



# An attempt for the interpretation of the rock art in Albania

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## ABSTRACT

*Rock art discovered in various regions of Albania and its hinterlands, such as the painting of Lepenica and those of Vlashnja, Bovilla, and Tren, as well as the engravings of Reçi and Xibri, can be considered important works done in specific cultural contexts, in the period from the fourth to the first millennium B.C. In view of their common mystical-religious character, these works of art belong to specific stages of prehistory. The quality of paintings and their considerable number make South Illyria a special region for prehistoric art in the Balkan Peninsula.*

## RIASSUNTO

*L'arte rupestre dell'Albania e del suo hinterland (le pitture di Lepenica, Vlashnja, Tren, Bovilla così come le incisioni di Reçi e Xibri) può essere considerata come un'importante manifestazione riferibile ad uno specifico contesto culturale databile attorno al primo millennio a.C. I soggetti a carattere mistico-religioso permettono d'inquadrare queste manifestazioni artistiche in un preciso quadro cronologico. La qualità delle pitture e il loro considerevole numero rendono il sud dell'Iliria un'importante centro d'arte preistorica nella penisola balcanica.*

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In the territory of Albania, about 28.000 km<sup>2</sup>, six paintings of the prehistoric rock art are discovered: the painting of Lepenica, the painting of Bovilla, the painting of Tren, the painting of Rubikut and the incision of Xibri and Reçi. Last year was discovered the painting of Vlashnja near the city of Prizren (Kosovo) few km away the northeastern border of Albania. The presentation and the interpretation of these prehistoric art achievements are of a great interest due to the large number in a limited territory of Balkan Peninsula. (The Map)

During my first excavations in the prehistoric settlement of Tren, (with longevity from Neolithic until the end of Iron period) in 1966, I discovered the first prehistoric painting –the painting of Tren, named after the settlements near it.

The first announcements for Tren painting were presented to the international scientific public in the publication in B.C.S.P.IV, 1968 by professor E. Anati, whom I would like to thank you and to personally meet for the first time in this symposium. During these 40 years of searches and studies of the prehistoric cultures in Albania, the rock art has been the attention of my researches. After 40 years, in the summer of 2006, I found two new paintings, the painting of Bovilla near the capital city -Tirana and the painting of Vlashnja in Kosovo. Therefore, today, in the XXII Valcamonica Symposium I have the pleasure to represent to you, as an investigator of the prehistoric art, the rock art preserved in the Albanian territory.

## THE PAINTING OF LEPENICA

The painting of Lepenica is applied in a cavy shelter situated in the northeast slope of Lepenica Mountain (Southern Albania), in an altitude around 800 m. over the sea level, where you can have a better view of the Shushica River.

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The painting is made in a rock shelter 3.5m high on a flat surface divided into two plans. Four anthropomorphic figures, which are graphically well realized, are depicted in the vertical plan. The shapes of human figure are made with thick lines and differ from one another as of the body position and the graphical presentation of the extremities. The body is represented with a short and thick line. The neck with the head is represented as a continuity of the body line. The arms are extended and then are partly enclosed and sometimes totally enclosed. The legs are presented in the same way like hands. A dot is depicted in the space created by the four extremities. The figure is 15-18 cm long. Fifteen figures with the same graphical presentation are spread through all the surface of about 2.4 x 1.40 m in the horizontal plan. Nine irregular figures, divided into small quads with a dot in the middle of each division.

All figures are with thick lines, in a well preserved light brown color. (Fig.1)

From the graphical presentation point of view, the anthropomorphic figures of Lepenica have similarities with the anthropomorphic figures of rock painting of Zhlijebit (in Eastern Bosnia) with the only distinction that they are in white color, whereas the brown color is used in the painting of Lepenica. It is worth mentioning that the human figures considering the way of depiction and the form of the arms are similar with the western rock art achievements and especially with Valcamonica paintings.

The paintings with these similarities are even noticed in the paintings with parallel quads and lines of the prehistoric art in Valtellina, the same with the geometric figures of Lepenica.

From the graphical presentation point of view and from the content of the anthropomorphic figures, the painting of Lepenica reflects the period of the social development and the importance of the concepts of its creators. Due to its characteristics it belongs to the group of the post Paleolithic rock paintings.

It is worth mentioning that in the right side of Shushica River across from the Lepenica painting, 6km away in an aerial distance is situated the cavy settlement of Velça, where blossomed a late Neolithic culture that is characterized by a fine painted ceramic. Probably the Lepenica painting is a monumental composition of the habitants living for a long period in Shushica River valley, during the fourth and third millennium B.C.

