

MAGOURATA CAVE, BULGARIA

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Magourata cave, near the village of Rabish, some 20 Km. from Biogradchik in northwestern Bulgaria, is the site of the richest series of cave paintings found so far in the Balkans. The inhabitants of this area have known of the cave for centuries and the cave-art was noticed at least as early as the 18th century: this is shown by names, dates and other writings found upon the figures and near them. A thorough study of the site and its art, however, had never been undertaken.

Over 30 years ago, Prof. Vasil Nikov considered the pictures as dating from the Iron Age; shortly after they were visited and described by Hendrik Van Loon who was fascinated by the «mysterious puzzle» that they represented. A lengthier description was published in 1963 in a guidebooklet to Biogradchik and its surroundings (Somov and Aleksandrov, 1963). The writer discussed the group of paintings referred to as a «monumental composition» since it shows a striking resemblance to rock carvings and monumental compositions from the Alps (Anati, 1968b). Another article appeared in 1969 in the *American Journal Archaeology* (Anati, 1969).

Fig. 35

The cave penetrates into the mountain for about four kilometers. Near the narrow entrance a series of cup-marks appears on the rock surface. As in other similar instances elsewhere, this may be a sign that the cave had a religious function. In the Alpine Area, in Turkey and elsewhere, the presence of cup-marks near the entrance of a cave, or on the path to a site, seems to have a definite religious implication (Anati, 1961, pp. 152-166; 1968b, pp. 22-35). The cave was inhabited or used in several periods: fossil bones of cave bear have been collected inside it, although no clear artifact evidence exists for the Palaeolithic. Apparently the cave was first visited by men during the Neolithic and finds from this period are plentiful. They include a wealth of flint implements among which are arrowheads and long blades. Polished stone axes, coarse handmade pottery vessels, loom weights and other objects show that from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age the cave was frequently used by man. Less copious are remains belonging to the Iron



Fig. 34
Location of Magourata Cave in North - western Bulgaria, near the Danube Valley.

Age, but thereafter, in the Roman period, evidence of human presence is again abundant: finds include Roman fibulae, Roman tools and pottery. Also, according to Somov and Aleksandrov, a burial excavated in 1936 belongs to the Roman period.

When we visited the site in 1964, the entrance to the cave was a sloping and difficult passage; it has since been furnished with stairs to provide an easy descent. After the entrance corridor, one finds oneself in a large hall with a high ceiling; the floor is covered with fallen rocks, some of which are several meters high. Various openings appear at the sides of this hall. Following a narrow corridor after over one hundred meters another hall is reached. From there a side corridor leads, in a few minutes, to the prehistoric paintings. Then for a length of about 70-80 meters several art groups are found, starting with a series of simple geometric and linear signs, followed by a hunting scene, then the series becomes richer and richer until, finally, the vaulted «sanctuary» is reached.

Figs. 36-38

The temperature inside the cave is constant at 12 degrees centigrades all year long. Water is available in several spots and the various halls are spacious; the cave must have made an excellent place for assembly and possibly also for living.

The prehistoric figures are executed in bat guano, which is found in large quantity inside the cave. Guano

