

THE “KHAN” AND HIS “KUMIHRS” (NEW DETAILS FROM THE DOCUMENTATION OF A GRAFFITO FROM STANCHO VAKLINOV’S EXCAVATIONS NORTH OF PLISKA’S CITADEL)

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ABSTRACT

The photographic documentation conducted by the current research team is the third such documentation to be made on a stone block with a graffito, found by Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov). The purpose of the documentation was to juxtapose a number of techniques in order to choose the most efficient from among them, i.e. one where subjective visual perception is minimized, and at the same time, one that renders the greatest number of details that had remained unnoticed despite previous scientific observation. The chosen techniques were: Reflectance Transformation Imaging and 3D Laser Scanning. The rendered results, as it became apparent during data processing, complement each other in an excellent way.

The new details from the latest photographic documentation of the graffito can be divided into: one fully unknown figure and details of already known figures; letter characters, most of which in front, above and behind the figure of the rider.

Key words: Pliska, Graffiti, Contemporary techniques of documentation

Introduction

The present paper is the first in a publication cycle dedicated to the promulgation of the results from the scientific project “The Round Stone Platform in Pliska: Construction Materials, Graffiti, Marks and Inscriptions”.¹ The purpose of the article is to present the methods and contemporary techniques used for graffiti documentation, as well as the results from their application. The same

¹The project started in 2021 and is conducted with the financial help of NAIM – BAS (Scientific Council Protocol № 24/25.03.2021). The team consists of: Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova (head of the project), Andrey Aladzhov, Pantelis Charalampakis and Miglena Raykovska. The processing of materials from the monasteries at Ravna and Murfatlar was carried out with the knowledge, consent and cooperation of Prof. Kazimir Popkonstantinov (Veliko Tarnovo University “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”) and Dr. Aurel Mototolea, Director of the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanța. I would like to express my gratitude to both of them (E. K.).

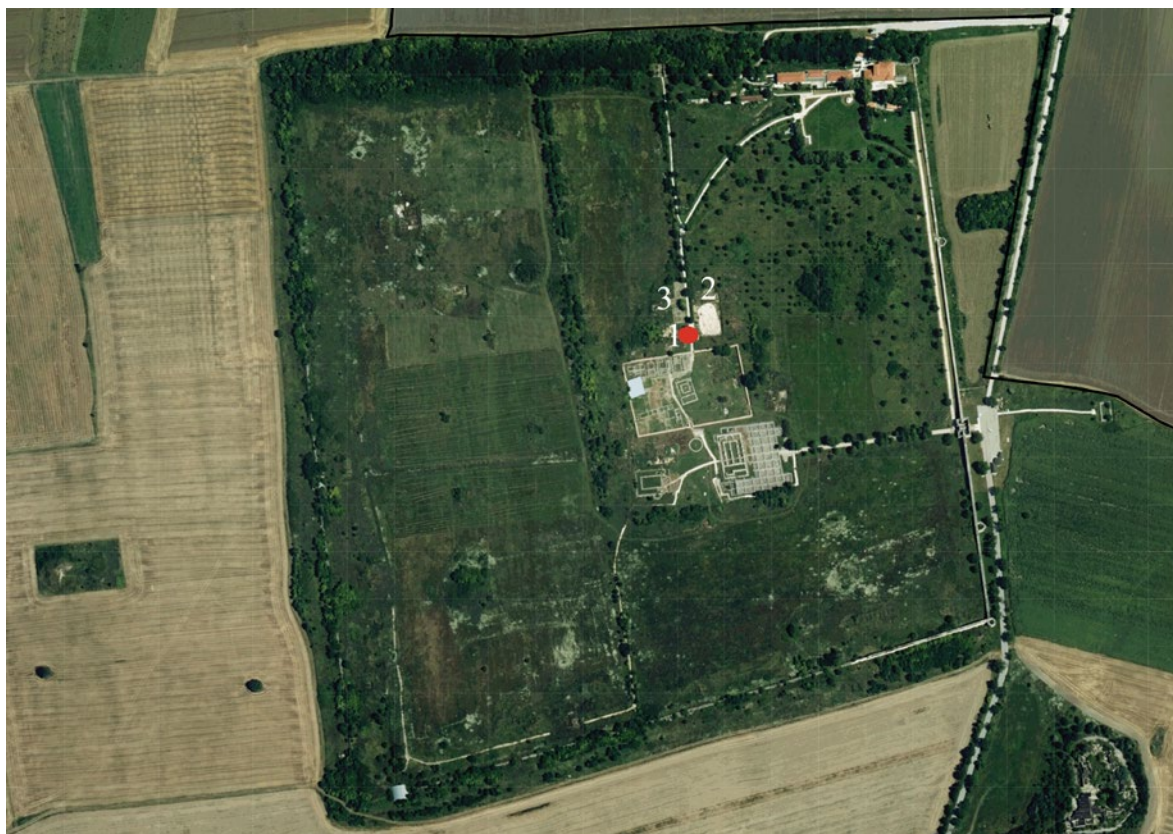


Fig. 1. Aerial photograph of the Inner town of Pliska (photo: Stanimir Stoychev): 1. Approximate localization of the tripartite building and "late" stone pavement, found in 1948 by Stancho Vaklinov; 2. The Round stone platform; 3. Boyar residence

Обр. 1. Въздушна снимка на Вътрешния град на Плиска (снимка: Станмир Стойчев): 1. Предполагаемо местоположение на триделната гражданска постройка с „късната“ каменна настилка от разкопките на Станчо Ваклинов през 1948 г.; 2. Кръглата каменна площадка; 3. Болярското жилище

techniques were employed not only in the process of the documentation of the drawings, inscriptions and wall-painting fragments from the Platform in Pliska (72 in total), but also in the comparative database collected for our research – the graffiti from the monasteries in Ravna, Provadiya municipality, and Basarabi-Murfatlar (Churches Nos. 1 – 4, Gallery E), Constanța region, Romania. The monuments documented within the framework of the project exceed 300 objects.

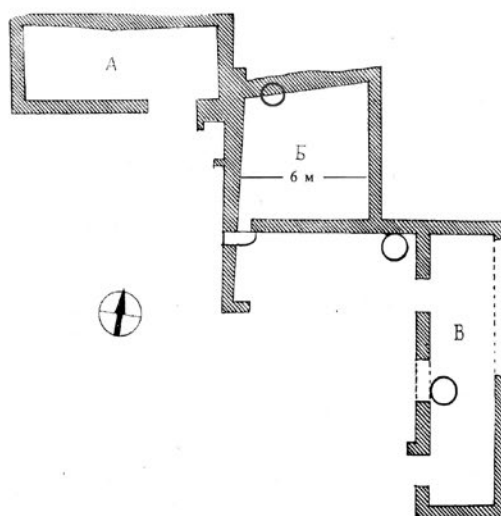
The decision to illustrate the team's chosen methodology particularly through the graffito drawing on a limestone block discovered north of Pliska's Citadel, is not an unconsidered one. On the one hand, this graffito is among the most recognizable of this type of artefact known to the broader academic audience, and to a certain extent is considered one of the emblems of Bulgarian "pagan" culture. On the other hand, it was, just like the other graffiti from the blocks in the Stone Platform, embedded – secondarily or for the third time – as a spolium in a building in the west periphery of the platform (fig. 1, fig. 2: 2). The block was unearthed in 1948 by Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov) during the investigation of a "civil" structure featuring a row of three rooms, to the "north-east of the Small Palace" (Станчев 1955, обр. 10).² The absence of a situational plan and a preserved scientific archive from that time allows only the approximate localization of this building to the north of the Citadel's north entrance, under the contemporary visitors' path (fig. 1). A number of the

² Currently the monument is part of the permanent exhibition of the National Archaeological Museum in Sofia (Inv. No. 3936).



