

SANCTUARIES, ALTARS AND CULT HEARTH FROM THE IRON AGE IN THE BALKAN-CARPATHIAN-PONTIC SPACE

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In the Balkan-Carpathian-Pontic space are known more than 83 cult constructions. They were discovered at 49 archaeological monuments, the same number of discoveries was made at the Greek towns as Olbia (Arheologia SSSR, 1984, p. 301, tabl. CXI, 2, 3), Callatis (Iconomu 1980, p. 229-233), Thracian urbs as Seutopolis (Čičikova 1975, p. 181) or mixed urbs as Pistiros (Lazov 1996, p. 63-73; Domaradzki 2002, p. 11-29), Albesti (Trohani 1986, p. 662), Thracian-getic davas as Neoporotovo (Krušel'nica 1980, p. 90, 97, 109), Butuceni (Niculiță 1987, p. 3-79), Saharna Mare (Smimov, Niculiță 1987, p. 73-79), Saharna Mare (Smimov, Niculiță 2003, fig. 15-20), Brad (Ursache 1995, p. 62-71), or at the fortresses from Zolotaja Balka (Vjazmitina 1969, p. 132-188), Matronino (Bessonova, Skoryj 2001, fig. 2/3), Žabotin (Pokrovskaja 1962, fig. 3, 6) and at the settlement from the village Dolineni, Cernăuți region (Smimova 1976, 293-307). Some categories, such as the cult hearths, are not missing either from the tumuli burials discovered during the excavations from Zimnicea (Alexandrescu 1980, p. 19-126), Goleamo Izvor (Čičikova 1975, p. 185), Sveščari (Faher 1934, p. 110), Batak (Končev, Milčev 1970, p. 186-187), Fântânile (Mateescu, Babeș 1988, p. 283-291), etc.

There aren't two complexes that would be completely identical among those 83 known at present. Generally speaking they form tree big categories: a) sanctuaries, b) altars, c) cult hearths.

The sanctuaries in their turn are: circular (Philippopolis, Butuceni, Dolineni, Sarmizegetusa), apsidal (Racoș, Popești) and rectangular (Sarmizegetusa, Bâta Doamnei) with stone tambour alignments or wooden columns with stone quadric-bases. Such sanctuaries were discovered in - different sites that existed during the first millennium BC – first centuries AD known by such sites: the complex from Philippopolis-Plovdiv from the 6th-5th centuries BC (Koleva 2000, p. 103-105), Getic fortresses from Butuceni dated with the 4th-3rd centuries BC (Niculiță 1987, p. 73-79), the settlement from Dolineni from the 1st century BC – 2nd century AD (Smimova 1976, 316), the davas Bradu (Ursachi 1995, p. 69), Sarmizegetusa – 1st century BC – 2nd century AD (Daicoviciu 1972, p. 235-240, 260-262), Racoș (Florea 2002, p. 194-195) etc.

The majority of the specialists who approached the problem of the use of the sanctuaries have pointed out that regardless of the circular, apsidal or rectangular form, the sanctuaries represented cult construction destined to satisfy certain religious rituals, and they had an applicative functionality of „astronomic time measurement” – sanctuaries-calendars (Bobancu, Samoilă, Poenaru 1980, p. 190; Rodean 1984, p. 320).

The second category of cult constructions – the altars – is represented through a much bigger number of findings and is spread on a larger area. According to the form they are quadrangular and circular, ornamented or ornament free.

Ornamented rectangular altars discovered at Philippopolis chronologically refer to the 6th-3rd centuries BC (Koteva 2000, p. 105), Seuthopolis, were found mainly in houses or cult dwellings dated with the 4th-3rd centuries BC (Čičikova 1975, p. 181-192), Pistiros which functioned in the period of the 3rd-2nd centuries BC (Lazov 1996, p. 73), Popești, in the apsidal construction from the 2nd-1st centuries BC (Vulpe 1959, p. 314-319) and in the burial rooms from the tumuli burials at Zimnicea, Sveščari, Fântânile etc. functioning in the same chronological diapason.

On the basis of the materials that are at the disposal of the researches it is possible to establish that rectangular altars, as well as circular altars were more largely distributed in the second half of the 1st millennium BC. Their functioning corresponded generally to the one of the circular and quadrangular sanctuaries with stone or wooden tambours. Hence, the circular altar from the fortress Matronino from Čerkasc region – the basin of river Teasmin – Ukraine, was discovered in association with the material from the 7th-6th centuries BC (Bessonova, Skoryj 2001, p. 9), the one from Zolotaja Balca refers to the 4th-3rd centuries BC (Vjazmitina 1969, p. 122-135) and from Olbia dates with the 2nd century BC (Arheologia 1984, p. 301).

Both circular and rectangular altars are ornamented. They represented a crust of burned clay covered with décor, that was done through stamping, known by the pieces discovered at the fortress from Zolotaja Balka, Bel'skoe, Pistiros and Grădina Bosut.

Although, there aren't known until present two identical rectangular or circular altars based on their form or decor, as stated before, in details they have a lot of common traits.