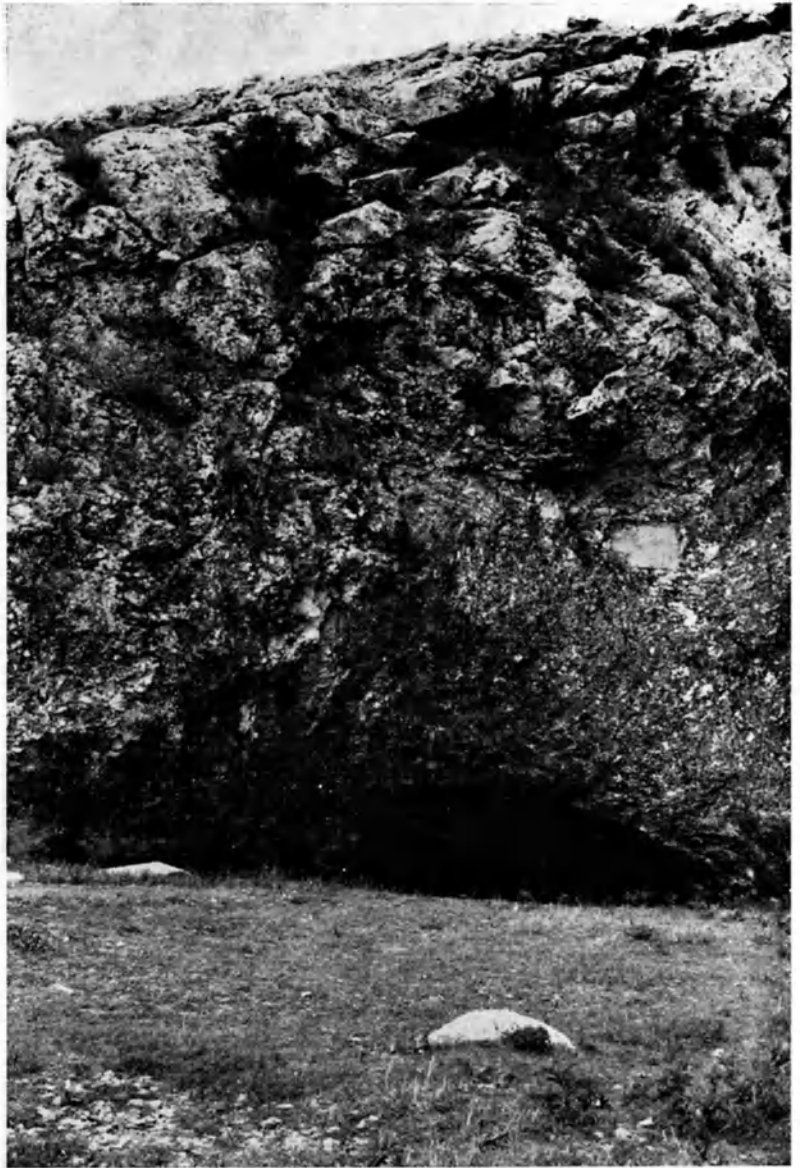


Fig. 35
The entrance of
Magourata Cave.

was used generously, so that the figures are in high relief which sometimes gives a three-dimensional impression, producing a peculiar effect under transverse light. Sometimes the dark brown guano has whitened as the result of calcification, obtaining the same colour as the rock surface, but its relief is still clearly visible. The walls of the cave are wet and the guano applied upon them by the prehistoric artists has consolidated and almost fossilized. Later drawings were made also with ocher, mud or by carving. They are sometimes superimposed upon the prehistoric figures, but they are easily recognizable.

Figs. 37-39



Fig. 36
A series of parallel lines, introducing one of the groups of figures in the corridor.

Fig. 37
Paintings with several superpositions. The latest paintings include an inscription dated 1908 and several even more recent ones above it. The neolithic axes are the earliest figures.



Fig. 38
A group of zig-zag decorations in the corridor.



Fig. 39
A large panel with figures added in at least three different phases. Apparently the added figures were intended to complete the previously existing composition.



Fig. 40
Tombstone from
Krasnaya Gora,
Crimea (drawn
from a photograph
of A.M. Tallgren,
1926, p. 49).

