

# CHURCH № 4 FROM THE MURFATLAR ROCK COMPLEX – SOME NEWLY DOCUMENTED GRAFFITI ALONG THE EAST-WEST AXIS AND THEIR ANALOGIES

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*In memory of:  
Ion Barnea (1913–2004) and  
Petre Diaconu (1924–2007)*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Pliska, Murfatlar, desene-graffiti, inscripții-graffiti.*

**Keywords:** *Pliska, Murfatlar, graffiti-drawings, graffiti-inscriptions.*

**Rezumat:** *Prilejul pentru o nouă documentare arheologică în istoria cercetării bisericicii rupestre de la Murfatlar a fost determinat de cercetarea unei structuri descoperite în săpăturile recente (2005–2010) de la Pliska – așa-numita platformă de piatră rotundă. Redescoperirea sa a avut loc cu un deceniu în urmă în legătură cu un studiu special axat pe graffiti-urile incizate pe 2% din materialul de construcție, dintre care majoritatea sunt invizibile cu ochiul liber și transmit simboluri creștine, personaje și scene cu caracter biblic. Aceste împrejurări au adus echipa de cercetare la cea mai sigură (și mai bine păstrată) analogie posibilă-complexul rupestru de la Murfatlar, din județul Constanța, România.*

*Subiectul acestei lucrări îl reprezintă graffiti-urile aflate de-a lungul axei est-vest din Biserica nr. 4. Documentarea fotografică din aprilie 2022 a încercat să acopere cu maximă precizie toate inciziile, în special pe cele mai puțin adânci și pe cele care sunt practic invizibile cu ochiul liber. Atâta timp cât un desen al acestui graffiti nu a fost publicat până acum, se poate spune că detaliile necunoscute, până acum, din el, reprezintă: completări și/sau corectări detaliate ale celor două inscripții chirilice, precum și două inscripții asemănătoare runelor. Am completat vizualizarea fotografică și grafică a imaginilor, cu detalii ale celor două figuri umane și ale păsării.*

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**Abstract:** *The occasion for yet another archaeological documentation in the research history of the Murfatlar rock monastery was provided by the continuous excavations (2005–2010) of one particular site in Pliska – the so called Round stone platform. Its rediscovery occurred a decade later in relation to a special study focused on the graffiti incised on 2% of the building material, most of which are invisible to the naked eye and convey Christian symbols, personages and scenes of Biblical character. These circumstances brought the research team to the most certain (and best preserved) possible analogy—the rock monastic complex of Murfatlar, in Constanța County, Romania.*

*The subject of this paper are the graffiti along the east-west axes in Church № 4. The photographic documentation of April 2022 attempted to cover with maximum precision all carvings, especially the shallowest ones and those that are practically invisible to the naked eye. As long as a drawing of this graffito has not been published so far, it can be said now that the so far unknown details in it are: additions and/or thorough corrections of the two Cyrillic inscriptions, as well as two rune-like inscriptions. We have completed full photographic and graphic visualization of the images, with details of the two human figures and that of the bird.*

## Introduction

The occasion for yet another archaeological documentation in the research history of the Murfatlar rock monastery was provided by the continuous excavations of one particular site in Pliska and the results it has yielded. At first glance, the two sites do not seem to share anything in common: either in their structure, or in their function, and least of all in the historical events that more or less led to their existence. The connection between them reminds to a certain extent the Butterfly effect in the Theory of chaos. As far as their archaeological aspect is concerned, there are only two invariables: part of the team that carried out the investigations, and the working methodology with its results. The defining element about both sites is their irregularity, due to which they have not found – for decades now – logical interpretation in the “Theory of archaeological chaos”.

In the period 2005–2010, an archaeological site that later became known to academia as the Round Stone Platform was studied in Pliska. This is a vast open-air space of elliptical shape, situated to the north of Pliska’s Citadel over an area of 1 dca (**Fig. 1/1**). Its pavement consists of several thousand stones: various limestones, marls and marbles, worked to a different extent and aligned in 8 imperfect rows running NE-SW (**Fig. 2/1**). In the course of investigations it became clear that all of the material is, in effect, reused *spolia* from collapsed earlier building(s), which marks a stage of considerable destruction and/or reconstruction, unknown so far for Pliska, that had affected its central part especially. The stratigraphic position of the platform dates it to the last quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, thus making it the latest monumental structure of Pliska’s capital period, or among the earliest ones from the city’s post-capital history. Its function remains unknown. The leading hypothesis is that of an athletic facility, similar to the hippodrome in Constantinople.

The rediscovery of the site occurred a decade later in relation to a deliberate study focused on the graffiti incised on 2% of the building material (92 in total), most

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<sup>1</sup> STANILOV *et alii* 2007, p. 583; STANILOV, ALADZHOV 2011, p. 388–389.

of which are invisible to the naked eye and, contrary to expectations (as well as logic, and the stratigraphic context), convey Christian symbols, personages and scenes of Biblical character. The scenes find no analogies in Pliska, mainly due to the scarcity of visual materials there, but find similarities only among the graffiti material from the monasteries in Ravna (Provadia region), Veliki Preslav (the second capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom), and the rock churches in Dobruja—all of which, however, are of later date in comparison to the graffiti in Pliska.

Our starting points in the solving of this complex puzzle are two inscriptions. The first one is of pilgrimage content in Greek (to be published separately), and the second one, designated as № 2 according to the graffiti nomenclature, is written in rune-like characters and is in combination with a drawing that represents an Old Testament scene (**Fig. 2/2, 3**)<sup>2</sup>. Essentially, this is the second known rune-like inscription from Pliska, but the first one to originate from a certain context, with a clear stratigraphic position, and as a result of archaeological excavations<sup>3</sup>. One of the “corners” of the general picture of this puzzle is the depiction of a saint dressed in a bishop’s attire, with the name Michael repeating several times around the figure (a publication is currently under preparation). Collected together, and moreover, found close to each other, these graffiti left no room for doubt that in the construction of Pliska’s Round Stone Platform were embedded pieces from the debris of a church which had been destroyed or refurbished only about 2 decades after the Christianization of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in 864, and perhaps even in a shorter time interval that began at the onset of church construction in the First Bulgarian Capital and the erection of the Great Basilica, probably around 870.

The circumstances mentioned above in short brought the research team to the most certain (and best preserved) possible analogy—the rock monastic complex of Murfatlar, in Constanța County, Romania.

The following contribution is a token of our deepest gratitude to the colleagues in the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanța, who allowed us to work with this exceptional monument. We are also obliged to acknowledge its discoverers who worked under the direction of Prof. Ion Barnea and we dedicate this paper to their memory.

The work of the team from the National Archaeological Institute with Museum (NAIM-Sofia) was carried out in April 2022 and was focused on churches № 3 and № 4 in Sector B, where the graffiti-drawings and inscriptions are most numerous<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> KOMATAROVA-BALINOVA 2023, in press.

<sup>3</sup> The first certain rune-like inscription was discovered during a field survey in 2010 within a settlement (Site 109) in the southeast periphery of Pliska’s Inner City, generally dated to the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (**Fig. 1/2**) (Regional Museum of History-Shumen, inv. № 4628) (ALADZHOV *et alii* 2014, p. 90, 130, табл. XIX, обр. 12; ALADZHOV 2022, p. 282). The photograph presented here was personally suggested and provided by Andrey Aladzhev, head of the field survey, to whom I am genuinely grateful (note E. Komatarova-Balinova).

<sup>4</sup> The research project is financed by the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (NAIM-BAS) in relation to the project “The Round Stone Platform of Pliska: building materials, graffiti, marks and inscriptions” under the supervision of Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova. The project began in 2021 with a resolution of the Scientific Council of NAIM (Scientific Council Protocol № 24/25.03.2021). As a result, in November 2022 (with the support of MINAC), the work of the team under the same director covered the entire B

The graffiti in both churches were documented with the help of several contemporary techniques that have already been laid out in detail in a publication related to the working methodology and documentation of the graffiti from Pliska<sup>5</sup>.

### Graffiti along the west-east axes in Church 4

Church № 4 was discovered in the course of the second archaeological campaign of Murfatlar in 1960<sup>6</sup>. According to its floor plan, it is a single-apse church that measures 7 × 3.50 m<sup>7</sup>. Its interior space is partitioned by 9 asymmetrical pillars, the first four of which separate the narthex from the naos (Fig. 3). As far as their architectonic properties are concerned, only the monolithic pillars № 2, № 3 and № 6 have a supporting function. The first two, which are also centrally situated, are located frontally and opposite the entrance of the church. On three of their faces, the west, north and south – which also happen to be the ones most illuminated by natural light – can be observed a high concentration of incised images and inscriptions. As for iconography, they contain almost the full repertoire of graffiti-drawings in the rock monastic complex. The south face of pillar № 2 and the north face of pillar № 3 flank the east-west axis and only the narrow space between them allows direct visibility from the entrance towards the church altar (together with the south altar table). On the walls of these two pillars are scratched multiple drawings and inscriptions of various content and genre. Regardless, an overlapping of graffiti in church № 4 – and specifically of drawings over inscriptions – has been registered only on the south face of pillar № 2, as well as on the west faces of pillars № 2 and № 3. It is namely these rare occurrences and specifically the first of these three instances that provoked our special research interest, because the sequence of graffiti engraving gives grounds to contemplate on their relative chronology. The same situation – of overlapping (here only partially) images on inscriptions – repeats only in one more place of the entire rock-cut complex: to the left of the entrance to the apse in Church № 3.

The south face of pillar № 2 is aligned exactly along the east-west axis (Fig. 4)<sup>8</sup>. A total of 4 inscriptions are carved on it: two rune-like, two Cyrillic; as well as 28 drawings: four anthropomorphic figures, five zoomorphic figures, 19 crosses and many other incisions that have now faded due to the atmospheric conditions (Fig. 5–6). Independently incised are 23 other rune-like characters, 11 of which occupy the lowermost part of the ornamented field, while the other 12 have been fitted within the

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sector, or the so-called Peninsula Massif, where a 3D laser scanning was performed on all structures, together with a topographic mapping of the graffiti according to their repertoire and graphic system. This second stage was financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria within the framework of the National Scientific Program “Development and Promotion of Bulgarian Studies Abroad”.

<sup>5</sup> KOMATAROVA-BALINOVA, CHARALAMPAKIS, RAYKOVSKA 2022, p. 26–31.

<sup>6</sup> BARNEA 1962, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 202; AGRIGOROAEI 2007, p. 93; DAMIAN 2015, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Here we refer to the dogmatic east-west axis, whereas the long axis of the church is in fact oriented with an azimuth of 325, which proved a significant challenge for the identification of the already published inscriptions, the same graffiti zones being recorded in literature as west, southwest or south.

outlines of the human figure on the right. Despite the visible traces of past restoration activities, it is beyond doubt that the separate parts of the ornamented field, especially at the upper part of the pillar, have not changed their authentic location.