#### THE PAINTING OF VLASHNJA

The prehistoric settlement of Vlashnja (inhabited during the Neolithic, Eneolithic, the Bronze and Iron period) is located 6 km in the west part of Prizren city (Kosovo). The rock painting of Vlashnja is situated 1,5 km in the west, near the place where Prizren River joins with Drin i Bardhë River.

In an altitude around 30 m from the river level, in the shelter formed by one of the massive rocks, the Neolithic man had engraved parts of his mystic- religious life.

Painting is applied in three plans, two vertical and one horizontal. A surface of about 16 m<sup>2</sup>, 7.00 m long and altitude 2, 30 m was used. The painting is made in three parts as it was conditioned by the rock face (Fig.2). Eight spirals in thick lines with red-ocher color (no.1-8) are depicted in the shelter's cover. The four first spirals (no.1-4) are placed in a group, in a distance 20-40 cm from one another. The spirals no 3,3 are well preserved and have a maximal diameter of 34 cm. The spiral no. 4 is partly damaged, while the spiral no. 1 is badly damaged. On the right of the first group, in a distance of 70 cm, a double spiral is drawn, no.5 that is similar to a "spectacle fibulae". The big diameter is 80 cm and the small is 37 cm. On the right of the double spiral 40cm, are depicted three other spirals, no.6, 7, 7 that form a group. The spiral no.7 and 8 are partly preserved, while the spiral no.6 is badly damaged.

In the second plan (vertical) in a surface about 10 m<sup>2</sup> (2,10 m x 0,50 m ) a deer (no.9) and two spirals are drawn. (no.10,11). The deer is presented in side view and the color is well preserved. Even the color is pale in some parts the deer is clearly perceived. The dimension of the figure is 30 x 28 cm. Two of the spirals placed in a horizontal line in a distance 50 cm from the deer and 160 cm from the other one are similar with the other spirals. The spiral no. 11 is fully preserved with a maximal diameter of 36 cm. the lines are thick similar with the other cases 2-2,5 cm.

In the third plan, the lower part of the rock face, in a surface about 2 m<sup>2</sup> a double spiral is depicted which is the biggest with a maximal diameter of 78 cm and a minimal diameter of 78 cm. The lines are thick about 2,5-3 cm. One of the spirals is well preserved, while the right spiral is badly damaged. Some other paintings can hardly be distinguished as they are badly damaged.

The spiral symbol is in the center of Vlashnja painting repeated in 12 cases. The spirals are odd and two cases are of spectacle fibulae. They are made in a similar way, with a same color but in different size, consequently their realization has a mystic -religious concept and probably related with the cult of the sun.

The deer figure placed on the top of the painting hinders to understand the relations of the deer with the spiral motif. Technically, it is the same manner with the same color. In these aspects Vlashnja painting is the same with Lepenica painting. Regarding to the deer presence there are parallels with the painting of Zhlijebi and the painting of Tren.

During the surveillance of Vlashnja painting I had the chance to know the results of the recent excavations in the multi layer settlement of Vlashnja, with its intensive culture, during Neolithic, Eneolithic and Iron period and I am convinced that the rock painting is a work of the prehistoric inhabitants of this settlement.

#### **THE PAINTING OF TREN**

The painting of Tren is situated in the territory of Southeastern Albania, near Prespa e Vogël Lake, on a face of a massive rock over the lake near the prehistoric settlement of Tren. The painting represents a hunting scene; it is formed in three parts. Two warriors with swords and three dogs following a deer are depicted in the central part. Above them in a distance of 60 cm it is the figure of another knight and a dog. On the right of the central group, about 4-5 m in distance are not well preserved the figures of two animals, probably a deer and a dog. (Fig.3).

Figures are represented in silhouette and generally are in proportion with each-other. Their situation in groups is limited because of the rock surface. They are in white color that covers the entire figure.

The painting of Tren has similarities with the painting of Lipiei (in Montenegro) consequently belong to the same period.

#### **THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF REÇI**

Reçi's rock depiction is situated in the territory of Northeastern Albania near Drini I zi valley. It is made in the face of a rock having a predominant position over the valley as the shelter of the painting of Lepenica, the painting of Vlashnja and the painting of Tren.

Reçi incision are in the vertical face of the rock in a surface with dimension 1.80 high and 1,75m wide, in an altitude from the level of the earth that is reached by hand. In a first sight we can distinguish three parts, probably are conditioned by the surface of the rock.

