

Images of Horsemen in Battle on Works of Thracian Art

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Thracians is a common name given by the Greeks to the tribes inhabiting most of the territory of modern southeastern Europe. One of the most common and important figures is the horseman who is identified with the Thracian ruler or members of the aristocracy. The present paper reviews five depictions of battle scenes from two Thracian tombs – the Alexandrovo tomb and the Kazanlak tomb, situated in modern day Bulgaria. The images, though different, have some common elements such as the depiction of horsemen and that the soldiers do not wear armor, even though they are equipped with various weapons. The wall paintings are never found within the burial chamber itself but in the rooms leading to it. This, as well as the small number of such images, may suggest that even though battle was an important rite of passage in Thracian culture, it was not the most important element.

Introduction

This article seeks to introduce and interpret the repertoire of currently known representations of horsemen in battle in Thracian art as found within modern Bulgaria. *Thracians* is a common name given by the Greeks to the tribes inhabiting most of the territory of modern South-Eastern Europe. “Thracian art” is herein defined as the depictions found in buildings or on objects which functioned in a Thracian context though not necessarily created by local craftsmen.

Objects of art that are attributed to the Thracians are found primarily within graves, or other funeral structures, and treasure deposits. Both these categories of objects were intentionally deposited into the ground. The former allow, in most cases, a clear dating of the objects based on comparison with other findings in the same complex. On the other hand the treasure deposits are often discovered by chance and cannot be directly related to a particular settlement or cemetery.¹ Thus, their date is determined according to stylistic criteria and is usually quite broad and imprecise. Authorship of the mentioned works of art or the place of their manufacture is also, in most cases, impossible to determine, thus the only secure criteria is that the images functioned within a Thracian cultural context.

The nature of the preserved artefacts, objects of gold and silver as well as other luxurious items, indicates that the images were primarily created for the enjoyment of the wealthy. The little information we possess regarding the social structure of Thracian society indicates that within Thracian culture, the wealthy were the aristocracy.² Thus, at least some of the images were created with a political motive and not simply to satisfy esthetic needs.

All scholars studying ancient Thrace agree that the ‘horseman’ represents the ruler or members of the aristocracy.³ Riders appear on different type of artefacts, including golden or silver vessels, gold rings and wall paintings,

and present a variety of themes such as scenes of investiture, hunting and, what is most important for the current article, battle.

Only those scenes which are undoubtedly depictions of battle where both sides of the conflict are depicted will be taken into account in this paper. Only five works of Thracian art, where horseman are present, fit this criterion, all of which are found on wall paintings in Thracian tombs. They will be presented here chronologically according to the widely accepted dating of the tombs where they were discovered.

Wall Paintings in the Tomb near Alexandrovo

The Thracian tomb near the village of Alexandrovo, Haskovo province in Southeastern Bulgaria was discovered on December 17, 2000 in a mound called *Roshavata chukka* by the Bulgarian archaeologist Georgi Kitov. There were no ancient artefacts discovered in the tomb, which lead Kitov to suggest that it had been broken into before, most likely in antiquity.⁴ A piece of uniform from a Bulgarian soldier suggests that the tomb was also entered between 1943-1944⁵ as well as a few days before Kitov’s discovery.

The tomb consists of a corridor, antechamber and circular burial chamber (fig.1) built entirely with stone blocks without mortar. The corridor is 10 m long with E-W orientation, its height is 2.25 m and gradually lowers to 1.80 m at the entrance to the antechamber. The antechamber is rectangular in shape the long side being aligned to N-S axis. The room is 1.92 m wide and 1.50 m long. The diameter of the burial chamber is 3.30 m at floor level and the walls gradually arch forming a vault. Double doors, fragments of which were discovered during the excavations, blocked the entrance to the burial chamber.⁶

Kitov believes that it was built in the first half of the 4th century B.C.E. and assumes that it was used for mystery rituals.⁷ The adding of the wall paintings marks the second phase in