Обр. 4. Каменна настилка в западния край на изследваното пространство

1



Обр. 10. Гражданска сграда. План

2



3

Fig. 2. 1, 2. The stone pavement and the tripartite building, found by Stancho Vaklinov (after: Станчев 1955, fig. 4, 10); 3. Extension to the west of the stone pavement and a section of a secret passage which ends under the Round stone platform (photo: Mariela Inkova)

Обр. 2. 1, 2. Каменната настилка и триделната сграда, разкрити от Станчо Ваклинов (по: Станчев 1955, обр. 4, 10); 3. Западно разширение на каменната настилка с участък от таен ходник, с изход под Кръглата каменна площадка (снимка: Мариела Инкова)

trenches worked by Stancho Vaklinov were then rediscovered in 2012 – 2013 (unpublished data from the excavations), during the process of the clearing of the “late” stone pavement found by him (fig. 2: 1) (see Станчев 1955, с. 187, обр. 4). Its extension to the west and north (at elevation of 183.22 – 183.26 m) was documented during the investigation of the sites labelled “Courtyard with Wooden Fence North of the Citadel” (fig. 2: 3) (Станилов и др. 2016, 648, обр. 2.1) and “Round Stone Platform” (Аладжов и др. 2016, 650). The upper chronological border of the structures discovered by the aforementioned archaeologist – the tripartite building and the stone pavement – was determined by the coins discovered in the stratum, the latest among which were of Empress Theodora (1055 – 1056) (Станчев 1955, 194). Chronologically close to them were seven gold coins (from the same nominal) of Constantine X Doukas (1059 – 1067) (Аладжов и др. 2014, 443), which originated from the northern areas of the pavement partially unearthed in 1948 (in square 7/3 of the grid of the “Round Stone Platform” site, field journal of 21.10.2013).

The limestone block (measuring 0.48 x 0.28 x 0.25 m) (fig. 3: 1, 2) from the tripartite building, found together with other spolia (building ceramics that also feature engraved drawings and a Greek inscription) was embedded in the inner face of the north wall of the “residential” precinct Б (fig. 2: 2), so that the images on it were turned upside down (Станчев 1955, 192, 209, 212). According to Vaklinov, this stone block had been reused several times and used still later as an animal trough before it ended up built into (for possibly the third time) the tripartite building. The place of its original provenance is considered to be among the monumental structures in the Palace complex in Pliska (Станчев 1955, 212).

In the following decades, the artefact was included in several publications penned by Veselin Beshevliev (Бешевлиев 1992, 252 – 253), Dimitar Ovcharov (Овчаров 1982, 51 – 55), Pavel Georgiev (Георгиев 1991, 198 – 208), Stamen Mihailov (Mihailov 1998), and Rasho Rashev (Рашев 2008, 227 – 228). The interpretations of the depicted elaborate scene, rich in detail, mainly fall into two groups of hypotheses. According to the first, the scene is of triumphal character, the most solid argument in favor of which is the obvious similarity of the rendition of the central mounted figure to that of the Madara Horseman (Станчев 1955, 211–218; Овчаров 1982; Рашев, Димитров 1999, 45). According to the other group of hypotheses, the scene represents a “cult ceremony in the Bulgarian capital of the first half of the 9th century”, which gives grounds for a “precise and convincing reconstruction” of the “cultic-religious ceremonials in the pre-Christianisation era” (Георгиев 1991, 198).

The main reason for the existence of multiple interpretations of the scene, are the missing or barely visible details on the stone surface – especially in its left half – which has created a wide open field for the imagination and has generated various interpretations, many of which are entirely conjectural. For the period since the discovery of the block ca. 75 years ago until today, the stone has been photographically documented twice. The first time it was recorded by its discoverer (fig. 3: 1) and the facsimiles of his graphic documentation have been reprinted with some additions by Veselin Beshevliev and Dimitar Ovcharov (Бешевлиев 1992, 253; Овчаров 1982, фиг. 1). In 1991, Pavel Georgiev documented it again (fig. 3: 2), which gave him a reason for a new interpretation, different from that of Vaklinov. According to Pavel Georgiev, the key role for the understanding of the drawing is played by the word inscribed between the standing human figure on the left and the rider in the centre, read by him as КОУМІР instead of ПОУМІР, as per Vaklinov and Beshevliev. From this starting point, the entire scene is interpreted as a moment captured from a ceremony related to the ancestors’ cult, “well-known among the Turkic people”. In the so presented scene, the standing figure is identified as a statue of a *kumihir* (idol), symbolizing one or more dead ancestors (Георгиев 1991, 205). The same author argues that to the left of the standing



1



2

1955 г.

1991 г.

2022 г.



3

Fig. 3. 1, 2. The images on the stone block, documented by Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov) and Pavel Georgiev in 1955 and 1991; 3. Juxtaposition between previous documentation and the new one, in 2022

Обр. 3. 1, 2. Документация от заснемането на изображенията върху блока от Станчо Станчев (Ваклинов) и Павел Георгиев през 1955 и 1991 г.; 3. Съпоставка между по-старата документация с осъществената през 2022 г.

human figure there is another one – a second *kumih*r which, together with the first one and the remaining personages, depict a moment from a consecration ritual of a Khan's memorial or burial ensemble (Георгиев 1991, 205). The full reading of the inscription on the right as “the very strong khan descendant (grandson)” allows the suggestion that the central figure represents the young Khan Malamir (Георгиев 1991, 207). The author elaborates his hypothesis decades later, in 2018, in his comprehensive study “Pliska, the Pagan Centre of Bulgaria”. He does so in the context of the problem of the construction history of the Great *kapish*te (pagan sanctuary), where he suggests a possible reconstruction of the temple and derives its “inherent connection” to “Turkic memorial temples dedicated to the higher aristocracy”, one of which is the temple of Kul Tigin in Mongolia. In support of this statement is the same “*kumih*r” from the graffito discovered by Stancho Vaklinov, which should have been placed inside an alcove in the broadest (eastern) wall of the inner rectangle of the Great *kapish*te in Pliska (Георгиев 2018, 41).

