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**SOCIETÀ  
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**3<sup>RD</sup>**  
**INTERNATIONAL  
SYMPOSIUM  
ON UNDERGROUND  
QUARRIES**

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**Napoli**  
**Castel dell'Ovo**  
**10-14 July 1991**



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# **3<sup>RD</sup> INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON UNDERGROUND QUARRIES**

**A T T I**

a cura di R. Paone e C. Piciocchi

Napoli - Castel dell'Ovo - 10/14 July 1991

**MEDIEVAL PICTURES OF ANIMALS-GRAPHITES  
IN THE CAVES OF NORTHWEST BULGARIA  
AND THE RELATION OF SOME OF THEM WITH  
THE RELIGIOUS-MYTHOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF THE BULGARIANS**

*M. Asparuhov\**

**Riassunto**

*Le ricerche diversificate sulla cultura medievale Bulgara hanno spiegato in buona misura i problemi connessi alla origine, al contenuto, al carattere ed al significato delle pitture e dei graffiti simbolici, opera dell'arte popolare primitiva. Incise su pietre, in cave, sui muri di chiese tagliate nella roccia ed in anfratti, esse impressionano per la generalità delle forme, l'espressività e l'emozionalità del tratto. Nella maggior parte dei casi, esse sono realistiche rispetto alla natura, espressione della percezione diretta del mondo che circondava l'autore. Alcune, che dipingono forze magiche e soprannaturali, sono ispirate dalla religione pagana, ed altre fra le più tarde sono legate alla Cristianità. A dispetto della varietà di temi e soggetti, il mondo degli animali è un tema specifico comune a tutte. Le immagini preferite sono: orsi, daini, cervi, lupi, cani, etc. che, in quanto parte dell'immaginario tradizionale e delle nozioni dell'uomo medievale, sono direttamente collegate alla mitologia Bulgara. La quantità di animali ritratti mostra un esplicito culto degli stessi e la venerazione si basa sulle loro intrinseche virtù naturali. Viene fatto un tentativo per spiegare la semantica di alcuni dei dipinti su roccia per mettere in evidenza visioni mitologiche del mondo, concezioni estetiche e valori dei Bulgari medievali.*

*Cronologicamente la maggior parte delle pitture discusse appartiene al Regno Bulgaro (VII-XI sec.), una parte di esse al secondo Regno Bulgaro (XII-XIV sec.) ed altre più tarde al periodo del dominio Turco.*

The versatile investigations of the medieval Bulgarian culture revealed the problems of the origin, the content, the character and the significance of the drawings and the symbolic signs-graphites, works of the primitive, humane folk art <sup>(1)</sup>. Engraved with a sharp object on stones in the caves, on fortress walls, in churches high in the rocks, sheds, recesses and so these drawings impress with their generalized forms, with their expressive and emotional style. Most of them have realistic subjects, result of the natural perception of the world surrounding the artist. Some of them reveal magic and supernatural forces inspired by the pagan religy and part of the later ones are directly con-

\* District Historical Museum, Department of Archaeology, Pleven, Bulgaria.



nected with the Christian symbolics. Chronologically, most of them refer to the first Bulgarian Kingdom (VII-XI c.) a small part to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (XII-XIV c.). There are also late ones referring to the ensuing centuries — the period of the Turkish yoke. There are early drawings as well connected with the pre-history but they are not the objective of the present study.

The drawings show thematic and subjective diversity, having its definite pattern and typical peculiarities for the different historical periods.

Fifteen panneaus with drawings-graphites taken by means of photographic techniques in two of the numerous places in the Northwest Bulgaria are the subject of investigation of the present paper. Most of them are presented for the first time in this authentic way. The drawing are shown in their compositional unity, so their plan, organization, character and stratigraphy have been preserved. The panneaus N. 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 are from the caves near the village of Tzarevetz, the district of Vratza. The district is famous not only as a natural phenomenon but as well as one of the places in Southeast Europe with the most versatile and numerous drawings, symbolic sign and inscription-graphites. Archeological object from Neolith, Halstead and Lateran cultural period, from the bronze epoch as well as monuments from the first centuries d. C. have been found in the vicinity.

During the early Middle ages the shortest way from the North to the South Bulgaria, the Aegean and Macedonia passed nearby. In the XIV c. the settlement near the town of Vratza had become one of the big towns in Northwest Bulgaria — an important political and administrative center. In the ensuing centuries, the time of the Turkish yoke, this settlement had become quite brisk.

