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THRACIAN AND PHRYGIAN ROCK-CUT TOMBS:

A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Maya Vassileva

Recent years saw a significant progress in the study of both Thracian and Phrygian monuments. New sites have been registered and preliminary published in western Phrygia: mainly in the Phrygian highlands, the territory between modern Eskişehir, Afyonkarahisar and Kütahya (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005; 2007) (Fig. 1). However, important categories of rock-cut monuments still remain understudied in both countries.

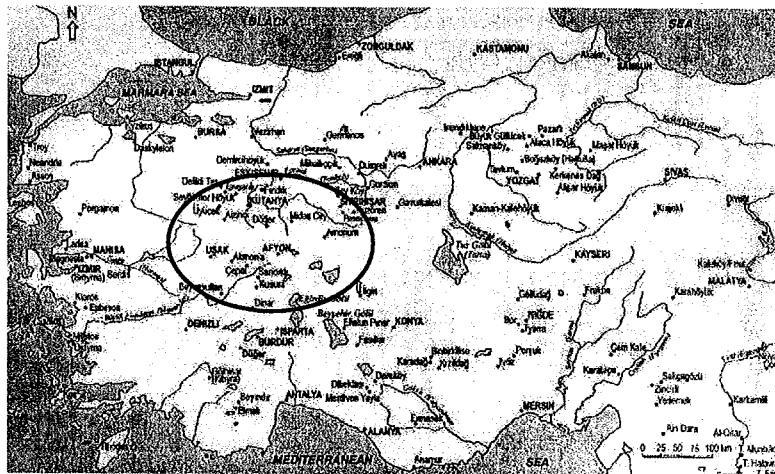


Figure 1. The Phrygian Highlands.

Phrygian rock-cut façades and features associated with them have mostly attracted the scholarly attention. A serious contribution appeared on the Phrygian rock-cut cult places and complexes by S. Berndt-Ersös (2006). Scholars started to pay attention to smaller and less attractive rock-cut monuments in Phrygian highlands: Recently tens of previously unnoticed “idols” at “Midas City” have been published (Berndt 2008). Significant progress in the interpretation of these monuments in the context of the Kybele’s cult has been made. The symbolism of the rock-cut façades was related to the decorative patterns of the other objects found in Phrygian tombs, like the pieces of wooden furniture and the bronze belts

(Simpson 2010 with her previous works quoted there; Vassileva 2001, 59-60). Despite this work done, the role of the Phrygian *Matar* in burial rites and funerary context remains less obvious. On the other hand, specialists tend to look for parallels rather to the East than to the West (a recent example: Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 222; 2007, 81 on the rock-cut discs).

During the last decades a number of Thracian rock-cut sites have been registered and studied during field surveys in addition to several peak sanctuaries (Нехризов 1999; 2004; Попов 2009; Попов, Илиев 2004; 2005; 2007). Several rock-cut tombs have been excavated that provided a good chronological reference for this type of monuments (Нехризов 1994). The famous site of Glouchite Kamani has seen five seasons of excavations that help to specify the time span in which the site had been frequented (Nekhrizov et al. 2012; Нехризов и Цветкова 2012). A more detailed classification of the Thracian rock-cut sepulchral monuments has been offered (Кулов 2002). Suggestions about their relation to the Thracian stone-built tombs also appeared (Нехризов 1994, 11).

Nevertheless a number of common difficulties in studying rock-cut monuments and complexes remain both in Thrace and in Phrygia. Despite the numerous rock-cut inscriptions in Phrygia still a lot of questions about function and chronology of the monuments remain open. Besides Midas City, no other rock-cut site has been properly excavated in Phrygian highlands. Normally, in both areas these monuments have been widely re-used in later times, a fact that poses serious difficulties in distinguishing the early features. In Anatolia the Roman rock carvings and rock-cut tombs are at least more prominent and much better recognizable than in Thrace.