These authentically preserved part's dimensions are: 0.89 m height, and 0.73 m width at the top and 0.64 m at the bottom.

Although this is one of the most recognizable graffiti from Murfatlar, it has been published only fragmentarily so far. Moreover, all publications use only photographs to illustrate it, which however does not reflect all actually existing details. In a reverse chronological order, the graffiti have been included in the rich catalogue of the Constanța Museum, "Mixobarbaroi from Dobruja in the context of the Byzantine world" (2020)<sup>9</sup>, which features a bibliographic reference to its first publication in "The culture in the territory of Dobruja in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century" in volume 3 of the fundamental work "History of Dobruja" (1971)<sup>10</sup>. In the first publication of church № 4 (1962), there is no detailed description<sup>11</sup>. A few decades later (in 1994), to the only Cyrillic inscription published by Ion Barnea, Kazimir Popkonstantinov added one more, which he documented graphically in person, without however providing a photograph in support of this information<sup>12</sup>. The photographic documentation carried out by our team did not confirm the existence of such an inscription, but of another one in the same location, of different content (see below)<sup>13</sup>. Later, the discussions in academic literature – Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian – focus exclusively on the reading of the so-called donor inscription (see below), and in particular, on the titles and personal names mentioned in it.

The common flaw of all authors mentioned so far – whether Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish or Russian – remains the absence of objective and thorough documentation to illustrate the inscriptions and drawings, with the help of photographs and graphic drawings simultaneously. After all, vision is one of the most subjective human senses. This fault of the past publications is also particularly true about the topographic location of the drawings and the inscriptions, mainly due to the lack of direct observations by the authors.

## Results of the photographic documentation

The photographic documentation of April 2022 attempted to cover with maximum precision all carvings, especially the shallowest ones and those that are practically invisible to the naked eye. As long as a drawing of this graffiti has not been published so far, it can be said now that the so far unknown details in it are: additions and/or thorough corrections of the two Cyrillic inscriptions, as well as two rune-like inscriptions. We have completed full photographic and graphic visualization of the images, with details of the two human figures and that of the bird (**Fig. 6**).

<sup>9</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2020, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 212, fig. 63.

<sup>11</sup> See BARNEA 1962, p. 293–316.

<sup>12</sup> See POPKONSTANTINOV, KRONSTEINER 1994, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Part of the Cyrillic graffiti is visible only in laboratory conditions with artificially simulated light sources. Its publication will be possible after it has been processed with a digital program which is being developed presently.

## Graffito-drawings

It is clear from the first glance that all images and inscriptions differ in terms of style and are carved by different hands and by people of a different level of skill, knowledge and esthetic taste. The fact that some of the images and inscriptions overlap suggests that they were also not synchronous. This suggestion is supported by the variety of artistic techniques used – of the carvings and of the shallow relief. Taken into consideration together, these circumstances mean that the presented figures hardly belong to the same composition, or a scene taken from any narrative, clarified and further elaborated by the inscriptions that surround the drawings. Moreover, the central drawing disturbs the longest of these inscriptions. In terms of width, the graffiti are incised in such a way that they occupy thoroughly the ornamented field from the very left to the right edge of the pillar's south face.

## Anthropomorphic depictions

The first of them is located at the very west end of the ornamented field and is a human figure in the *orans* position (**Fig. 7**). Its dimensions are 0.15 × 0.12 m. The torso and the lower limbs are outlined with a double contour, the legs are bent sideways at the knees and the heels face each other, adding a certain “dancing” motion to the overall depiction. The head is round, slightly elongated at the chin. The facial details are minimalistic and unrealistic-with an exaggerated nose and a barely marked mouth through a shallow horizontal line. The ears are unnaturally enlarged, with pointy tips. The general impression is of a fantastic image that combines anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features – the former in the body, the latter in the head.

The second figure is also in the *orans* position and is to be found at the east end of the ornamented field, but is of considerably larger dimensions (0.39 × 0.22 m) and far more realistic rendering, even though the body proportions demonstrate an emphasized irregularity (**Fig. 9**). Apparently, the represented individual is a religious figure, considering the long mantle decorated with horizontal bands, barely visible in the original photographic documentation, that covers fully his body from the shoulders down. The fact that one more piece of vestment is present under the mantle is seen in the shallow incisions that run diagonally and merge in the rectangular cleavage around the neck. In the left ‘division’ is visible a cross with an elongated vertical and a short horizontal arm. With great caution, it could be suggested that the undergarment in question is a *sakkos*, from which is discernible also the wide horizontal band at the bottom end of the piece and the diagonal stripes – the two bands of the *omophorion*. That the image represents the figure of an archpriest (who was perhaps really present at Church № 4), is implied by the mantle whose decoration of horizontal bands, visible mostly in the area of the right shoulder, is rather reminiscent of bishop mantles. The lack of some details from the parts of episcopal garments enlisted above, as well as the absence of other characteristic attributes related to this rank, e.g. the scepter and the tiara, should be explained with the artistic skills of the author of the drawing who was unable render them within the constricted space. For this reason, in fact, the left part of the drawing remains unfinished as it reaches as far as the right edge of the pillar's face. Could be possible,

again with a great caution, that the preserved cross near the left hand is an ending of a scepter and the lines over the human head are part of tiara.

At the lower part of the human figure outlined with the contour of the mantle, to the right can be seen a cross with triangular endings, and under the right horizontal arm is a rune-like character similar to Cyrillic front nasal. Another 12 characters of significantly smaller size have been fitted inside the right lower half of the figure, between the details of the garment, which means that they take the existing lines into consideration and are thus of a later date (**Fig. 6**).

To the group of anthropomorphic images could be added also the drawings of boots. This suggestion was first put forward by Petre Diaconu who connected them to the shortened version of the Biblical narrative and the scene of Jesus Christ washing apostle Peter's feet<sup>14</sup>. The boot drawings have been incised very shallowly here. The first boot is placed within the body of the bird, and the second one – in the lowest part of the ornamented field (**Fig. 11/1, 2**). Both are in motion to the right, towards the altar of the church. At their lower side they are shaped through an emphasized curve at the heel and the sole, the tips are sharp, and the upper part of the boots consist of cylindrical legs up to knee height.

The four anthropomorphic depictions are visibly heterogeneous, carved with lines of different thickness. Topographically, their analogies can be traced first in the rock monastery itself – in church № 4, as well as in church № 3 and chapel E5 in gallery E.

The artistic approach which is characterized by the outlining of the torso and the limbs with a double line, as in the graffito of pillar № 2, was used also in the depiction of the human body on the south face of pillar № 5, where at approximately the same depth of carving has been added an ornamental motif – interlaced pattern (**Fig. 8**). Outside Murfatlar, the most precise iconographic parallel is the figure in graffito № 2 from the Round Stone Platform in Pliska, which was in fact the very reason that prompted the search of analogies in the rock monastery. In the Pliska graffito, apart from the fact that the torso and the limbs are traced with a double line, we can see the same “dancing” motion of the figure (**Fig. 2/2**). The scene from graffito № 2 in Pliska is interpreted as shortened visual version of the Old Testament tale from the Torah – Moses and the Burning Bush<sup>15</sup>. Our initial expectation that the anthropomorphic figure from church № 4 might also be part of a narrative composition was not confirmed in the course of our work.

Certain details of the second figure – that of the so-called monk – are repeating also in the figures from pillar № 3 in church № 4 and the south wall in church № 3 (**Fig. 10/1**), as well as in the saints' depictions in church № 4<sup>16</sup> and chapel E5 (**Fig. 10/2**). In the first case, they are the details of the upper garment and the marked cleavage around the neck, and in the second – the rune-like characters carved in the lower right half of the skirts of the upper garment. As far as the stylistic specifics of the drawing are concerned, and in particular the disproportion in the rendering of the human figures with the unnatural augmentation of the upper torso and the

<sup>14</sup> DIACONU 1975, p. 267–268.

<sup>15</sup> KOMATAROVA-BALINOVA 2023, in press.

<sup>16</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 209, fig. 58.

shaping of the armpits of the arms raised in orans position, it can be pointed out that the most precise analogy is the human image incised at the lowermost part of the west face of pillar № 3<sup>17</sup>.

As far as the above-mentioned type of vestment indicates – to a certain extent – the rank of the depicted individual, it can be said that the most suitable analogy from Bulgaria comes from the building material of the Round Stone Platform. But there, in graffito № 3 the figure of the saint is presented with an epitrachili, and with an omophorion. Therefore – with relative caution about Murfatlar and more confidence about Pliska – we can say that both figures represent church *archiereis*, most probably bishops. The visible details of the garment in Murfatlar and especially the omophorion without the additional marking of the epitachelion, match the images in the Paris Psalter (BnF Grec 510), dated to the last quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. In the graffiti material of Ravna, which is also among the best preserved and richest in visual aspect, there are no drawings that represent religious figures in such vestment. Only the headdress, whose lower end is marked by horizontal lines across the forehead, implies that there might have been similar images, as long as such head-dresses appear also in the graffiti repertoire from Pliska and Ravna.

The parallels of the two small boots and their topography inside Murfatlar also demonstrate certain interesting correlations. In church № 4 they are situated in all functional parts of the temple – at the south wall of the narthex, in the naos – on the surface of pillars № 2, № 6, and № 8, as well as in one of the central arches of the altar – by pillar № 10 (**Fig. 3**).

Almost all of them, except those in the narthex of B4 (2 in total, single, not pair), are walking right, or towards the altar. In church № 3 they are on the north wall, as well as in the room attached to it (the so-called chapel 2), also from the north. In both cases they are also single, first three – walking right towards the altar, the second three – too (**Fig. 11/4**). Such images are also clearly visible in the Crypt № 1 from the primary publication of Murfatlar<sup>19</sup>, and from our documentation. In the latter case, the drawing is situated to the left of the entrance of Crypt № 2 and is presented in motion towards it (**Fig. 11/3**). An attempt at the logical assessment and interpretation of these images would be related to their topographic position.

Approximately the same topographic situations, as in Murfatlar, are seen in the boot drawings from the “Theotokos” monastery at Ravna (**Fig. 12/1, 2**), with a total of 75 depictions, the largest number in Bulgaria. The topographic, typological and statistical analysis of the boot drawings there indicate that they are distributed mainly in two zones – in the inn and in the church. The smallest number is in the scriptorium – only 3. This leads to the conclusion that they were left by outsiders to the brotherhood of monks – most likely pilgrims<sup>20</sup>. Judging by the example from Church № 4 in Murfatlar, especially based on the drawing incised at the central entrance to the altar (**Fig. 3**), to the possible circle of these pilgrims should be added also members of the clergy because it was mostly them that had access to this most sacred part of the temple.

<sup>17</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 205, fig. 54/1.

<sup>18</sup> THIERRY 1966, p. 309, fig. 1.

<sup>19</sup> BARNEA, BILCIURESCU 1959, fig. 11.

<sup>20</sup> KOSTOVA 1994–1995, p. 147; KOSTOVA 1996a, p. 226–227; KOSTOVA 1996b, tabl. 5.

