

GLUHITE KAMANI: OLD QUESTIONS AND NEW APPROACHES

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The site of Gluhite Kamani is located in the most northeastern part of the Rhodope Mountains in southeastern Bulgaria. It is situated on a mountain ridge, to the east and below the peak of Sveta Marina (708.6 m), one of the most prominent peaks of the Gorata ridge in the Eastern Rhodopes. A medieval fortress and a church are located on the peak, along with traces of habitation from the first millennium BC. The area is rich in archaeological sites (Fig. 1). Further east on the same ridge are several other sites with similar characteristics: the Mezek fortresses and Kurt Kale (on Sheynovets peak); nearby are two Thracian tombs (Велков 1937; Аладжов 1997: 48, 161-163; Филов 1937). Also to the east, in the region of the village of Valche Pole and around the rocks of Kush Kaya there is a large Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age¹ and Roman site, partially excavated (Аладжов 1997: 49; Попов 2009). Further to the east lies the Kovan Kaya cliff with many niches carved on it; this is the easternmost site of this group (Аладжов 1997: 4). A number of archaeological sites have also been registered to the north, west and southwest. The highest concentration of sites is in the vicinity of the town of Madzharovo (Аладжов 1997: 26-30, 57, 73-77, 90, 142-146, 148-149, 198-199, 292-301; Nekhrizov 2000; Нехризов 2004).

Gluhite Kamani (meaning “Deaf Stones”) probably owes its name to the fact that there is practically no echo in the area.² Its fame is due to the prominent rock formation on the top of the ridge. In geological terms these are Paleogene tuffs and rhyolites, dispersed in several groups from northwest to southeast (Aleksiev et al. 2000; Костов 2001; Kostov 2008; Желев et al. 2010).

The site has long been known, though until recently it has never been investigated archaeologically. Its main point of interest lies in the numerous niches carved on the vertical parts of the *ca.* 20 m high cliffs. Most impressive are the carvings at the westernmost rock formation which dominates the area. The top of this formation has been flattened to accommodate several architectural features: a large rectangular cistern for water collection and a two-flight staircase leading to up to the cistern. The southern rock face, to the left of the steps, is vertically dressed (Fig. 7/a). There, a cave-like room was cut out, almost quad-

1 Hereafter some common abbreviations are used as LBA – Late Bronze Age, EIA – Early Iron Age, LIA – Late Iron Age.

2 Despite inquiries among the local people, we were unable to learn when the site became known by this name.

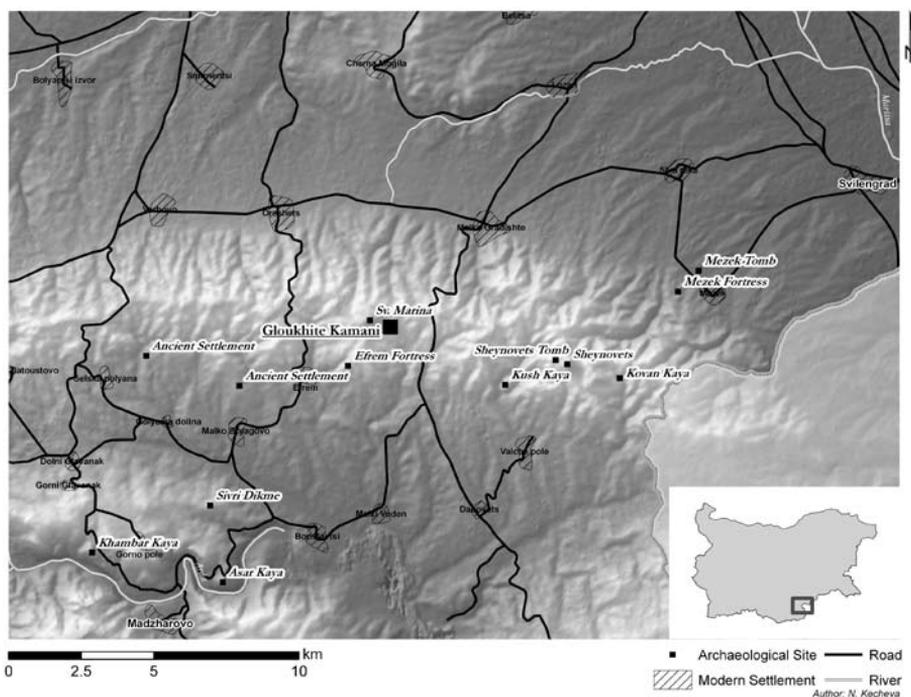


Fig. 1. Map of Gluhite Kamani and its Environment

angular in plan and with a dome-shaped ceiling. Perhaps because of this, the cave-like room became known as a “rock-cut tomb.” Immediately below, on the ground, southwards from these cuttings the remains of a medieval church were found.

The first brief description of the site of Gluhite Kamani was made by Karel Škorpil in the early 20th century (Шкорпил 1912/13: 261).³ His attention was drawn to the big arch-shaped niche (that looked unfinished) and the cave-like room next to it on the rock mentioned above, called by the locals *Hamam* (Bath). He also describes the steps leading up to the cistern on top. I. Velkov also mentions the site briefly as having numerous niches (Velkov 1952: 30).