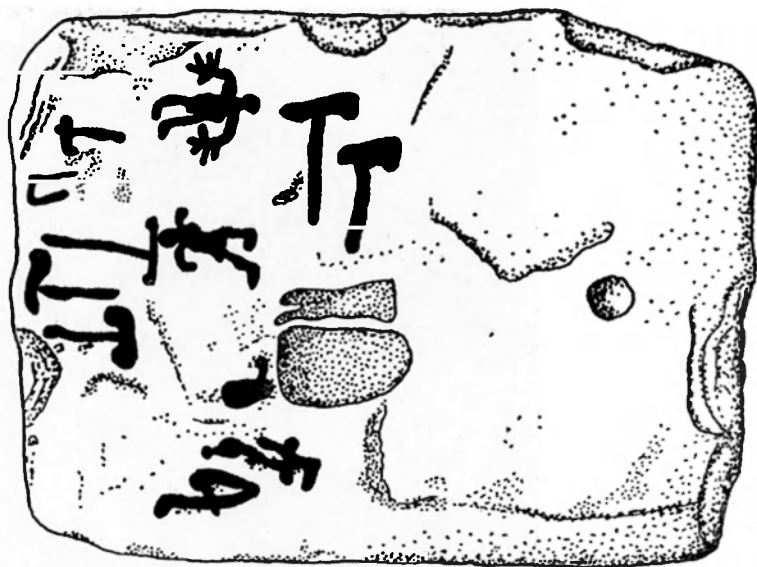


Fig. 41
Figs. 40-42

A wealth of representations of tools and weapons among the pictures helps in establishing the dating of the cave paintings. Several axes and human figures are clearly reminiscent of engravings on a cist slab from Krasnaya Gora in Crimea, which belongs to the Catacomb-grave period and can be dated to the late third millennium B.C. or the very beginning of the second millennium (Tallgren, 1934; p. 43, fig. 36b; Formozov, 1958, p. 138; Gimbutas, 1956, p. 46; 1965, p. 495). The same figures also show strong similarities to rock-engravings from the Luine area in the Camonica Valley which indicates a general chronology around the beginning of the second millennium B.C. (Anati, 1970).

There are figures of tools of the same type as those represented on anthropomorphic stelae, especially those from Natalevka, in the Southern Dnieper region, from Hamangia, in eastern Rumania (Markovin, 1959; Häusler, 1969), and at Ezerovo, near Varna, in Bulgaria (Tontcheva, 1967). Again, these comparisons lead us to the late third millennium B.C.

Fig. 43-45

The most important single element for chronology is provided by a quantity of elongated battle-axes, characteristic of the Bodrogkeresztur Culture of Hungaria, best exemplified by an excellent series of copper battle-axes from Tiszavalki and elsewhere studied by P. Patay (Patay, 1968, pp. 9-23). This context is a pre-Bell-Beaker Chalcolithic phase and their date should be fixed around the middle of the third millennium B.C. This is further confirmed by recent general considerations on the chronology of the Danubian «Eneolithic» and its synchronism with Troy II (Dumitrescu, 1970).

Fig. 41

A series of weapons and tools including, from left to right: an elongated double axe, a t-shaped implement, a «paddle», a rectangular undefined sign, a mallet, a larger t-shaped implement and a composition with a rectangular scuti-form sign filled with parallel lines, two arms and a series of vertical short lines.



Fig. 46

flat, biconvex, perforated axes and hammer-axes; some of these figures represent objects made of stone, others seem to illustrate metal objects. Some figures of flat axes seem to represent rather early types. There are representations of polished axes, obviously made of stone and inserted in a shaft-holder, which are likely to date back to the first half of the third millennium B.C. or earlier. Several stone axes of this kind have actually been found inside the cave at Magourata. Mallets and hammering tools, knives, some apparently with flint blades, bows and arrows, spears and other tools are likely to cover a relatively long range of time from the late Neolithic, probably from the late fourth or the early third millennium, through the Chalcolithic, to the beginning of the Bronze Age, in the early second millennium B.C. During this period of nearly a thousand years, figures appear to have been made almost continuously. Several superimpositions show that there were various phases, but a clear stylistic evolution within this range has not yet been detected. A systematic tracing and study of the entire complex may prove extremely helpful for this purpose.



Fig. 42

Figure of a large perforated axe from Magourata Cave.

Approximately seven hundred figures have been counted, representing over fifty different subjects. Human and idol-like figures are abundant, animals are represented by deer, birds, possibly a dog in connection with a hunting scene, several unidentified quadrupeds, a horse-like figure and some imaginary animals. About two thirds of the figures are various symbols and signs. Solar and astral symbols are common, series of geometric designs (points, lines, triangles, zig-zags, squares and bell-shapes) are found all over. There are also numerous figures with