The remaining part of the panneaus with drawing — N. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8 are from the two-storeyed church in the rocks — “St. Stephen” near the town of Nikopol. The town has been one of the big military-political and administrative centers during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (XII-XIV c.). The drawings had been engraved when the church hadn’t been functioning. an inscription on its west wall was found. It became known from it that the church was made in the rocks and turned into a place of worship at the end of XIII — the beginning of the XIV century. When Bulgaria was conquered by the Turks at the end of the XIV c. the church hadn’t been spared. Probably the drawings refer to this period or a little bit later when the artists have been facilitated by the preserved floor in its eastern part, using it for a scaffolding.

In spite of the diversity of themes and subjects the animal world is a common specific feature for all places with graphites. Horses, deer, wolves, dogs and others are favorite images which as an element of the traditional ideas and notions of the medieval man are connected with the Bulgarian mythology. Their repeatedness shows the worship of the drawn animals. They are respected for their natural strength. Part of these works are in direct relation with the mythological aspects for the world, the aesthetical conceptions and the criteria of the medieval Bulgarians. These problems are comparatively well explained in the scientific literature <sup>(2)</sup>.

The horse had played an extremely important role in the home and military life of the Bulgarians, it had a special place in his religious world. This refers especially to the period of the early Bulgarian state. At this time the horse and the hero-horseman

are a typical subject in the folk art, created with love and inspiration. The superb plastic forms of the horse with its exquisite movements are an interesting and attractive model for drawing. The Protobulgars connected it with the Sun, being an attribute of the heavenly God Tangra. The military symbol of Tangra explains the using of the horse tail by the Bulgarians as a military flag. Very often the horse is drawn with a rider, an important person in the context and the complex world of the early Bulgarian state, full of symbolism and cosmologism. Probably this is the generalized image of the hero-horseman or the heavenly God itself. Having made a conditional analysis of the drawings we accept that the panneaus 1, 2, 7 and 11 represent horses. The outlines of an extremely interesting in character and content drawing, having a conditional analogy with some early medieval Bulgarian monuments can be seen on panneau 2. It is not difficult to compare this work with the small bronze horse-amulets with human heads or a mask on the saddle directly connected with the culture of the First Bulgarian Kingdom<sup>(3)</sup>. There is not one common opinion in the scientific literature, however, concerning their purpose of use. It is considered that they express directly or indirectly the cult toward the sun. It is accepted that their magic force is concentrated in the horse and the horsetrappings, they are related to some Bulgarian customs.

Among the drawing of horses from the Northwest Bulgaria there are not such masterpieces as from the Northwest Bulgaria or South Dobroudzha. In these settlements dwelled in by Protobulgars the images are engraved with skill and dexterity.

Panneaus 2, 3, 4, 10, 12, 13, 15 depict deer. With its handsome mighty body and huge antlers the stag excites unspeakable rapture. It is one of the favourite images, encountered often among the numerous medieval Bulgarian graphites not only from the Northeast Bulgaria and South Dobroudzha but also in Northwest Bulgaria and East Macedonia. It is represented in different way — with a big, elongated or shortened body, standing motionless or in a whirling flight. With small or huge antlers at a different angle toward the body. There are images of deer with a spear in different parts of his body. It is a moment of successful hunting. Panneau 2 showing the animal pierced through its back and panneau 15 through its neck. It is known that the deer played a definite role in the priesthood in the Protobulgars — it is an assistant of the priest. His main spirit and ancestor. A holy animal of the Saviour or a symbol of the soul in Christianity too.

The image of the wolf is one of the most popular symbols and totems of the Protobulgars. There are evidences showing the protective and patronizing role of this animal. According to the Turkish beliefs every priest can be turned into a wolf, a belief shared by other tribes as well.

The Protobulgars honoured the dogs, offering them sacrifices. they played an important role in the contract vows. In the subject analysis of the panneaus under discussion we didn't find images of a wolf and a dog.

The mythological idea for the goat in the Bulgarian folk beliefs is connected with the devil. It is a devil's animal that cannot be offered up as a sacrifice. Panneaus 3 and 8 represent drawings of a goat.