In the 1970’s the newly founded Institute of Thracology organized a series of field surveys to investigate megalithic, rock-cut sites and fortresses in south-eastern Bulgaria. The expedition visited the site of Gluhite Kamani in 1975 and made the first attempt at a more detailed study and description (Венедиков 1976: 99. Обр. 11-19; Делев 1982: 174, 256-258, Обр. 149-156). For this reason we are pleased to offer the preliminary results of our survey and archaeological investigations of the site in honor of the anniversary of the Institute of Thracology.

Since the original survey in the 1970’s, the site has been mentioned in a

3 Škorpil does not mention this name but speaks about the eastern slope of the St. Marina’s peak.

number of publications on megalithic and rock-cut monuments and on Thracian cult and religion, where the initial description of the expedition was repeated with only a few more details (Delev 1984: 29; B. Фол 1993: 46-47; 2000: 74-76, 78, 88; 2007: 148, 246, 306, the first colour pictures: 97, 141-142, 151-152; Аладжов 1997: 150-152, Обр. 69; Кузманов 2001: 113; V. Fol 2008: 158). More recent progress in the study of the region, the Haskovo district and the Eastern Rhodope Mountains in particular, led to the first attempts at making a typology of the rock-cut monuments, the niches included (Кулов 2002: 113-117). The discovery of the remains of ancient mining in the area of the town of Lyubimets has encouraged recent interest and led to further field surveys (Попов, Илиев 2004; 2005: 74; 2007: 620, Обр. 3). A large number of published works have appeared suggesting various views on the function and symbolism of the niches (see below).

In the summer of 2008 the first systematical archaeological investigation of the site was undertaken. During this first field season the aims were focused on defining the site limits, locating its unusual features, and gathering data about its stratigraphy and chronology. The initial observations showed that there are a dozen prominent rock formations further down on the southern slope of the site, most of them also covered with niches. A natural cave was also recorded, showing traces of various carvings in it; these included grooves, shallow niches and holes (rock 24). The most impressive 2008 discovery was the petroglyph, carved on the floor of a naturally formed shallow cave-like recess on the western side of the eastern most rock in the complex (rock 6) (Fig. 4/c). Two unusually small trapezoid niches, 0.10 to 0.15 m height, were registered below this rock. Their dimensions suggest they may have been miniature models of niches (Fig. 4/a).

The 2008 results demonstrated the necessity for a more thorough and detailed field survey and further excavations. In 2011 with the financial support of a grant from the America for Bulgaria Foundation, administered by American Research Center in Sofia, a joint Bulgarian-American project entitled: “Rock-cut Sanctuaries in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains: the Gluhite Kamani Cult Complex,” was undertaken. Here we present a summary of our results.

The Survey Project

The site of Gluhite Kamani is the largest example of its type, with over 450 rock-cut niches. The target of our field survey was the high rock outcrops in the vicinity of Gluhite Kamani that bear niches cut directly into the cliff walls. The main goals of the survey were: a thorough inspection of the rocks, recording the precise location of the existing rock carvings using accurate devices according to modern technical standards, and completing a detailed description and photographic documentation of all artificial features.

The method used to survey the rock-cut complex was intended to provide

full coverage of a given area, in order to conduct a complete survey and thorough observation of all natural rocks in the complex. The area covered exceeds 0.5 sq. km. Within the region studied the borders of the area with artificial rock carvings were defined at ca. 0.2 sq. km. Modern devices such as GPS (Global Positioning System) and mobile GIS (Mobile Geographic Information System) were used during the survey to pinpoint the precise position of different rock groups, and the data collection was further augmented by photography and visual observations. Such mobile GIS devices are widely used in modern field surveys (Wheatley, Gillings 2002: 216-217; Pundt 2002; Tripcevich 2004), and have proved to be very helpful in fieldwork, because of their small size and portability. Mobile GIS devices are especially useful in full coverage surface surveys, where the surveyed area is divided into transects and polygons corresponding to terrain characteristics (Tripcevich 2004: 137). The equipment enables the use of a GNSS application (Global Navigation Satellite System) with the appropriate software, and makes possible the use of preliminarily georeferenced images (images that have spatial location) in the field.

The Gluhite Kamani survey used Trimble-Juno SB mobile GIS devices with license software of ESRI, ArcPad, Version 10. During the survey, the function of the mobile GIS was to locate and record the rock-cut features as precisely as possible. This would otherwise have been very difficult to do with human observation alone, due to the heavy deciduous forest cover that often made niches on the high surface of rocks difficult to see; a further difficulty was the uneven ground, thick underbrush, and frequent sharp stones, all of which significantly impeded our path and often made walking challenging. A further problem was the low strength of the GPS satellite signals. In addition, the following preliminary preparations were made: georeferencing of 1:10000 and 1:25000 topographic maps, usage of georeferenced satellite images, and the creation of extra attributive tables that permitted more precise descriptions of the rock formations and facilitated careful processing of the data collected.

