

WHERE WAS THE SO-CALLED MAIN SANCTUARY OF DIONYSUS IN THRACE IN THE 6th - 1st CENTURIES B. C.? (an opinion)

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The cult of Dionysus in Ancient Thrace and holy places connected with this cult (mountains, mounts, hills, holy land, holy woods, temples, etc. noted in general as sanctuary or sanctuaries of Dionysus) are mentioned both in the first works of the ancient authors and many of the later works having reached our days and containing certain historical information (*a short review of the information related to the sanctuaries of Dionysus in Thrace is given in Златковская 1971, p. 248, NB 173; Фол 1990, p. 178-194*). They mention the existence in south-west Thrace of the so-called now most well-known sanctuary of Dionysus or the so-called now main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace and give a fragmentary and, in most of the cases, contradictory information about its location. Without submitting to discussion the point whether one or several very well-known centres connected with the cult of Dionysus had existed in Ancient Thrace (similar to the numerous great centres connected with the cult of the Great Mother Goddess in Thrace) and whether one or another of the existing great cult centres was selected to be the most important one in certain periods of time, we shall call, in this study, the holy place commented in the sources and related to the cult of Dionysus the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace.

The modern research workers having studied the past of Ancient Thrace have dealt with the problem for different reasons and have expressed different opinions on the point where the main sanctuary of Dionysus was. We think that there is not yet a view having been generally accepted which could adduce sufficiently sound arguments to accept at least one of the assumptions expressed about the exact place of the main sanctuary of Dionysus.

The new communications having been made lately that the main sanctuary of Dionysus has been discovered this time in the Eastern Rhodopes are the cause which has provoked us to express our opinion on the problem brought forward. Unfortunately, specific arguments taken from the information available from the ancient authors and supported by facts of well-known historical events having taken place in this region in the period from the 6th to the 1st century B. C. have not been given. Instead some assumptions based on the existence of a sanctuary in rocks known for a very long time already and similar to many such sanctuaries existing in almost the whole territory of south Thrace are categorically presented as proven. This is one of the reasons for which we make a review of part of the scanty information from the sources and interpret it somewhat differently. For this purpose we have taken into consideration the actions of the historical persons having participated in the events of that epoch (persons mentioned by the ancient authors, when speaking about the main sanctuary of Dionysus) and we have tried to avoid the modern trivial interpretation of this information. In our review we shall submit direct and indirect information of numismatic character related to the problem and our conclusions drawn from the study of such numismatic information and from our visits to the sanctuaries in rocks in south Thrace, and we shall express our opinion on some results of the studies having

been carried out up to now and related to the main cults in Ancient Thrace and those specifying the location of the main sanctuary of Dionysus. At the same time we shall point out the arguments which should be adduced in our opinion when looking for the answer to the question where in Ancient Thrace the main sanctuary of Dionysus must have been. We shall also point out a complex of adjacent cult places which may be considered with good grounds, in our opinion, as the most probable main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace.

The information known at the moment from the sources has been quoted and commented in the studies having been carried out up to now. Therefore, we shall quote only some passages of works of ancient authors.

In his "History" Herodotus (who wrote in the 5th century B. C.) mentions that "The Satrae were not conquered by anybody, as far as I know; they were the only tribe among the Thracians that remained free to this day, because they live in high mountains covered with various thick forests and snow and because they are bellicose. The sanctuary of Dionysus belongs to them, and this sanctuary is on the highest mountain. The oracles in the sanctuary are Bessians from the Satrae. There is also a priestess who gives answers in the same way as in Delphi, but nothing special" (Herodotus, VII, 111).¹

Aristotle (who wrote in the 4th century B. C.) mentions in his "Strange Things" ("About the Marvellous Stories") that in "Crestonia that is in the lands of the Bisaltae"... "there is also a great beautiful temple of Dionysus in which, they say, a feast takes place and oblations are made, and when the god intends to make the year fertile, a large flame appears, and all men who are near the holy place, can see it. When (he intends to make) a lean year, no such light appears..." (Aristoteles, 842a, 122).

In a scholium to "Hekuba" of Euripides (it is not known, when this scholium was written) it is mentioned that "Some affirm that the sanctuary of Dionysus must be around Pangeus, others - around Hemus..." (Euripides, Hekuba, scholia, 1267).

It is possible to find a short information related to worshipping of Dionysus in Thrace in a passage of Pomponius Mela (who wrote in the 1st century A. D.) saying that "In the interior of the country rise the mountains Hemus, Rhodopes and Orbel famous for the rites of Liberus and for the orgies of the maenads initiated by Orpheus for the first time" (Pomponius Mela, II 2, 16-33). Here it should be noted that the majority of the research workers connect the mountain Orbelus mainly with the mountain Belassitza but it is also connected with other adjacent massifs.