The study of Phrygian rock-cut tombs presents the major gap in the investigation of these monuments. New tombs have been discovered and announced in writing but no excavations have been carried out (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005; 2007). To my knowledge, a new classification of Phrygian rock-cut tombs has not been offered since the major work of Emily Haspels back in 1971. Her grouping and chronology of the tombs has in passing been contested but never seriously challenged. At that time, understandably, her attitude to small and plain

rock-cut tombs was as “of no real significance” (Haspels 1971, 118) and out of her scope of study. That is why my present paper deals mostly with the possible parallels between Phrygian and Thracian rock-cut tombs.

Similarly to the cult monuments, the Phrygian rock-cut tombs that mostly attract scholarly attention are those elaborately cut out rooms with pitched roof and one to three funerary beds arranged along the three sides of the chamber. Usually, the chamber imitates a wooden construction as beams, rafters and king posts are imitated in the rock and pediments are executed in relief on the two short sides (Haspels 1971, 112-138; Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 218, n. 1). Often, the legs of the beds are well profiled and shaped as lion’s paws, bull’s hooves or hawk’s claws (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 218, 220; 2007, 83; 2008). Only rarely the façade of the tomb was decorated with reliefs. There are a few examples of double tombs: two chambers arranged in a line, one behind another (Haspels 1971, 116; Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 218, 220, Figs. 2 and 6). Sometimes a short *dromos* precedes the chamber. Against this background, naturally, simple and much smaller rock-cut chambers remain unstudied.

We do not have such sophisticated examples from Thrace. However, when one reads carefully E. Haspels’ book, he will find mentioning of plain chambers with flat or rounded ceilings. The huge necropolis in the Könuş valley provides one of the most impressive façade of a Phrygian rock-cut tomb – Arslan Taş - and at the same time prompted differentiation of a category of plain tombs for the area (Haspels 1971, 118-119). The same tomb, despite its ornate façade has a simple rectangular chamber with an almost flat roof and no *klinai*. Even among those with two or three beds there are examples of flat or barrel vaulted ceilings.

My point here is about the possible parallels between a number of much smaller Phrygian rock-cut tombs and some of the Thracian ones. Most of them are badly damaged and their outlook is quite unattractive. Still, their shape and size can be estimated. There are two such tombs in the same big necropolis at Arslan Taş (Fig. 2). They have barrel vaulted and irregularly vaulting roofs (Haspels 1971, 120-121; Könuş Nos. 20 and 22). The other example is from Büyük Kapı Kaya where a façade with an image of the Phrygian goddess stood (now destroyed by

treasure hunters). Opposite it a small, rectangular in plan, rock-cut tomb, also broken, can be seen (Fig. 3). It had barrel vault ceiling and rounded corners. No any details about the entrance are known. A similar tomb exists at Fındık Kale (Fig. 4). There is no way to establish the chronological position of these small tombs in respect to the larger and more elaborate ones, neither in respect to the other features in the “kales”.

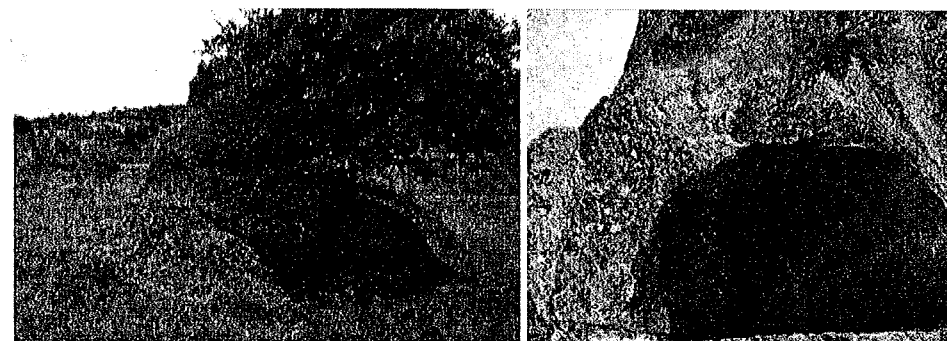


Figure 2. Two rock-cut tombs from the Arslan Taş necropolis, Turkey.



