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Editorial Note: Madara Plateau - amazing nature and ancient history**Dimcho Zahariev**

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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 Madara Plateau. The Madara Plateau is located in Northeastern Bulgaria. It is located 17 km east of Shumen and 80 km west of Varna. It is part of a larger plateau system called the Provadia-Royak Plateau. Due to the peculiarities of its relief, it can be distinguished as a separate plateau with clearly defined boundaries. Its name is due to the village of Madara, Shumen region, located at its western foot.

The area of the Madara plateau is 20 km². The length from west to east is 7-8 km, and the width from north to south is 4-5 km. The maximum height is the peak Dvete Mogili (429.8 m above sea level), located in the northwestern part of the plateau. In its western part there are rock crowns with a length of 6 km and a maximum height of 110 m. Along the length of the rock crowns, vertical cracks are observed between the main rock and blocks separated from it. In some places they form precipices up to 90 m deep and 5 m wide. Natural rock niches have formed in the upper part of the rocks. It is believed that the thick layer of rocks formed at the bottom of the ancient Sarmatian Sea. This is evidenced by the large number of fossils of marine animals found in the rocks.

The majestic view of the Madara rocks makes them an attractive center for the people who settled in these lands in the IV millennium BC. The place is an important spiritual center of ancient Bulgaria due to its proximity to the old Bulgarian capitals Pliska and Preslav. It can be reasonably believed that Madara (Madra) is the name of a large proto-Bulgarian sanctuary. The meaning of the word "Madara" has been the subject of a number of studies. According to some of the most reliable, the name comes from the proto-Bulgarian word

I

Mondra (Madara, Mundraga), which means "high rocky peak". It can also be associated with the ancient Iranian and Indo-Aryan word Mandara, which means "huge, hard rock," the name of the main, sacred mountain of the ancient Iranians and Indo-Aryans, where their gods lived. Some researchers conclude that Madara is a religious concept and name similar to what Mount Mandara was to the earliest Indo-Aryans.

Madara is often called "Bulgarian Troy". The area is full of remains from many eras, from different cultures and traces of all tribes and peoples who lived here: prehistoric people, Thracians, Romans, proto-Bulgarians. This is the reason why the area was declared a historical and archeological reserve. At the base of the rocks there are a large number of niches and caves, the largest of which are the Big Cave and the Small Cave. In the caves there was a settlement from the Stone-Copper Age (3500 BC). The large cave is a vast rock niche with a length of 120 m, height 60-70 m and depth 25-30 m. There was a Thracian sanctuary of the three nymphs, patrons of the springs and donors of health. The small cave is about 20 m long. The tomb mounds on the plateau also testify to the life from the Thracian epoch (IV-I century BC).

Due to the impressive size and unusual appearance of the rocks, as well as the abundant water flowing from the rocks, according to some researchers Madara rocks were the largest ancient cult complex on the Balkan Peninsula, much older and larger than Delphi, Dodona and others known today in Europe cult complexes from the era of ancient Greece.

Under the rocks on the slopes of the plateau to the plain was found a late antique building called "Villa rustica", which means agricultural farm. It is an impressive complex of buildings typical of agricultural villas in the European provinces of the Roman Empire. Around it in the II-IV century a whole settlement developed with a large public bath, an early Christian church, civic and farm buildings.

The most famous site in the area is the bas-relief carved into the rocks, called "Madara Horseman". It is included in the UNESCO World Cultural and Historical Heritage List. The Madara Horseman is the only rock relief in Europe from the early Middle Ages and thanks to its Madara became world famous. It is carved into the vertical rock walls at a height of 23 m. The relief is an almost life-size rider piercing a lion lying at the horse's feet with his spear. A dog is running behind the rider. According to a number of researchers, the relief is a triumphant scene, symbolizing the victory of the Bulgarian ruler and the great power of the young Bulgarian state, soon after its creation of territory gained by war from the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium). The pierced lion symbolizes the defeated enemy: the Byzantine Empire.

Around the bas-relief in the rock are carved inscriptions by the first Bulgarian rulers. The first perpetuates the events that took place during the reign of Khan Tervel (701-717 AD) and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. In this inscription for the first time in a Bulgarian source the name "Bulgarians" is read. There is talk of the help that Khan Tervel provided to the Byzantine emperor to regain his throne. The second inscription is from the time of Khan Kormisosh (756 AD), and the third is from the time of Khan Omurtag

II

(814-831 AD). All inscriptions mention events that took place between Bulgaria and Byzantium. These inscriptions are part of a kind of stone archive from the earliest period of the Bulgarian state.

Nowadays the place is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Bulgaria. Different types of tourism can be practiced here, as well as different sports, including paragliding. Every year various cultural events are organized in the area of the Madara Rocks. The most impressive of them are "Madara Music Days" and the medieval festival "Magic Madara". Until 2015, "Madara Music Days" are held in the Great Cave, due to the excellent acoustics. The medieval fair "Magic Madara" gives visitors the opportunity to watch a historical spectacle, get acquainted with the life, traditions and weapons of the old Bulgarians, to shoot a bow at a target, to try horseback riding and to get acquainted with the medieval Bulgarian cuisine. People's fairs of local significance are also held in the region. In order to preserve the richness of the living nature, the rock crowns and part of the neighboring territories in the area are included in the boundaries of the protected area "Madara Rock Wreaths". The entire territory of the Madara Plateau is included in the boundaries of the protected area "Provadia-Royak Plateau" by the European Ecological Network "Natura 2000". The Madara Plateau area is still lively and interesting.