Suetonius (who wrote in the 1st-2nd centuries A. D.), when commenting the actions of Octavius (the father of the future emperor Octavian August) as a ruler of Macedonia in 60-59 B. C., notes that "... when Octavius led his army somewhere in the remote places of Thrace, he asked the oracle of Dionysus in a barbarian rite in the holy wood of this god about the fate of his son, and his prediction was confirmed by the priests, since after the wine was spilt on the altar, a flame flared high up to the sky over the sanctuary - an omen similar to the one that was bestowed only on Alexander the Great, when the latter offered a sacrifice on the same altar" (Suetonius, *Aug.*, 94).

¹ In this first quotation we shall draw the attention to the differences in transmitting some designations in the translation from ancient Greek in the Bulgarian and Russian publications available to us. Such differences make difficult drawing unambiguous conclusions. This is also valid for this first quotation of which we have several quite different translations. The translations quoted in this study are taken, without mentioning where exactly they are included, from "**Sources of the History of Thrace and the Thracians**" vol. 1. 1982, and vol. 2, 2002, as far as the authors until Aristotle included are concerned, and from "**Sources of Ancient History and Geography of Thrace and Macedonia**", 1949, as far as the other later authors are concerned.

Dionis Casius (who wrote in the 2nd-3rd centuries A. D.), when describing the military actions of Crasus in Thrace in 29-28 B. C., notes that, “when he gained a victory in a battle with the Thracian tribes the Medae and the Serdae, he cut the hands of the captured warriors and thus he could check them, however with difficulty. He devastated also the lands of all the other Thracian tribes with the exception of the Odrysaee. He spared the latter because they worshipped Dionysus and met him unarmed. He bestowed on them the land on which they celebrated their god after he took it away from the Bessaee that owned it up to that moment” (Dionis Casii, LI 23, 2-27).

Macrobius (who wrote in the 4th-5th centuries A. D.), when commenting information from Aristotle, notes that “Aristotle who wrote “The Principles of Gods” affirmed that Apollo and Liberus Pater are one and the same god, and many other evidences prove it; even he says, the Ligerace in Thrace had a sanctuary of Liberus Pater where prophesies were made...” (Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 18).

In one of his studies K. Vlahov discusses in detail this information of Macrobius and gives a different translation of this passage of Macrobius to which he has added his own interpretations. We quote hereunder the whole K. Vlahov’s passage which is of interest in this case:

“We have learned that the Sun is also considered as Liberus (Italian god of fertility and plants) which those people (i. e. the inhabitants of Thrace, my note - K. V.) calling him Sebadius glorify in a splendid cult, as Alexander wrote, and to this god is built up on a hill a temple surrounded with a palisade of pointed stakes with a round roof open in the middle” (Vlahov 1982, p. 43).

The critical review of the earliest information of ancient authors included in the sources shows that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace is situated somewhere in south-west Thrace. The later authors and the later scholiums to some of their works give direct information about the existence of well-known great sanctuaries of Dionysus not only in this region, but also in the Rhodopes and even in Hemus. Their different description also gives us indirect information about the existence of many sanctuaries of Dionysus in Thrace. It is possible to determine from the information from the authors quoted above that in their opinion the sanctuaries described are:

- “on the highest mountain”, (i. e. on a peak - it should be noted that the highest peaks in this region are bald);
- on a mountain (different “mountains” in Thrace are named without mentioning that this is “the highest mountain” which explains to a certain extent that there is a “holy wood”, since the forests in his region are mainly on the lower peaks);
- at the foot of a mountain or even a hill (this being an explanation of the existence there of a “holy land”, “a holy wood”, a spring, etc.);
- in a temple (this information explains in the best way the presence of “a holy land”, “a holy wood”, a spring, etc.).

In a number of monographs related to the study of the Thracian religion prof. A. Fol describes the cult of the Thracian Dionysus, the rites connected with this cult and the Thracian sanctuaries of Dionysus. In accordance with his studies “this god which has no name in the Thracian-Pelasgian antiquity” has been identified “first with the solid cosmic element, the stone, it is a god of the rocks”, “this anonymous god having been adopted first in Delphi in the 8th

century B. C.”... “in one of the most ancient Thracian-Pelagian sanctuaries” (Фол 1990, p. 147). “At the beginning of the deification of Dionysus holy erect stones and altars were decorated with flowers” (Фол 1991, p. 252). On the basis of these studies it is possible to draw the conclusion that the earliest sanctuary (or the earliest sanctuary of Dionysus represented natural rocky configurations. In Ancient Thrace the other main Thracian god, the Great Mother Goddess, was also worshipped on mountains. It is sufficient to note that the main cult place of this goddess was on the Holy Mountain. We shall add that the great cult centre of the Great Mother Goddess named in the later epochs Cybella and Artemis Phosphoros built up in the second millenium B. C. was on a rock in the highest place in Kabyle. Some research workers presume that the image of the god worshipped in the region of Kabyle was represented in an archaic way by sculpturing its contours on the rock.