The photographic documentation

The photographic documentation conducted by the current team is, as mentioned previously, the third for this stone block (fig. 4). The work was carried out in March 2022, immediately after the last cleaning and conservation of the monument with regards to the inclusion of the graffito in the exhibition “Mounted Nomads in Europe” (Schallaburg, Austria, 09.04. – 06.11.2022). The purpose of the documentation was to juxtapose a number of techniques in order to choose the most efficient from among them, i.e. one where subjective visual perception is minimized, and at the same time, one that renders the greatest number of details that had remained unnoticed despite the previous decades of scientific observation. The chosen techniques were: Reflectance Transformation Imaging and 3D laser scanning, whose results, as it became apparent during data processing, complement each other in an excellent way.

Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) is a technique used for the documentation of very fine surface details – often invisible to the naked human eye, and difficult or even impossible to capture through other photographic or 3D methods – on a wide spectrum of materials (Raykovska et. al. 2015, 140). The method uses the algorithms of Polynomial Texture Mapping (PTM) and Hemispherical Harmonics (HSH) developed in 2001 at Hewlett-Packard Labs by Tom Malzbender



Fig. 4. Contemporary condition of the monument (photo: Miglena Raykovska)

Обр. 4. Сегашно състояние на паметника (снимка: Миглена Райковска)

(Warda 2011, 125; Bevan et al. 2013, 221). In contrast to laser scanning and photogrammetry, RTI does not result in 3D data in a point cloud with concrete dimensions in the x, y and z axes. Instead, the obtained data contains information about the normal vector for each pixel of the area photographed. That means that each pixel can be positioned correctly in space and in relation to one another, thus forming a 2D representation that is of a 3D character.

RTI is a flexible technique, and easy to use. The necessary equipment consists of a photo camera of good resolution, a stable tripod, a flashlight, a black reflective sphere and synchronizers. The technique entails a sequence of standard captures of a given object, each taken with the help of a fixed camera under directional lighting (flashlight). The object is illuminated from no less than 24 evenly distributed lighting positions (Mudge et al. 2010, 115) (fig. 5). The purpose of this is to calculate the normal for each separate pixel of the image with the help of the data stored in the capture (fig. 6). The RTI algorithm calculates the reflection for each pixel according to each lighting position coming from the illuminant (Gabov, Bevan 2011, 4). Along with that, the pixel also preserves the data of the colour coordinates within the colour dimension used. This information is sufficient in order to reproduce the direction of the normal and, based on that, the relief of the object's surface, as well as its texture. Taken together, the "normals" trace the shape of the surface in the so called "normal map" (fig. 6), and with the help of the respective software (RTI Viewer) and computer-simulated light sources and filters, the end user can manipulate the lighting positions and reflections of the studied object, thus discerning different areas of the surface (fig. 7). When a camera of high resolution is used, the ground sample size for each normal measurement can be less than 50 microns (Raykovska et al. 2015, 142), and as a result, some very thin and shallow incisions can be identified.

The RTI documentation of the graffiti from the tripartite building north of the Citadel was carried out using a Nikon D500 camera and a macro lens Nikkor 105mm. One RTI sphere was used, together with a GodoxTT685n flashlight. The photographic documentation was completed in 69 captures, with the use of one RTI sphere (fig. 5). The tentative aspects of the scene's interpretation in the publications cited above were used for orientation when the data was processed in RTI Viewer. Lighting positions that reveal missing or unclear elements of the drawing and parts of inscriptions were deliberately sought (fig. 9). Finally, the vector graphic image was traced upon the normal map



Fig. 5. 69 frames of the graffiti with 1 RTI sphere and different positions of the light source

Обр. 5. 69 кадъра на графитите с различна позиция на светлинния поток и 1 бр. RTI сфера

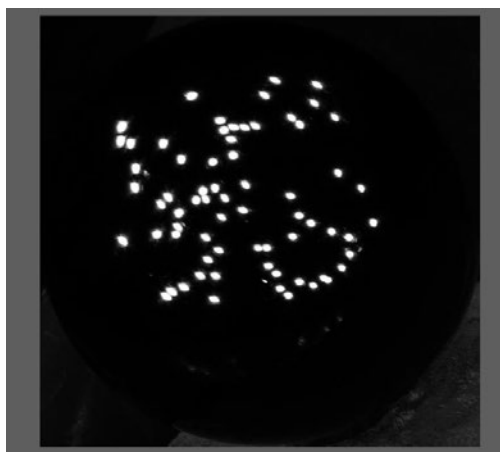


Fig. 6. A snapshot of the stored light positions on the RTI sphere

Обр. 6. Общ кадър на съхранените позиции на светлинния поток върху RTI сферата

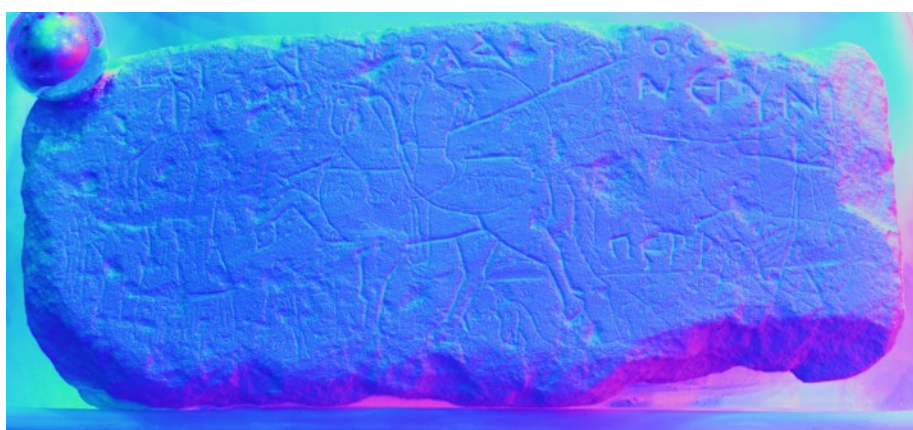


Fig. 7. A normal map derived from the RTI Viewer

Обр. 7. „Карта на нормалите“ от RTI Viewer



Fig. 8. Detail of the graffiti surface, with reduced saturation and a sharp angle of the light source, revealing details of fine incisions

Обр. 8. Детайл от повърхността на графита, с намалена сатурация и остър ъгъл на светлинния поток, разкриващ детайли от фини врязвания



Fig. 9. Graffiti's detail demonstrated through the Specular Enhancement filter

Обр. 9. Детайли от графита, демонстрирани чрез Specular Enhancement филтър



Fig. 10. Vector graphic image of the drawings on the limestone block (drawing: Miglena Raykovska, Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova, Pantelis Charalampakis)
 Обр. 10. Векторно изчертаване на рисунките и графитите върху блока (рисунка: Миглена Райковска, Евгения Коматарова-Балинова, Пантелис Харалампакис)