The discovery of such drawings in Pliska, on the spolia of the Round Stone Platform (**Fig. 2/2, 3**), is astonishing, because, if we follow the example of Ravna and Murfatlar, they must also originate from a monastery, and the only one known so far is the monastery at the Large Basilica. Difficult for interpretation remain the boot drawings from Crypt № 1, unless we accept that the object of pilgrimage in this case were – collectively – the three persons buried in the two crypts<sup>21</sup> and especially the individual (possibly re-buried) in the small niche, carved into the floor of the room designated as Crypt № 2.

## Zoomorphic depictions

### 1. *Ornithomorphic depictions*

The central position in the ornamented field belongs to the figure of a bird walking left (**Fig. 6, 13/1, 2**). Its body is comparatively realistic and is rendered through the help of two different techniques. The first one is shallow relief – the body, head and legs of the bird are formed through the scraping of the surface of the soft rock. Apparently, the wide and not too distinct grooves in the upper part of pillar № 2 took into consideration the existence of this image because they start at the curve of the upper wing. There is no doubt that the deep tracing of the bird's back interrupted the right part of a two-line rune-like inscription, as well as part of the anthropomorphic image in the east half of the pillar (**Fig. 13/1**).

The second technique – engraving – was used for the depiction of the wings. What is peculiar here is that they are three in number. One is folded close to the body and its position is realistic, matching the peaceful walk of the bird. The other two wings – above and below – appear to have been added after the deep tracing. They are presented in the flight motion characteristic of the so-called heraldic imagery of birds of prey – falcons and eagles – known from the elite specimens of stone sculpture, toreutics, decorated ceramics, and textile.

In the center of the body, with approximately the same depth of the outline, is engraved a Maltese cross with triangular arms of approximately the same size, which do not join in the middle. The upper vertical arm also disturbs (and partly destroys) the earlier two-line rune-like inscription (**Fig. 13/1**). As for style and decoration, the combination of the technique of shallow relief, together with the Maltese crosses, is repeated on the west faces of pillars № 2 and № 3, situated frontally opposite the entrance of the church, where they disrupt older rune-like inscriptions. It seems that they, together with the groove decoration of the pillars, represent a later stage of the general decoration program of the temple, which appears to have been suddenly interrupted since it was applied only in certain parts of it, and in relation to the supporting structure of the church – only on some of the pillars and some of the vaults.

The same situation is repeated in church № 3 at the altar, where the cross depiction, together with that of a water bird, disrupt (and partly destroy) older rune-like inscriptions (**Fig. 14**).

We can say with confidence that the images that mark the second (later) ornamental stage were carved by people who had been acquainted with finer art

<sup>21</sup> DAMIAN, SAMSON, VASILE 2009, p. 129, fig. 24/a.

specimens which so far have not been found in Bulgaria dating before the first half of 10<sup>th</sup> century, especially with regard to zoomorphic decoration. It seems most probable that they follow Byzantine prototypes that became popular in the First Bulgarian Kingdom with the Christianization.

What is particularly impressive is that the same ornamental motif that was used in the rendition of the folded wing was applied also in a little known scene from pillar № 3, also situated along the east-west axis. It can be therefore assumed that the above mentioned ornithomorphic images have the same author.

## 2. Teratomorphic depictions

This group comprises the depictions of four snakes or so-called dragons. In the ornamented field of the south face of pillar № 2 they occupy the left half, and in all instances only the bodies are drawn (**Fig. 7**). The first two are overlapped by the anthropomorphic figure and the third one – by a Maltese cross. “The complete catalogue” of the teratomorphic depictions in Murfatlar is presented in Crypt № 1, as noted already by Ion Barnea<sup>22</sup>. The obvious similarities in the shaping of the bodies as double serpentes ending in sharp tails, and of the heads (where present), rendered expressively in profile with tongues sticking out and triangular horns, are presented only on pillars № 2 and № 3 in Church № 4, and gallery E which suggests that the individuals who left these depictions had access both to the church and the crypts, and to the gallery. The question about the origin and semantic essence of these depictions is rather complex due to their ambivalent symbolic meaning. Their connection to a particular ethnos or “people of Nordic origin”<sup>23</sup> remains problematic for now. Regardless of the fact that it is challenging to say which part of their rich semantics has been employed here, such depictions among the monuments synchronous to Murfatlar are encountered among the graffito material from the Ravna monastery<sup>24</sup>, and their concentration in the unit interpreted as a scriptorium<sup>25</sup> suggests that they were left by people involved in the production of manuscripts and/or their illumination. In various variants, such images are encountered as decorative elements in other textual monuments, among which stand out the Boyana Palimpsest and Roe’s Manuscript, in its marginalia (MS-Roe 27), the latter document being dated within the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>. A later but still indicative example comes from St. Sophia in Kyiv, where such drawings that undoubtedly originated from manuscripts, are encountered in the north inner gallery, known as St. Vladimir, with its lower chronological border in the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> BARNEA, BILCIURESCU 1959, fig. 11; BARNEA 1962, p. 311.

<sup>23</sup> BARNEA 1962, p. 311.

<sup>24</sup> KOSTOVA 1996a, tab. A/II.

<sup>25</sup> KOSTOVA 1996a, tab. 1.

<sup>26</sup> MOUSSACOVA 2016, fig. 7; GRANBERG 2005, fig. 1, fig. 4.

<sup>27</sup> KORNIENKO 2019, p. 103, tab. XVII, tab. LXXXIX.

## The graffiti-inscriptions<sup>28</sup>

On the south face of pillar № 2 there are a total of 4 visible inscriptions: two rune-like, two Cyrillic and nine separate characters situated at the lower end of the ornamented field.

### 1. Rune-like inscriptions

The first one of them has 19 preserved characters of which 11 are located on the first and 8 on the second line (**Fig. 13/1, 2**). The length of the first row is 0.15 m, with character size of 0.09-0.12 m. Considering the spacing between the characters, the later depictions – those of the bird and the Maltese cross – must have destroyed three characters from the first and two characters from the second line. Despite this partial overlapping and disruption, it can be pointed out that the inscription is aligned to the left, because the length of the second line starts from under the first character of the first line (**Fig. 15/1**). The first and the second four and five characters from the second line have been set apart with an interval. The sequence of five of the characters (№ 7, № 8, № 9, № 10, № 11) – the last five on the first line – coincides precisely with the sequence characters in the rune-like inscription engraved under the saint's figure on the south wall, to the right of the altar of B4 (compare **Fig. 13/2** and **Fig. 17/1**). The repetition of 3 of the characters from the first line is especially distinct on the north wall of B4, next to the anthropomorphic image (**Fig. 16**). Taken in to account together, these similarities present a good starting point for our future work with the rune-like inscriptions, especially after their last documentation which unveiled new (previously unpublished and undocumented) characters.

The topographic distribution of the rune-like inscriptions in B4 demonstrates some curious details: in the east half of the church they are situated in zones of relatively low concentration of graffiti and Cyrillic inscriptions (**Fig. 3**). Some of them can be interpreted as “clarifications” as they surround two anthropomorphic images, one of which represents a saint, and the other one is located close to the grave niche. The fact that some of those on pillars № 2 and № 3 are interrupted by later carvings suggests that they were inscribed in a period when the church did not have many visitors yet. What is very striking is the absence of rune-like inscriptions on them as on pillars, especially the side ones of the naos, № 1 and № 4. So far, we can offer, as a working hypothesis, that they predate the second (main) stage of decoration of the church, when the shallow relief images appeared, as well as the masonry pillars plastered in red (still visible here and there) (**Fig. 18**), which made the interior of the temple more “lively”.

The second rune-like inscription is of particular interest. It has been carved by a different hand. It contains 10 characters-respectively 4 and 6 on the first and second line, with a total length of the inscription of 0.06 m and a height of 0.025 m (**Fig. 13, 15/2**). The first three characters on the first line have been separated from the fourth one with an interval.

Undoubtedly, this inscription is later than the previous one, because it takes into consideration the already existing bird figure and that of the human in church attire. There is an obvious intent for left alignment, not only due to the situation

<sup>28</sup> The Romanian-Bulgarian scientific discussion that actually never happened.

of the lines, but also based on the interval that separates the first three characters from the fourth one on the first line. The characters are carved with precision and imply a very good level of graphic competence, close to that of cursive writing. The only circumstance to prevent us from suggesting that the author of this inscription had calligraphic experience is the lack of a textual document of rune-like script to confirm that. Nevertheless, the existence of such a monument can be speculated about. In terms of paleography, this inscription is closest to the rune-like inscription on the west face of pillar № 6 (**fig. 17/2**), in which one can observe similarity in the writing with four out of the eight non repeating characters from the second rune-like inscription from the south face of pillar № 2. Outside Murfatlar, the most intriguing analogy originates from Pliska where, within a settlement from the southeast periphery of the Inner City was found a ceramic sherd with a “Murfatlar-style” rune-like inscription in three lines (**Fig. 1/2, 3**)<sup>29</sup>. It was incised on the back side of the fragment and its lines are situated perpendicularly to the pottery wheel’s horizontal traces. The fact that this fragment was part of the shoulders of a jug and that the inscription can hardly be incised from the inside, especially at this part of the vessel, means that the inscribing happened after the jug had been broken. On the other hand, the vertical breakage of the sherd does not interrupt any of the characters on the right; therefore, this is a full inscription, which is again aligned to the left. To the fact that it has to be read from left to right attest also the two single characters at the beginning of the third line. Compared to the rune-like inscriptions of Murfatlar, most of which are in one line, the analogy from Pliska indicates with a fair degree of certainty, at the very least, the reading direction. To a full extent this is valid also about the second rune-like inscription from the west face of pillar № 2.

## 2. Cyrillic inscriptions

The first and most debated one among them is located at the very left edge of the south face of the pillar (**Fig. 7/1, 2**). The lines go slightly diagonally, from left to right, apparently because they take into account images that predate them: the anthropo-zoomorphic one in orans position, and the Maltese cross whose outlines are not disrupted by the last two lines of the inscription, which are smaller in size for that reason. Over the left half of the inscription is incised a pentagram, so that it affects eight of nine inscription’s lines.

The inscription has undergone significant damage in modern times. Humidity has made some of the letters impossible to decipher. Nevertheless, thanks to some older photographs and to modern technologies, at least some of them can be reliably reconstructed.

The inscription has been published several times.

The brief overview of the different interpretations should begin with that of Ion Barnea, who found the inscription and published a photograph and reading of the text for the first time<sup>30</sup>:

<sup>29</sup> ALADZHOV 2022, p. 282.

<sup>30</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 212, fig. 63.

†[Ж]ОУПАН  
 Н НМАЕТЪ ГЕОР-  
 ГЕ.ЖЦ ПЕВЕ ПАМ  
 МЪ ЕСТЪ КЪКЪ КРЪННЪ Н РЪЖЪ  
 ТЪ. .  
 А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ  
 ТЪКА ОБАСА  
 .ЕС . АП . Ж

According to Barnea's interpretation, this graffito informs us about a certain Georgi, who held the title *zhoupan*, i.e. governor of district. His name here and the context leads to the suggestion, that *zhoupan* Georgi was allegedly the donator and initiator of the construction and foundation of the church.

