

The Sacred Stones in Ancient Greek and Macedonian Folk Traditions

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Abstract: *This paper provides a comparative interpretation of sacred stones in ancient Greek and Macedonian folk traditions. The analysis examines how these images are understood today, first as a mythological figure in the case of Hermes, and second as a belief in the power of sacred stones in both the Ancient Greek and Macedonian folk traditions. The goal of this research is to show the differences, similarities and parallels of these two characters, both in terms of mythology and folk religious interpretations and their vestiges in modern society. By comparing the interpretation of the sacred stones in ancient Greek and Macedonian folk traditions, and then through the comparison of the days that mark their celebration, the aim of this paper is to show that rudiments of Macedonian folk beliefs and customs, although modified, are still strongly present in the folk traditions on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia.*

Keywords: Sacred stones, Greece, R. of Macedonia, folk traditions, folk beliefs

1. Introduction

One can notice certain parallelisms between the documented folk traditions regarding the cult of sacred stones in ancient Greece associated with the name of the god Hermes. The ancient Greeks referred to Hermes as a god rather than as an object or a subject. Intersections were particularly revered because they symbolized the transition between life and death. Many stone statues were built at crossroads because they were believed to ward off demons and disasters. Hermes was represented as a quadrilateral stone pillar upon which a beardless, smooth-faced head was typically placed, and was anatomically correct with a realistically modeled phallus. Although Hermes was modeled with erectile form, his power was not drawn from the phallus or the stone, hence there are no records from ancient Greeks regarding the fertile powers of Hermes. For them, he was simply symbol that conveyed strength and potency.

2. Parallel Interpretation of Sacred Stones in Ancient Greek And Macedonian Folk Traditions

In terms of parallel interpretations, there is a belief in the power of sacred stones in both the Ancient Greek and Macedonian folk traditions. In ancient Greek mythology, the belief in sacred stones was associated with the god Hermes, whose likeness was built near crossroads to chase away demons and ward of disaster. From an etymological point of view, the roads in Ancient Greece were paved with hermai (έρμαι) stones. Hence the name Hermes (Ερμης) is a noun derived from herma, hermaion (έρμα (ξ), έρμαιον), indicating a pile of stones. The appearance of the sign e-ma-a2 in Mycenaean tablets identifying Hermāhās led Chadwick to oppose the etymology because of the absence of *f* (*w*) in the name, which is recorded by the Mycenaean Greeks [1]. Thus, according to research from P. H. Ilievski, the Aeolian Έρμάφων form that has been used to explain the relationship between έρμα, έρμαιον, must have appeared later [2].

The worship of sacred stones in ancient Greece is best seen in the setting of stones shrines, where the Herma form was

regarded as the most sublime monument. W. Burkert contends that for the ancient Greeks the setting of features (symbols) was done in the Herma form. According to his description, Herma is a quadrilateral stone pillar, upon which sits a beardless head, and male genitals are carved at the appropriate height in erectile form. Following this description of Herma being represented in the form of a phallus and carved stone pillar comes his name: herma (έρμα), mounted stone, because it was seen as the Hermāas or Hermāon (Χερμάας, Χερμάον).

Herma was always meant to be outside of houses, in town squares, or next to intersections where the statue could serve as a landmark along the road. Although Herma was modeled with erectile form, its power was not drawn from the phallus or the stone, hence there are no records from ancient Greeks regarding the fertile powers of Herma. For them, it was simply a symbol that conveyed strength and potency. The monument simply marked the transition from a dark past to hopeful future. Therefore, the ancient Greeks did refer to Herma as an object or a subject, but rather as the god Hermes [3].

In Macedonian folk tradition, sacred stones were revered because of their distinctiveness from other items in nature, and were regarded as symbols of supernatural power. Due to its hardness and durability, the stone was considered impervious to changes, and in the consciousness of the primordial man generated religious fear and respect [4]. Stones with an anthropomorphic form were imaged to be petrified human beings, and they were considered to have supernatural power because of the popular belief that the soul or spirit stayed in the stone [5].

