

Framing in Thracian cult architecture

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Abstract. All human activities could be perceived as acts of creating material and virtual frames that enclose spaces and ideas. Perceiving architecture as a system of frames through which people organize the world around them allows an abstract view beyond the purely utilitarian functions of architecture. In the case of the Thracian cult buildings, this way of thinking allows a better understanding of the intention behind these spaces, where various material and non-material frames enclose abstractions and ideas such as the idea of the ‘sacred’, the principles in Nature or the organization of the Universe. This article presents the various types of frames that could be identified in the Thracian cult spaces and offers an interpretation of their purpose and message.

Keywords: Thracian cult architecture, frames, light

Framing is one of the earliest ways of organizing the world around us (Unwin 1997, 76). It presupposes the creation of material and virtual frames that enclose ideas, values, spaces, objects, views (Fig. 1) with the aim of bringing some order into the unknown. Thinking and perceiving the world in frames is naturally inherent in humans and the largest frame through which a human being sees the world is his or her outlook.

Creating frames is probably the most natural process in architecture, bearing also deep meaning - distinguishing the inside from the outside, the known from the unknown, the safe from the wild. But framing also has a much more philosophical purpose, giving an abstract concept a physical presence. Framing is one of the main architectural methods of creating or *staging* a particular *atmosphere*¹.

¹ The term “atmosphere” is used by modern architects and scientists such as Peter Zumthor, Juhani Pallasmaa, Gernot Böhme.



Fig. 1. A view through the Sun Gate near Buzovgrad. Photo: A. Sarbova

“In an abstract sense, a frame can be a theory. [...] Architecture involves considering how things should be framed, theoretically as well as physically [...]” (Unwin 1997, 77).

One of the most interesting and enigmatic concepts, whose definition often involves the use of framing, is that of *sacred space*. In this context I believe that the topic of framing is extremely important in the field of Thracian cult architecture. Thracian cult buildings are multi-layered (in a literal and abstract sense) edifices, expressing the Thracians’ understanding of the structure and the processes in the Universe, their concept of the cycle of life in nature, the idea of *beyond* and, ultimately, their belief in immortality. In my view, thinking through frames and boundaries² plays a major role in interpreting the world in such complex models.

Frames in architecture could be used for several main purposes. These are: defining/materializing a concept; creating boundaries (demarcation); framing in order to emphasize something important or place special importance on something by enclosing it; staging certain actions and processes, so that they can be involved in creating the overall atmosphere of the architectural space.

Different types of frames can be distinguished. They could be divided into tangible and intangible, but also into two-dimensional (contours) or spatial. In addition, they can be openings in material enclosures (e.g. windows, doors).

All these considerations can be transferred to and applied as an analytical method in the field of Thracian cult architecture. Considering the Thracian cult buildings and structures in the context of the architectural framing theory poses several questions:

1. What does the Thracian cult building frame?
2. What is the role of framing in creating the binary oppositions that define sacred space: *inside/outside*; *known/unknown*; *permitted/forbidden*; *solidity/opening*; *light/shadow*; *sacred and profane*?
3. What types of frames can be found in Thracian cult architecture and what is their significance in building up the overall atmosphere in this type of structures?

Although so far only assumptions can be made about the specific way of functioning and use of the Thracian cult spaces, it is clear that the main function of some of the so-called tombs was not to serve as burial structures (see Ruseva 2000, 76-77; Fol, A. 2014, 280-281; Kitov 2005, 91-93; Fol, V. 2007, 193-196).

I adopt Malvina Ruseva’s hypothesis that the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings with a circular plan of the central chamber were sanctuaries or temples where certain rituals related to the Thracian belief in immortalization were performed (Ruseva 2000, 76-77). Moreover, they are perceived as cosmogonic models, expressing the belief of the Thracians in the cyclic character of life and the immortality of the soul (Ruseva 2000, 67-83).

² The boundaries in architecture can be seen as a kind of frames. I have discussed the topic of the boundaries in Thracian architecture in my article *Границите в тракийската култова архитектура* / *Granitsite v trakiyskata kultova arhitektura* [Boundaries in Thracian cult architecture] (Sarbova 2019).

Framing is very important in creating a sacred space as the boundaries that distinguish the sacred from the profane also serve as a kind of frames. The current study, however, discusses the concept of “framing” more broadly - as an architectural method of defining and perceiving a certain space as an experience. This experience is a combination of different sensory perceptions and involves creating visual and spatial interpretations of philosophical ideas (such as the understanding of sacred space, as well as that of the beyond), using understandable concepts like inside/outside, known/unknown, permitted/forbidden, solid/open, light/dark. Therefore, I consider it important to establish and analyse the meaning of these binary oppositions, which largely shape the notion of the Thracians’ sacred space.