Barnea's reading leaves much unexplained, for only three or four words have any meaning, and it is difficult to speak of any text that makes sense at all. However, the inscription was referred to as *the inscription of zhoupan Georgi* for many years. As an example, we can point to a study by V. Beshevliev (1976), in which otherwise important clarifications are made regarding the proto-Bulgarian word *toganъ*<sup>31</sup>.

A significant step towards revealing the message of the graffito was made by Kazimir Popkonstantinov. After visual examination and making new photographs, he suggests that it reads as following<sup>32</sup>:

[Т]ОУПАН  
 Д'ВЛАЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ  
 ГЕЪЖ ЦРЪКЪВЕ КАМ[ ]  
 НЪН СЪКЪН КРЪННЪ Н РЪЖЪ  
 НЪН  
 А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ  
 ТЪКА [ ] ОБА СА  
 ЕС[ ]АП[ ]ЖЧ

The authors, Popkonstantinov and Kronsteiner, have translated the first part only: „Tupai macht eine Kirche für den heiligen Georgi, aus Stein gehauen (...)“. The detailed analysis is postponed for another study<sup>33</sup>. In it K. Popkonstantinov assumes, that there are two proper names of Turkic origin featured in the inscription. The first one is Tupai, the donator of St. George's church, and the second one is Tongan, one of its builders, therefore *zhoupan* Georgi does not feature in the text at all. As concerns ПОЛОУТЪКА, Popkonstantinov thinks it is a toponym, closer in form to a well-known village named Poloutesk.

A. A. Zaliznyak has contributed to the reading and interpretation of the inscription in an article, intended as *corrigenda* to various inscriptions, published by other

<sup>31</sup> BESHEVLIEV 1976, p. 12–22.

<sup>32</sup> POPKONSTANTINOV, KRONSTEINER 1994, p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> POPKONSTANTINOV 1996.

scholars<sup>34</sup>. Even though he worked with the photograph from the above mentioned catalogue, his intuition and considerable experience in epigraphy enabled him to observe some unnoticed features:

--[Т]УПАИ  
 Д'КЛАЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ  
 ГЕВЖ ЦРКЪВЕ КАМ[Е]  
 НЪЕ С'КЪИ Н КРЪННЪН РЪЖ'КЪ  
 НЪН  
 А ТЖГАНЪ НЪ ПОЛОУ  
 ТЪКА ОБА СА  
 ЕС[Т]А П[ОР]ЖЧ(НА)[А]

After a brief analysis, Zaliznyak suggests the following translation: „--тупай делает Георгиеву церковь, обсекая камень, и сосуды для ржи. А Туган [с ним] исполу. Оба поручились“ (--tupai makes St. George's church, by cutting stone, and vessels for rye. And Tugan [with him] a half. Both were charged with that duty). According to the author, the seemingly strange message that the stonemason was simultaneously carving out a temple and making stone (!) vessels for rye becomes understandable if we take into account how often churches were used as granaries. The Krepcha inscription, which prohibits the use of monastery premises for granaries, is cited to illustrate this.

A similar interpretation is proposed by A.-M. Totomanova<sup>35</sup>. Without being acquainted with Zaliznyak's notes, she considers РЪЖ'КЪНЪН acts as modifier of КРЪННЪН, thus the whole phrase refers to vessels with a grain of rye, which were probably received as a reward for the stonemason's work. This rendition was adopted by V. Ilieva in her dictionary of Old Bulgarian inscriptions<sup>36</sup>.

Meanwhile, A. A. Medyntseva has continued forward in the same line of thought, while developing her own, quite different conception of the meaning of the text. According to her analysis, the inscription tells us about the work for the monastery (the Church of St. George) of two peasants, Tupai and Tugan. The former cultivates a piece of land, КРЪННЪН, sowing it with rye, while the latter is working for half, НЪ ПОЛОУ, of the product received<sup>37</sup>.

As compared to photographs from 40 years ago, the condition of the inscription is now worse than it was when it was discovered. Some letters that were clearly visible then are illegible today. On the other hand, modern technologies help to identify signs or traces of signs that previous researchers could only guess about. Here we will offer the three readings presented above with brief line-by-line commentary that takes into account the old images and the new digital photographs. Based on this analysis, at the end we will suggest a possible reconstruction of the text of the inscription and an interpretation.

<sup>34</sup> ZALIZNYAK 2004, p. 280–281.

<sup>35</sup> TOTOMANOVA 2014, p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> ILIEVA 2021.

<sup>37</sup> MEDYNTSEVA 2019, p. 299.

line	I. Barnea and St. Ștefănescu	K. Popkonstantinov and O. Kronsteiner	A. A. Zaliznyak	new reading
1	✠[Ж]ΟΥΠΑΝ	[Т]ΟΥΠΑΝ	--[Т]ΟΥΠΑΝ	[сДε] ТΟΥΠΑΝ
2	Н НАДЕТЪ ГЕОР-	Д'ЕЛАДЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ	Д'ЕЛАДЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ≠	Д'ЕЛАДЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ
3	ГЕ.ЖЦ ТЕВЕ ТАМ	Г'Е'КЖ ЦРЪКЪВЕ КАМ[ ]	Г'ЕВЖ ЦРЪКЪВЕ КАМ[ε]≠	Г'Е'КЖ ЦРЪКЪВЕ · КА[М]ε
4	МЪ ЕСТ ЧКЪ КРЪННЪ Н РЪЖКЪ	НЪН С'КЪН КРЪННЪ Н РЪЖКЪ	НЪЕ С'КЪН Н КРЪННЪН РЪЖКЪ≠	НЪ Н[С'ККАА]Н : КРАННЪ Н РЪЖКЪ
5	ТЪ. .	НЪН	НЪН	НЪН
6	А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ	А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ	А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ≠	А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ
7	ТЪКА ОБАСА	ТЪКА [ ] ОБА СА	ТЪКА ОБА СА	ТЪКА ОБА СА
8	.εс . ап . ж	εс [ ]ап[ ]жч	εс[Т]а п[ор]жч(на)[а]	[Н'Б]СТА П[ор]жч
9				Н[ла]

1. On the first line, we read a proper name, *τουπαι* (Toupai) and without any doubt the first letter is *τ*. I. Barnea thought that there is a cross before these six letters and A.A. Zaliznyak has assumed that it is not a cross, but rather two more letters. In fact, the first line aligns with the following ones and the word *τουπαι* is not indented, there are other letters before it. Traces of such are visible on both the old and new images, however the problem is they are more shallowly and tentatively carved into the stone than all the others. We argue that there are probably three signs. In our opinion, they are not part of the name of the builder, as Zaliznyak has suggested, but form another word, which could be *сДε* 'here'. Of these three letters, only the middle one (*Δ*) can be identified with greater certainty, while as regards the others very faint portions of letter outlines are visible. Judging from the fact that Barnea took the *ε* for a cross, it seems this part was better preserved in 1960s.

2. Second line reads *Д'ЕЛАДЕТЪ ГЕОРЪ*. The first six letters are much harder to read today than they were some decades ago.

3. On the third line we read: *Г'Е'КЖ ЦРЪКЪВЕ · КА[М]ε*. The reading *Г'Е'КЖ* seems much more plausible after examining the digital images of the inscription. Therefore, we prefer the anomalous form *ГЕОРЫГ'Е'КЖ* instead of conjecture *ГЕОРЫГ'ЕВЖ*, proposed by A. A. Zaliznyak. The word *ЦРЪКЪВЕ* is easy to read. However, this is not the case regarding the letters following afterwards, as the inscription is not preserved well. What is more, the author had to take into account the remaining space for writing next to the partially drawn cross on the right, thus he had to reduce the size of the letters, warp the text and write below the drawing. Previous researchers did not notice that at the end there seems to be letter *ε*. Thus this part reads *КА[М]ε*.

4. Fourth line is the longest one: *НЪ Н[С'ККАА]Н : КРАННЪ Н РЪЖКЪ*. First three letters are *НЪН*, and they form the rest of the word *КА[М]εНЪН* (not *КА[М]εНЪЕ* as Zaliznyak read it). Many of the letters that follow are unclear. The text so far speaks of certain Toupai, who is building St. George's church. It is made of stone, thus the word next to *КА[М]εНЪН* should mean the action which the stonemason performs upon the stone. Only traces of the letters survived and they remind *с*, *ч* and *к*, then there should follow two letters, now illegible, and *н*. Therefore, all readings are tentative: *С'КЪН* fails to record one symbol, *С'КЪНН* does not coincide with the way *jury* is rendered in

the inscription and  $\text{сѣкы н}$  is impossible, because there are two dots after  $\text{н}$  that mark end of the clause. One possible solution is to reconstruct form  $\text{нѣккани}$  and a phrase  $\text{ка[м]енѣ нѣккани}$  ‘carving out the stone’. After the two dots we read  $\text{крани н ѣжѣ}$ . We interpret  $\text{крани}$  as an adjective, which agrees with  $\text{ка[м]енѣ}$  and means ‘situated away from the center, side, on/from the side’.

5. On the fifth line there are three letters only,  $\text{нѣн}$  ( $\text{нѣн}$  is also possible). It is the ending of the word that begins on the previous line –  $\text{ѣжѣнѣн}$ . It is obviously an adjective and scholars translate it as ‘rye’. The phrase  $\text{ѣжѣнѣн ѣжѣнѣн}$  is the most obscure passage in the inscription. We do not think that the text speaks of stone vessels for rye made while carving out the church, nor it refers to sowing a field with rye. Such vessels were being normally made from wood, they would be unusable if made of stone because of their weight. Second, if the author wanted to write *vessel for rye*, he would normally use a noun, not an adjective (i.e.  $\text{крина ѣжн}$ ), and if it was the pay he worked for he would normally use preposition  $\text{за}$  with accusative ( $\text{за кринѣ ѣжн}$ ). The idea that this humid space was originally used as a granary is untenable, moreover the author himself a) claims that he is building a church and b) complies with previously carved crosses around the inscription. As we mentioned above, the reading  $\text{ѣжѣнѣн}$  is dubious, and  $\text{крани н}$  is more probable. Toupai worked upon the “side stones”, and  $\text{ѣжѣнѣн}$  is second adjective referring to certain quality of the stone. It could be its color, if the author of the inscription has connected by analogy  $\text{ѣжѣ}$ ,  $\text{ѣжѣнѣ}$  ‘rye’ (deriving from Proto-Slavic root  $\text{*rvg-}$ ) with  $\text{ѣжѣ}$  ‘rufous’,  $\text{ѣжѣда}$  ‘rust’,  $\text{ѣжѣрѣ}$  ‘reddish’ (deriving from  $\text{*rbd-}$ ). In this case, the inscription so far would read “Here Toupai builds the church of St. George by carving out the reddish stones from the side”. Such a translation fits the actual interior of the church, which features two monolithic central pillars between the narthex and the naos, and the side ones (to the left and to the right of them, but along the same line – are built of blocks by a stonemason and plastered in red. (Fig. 18/1, 2).