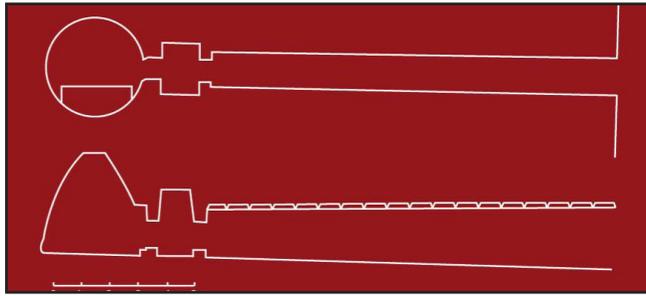


Figure 1: Plan of the Alexandrovo tomb (after Petrov 2009, оѡр. 2).

the usage of the structure which has been dated to the second half of the 4th century B.C.E.⁸ According to Kitov the tomb was sealed in the beginning of the 3rd century B.C.E. at the latest.⁹ Such an interpretation suggests that the building was not initially intended as a tomb and was only later adapted to serve this purpose. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the wall paintings were created for a specific burial.

Due to the multiple previous entries to the tomb, no objects that could have been part of the grave goods were recovered, as well as no physical remains. There are many problems with the interpretation of this building as a tomb based solely on the presence of a ‘stone bed’ situated by the north wall of the main chamber on the left-hand side of the entrance to the latter. This could have served a very wide variety of functions particularly with the evidence of fire on the bed.¹⁰

The stone blocks of the structure were flattened with a mixture of lime and sand, on top of which about 0.05 to 0.10 cm thick layer of plaster was implied.¹¹ The painter used tempera technique for the wall painting, i.e. that natural pigments were mixed with a binding agent such as egg, glue, water, etc. It is not established what the binding agent was in this particular case.¹² The wall paintings covered the walls of the corridor immediately adjacent to the antechamber, the antechamber and the main chamber, the walls of which were entirely covered with paintings from the floor to the ceiling.

Northern Wall of the Corridor in the Alexandrovo Tomb

The wall painting on the northern wall of the corridor in the Alexandrovo tomb is relatively well preserved and represents a horseman on the right-hand side with a naked figure in front holding a shield, obviously trying to escape. The image of the horseman has been severely damaged (fig. 2). The position of his right hand suggests that he is holding a weapon – a sword or a spear as suggested by Kitov.¹³ In my opinion, the position of the fingers points to a spear as the more likely of the two possibilities.

One of the central questions, which is directly related to the interpretation of the wall painting, is whether the preserved images were part of a larger scene. In the western part of the corridor, Kitov observed a smooth transition



Figure 2: Wall painting on the north wall of the corridor in Alexandrovo tomb (after Petrov 2009, оѡр. 18).

about 7-8 cm long between the thick plaster and the stone wall where no remains of plaster could be distinguished.¹⁴ Moreover he does not mention the discovery of plaster fragments on the floor of the corridor apart from the section near the entrance to the first chamber where the wall paintings are preserved. This suggests that the image in question was indeed not part of a larger scene and thus should be interpreted independently.

Of particular interest is the dress of the rider, though the image is severely damaged, trousers and shoes with pointed tips are clearly visible. Similar clothing can also be seen on other wall paintings in this tomb as well as in the tomb at Kazanlak. It is not certain whether the rider was wearing armor since the details on his torso are nearly impossible to distinguish. The nakedness of the other figure is quite peculiar. This may relate to the identification of a particular person or tribe, if this is perhaps a depiction of a real event. Interpreting the image as a typical battle scene is rather impossible as only two figures are shown, thus it seems likely that it presents a singular moment from a battle or a duel.

Kitov believes that the scene is a depiction of a ritual dance and that the person in front of the rider is actually a dancer.¹⁵ Xenophon in the *Anabasis* mentioned a dance imitating a battle during a feast in the court of the Thracian ruler Seuthes II (Xenophon *Anabasis* VI, 1.5-6), which led Xenophon to believe in the ritual meaning of the observed actions. However, Xenophon describes a “fight” between men without the participation of horses or horsemen. Kitov’s argument in support of the ritual dance interpretation is based on the position of the legs and toes of the person¹⁶ though this is not entirely convincing.