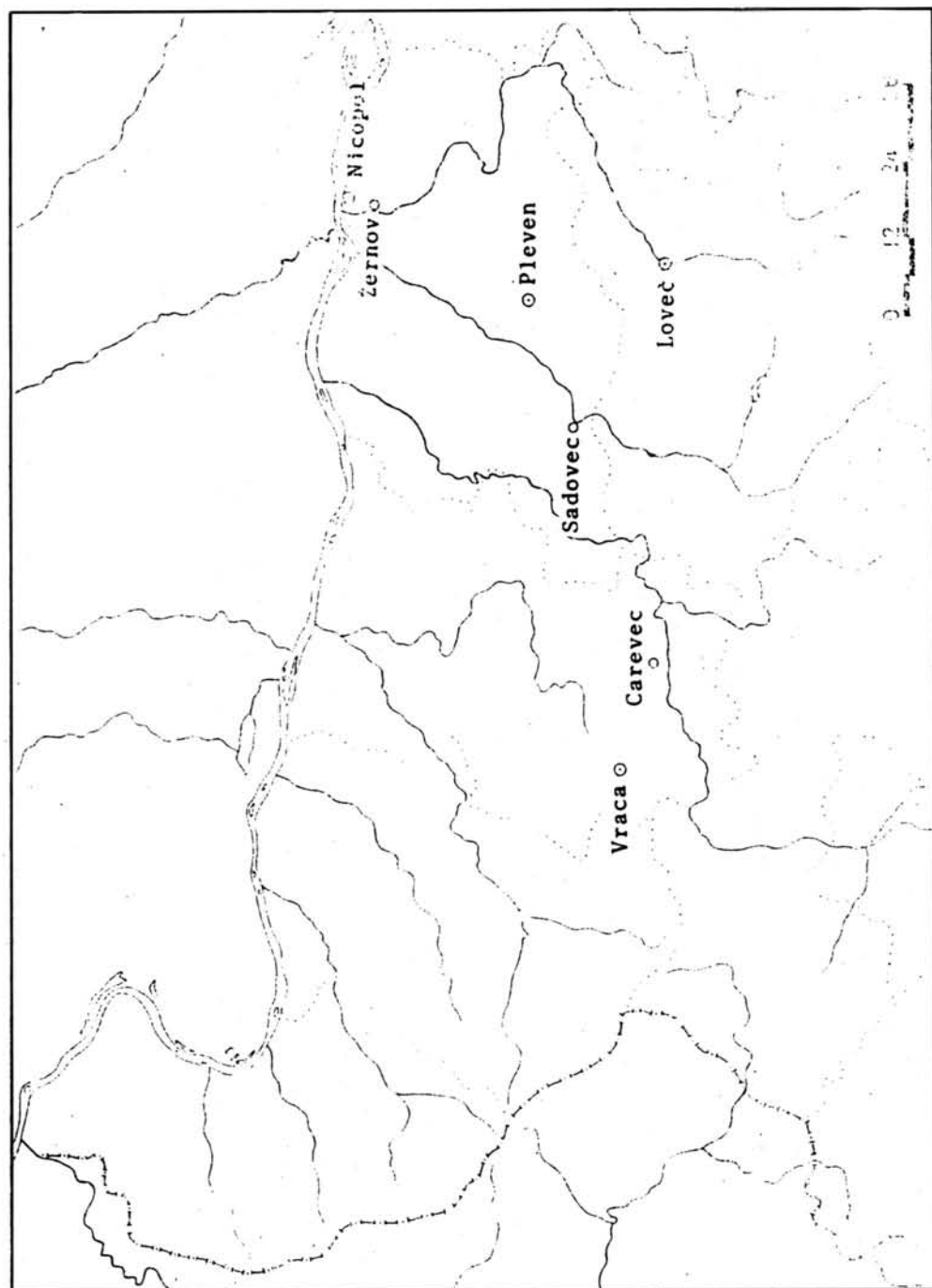
Having in mind the specific silhouettes we can distinguish somehow with reserves an image of a doe - 9; of a fox - 7; of a sheep - 6; of a stork - 5; that are not so popular and typical in the folk beliefs.

The scarce material revealing the culture of the people during the Middle Ages will be supplemented by the versatile content of the drawings-graphites. They will continue to be a historical source for future analysis and generalizations.

#### Letterature cited:

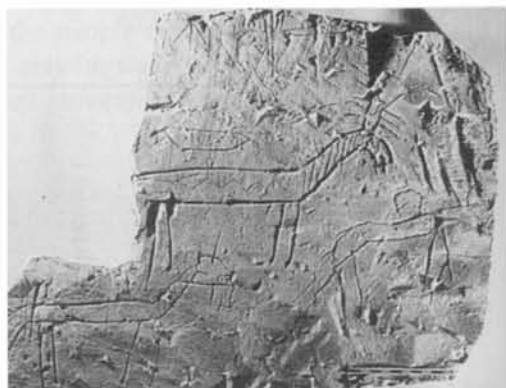
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*M. Asparuhov*, Medieval graphites from the Northwest Bulgaria, Intersubject studies XI-XII, S., 1984
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# THE NORTHWESTERN PART OF BULGARIA