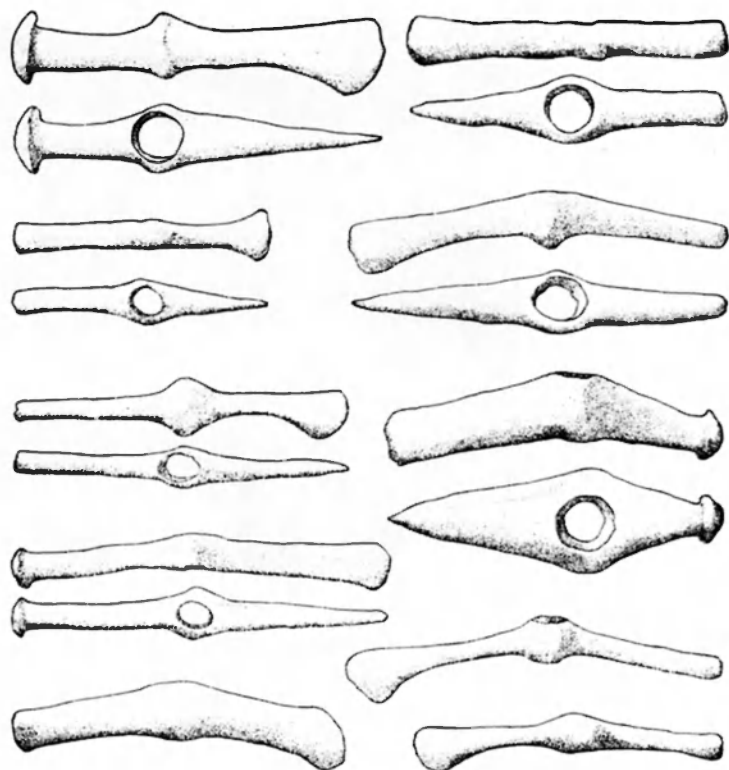


Fig. 43
Copper battle axes from the Bodrogkeresztur Culture, Hungarian Early Copper Age (redrawn from P. Patay, 1968).

Fig. 44
A section of the decorated corridor showing the superposition of paintings.

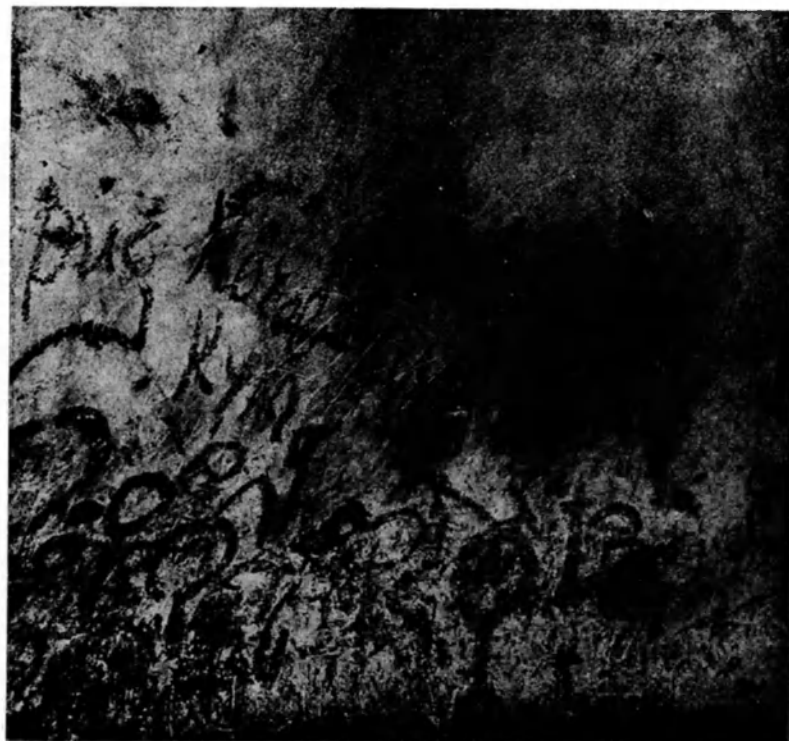


Fig. 45

Two elongated battle axes from the monumental composition in the «Sanctuary» hall.



Fig. 46

A series of weapons and tools and possibly a bucranium in a symbolic composition.



ill-defined shapes: for them no interpretation could be given.

Human and animal figures, especially in two hunting scenes, are reminiscent of rock engravings in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and further east, to such a degree as to suggest some sort of connection or derivation (Appelgren-Kivalo, 1931; Shatskiy, 1966; Ksica, 1969; Formozov, 1969). Minor similarities exist also with rock carvings in eastern Anatolia (Uyanik, 1968; 1970a; 1970b; Anati, 1968a) and in the Near East (Anati, 1963, p. 198). One gathers the impression that Magourata Cave belongs to a well defined intellectual-ideological world, which must have originated further east, though probably developed locally during its relatively long presence on this site and in this area.

