which peoples had created them. That, however, does not in any way reduce their historical value and significance. Some of these monuments in our lands are believed to have been created by the Thracians [10, 11]. But there are other views on this issue, according to which the Thracians have inherited the megalithic culture from tribes that have had lived earlier in our lands, and have not created it (Zaharieva, 2000) [12]. According to the mentioned author, these were tribes of Pelasgians who, according to her, inhabited both mainland and island Greece and the lands of Ancient Thrace before being settled by Thracian tribes. The dispute over the origin of these monuments is still ongoing, moreover in 2003 year, near the Ropotamo Reserve, on the southern Black Sea coast archaeologists have discovered the Megalithic Complex Beglik Tash, whose age is estimated at about 15,000 years. This prehistoric sanctuary is a circle of huge stones located on a rocky surface in the middle of a large meadow with a total area of nearly 12 hectares. Multi-tonne stones, which are skillfully crafted by technological means unknown to modern science, are collected and placed in such a way as to form a clock, a calendar and an observatory. That's why Beglik Tash is often called the Bulgarian Stonehenge. In an unknown way, the stones are lifted to the top of the hill, and along with the stone slabs and blocks form incredible shapes. In the rocks there are cut circles, carvings are made and cross openings, which are supposed to form a calendar, because during the solstice and the equinox the light beam penetrates between two huge stones that stand side by side. One of the main natural anomalies of this place is the surprisingly clear sky throughout the summer months, making it ideal for an observatory. The main question remains - who invented and built this complex at the very beginning? The Thracians subsequently used it at their discretion and according to their beliefs. Later, at the end of the third century AD the sanctuary was seriously destroyed and the archaeologists opined that it was happened after coming of the first Christian missionaries.

During the Thracian period of our history - the first historically well-established civilization on the Bulgarian lands, the region of the Eastern Rhodopes was called "the land of the rock people". In general, the megalithic complexes there are dated from the end of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages until the 6th century BC. They are found in two distant parts of the mountain - to the northeast and to the south. According to archaeologist Ovcharov (2006) at the beginning of the 20th century, megaliths were more numerous than now. Only dolmens were about 600. But later most of them were destroyed for the needs of construction. Better are preserved the dolmens from the southern group, exceeding 100, dated from the Early Iron Age (1200-900 BC) and distributed on both sides of the modern Bulgarian-Greek border [13]. These are facilities made up of huge stone blocks and slates. In the Eastern Rhodopes they are most often one-chambered with open antechamber and a small archwise entrance. Particularly monumental are the well-preserved dolmens in the villages of Ostar kamak (Harmanli municipality) and Chernichevo (Krumovgrad municipality). The "Civilization of rock people" developed in these places is a culture for which there is much to be done to clarify and explore.

**Rock shrines, shrines in caves and rock niches.** In Bulgarian archeology it is believed that the sanctuaries carved in the rocks, caves and rock niches from the period of Thracian civilization should also be perceived as megalithic objects because of the rock material from which the classic megaliths were created too.

The Thracians (in ancient Greek: Θραῖκες, in latin: Thraci) were a group of numerous Indo-European tribes inhabiting between the second half of 5th millennium BC and the 6th century AD the vast areas of the Balkan Peninsula and Northwest Asia Minor. This is approximately the modern territories of Bulgaria, the lands south of the Carpathians, northern and northeast Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova and northwest Turkey (Popov, Nikolov, 2001) [14]. It is

accepted as proven that these tribal communities are the oldest inhabitants in this part of Europe and the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, whose culture has many artifacts left.

The biggest concentrations of the monumental immovable Thracian sites, among which are the rock sanctuaries, sanctuaries in caves and rock niches, as well as the stone tombs, are shown on Fig. 6 as three localizations.



**Figure 6.** Main localizations of the rock sanctuaries, sanctuaries in caves, rock niches and Thracian tombs.

The regionalization of these immovable cultural-historical sites shows their geographic location and gives a spatial idea of them.