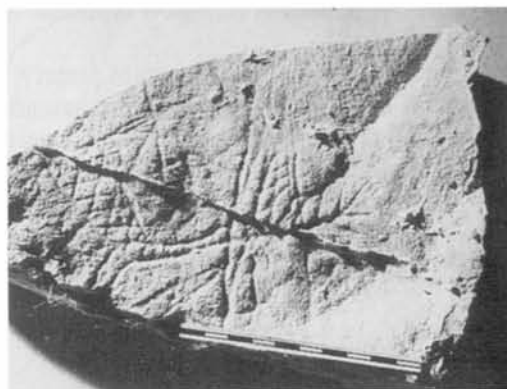
**Panneau 1**



**Panneau 2**



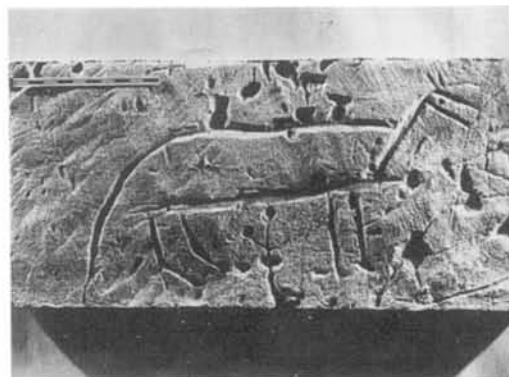
**Panneau 3**



**Panneau 4**



**Panneau 5**



**Panneau 6**





Panneau 7



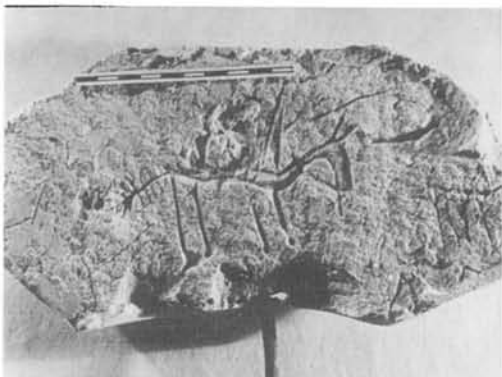
Panneau 8



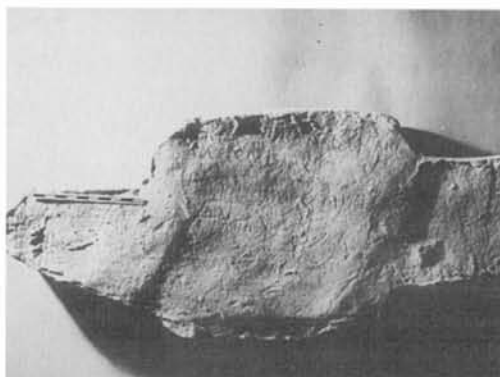
Panneau 9



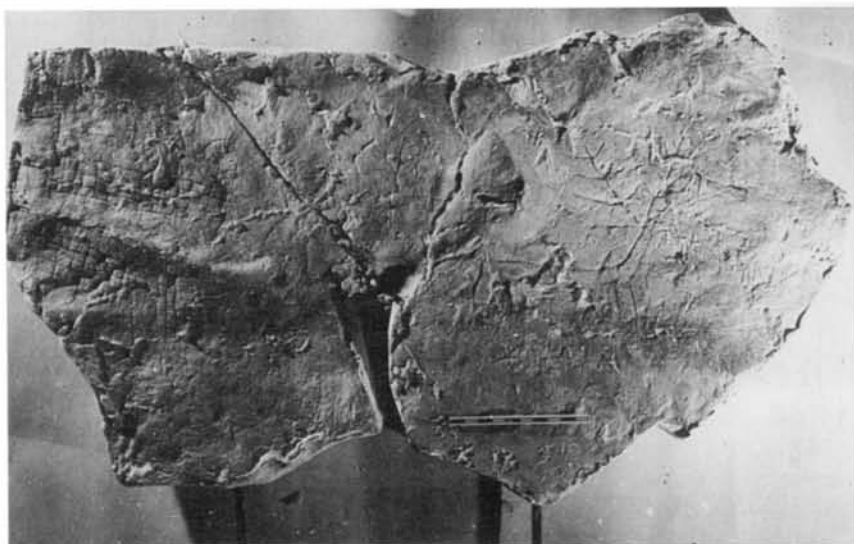
Panneau 10



Panneau 11



Panneau 12



Panneau 13



Panneau 14



Panneau 15