Sharing his personal impressions of the sanctuary of Delphi prof. A. Fol notes: “I noticed that many recesses and tombs, sacrificial platforms and steps were hewn into the rock. I saw recesses and tombs near the holy spring too... However, there is no doubt for me that Delphi is a majestic sanctuary in rocks belonging to the Thracian-Pelagian culture from the middle of the second millenium B. C. (Фол 1986, p. 150-151). Further in the study he gives some short information about the best known large Thracian sanctuaries in rocks in the mountains of Strandzha, Sakar, the Eastern Rhodopes and Rila. In another study the following general description is made: “A wood with a holy stone (a cove, a piece of rock) near some water is the typical archaic sanctuary in the open” (Фол 1990, p. 164). We have also noted the existence of such sanctuaries of Dionysus in Pirin, in the region of Pangeus (where was the main sanctuary of Dionysus according to some research workers) and where the prophets (and not the possessors of the sanctuary) were Bessians The mountain in the region was named Orbelus in the sources (connected with the mountain of Belassitza at the present times and/or some of its adjacent spurs to the east or the west) and was “in Crestonia, near the land of the Bisaltae” which corresponds to the massifs around and to the west of Belassitza situated to the north of Ancient Macedonia.

Since many of the ancient authors, when mentioning the main sanctuary of Dionysus, locate it in the Rhodopes, many modern research workers look for this sanctuary in the Rhodopes for this reason. However, we shall submit some evidences supporting a different opinion on the point which massifs were usually given this name by the ancient authors, when they used the name of the Rhodopes, very popular among the ancient people without trying to situate this mountain more exactly.

In the early epoch especially the high mountains of the interior of Thrace situated most closely to the Aegean coast represented according to the ancient Greeks two very long, almost parallel massifs. This notion was based on the actual situation of Hemus (Stara Planina) within the lands of Thrace to which were added some smaller spurs to the west and the nearby parallel parts of the mountain Sredna Gora. The mountains consisting of the present Rhodopes, Pirin (and Rila), Ograzhden, Belassitza and some other smaller spurs to the west of Belassitza appeared to them as a second similar long massif. It is possible to suppose that Sakar and Strandzha in the east were included in some cases in the name of the Rhodopes. One of the reasons for such a general designation of the group of mountains by the name of the Rhodopes is that they were inhabited by one community of people, namely the Thracians. These massifs are related in the ideas of the ancient authors to the numerous Thracian tribes having populated these regions. In most of the cases the name of the Thracian tribe populating the region was given as a reference point for a better geographical determination of the part of the mountain in question, and only in rare cases were the names of some spurs mentioned as in the case of

Orbelus already mentioned. Here we shall quote again Herodotus who mentions laconically that “the Bessians from the Satrac... rule the sanctuary of Dionysus, and this sanctuary is on the highest mountain” (Herodotus, VII, 111). In our opinion, “the highest mountain” according to Herodotus means the highest mountain in Thrace which includes, in his opinion, not only the relatively low massif of today’s Rhodopes but also the actually highest mountains of Rila and Pirin, since in the earliest ideas of the ancient authors this range of mountains was designated by the general name of the Rhodopes.

An indirect proof thereof can be found in looking through the old maps existing still nowadays in which are marked parts of the land populated by the Thracians. The map of Ortelius shows that Stara Planina and the mountains situated to the south of Stara Planina which have different names at present are almost parallel. They were marked by the general name of the Rhodopes in the antiquity. It is possible to see clearly on the map of Mercator that the range of mountains in the west of today’s Rhodopes are represented as a continuous massif.

Information given by Herodotus in the 5th century B. C. represents serious grounds to suppose that by the name of the Rhodopes were designated several massifs situated very far to the west of today’s Rhodopes. Noting chronologically events of the campaign of Xerxes through Thrace, the father of the history says that “The king of the Bisaltae who is a Thracian did there and in the Crestonian land an unheard of action: he did not agree voluntarily to be Xerxes’s slave and fled high up in the Rhodopes after having forbidden to his sons to take the field against Athens. But they either did not obey his father or they simply wanted to see the war and took the field with the Persians. However, after they returned back safe and sound all of them, and they were six, their father gouge out their eyes for their inobedience” (Herodotus, VIII, 16).

According to the studies having been carried out up to now the Bisaltae ruled over the lands to the west of the lower course of Strimon (the river Strouma), their northern border reaching Orbelus (Belassiza?). The Thracian tribe of the Crestonae inhabited lands to the west of the Bisaltae situated on the northern slopes of the mountains of Dissoron and Bogdan (*Кратка енциклопедия тракийски древности = Short Encyclopedia of Thracian Antiquities, 1993, p. 42 and 155*).