Figure 3. Small rock-cut tomb (broken) at Büyük Kapı Kaya, Turkey.

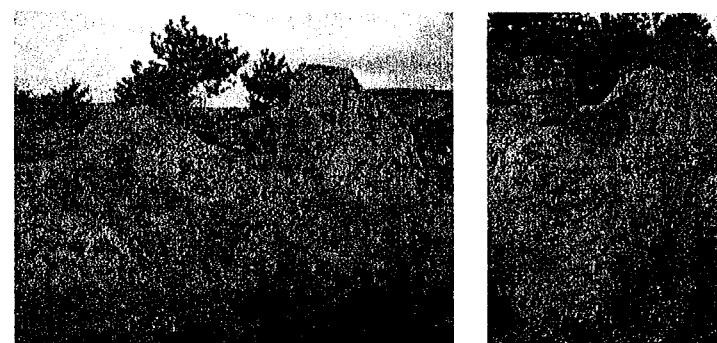


Figure 4. Remains of a rock-cut tomb at Fındık Kale, Turkey.

The above examples show that these plain rock-cut tombs are situated either in cult complexes of the Phrygian Mother, or are part of a larger necropolis. Thracian rock-cut tombs tend to be more isolated and groups of one to four can be distinguished (Нехризов 1999, 26). The three tombs at the Hambar Kaya site near the village of Dolno Cherkovishte (Колев 1965; Нехризов 1994) might have been part of a sanctuary (Fig. 5).

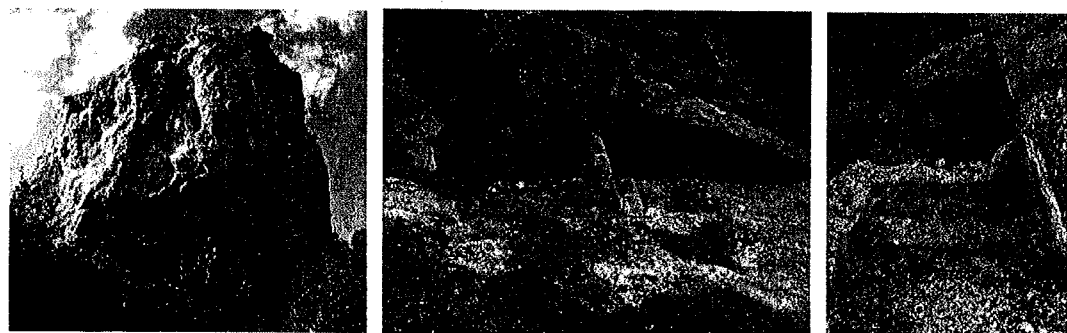


Figure 5. Hambar Kaya near Dolno Cherkovishte: the niches at the front side of the rock and two of the three tombs.

They are cut on the same rock whose front bears several niches. They are trapezoid both in plan and section. Further to the west in the same area there are two more rock-cut tombs that look more like graves. The former have short open entrance halls as some of the Phrygian tombs of the second group according to Haspel's classification have (Haspels 1971, 128, 134). Happily, excavations provided material, iron fibulae included, that dated the tombs to the 9-8th centuries BC (Нехризов 1994). Field surveys detected a nearby settlement of the LBA and EIA. Other examples of tombs of trapezoid plan and section are known from the Eastern Rhodopes: at Ovchevo (Венедиков 1976, 83-85), Rogach (Fig. 6), Dzhanka (Fig. 7), Popovets (Нехризов 1999, 26-27, Fig. 3; Кулов 2002, 101, notes 27 and 28), etc.