The most extensive is the localization, covering the mountains of the Eastern Rhodopes and Sakar (II localization), followed by the localizations in north-east Bulgaria (III localization) and in central Bulgaria (I localization). The latter one is so called by archaeologist Georgi Kitov – Valley of the Thracian Kings. A smaller part of such monuments are also found in the Strandzha Mountain (Southeastern Bulgaria) and the Eastern Stara Planina Mountain.

Very original monuments of the megalithic culture are also the *rock tombs*. Up to 50 such facilities have been registered so far, mainly concentrated in the central parts of the Eastern Rhodopes. Some of them are carved into the rock massif, and the entrance to the interior has been covered with a slab. Others are shaped as artificial caves and have a large burial chamber in a square or oval plan. They are situated horizontally, have a small antechamber, and the entrance has been closed with a massive stone slab running in a groove. Very interesting is the architecture of the rock tombs found near the village of Pchelari – Stambolovo municipality, village of Ovchevo – Dzhebel municipality, village of Tatul – Momchilgrad municipality (Fig.7) and the surroundings of Zlatograd.



**Figure 7.** The sarcophagus near the village of Tatul (Eastern Rhodopes).



**Figure 8.** Megalith site near the village of Buzovgrad in the Valley of the Thracian kings. (It also may have been an astronomical observatory).

These are cut into the rocks cult objects, usually with domed shape, in which the stone bed was carved for the noble deceased. They were have been tombs of Thracian tribal chieftains-priests. Their elliptical entrance has ever been closed by a massive slab. The surroundings of the city of Zlatograd are the most extreme western point of the characteristic Thracian "rocky civilization". To the west of them fellings in rocks are no longer found in the mountain.

Unfortunately, the tombs have been robbed still in ancient times. Nowadays most of them are not very well known and there is not enough good transport access to them. An exception to this rule is already made by the archaeological complex of the ancient and medieval town of Perperikon, which is the sacred rock town of the Thracians and the most extensive megalith on the Balkans (Fig. 9); the rock sanctuary of Orpheus near Tatul village (Momchilgrad municipality) and the Thracian tomb near Aleksandrovo village (Haskovo municipality).





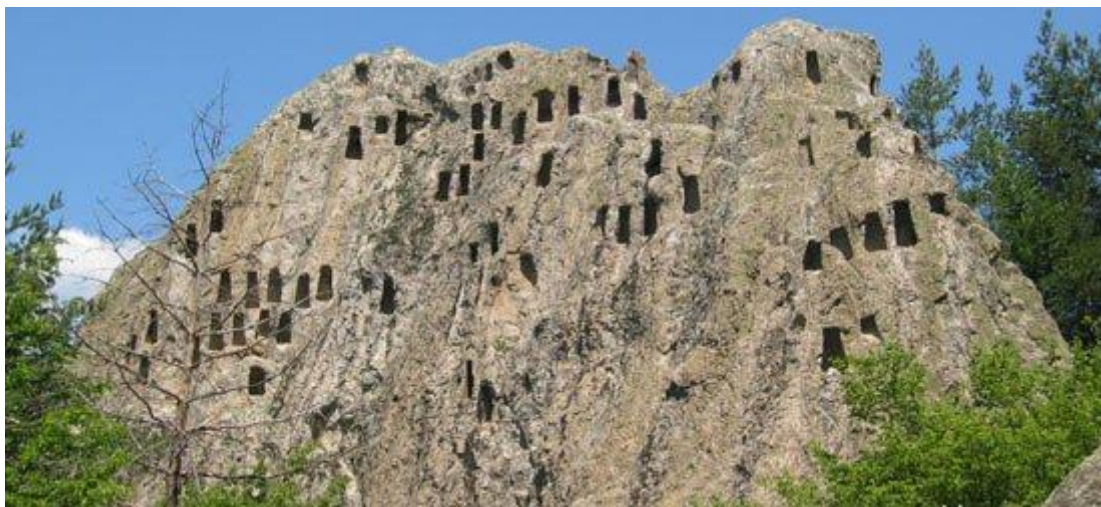
**Figure 9.** A part of archaeological rock complex Perperikon.