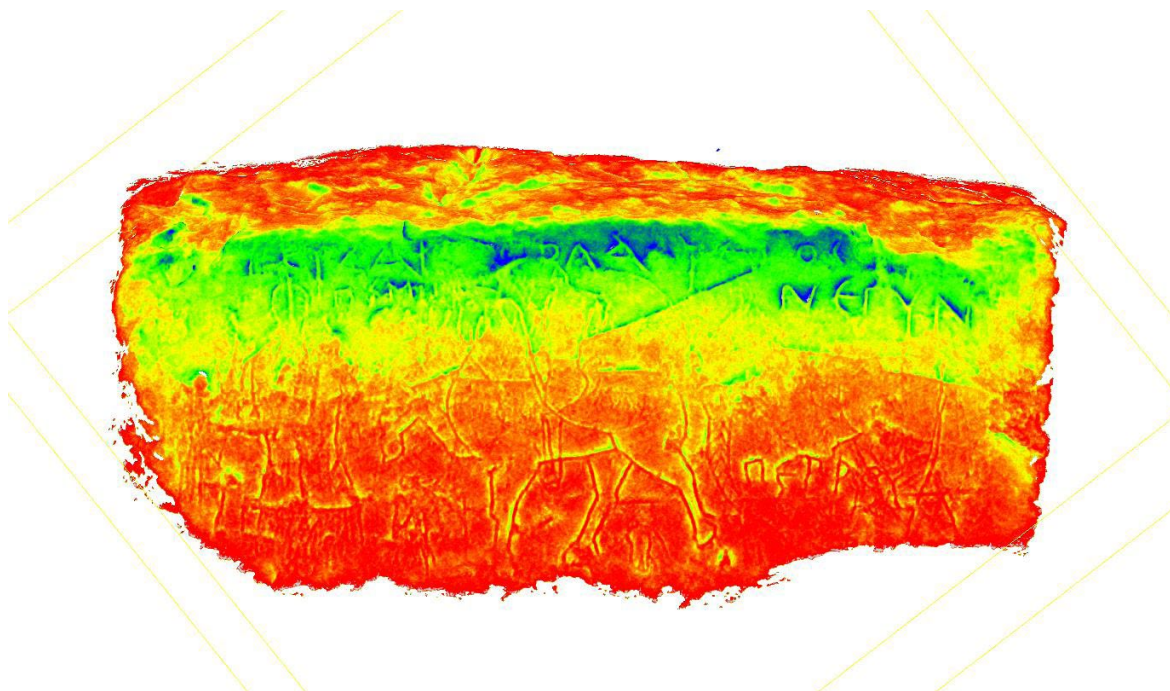


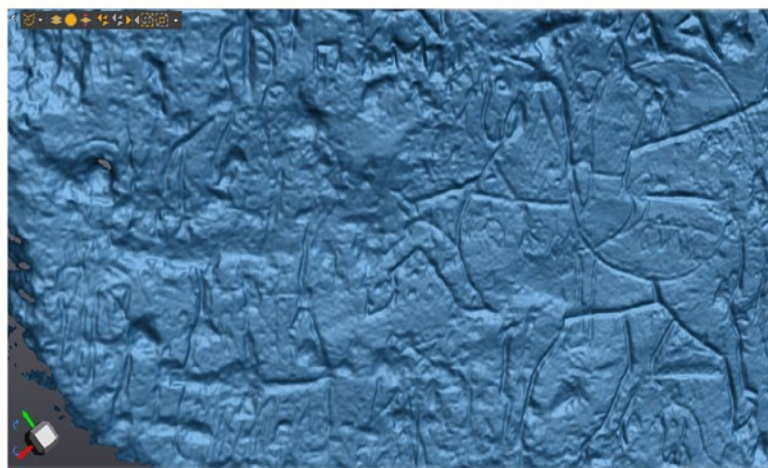
Fig. 11. Snapshot of the 3D segmentation in CloudCompare v.2.12.1

Обр. 11. Общ кадър от триизмерна сегментация в CloudCompare v.2.12.1

and the selected views from RTI Viewer, which in fact were used as its base and therefore reflect the objective condition of the monument (fig. 10).

The laser scanning was performed using a CREAFORM Handy SCAN 3D – scanners of the latest generation. The precision is 0.025 mm with a resolution of 0.050 mm. It works with 7 laser crosses and 1 additional laser line. This scanner type does not generate texture but in this particular case, in the presence of detailed photographic documentation, that is not necessary. The visual study of the 3D model clearly demonstrates the existence of images and graphic elements that were not noted in earlier publications. In order to confirm that, and to facilitate the comparison with the results of RTI photography, the so-called process of segmentation was conducted (fig. 12: 3). This is, broadly speaking, a mathematical algorithm for the recognition of images from a certain picture. It is often used in medicine and is a known tool in epigraphy. The 3D segmentation is a derivative approach based on a mathematical analysis of 3D databases, instead of 2D photographic images. The process permits the “mapping” of depths of artificial incisions upon a given surface. For the purpose, a 3D point cloud of high resolution is used, to which an additional plane can be mounted and serve as a reference point for the measurement of distance between the two surfaces (Longo 2016, 30).

The Cloud Compare software is among the most preferred packages for the conducting of such research. For the purpose of the project was used the so-called Poisson surface reconstruction – a method for the calculation of depths and distances, in which, with the aid of an additionally mounted smoothed surface, a coloured map is produced, which reflects the extent of deviation between the planes. This is often represented in two colours: red-yellow, black-white etc., where the darkest colour denotes the most extreme negative deviation of the depth towards the light, which in turn illustrates the most positive deviation of the depth. Examples for the segmentation of the 3D model of the graffito in Cloud Compare 2.12.1. are presented in Figure 12: 1, 3.



1



2



3



4

Fig. 12. Snapshots of the 3D laser scan model and the point cloud segmentation

Обр. 12. Общи кадри на 3D модела от лазерното сканиране и сегментацията на облака от точки

Results from the new documentation

The new details from the latest photographic documentation of the graffito can be divided into: one fully unknown figure and details of already known figures; letter characters, most of which in front, above and behind the figure of the rider.

The graffiti drawings

The details which are most problematic and challenging to interpret regarding the previous documentation campaigns in 1955 and 1991 appear as follows, when compared to the results of 3D scanning and RTI (fig. 3: 3, fig. 12). The incisions that have been interpreted as a second “*kumih*” figure in the left part of the block are, in fact, the head, neck and part of the chest of a horse. His head is rather bent downwards, disproportionately elongated, and some of its components are rendered both facing and in profile: the ears, the eye and the jaw. The back, the hind limbs and the tail of the animal are shown in a similar way as the horse figure in the right half of the block. At the same time, the line drawing of the head emulates almost thoroughly that of the figure under the horseman, from which (in reverse perspective) are depicted only the front body parts. It could be therefore considered that all three horse figures were drawn synchronously and by the same hand, which is also shown by the same pressure applied on the sharp tool that left a very shallow incision.