If the text of Herodotus is analyzed carefully, it will be established that, when Xerxes reached the lands of the anonymous ruler of the Bisaltae and the Crestonae, the latter could not fly from the Persians “up in the mountain of the Rhodopes”, since the western parts of the Rhodopes is about 150 km to the east, and the road to that part was already under Persian control. This anonymous king could withdraw “up in the mountain” only to the north where several massifs to the west of Belassitza are situated. Here we shall point out again that “in Crestonia near the land of the Bisaltae” “there is also a very big beautiful temple of Dionysus” (Aristoteles, 842a, 122) and we shall also note again the information of Pomponius Mela quoted already above and related to the existence of a sanctuary of Dionysus in the mountain of Orbelus (Pomponius Mela, II 2, 16-33). Another similar information is included in the text of Dionis Casius also quoted above saying that after Xerxes won the battle with the Medae and the Serdae, he bestowed on the Odrysaes the sanctuary of Dionysus which “he took away from the Bessaes” (Dionis Casii LI 23, 2-27). Obviously Crasus did not wage war against the Medae and the Serdae in today’s Rhodopes. Therefore, it should be mentioned here again that the Bessaes did not possess the sanctuary of Dionysus, but Bessians were oracles in the sanctuary of Dionysus as in the earlier epoch priests of Thracian origin were oracles in Delphi.

We also find grounds that the main sanctuary of Dionysus was not in today’s Rhodopes, when interpreting some information from the sources and connecting it with the coinage and the

decoration of vessels of precious metals with images and symbols of the early Odrysian regal coinage.

The image of a bipennis connected with the cult of Dionysus was introduced in the coinage of the junior branch of the Odrysian dynasty at the time of Sitalces. We have information about two great campaigns of Sitalces to south-west, the first against the Peonae, when he added territories around the upper and the middle courses of the river Strouma to his possessions, and the second one carried out shortly thereafter against the Macedonian Kingdom and described in details in the sources (Thucydides, II 29, II 67, II 95-101). It is considered that the aim of these military activities was to satisfy the territorial pretensions of the Odrysian kings to the Macedonian Kingdom for lands around the lower course of the river Strouma. It is exactly at that time that the image of a bipennis started to be used as a symbol of the royal-priestly power in the lands of Ancient Thrace, and it is for the first time that it is connected with the Odrysaes and their king Sitalces (May 1950, p. 96). The image of the bipennis is used by the successors of Sitalces - Metokos, Amatokos, Teres II - as a dynastic symbol of the coinage of the Odrysian kings of the junior branch of the dynasty after Teres I. It is considered that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace fell in the hands of the Odrysaes during the reign of Sitalces and that it is this event that is the reason for which the image of the bipennis was adopted as a symbol of the kings residing in this region of the Odrysian Kingdom. The same image is encountered on objects of precious metals such as the vessels of the Rogozen treasure on which the name of Satokos, the son of Sitalces, is written in addition to the image of the bipennis (*relatively detailed explanation in* Топалков 1994, p. 74-75). At that time Sitalces did not wage war with the independent Thracians (called Satrae, Diae and Bessaie) populating part of today's Rhodopes. The latter joined voluntarily his army, and for this reason it should be considered with good grounds that he did not take possession of the main sanctuary of Dionysus. The direct or indirect submission to Sitalces of some regions around the middle and lower course of the river Strouma at the time of the campaigns mentioned here shows that probably the main sanctuary of Dionysus was somewhere in these lands, since the Thracian territories incorporated in the Odrysian Kingdom at that time were situated exactly in these regions. The northern part of the land of the Migdonae, the Crestonae and the Bisaltae was also exactly in this region. The main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace was also in this region according to the information included in most of the sources.

A parallel between the time, when the main sanctuary of Dionysus was put under the control of the representatives of the junior branch of the Odrysian dynasty, and the time, when the main sanctuary of the Great Mother Goddess in Thrace situated on the Holy Mountain was put under the control of the representatives of the senior branch of the Odrysian dynasty, shows the almost simultaneous introduction of the two different dynastic symbols in the coinage of both branches of the dynasty. In the case of the junior branch (whose representatives after Sitalces were Metokos, Amatokos and Teres II) it is the image of a bipennis connected with the cult of Dionysus. In the case of the senior branch (whose representatives after Sparadokos were Seuthes I, Hebryzelmis, Kotys I and Kersebleptes) it is the image of the typically shaped conical vessel with two handles (cotyle?, cotyliscus?) connected with the cult of the Great Mother Goddess. Here it should be noted that after Philip II thrust the Odrysian kings out of the southern parts of the Odrysian Kingdom towards the initial lands of the Odrysian tribal union (situated around the middle course of the rivers Maritza and Toundzha), where were not the main sanctuaries of Dionysus and the Great Mother Goddess, these two basic images used until that time were not stamped anymore on the coins of the next Odrysian kings.