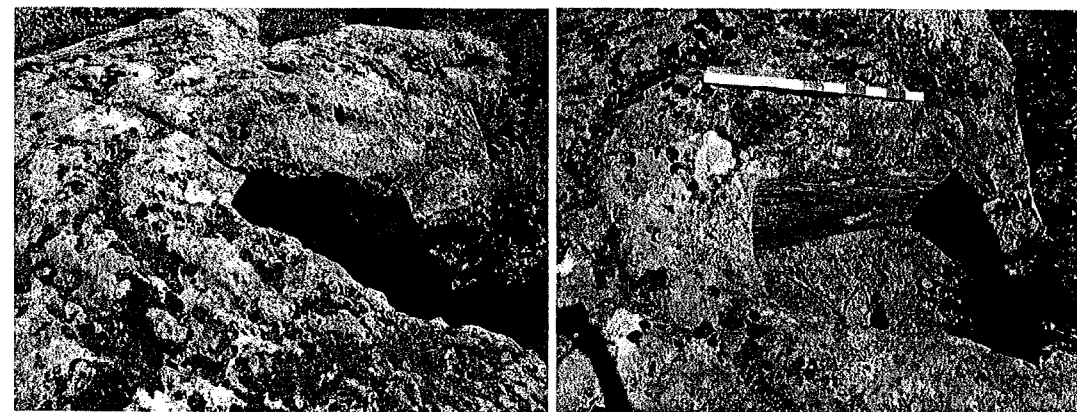


Figure 6. The rock-cut tomb at Rogach, Krumovgrad area.

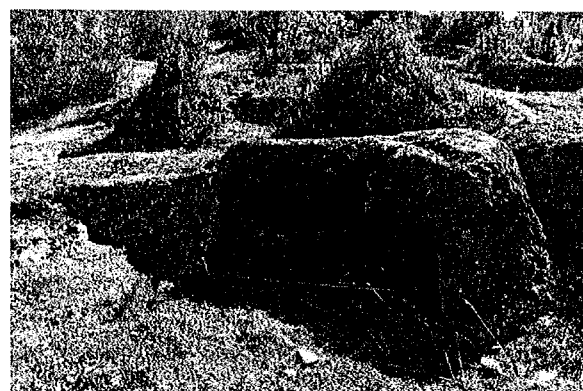


Figure 7. The rock-cut tomb at Dzhanka, Krumovgrad area.

Earlier Phrygian tombs (the Group I according to Haspels) are usually situated high above on the rocks and are difficult to access. Almost no such examples are known from Thrace. There are however Phrygian tombs whose entrances are on the ground level, among them the simple ones mentioned above. Some of the chambers are cut partially below ground level with a short entrance, a *dromos* or a few steps leading down to them.

Almost all Phrygian rock-cut tombs have square or rectangular entrance openings tending to a trapezoid shape. A preference to this shape can be noticed in the plan and section of some of the Thracian rock-cut tombs, the rock-cut niches in the Eastern Rhodopes and the door frames of the Thracian stone built tombs. Phrygian tombs have a small recess around the entrance or a more elaborate door frame (Haspels 1971, 124). Thracian rock-cut tombs, mainly the ones with circular

or arch-shaped entrance opening (as they are better preserved) have a similar recess, probably for the closing stone slab. Evidence for doors or closing stones existed also for the Phrygian tombs (a door stone was found inside Karakaya tomb: Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 218).

A great number of Thracian rock-cut tombs have circular, semicircular or ellipsoid plan with dome, oven- or bee-hive shaped ceilings, sometimes irregularly slanting backwards (Венедиков 1976, 85-99). Similar tombs are known from Phrygian highlands (briefly enumerated: Haspels 1971, 122) (Fig.8). Almost all of them have a groove around the entrance for draining the rain water and sometimes a perpendicular small channel on top or on the threshold. These examples make more certain the assumption that the groove and the opening on top of the semicircular niche at Tatul were rather simultaneously cut out with the entire monument than later additions or damage.