The standing human figure – the so called first *kumih*, is in fact a depiction of a warrior in armour, presented facing, disproportionate, especially his torso. Part of the upper half of his body is covered by a helmet. The way the helmet is rendered suggests that it comprised a solid component and a plastic one. The former is spherical on top and engulfs completely the head, with cutouts for the eyes. The second part covers the neck and some of the chest, and was made of fine small chains which the “artist” depicted rather unskilfully. A deeply incised line – possibly also an opening – slices the helmet into two symmetrical vertical parts, ending on top with plumage of two stripes descending symmetrically downwards. An entirely new detail revealed in the latest photographic documentation is the belt of the figure (fig. 3: 3, fig. 9, fig. 12). It wraps tightly around the waist and is fastened with a rectangular buckle, much wider than the band. The shape of the buckle was traced not by incision but by scraping off the surface, and because of that does not feature a tongue. To the right and to the left of the belt, symmetrical to each other, are attached a scabbard for a sword (or sabre) and a single-blade knife, but it would be premature to claim whether they render concrete weaponry since they are drawn too schematically, without any type-determining characteristics like the hilt, the guard and the point of the wedge. Entirely conjectural in this case would be the suggestion that the right arm folded in the elbow is holding this sabre or sword with a “tip” pointed upwards, because its length does not correspond to that of the scabbard.

The lower half of the body of the standing figure is presented up to the knees. It is dressed in a flared garment, of which two frontal parts are visible. They are clearly visible in the area of the skirt, slightly open in front and presented by a thickened line. The folds and the model of the garment are rendered without skill, but they nonetheless allow the observation that this flared piece of clothing ended with a narrow band or cuff.

Due to the scarcity of historical, archaeological and visual art evidence from the period of the Early Middle Ages – here we have in mind the information from the so called aristocratic graves and those collected in Valeri Yotov’s monograph “Arms and Armour in the Bulgarian Middle Ages (7th – 11th century)” (Њотов 2004, 37 – 77, 115 – 120) – as perhaps the most certain analogy of our depiction we can point out the warrior figure on the round medallion of the bone amulet from Harlets, Vratsa Municipality. The similarity in details in this case are: the two-part helmet to which

plumage is added on top, the undecorated belt, the flared garment, and the sabre suspended to the left of the belt (Stanilov, Komatarova-Balinova 2018, abb. 2, 3). At the same time, the round shield of the rider from this graffito, despite shown without an umbo, so far corresponds only to the shields from the right branch of the Harlets bone amulet, which has been also noted in Valeri Yotov’s monograph (Йотов 2004, 117, обр. 66, обр. 77).

No doubt, scholarly attention has been drawn so far mainly to the central figure of the composition – that of the rider (fig. 8, fig. 10). He is presented in profile to the left, and part of his upper body half and face are turned towards the viewer. He is depicted with similar artistic methods as the Madara Horseman, and they share several details in common. The most obvious among them are: the pose of the rider, the proportions of the human figure, the “ceremonial pose” and the ratio in the rendition of the horse, and even minute details like the movement of the beast, the ankles and the hooves. Among the newly documented details one can see the high front curve of the saddle, similar to that of the Madara Horseman, the round chest piece of the horse similar to the Madara relief, and the braided tail made of three strands of hair. The static pose of the rider is supported also by the stirrup and the horse reins which he holds in his right arm raised high. The new element in this figure is the pectoral that covers the upper half of the torso and its contour merging with that of the stiff-tipped helmet. To the limited number of analogies, with a degree of certainty, we can mention the human figure with a pointy two-part helmet engraved to the west of the Church 1 in Murfatlar that have so far remained in the periphery of scientific interest (fig. 13).

The textual graffiti

Apart from the drawings, the stone block from Pliska includes textual graffiti that covers five segments of the surface, above the drawings and between them. In four out of five, the characters are scratched with thick sharp instrument and are of large size in regard of the stone’s overall dimensions, while in the fifth the characters are small in size, and consist of very thin lines. Despite the vast scholarly literature on this stone, the small-size letters appear only in the drawing by Pavel Georgiev (fig. 3: 2) (Георгиев 1991, 203; Георгиев 2018, 40, обр. 14). Of the four clearly visible



Fig. 13. A graffito drawing west of the entrance of Church 1 in Murfatlar (photo: E. Komatarova-Balinova)

Обр. 13. Рисунка-графит, врязана западно от входа на Църква № 1 в Мурфатлар (снимка: Е. Коматарова-Балинова)

texts, one is a continuous line at the upper part of the stone, with possible traces of another line broken off above, while the other three are single words appearing at different parts of the surface. Whether all these texts are related to each other or to the drawings on the same stone block, is an issue difficult to interpret. The following commentary touches upon the large-size characters only, because the small ones are extremely faded and no longer visible even in the high quality RTI photos. The multiple and varying interpretations and explanations of the text, provided by previous scholars can be found in the cited literature. Before proceeding to the commentary, it must be emphasized that the textual content of this stone can hardly be of a monumental, official character: the overall size of the figures and the letters, the medium of execution, as well as the fact that they have been scratched as graffiti probably mean that these were spontaneous in nature, created on personal initiative (by more than one person) and were definitely not the outcome of a commissioned artwork or inscription.

The inscription was first read by Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov) (fig. 14: 1) as: [...]ΔΕΖΑΝ[.] ΠΟΛΑ ΔΥΑ ΓΟC[ΤΟΥΝ? ΚΕ] ΝΕΓΥΝ – ΠΟΥΜΙΡ – ΠΕΤΡΟC, without providing a translation or a clear explanation for this reading (Станчев 1955, 211 – 217). It was later complemented by Veselin Beshevliev as: [ΕΝΘΑ]ΔΕ ΙCΑΝ ΠΟΛΑ ΔΥ<Ν>ΑΤΟC ΠΟΥΜΙΡ ΝΕΓΥΝ ΠΕΤΡΟC, translated as: “Here were: the very strong Poumir, (as well as) Negyn, Petros” (Бешевлиев 1992, no. 89, обр. 189 – 190). In this interpretation, only Poumir was “very strong”, and he was accompanied by the other two persons. Dimitar Ovcharov, on the other hand, suggested the following reading: [ΕΝΘΑ]ΔΕ ΚΑΝ ΠΟΛΑ ΔΥ<Ν>ΑΤΟC ΠΟΥΜΙΡ ΝΕΓΥΝ ΠΕΤΡΟC, translated as: “Here (are depicted) the most powerful khan, (as well as) Poumir, Negyn, (and) Petros” (Овчаров 1983; id., 1982, 56 – 58, 145, обр. 24, табл. LXXX; the reading of the word “khan” was accepted by and repeated in: Рашев 2008, 227). According to this – third – reading, only the “khan” was “very strong”, and he was accompanied by the other three. Yet another reading was proposed by Pavel Georgiev, who split the text in two parts, to the left and to the right of the shielded horseman, as two inscriptions in two lines: ΙΔΕ ΚΑΝ – ΚΟΥΜΙΡ / ΠΟΛΑ ΔΥ(Ν)ΑΤΟC ΚΑΝ[ΑC] ΝΕΓΥΝ[ΟC], translated as: “This is Khan – koumir” / “the very strong khan – descendant (grandson)” (fig. 14: 2) (Георгиев 1991, 200 – 205. See also: Георгиев 2018, 39 – 42). A few years later, Stamen Mihailov suggested the reading: ΙΖΑΚ ΠΟΛΑ Ο ΑΓΟC, translated as: “Isak, the very guilty” (Mihailov 1998). According to Mihailov, the inscription refers to the Bulgar bolyars Isak, Poumir, Negyn, as well as the Slav Petros, who were punished for opposing Boris’ plans to Christianise the population of his state.