1. **INSIDE/OUTSIDE.** This pair of oppositions expresses the essence of enclosure as an act of creating a new type of space that contrasts with the surrounding environment. *Inside* could be within the boundaries of a contour or within a spatial frame defined by a building or a chamber.

2. **KNOWN/UNKNOWN.** Although it is usually the *known* that is enclosed in a frame to distinguish it from the *unknown*, the wild, the Thracian cult buildings are spatial frames, keeping *the unknown* hidden from the eyes of the uninitiated. The enclosed space seems secret and mysterious, as if hiding a space/world different from the earthly one.

3. **PERMITTED/FORBIDDEN.** Since Thracian Orphism is a religious doctrine, accessible to and practiced by the Thracian aristocracy (Fol, V. 2020, 72-78), it may be assumed that access to the cult buildings was also strictly limited. In this context, the frame of the structure is a boundary that can only be crossed by the initiated. Permitted/forbidden may also be understood as safe/dangerous and in this case, the possession of certain knowledge makes the Thracian sacred space permitted and safe.

4. **SOLID/OPEN.** The openings in the spatial frame of the Thracian cult building are highly limited and have a special meaning. They serve as both frames and the connection between the demarcated profane and sacred spaces. Only the initiated pass through them... and the sunlight.

5. **LIGHT/DARKNESS.** It is precisely light and its opposition - darkness that play an extremely important role in creating the sacred space of the Thracians. First and foremost, the sunbeam is involved in the sacred act of the conception of the Mother Goddess’s son - the priest-king:

“The coupling of the rock womb, symbol of the Great Mother Goddess, and of the beam of light, symbol of her Son-Sun, is the act of creation of the Son of the gods-paredroi, of the king-ruler of the socium” (Fol, V. 2007, 136).

The described phenomenon is essentially a cyclic process in which two natural elements are involved - stone and sunlight (or fire) on some of the days of the summer/winter solstices or spring/autumn equinoxes. This process has received a religious interpretation connected with the Mother Goddess and her Sun son - Dionysus. The architectural role in the religious interpretation of this phenomenon is related to the creation of a kind of setting, *framing* the moment when the sunbeam hits a precisely defined, usually marked, rock spot. Initially, such frames are found in megalithic structures and subsequently, the sacred act is *enclosed* within the spatial frame

of the building. In some cases, the sunbeam can even take on an abstract form - that of a column³.

Light contrasts with darkness. Darkness also plays a role in creating the sacred atmosphere in the Thracian cult buildings. The idea of locating these structures under an earth mound, i.e. underground, predetermines a restricted amount of sunlight, coming inside only through the *frame* of the entrance or through that of an opening in the roof (regarded as a second entrance, by analogy with the rock cave temples with two openings). The interpretation of the meaning of these openings may be sought by drawing a parallel with the two gates of the cave in the treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs (De antro nympharum)* by Porphyry (Fol, V. 2020, 150-151).

The absence of natural light in the central chamber of the Thracian cult buildings presumes a feeling of infinity (Fol, A. 1990, 169), as well as the chaos before the sunlight defines the cosmic order (i.e. well-ordered space). Light symbolizes the limit (Fol, A. 1990, 169). It gives meaning to the existence of the architectural space (and perhaps existence in general) and makes the building's material elements, colours and shapes visible. Light is also associated with enlightenment (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1996, 600), and the sequence of darkness and light, according to *A Dictionary of Symbols*, is considered to represent an evolutionary process (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1996, 600).

“... *I have to admit that daylight, the light on things, is so moving to me that I feel it almost as a spiritual quality*” (Zumthor 2006, 61).

Sometimes, however, light itself is capable of framing, thus sacralizing, as it were, a certain object, territory or person. This is, for example, the meaning of the halo (see Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1996, 464-465). The same effect can be observed in the Thracian cult building under the Griffins Mound in the Valley of the Thracian Kings. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the sunlight entering through the frame of the entrance falls directly onto the stone bed inside, turning it, on the one hand, into a focal point of the chamber, and on the other hand, imbuing it with special importance, even sacredness.

Ultimately, all these opposing states achieved through the creation of *frames* and *boundaries* are at the core of defining and delineating sacred from profane space.