The construction of the ancient cult center Perperikon (Kardhzali Municipality), which was cut entirely in the rocks, dates back to the XIII-XII century BC. It is situated on a hill with an altitude of 470 m above the valley of the Perpere River, near the town of Kardhzali. Scientists suggest that this is the ancient sanctuary with an oracle, known in antiquity, dedicated to God Dionysus. The total size of the complex is about 12 square kilometers. It represents a combination of uniqueness in archaeological, historical, natural and multi-religious aspects. Another very valuable archaeological find from the time of the Thracians, and even before them, is the sanctuary near the village of Tatul, which is supposed to be the heroon of Orpheus, i.e. the sepulcher of a Thracian king who was deified after his death. Until now, scientists believed that the ancient Thracians deified the rocky places, and that it was they who had this increased cult of stone, which is also associated with the cult of the sun. The result of which the stone town of Perperikon, the town-coeval of Troy and Mycenae. But from the ceramic fragments found in the sanctuary near Tatul, archaeologists conclude that the rocks were deified by humans even earlier, during the Stone-Copper Age (6000-3500 BC). In 2007, in the central part of the sacred space, about 1.5 meters deep, a team of archaeologists under the guidance of Professor Nikolay Ovcharov fall into a thick cultural layer from the prehistoric age. The Foundations Found of a large building are dated from before 6,000 years ago, that is, the late Neolithic. It is built with thick clay walls, and within it archaeologists find numerous ceramic vessels of different sizes and shapes. Obviously the earliest sanctuary here has appeared since the time when the man had just discovered the first metal. The restored historical fate of the sanctuary near Tatul fully supports the insights of Professor Ivan Venedikov that there was the heroon of Orpheus [15]. It is known from the sources that Orpheus is a Thracian but quickly became popular in ancient Greek mythology. The sanctuary continued to function throughout the whole I-st millennium BC and became a monumental architectural ensemble in the IV-III century BC. On the visible from all sides hill a white-stone temple was built. Its walls are raised with massive stone blocks placed side by side so that even the blade of a knife cannot be inserted between them. Today the building is preserved to the unique 6 m height. The sacred space is enclosed with a thick wall, similarly constructed. For ten years on the mysterious rock near the Momchilgrad village of Tatul, tens of thousands of tourists climb and it becomes one of the remarkable sites of Bulgarian cultural and

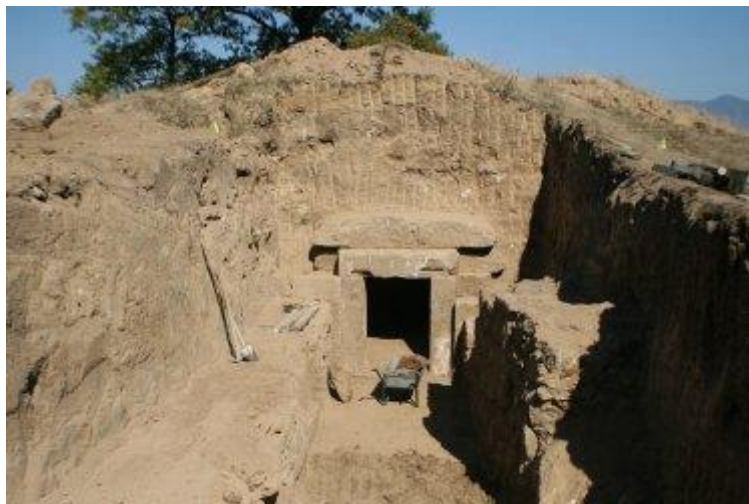
historical tourism. An interesting fact is that in Perperikon and Tatul there is a complete continuity between pagan cults and Christianity.