6. On the sixth line begins a second part of the text, which can also be taken as a second inscription, continuing the previous one. The author definitely decided not to continue on the fifth line, but to start a new paragraph:  $\text{а тѣганѣ нѣ полоуѣ}$ . The text is warped in order to avoid a cross drawn on the right: it is written at a different angle, and goes straight to the other part of the inscription.

7. There are four letters on the seventh line:  $\text{тѣка}$ . Then some space is left blank and the third part of the inscription begins:  $\text{ова сѣ}$ . First four letters are in fact part of the word that begins on the previous line:  $\text{а тѣганѣ нѣ полоуѣтѣка}$ . We think that Tongan is definitely proper name and  $\text{нѣ полоуѣтѣка}$  is not a reference to certain village, but means ‘from the half, from the point at an equal distance from the sides, from the middle’. Conjunction  $\text{а}$  is very important, since it introduces dependent comparative clause to indicate dissimilarity: Toupai works on the side, and Tongan [works] in the middle.

8. The text of the inscription on line eight is almost illegible and may be reconstructed as follows:  $\text{[нѣ]ста н[ѣ]жѣ}$ . First letter is unclear, it is not a  $\text{в}$  (i.e.  $\text{вѣста}$  ‘were’) and looks more like  $\text{н}$  (i.e.  $\text{нѣста}$  ‘weren’t’). The second letter resembles  $\text{ѣ}$ , however the lower part of the symbol is missing thus it could be  $\text{ѣ}$ .

9. The fact that the inscription continues has remained unnoticed by scholars.

The text is warped, the letters are arranged in a step-down manner and are almost unrecognizable. We read it as н[лѧ]. If this reconstruction is correct, then the text states that Tupai and Tongan did not engage in this work by virtue of an agreement, which could mean that they had provided their services voluntarily and without payment.

In the light of the above, we suggest the following reading of the inscription:

[сдѧ] ТРОУПАИ  
 Д'ѢЛАЕТЬ ГЕОРЪ  
 ГЕЪЖ ЦРКЪВЕ · КА[М]Ѣ  
 НЪ Н[с'ѢКАД]Н : КРАНИЪ Н РЪЖЪ  
 НЪН  
 А ТЖГАНЪ НЗ ПОЛОУ  
 ТЪКА ОВА СД  
 [Н'Ѣ]СТА П[ОУ]ЖЧ  
 Н[Лѧ]

This is an inscription of the stonemasons who worked on the premises: “*Here Toupai builds the church of St. George by carving out the reddish stones from the side, and Tongan [works] from the middle. Both hadn't been bound by agreement*”.

The second Cyrillic inscription is placed above the head of the male figure (a bishop?), on the upper right part of the south face of pillar № 2 (Fig. 6, Fig. 9/1). The inscription has been published once, by Popkonstantinov and Kronsteiner, who identified a three-line long Cyrillic inscription<sup>38</sup>:

[ ] ИЛИ ХОУТИ  
 [ ] ЁНЪ ВЪ  
 [к]АЛОУГЕРЪ

The authors suggest that the proper name ЁНЪ (Ěn) on the second line of the inscription presumably refers to a son of Tsar Simeon, who became a monk, and that the inscription therefore is a clarification of the male figure below<sup>39</sup>. This is probably the reason the inscription has been dated to the 10th century in this publication. The new photographic documentation resulted in a revision of what can be seen on this part of the pillar. It reveals only two lines containing Cyrillic letters, and below them, a ligature and a single rune-like letter. The ligature and the single rune-like letter differ from the Cyrillic letters in terms of the depth and width of the lines, as well as in the height of the letters. They were not made by the same hand that left the Cyrillic inscription. In this article we include the analysis of the first line of the Cyrillic inscription. The rest will be part of a future publication.

1. A line with four clearly distinguishable Cyrillic letters, here reproduced with normalized letterforms: [ ]ИМДХ[ ].

<sup>38</sup> POPKONSTANTINOV, KRONSTEINER 1994, 95.

<sup>39</sup> POPKONSTANTINOV, KRONSTEINER 1994, 95.

The surface to the left of the first visible letter, **H**, has been damaged. Short indistinct traces of one or two letters are visible to the left of **H**, but it is very difficult to identify anything with certainty. The same applies to the space after the fourth letter – **X**. There are indistinct traces of the upper part of one letter to the right of **X**, but it is difficult to determine which letter it is. It might be the upper part of the letter **Є**, **O**, **P** or **Г**. The letters **ОѢТН** suggested in the publication by Popkonstantinov & Kronsteiner (1994: 95) could not be verified in the recent photographic documentation. The space on the stone surface after the letter **X** is not large enough for more than one or two letters. No *titlo* is visible above the letters, and today it is impossible to determine whether there has been any, as the stone in the space above the letters is badly damaged and has been repaired with cement.


This inscription was made by a well-trained hand. Some of the letters have a very special shape that provides a solid basis in dating the inscription to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The form of the letter **М** is quite wide. The middle part of the letter, the “belly”, is pointed and it reaches the same level as the lower part of the side lines of the letter. All lines are the same length. This form of the letter **М** has been attested in inscriptions from the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century:

a) Bulgarian military inventory inscriptions with Greek letters from the first quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>40</sup>, and an inscription with Greek letters from Preslav, from the first quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>41</sup>.

b) Bulgarian Cyrillic inscriptions from the 10<sup>th</sup> century: a dated inscription from 943<sup>42</sup>, the inscription by monk Ananij against the *Bogomils*<sup>43</sup> and the bilingual Cyrillic-Greek funeral inscription of Ana, from Preslav<sup>44</sup>.

Among the Cyrillic inscriptions from the monastery complex in Murfatlar, the letter **М** with identical shape has been attested in an inscription, by another hand, on the vault of the south entrance to the altar (close to the altar in B4, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>45</sup>.

The form of the third letter, for the front nasal vowel, has two intersecting lines in the middle. They are longer than the side lines. So far, this form of the letter –  – is known from two other Bulgarian Cyrillic inscriptions, dated from the 10<sup>th</sup> century:

a) The inscription by monk Ananij against the *Bogomils*<sup>46</sup>.

b) A funeral inscription of Antunij from the cave monastery in Krepča<sup>47</sup>.

The fourth letter: in this form of **X**, the upper part of the lines is angled downwards at a sharp angle. The same form of the letter has been attested in Bulgarian inscriptions in Greek from the 9<sup>th</sup> century: a) Inscription № 14<sup>48</sup>, and b) Inscription №

<sup>40</sup> BESHEVLIEV 1979, №№ 49 and 50.

<sup>41</sup> BESHEVLIEV 1979, №№ 90.

<sup>42</sup> GOSHEV 1961, p. 117, Obr. 95<sup>a</sup>/3, 153, Tables XVa,b, DOBREV 1985, p. 601–602, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 192–193.

<sup>43</sup> GOSHEV 1961, p. 79–83, 154, Table XVI, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 201.

<sup>44</sup> MALINGUDIS 1979, p. 25–26, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 199, SLAVOVA 1985, p. 664, 665.

<sup>45</sup> BARNEA 1962, p. 312, Fig. 19, DOBREV 1985, p. 602–603, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 189.

<sup>46</sup> GOSHEV 1961, P. 79–83, 154, Table XVI, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 201.

<sup>47</sup> POPKONSTANTINOV 1977, p. 19–22, Obr. 5a, 5б, POPKONSTANTINOV 2019, p. 377–379, SMYADOVSKI 1993, p. 195.

<sup>48</sup> BESHEVLIEV 1979, p. 132–138.

15<sup>49</sup>. This shape of X appears in a Greek/Cyrillic/rune-like inscription on the shoulder of a fragmentary amphora from Dinogetia, attributed, in accordance with its shape, to the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>50</sup>. Among the Cyrillic inscriptions in B4, this form of X has been attested in an inscription carved by another hand,  $\text{нѣ } \text{ѣ} \text{ ѡ} \text{ ѡ} \text{ ѡ} \text{ ѡ} \text{ ѡ}$ , in the right part of the altar<sup>51</sup>.

Summarizing the paleographical analysis, we can conclude that the shape of three of these four letters is related to the use of Greek and Cyrillic script in Bulgarian epigraphic tradition from the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The clearly visible letters on this line are [  $\text{H} \text{M} \text{A} \text{X}$  ]. The letter H is most probably the verb ending for the imperative mode, the 2d person sg.  $\text{M} \text{A}$  is the personal pronoun for the 1st person, Ack. sg., and X is the beginning of a word, probably X[ε], in Voc. sg., or X[ρ], X[c] ‘Christ’, The trace of the letter before H corresponds best to the shape of the letter G—[ $\text{с} \text{ъ} \text{п} \text{л} \text{а} \text{с}$ ]H  $\text{M} \text{A}$  X[ε] ‘Save me, Christ’. No *titlo* is visible above X, but the surface of the stone has been damaged and it is impossible to say if there originally was a *titlo*.

This inscription does not have any immediate connection to the other inscriptions on the pillar, or the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic depictions. It was not carved over any previous existing letters or figures.

A single letter,  $\text{f}$ , not documented earlier, or mentioned in previous publications, is clearly visible on the surface below the Cyrillic inscription. This single letter has, in comparison with the Cyrillic letters above it, without doubt been made with a different tool, a tool which leaves narrower, deeper, and much clearer lines. The upper horizontal line coincides with the horizontal line of the Cyrillic letter H in the inscription above.

The letter  $\text{f}$  appears to be a single letter here; there are no traces of letters to the right or the left of this letter. The same letter has been used in inscriptions in B1, the east side of the pro-narthex<sup>52</sup>, and in B4, on the west face of pillar № 6<sup>53</sup>; it has also been used as a single letter in several places in B4, in the left upper part of one of the crosses to the left of the figure of a bishop (south face, pillar № 2), as well as on several places on the west-side of pillar № 2, on the west face of pillars № 3 and № 6, and on the wall of the narthex, to the left of the entrance.

Summarizing the results: Above the head of the male figure, we only identified the Cyrillic letters, [ $\text{с} \text{ъ} \text{п} \text{л} \text{а} \text{с}$ ]H  $\text{M} \text{A}$  X[ε] ‘Save me, Christ’, and we dated them to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, based on the paleographical analysis. No other Cyrillic letters could be verified. In addition, we identified one previously undocumented and unpublished single rune-like letter under the Cyrillic inscription.

## Relative chronology of the graffiti on the south face of pillar № 2

With its surface area of merely 1.14 sq.m., the south face of pillar № 2 in Church № 4 amounts to one ten-thousandth part of the total area of the Murfatlar rock

<sup>49</sup> BESHEVLIEV 1979, p. 139–140.

<sup>50</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 63–69.

<sup>51</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 220, Fig. 69.1.