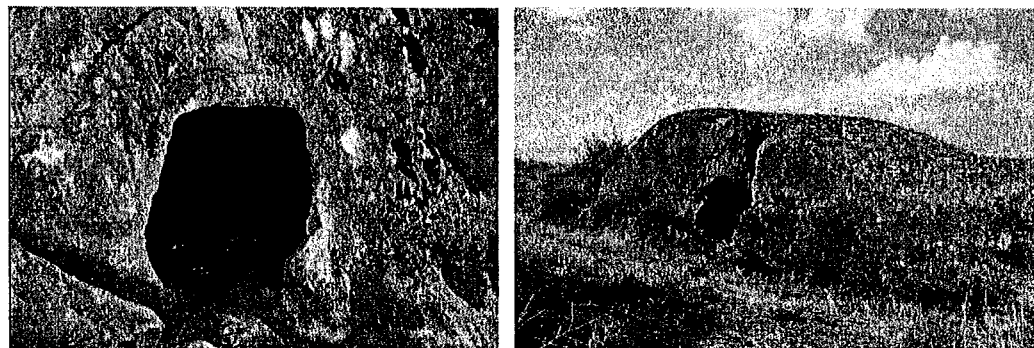


Figure 8. Rock-cut tombs at Kirkinler and Kayhan, Turkey.

A peculiarity is the second opening on the roof of some of the Thracian rock-cut tombs, probably closed by a stone lid. This feature can be seen on both trapezoid and round chambers. It has provoked a hypothetical interpretation of these monuments as shrines or small open-air sanctuaries where initiation rites were performed (В. Фол 2007, 92-98; 132-138). The Phrygian tomb at Beypınarı had a roughly worked stone for a cover of the short *dromos* (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 219, Fig. 5)

Thracian rock-cut tombs usually do not have worked out or decorated façades. An example near Momchilgrad shows a rectangular smoothed surface

around the entrance of the tomb (Fig. 9).¹ Phrygian tombs also rarely display decorated façades; however the few pieces are impressive. The two lions standing on their hind legs on both sides of the tomb entrance at Arslan Taş are striking. It seems that rather the later tombs tend to be decorated than the earlier ones. The so-called 'Broken Tomb' or Yılan Taş probably belongs to the time of the Achaemenid rule. An unfinished monument at Balkayası near modern Sivrihisar (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 219; 2007, 82) that bears traces of painted decoration could have been meant for a tomb as well as for a façade, again most probably of Achaemenid period.



Figure 9. The tomb near the "MG-Hizhata" Hotel outside Momchilgrad.

A common feature of Thracian and Phrygian rock-cut tombs, regardless of their crude or sophisticated appearance, is the different carvings on top of the tombs. In Thrace these are mainly small basins connected with channels. When these bowl-like depressions are carved on top of the tomb entrance and a channel is leading to the front, then one can speculate whether the grooves around the tomb entrance were meant only for rain water drainage or for libations. In Phrygia more elaborate carvings occur on top of the rock-cut tombs. The examples at Zey necropolis are worth noting: small basins and a bench-like formation were found (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 221) (Fig. 10). Platforms and steps are carved on top of the

¹ I thank G. Nehrizov who discovered this tomb and attracted my attention to it. It is situated just below a dirt road, about 100 m away from the "MG-Hizhata" Hotel outside Momchilgrad.

imposing tomb at Arslan Taş. Recently it has been noticed that three convex rock-cut hemispheres arranged in a triangle occur at some Phrygian complexes but also in association with tombs (Berndt 2008, 14). These features might possibly be connected to the funeral and commemorative rites and practices.