In order to achieve a credible interpretation, the function of the building must be taken into consideration. If we assume that the wall paintings were created on the occasion of a burial, we may presume that they represent significant moments in the life of the person

for whom the tomb became a final resting place. Another interesting observation made by Kitov may point in this direction. The archaeologist believes that three figures: one painted in the corridor, one in the antechamber and one on the lower frieze in the burial chamber,^{17, 18} have a similar profile, and thus it is possible that this is a representation of the same person.¹⁹ Based on this observation, it is possible to assume that the images on the northern wall of the corridor in the Alexandrovo tomb represent real events.

Southern Wall of the Corridor in Alexandrovo Tomb

The wall-painting on the southern wall (fig. 3) of the corridor is situated opposite the image discussed above and is poorly preserved. Similar to the previous example, the figure of the horseman on the left-hand side of the image is more damaged than that of the figures on the right. In front of the horse there are two human figures, one of them stands upright and holds a round shield and attacks with a spear, while the other is kneeling. The latter is believed by Kitov to be a woman.²⁰

A small, though very important, element of the wall painting can be observed in its lower part consisting of red triangles with one of the points pointing down. These were obviously



Figure 3: Wall painting on the southern wall of the corridor in Alexandrovo tomb (after Petrov 2009, σφ. 17).



Figure 4: Wall painting over the entrance to the main chamber in Alexandrovo tomb (after <http://aleksandrovo.com/>).

part of the decorative frame of the image although no ground level is marked. The horseman and the infantryman are dressed in short *chitons*, the latter also wears trousers. Both of them hold spears, however, as in the first image, neither of them wears armor.

The third figure is dressed in a longer *chiton*,²¹ according to Kitov, with red dots visible along the neckline, which he interprets as jewelry.²² The scholar also describes a “strange position of the legs,” which according to him indicates that she is jumping²³ though it appears as if the person is simply kneeling on one knee. Closer observation of the clothing of this figure reveals it to be about the same length as those of the other two, thus the only argument that this is an image of a woman is that the legs and hands are thinner than those of the other figures. Kitov himself writes that it is very difficult to distinguish figures of women from men in the tomb and such a distinction is only hypothetical.²⁴

Kitov interprets this wall painting as a ritual dance as well based on the “jumping” woman.²⁵ However, it is more likely that the image represents a battle scene. The kneeling person is in front of, or even under the front legs of, the horse and looks as if they are begging for mercy. Irko Petrov suggests a similar interpretation with the kneeling figure holding a sword in their right hand.²⁶

The identification of the wall painting with a real event, though very likely, is not easy to prove, as we are not able to relate it to a particular historical fact. However, it is likely that this painting depicted an important moment in the life of the person who was buried in the tomb or of the community that used the building and had access to the images.

Wall Painting over the Entrance to the Main Chamber in the Alexandrovo Tomb

The wall painting in question (fig. 4) is situated in the antechamber on the triangular tympanum above the entrance to the main chamber. It is better preserved than the two wall paintings discussed above. The image has been damaged only in its upper part, where the face of the horseman and the horse’s head were situated.

The image is similar in composition to the one on the north wall of the corridor (fig. 2), a horseman is shown attacking, while another figure, naked from the waist down, is turned towards the rider and is protecting himself. Kitov interprets the presented scene as a ritual dance²⁷ and he suggests that the half-naked figure shows the mother goddess who is performing the investiture of the ruler.²⁸ These hypotheses are unlikely for two reasons. First, the position of the right hand of the rider looks as if he is holding a weapon, possibly a spear, which he is using to attack the person in front of him. Secondly, the horse is rearing and

the person in front of it is obviously trying to protect himself by holding an oval shield²⁹ in front of his body.