Thracian sacred architecture includes several main types of cult structures - megalithic structures, rock temples, sub-mound buildings. In each of them, it is possible to identify different types of frames, used to create a sacred atmosphere. Furthermore, it is also possible to trace the development of some types of frames over time. Framing may also be seen as a way of staging the experience in a certain space. In my opinion, the role of framing in the Thracian cult buildings may be sought in two main aspects. The first one concerns the meaning of the

³ I refer to Prof. Valeria Fol's interpretation: she regards the column in the middle of the central chamber of the Thracian cult building under the Shushmanets Mound as a sunbeam entering through the roof (Fol, V. 2020, 158-162).



Fig. 2. A photo of the stone bed illuminated by sunlight entering through the frame of the gate in the Thracian cult building under the Griffins Mound. Photo: A. Sarbova

enclosure as a boundary separating sacred from profane space. The second aspect presents framing as an instance of staging a particular view, usually a certain natural phenomenon (for example, positions of the sun at sunrise and sunset), or the performance of certain rituals, which largely defines the understanding of “sacred place”.

1. Megalithic frames

One of the first frames that enclose the idea of sacred space is the stone circle - the cromlech. It is as much a material enclosure as a psychological one, because it is not a solid barrier that limits access. It is rather the psychological effect that is stronger in this case. The stone circle organizes space and gives the *outside* and the *profane* a different meaning from that of the *inside* and the *sacred*, and this division extends even in a vertical projection (Fig. 3, 4).

In the case of the cromlech, two types of frames could be found: the material one formed by the stone circle and the imaginary spatial frame created by its vertical projection. The purpose of both is to delineate sacred from profane space.



Fig. 3. A cromlech near the village of Dolni Glavanak, Madzharovo Municipality, Bulgaria. Photo: A. Sarbova



Fig. 4. A sketch showing the projection of the Dolni Glavanak cromlech's impact in space. Drawing: Architect Yana Topalova (Nehrizov 2004, 12), author of the sketch: A. Sarbova

In the megalithic architecture of the Thracians, it is possible to recognize another purpose of framing. It relates to creating a specific composition of sacred structures, meant to represent the act of merging the rock (the Mother Goddess) with the sunbeam (Dionysus). For this purpose, frames or openings are shaped (or natural resources with appropriate composition are used) in such a way that on a specific day of the year, they allow the sunbeam to fall onto another *framed* (for example, shaped like a circle) rock surface.

A similar hypothesis has been proposed for the Sun Gate discovered in Sarnena Sredna Gora (Fig. 5)⁴, but while this particular megalithic structure needs to be further investigated, the archaeo-astronomical studies conducted on the Sun Gate in the village of Buzovgrad prove that along with their ritual purpose, these structures were also used to measure time (see Fol, V. Hipoteza).

⁴ Valeria Fol describes the megalithic monument in her article *Мегалитна слънчева врата със слънчев диск, с. Розовец, община Брезово / Megalitna slancheva vrata sas slanchev disk, s. Rozovets, obshtina Brezovo* [A Megalithic Sun Gate with a Sun Disc, the village of Rozovets, Brezovo Municipality] on the site “Ancient Thrace and the Thracians Encyclopaedia” (<https://thracians.net/sacral-architecture-bg-bg/>) (Fol, V. Megalitna slancheva vrata).



Fig. 5. The Sun Gate in Sarnena Sredna Gora. Photo: A. Sarbova

2. The cave

Cave temples are sacred spaces which, unlike the megaliths discussed above, enclose a space. They are not yet completely man-made architectural structures but are part of a natural formation - the rock, which is usually subjected to additional processing. A great deal of symbolism can be found in the image of the cave and the latter has become an archetype that is far from being associated only with Thracian culture. As regards framing in cave temples, it is possible to identify several types of frames, whose use has its own significance and specificity in creating a sacred atmosphere. Some of the frames have already been discussed in the previous examples. Such a frame is the outline of the void of the cave (in plan view), whose purpose here is again to enclose the sacred from the profane (see 1 in Fig. 6). But if in the case of the cromlech the vertical extension of the enclosure in plan creates an imaginary spatial frame, here the rock mass around the cavity defines a real one (see 2 in Fig. 6).

The other important frame that I find in the rock temples is the **FRAME OF THE ENTRANCE(S)** (see 3 in Fig. 6). The shape of the womb-cave's entrance (as well as the spatial frame of the entire space) is loaded with feminine symbolism, showing the association that the Thracians made between the woman and the earth/rock. The size and orientation of the openings in the rock temples enables the sunbeam to fall into the heart of the cave on a specific day of the year in order to recreate the sacred act of hierogamy between the earth and the sun, between the Mother Goddess and her Sun son (Fol V. 2007, 133-136). The staging and framing of this ritual are the essence of the sacred atmosphere in this type of sacred spaces.