A figure in the shape of an irregular quadrangle with rounded angles with dimensions 50cm x 60cm is applied in the upper part of the drawing which is covered with groove lines divided into 14 unequal parts. A square is depicted above the quadrangle, with two diameters cutting each-other, 22 cm. Some circles with two or more diameters with the dimensions 10-11 cm are made below the quadrangle and near one another, and a number of grooves in a cross shape and some of them look as anthropomorphic figures. On the left side of the quadrangle in a smaller surface, but near one another, are repeated the same incises as circles, human figures and a small, regular quadrangle. Another group is realized with two circles and some incises in cross shape, around 1.30 m (Fig.4)

All figures of Reçi are made with the incision technique, with lines 2- 5 mm thick and 1-2mm wide. The lines of the figures are regular and well preserved. In the center of this prehistoric work is the sun cult combined with anthropomorphic figures and irregular geometric figures. The findings of some ceramic fragments of the bronze period in the foot of the cave shelter make us consider the painting of Reçi as a creation having the bronze period as a "post quem".

#### **THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF XIBRI**

Near the Illyrian town of Xibri, in the territory of Albania, it is situated a massive rock in a shelter shape, around 40 m long and 10-12 m high, that faces in the east. The incision of Xibri is applied in this rock shelter that is clearly distinguished from the other rocks.

The incisions are applied along the face, 40m long. They arise in the altitude 0.90m from the earth level and arrive up to the altitude 1,75m. The most important group of the incisions is situated on the right side of the shelter and continues in the middle of the shelter and beyond, up to its end.

The main motif of all incisions is formed by a grooved circle in the rock that is covered by two diameters dividing into 4 equal parts. The circle in some cases takes the form of a quadrangle with rounded edges. The circles have different dimensions with diameter 21-23 cm, while the smallest circle has the diameter 6-7 cm.

The motif in circle shape with cut diameters is the same with the incisions of Reçi, but there is lack here of anthropomorphic figures. The motive of the circles or better expressing the sun motif in the circle shape is also presented in other realizations of rock art, in the painting of Bovilla and the painting of Rubiku.

#### **The painting of Bovilla**

In the north of Tirana city in a distance of 15 km, in the canyon formed by Bovilla River, in the face of a massive rock it is applied the painting of Bovilla. It is in a relatively large surface around 60 m<sup>2</sup> (11m x 5.30m) conditioned by the surface of the rock suitable for the painting. Consequently it is divided into two parts (A and B)

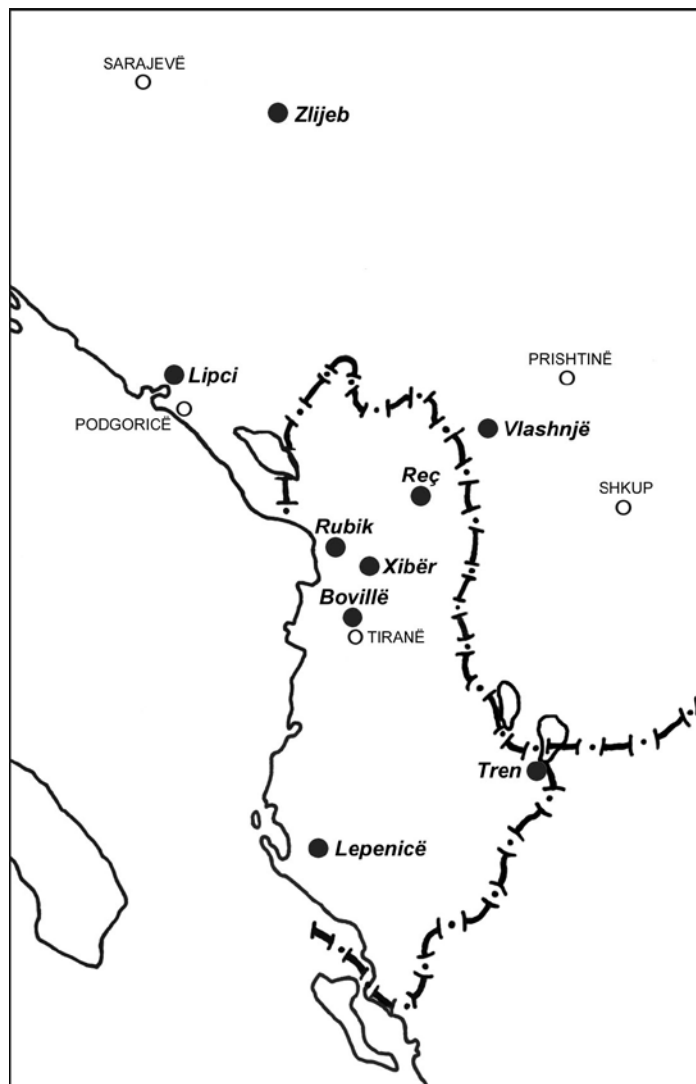


In the part A, in a surface about 6 m<sup>2</sup>, 14 figures compounded by circles with two diameters: the circle A3 with the diameter 29 x 27cm, whose diameter is partly damaged and the circle A6 with a diameter 48 x 40 cm with a preserved perimeter. The circles are in white color with wide lines 2-4 cm. A great many are the figures in cross shape (A1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12) which have approximately the same size with the big diameter 15-20m in wide lines but not carefully made. Some of them have tracks of the limitative circles that can hardly distinguish because they are damaged. There are spots and dots (A2, 11, 13) as well a mark in an irregular quadrate shape. (A140 and another in B letter shape turned backwards.(A9) (Fig.5)