Further evidence against Kitov's theory is the clothing of the standing figure which is naked from the waist down. Such a depiction of a deity would be quite unusual as all representations of the mother goddess found on silver vessels from the Rogozen³⁰ treasure and on the wall painting in the Sveshtari tomb³¹ show her in a long *chiton*. In this context depicting the goddess half-naked may have been perceived as a lack of respect. Moreover, the painting strongly differs from the scenes of investiture shown on three gold rings discovered in Bulgaria. The said rings were discovered in three separate burials situated in Central and Southeastern Bulgaria near the villages of Rozovets, Brezovo and Malomirovo-Zlatinitsa. On all three of them the goddess is standing in front of the horseman (facing him or leading him forward with her back turned to him) and is holding a *phiale* or *rhyton*³² considered to be part of the royal regalia.³³ In addition, the notion of a fight with the goddess seems quite disturbing, especially when we consider that according to many written sources female deities were highly revered in Thrace.³⁴ As well, we are actually not sure whether this is a woman at all since the figure is turned with its back towards the viewer.

Kitov has also suggested another interpretation of the image as a dance,³⁵ however, he does not provide any explanation as to the meaning of such a depiction. This hypothesis as well seems quite unfounded. Perceiving the figures as "jumping" or "dancing" is potentially due to the lack of a background as well as a ground level. Therefore, it seems quite possible that this is a depiction of real events which we are unfortunately unable to identify.

The Corridor of the Kazanlak Tomb

The tomb was discovered by chance by Bulgarian soldiers on April 19, 1944 near Kazanlak, Stara Zagora province. The building is constructed of bricks, which is typical for late 4th century tombs in this area. The tomb consisted of an antechamber, a corridor and main burial chamber³⁶ (fig. 5). There were only a few objects discovered in the tomb, most of them in the burial chamber, which suggests that it was robbed. Vasil Mikov who was in charge of the excavations suggests that the robbery probably took place in antiquity.³⁷ In the antechamber, the skeleton of a horse was discovered with its bones in disarray.³⁸ Another archaeologist, Ivan Venedikov, writes about the discovery of two horse skeletons in the same place.³⁹ The entire building was covered by an earthen burial mound.

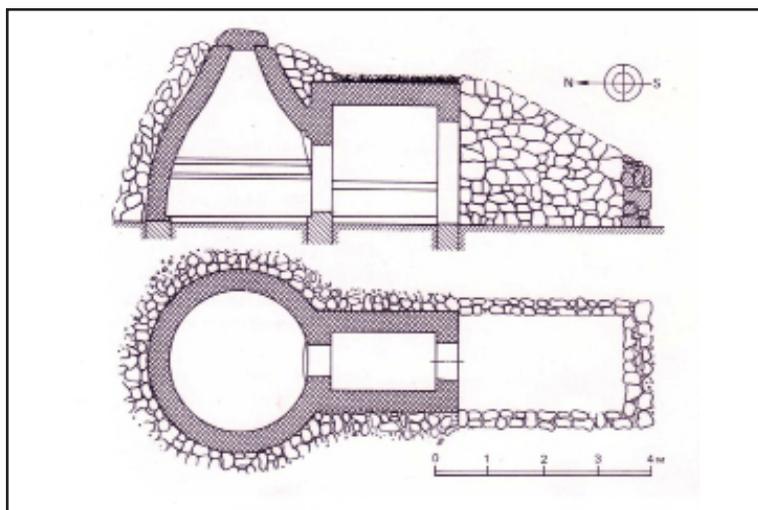


Figure 5: Plan of Kazanlak tomb
(after <http://traciantombs.blogspot.com>).

The tomb is the final resting place for two people – a man and a woman whom Mikov suggests were buried in wooden coffins due to fragments of burnt wood. He also believed that the two were buried simultaneously.⁴⁰ The high quality of the painted decorations as well as the burial ritual and especially the burial of a horse in the antechamber identify the couple as members of the aristocracy.

In the wall paintings both *tempera* and *al fresco* techniques were used.⁴¹ The depictions cover the walls of the corridor and the burial chamber and are organized into friezes – one on the ceiling in the chamber and two on the vault of the corridor. The latter two friezes show two battle scenes involving horsemen and infantry.