Fig. 44

The artistic skill and aesthetic value vary from figure to figure, indicating the presence of numerous hands and hinting at a variety of ideas and concepts, in what must have been a rich and multiform ideological, mythological and intellectual world. The size of the figures varies considerably, from a few centimeters to over one meter in length.

Figures and symbols are usually assembled in scenes and compositions. Only in rare cases do single figures seem to have been depicted alone. In most cases figures

Fig. 47

A composition which seems to have an ideogrammatic value. The five symbols are obviously associated with one another. The central and most important figure is the «Lady of the Cave».



are grouped together as if they acquired a meaning in the context. Some of the symbols seem to be connected to hunting magic or hunting symbolism.

Fig. 52

One of the most commonly represented subjects is a female anthropomorphic image, the body of which is composed of two converging triangles. She appears to be wearing a dress with a projection at both sides of the waist. In some instances she reminds one of the female clay figurine with upraised arms from Stepanovice, in Moravia, which V.G. Childe considered as to

Fig. 48

The «Lady of the Cave» painted as headless with two marks on her right.



Fig. 49

A row of six ideograms. From left to right: a schematic human figure, the «Lady of the Cave», her schematic companion, a curved mark, a bucranium and an undefined tool or object.



Fig. 50

A hunting scene with the «Lady» between the hunter and the animal.



Fig. 47

belong to «phase C of the Danubian II» period (Childe, 1929, p. 80, fig. 46); and which is likely to belong to the Lengyel-Tisza horizon. Another interesting parallel is provided by a female figure decorating Vucedol pottery, although this comparison is not necessarily conclusive for chronological purposes (Schmidt, 1945, p. 98, fig. 58). Its arms are usually upraised in an elegant posture of prayer or dance reminding one of some Predynastic Egyptian figurines. It is quite obvious that she must have occupied a prominent place in the ideological world represented by the art of this unique site. We have called her «The Lady of the Cave». Her head varies considerably in size and shape. Sometimes it has a mushroom form, in other cases it is round or square and two small disks or earrings are sometimes depicted at the sides. This combination of the central head and two side disks reminds us of similar representations in the Alpine monumental compositions of late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (Anati, 1966, 1968b). It seems to reflect the same kind of ideological concept, appearing in the monumental composition found in the final «sanctuary» of this cave.

Fig. 57

Fig. 48

In a few cases the entire space between the upraised arms of the «Lady» appears as her face, while in a few instances the head is not depicted at all; frequently the eyes are well marked. The legs are short and delicate when they are represented, but often they are not; sometimes the being is represented by the converging triangles without any further detail.

Fig. 50

The «Lady of the Cave» appears in a variety of scenes and compositions. The figure occurs in hunting scenes, between the hunter and the animal, possibly representing the main connection leading the one to the other. It is found also in a scene where male and female figures

Fig. 51

A composition with six ideograms: two axes with a mark between them, the «Lady», a disk-face and a schematic animal.



Fig. 68 walk towards each other: a battle-axe is near the man and a figure of the «Lady of the Cave» is near the woman.

Figs. 53-54-55

In several instances the «Lady» has a schematic companion of obvious phallic significance. The couple is sometimes accompanied by two signs which seem to represent weapons or tools, and probably signify the attributes of the couple. The «Lady's» breast is marked only rarely and she does not seem to have other evident sexual attributes; on the other hand, her companion appears as a phallic figure who reveals its sexual entity both by its general shape and by a clear representation of the sexual organs. Sometimes it would seem that he is holding his male organ in his hand.

Figs. 49-51

In a few cases the Lady is found in more complex compositions of signs which seem to have an ideographic meaning. One of these groups has six distinct symbols in a row, representing (from left to right): a schematic human figure, the «Lady», her schematic companion, a curved mark, a bucranium and an undefined tool or object. There can be no doubt that the «Lady» was an important character in the ideological assemblage illustrated by this group of cave art, but we do not yet know the precise meaning of the figure, whether she represents a divinity, another kind of supernatural being, the priestess of the cave or some other actual or symbolic subject. Other such compositions show the «Lady» connected with tools and weapons, human beings, animal figures, solar disks and other symbols.