In part B of the Bovilla painting is clearly noticed a large circle with two diameters (B16), size 69 cm x 68 cm and line 5-7cm wide, placed in the top of the painting, 5.30 m by the earth level. This figure is distinguished from the others as well for its depicting quality and the position to the other figures. Figure (B 15) is badly damaged, but probably it was a circle with two diameters. There are other undistinguishable spots in part B (B 17, 18).

The motif of the circles with two diameters of Bovilla painting is the same with the painting of Reçi and Xibri, which are made with the incision technique. Considering the use of white color the similarities takes us to the Rubik and Zhlijeb paintings.

In a general point of view the six realizations of rock art discovered in the territory of Southern Illyria (the painting of Lipieit it is included in this territory) are considered important works done in certain cultural territory, in the period from the fourth millennium to the first millennium B.C. At the same time they have common mystic-religious concepts making those creations of a certain stage in the prehistoric period. Consequently the region of South Illyria is a special area of the prehistoric art with prominent values for Balkan Peninsula.



The map of rock painting sites in Southern Illyria.jpg

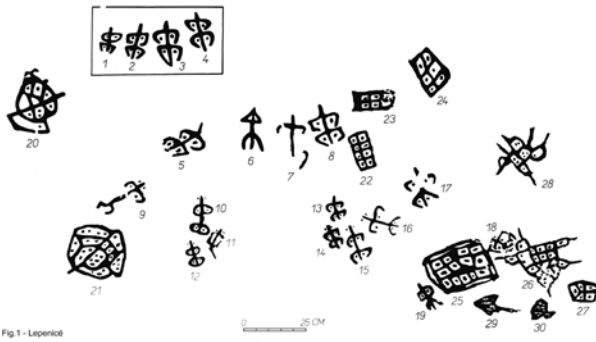


Fig 1 - Lepencë

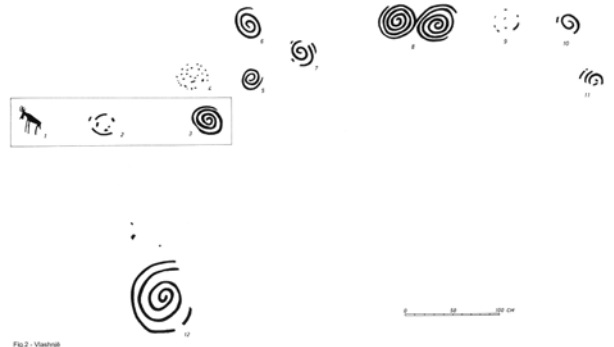


Fig 2 - Vlashnjë

fig.1-Lepenicë

fig.2-Vlashnjë



Fig.3 - Tren

fig.3-Tren

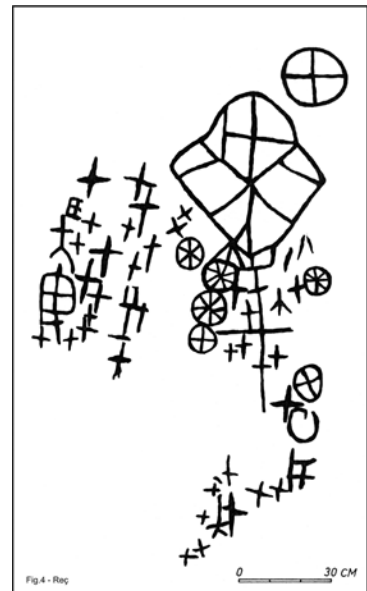


Fig 4 - Rec

Fig.4-Rec

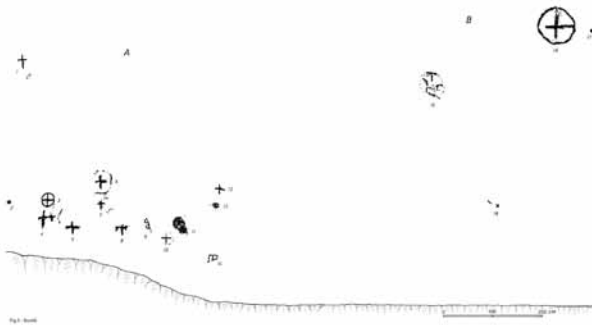


fig.5-Bovillë