The Bulgarian archaeological finds from the Thracian times during the last decades have become world-wide events. The mysterious Perperikon and the mystical sanctuary near the village of Tatul are only part of the many monuments carved in the rocks along the Arda River in the Eastern Rhodopes. The rocky cave-womb near the village of Nenkovo, the rocky temple-womb next to the village of Padartsi (Kardhzali municipality) and the discovered in 2013 cave-womb near the village of Benkovski in the area of Zlatograd were temples of the Great Mother Goddess, whose cult was important to the Thracians. Initially, these caves were natural rock niches, carved and expanded by the human hand in the form of a womb, at the southern end of which an altar is situated. They are incredible facilities situated high in the mountains, in rocky and deserted localities.

Also ancient Thracians have carved thousands of rock niches. In the immediate vicinity are some of the largest and unexplainable grandiose ensembles of niches cut into the rocks in the Eastern Rhodopes (Figure 10). They are all carved at high altitude on vertical rocks, seen from afar, mostly on their sunny sides. Principally, the niches are trapezoidal with a height of 1 m and a depth of 40-50 cm. They are usually in groups of 3-4 to about 100, and up to 1500 individual units have been localized so far. There are different opinions about their specific purpose, as they are always found to be empty. The most common hypothesis is that these are facilities for burial urns - that is, some kind of necropolis. Unlike other megalithic monuments, the rock niches are not found anywhere else outside the Eastern Rhodopes. This suggests that the connection between the individual rock facilities in this area is not accidental. Their distribution is determined by the religious beliefs of the Thracians in the sacred rocks and by the natural presence of monumental stone massifs. The niches were created between XII and IV century BC.



**Figure 10.** Thracian funerary niches near the town of Ardino (Eastern Rhodopes).



**Figure 11.** Tomb in the Valley of the Thracian kings. This is just one of numerous Thracian tombs in Bulgaria.

The Thracian tombs were most often built in the 4th-3rd century BC and are made of large stones without binders. Their vault very often takes the form of an ideal semicircle, especially those in northeastern Bulgaria (localization III). The tombs in the oldest and largest sanctuary in this area, on the territory of the Sboryanovo archaeological reserve, have sliding doors placed on a lead groove. These are the first doors of this type found in the Balkans. Later, the Thracian sanctuaries in these places became the foundation for the construction of sanctuaries of other peoples with different beliefs - Proto-Bulgarians, Christians, Shiites, Sunnis, Alians, etc. All of them, however, had the same unwritten and unspoken laws of equality before God and the Universe. The intertwining of different cultures is clearly visible in the ritual practices of the people of this region even today, and the name of Sboryanovo (Congregational place) speaks eloquently about the achieved ethnic and human harmony.

Because of its uniqueness, the article presents an early medieval Bulgarian monument – Madara Horseman (Fig. 12). Madara Horseman rock relief is located 20 km east of the town of Shumen, near the village of Madara in northeastern Bulgaria. It is the only monument carved into a cliff in Europe. Presumably, that is carved in the VIII century in 23 meter high cliff. This is a life-size horseman with a lion and a dog. Below it there are inscriptions in Greek incurred by the medieval Bulgarian rulers Tervel, Kormisosh and Omurtag at VIII and early IX century AD. The monument resembles ancient Iranian rocky bas-relief. This hunting scene is depicted on the contemporary Bulgarian coins. Since 1979 Madara Horseman is on the UNESCO World Heritage list.



**Figure 12.** Madara Horseman rock bas-relief.

### **Conclusions**

These territorial formations created by the author are not just theoretically important. With the growing interest of tourists to cultural and historical sites in Bulgaria, travel agencies increasingly use these places to organize the relevant tourist routes. Such theoretical studies help to the practice of tourism in the country.

Of course, the development of tourism in Bulgaria should be in line with the global trends adopted in the "Sustainable Tourism Charter" developed by UNESCO and the "Tourism Development Program" adopted in Beijing in 2004 by UNESCO and World Tourism Organization, whose priorities require the preservation and development of the cultural and historical heritage, the traditions and customs of the local population and others. As an elitist type of tourism, the cultural and historical one can successfully be combined with another type of tourism, such as the congress, for example.

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