<sup>52</sup> BARNEA 1962, p. 309, fig. 16/1.

<sup>53</sup> BARNEA 1962, p. 309, fig. 16/3.

monastery. Regardless, this insignificant (but only in terms of size) segment “narrates” almost the entire history of what is known today about the complex (we would like to remind that the original documentation from the excavations is off limits), due to the exceptionally high concentration of graffiti. The review above leads to the conclusion that no less than 17 different hands have left drawings and inscriptions on the soft chalk surface. In a relative sequence, they appear as follows: *Hand № 1 (Fig. 19/1)* incised the earliest two-line rune-like inscription, which is aligned to the left and situated centrally, at eye level. Synchronous to it are the single- and two-line inscriptions from the east part of Church № 4, from a time when it was not much visited. In terms of paleography, most similar to this inscription are those on the north and south wall of the church, as well as on the west face of pillar № 6 (**Fig. 16, 17/1, 2**). All of those have been carved on their own, at eye level, and in the case of pillar № 6 – also in center of its west face. *Hand № 2 (Fig. 19/2)* left the anthropomorphic image dressed in an archpriest’s attire to the right, as the right arm of this figure disrupts the first line of the rune-like inscription of Hand № 1. Separate details of this image and especially the cleavage of the garment at the neck area point to the fact that it is synchronous with the figure of the saint from the south wall of Church № 4, to the right of the altar. *Hand № 3 (Fig. 19/3)* engraved the figure of the bird in profile walking left. The outline of its back affects partly the last characters from the inscription by Hand № 1 and the right arm of the figure made by Hand № 2. *Hand № 4 (Fig. 19/4)* added to the bird the unnaturally spread wings of an eagle, hawk or other bird of prey, facing. The author of these additions was perhaps present at the monastery, together with the one who drew the bird that overlaps the rune-like inscription to the left of the altar of Church № 3 (**Fig. 14**). *Hand № 5 (Fig. 19/5)* incised the second rune-like inscription, also aligned to the left, that took into consideration the existing outlines of the figures left by Hands 2 and 3. *Hand № 6 (Fig. 19/6)* drew the images of snakes whose bodies resemble double serpentes. The reason for this assumption is the images from Crypt № 1, where the teratomorphic images are also in combination with closely situated rune-like inscriptions. This would also mean that at that time human remains were (re)buried only in Crypt № 2, because Crypt № 1 measures just  $3 \times 1.5$  m<sup>54</sup> and in order to engrave the graffiti there, the visitors had to step over the deceased that were laid across at the entrance, which is naturally impossible. *Hand № 7 (Fig. 19/7)* scratched the anthropo-zoomorphic figure in orans position on the left part of the pillar’s face. This figure is definitely later because it interrupts the bodies of two of the snakes. *Hand № 8 (Fig. 19/8)* (and probably one more hand after it) left the drawings of boots walking right, towards the altar. The following, *Hand № 9 (Fig. 19/9)*, engraved the Maltese cross that damaged the inscription by Hand № 1, the bird’s wing drawn by Hand № 3 and the little boot left by Hand № 8. *Hand № 10 (Fig. 19/10)* wrote the so-called donor’s inscription. It is later than the anthropo-zoomorphic figure left by Hand № 7, because its last three lines go diagonally, taking into account the narrow space above the figure’s head. *Hand № 11 (Fig. 19/11)* (without any definite proof) left the «Save me, Christ» inscription. The paleographic similarity of some of the letters to those written by Hand № 10 suggests that they were left within a short period of time.

<sup>54</sup> BARNEA, BILCIURESCU 1959, p. 546, fig. 8.

Much more complicated is the issue about the single rune-like characters inscribed at the bottom of the ornamented field of the south face of the pillar, and also the ones fitted between the folds of the garments of the human figure on the right. Provisionally, they can be labeled as *Hands* № 12, № 13, № 14, № 15, № 16, because they are of different sizes, depths and paleographic properties, but it is difficult to arrange them in a relative sequence, because there is no overlapping. The last *Hand* № 17 (**Fig. 19/17**) left the drawing of the pentagram that affects eight out of nine lines from the so-called donor's inscription. A similar drawing is encountered once again-on the south wall of the B4, under the Gospel text: "For it is written, I will beat the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered" (Mark XIV, 27 = Mathew XXVI, 31)<sup>55</sup>.

In the totally chaotic (but only at first glance) manner all these graffiti are scattered, one can still discern at least two layers that can be related to the other graffiti in Church № 4. In the interpretation of their horizontal stratigraphy, we can outline the following connections: the rune-like inscriptions and the single characters occupy the center and the right half of the ornamented field, while the "donor" inscription in nine lines is in the left one. The rune-like inscriptions were engraved within a close interval of time with the large anthropomorphic figure and with a certain degree of caution, it can be suggested that they are captions to the images. This hypothesis is consistent with the remaining anthropomorphic depictions, especially those of saints, around which can be seen rune-like inscriptions only.

### Notes on the absolute chronology

The questions on the dating of the Murfatlar rock monastic complex, naturally, were first raised among the Romanian colleagues<sup>56</sup>. The epigraphic material and especially the so-called dated inscriptions have been the subject of multiple publications, but the Romanian-Bulgarian discussion on them never really happened, because the position of each side is, in fact, hardly conducive to debate.

The possibilities for the dating of the graffiti on the south face of pillar № 2 are also based predominantly on the inscriptions. Crucial for the understanding of the chronology are the "Murfatlar-style" rune-like inscriptions in Pliska which can be related to two clearly distinct chronological periods – pre-Christian and Christian. The first one is associated with the settlement in the south-east periphery of the Inner City, dated in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>57</sup>. The rune-like inscription found there indicates that, at the period in question, this graphic system was already in use. The material on which the inscription was incised suggests that this script was not limited only to Pliska's elites, but was also available to the broader social circles of the population. The second period has been detected among the spolia from the Round Stone Platform to the north of the Citadel, due to the fact that there the rune-like inscription of graffito № 2 is found in a combination with a scene-drawing of Christian symbolism (**Fig. 2.1, 2**)<sup>58</sup>. The stratigraphic observations demonstrate that

<sup>55</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 211, 219, fig. 67; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2020, p. 134, № 86.

<sup>56</sup> See BOGDAN 1960, p. 31–49; COMȘA 1964, p. 363–370.

<sup>57</sup> ALADZHOV *et alii* 2014, p. 90, 130, таб. XIX, оѡп. 12.

<sup>58</sup> KOMATAROVA-BALINOVA 2023, in press.

the Round Stone Platform dates to the last quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup>-the very beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and thus the material reused for its construction, some of which clearly originating from a church (along with its inscriptions and graffiti), predates it. A certain indication for the lower chronological limit of this reused building material in this case would be the earliest ecclesiastic structure-that of the Great Basilica, which, according to the accepted chronology, dates to ca. 870. The left alignment of the rune-like inscriptions and the pottery sherd from Pliska, as well as the graphic resemblances in the lettering of the inscription from the Round Stone Platform currently serve as the only chronological indicator for the dating of the rune-like texts, at least as far as pillar № 2 in Church № 4 in Murfatlar is concerned. In this sense, *terminus ante quem* for them would be the last quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on the above mentioned analogies of a broader date – within the 10<sup>th</sup> century – are the two Cyrillic inscriptions, one of which has been defined as a donor inscription in literature so far. According to the interpretation suggested by our team, it should be instead considered a building inscription. It is not synchronous to the beginning of the construction of Church № 4, but to its second construction period which was defined by the addition of the masonry pillars that separated the narthex from the naos, № 1 and № 4. In favour of our statement that the rune – like and the Cyrillic inscriptions belong to two different chronological periods – respectively to the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century – is the fact that there are no rune-like inscriptions or single rune-like characters on pillars № 1 and № 4 from the second construction period.

Perhaps some of the hypotheses laid out here would be confirmed one day, or, quite the opposite, revised. This publication marks the beginning of the announcement of the results from the new thorough documentation of the Murfatlar rock monastic complex, product of the joint effort and goodwill of the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanța. Regardless of what part of our observations and conclusions would be confirmed or revised in future publications, what remains certain is the identification of chronological reference points to which the relative chronology of the rock complex can be linked and thus new observations on the absolute dates can be put forward.

The authors of this study express their hope that the joint effort will continue in the future as well.

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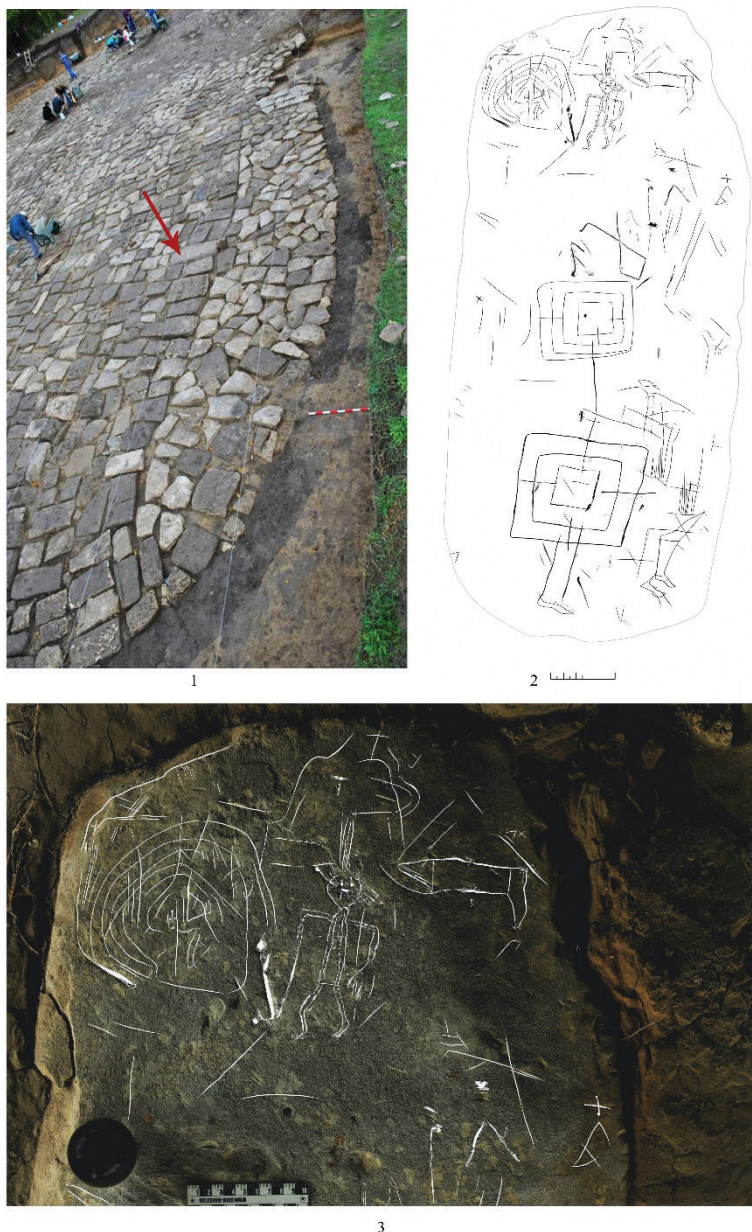
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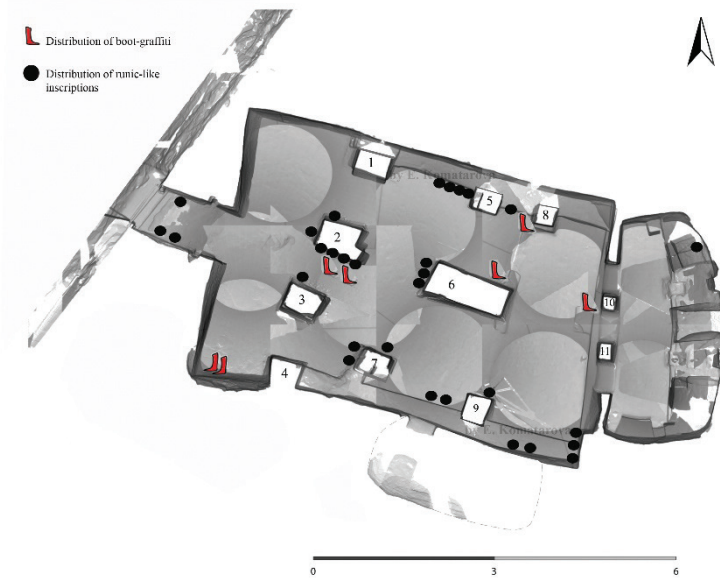
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**Fig. 1.** 1 Aerial photo of the Inner city of Pliska (photo Stanimir Stoychev); 2-3 Ceramic fragment with rune-like inscription from the SE part of the Inner city of Pliska (photo Andrey Aladzhev).