Although the three “names” pose no problem, the continuous text is hardly legible, for the upper part of the stone is damaged. The new methods of photography applied to this stone revealed much evidence regarding the pictorial graffiti and very little, yet significant, information regarding the textual graffiti. In fact, each of the previous scholars who tried to read the text was right about something, adding small pieces to a bigger puzzle. The following is the proposed new reading of the inscriptions on the stone, based on the letters visualized through RTI and laser scanning.

On the continuous text in the upper part of the stone block:

[...]ΔΕΚΑΚΕΠΟΛΑ[.T or Y]Α[Φ or Ι]Ο[С or Ι]C[...]

[...] ten (?) and many ... [...]

The sixteen visible characters deserve to be commented upon, one by one (fig. 14: 3, 4): The

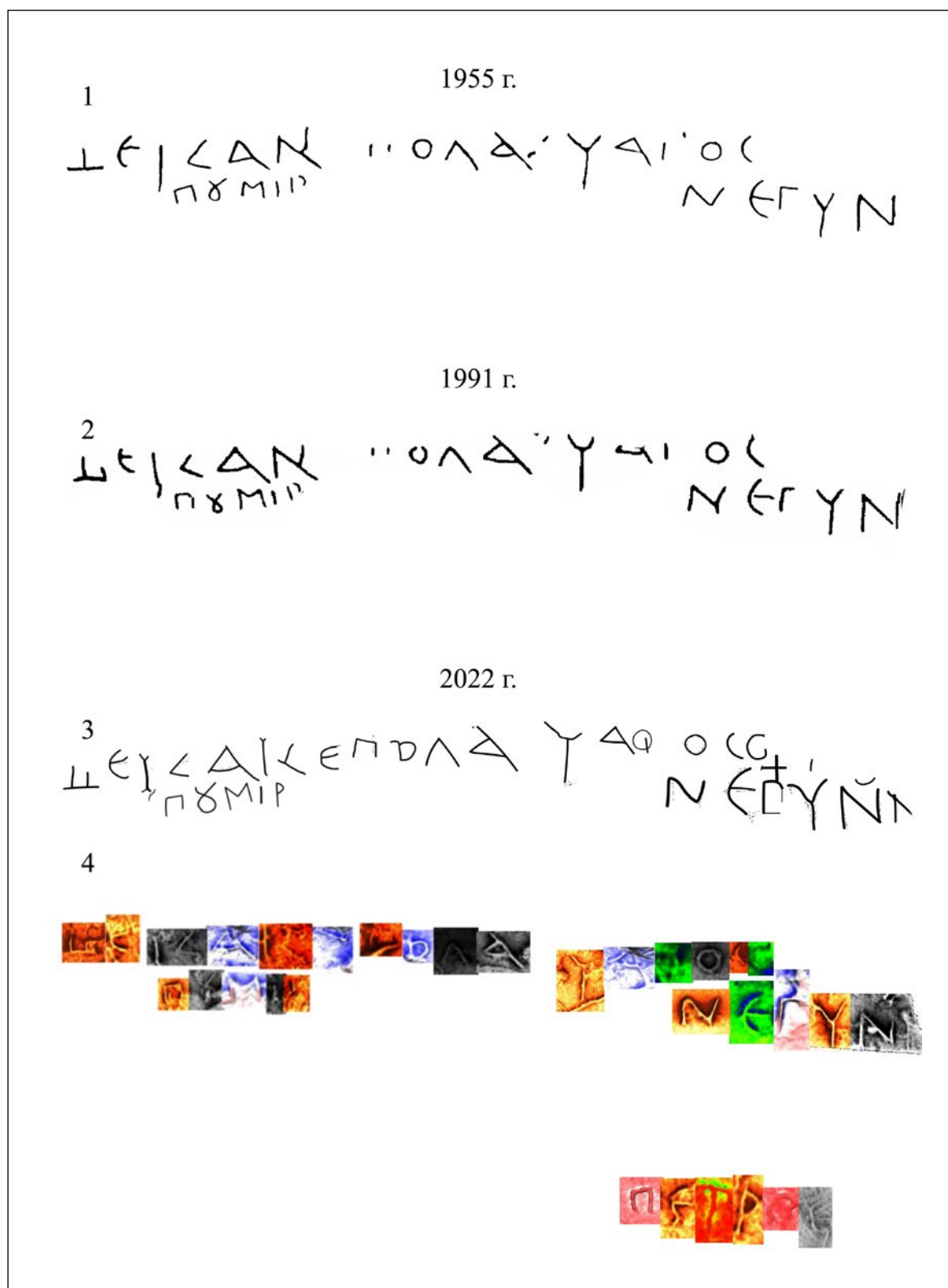


Fig. 14. 1 – 3. Documentation of the inscriptions on the block in 1955 (by Stancho Vaklinov), 1991 (by Pavel Georgiev) and in 2022 (by the team of the project); 4. 3D Laser scanning of the inscriptions on the block

Обр. 14. 1 – 3. Заснемане на надписите върху блока през 1955 (на Станчо Ваклинов), 1991 (на Павел Георгиев) и 2022 (от екипа по проекта); 4. 3D лазерно сканиране на надписите от 2022 г.

first visible character, at the upper left part of the stone, consists of a horizontal bar below with two vertical hastas springing up from it (resembling an upside-down Greek *pi*). It can be compared with the peculiar *delta* attested in a graffiti at the church no. 2 at Avradaka, near Preslav, dated in the late 9th – early 10th c. (Иванова 1949, 60; Иванова 1955, 80, 130, обр. 22; Овчаров 1979, 190. Станчев 1955, 215, also saw a *delta* on the stone presented here, without, however, being able to provide its exact shape or any parallel). The difference between these two characters – the one from Pliska and that from Avradaka/Preslav – is that the second one, according to Vera Ivanova who excavated the site and published the graffiti, bears a small line which cuts diagonally the left vertical arm (Dimitar Ovcharov has omitted this line). If this small, diagonal line is not an accidental scratch or damage, it could have been an element added by the person who wrote these words, perhaps in order to form a cross, given that the text is of religious, Christian character. This type of *delta*, not attested elsewhere, must have been a local variety, perhaps developed by locals who had been schooled in the Greek language. It is not attested in inscriptions known so far which were commissioned by khans or other official and funeral inscriptions on stone. The possibility of a connection with the Runic characters that according to scholars correspond to the phoneme (?) ΔΑ and similar ones (on these Runes see Йончев, Йончева 1982, 56, обр. 81, 63, обр. 87, 65, обр. 92) needs further investigation. Hopefully, future discovery of more samples will help scholars to map the finds and trace the origins of this peculiar character.