The combination of some other data from the sources related to the events of the period of the 4th - 1st centuries B. C. represents an important argument that the main sanctuary of Dionysus was not in today's Rhodopes.

The current studies show that the route of the greatest military campaigns in Thrace having taken place in antiquity did not cross today's Rhodopes from the time of the Persian invasion to the time when Thrace was declared Roman province. Even the victorious Roman army could not place under its direct control the highest parts of the Rhodopes until about the middle of the 1st century B. C. Sometimes the campaign of Philip II and later of Alexander III to the east of Macedonia took the old roads laid along the Thracian coast and the courses of the rivers Maritza and Toundzha. The campaigns of the Macedonian kings to the north of Macedonia were mainly along the courses of the rivers Strouma and Iskar. The same is valid for the great campaigns of the Roman military units in the period of the 2nd - 1st centuries A. D. Even when using the well-known roads beaten in military actions, the Thracians were striking heavy blows to the Macedonian army and later to the Roman army in their mountains. We shall note only the first and the last cases, namely that Philip II himself was wounded and his spoils from his victorious campaign in east Thrace were taken away by the Tribalae in the region around the gorge of Iskar and that the Roman army, when returning from a victorious war in Asia Minor, was being plundered during three days in the region of the Korpilian gorge by the not so numerous Thracian tribes. For this reason it is extremely illogical to expect that kings such as Philip II and Alexander III could undertake so risky visits to a sanctuary situated high in today's Eastern Rhodopes, because good roads on which even a small military unit may move up to secure the safety of the kings were missing at that time. For the same reason the father of the future emperor Octavian August, being the Roman governor of Macedonia responsible for its protection from the continuous attacks of the neighbouring tribes would hardly undertake a campaign far to the east of Macedonia in territories controlled at that time by the Odrysian kings, allies of Rome, and penetrate in the interior of today's Rhodopes inhabited by the Bessae only with a view to visiting the Thracian sanctuary of Dionysus that was there. Both the Macedonian kings and the Roman governors in Thrace could visit, relatively without problems, the well-known sanctuary of Dionysus starting from the territory of Ancient Macedonia, only if this sanctuary was situated to the north of their possessions in relatively low and more accessible massifs. As the sources show these are the mountain spurs to the west of Belassitza, that are the mountains called by the ancient authors Orbelus and unidentified up to now, which represented probably several adjacent massifs.

Searching additional information about the thesis being elaborated that the popular name of the Rhodopes was used in antiquity to designate in many cases a number of mountains and mountain spurs situated to the west of today's Rhodopes, we came across the comments of B. Guerov related to the determination of the location of the mountain called Orbel by the ancient authors. After reviewing and summarizing the information from the sources, B. Guerov draws the following conclusions: "From all this information it is possible to conclude that initially Orbelus meant only Belassitza, but the later authors who knew poorly the interior of Thrace began to call by this name... all the mountains that were behind Belassitza between the middle courses of the rivers Strouma and Vardar and also between the rivers Strouma and Mesta" (Геров 1961, p. 167-168). Since Orbel was described in some of the sources as one of the highest mountains in Thrace together with the Rhodopes and Hemus (Pomponius Mela, II 2, 17), probably this name was used to designate some of the spurs of the mountains to the west of the river Vardar too. This description of the mountains to the west of the river Strouma (and even Mesta) representing one and the same massif supports our opinion that, in the notions of

the ancient people, the long mountain range to the south of Hemus and similar to Hemus was generally called the Rhodopes, a name that was popular in that epoch. And the main sanctuary of Dionysus was in its western part.

It is possible to find also some information related to the place of the main sanctuary of Dionysus in the farthest western parts of Thrace, when making a comparison with some other data from the sources and the images and the inscriptions on a rare issue of Thracian imitations of Thasos tetradrachmas of the second period from the end of the 1st century B. C.