The method used by the surface survey to document the rock-cut niches was as follows: each rock formation was given a number (called Rock Number); then each individual niche or group of niches was numbered with different numbers, called Identification Number.⁴ For each Identification Number the following data were recorded: number of registered niches (if more than one in a group), their facing and azimuth, photo direction, GPS position of the niches and of the place where the photographs were taken, in cases the niches were situated at inaccessible heights, and dimensions (where possible) or estimated dimensions.

Our investigation was successful in locating 28 rocks and rock groups that bear niches, as well as in identifying 81 clusters (single or group of niches).

4 We gave individual numbers to isolated niches or groups of niches, defined according to visual clustering.

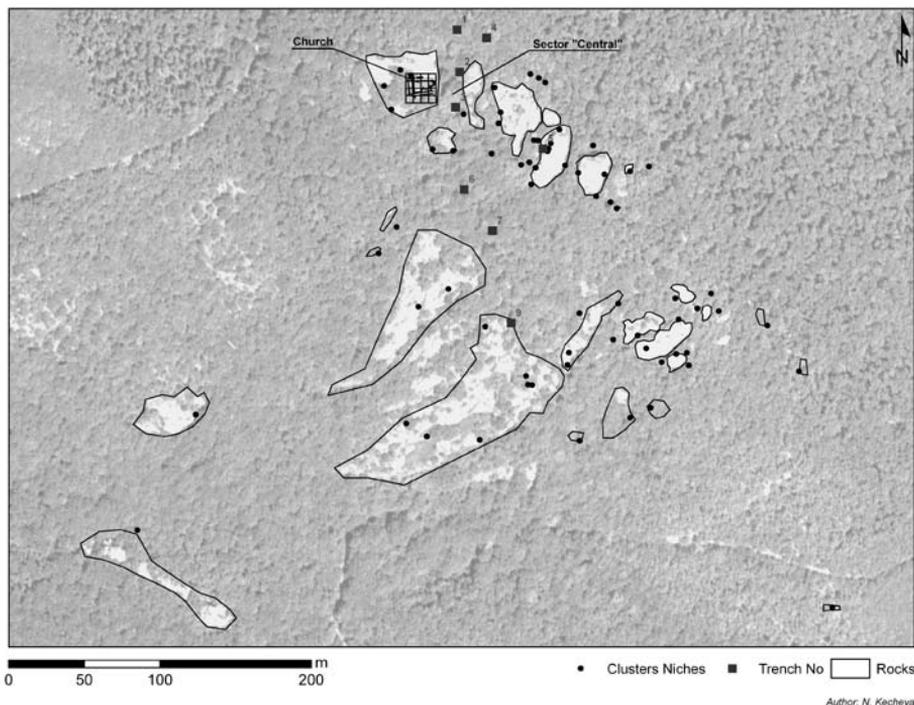
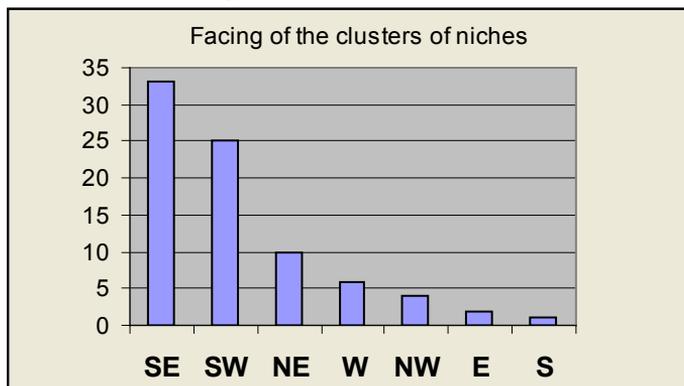


Fig. 2. Map of the Area Covered in the Survey

The rocks with niches are situated primarily on the eastern and southern slopes. Their density becomes less in the lower terrain near the river bed. On the opposite side of the river bed, on the southwest slopes direction there is one rock with carvings but nothing that matches the density of niches noted above.

A total of 459 rock-cut niches were registered during the survey. Most of them are situated on rocks facing to the south, southeast and southwest, but there are also some on panels oriented to the north, east and west (see the chart below), as sometimes carvings extend around the entire surface of a rock.



We were able to access and measure precisely 67 niches, 51 of them of

trapezoid shape. The most common dimensions of the latter are 0.70/0.60 x 0.40/0.30 m (see the table below).

| Dimensions (in meters) | Number of niches |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1.00/0.90 x 0.60/0.50 | 5 |
| 0.90 x 0.30 | 1 |
| 0.80 x 0.60 | 2 |
| 0.80/0.70 x 0.50/0.40 | 14 |
| 0.70/0.60 x 0.40/0.30 | 20 |
| 0.50 x 0.30 | 6 |
| 0.40 x 0.20 | 1 |
| 0.30 x 0.15 | 1 |
| 0.13 x 0.05 | 1 |

Most niches were carved in locations near the top of the rock, some fifteen meters or more above current ground level; thus they are virtually inaccessible now.