Fig. 67

A few less common figures should be singled out. One of the most beautiful pictures is that of a galloping horse-like animal. It is painted in guano, but in a style different from all the other pictures and it does not seem to belong to the same assemblage. It may belong to a period different from that of the majority of the figures in this cave. Its style bears some interesting resemblance to rock carvings from the Southern Soviet Union but nothing can clearly be established as its date.

Fig. 52
The «Lady of the Cave». The two large disks at the sides of the schematic face. remind one of the «lateral disks» in the Alpine monumental compositions.





Fig. 53



Fig. 54



Fig. 55

Figs. 53-54-55
 Three examples of compositions in which the «Lady of the Cave» appears together with her schematic companion. In two scenes two marks, possibly representing tools or weapons, accompany the couple.

Another unusual figure is that of a large deer, created by cumulating and incorporating earlier figures. A large rectangle, originally the frame of a checkerboard pattern, was used as the body of the animal. Two small deer of a second phase were used as antlers and a squarish face was drawn below them. This last addition was probably made after the site ceased to be a sanctuary.

The series of drawings include a variety of imaginative figures and groups. Hunting scenes apparently illustrate specific experiences of the artists and show men wounding deer, wild geese and imaginary animals, with bow and arrows.

Fig. 56



Fig. 56
 Standard figures represented by a disk with oculi and a handle-like line.

Other figures are more symbolic, showing idol-like and spirit-like images, vaguely anthropomorphic beings, figures like standards or totem-poles with an oculi-face inside them. The most impressive of these is part of a large and elaborate composition, probably the central and most important group of the final hall, the so-called «Sanctuary». The solar figure in this composition has two concentric circles, rays all round and an oculi-face in the middle. Below it there are two parallel lines and a checkerboard pattern. On each side of the solar face there are two smaller disks and on the left side two elongated battle-axes. Later additions and superimpositions have disturbed this composition, but still its unity and its separateness from the surrounding figures are clearly detectable.

The composition is of great interest because it shows a striking conceptual similarity with others in the Camo-

nica Valley, Valtellina, Tyrol, the Swiss Valais, and other sites in the Alpine area (Anati, 1968b; Bocksberger, 1968). In the Alps, and probably here as well, the elements seem to represent the attributes, or the «members», of a «divine image» in which the central face (identified with the sun) has two minor entities at the sides forming with them a triad of circular elements, three «faces» in a single «body». A similar concept may be illustrated by Siberian idols with three eyes (Vadetskaia, 1967), and by numerous menhir statues and rock figures throughout Europe (Anati, 1968c). The concept of a prehistoric triad is one of the distinguishing elements of the monumental compositions and it is widespread, apparently having its main centre in the Alpine area, but possibly having been originated elsewhere (Anati, 1965). The two lines and the checkerboard pattern have been thought to have a double significance, one anthropomorphic, the other naturalistic, as has appeared in the study of the Borno and the Pasparado monuments in the Camonica Valley (Anati, 1966). On one side, they appear to represent the belt (the pa-

Fig. 57
The «Lady of the Cave» and her schematic companion.



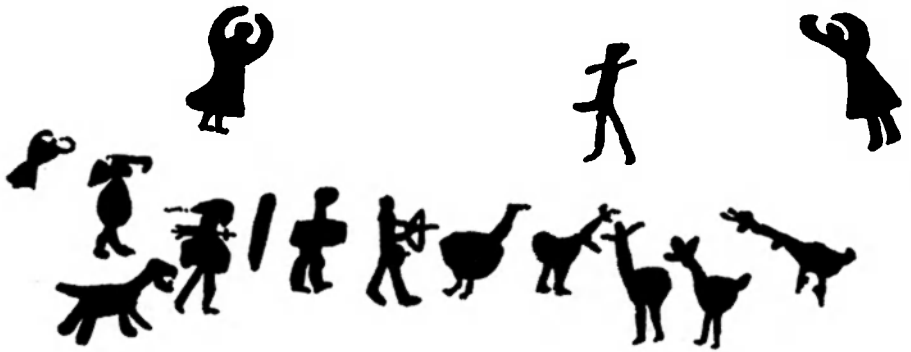


Fig. 58
The scene is divided in two rows. In the upper row between the two female figures with up-raised arms, there is a phallic male figure. The lower row shows a hunting scene. From left to right: the «Lady of the Cave», a masked human figure, a dog (?), two human figures with a vertical mark between them, a hunter with bow and arrow and five large birds, at least one of which is wounded by an arrow.