Next, the second letter is an *epsilon*, whose upper half is shorter than the lower part, and the angle formed between the upper line and the middle bar is sharper than usual. Moreover, the ending of the lower tip is curving upwards. It resembles neither the *epsilon* of ΝΕΓΥΝ, nor that of ΠΕΤΡΟΣ, scratched on the same stone.

The third and fifth visible letters of the inscriptions are *kappas* and it is worth analysing them together. The *kappa* following the *epsilon* consists of two separate lines, one is a vertical hasta and the other resembles a C or <. This shape was common in that period (see, for example: Овчаров 1982, табл. LXXXIII and CXXIV; Бешевлиев 1992, no. 28, with обр. 91; also in inscriptions from Ravna: the establishment or restoration inscription – Попконстантинов 1986, 10, обр. 2; the so-called inscription of Pope Clement – e.g. Георгиев 2017, 226; and in unpublished graffiti from this same monastery). Sometimes, a small horizontal line connects the two main parts, but it is so faint that is barely visible (Бешевлиев 1992, no. 31, with обр. 94). Occasionally, two different types of *kappa* – with connected and separate lines – were included in the same inscription (see, for example, Иванова 1955, 90, 138, обр. 34; Бешевлиев 1992, 158, no. 26, with обр. 89). Stancho Vaklinov and Stamen Mihailov (Станчев 1955, 215 – 216; Mihailov 1998) read the first *kappa* as IZ, YZ, or K, showing preference for the Z. In the next *kappa*, there is, indeed, the trace of a connecting line. On both *kappas*, curved feet (“serifs”) terminate the vertical hastas’ upper parts. The second *kappa* had not been detected by previous scholars, who interpreted the lines either as IC (ισ) or N (ν). It must be admitted that IC / I< is, more than frequently, simply the sequence of the two letters (ισ) (as, for example, in: Овчаров 1992, 259 – 260, обр. 1, the IC standing for I(H)C(OYC) [ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ]). In this case, if one accepts the reading ισ, the δεκαισεπολα would not make sense, even if the first part is interpreted as [ενθα]δε (the preposition σε used in modern Greek was still εις at that time). However, the connecting line, the curved feet, the overall resemblance between the two characters, as well as the vowel (*epsilon*) that follows, all point to a *kappa*.

Between the two *kappas*, the fourth discernible letter is an *alpha*, of similar type with the other two *alphas* attested further in the same line – the tenth and the twelfth visible characters. The only difference is that the left bar looks more vertical than usual; nonetheless, this character cannot be mistaken for a *delta*.

After the second *kappa*, in the sixth position, there is an *epsilon*, no longer visible to the naked eye but detectable with the help of the 3D laser scanning photo (fig. 14: 3, 4). It is similar to the *epsilon* attested previously in the same line: same angles and curved ending of the lower tip.

The next, seventh character, already noted by previous scholars, is a *pi*. The left vertical line is longer than the right, and the horizontal bar has been scratched slightly diagonally, falling from left to right. There are no serifs visible, only plain, straight lines.

The *pi* is followed by what looks like an *omicron*. Although this letter placed here fits perfectly with the previous and following ones to form a word, one cannot but notice the unusual shape of this character: its left half is not curving, but rather seems to be a vertical, straight line, whose lower part ends projecting leftwards; another straight line, this time horizontal, is attached to the lower – curving – part of the character. Moreover, the vertical line on the left is projected a little higher than the letter’s upper curve, and it ends with a serif to the left, making the character similar to the Old Cyrillic letter *yer* – strong (on this letter, see also below, about the chronology).³ It must be noted, however, that despite the existence of several bilingual inscriptions with text in Greek and Bulgarian (written in Cyrillic), so far no Greek text in Greek mixed with Cyrillic characters has been discovered. For this reason, it seems that it is an *omicron*, and that the character’s shape is not circular due to the scribe’s slipping hand.

The ninth visible character can be confused for an *alpha* when seen with naked eye, but is in fact a *lambda*, as the RTI image convincingly shows. It has a standard form, without serifs or other special features.

Then follows an *alpha*, again of a common type.

After this *alpha* follows something that has been interpreted as a *delta*. In fact, what we see is a break on the stone, roughly in the shape of a standard *delta*, and not the letter *delta* itself (the absence of a letter here has been already noted by Stamen Mihailov 1998, 5). Moreover, judging by the neighbouring letters *alpha* and *lambda*, which have a shape similar to the standard *delta*, their lines are stretched much more than the damaged area, meaning either the *delta* was too small compared to the other letters, or it was not a *delta*. Last but not least, even if the spot was occupied by a character that was a *delta*, it should have been similar to the one attested previously – the first visible letter in the same line (see above). The use of two different *alphas*, *betas* or *kappas*, for example, in one and the same inscription would not be a surprise, because of the close similarity between the types of characters; but using two very different *deltas* (if assumed that the first visible letter of this inscription is certainly a *delta*), such as the standard type and the rare one that resembles an upside-down Greek *pi*, is rather unlikely.

³Despite the fact that the overall image of the text shows that it is in Greek and, therefore, the letter is *omicron*, it is worth commenting on this peculiar character: if the word is correctly read and understood as $\pi\omicron\lambda<\lambda>\acute{\alpha}$, then the – hypothetical – spelling ΠΒΛΑ instead of ΠΟΛΑ might be yet another indication (aside from the *delta* mentioned above) that the person who scratched this text was perhaps not a Greek: it is possible that the phone /o/ was written with a (strong) *yer*. This may happen for several reasons, for example because the receiver heard the word pronounced like $\pi\omicron\lambda(\lambda)\acute{\alpha}$. Unstressed /o/ is pronounced /u/ in most idioms of North and many of Central Greece. To my knowledge, there is no systematic study on evidence of this change in everyday speech through inscriptions and manuscripts (P. C.); among the earliest medieval literary sources is the 15th c. manuscript of the so-called Chronicle of Ioannina, where the scribe has repeatedly written ΟΥ instead of Ο or Ω – see: Osswald 2021, 25. This phenomenon is attested already in Late Antiquity, for example the name Dometius/Domitius appears both as ΔΟΥΜΕΤΙΟC and ΔΟΜΗΤΙΟC in inscriptions from Nikopolis, but scholars attributed the different spellings to the meter used in these texts – see: Χαλκιά 2017, 683). In Proto-Bulgarian inscriptions, this phenomenon is attested, according to Veselin Beshevliev, in a couple of nouns, as well as in some Bulgar names and titles (Бешевлиев 1926, 385 – 386; Бешевлиев 1992, 51, 60 – 61). A second example of an *omicron* resembling a *yer* is attested in the word ΔΟΥΛΩ in a Greek inscription in Murfatlar church B4. It is possible that the person initially wanted to write either a *yer* or a Greek ΟΥ ligature, to which he then added the *upsilon* (see Барня 1962, 314 – 315, fig. 22; Barnea, Stefanescu 1971, 218, fig. 65; Barnea 1981, 68, plate 20. Barnea did not notice the letter’s shape).