First, according to their location the altars are known in towns or in davas, in rectangular constructions built at the surface of the ground representing probably sacred cult dwellings, and in mortuary rooms.

Second, the ornament, although not identical and regardless of the altar form or location, was composed of the same incised or incrustrated spiraled combinations, squares, triangles, quadrangles or parallel circles. In some cases are noted palmettos or petals.

A particular interest represents the findings of altars covered with stamped decoration in the form of twisted or incised cord, or rows of hatched triangles – ornaments characteristic to the ceramics from the facieses Pšeničevo-Razcapanica-Cozia-Saharna-Babadag. At a large number of sites, such as those from the region of the Lower Dnieper, from Zolotaja Balka, Liubimovka, Gavrilovka, and from Poiana etc., were found “firedogs” characteristic to the Thracian-Getic world (Vjazmitina 1969, p. 122-135).

The circular or oval in plan cult hearth represent clay platforms, some of them built on the antic ground level, others on a fundament of refined stone pieces, or of earth mixed with clay, as known by the discoveries from Pistiros, Saharna Mare etc. The diameter of the hearths vary as a rule from 30x40 cm up to 1x1,20 m. The circular hearths do not exceed the diameter of 1,20-1,50 m. The width of the hearths varies between 8 and 12 cm (Niculiță 2003, p. 26-27).

Some cult hearth had a notch made of non-refined stone pieces or of clay.

The cult hearths are found more frequently than other cult constructions of this type. Only at the Thraco-getic fortress Saharna Mare were found 12 cult hearths. As fragments they are considerably present also at the fortress Bel'skoe (Šramko 1987, p. 127).

In this category of cult construction are included also clay hearth with kernosos. The hearths had a notch of no more that 6-8 cm width. In the center they had several funnel-shaped pots of relatively small dimensions with 16 cm in height, the upper side diameter of 12 cm, and the lower side of 3 cm in diameter. It is similar with the hearths from Girișul de Criș (Sfrengeu 1999, 5-16) and with the globular trunk of those from the fortress Zolotaja Balka (Vjazmitina, 1962, p. 227).

If both the initial stage – the second half of the 1st millennium BC – and the use of the circular and quadrangular sanctuaries with alignments as cult constructions and calendars, are generally accepted by the majority of the specialists, their origin and interpretation of the decorated altars raise certain discussions.

Some specialists link the emergence and the distribution of the altars in the Eastern and Central Europe with the influence of Greek religious ideas (Makiewicz 1987, p. 38-39; 55-64), assumption that cannot be accepted due to the fact that altars are known in the 7th century BC when Greek colonization of the north-west of Pontus Euxinus was in its initial stage (Niculiță 1996, p. 62). On the other hand, circular altars with spiral décor were discovered in the space towards the north of Balkans already in the 13th-12th centuries BC according to the piece found at Sighișoara which's décor is similar to the Mycenaean altars (Horedt 1960, Abb.3).

Already in the 70ies of the 20th century was launched the assumption according to which ornamented cult altars represented indispensably an attribute of the Thracian religion (Čičikova 1975, p. 190-194). This idea was presented by us with arguments in several studies published in the last years (Bessonova 1996, p. 34-36; Lazov 1996, p. 63-73).

If we admit that circular sanctuaries, altars and cult hearth to be of Thracian origin, the only thing that remains unexplained is their presence in Central Europe. It is hard to imagine a Thracian-Getic influence during the 1st millennium BC on such a large scale.

In our opinion, the large distribution of these cult constructions could be connected to the process on Indo-Europeanization.

The similitude of these clay altars from this early period could prove as well the existence of some common religious representations.

If circular constructions from Pistiros, Butuceni, Dolineni, Bradu, and the later ones from Orăștia Mountains are considered sanctuaries-calendars linked directly with the cult of the sun, having also an applicative functional predestination related, more or only with the supreme priest which represented the link between the supreme god, the king and the society though the sent messenger each 5 years to Zalmoxis, the cult hearth, as ritual pits, could be linked to the adoration of some concrete gods from the Thraco-getic pantheon.

The specialists consider that rectangular or circular clay hearth often associated with "firedogs", ornamented with circular décor done through impression, or with the representation of the "Thracian horseman" as on the pieces from Zolotaja Balka; or with cord in relief décor, alveolar and crested cord as those from Poiana and Pistiros, represent altars related to the adoration of Big Goddess, protector of family's hearth.

Lately was launched the assumption that clay altars could be linked to the cult of Dactyls – protectors of the extraction and manufacturing of iron – as the clay hearth from Pistiros were discovered concentrated in one single place with a lot of pieces of ore and iron slag, forming thus a sacred zone.

It is known that the Thracian-Geto-Dacian religion, being polytheist, disposed of a complicated doctrine with a lot of deities and as a consequence with a numerous cast of priests, hierarchical and well instructed (Sîrbu 2006, p. 21-86), which held a sufficient level of knowledge and skills necessary to forecast the weather according to the movement of the celestial bodies, using for this end the sanctuaries-calendars, to heal the humans and animals with medical plants, to practice the ceroplastics – "firedogs" – and different libations at the rectangular or circular altars.

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