There is quite a range of sizes, though, and some niches are much larger than this, over a meter in height, while a few are considerably smaller. Examples of miniature niches (0.15 m height) were also recorded.

The majority of the niches are shaped like a trapezoid. Some of the trapezoid ones have steeper sides coming closer to a triangular shape; some are wider and with slightly curving sides. Trapezoid niches are deeper at the base than at the upper side. Two unfinished trapezoid niches shed light on the method of cutting (Fig. 3/c): first, the outlines of the niche were carved and then the niche itself was cut up starting from the top downward, thus the back side is sloping down. Sometimes the “floor” of a niche becomes oval or trapezoidal in plan, i.e. the niche is wider inside than at the entrance.

There are, however, a number of niches with other shapes, including rectangular, square, circular, oval and arch-shaped ones (Fig. 3/b). Most often they were carved in combination with the common trapezoid ones. Several examples were found of niches rotated 90°, looking like trapezoid niches lying on their sides, and their back slopes sideward instead of downward (Fig. 3/d).

The largest rock formation, the one that can be seen on the mountainside from a distance, contained over a hundred niches extending around all 360 degrees of the rock surface. In a few cases an individual niche was cut into the rock, but most niches were found in clusters, usually of three to five. It is hard to detect a special pattern in the arrangement of the niches: most often they are placed in more or less regular rows or columns, and there are a few examples of a checkerboard design, but mostly the placement of the niches looks chaotic (Fig. 3/a). This rock massif displays the largest concentration of niches, but at least four other panels with multiple niches were located, as well as other, smaller rocks

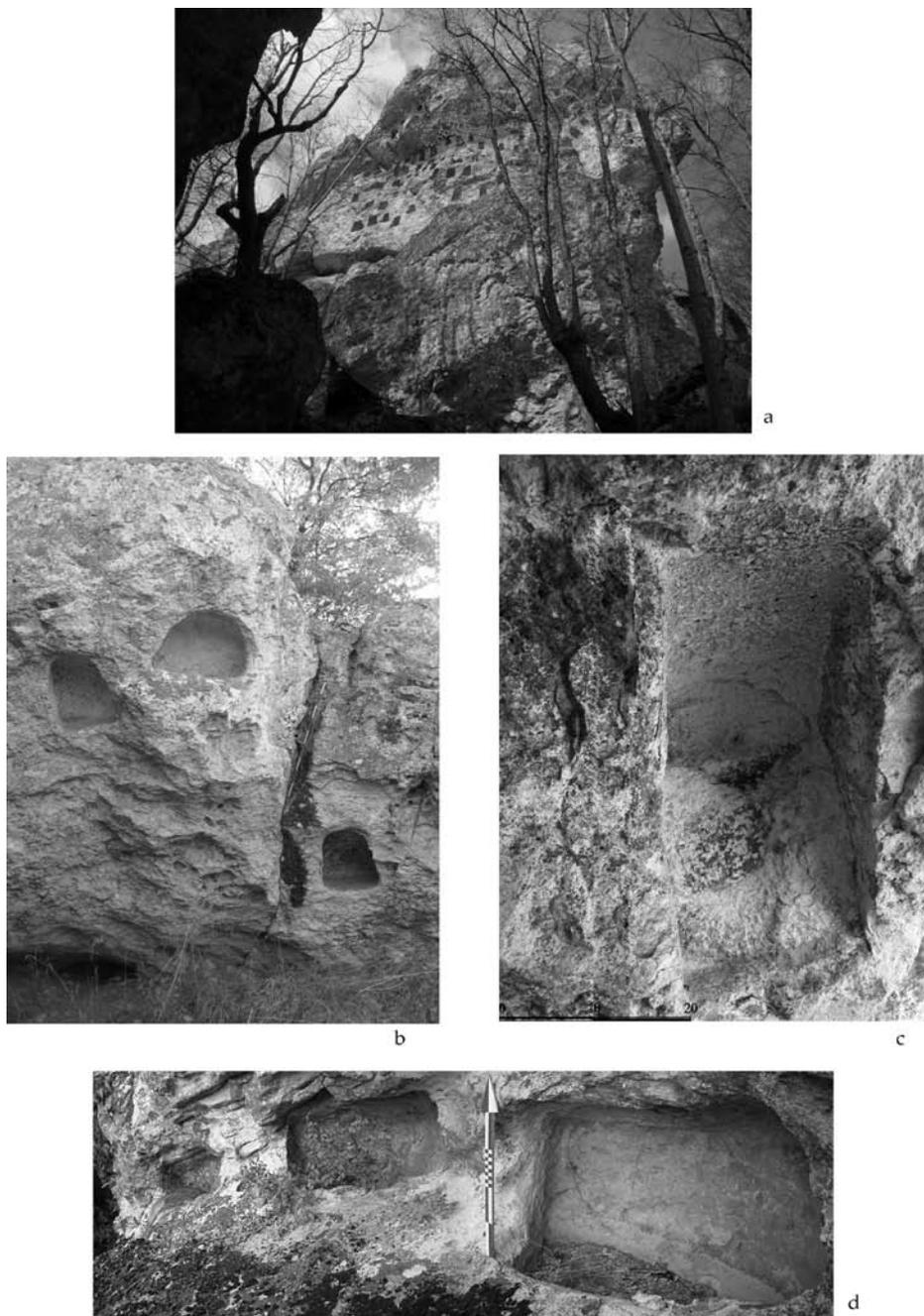


Fig. 3. Niches of Different Type and Shape

with fewer groups. The team also located a number of major rock formations that did not have niches, even though the formations seemed similar to the rocks with niches. This indicates that the mere presence of rocks and their proxim-

ity to the central area was not a sufficient factor to account for the choice in placement of the niches.

