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Editorial Note: Begliktash - where the Sun fell in love with the Earth

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This article is part of a series of articles united thematically by the new logo of the Journal Acta Scientifica Naturalis: The Natural Sciences - where Science meets Beauty. The article is dedicated to Begliktash - a Thracian rock sanctuary. The Begliktash is located in Strandzha Mountain in Eastern Bulgaria, near the shores of the Black Sea next to Maslen Cape. It is located 4 km north of Primorsko - a small and beautiful resort town, and 40 km southeast of Bourgas - one of the largest seaports in Bulgaria.

Begliktash translated from Turkish means "Stone for a natural tax": from "beglik" - "a tax in kind for the feudal ruler in the Ottoman Empire" and "tash" - a stone. It is believed that at the time when this territory was part of the Ottoman Empire, local shepherds came here to pay the tax on their flocks. The tax was in kind - in the form of animals and they were brought to the meadow in the area. On the big stones stood the authorities who collected the tax.

The rock complex is also called "Bulgarian Stonehenge" and is one of the most famous tourist sites in Bulgaria (Figure 1). The total area of the complex is 1.2 ha, and of the part studied so far - 0.6 ha. Due to the large size of the stone blocks of which it is composed, it belongs to the group of megalithic complexes. It is considered one of the largest prehistoric megalithic sanctuaries in Bulgaria. According to various sources, the weight of some of the blocks reaches 100-200 tons. Some of the stone blocks are shaped naturally by erosion, while others are shaped by hand. The arrangement of the stone blocks is supposed to also combine naturally arranged blocks and specially arranged by man, but it remains unknown with what technical devices this is done.

I

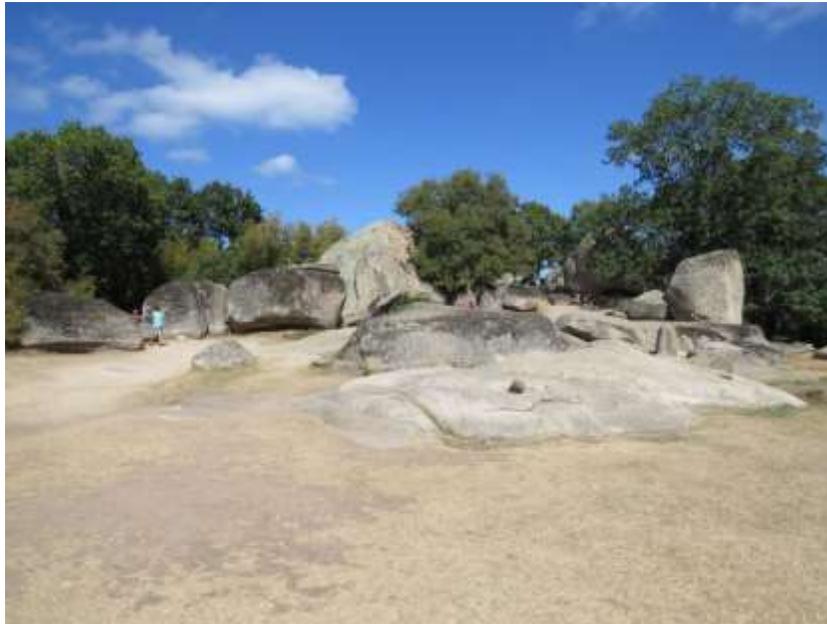


Figure 1. A view to the entrance of the rock complex (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev)

The research shows that Begliktash has existed since the 15th century BC. At that time these lands were inhabited by the Thracian tribe "Skirmians". They are known as the most ancient metallurgists in ancient Thrace. Apparently, they not only had the ability to process metals, but they also managed to sculpt rock blocks with metal tools. Due to its easy access and fame, during the different epochs of its existence the place was visited by Thracians, Greeks and Romans.

Begliktash has been known to Bulgarian archeological science since the field research of the famous archaeologist Karel Shkorpil in Bulgaria, carried out at the end of the 19th century. Karel Shkorpil notes that there is a rocky peak near Maslen Nos, which he calls "Apostle Tash". He describes the site as a rock block with a special heart shape, placed back on the rock base. It is unusual that the large piece of rock is supported by three points and under it there is a specially cut cavity with enough space for a person to lie down (Figure 2). Despite its originality, this object remains unknown to people outside the scientific community for nearly a hundred years.