We have noted that about 28 B. C. the main sanctuary of Dionysus was taken away from the Bessae. At that time, the most loyal ally of Rome in Thrace was the Sapeian Kingdom, the main territories of which since the middle of the 2nd century B. C. were around the lower courses of the rivers Strouma and Mesta. The silver coins of high denomination mostly used in this region were the tetradrachmas of Thasos of the second period of coinage and their Thracian imitations minted mainly in their lands at the beginning. In 27 B. C. after the death of Roles, king of the Getae, Rome conceded his possessions to the dynasty of Thrace tolerated by Rome. Some of the research workers consider that its representatives are of an Odrysian-Sapeian origin. With a view to introducing more easily the Thracian imitations of Thasos tetradrachmas which were new for the territories of Roles, issues of the same having a typical concave shape of the flans which were not used up to that moment began to be minted. The letters on these coins are replaced with a succession of dots usual for the Thracian imitations of tetradrachmas of the types of Alexander III/Philip III Arrhidaneus used up to that moment in the lands of the Getae. The unusual additional inscription <IHNNTUS was put around the barbarized image of the head of Dionysus in one of these issues. This inscription, by analogy with other types of coins minted earlier in this region probably offers the written information related to some change having taken place at that time and allowing to interpret the meaning of the image. The unusual inscription has been deciphered as “(image of the head of Dionysus) Sintian”, and it is possible to suppose that it appeared in this issue exactly, because the main sanctuary of Dionysus was taken away from the Bessae and handed over to the ruling Thracian dynasty tolerated by Rome (detailed study in Топазов 1996, p. 72-74). The Sintae or Sintiae marked in the inscription are localized in some studies to have been inhabiting lands on the right riverside of the Vardar, i. e. to the west of the Bisaltae (Златковская 1971, p. 28, and map 1). According to other studies, the Sintae inhabited lands around the middle course of the river Strouma, and they were related to the Sayae or the Sapeae (Спиридонов 1993, p. 261). Since it is mentioned in the sources that the animals cannot be fed with the barley cultivated by the Sintae and the Medae (Aristoteles, *De mirabl. auscult.*, 116; Theophrastus, *De odor.*, II, 4), it means that actually the Sintae were populating the lands between the Vardar and the Strouma and their neighbours must have been the Medae and the Bisaltae. The unusual additional inscription stamped shows that the head of Dionysus on the tetradrachmas is a head of a god, the worshipping of which was connected with the lands of the Sintae, i. e. this is a reason to think that a large cult centre of this god was situated in or near their lands. In this case, according to the information from the sources mentioned above, the Sintian cult centre of Dionysus is also in the region of the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace described by most of the ancient authors.

The information from the sources included herein, the results of some studies having already been carried out and the newest study having been carried out represent serious grounds to suppose that the main sanctuary of Dionysus was in the group of mountain spurs west of the Strouma. This mountain region is between the adjacent lands inhabited in the 5th-4th centuries B. C. by the Migdonae, the Crestonae, the Bisaltae and those of the Peonae, the Sintiae and the Medae situated to the north of the former, the sources noting that part of the Peonae included in

the territory of the Early Odrysian Kingdom after the campaigns of Sitalces. By Thrace the ancient authors and especially the authors of the Roman times meant mainly the lands from Stara Planina to the south Thracian coast. On the basis of this view of the ancient authors and pondering on the short text of Suetonius quoted above that “the holy wood of Dionysus” was “somewhere in the far off parts of Thrace” (Suetonius, *Aug.*, 94), we can establish that the thesis that the parts of today’s Rhodopes situated in the central part of Ancient Thrace should be considered as some “far off parts of Thrace” is unfounded.

After having reviewed the sources and the studies carried out (*summarized mainly in the publications of prof. Al. Fol*) and visited cult places in regions of Ancient Thrace, we have drawn the conclusion that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace must have been a large sanctuary in rocks very different from the other cult places in Thracian lands and having existed probably as early as in the 2nd - 1st millenium B. C. We think that it is right to suppose that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace must have represented a natural complex of primary formations, as follows:

- a mountain in some part of which there are big rocks which can be considered separately or altogether as the “holy” stones mentioned in the sources;
- large stone blocks rising over the rocks and suitable for cult rites consisting of natural high upright stones, since “at the beginning of worshipping Dionysus, holy upright stones and altars were decorated with wreath” (Φολ 1991, p. 147);
- there must have been a water spring quite near the rock designated in the information of the ancient authors as “a
- holy spring;
- there must have been a forest quite near the rocks representing, according to the information from the sources, “a holy wood”;
- due to the great general Thracian celebrations of Dionysus in the ceremonies of which were participating many pilgrims, the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace must not have represented a small isolated sanctuary but a large complex of characteristic rocks situated at the foot of a mountain adjacent to its highest part, so that the area around the sanctuary could allow all the people present at the ceremonies to participate in the celebrations;
- since the earliest cult places consisted of rocks (Φολ 1991, p. 252), cutting of platforms of different size in the rocks, steps between the platforms, making some cult facilities, shaping stones as altars, digging large reservoirs for collecting rainwater, digging large rectangular pits or chambers (determined by some research workers as “tombs” but more likely designed for sacrifices or other rites), digging channels surrounding them, excavating different recesses in upright cult rocks or other adjacent rocks, etc. could be expected as the only permissible interventions to change their original shape;
- the groups of cult places forming the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace must have represented rocks in the open without any buildings around them, i. e. they must not have been built up of shaped pieces rocks, or represent “temples” with high walls and roofs typical for later epochs;
- one (or several?) of the cult places in such a complex must have kept, until the present days, traces of the round palisade surrounding the altar as described by the sources. Such a palisade obviously must not have been very high because the people

present around the holy place should have been able to watch the flame of the wine poured on the altar which was raising over the palisade, i. e. it is expected that the holes around the altar in the rock in which palisade stakes were driven must have remained to the present times;