rallel lines) and the garment (the checkerboard pattern) of a symbolic body. As such they find a variety of parallels also in the Balkans, mainly in plastic female figurines from Kilcevac (Yugoslavia) (Kossack, 1954; Gimbutas, 1965), Pankalochori and Cnossos (Crete) (Crawford, 1957 fig. 18), and elsewhere.

But in some instances they may also represent the two basic elements found in the landscape: a river or just water (the parallel lines), and fields, or just land (the



Fig. 59
Detail of the solar disk in the monumental composition of the «Sanctuary» hall.

checkerboard pattern). In the Camonica Valley and at Mount Bego the same elements frequently appear in a more realistic form in which further details are provided (Anati, 1966; 1968b). The river may cross the fields and the fields may have inside them drawings of animals or men using a plough. Similar figurative concepts are widespread in Neolithic and Bronze Age rock-art from Central Asia to western Europe and even farther away, in the Moroccan Atlas (Malhomme, 1959-61), they show the presence of widely diffused ideological concepts among the rock-art makers over a relatively broad area.

Further East we notice sometimes that compositions of the same kind are simpler and more obvious. In the Urals one such composition in the rock carvings shows just three elements: the solar disk with rays, the parallel lines out of which a series of wavy lines may represent rain or just water, and an accompanying animal, similar to those found in connection with the monumental com-

Fig. 60
The monumental
composition of the
«Sanctuary» hall.



Figs. 61-62
 Two couples of figures showing the grouping of a square element and a rounded one. They probably symbolize respectively male and female.

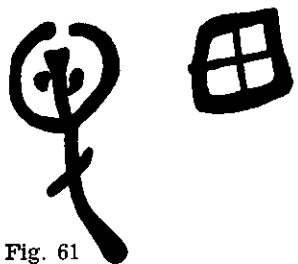


Fig. 61



Fig. 62

Fig. 63
 The grouping of a snake and a burcranium.



positions in the Alps (Formozov, 1969, fig. 47, p. 130).

While the linear and angular elements, the parallel lines and the checkerboard pattern represent such terrestrial elements as land and water, the circular elements, the solar face and the two lateral disks beside it are «astral» elements. The two minor disks, as discussed already elsewhere, seem to symbolize celestial entities possibly identical with the morning star and the evening star; they illustrate a prehistoric cosmological view in which one may foresee some of the concepts the mythology of historic times (Anati, 1968b).

It seems therefore that the elements in the lower part of the composition represent the water and the land, while the elements in the upper part symbolize the sun and stars. The composition therefore unites, in the same conceptual assemblage the sky and the earth, round shapes being celestial entities, while straight or angular ones representing terrestrial entities. Interestingly enough, in several cases, in this cave, there are other kinds of composition in which one rounded element and one angular element are coupled. The rounded element frequently has two smaller circles or dots inside it, almost forming a face, while the angular element is sometimes further subdivided by intersecting lines. There seem to be some analogies between, these simple compositions made of two main elements and the more complex monumental compositions. The complex cosmological image illustrated by the monumental compositions made up of Sky and Earth and apparently having also a value of Male and Female, is frequently surrounded by weapons and tools.

Figs. 61-62

Fig. 66



Fig. 64

A section of wall with checker-board patterns connected to a series of symbols.



Fig. 65

A section of wall with several compositions. On the left a bucranium on top of a checker-board pattern. In the lower center, the coupling of a rounded element and a square one. On top of the square element, a figure which might represent a four-wheel wagon led by two oxen. Further up a series of «sapin» patterns.



◀ Fig. 66

In the lower part a composition of three crosslike marks and a t-shaped one. In the central part two finely painted solar disks. In the upper part two figures: the square one has a pattern of parallel lines, the rounded one is a solar disk.