According to Macedonian folk's beliefs, phallic shaped rocks held special meaning for barren women, who could ritualistically touch or rub the stone and receive good health both for them and their children. The ritualistic worship of phallic stones is still present in the modern Republic of Macedonia. Cattle Rock in Ovcepolie is one such example. Barren women and the sick visit the stone during the religious holiday of St. George [6]. Cattle Rock is where a kind of religious practice takes place involving the offering

of a blood sacrifice, usually mutton, lamb, calf, bull, cow and rooster. Sacrificial goats, however, were forbidden because, according to Macedonian folk beliefs, they were created by the devil and thus resistant to "evil eye" and unable to be spellbound. The word "offering" specifically refers to animal sacrifice, for example, a lamb must be white in color, male, first born in the flock, the most attractive, the largest, and so on [7]; after the sacrificial custom, food is prepared from the sacrificial animal to mark national holidays, building and moving into a new house, the health or death of a family member, the fertility of humans and livestock, or because of a dream or to give thanks for surviving an accident. In the Republic of Macedonia, the ritual practice of the sacrifice is carried out by slaughtering and roasting the sacrificial animal, followed by a feast and setting a portion for the poor [8]. Sacrificial slaughters are done during the celebration of St. Archangel Michael. In Ohrid, for example, they slaughtered piglets and examined their spleens to see how the winter would be [9], and then from the meat made bacon and sausages [10].

In Macedonian folk tradition, offering blood sacrifices to the gods is viewed not only as the fulfillment of the wishes of the deity, but also the satisfaction of individual needs and desires in man. This view is due to the popular belief that offerings of sacrificial blood are seen as necessary and followed by prosperity, while not offering a blood sacrifice is considered dangerous, and hence followed by a punishment.

The worship of holy stones is apparent in both ancient Greek and Macedonian folk tradition. In terms of the parallel interpretation, for the ancient Greeks stone worship focused on the features (symbols) of Herma, the phallic shaped quadrilateral stone pillar. Although Herma was modeled with erectile form, there are no records pertaining beliefs in his fertile force. In the Republic of Macedonia, however, there is extensive evidence of the belief in the fertile power of sacred stones.

Both cultures place stones on graves, drawing on the indestructible and eternal symbolism of stones. Since ancient times it was believed that the tombstones are places where the souls of the underworld enter the world of the living, and it was believed that the soul of the deceased lives in the stone. In both ancient Greek and Macedonian folk tradition it was believed that the stones placed on the grave of the deceased actually protect against the appearance of spirits from the realm of the dead and defend against enemy forces [11].

According to Macedonian folk beliefs, the soul of the deceased visits all of the places where he stayed while alive, but only in the first year after death while the body of the deceased is not yet decomposed. After that time, the soul is no longer present and goes into the realm of the dead. The act of placing a stone monument binds the soul of the stone. However, if the monument is not set within a year after the death the soul of the deceased cannot be captured and bound to the gravestone, in which case no memorial is raised.

The original goal of raising a stone monument stone was to forcefully bind the soul of the deceased and to deprive it of

the freedom of movement [12]. Today, setting a stone monument is considered an act of piety, unlike in the past when it was considered to be religious obligation and a necessity [13].

One can recognize the duality of interpretation of the stone in Christian symbolism. On one side of the stone is a symbol of God, Christ and the Church [14] and symbolizes the first altar [15], and the other is the description of the stone in the Scriptures, which in its natural form is interpreted as lifeless, dead, emotionless and weightless. According to the description of the stone in Scripture, stone idols were of the sphere of pagan deities and deprived of life, as opposed to the life-giving and living God [16].

3. Conclusion

Ritualistic stones in the shape of a phallus are still present in the modern Republic of Macedonia. Cattle (herdsman) Rock in Ovcepolie is one such example. Barren women and the sick visit the stone during the religious holiday of St. George and thread through the cracks of the rock and offer the holy blood of a sacrificial lamb. For those who participate in the rituals of both folk traditions, the rock is not dead but rather a sign of strength that gives life. The offering of sacred stones in both folk traditions indicates correspondence regarding folk beliefs for better health of the participants and their families.

By comparing the interpretation of the sacred stones in ancient Greek and Macedonian folk traditions, this paper shows that rudiments of Macedonian folk beliefs and customs associated with this sacred stones are still strongly present in the folk tradition and belief on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia.

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