- it is also expected that a number of cult facilities situated one above the other must have been used for different cult rites just because of their different positions, the highest one having been intended in certain cases for the enlightened devotees of the cult or for special rites;
- The stone constructions in the area of the large cult complex at present should be considered as additional constructions of later times. In some cases, they probably were later defensive constructions built up with a view to preventing the destruction and the pillage of the cult complex in case of invasions of enemies such as the Celtic invasion in the 3rd century B. C.;
- Since such a large complex was situated high in the mountain, it must be expected that in the later epochs (and mainly after the Christianity was adopted) different fortresses with buildings for their inhabitants must have been erected in this region what would make difficult at present the categorical determination of the existing archaeological monuments as a specific early cult site.

On the basis of the information from the sources it should be expected that the great celebrations described by the ancient authors and related to the cult of Dionysus must have been taking place on a cult site in a favourable natural environment. Prophecies by pouring a holy liquid (wine according to the sources) connected with the god over the fire in the holy altar must have been told there too. The brief descriptions of the rite having reached our days allow to suppose that a special ritual holy place without any roof existed. Since the reply of the god was judged by the height of “the flame flaring up” observed by the participants in the rite, it should be supposed that the fence of the cult place was not very high, i. e. the cult place cannot be similar to the well-known big Greek temples of the 8th-5th centuries B. C. Since we have seen other cult places in rocks surrounded by holes of 15-20 cm diameter dug in the rock in a depth of about 50 cm symmetrically distributed over an area of a diameter of 10-20 m, we suppose that stakes were driven in those holes thus forming the palisade around the altar and the holy fire blazing in it. For this reason it can be expected to see in the complex of cult places forming the main sanctuary of Dionysus a platform cut on a rock different from the surrounding rocks and in addition to it steps leading to the same, recesses, etc., as well as deep holes forming a circle surrounding the holy space with the altar and the holy fire accessible only to the priests. Sacrifices in honour of the god and prophecies were told within this fenced space. Probably it is exactly this space that is mentioned by the ancient authors as the place in which “every animal brought in dies”, i. e. it was sacrificed in honour of the god. One of the significant texts that reached our days which we shall quote fully now again reads, as follows: “The story goes that the hares caught in Crestonia in the land of the Bisaltae had two livers (two hearts) and that there was a place one plethron long where every animal that goes in dies. There is there a large and beautiful temple of Dionysus too, where it is said that the festivity and the sacrifice were taking place, and when the god intends to make the year fertile, a high flame appears. Everybody in the holy place can see it. When (he intends to make it infertile, no light appears. Darkness covers the place like all the other nights (Aristoteles, 842a, 122).

When we express above our views on what most probably the main sanctuary of Dionysus could have looked like, we did not have to construct a presumable complex of cult

facilities of different size and destination probably concentrated together in one place. In this case we have only described by memory a complex of cult places in rocks of different type visited by us at the foot of the highest part of a massif situated almost in the middle of a large valley surrounded by other similar spurs of mountains. At the foot of the mountain described further (which should be probably considered with good grounds as a "holy mountain" in the antiquity) there was a large spring. Its water is caught and used at present in the nearby village. The first of a number of cult places is only about several dozens of metres from the large spring that existed there. A rock 7-8 m high resembling a column rises above a large level platform. A big recess of a regular shape has been dug out in the middle of this column. A relief cult slab was placed probably in it. Two horizontal rectangular chambers of 1.5 x 0.8 x 0.8 m have been excavated in close vicinity of the high stone column ("tombs" according to some research workers, but probably just facilities for sacrifices and other cult rites). They are surrounded by channels. There are many deep holes of 15-20 cm diameter forming a circle of a diameter of about 15 m around the high rock. Another flat rock platform has been made at about 30 m from the first one. A rock rises in the middle too. There are also horizontal rectangular chambers and surrounding channels around the latter. A third platform similar to the second one is nearby. All three form a triangle. Because of the particularities of the terrain the only accessible path to climb up the mountain passes through the three cult places described and leads to the peak. So, this natural path passes by many similar but still different natural rocks around which there are flat platforms, steps, chambers, recesses, etc. Almost rectangular stone blocks of about 8x6x6 m can be seen in several places. Steps, chambers and recesses are also made around them. Climbing up and looking at the big blocks from above, we can establish that the horizontal chambers with surrounding channels have been made on the upper surface of some of them. After climbing up about half a kilometre alongside cult places similar to the ones described above, we reach the highest part of the peak which represents a rock naturally shaped (or probably artificially shaped as it looks like now) as a block larger than the described ones, its three sides hanging over a steep precipice. A large water reservoir is dug out near the accessible side of the stone block. It was half full of rainwater, when we visited it in the summer. Platforms, steps, rectangular chambers surrounded by channels, recesses, etc. were made around in different directions.