Very intriguing examples of rock temples are those with two entrances. This means two frame-openings in the material cover (the spatial frame). The reference that Valeria Fol makes to the treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs* by

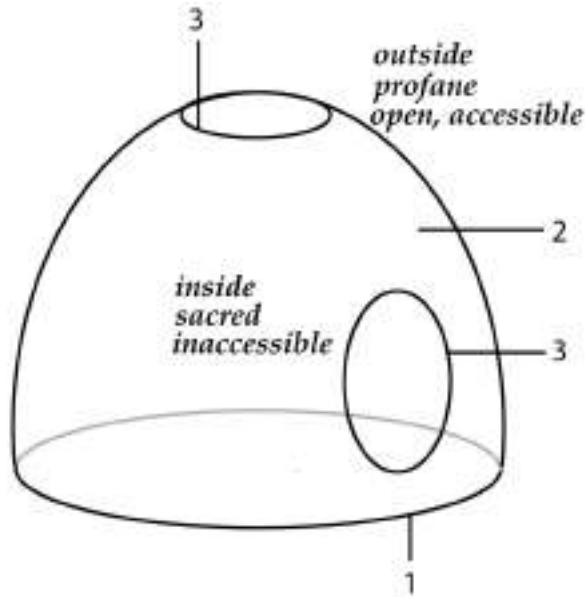


Fig. 6. A spatial diagram of a cave with a circular plan and two entrances.
 Author: A. Sarbova

Porphyry and an interpretation given by the ancient author to this type of spaces is curious (Fol, V. 2007, 184-187). Porphyry says that the two entrances to the cave described in the treatise (which discusses a cave that Homer writes about in the *Odyssey* (Hom. Od. 13. 102-112 - Omir 1971, 229)) are directed towards the two endmost constellations of the Milky Way - Cancer and Capricorn (Porph. *De antro nymph.* 21, p. 71 N - Porfiry 2000, 100); one entrance is intended for humans and the other - for gods and immortals (Porph. *De antro nymph.* 20, p. 55 N - Porfiry 2000, 87). The two openings in the rock help to recreate the idea of cyclicality and immortality.

Many of the models and types of frames discussed so far are preserved and developed in the spaces of the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings, which some scholars regard as architectural extensions of the frames (see Venedikov, Fol, A. 1976).

3. Sub-mound Thracian cult buildings

Prof. Valeria Fol sees an architectural interpretation of the above-described sacred act of the merging of rock and sunlight (the Mother Goddess and her solar son Dionysus) in the central space of the Thracian cult building under the Shushmanets Mound. She interprets the white-plastered column starting from the circular “keystone” of the false dome as an abstraction of a sunbeam (Fol, V.



Fig. 7. A view of the column in the middle of the central chamber of a cult building under the Shushmanets Mound. Photo: A. Sarbova

2007, 192-193) (Fig. 7). And in this case the rock cavity-womb is already a man-made stone construction.

It is proved that, in addition to being an architectural metaphor, the sunbeam literally penetrated the interior of some sub-mound Thracian cult buildings. Its trajectory, framed and delimited by the opening of the entrance, corresponds to the position of elements of the interior. The archaeo-astronomical research carried out by Assoc. Prof. A. Stoev (Stoev, Stoeva 2006) in the cult building under the Golyama Arsenalka Mound shows that:

“During the winter solstice, the beam of light that enters through the door reaches the stone bed situated opposite the entrance. During the summer solstice, the light beam illuminates the concave circular altar in the shape of a sun-disc with rays in the center of the floor” (Fol, V. 2020, 166) (Fig. 8).

Other types of frames can be identified in the architectural interpretation of the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings.