We observed a tendency for the niches to be carved on concave rocks whose upper parts jut out, or to be arranged under a natural overhang. Another tendency is to find groups of niches around and in natural cave-like recesses that had sometimes been hollowed out further by human agency. This suggests that these rocks were chosen for the opportunity to carve niches above a floor where ritual activities could have taken place, or for their conspicuous setting.

Carvings other than niches, such as channels, were also found at the Gluhite Kamani site. One tiny channel (3-5 cm width) is carved on the top surface, following the edge of a rock which bears several niches. The other one is carved on the vertical face of the rock framing part of



Fig. 4. Various Rock-Carvings: a) Miniature niches; b) Chanel; c) The Petroglyph

the niches below as if to lead the rain water away from them (Fig. 4/b).

The Excavation Project

As previous field work at the site had demonstrated, the chronology of the complex could only be specified by further archaeological investigation. The results from the 2008-2011 excavation seasons were very promising. Already in 2008, a total of nine trial trenches were laid at different parts of the complex (Fig. 2). The main purpose was to clarify the spatial organization and the chronology of the site. The archaeological observations and the analysis of the finds allowed for some preliminary conclusions about the functioning and the intensity of habitation of the site during different periods. The latest traces of occupation date to the medieval period, mainly to the 11th-13th centuries AD. The relatively small amount of pottery fragments from the early Byzantine period (4th-6th centuries AD) and LIA (5th-1st centuries BC) reveal a short-lived human presence there. The isolated Roman materials found are probably to be associated with incidental visiting of the site. The most intense period of use of the complex falls within the EIA (10th-6th centuries BC), which is attested by thick stratigraphic layers from this period.

The most important results were achieved in the “Central Sector” (see Fig. 2). It occupies the narrow area immediately to the east and below the medieval church. The place is naturally protected from east and west, and opened to the south, where the slope is extremely steep. It is accessible from the north through a narrow passage between the rocks. In spite of the considerable steepness of the slope to the southeast, the wider flat space between the rocks was intensively used. In the trial trench, an area of 36 sq. m, excavations revealed cultural depositions of *ca.* 2.60-3.00 m thick. The uppermost stratigraphic layer, *ca.* 0.60-0.75 m thick, is associated with the medieval period. It contained destructions from the church and related constructions. The medieval level is immediately followed by the EIA accumulations of 1.50-2.20 m thickness in the different parts of the trench. Within this stratum three layers of various thicknesses were distinguished (layers II–IV, respectively). The upper one belongs to the second phase of the EIA in Thrace. The next two, dated to the first period of the EIA, display the most intensive habitation on the site. Radiocarbon analyses of the collected seed samples suggest calibrated dates between 1010-850 BC for the third stratigraphic layer and 1190-1000 BC for the fourth one.⁵ Under the EIA accumulations and immediately above the bedrock a fifth layer (0.20-0.40 m thick) was distinguished by traces of a major conflagration. The pottery fragments date back to the end of the Chalcolithic, most of them with traces of a secondary firing. Radiocarbon dating for this last layer provides calibrated dates of 3790-3650 BC.

The remains of miscellaneous structures uncovered at different levels should

5 Radiocarbon analyses were performed by Beta Analytic Inc. Miami, Florida, USA.



Fig. 5. Miniature Vessels and Anthropomorphic Figurines.

be associated with the EIA period: stone accumulations, pieces of burned clay plaster, hearths and even parts of charred oak beams. All these testify to the existence of asynchronous buildings at the site. Worth noting among the artifacts discovered are grinding stones, a large quantity of pottery fragments, spindle whorls, different flint, stone and bone tools. There is an impressive collection of over thirty tripod cup-shaped miniature vessels and also thirteen anthropomorphic male/female terracotta figurines (Fig. 5), all uncovered mostly in the second stratum dated to the EIA second phase.

Of particular interest are thirteen hearths revealed at different levels, not always associated with building destructions. One of the best preserved was discovered in 2010. It is constructed like the other hearths: fragments of several ceramic vessels were laid under a thick layer of clay. The unusual features of this hearth are its dimensions of *ca.* 1.50 in diameter, and the presence of a border at its southern side, rounded on top and *ca.* 0.25-0.30 m high (Fig. 6).

Pottery fragments represent common East-Rhodopean vessel types and decorative techniques. Pots, kantharos-shaped vessels, cups, bowls, as well as jugs and amphora-shaped vessels are well represented.