Eastern Frieze

The eastern frieze (fig. 6) shows a battle scene involving four infantrymen and six horsemen organized around two soldiers facing each other. Behind each of them, an army is depicted and the soldiers of both armies are not mixed. Venedikov believes that the soldiers are prepared to act in case of an attack from their adversaries.⁴² His main argument is the position of the spears, which are facing down, as well as the calm position of the horses.⁴³ He also notes the position of the sword of the soldier in the middle of the composition, which is not directed towards the enemy.

There are some significant differences between the right and the left side of the frieze. The horses of the two riders on the right-hand side are standing and the soldier between them is decisively advancing forward. On the left-hand side, two of the horses are rearing,

as if they were stopped by their riders. Based on this observation, I strongly disagree with Venedikov's conclusion that the figures are static.

Each of the figures wears a *chiton* while some also have a cape and pointed tip shoes which are also seen on the wall paintings in the Alexandrovo tomb. Some of the soldiers have a helmet or a hat. The diversified clothing may suggest that the artist wanted to portray specific individuals. On the other hand, the reason may be much more mundane, that this was done to create a more interesting and colorful image. It is quite possible that the facial features of each of the soldiers were different; however, due to the poor state of the wall painting in some parts these have been obliterated. Even though the horsemen are equipped with weapons and some of the figures wear helmets, none of the soldiers are depicted in armor. This bears a striking similarity to the wall paintings in the tomb near Aleksandrovo.

Mikov as well as Venedikov suppose that the scene presents a battle between Thracians and Macedonians.⁴⁴ However, the clothing of the figures on both sides of the frieze is quite similar, thus it seems likely that the depicted battle took place between different Thracian tribes. Mikov additionally asserts that the leader of each army is the first horseman behind the central group of two soldiers.⁴⁵

Bearing in mind the dynamics of the scene as well as the gestures of the figures, Venedikov believes that this is not a battle scene *sensu stricto* and tries to identify the scene based on information regarding historical events from the period when the tomb was built in the late 4th to early 3rd century B.C.E. He interprets



Figure 6: Eastern frieze in the corridor of Kazanlak tomb (after Mikov 1954, табл. XXVII).



Figure 7: Western frieze in the corridor of Kazanlak tomb (after Mikov 1954, табл. XXVI2).

the scene as the capturing of Agathocles, the son of Lysimachus by the Thracians and hypothesizes that the man buried in the tomb was responsible for this military enterprise.⁴⁶ Mikov on the other hand, thinks that since no dead or wounded are depicted, the image in fact represents negotiations.⁴⁷ An equally plausible interpretation is that the two armies are observing a duel.

Western Frieze

The western frieze in the corridor of the tomb near Kazanlak (fig. 7) is quite similar to the previously discussed eastern frieze. Once more, we see the clash of two armies whose composition is similarly organized around two infantrymen in the center of the frieze. In this case, however, one of them is kneeling. The image is much more dynamic with the horsemen shown in motion while one of the soldiers on the right-hand side is running. When it comes to clothing, we can observe the same characteristics typical for the wall paintings already described in which none of the soldiers are wearing armor and they are dressed in a similar manner.

Particularly noteworthy is that there is only one horsemen in both friezes that has a beard (the first rider on the right-hand side behind the central group in the western frieze). Lyudmila Živkova is the first to suggest that this is the image of the Odrussian ruler Seuthes III⁴⁸ which is also supported by Venedikov. The main argument in support of this hypothesis is the similarity between the faces of the horsemen and the portrait of the ruler that may be seen on his coins (fig. 8).⁴⁹ The supposed date of the building of the tomb does not contradict such a possibility since it matches the years of Seuthes III's reign (c. 330-302/302 or 297 B.C.E.). Moreover, ancient written

sources describe him as an active warrior who often took part in military campaigns thus it is only natural for him to be presented in battle scenes. In addition, the tomb near Kazanlak is situated not far from the capital of Seuthes III in Seuthopolis. As was mentioned above, the people buried in this tomb were likely members of the aristocracy, so it is possible that the buried man not only knew the ruler, but also took part in his military campaigns. The strong likeness between the “bearded horseman” and the known portraits of Seuthes III is in my opinion a strong argument in support of the theory that it was real events which were depicted in the Kazanlak tomb.