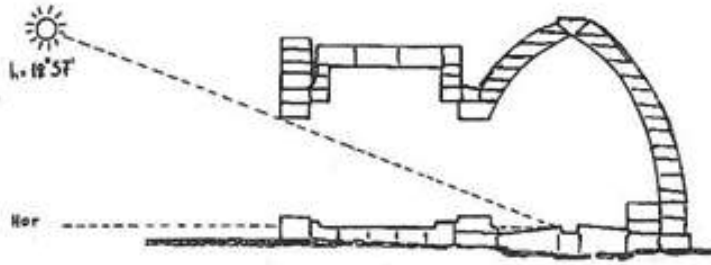


Fig. 8. A vertical section through a Thracian cult building under the Golyama Arsenalka Mound (by Fol, V. 2020, 166, based on Stoev, Stoeva 2006)

CIRCULAR FRAMES (HORIZONTAL) IN THE PLAN OF THE BUILDING

Up to this point, we have presented the circular frame of the outline that delineates sacred from profane space in the megaliths and rock temples. In the sub-mound cult buildings, this contour has grown into a series of “rings” that amplify the significance of what they enclose. These include: 1) the stone wall - *krepis*, which was usually built around the mound of the cult building; 2) the moat around the mound, which was filled with rainwater (formed as a result of the mound modelling); 3) the mound’s circular contour in plan view; 4) the circular plan of the central chamber in some cases. The purpose of these circular frames is to define both the boundary and the various levels of the sacred (see Sarbova 2019). The form chosen to achieve this purpose is not accidental either. Prof. Alexander Fol interprets the mound’s contour in plan view as a projection of the sun on earth, related to the Thracian solar cult (Fol, A. 1990, 170). The circle is also a symbol of infinity - it has no beginning and no end. It expresses the idea of cyclicity, and hence corresponds to the Thracians’ understanding of life in harmony with the natural cycles and the Thracians’ belief in immortality.

It is very possible that there also existed another kind of circular frames as part of the experience of the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings. These frames were formed by probable circular movements which are thought to have been performed around the mound of the building (Ruseva 2000, 70), as well as inside the circular central chamber. Their meaning is the same as that of the material enclosures - to sacralize the space framed in this way.

FRAMES DEFINED BY A HORIZONTAL RASTER

Another type of horizontal frames in the sub-mound Thracian cult building can be seen in the decoration of the central chamber and, sometimes, the chambers preceding it. These stripes, defined by different colours, friezes

or other type of relief decoration, can be viewed as an interpretation of the boundaries between the different parts of the Universe - the underground, earthly and celestial ones (Ruseva 2000, 141). A very typical example in this regard is the cult building under the Ginina Mound near the village of Sveshtari (see Fig. 9). The frieze located on the border between the walls and the dome of the Thracian cult building under the Chetinyova Mound near the village of Starosel can be interpreted in a similar way (Fig. 10).

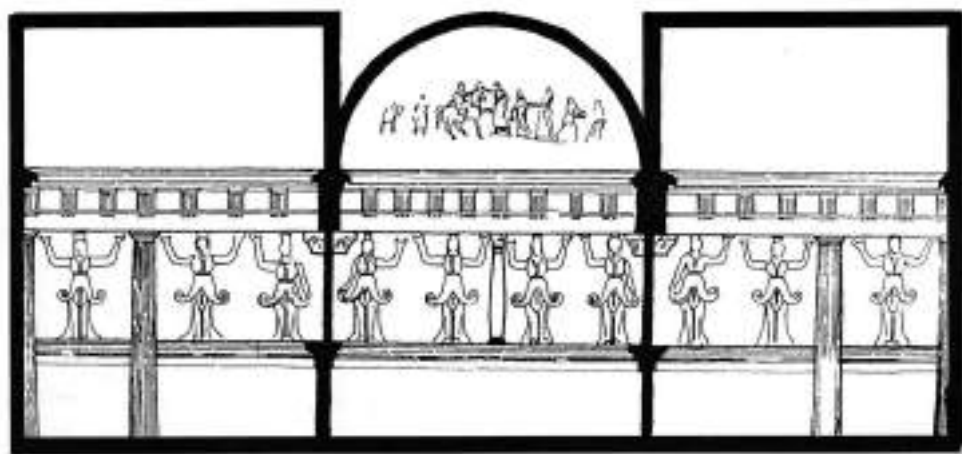


Fig. 9. An unfolded drawing of three of the walls of the central chamber in a Thracian cult building under the Ginina Mound near the village of Sveshtari. Author of the unfolded drawing: Architect M. Ruseva (Ruseva 2013, 100)



Fig. 10. The frieze with triglyphs and metopes in the sub-mound Thracian cult building near the village of Starosel. Photo: A. Sarbova

THE SPATIAL FRAME OF THE BUILDING

The spatial frame enclosing the sacred space in the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings is a stone or, in some cases, brick construction located under an earth mound. This is also the final variant in the development of this type of frame in the Thracian cult structures.