**Fig. 2.** 1 A part from the Round Stone Platform in Pliska with location of graffito № 2 (photo Andrey Aladzhev, 2010); 2–3 Graffito № 2 from the Round Stone Platform (photo Miglena Raykovska; drawings Miglena Raykovska and Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



**Fig. 3.** Floor plan of Church № 4 in the Rock complex Murfatlar (authors Georgi Evtimov, Miglena Raykovska, Laboratory on 3D Digitization and Microstructure Analysis, ICT-BAS); additions: distribution of the boot-graffiti and rune like inscriptions (by Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



**Fig. 4.** East-west axes of Church № 4 and the rooms of Church № 3 (authors Georgi Evtimov, Miglena Raykovska, Laboratory on 3D Digitization and Microstructure Analysis, ICT-BAS, additions: Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



Fig. 5. Graffiti at the south face of pillar № 2 (photo Miglena Raykovska).



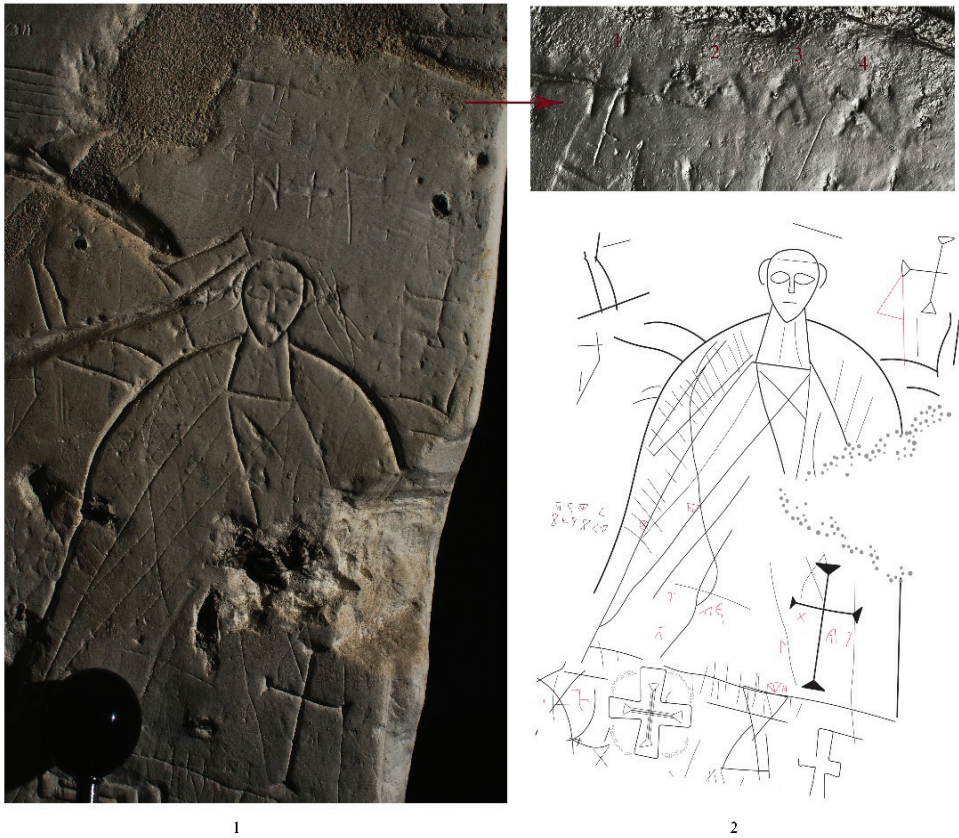
**Fig. 6.** Drawing of the graffiti at the south face of pillar № 2 (drawing Miglena Raykovska, Nina Stoilova, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova, Antoaneta Granberg).



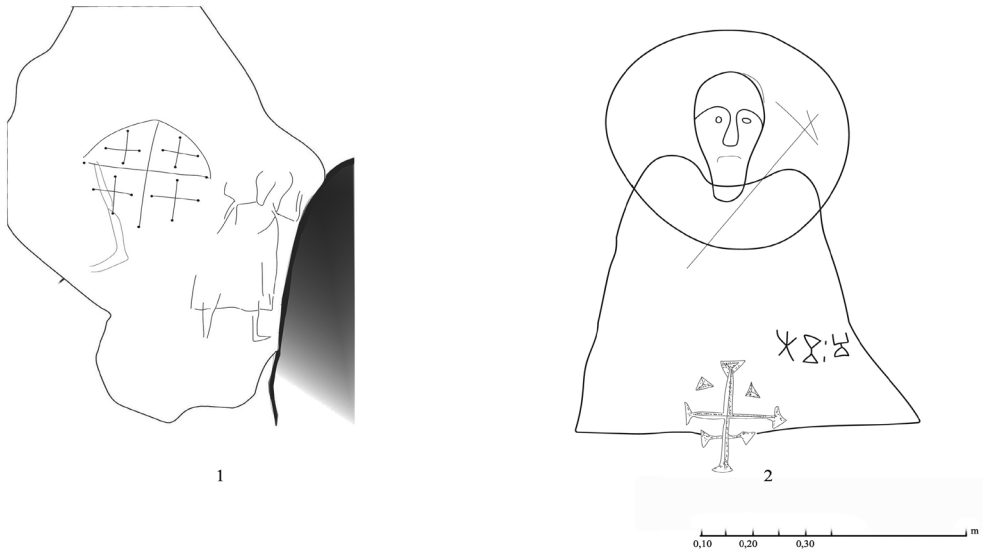
**Fig. 7.** The first anthropomorphic figure and the so-called donor inscription at the left side of the south face of pillar № 2 (drawing Miglena Raykovska, Nina Stoilova, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova, Antoaneta Granberg). [Note: The drawing of the inscription presented in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 is a result of analysis of archaeological documentation, made after professor Yavor Miltenov passed away. There are, as a result of this, slight differences between the drawing and professor Miltenov's interpretation].



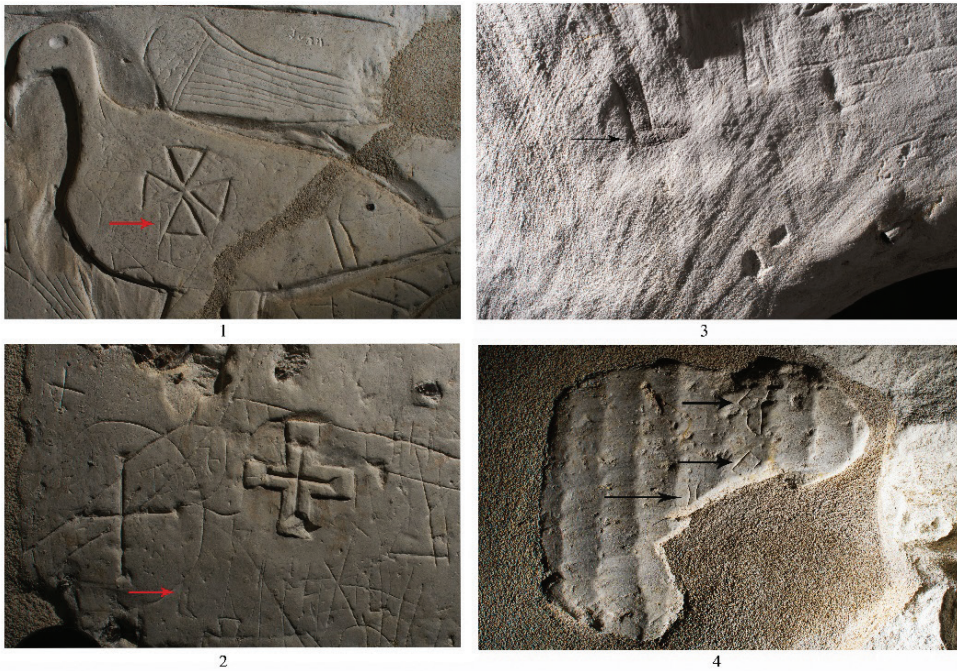
**Fig. 8.** Graffiti at the south face of pillar № 5 (photo Miglena Raykovska; drawing Miglena Raykovska, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