There are several theories regarding the interpretation of the western frieze. Mikov believes that the scene should be perceived as a duel⁵⁰ while Venedikov notes the dynamic movement in the wall painting and claims that this is a presentation of a ritual dance that imitated a battle.⁵¹ The theory of Venedikov that the friezes in the corridor of the Kazanlak tomb depict real events is quite plausible. The fact that each of the soldiers has individual features when it comes to clothing, weapons and facial features presents a strong argument in support of this hypothesis. However, we cannot rule out that this was not simply a result



Figure 8: Coin of Seuthes III, AE, obv.: bearded head of Seuthes right; rev.: Horseman riding right; wreath below (after <http://traciantombs.blogspot.com>).

of the imagination of the painter who wanted to diversify the image. Still, the latter cannot explain the resemblance between the “bearded horseman” and Seuthes III, which cannot be a mere coincidence. Unfortunately, the few iconographic and written sources do not allow us to identify each of the soldiers.

Conclusion

The wall paintings presented in the present article represent a small group, only five of approximately 40 known images of horsemen in Thracian art discovered within Bulgaria. It need be noted that a considerable number of depictions show a lonely horsemen without a counterpart, animal or special attributes. This is problematic when it comes to the interpretation of such images since it is quite hard, or even in some cases impossible, to reconstruct the idea behind the depiction. The archaeological context, which may provide a clue to the meaning and function of the images, is often quite uncertain as many of the objects have been found by locals and submitted to the museum or belong within a treasure deposit.

Some interesting observations can be made based on those five battle scenes. All of them are found on wall paintings in Thracian aristocratic tombs, situated in Central and Southern Bulgaria where tombs were more popular than in the north (fig. 9). Surprisingly, none of the horsemen or the infantrymen wears armor. The matter is further complicated by the fact that there are images of horsemen in armor, i.e. the silver appliques from the Letnitsa treasure.⁵² With the lack of written evidence it is hard to explain this phenomenon, however, this may have been a result of a certain belief or simply of esthetic preference.

Most important is to attempt to assess the function of the battle scenes in the context of the tomb. Ivan Marazov takes into consideration that war was one of the obligatory rites of passage in Mediterranean cultures.⁵³ He believes that the symbolism of war was more important than the depiction of real events. This is supported by the fact that these battle scenes are depicted solely within a funerary context within the corridor or antechamber, and never in the main burial chamber itself. In this sense, they are *en route* to the burial chamber, a symbolism reminiscent

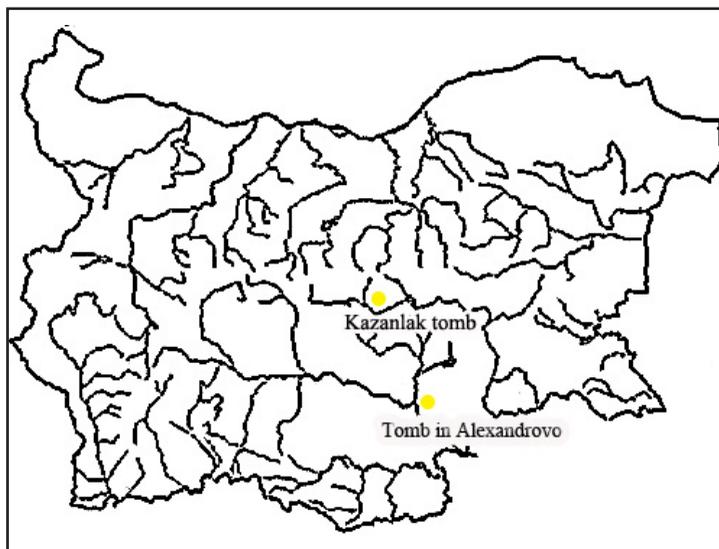


Figure 9: Map of Bulgaria showing Alexandrovo and Kazanlak tombs.

to rites of passage. Furthermore, we can hypothesize that being a warrior may not have been considered by the Thracians to be the most important characteristic but was rather a necessary element of their life. This may explain the lack of images of battle in the main chamber, which is believed by some scholars to be the most sacred place in Thracian tombs.⁵⁴