The complex of various cult facilities described which must be of Thracian origin in our opinion is on the territory of today's Republic of Macedonia in the adjacent areas described by the ancient authors as belonging to the Migdonae, the Crestonae, the Bisaltae, the Peonae, the Medae, etc. In the later epochs this mountain easy to be defended was surrounded by walls forming a stronghold in which buildings were erected for different purpose. Probably part of this large ancient cult complex was destroyed particularly after adoption of the Christianity. Nevertheless, the platforms, steps, chambers, etc. made in the rocks have remained, and in our opinion they represent serious grounds to suppose that the main sanctuary of Dionysus famous in the antiquity and described by the ancient authors was exactly in this place. We assume that large and small local sanctuaries of Dionysus were similarly created in very suitable rocky places in Ancient Thrace where the Thracians inhabiting the nearby regions were worshipping this god. It is possible to think that rites and prophesies were made in these local sanctuaries too. We draw this conclusion from the existence in some of them of deep holes for the wooden stakes forming a circle and probably surrounding the holy space in these sanctuaries and from the cult facilities made in this space in the rocks. In our opinion the sanctuaries in Tatoul and Perperikon are such local sanctuaries of Dionysus in Thrace. They were transformed in the Roman epoch into cult temples built with stones in which Dionysus continued to be celebrated.

They were included naturally later in the strongholds of the local feudal rulers during the Christian era.

We have mentioned that during the business trips we were on before 1989 connected with our main job of designing machines and automatic lines we had the possibility to visit for a short time the large cult complex described above which is supposed to be the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace. Returning to Bulgaria we acquainted research workers studying the past of the Thracian lands with our investigations. Up to that time we have not yet published any one of our studies in the field of numismatics and history of the Thracian lands. Probably for this reason and because of the unacceptable view that the main sanctuary of Dionysus must not have been in the Rhodopes, we were not even heard carefully enough. In spite of our proposal to send competent Bulgarian research workers in this region to visit this cult complex, nobody has taken an interest to carry out such a study. Since we have no financial means available to visit again the cult complex described above and to take photos of the cult places included in it with a view to presenting it in a special study, we have deferred this publication up to now. Although this information is missing, we offer this study to our readers with a view to submitting our view on how arguments related to new theses in this field should be set forth, our arguments and our conclusion drawn that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace is not in the Eastern Rhodopes but in a massif in the lands populated by the Thracians to the west of the Strouma valley, as well as a short description of the still existing ruins of the probable large sanctuary.

We think that the persons defending lately the thesis that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace is somewhere in the region of today's Eastern Rhodopes should, before to continue to speak on this subject in the mass media, have submitted sufficient well-grounded arguments in support of their opinion in the way adopted by science and sufficient well-grounded arguments related to the unsoundness of opinions similar to the one submitted in this study about the location of the main sanctuary of Dionysus in south-west Thrace. We have no reasons at all to suppose that the majority of the Bulgarian research workers dealing with these problems would commit themselves to support the thesis of the discovery² of the main sanctuary in Thrace and more specifically in the region of the Eastern Rhodopes, thesis that is not supported by any important arguments up to now but is fabricated in every possible way as proven. The long silence on the problem of Bulgarian historians considered as leading by their researches of the past of Ancient Thrace is surprising. Are also surprising declarations in the mass media on such an important issue for the past of Ancient Thrace which are not supported with the relevant scientific publications and scientific discussions. And this issue will become a problem from now on, since steps are taken to include the main sanctuary of Dionysus "discovered" in the last few years in the list of sites of world importance or, better, it will become a problem, when the groundlessness of such an assumption presented by its discoverers as an already generally accepted scientific fact will be established.

² The cult place in the Eastern Rhodopes declared lately to be the main sanctuary of Dionysus has been studied many times by some of the most eminent Bulgarian research workers of which we shall mention prof. Ivan Venedikov. The conclusions drawn from these studies, for which arguments have been adduced, are that it represents one of the numerous Thracian sanctuaries in rocks the territory of which was used in later epochs to meet their requirements as shown by past, present and future investigations in the same. What will not be established, in our opinion, by the new archaeological investigations are certainly the proofs that the main sanctuary of Dionysus in Thrace mentioned by the ancient authors was there.

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