Among the over 30,000 pottery fragments processed are no more than a dozen wheel-made fragments of LIA wares. The same is the situation with the few LBA fragments found. No structures or layers of these periods were revealed in the excavated area. This could be explained either by an incidental human pres-

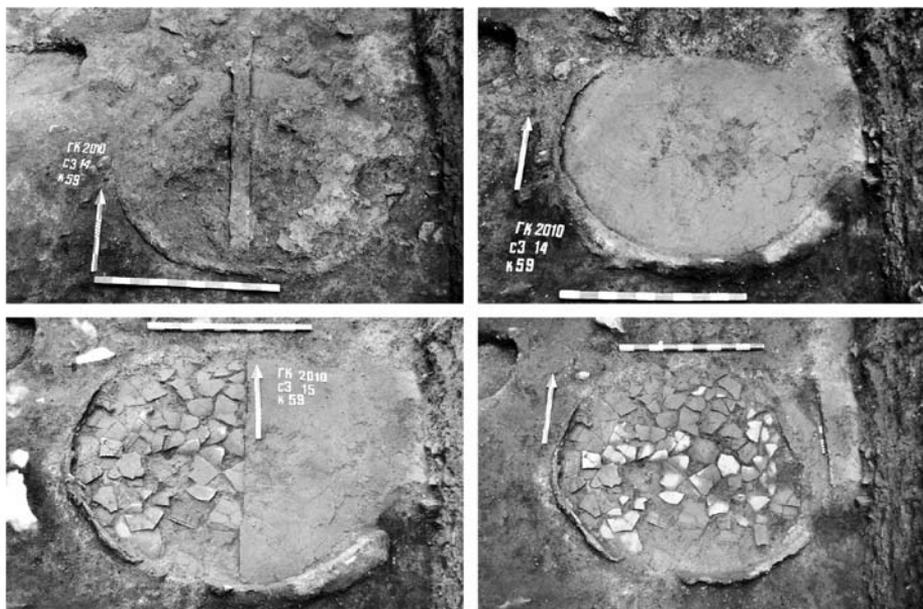


Fig. 6. Fireplace in the SE sector of the Trench: Different Investigation Stages.

ence during these periods, or by a horizontal stratigraphy of the site.

Animal bones are abundant in all levels. The archaeozoological analysis revealed a great variety of species. Domestic animals are well represented by small ruminants, cattle and pigs; single bones of dogs and horses were discovered as well. The quantity of wild species is relatively high – about 30%; among them are red deer, fallow deer, wild boar, and hare.⁶

Archaeobotanical analyses show the presence of crops, mainly cereal grains: einkorn and emmer wheat, barley, and millet. Single remains of fruit plants were also found: cornus, elderberry, raspberry and grape. Charred wood from deciduous trees, oak, hornbeam, hazel, cornus and maple⁷ was found in almost all samples; all these kinds are widespread in the region today. Such interdisciplinary studies can eventually shed more light on the palaeo-environment of the site.

In 2009 a project to investigate the church on top of the rocks was started.⁸ The monument had been severely damaged by looters and treasure hunters. Nevertheless, the archaeological excavations made it possible to clarify the plan of the church, its composition and different building periods. It became clear that this was a three-nave basilica, erected in the 5th-6th century AD. Later

6 The archaeozoological investigations were performed by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lazar Ninov.

7 The archaeobotanical investigations were carried out by Ivanka Slavova, PhD student at Sofia University.

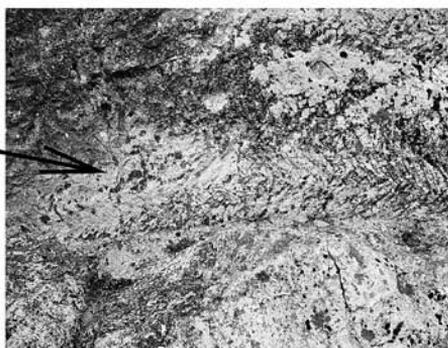
8 The excavations were conducted by Asst. Prof. Dr. Veselka Katsarova in 2009, and by Doychin Grozdanov and Galina Dyankova in 2010-11.



a



b



c

Fig. 7. The Medieval church with the rock-cut chamber and new uncovered rock-cuttings; detailed pictures of the traces of instruments.

the church was reconstructed and it continued functioning during the medieval period, when two building phases can be recognized. Excavations uncovered marble altar doors, a re-used stone block with a carved cross, pieces of church inventory, Byzantine luxury pottery, iron tools and arrowheads, and coins of the

Byzantine emperors Justin (518-527) and Justinian I (527-565), as well as those of Alexios I, John II, Manuel I and Andronikos I, all of the Komnenos dynasty (1081-1185 AD).

Some of the artefacts discovered during the excavations of the church suggested that it was erected on top of earlier EIA strata. A test trench was set within a previously existing looters' trench that had destroyed the central nave. The results confirmed the initial assumption: the trench revealed 1.60 m thick depositions under the church floor, comprising four stratigraphic layers. The excavations stopped at an accumulation of large stones without reaching the bedrock. The artifacts found belong mainly to the EIA period, though few LIA fragments were found in the upper levels. This fact illustrates the presence of Thracians here also, on the highest rock group.