It is also important to clarify whether the images show real events or mythological concepts. Marazov assumes that the scenes in question cannot be representations of real events because they are found in a tomb, i.e. within a sacred context. He suggests that these are mythological scenes or the mythical biography of the ruler.⁵⁵ However, we cannot be certain who was buried in these tombs and in some cases whether they were really tombs. Only the rich could afford the cost of such a building project, however, this does not necessarily mean that it was commissioned by the ruler directly as aristocrats were also rich. However, it seems rather more probable that the images present real battles. A good argument to that are the differences between the presented scenes which although have common elements, are actually very different. The most convincing explanation of this phenomenon is that the wall paintings indeed depict real events.

The small number of wall paintings with images of horsemen in battle limits the possibility of thoroughly understanding them. The five wall paintings discussed in the present paper were discovered in only two aristocratic tombs located in more than 100 km from each other. This demonstrates that the popularity of this subject was not limited to one region. Furthermore, it makes it possible to believe that further archaeological research may uncover similar paintings could give us a deeper understanding of the topic as well as new insights into Thracian life and beliefs.

Endnotes:

- 1 A good example for this is the Rogozen treasure discovered in 1986 on what is presently a farm. Though archaeologists conducted field survey in the area, no archaeological remains of Thracian inhabitation were discovered (Tačeva 1987, 1-11).
- 2 Popov 2011, 46-9.
- 3 Popov 2010, 215-32; Marazov 2010, 237-8.
- 4 Kitov 2009, 11.
- 5 Kitov 2009, 11.
- 6 Kitov 2009, 20-4.
- 7 Китов 2003, 171-2.
- 8 Kitov 2003, 171-2.
- 9 Kitov 2003, 172.
- 10 Kitov 2009, 18-9.
- 11 Kitov 2012.
- 12 Kitov 2012.
- 13 Kitov 2009, 27.
- 14 Kitov 2009, 27.
- 15 Kitov 2009, 27.
- 16 Kitov 2003, 166.
- 17 The lower frieze is believed to be presenting an offering to the gods.
- 18 Kitov 2003, 159-62.
- 19 Kitov 2003, 166.
- 20 Kitov 2009, 29-30.
- 21 In Thracian art, usually women are shown in long dress.
- 22 Kitov 2009, 29.
- 23 Kitov 2003, 157-8; Kitov 2009, 31.
- 24 Kitov 2003, 168.
- 25 Kitov 2003, 158.
- 26 Petrov 2009, 24.
- 27 Kitov 2009, 35.
- 28 Kitov 2009, 35-37.
- 29 Kitov suggests that the oval object held by the figure may be a shield, even though there are no known analogues (Kitov 2009, 35). However, shields of similar type may be seen on the wall paintings in the tomb in Kaznlak.
- 30 Popov 2010, 57-9.
- 31 Popov 2010, 58-9.
- 32 More detailed information regarding the mentioned three rings as well as their interpretation can be read in Avramova 2015.
- 33 Marazov 2010, 240-1.
- 34 Thorough study on the matter may be found in Popov 2010, 55-127.
- 35 Kitov 2003, 166.
- 36 Mikov 1954, 1-3.
- 37 Mikov 1954, 1-3.
- 38 Mikov 1954, 24-5.
- 39 Venedikov 1986, 2-3.
- 40 Mikov 1954, 27-8.
- 41 Tsanova and Getov 1978, 17.
- 42 Venedikov 1986, 4.
- 43 Venedikov 1986, 4-5.
- 44 Mikov 1954, 15; Venedikov 1986, 5-8.

- 45 Mikov 1954, 15.
46 Venedikov 1986, 6-7.
47 Mikov 1954, 15.
48 Živkova 1974, 18.
49 Venedikov 1986, 8.
50 Mikov 1954, 15.
51 Venedikov 1986, 7.
52 Venedikov 1996.
53 Marazov 2010, 230-6.
54 Marazov 2005, 7-8.
55 Marazov 2005, 12-3.

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