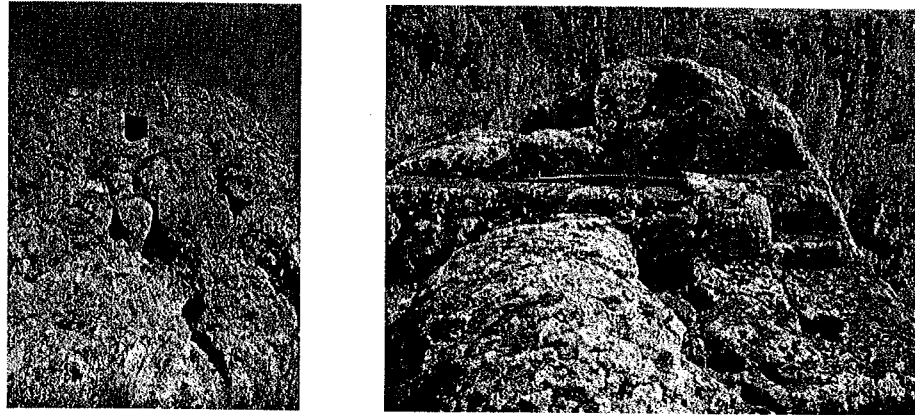


Figure 10. Tomb No. at Zey and the bench-like carving on top of it.

Another shared feature is presented by the rock-cut discs nearby or associated with tombs. Despite the vivid discussion these carvings have opened and the controversial hypotheses, a few cases are instructive. Again Tatul is the Thracian example (B. Φοι 2007, 177) and Hammamkaya, not far from Midas City, is the Phrygian one (Tüfekçi Sivas 2005, 222; 2007, 80) (Fig. 11).

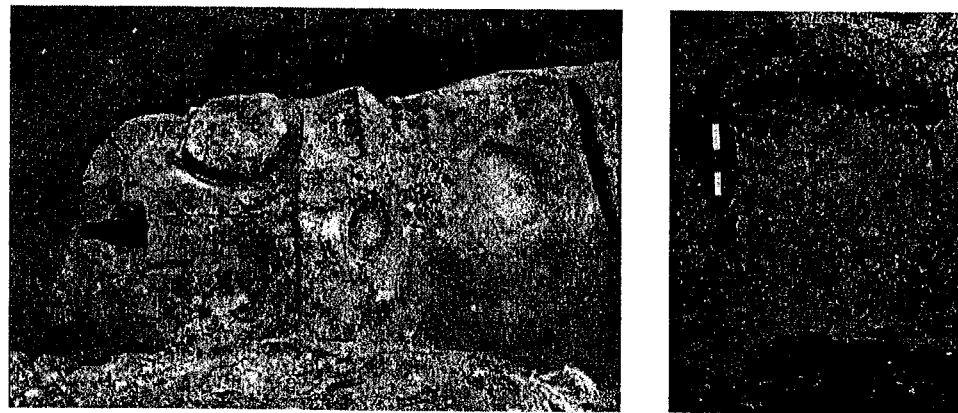


Figure 11. Rock-cut discs and other carvings at Hammamkaya and Tatul (after Tüfekçi Sivas 2007 and B. Φοι 2007).

As mentioned above, Phrygian rock-cut tombs are often arranged in big groups to form necropoleis or were cut in sacred complexes with a number of other features. The three tombs at Midas City and in the other famous “kales” are good examples (Haspels 1971, 112-113, *passim*). Thracian rock-cut tombs were also associated with other rock features like niches, channels or basins of different shape and size, but only rarely could be assigned to a bigger sanctuary or cult complex (except Tatul). This might also be due to the state of research and further investigations could possibly change the picture. The above mentioned three tombs at Pchelary are among the few examples as they were cut in the same rock with the niches. The rock with the niches is only a hundred meters away from a rock-cut tomb at the village of Muzhentsi, Benkovsky area, thus probably meant to be in close association. The landscape there with lower rock outcrops reminds closely the area of Büyük Kapı Kaya and other sites in Phrygia. Generally, in the area of distribution of the rock-cut niches in the Eastern Rhodopes there are a number of rock-cut tombs as well but the two types of monuments are not to be seen in the immediate vicinity of one another.

An indirect relation could possibly be seen between the rock-cut tombs and the trapezoid niches. Tombs of round or semicircular plan seem to imitate caves. Niches on the other hand were sometimes cut out near or in small caves or cave-like recesses (Nekhrizov et al. 2012, 222).