What follows is an analysis of several vertical frames present in the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings.

THE FRAME OF THE ENTRANCE

“On the one hand, the frame of the entrance delineates the boundaries between inside and outside, mortal and immortal, secular and sacred. On the other hand, it removes these boundaries by connecting the entrance to the surrounding human environment and fitting it into the specific frame of the specific culture, tradition, ritual” (Ruseva 2013, 92, based on Phelan 2006, 162-164).

Malvina Ruseva examines and systematizes the types of entrances in the Mediterranean cult architecture from the 2nd-1st c. BC, identifying three basic types: 1) entrances with a trapezium-shaped section of the opening; 2) entrances with a stepped section of the opening; 3) entrances with an arched (eaves-shaped) section (Ruseva 2013, 71-92). In all three types, the shape of the entrance frame has a peculiar effect - it amplifies the perspective and seems to indicate a direction of movement (Ruseva 2013, 71-92). The entrances of the cult buildings are also usually some of the most richly decorated spots (Fig. 11).

The frame of the entrance, however, is also the exit point of the cult building. And if upon entering, the entrance frames the internal sacred space (Fig. 12), then upon exiting, sunlight can be seen through this frame (Fig. 13). Light symbolizes knowledge and, in this case, it also most probably refers to the idea of change and acquired knowledge after the performance of a ritual⁵. Although there is no evidence proving that exiting the building occurred during the day, I believe that the impressive view of the sunlight contrasting against the background of the dark interior and carrying such important symbolism is almost impossible not to be a “staged” part of the entire sacred experience (Fig. 11).

⁵ As in the *imitatio mortis* initiation ritual (see Lozanova-Stancheva 2010, as well as Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1996, 600-606).



Fig. 11. The entrance to a Thracian cult building under the Griffins Mound in the Valley of the Thracian Kings near the town of Kazanlak. Photo: A. Sarbova



Fig. 12. A view through the entrance to the central chamber upon entering a Thracian cult building under the Golyama Arsenalka Mound in the Valley of the Thracian Kings near the town of Kazanlak. Photo: A. Sarbova



Fig. 13. A view through the door of the central chamber upon exiting a Thracian cult building under the Golyama Arsenalka Mound in the Valley of the Thracian Kings near the town of Kazanlak. Photo: A. Sarbova

ENFILADE ROOMS LEADING TO THE CENTRAL CHAMBER

The presence of a varying number of complementary rooms, arranged one after another (enfilade) and leading to the central chamber, define additional boundaries before reaching the most sacred space. At the same time, their entrances form a system of concentric frames that, along with the circular frames in plan, enclose the sacred and create a visual illusion - a feeling of infinity (Fig. 14). Such an architectural composition turns entering the building into a kind of ritual, as it defines levels of accessibility and specific actions necessary to overcome a certain distance and some material barriers.



Fig. 14. A view through the sequence of rooms leading to the central chamber of a Thracian cult building under the Golyama Kosmatka Mound. Photo: A. Sarbova

FRAMES DEFINED BY A VERTICAL RASTER

It is mainly in the central chamber of the sub-mound Thracian cult buildings that one can see a vertical raster, defined by vertical architectural elements, for example, semi-columns (Sushmanets - Fig. 15, Starosel - Fig. 16) or upright female relief figures (Sveshtari). What is peculiar, regardless of the type of these elements, is that their number bears specific symbolism, whose interpretation is based on Pythagoras and his followers. For example, the numbers 7 and 10 are associated with the idea of the Universe and its entirety (Ruseva 2013, 117-118). This is why this kind of grid of vertical elements could also be perceived as a kind of imaginary frame - a numerical meaningful frame, which again turns out to enclose the holiest space in the building.



Fig. 15. The semi-columns in the central chamber of the Thracian cult building under the Shushmanets Mound in the Valley of the Thracian Kings near the town of Kazanlak. Photo: A. Sarbova



Fig. 16. The semi-columns in the central chamber of the Thracian cult building under the Chetinyova Mound near the village of Starosel. Photo: A. Sarbova

Some of the presented frames in the Thracian cult buildings could also be regarded as boundaries, effectively limiting the access for the uninitiated but also creating levels of sacredness, which reaches its climax in the central chamber. It is precisely this chamber and the ritual performed or observed in it that are repeatedly framed by different types of frames, which could be perceived as an architectural way of sacralizing the space.

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Abbreviations

Hom. Od.: Homerus, *Odyssea*

Porph. De antro nymph.: Porphyrius Tyrius, *De antro nympharum*

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