Fig. 67

The galloping horse painted in a style different from all the other paintings of the Cave.



Fig. 68

A composition showing a male figure and a female one sided respectively by a battle-axe and by the «Lady of the Cave».

In some instances, in the Camonica Valley, in Valtellina and the Tyrol, these weapons spring out of the composite «body» as if they were the divine limbs of the «Being», either arms or legs, or both (Anati, 1968b). At Magourata and elsewhere the «arms» appear in couples, but in the Alps they occur also in larger number, as if the entity had a larger number of limbs, and not just two pairs as in mortal beings. The presence of such a composition in Magourata Cave and the connections it shows with a broad and specific ideological world are indeed of very great interest, as they show how widespread certain concepts were during this period.



Fig. 69

This animal was composed in three subsequent phases: a large rectangle, which originally was the frame of a checker-board pattern is used as body. Two small deer are used as antlers, and a square face is drawn below them with darker and fresher lines.

This is the only monumental composition of this kind known so far in the cave art of the Balkans. In the Alpine Area these concepts appear quite suddenly at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and last as a dominant element until about 1400 B.C. (Anati, 1968b). At Magourata the two battle-axes belonging to the composition may be considered as dating back to the second half of the third millennium B.C. and should be earlier than the parallel figures found in the Alps.

This monumental composition seems to be the central and main complex in the sanctuary cave, but it is not the earliest for even on the same wall surface there are some older pictures. Together with the figures of the «Lady of the Cave» and the other symbols and scenes, it emphasizes the religious character of the figures and the particular importance of this cave for the cults of prehistoric men.

It is obvious that these pictures embody a very rich and complex significance, indicating an intellectual world with similarities and conceptual connections with other major groups of rock art from relatively remote regions.



Fig. 70
A series of
figures in the
West corner of
the «Sanctuary».
On the right side
two large «bell
shapes».

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RÉSUMÉ

Les parois du « sanctuaire » néolithique de la grotte Magourata (Bulgarie) sont couvertes de peintures faites avec le guano. Les représentations d'outils et d'armes, principalement des haches de bataille, permettent de situer cet ensemble dans le IIIème millénaire. Au nombre des figures (qui sont environ 700) apparaissent des êtres humains et des idoles, des animaux réels (cerfs, oiseaux, quadrupèdes divers dont peut-être un chien) et imaginaires, des symboles et des signes variés, parmi lesquels les symboles solaires et les motifs géométriques présentent un intérêt tout particulier. Les ressemblances avec les manifestations artistiques de Russie Méridionale, du Proche-Orient, de la région danubienne et des Alpes sont surprenantes. Une des représentations prédominantes consiste en une figure féminine stylisée, accompagnée dans certains cas d'une figure phallique schématique. L'ensemble formé par un disque solaire, des disques mineurs, un échiquier, un élément à lignes parallèles et des armes est interprété comme une représentation cosmologique, semblable à celle des compositions monumentales des Alpes. et de toute une série de sites qui se distribue de l'Asie Centrale à l'Atlas Maroquin.

RIASSUNTO

Nella grotta Magurata (Bulgaria), una galleria riccamente affrescata conduce ad un sala dove si concentrano le figure più importanti e che viene considerata come un « santuario » neolitico. Figure di strumenti e armi, specialmente asce da battaglia, eseguite con guano, permettono di datare il complesso al III millennio a.C. Fra le figure (circa 700), appaiono esseri umani e idoli, animali (cervi, uccelli, forse un cane e altri quadrupedi) nonché figure zoomorfe immaginarie, simboli e segni vari, fra cui di particolare interesse dischi solari e motivi geometrici. Si notano sorprendenti somiglianze con manifestazioni artistiche della Russia meridionale, del Vicino Oriente, dell'area danubiana e dell'area alpina. Una posizione di rilievo è occupata da una figura femminile stilizzata, accompagnata in vari casi da un essere fallico schematico. Il complesso formato da disco solare, dischi minori, motivo a scacchiera, elemento a linee parallele e armi è interpretato come una rappresentazione cosmologica che sembra confermata da simili composizioni nelle Alpi e in una serie di località che si estende dall'Asia centrale all'Atlante marocchino.