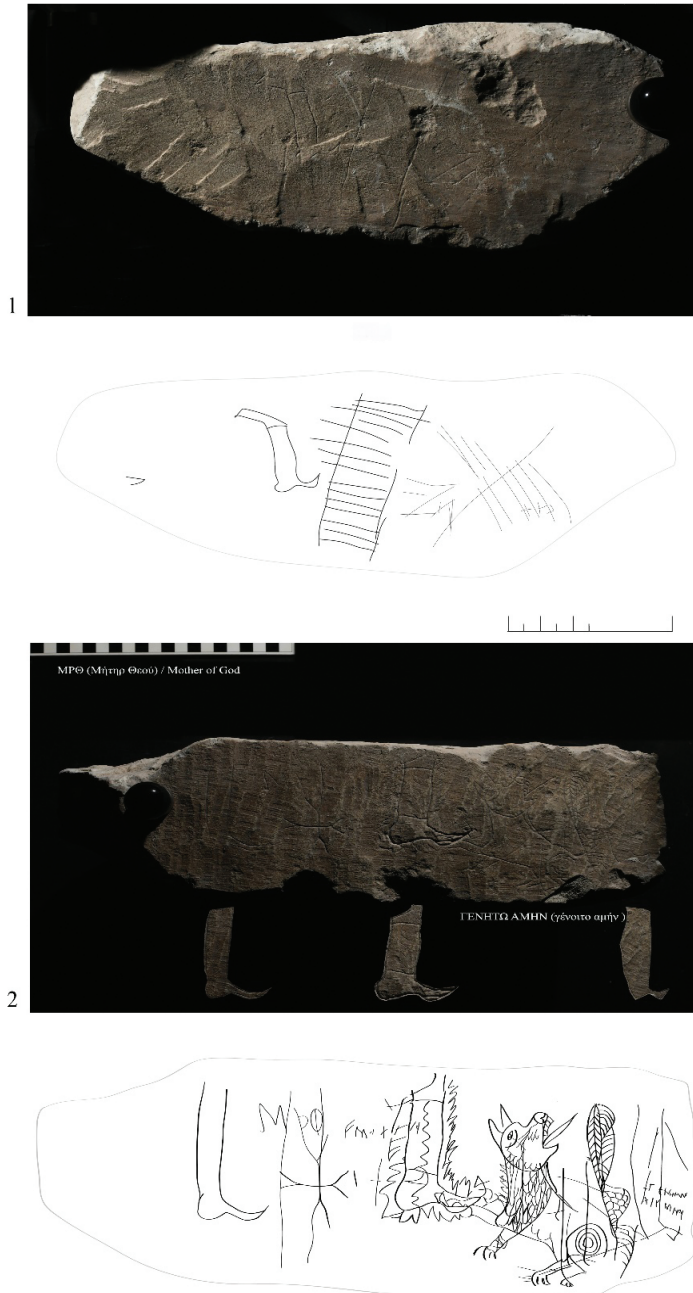
**Fig. 9.** 1- 2 The second anthropomorphic figure at the right side of the south face of pillar № 2 and the Cyrillic inscription above it (photo Miglena Raykovska; drawing Miglena Raykovska, Nina Stoilova, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova, Antoaneta Granberg).



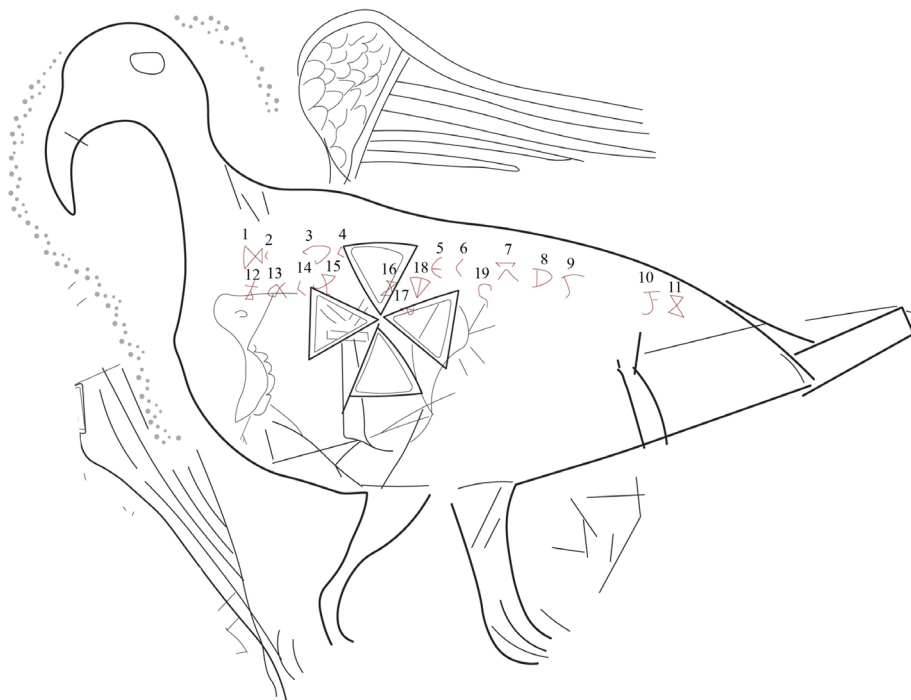
**Fig. 10.** 1 An image of a saint from the south wall of Church № 3, 2. An image of a saint from chapel E5 (drawings Miglena Raykovska, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova)



**Fig.11.** Boot-graffiti from: 1–2 the south face of pillar № 2 in Church № 4, 3. Crypt № 1, to the left of the entrance of Crypt № 2, 4. The north wall of chapel 2 in Church № 3 (photo Miglena Raykovska).



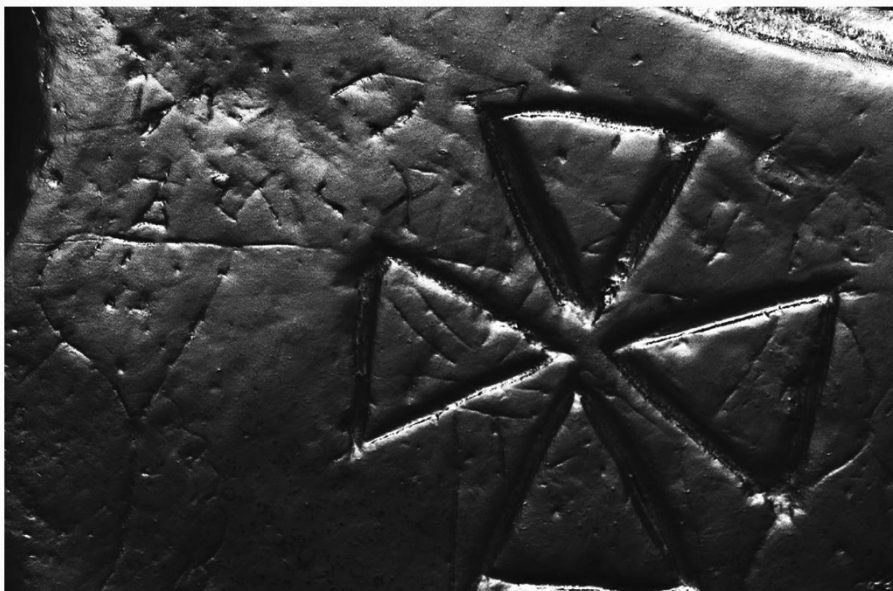
**Fig. 12.** 1–2 Graffiti from the “Theotokos” monastery at Ravna, Provadia district, Bulgaria (photos Miglena Raykovska; drawings Miglena Raykovska, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



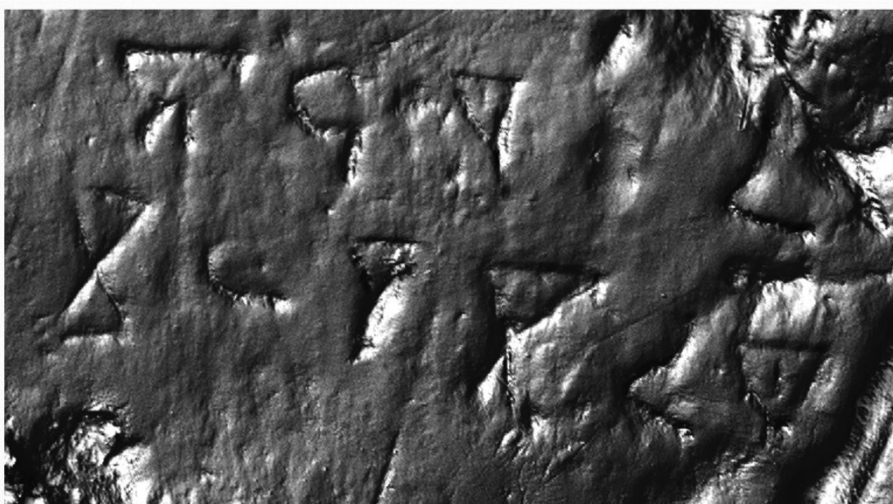
**Fig. 13.** The image of the bird at the central part of the south side of pillar № 2 and the first (with numbering of the signs) and the second rune-like inscriptions (photo Miglena Raykovska; drawing Miglena Raykovska, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



**Fig. 14.** Graffiti at the left side of the altar at Church № 3 (photo Miglena Raykovska).



1

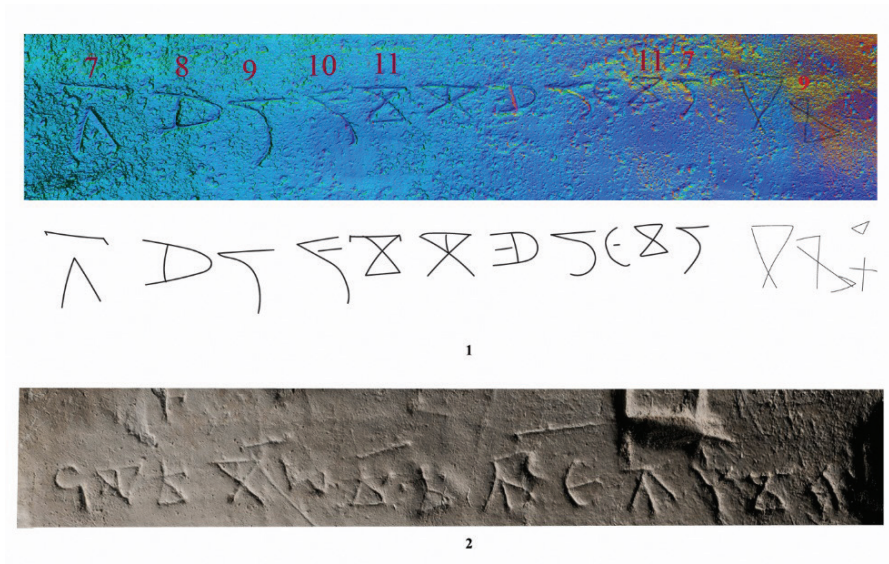


2

**Fig. 15.** 1 Detailed photo of the first rune-like inscription at the south side of pillar № 2;  
2 Detailed photo of the second rune-like inscription at the south side of pillar № 2 (photo Miglena Raykovska).



**Fig. 16.** Detailed photo of the rune-like inscription from the north wall of Church № 4 with the repeating signs from those of the first rune-like inscription at the south side of pillar № 2 (photo Miglena Raykovska; additions Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



**Fig. 17.** 1 Detailed photo of the rune-like inscription from the south wall of Church № 4 with the repeating signs from those of the first rune-like inscription at the south side of pillar № 2; 2 Detailed photo of the rune-like inscription from the west side of pillar № 6 with the repeating signs from those of the second rune-like inscription at the south side of pillar № 2 (photo Miglena Raykovska; additions and drawings Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



1



2

**Fig. 18.** 1 South side of pillar № 1; 2 West side of pillar № 4 in Church № 4 (photos Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova).



**Fig. 19.** Relative chronology of the graffiti at the south side of pillar № 2 in Church № 4 (authors Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova, Nina Stoilova).