In 2002 the Bulgarian archaeologist Tsonya Drazheva from the Regional Historical Museum of Burgas started archeological excavations of the ancient sanctuary. Pottery, coins, tools, weapons, etc. were found in the area. Based on the findings, it is assumed that the sanctuary has functioned without interruption for nearly 2000 years - from the XV century BC to the 4th century AD. The lack of later construction on it has preserved the cultural layers and the sacred elements in their original form.

II

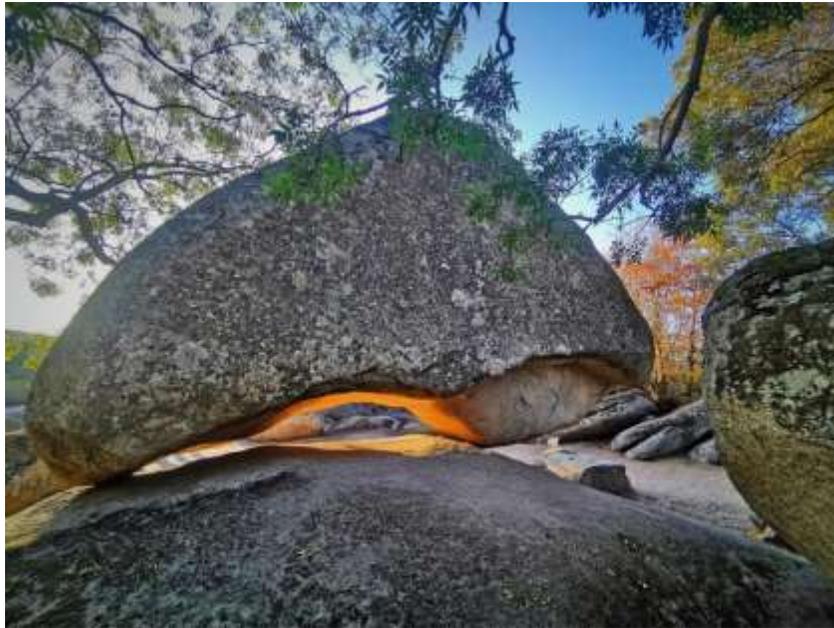


Figure 2. The Main Dolmen (Photo by Dimitar Tabakov)

The complex consists of a central stone platform, which has indentations that depict the location of the stars of the constellation Pleiades. Around the site are several groups of stone blocks of different shapes and different applications. It is believed that the complex served as a temple, calendar, and clock.

It is believed that the temple part is dedicated to the cult of the sun god and the cult of the mother goddess. The whole complex is oriented around an axis that is directed in the east-west direction - a reference to the direction in which the Sun moves. The main stone blocks are located around this axis. The main dolmen, called the Sacred Cave-womb, is 12 m high and 9 m long. The dolmen is a megalithic structure built of several vertically located stone slabs, which form a chamber and are covered with another stone slab. In Begliktash, the dolmen resembles a womb and, according to archaeologists, symbolizes the feminine principle. According to the existing explanations, the sacrament of the birth of Heros takes place in the womb, who after his appearance, illuminated by the sunrise, is under the arch of the Apostle Tash and is greeted by many worshipers (Figure 3).

If a person manages to climb the huge rounded stone, also called menhir (an elongated stone, driven in independently), he will see the step of the Sun God on it. This is a specially carved in stone place, resembling a step, also oriented east-west. On the opposite side of the rock terrace is the footsteps of the mother goddess. Rock prints were created to attest to the presence of the gods and to prove their appearance. They are characteristic of the religious symbolism of the ancients and come from more distant times, when the deities did not have their own appearance.