During the excavations of the church special attention was paid to the rock-cut components in this part of the complex. Alongside with the ones already known, i.e. the cistern, the two-flight staircase and the cave-shaped room, numerous other carvings in the area around the church were registered. At the same time some observations on the church spatial organization within the rock setting were made. The only approach to the rock platform is from the east. That is why, to secure the approach to the entrance of the church narthex, part of the rock was cut out to form a passage. Shallow steps at the eastern end of the passage and in front of the apse were cut to overcome the natural slope. A drainage channel was carved along the northern long side of the church (Fig. 7). The entire southern rock face was vertically smoothed and subsequently the cave-shaped room was cut into it. On this vertical front several grooves were chiseled leading to the entrance of the room and thus directing the rain water inside. This fact, as well as its plan and the tool marks observed inside, make it clear that the previous interpretation as a rock-cut tomb is no longer valid.

All cuttings in this part of the complex were performed in the same manner and with similar tools. The instruments have left long oblique traces, forming herringbone-shaped rows in the rock (Fig. 7/c).

Such stone treatment can be seen at many other Late Antique and medieval sites in the Eastern Rhodopes, including Perperikon, Harman Kaya, Dolna Kula, and Angel Voyvoda. This observation, alongside with the plan and the setting of the church, allows us to connect these rock-cut features with the periods of the functioning of the church and not with earlier periods, as had previously been suggested.

Preliminaries to Discussing Niches Purpose

The four seasons of excavations and one of field survey confirmed the previous interpretation of the Gluhite Kamani site as a complicated cult complex. The remains of the church point to a long tradition of recognizing the place as sacred. Remains of constructions of non-permanent nature were found in EIA

strata suggesting occasional or seasonal occupation of the site. The significant number of hearths discovered, some of them unrelated to a building and asynchronous, concentrated on such a restricted area, further supports the idea of a non-residential site. The preliminary observations on EIA ceramic assemblage from Gluhite Kamani show that drinking vessels, cups and jugs, did indeed prevail in quantity over the insignificant number of bowls. This disproportion indicates different functional characteristics of the site, since the distribution of the vessel types would be expected to be more balanced in a settlement. The finds suggest ritual drinking and feasts (the animal bones) as well as libations. The anthropomorphic clay figurines and the miniature (again drinking) vessels supplement the impression of a cult site (perhaps a place of pilgrimage?).

The main cult area seems to be at the highest place where the church was later built over a large EIA layer. From the view point of rock carvings, the focal spot seems to have been to the south-east of the church where the rock with the greatest number of niches is situated.

The rock-cut niches region falls totally within the watershed of the Arda River and its middle flow in the Eastern Rhodopes (Нехризов 1996, 9, обр. 1). Although not studied in detail, the rock-cut niches have already prompted a significant amount of discussion speculating on their interpretation, by both scholars and laymen. The size and careful workmanship of most niches suggests that they were made in order to place something in them. It was suggested that they accommodated votives (Welkov 1952: 30). Nevertheless, whatever was placed in the niches could not have been large and would have been exposed to the elements. The object/s would probably have survived in the niche only for a short time, for example, on the occasion of a religious festival.

The association of the niches with funerary cult practices is probably the most widespread interpretation suggested (Колев 1965: 209; Венедиков 1976; Делев 1982: 258; Delev 1984:30; В. Фол 1993: 47; Нехризов 1994: 10; 1996; 1999: 26; Кулов 2002: 113-118). Recent studies tend to consider the niches as part of bigger cult (mega-) complexes or sanctuaries where rock-cut tombs are also present (В. Фол 2000; 2007; rock shrines: Naydenova 1990: 91-93). It has been suggested that the niches were cut as a single (individual or communal) ritual act associated with initiation or other occasions from the ritual calendar (В. Фол 2000: 117; 2007: 284). Placing of votives in them is not excluded.

As a great number of niches are located high up on the rocks and are well exposed to sunlight facing mostly the “sunny” directions, south, southeast and southwest, it is a traditional belief of many scholars that they were related to a solar cult (first in Welkov 1952: 34-36, although some doubt this interpretation: Кузманов 2001: 115). At many sites niches occur in the vicinity of rock-cut tombs, which suggests to a number of scholars that they are an evidence for a combination of solar and chthonian cults (Делев 1982: 258; Фол 1986; 1994 *passim*; В. Фол 1993: 153; Аладжов 1997: 152) which in its turn is associated

with Orphic beliefs and rites (in a number of works by A. Fol).