Stepped monuments often called altars and sometimes in the shape of seats or ‘thrones’ are common in Phrygia. To my knowledge the closest Thracian parallel is offered by the monument near the village of Angel Voyvoda near Haskovo (Fig. 12).² In Phrygia they are usually part of bigger complexes. However, association with tombs is also present: Tekören, near Pessinus (Claerhout, Devreker 2008, 148-150; Tüfekçi Sivas 2003, Fig. 14). The latter site offers a combination of a rock-cut tomb, a ‘throne’ and a ‘wine press’ arranged almost in a straight line and not far from each other. The so-called ‘wine presses’ or connected basins on one or different levels have been attested both in Phrygia (seven of them published: Tüfekçi Sivas 2003; 2007, 88-89) and in Thrace.

² Also discovered by G. Nekhrizov whom I sincerely thank for showing it to me

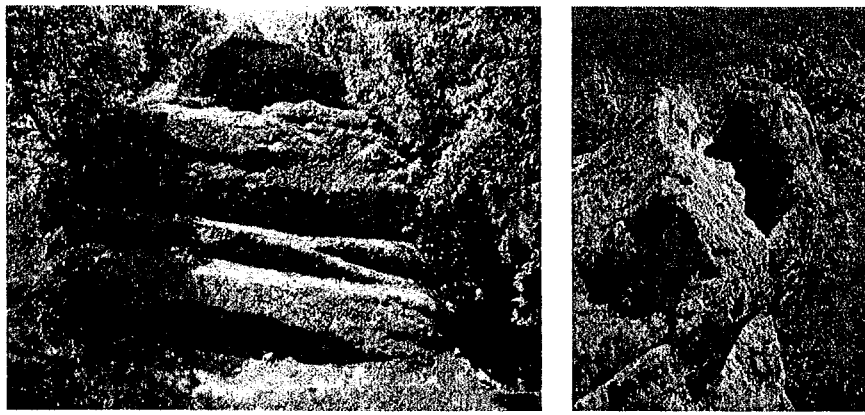


Figure 12. Step altar and a grave at Angel Voyvoda, Haskovo district.

This brief overview of Thracian and Phrygian rock-cut monuments outlines the serious problems that arise in their study. A huge variety of less impressive and unattractive monuments stay out of the scholarly interest. This is especially true about the smaller Phrygian rock-cut tombs. Their detailed recording and publishing is crucial. Excavations cannot definitely solve the problems of function, use and chronology of the other monuments but could offer a significant background. A new stage of study according to modern standards and using modern technologies should be launched. My paper aims at showing that much more parallels for the Thracian rock-cut tombs can be found in the lesser, not so remarkable Phrygian monuments, which are unfortunately almost unstudied.

The synopsis of Thracian and Phrygian rock-cut tombs shows that they may be part of bigger complexes, more often in Phrygia than in Thrace. They occur both at easily accessible places and high up the rocks. Additional carvings on and around the tombs suggest ritual activity related to the deceased: these could have been performed at the funeral itself or at commemorative services. Rock-cut basins and cup-marks, as well as 'wine presses', speak in favor of libations. Animal sacrifices accompanied by blood shed cannot be excluded but there is no way of proving this practice. Differentiating of rock space into steps and seats on top of the tombs suggest processions and seated personages. Some of the rock-cut ledges could have been for offerings, as probably were the niches inside some tombs. It is often impossible to determine their relative date in respect to the cutting of the tombs. The function of the trapezoid niches in southeastern Bulgaria remains

uncertain. According to me, their purely votive nature seems more likely, which does not exclude their association with sepulchral monuments. As we know that the Phrygian rock-cut monuments were dedicated to the Phrygian Mother Goddess or Mother *Kybeleya*, a hypothesis of a similar meaning of the Thracian monuments can be launched. It has already been stated that mountain, cave, grave, niche and façade merge into one to signify the image or rather the epiphany of the goddess (Börker-Klähn 2000, 49).

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