III

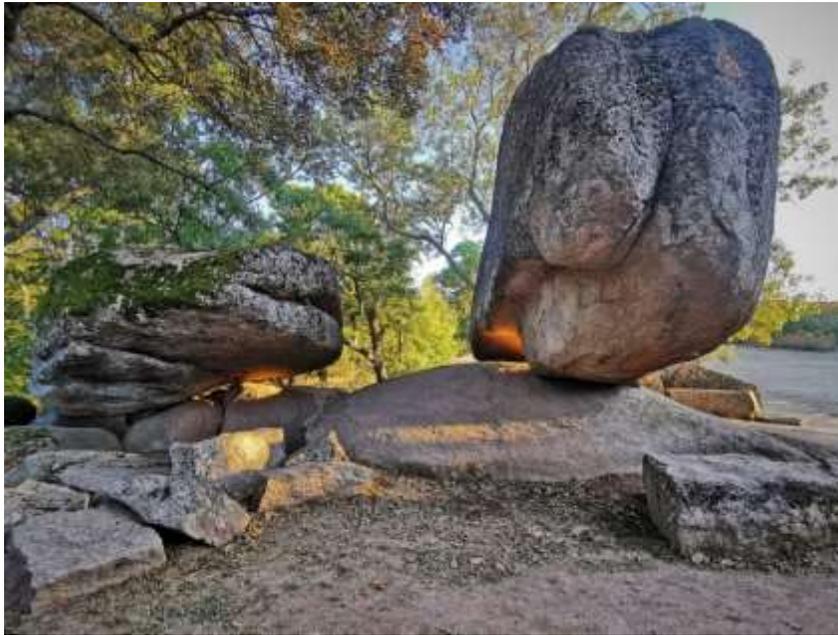


Figure 3. The Sacred Cave-womb (Photo by Dimitar Tabakov)

In the easternmost part is the vestibule to the complex, next to which there is a "marriage bed", oriented east-west. The cushions modeled on the scale are oriented to the east. Around the "bed" are carved tubs in which the four initial components of the cosmos were poured according to the Thracians. These are: water, which symbolizes the elements, milk is a symbol of air, vegetable oil is a symbol of fire and wine, which is a symbol of the earth. According to archaeologists, this is how the ancient Thracians recreated the cosmic model of the world and their ideas about it.

After this first group of stones of "divine union" are two altars and a priestly throne. It is assumed that only gifts of plant origin were brought here - grapes, figs and others. In the middle of the megalithic complex is the stone throne of the great Thracian priest, which offers a view of the entire site of the sanctuary. The rock-carved seat in ancient times stood on one of the great rocks, but nowadays it lies on the ground - probably collapsed in an earthquake. The great Thracian priest inhabited another rock phenomenon called the Lion's Head. It is located about 3 km from the megalithic complex near the Ropotamo River. The whole area around abounds in Thracian mounds, dolmens and small rock sanctuaries. This wealth of ancient monuments gives grounds for this part of the Strandzha Mountain, which is located on the right bank of the river Ropotamo, to be called the Holy Mountain of the Thracian metallurgists.

In the northeastern part of the complex is built a kind of labyrinth of monoliths. It is believed that it served to foretell the future and the profession to which the young people of the tribe will be directed. The

labyrinth has two exits - the left, associated with the sacred beginning and the priestly profession, and the right, which is associated with pragmatic activity in life. In order to reach the exits, the young people had to go through various trials. One of them is the passage through a narrow rock crevice. The gap is about 50 cm wide and is located between the two halves of a megalithic boulder with a height of 6 m.

Next to them is a sundial, consisting of a main stone, curved in a specific way, and six smaller stones, which have been torn down, like domino tiles, and are about to be raised again (Figure 4). The shadow of the sundial falls on a different stone in different parts of the day.



Figure 4. Part of the sundial (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev)

In the complex is also Temenos (House of the Oracle). This is a building, probably inhabited by the priestly class, which served the sanctuary all year round. It was built in the IV century AD. And unlike other sites, it has been used for a relatively short time. It is believed that with the advent of Christianity in the Roman Empire after the V-VI century AD, the place was abandoned and the spiritual center moved north to the bay of St. Paraskeva, where a Christian monastery was built with the patron Saint Paraskeva.

Today the place is a famous tourist site that connects the past with the present, the forest with the open spaces, the land and the sea. This is the place where the Sun is still in love with the Earth.