A functional connection between rock-cut niches, tombs and graves is suggested not only by their close location, but also by the trapezoidal shape of the niches and the use of the trapezoid shape in the entrances of dolmens and rock-cut and stone-built tombs. The plans and the cross-sections of the rock-cut tombs near the villages of Dolno Cherkovishte and Pchelari are trapezoidal (Колев 1965; Нехризов 1994; 1999: 29 with other examples). This shape suggests the image of a door (and a door frame in some cases). Thus niches were recently interpreted as a door where epiphany occurred, where the divinity would appear (В. Фол 2007: 284-285) or as a symbolic door to the netherworld (Кузманов 2001: 116). These hypotheses were offered on the grounds of parallels with rock-cut monuments and complexes in Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean. Such parallels prompted the interpretation of the complexes as associated with the cult of the Mountain Mother like those of the Phrygian Kybele (А. Фол 1994: 256-264; Vassileva 2001; В. Фол 2007: 300-325). A number of other hypotheses were offered regarding the interpretation of the phenomenon "East-Rhodopean rock-cut niches" (cf. Костов 2001). Only further complex investigations, with the application of interdisciplinary approaches combining not only cultural anthropological and comparative analyses but also petrological, geochemical, paleoenvironmental and other geological investigations, can allow for more definite conclusions about their function.

The project for a more detailed study of the Gluhite Kamani site and its area is still in its early stages. Our preliminary results show that the site was used from prehistoric through medieval times, most intensively during the Early Iron Age. Right now there is no firm indication of how the cult site at Gluhite Kamani was used, whether to honor a major deity, local hero, or ancestor figure. Could the trapezoidal shape of the niches be an allusion to burial rites, perhaps commemorative rites for a chieftain clan or hero? We may also wonder whether the niches that occur in groups might signify offerings by members of a social unit, such as an extended family or clan. Future work at Gluhite Kamani and neighboring sites should help address these questions.

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GLUHITE KAMANI: OLD QUESTIONS AND NEW APPROACHES

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ГЛУХИТЕ КАМЪНИ: СТАРИ ВЪПРОСИ И НОВИ ПОДХОДИ

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Големият интерес към Глухите камъни се дължи основно на многобройните ниши, изсечени по увенчаващите билото скални зъбери. Най-впечатляващи обаче са изсичанията в доминиращия над околните скален масив. Върху заравнения му връх е вкопана дълбока правоъгълна шерпа за събиране и съхраняване на вода. До нея води добре оформена двураменна стълба. Южното лице на скалата, от където започва стълбата, е оформено отвесно. На това място е издълбано пещерообразно помещение, с правоъгълен план и куполообразно покритие.

Първият опит за системно изследване на обекта е поставено от експедицията на Института по тракология през 1975 г. Затова с удоволствие представяме първоначалните си резултати в издание, посветено на 40-годишнината на Института.

Първите археологически проучвания на Глухите камъни започват през 2008 г. под ръководството на д-р Г. Нехризов. Резултатите веднага показаха, че е необходимо ново теренно изследване и документиране на нишите с модерни технически средства и според съвременните стандарти за теренно проучване.

През 2011 г. с финансиране от Фондация Америка за България чрез конкурс, организиран от Американския научен център в София, започна българо-американски проект с две основни задачи – теренно проучване на района на Глухите камъни и археологически разкопки в централния сектор на обекта. В настоящата работа представяме предварителните резултати от тези изследвания.

Основната цел на теренното проучване беше оглед, точно локализиране с мобилни ГИС и GPS устройства, подробно описание и документиране на всички изкуствени изсичания върху скалите в м. Глухите камъни. В резултат на теренната работа бяха установени 459 ниши, част от които

неизвестни досега. Те са обединени в 81 единични или групи от ниши, разположени върху 28 обособени скали и скални групи. Вероятно броят на нишите е по-голям, регистрирането им обаче е затруднено от гъстата растителност, която ограничава видимостта към скалите.

Още в началото на археологическите разкопки се установи, че на обекта има значителни културни напластявания от ранната желязна епоха. Археологическите проучвания в централния сектор продължиха четири сезона докато културните отложения бяха напълно изчерпани. В резултат на стратиграфските наблюдения се установи, че под пласт от средновековието е отложен седимент от ранната желязна епоха с обща дебелина над 2,40 м. В него се разграничиха три стратиграфски пласта с различен интензитет. При проучванията на различни нива бяха разкрити огнища, замазки и други структури, както и голямо количество фрагментирани керамични съдове и разнообразни находки.

Резултатите от четиригодишните проучвания на пластове от ранната желязна епоха, както и изследванията на целия комплекс ни дават основания да потвърдим досегашната интерпретация на обекта – сложен комплекс с култов характер. Центърът на култовата дейност изглежда е бил на най-високото място, където сега се намират останките от средновековната църква.

Предварителните резултати ни дават възможност само предпазливо да се обърнем към хипотези за предназначението на скалните ниши. Връзката на нишите с погребалната обредност не може да се изключи напълно. Трапецовидна форма на нишите би могла да е алюзия за погребални ритуали или възпоменателни ритуали за вожд или герой. Групите ниши може да са предназначени или изсечени от членовете на една социална единица, като например семейство или род. Също така може да се предположи, че те са били правени по време на различни ритуално (календарно) важни моменти. Дали става дума за почитане на божество, местен херой или култ към предците все още е рано да се каже.. Бъдещите изследвания на Глухите камъни и съседните обекти вероятно ще помогнат за решаването на тези въпроси.