Although the lines of the letters after the damaged spot are visible, they are so close to each other that it is difficult to tell the characters apart. The only clearly detectable letter is an *alpha* in the twelfth position. Its left edge is almost touching the eleventh character which resembles a Cyrillic *che*, or, more likely, a *tau* or *upsilon* (and less likely a *rho*), or even a ligature of two letters. Be that as it may, the main, vertical line of this character or ligature stretches far too long downwards. There is no satisfactory explanation for this eleventh character (or ligature). If it is a *tau*, the horizontal line is not straight at all, and does not match any other forms of *tau* from inscriptions and graffiti in Bulgaria; if it is an *upsilon*, it certainly does not resemble the *upsilon* in ΝΕΓΥΝ, which suggests it was scratched by a different hand. Again, this form of *upsilon* is not attested elsewhere. In fact, this character's shape resembles the Cyrillic *che* from inscriptions of that era, but its place here would not make sense (see also above, the comments on the Cyrillic *yer*).

After the *alpha*, there is a vertical line which could or could not be attached to a barely visible circle around it (detectable only with RTI photos), thus forming the thirteenth character, a *phi*, or, less likely, a *iota*, if one does not consider the circle. This character has been traditionally perceived in literature to be a *tau* or a *gamma*, because of the upper part of the circle which was thought to be a horizontal line.

Identification of the fourteenth visible letter in this line is beyond dispute: it is an *omicron*. As for the last two, the first could be a *sigma* or, perhaps, a *iota* scratched with curved, not straight line, and the second is again a *sigma* (visible mostly in the high quality RTI photos).

The sequence of these letters gives two certain words, one almost certain (either this exact word or a composite), and several characters that cannot be interpreted without speculation.

The first four legible characters give the almost certain word: δέκα ("ten") (see also Mihailov 1998, 3). It is possible, of course, that this is only the second part of a composite word containing the numeral δέκα, for example ἑνδεκα ("eleven"), δώδεκα ("twelve"), πεντεκαίδεκα ("fifteen"). Numerals appear quite often in early Bulgarian inscriptions, for instance, in the inventory lists of equipment (Бешевлиев 1992, 193 – 205, where, however, numerals are indicated with Greek digits – letters) and other official inscriptions (Бешевлиев 1992, 207 ff., No. 56; 215 ff., No. 57, where they are either indicated with Greek digits, or written in full), as well as in texts related to calendars and time-keeping (for example, Бешевлиев 1992, No. 91, with commentary).

Next, the letters *kappa* and *epsilon* form the conjunction κε – a misspelled καὶ ("and") – a very common mistake encountered even in the works of experienced scribes, throughout the Middle Ages.

The following four letters give the word πολλὰ ("many", "numerous"), a reading with which all scholars agree so far. This word is repeatedly attested in Proto-Bulgarian inscriptions spelled with one *lambda*, instead of πολλὰ (Бешевлиев 1992, Nos. 14.41, 41.6, and also 14.1, 57.20). There is one circumstance, however, that deserves attention: in the other Proto-Bulgarian inscriptions, πολλὰ matches nouns or names and, moreover, as Jannaris explained (Jannaris 1897, 151; cited by Бешевлиев 1992, 252), πολλὰ can also match with adverbs; the scholars who tried to interpret the inscription on the Pliska stone examined here matched πολλὰ with an adjective. This word could also be a substantivized adjective, but since the context remains unknown it is not possible to define its use within a sentence.

Be that as it may, neither the following characters form the word δυνατός (a word suggested by Beshevliev and Ovcharov), nor it is clear what word was written there. There is no *delta* or *nu*, and the reading of some of the other characters is still questionable. The reading of the word τάφος

(“tomb”, “grave”, in singular, nominative) or τάφοις (in plural, dative) is possible, but tentative. Alternatively – and most likely –, the *omicron* is followed by two *sigmas*, probably belonging to two different words. After the last visible *sigma*, there are traces of at least two more letters: one vertical line (*hasta*) and part of what could be an *omicron*. It is not possible to connect them to the visible letters, because this part of the stone is very damaged and nothing else can be seen.

On the three one-word captions:

ΠΟΥΜΙΡ / ΝΕΓΥΝ / ΠΕΤΡΟΣ

Poumir / Negyn / Petros

Apart from the continuous text in the upper part of the stone block, there are three more words inscribed in different parts of the surface, surrounding the drawings. These have generally been accepted by scholars to be proper names – Poumir, Negyn, Petros.

Stanchev (Станчев 1955, 215) assumed that the “name” Poumir corresponds to the (allegedly) standing figure to the left, and the name Petros to the central figure of a horse-rider. According to the same author, both Poumir and Petros were inhabitants of Pliska and the text above was about them and/or their deeds. A similar interpretation was provided by Stamen Mihailov, who assumed that the depicted figures show Boris I (or someone close to him) and his enemies within the state. In general, all scholars have linked in one way or another the figures on the stone with the names (and the text above them). Only Rasho Rashev suggested that not all the graffiti depicted on this stone belong to one and the same layer (Рашев 2008, 228). Pavel Georgiev, on the other hand, proposed the reading KOYMIP and suggested that this is not a proper name, but a noun meaning “idol” (Георгиев 1991, 204). The summarization of the data from RTI and laser scanning shows clearly, however, that the first letter from the word should be read as a *pi*, since its vertical right *hasta* is not a result of “an accidental sliding of the sharp tool” and / or a natural crevice of the stone (compare: Георгиев 1991, 202). Against these arguments is the uniform depth of the incision, as well as the fact that the *hasta* in question, specifically in its upper part, connects at a right angle with the horizontal bar of the letter, and that can hardly be accidental (fig. 12: 1, 3, 4; fig. 14: 4).⁴

The personal name Petros suggests a Christian background. It is commonly attested in medieval Bulgaria, and its spreading is, perhaps, related to the popularity of the Apostle’s figure among the newly converted. Alternatively, it could be related to the activity of Papal missions in the country. Finally, it is possible that this Petros was a Christian (Byzantine, Bulgar or other), who visited Pliska either before or after the Christianisation of the Bulgars. A different meaning of the word “petros” in this stone was put forward by Georgiev, who does not consider it a proper name (Георгиев 2018, 42).

The word Poumir (with the OY written in ligature, which was very common) is a hapax: it is not attested in any other source, at least not in a spelling that can be linked to it. It is, most likely, a personal name of Turkic origin, but due to the lack of a parallel within a context, which would allow scholars to interpret it, it might as well have been a noun. Although several Proto-Bulgarian

⁴If Georgiev’s reading, who considered the *pi* to be a *gamma*-shaped part of a *kappa*, was correct, one might suggest yet another, more plausible interpretation of this word: with the first letter perceived not as a *pi* but as a *gamma*, the word reads ΓΟΥΜΙΡ. Goumir could have been a personal name, and for this there is direct evidence of a Byzantine style lead seal with Christian elements and invocation, issued by a certain Khoumer (ΧΟΥΜΗΡ) in the first half of the 8th c. (Zacos, Vegler 1972, 1701, No. 3010. On the possible etymologies of this name see: Симеонов 2008, 188). Nevertheless, since the first letter is a *pi*, the reading Poumir is beyond doubt.

names show similarities to this one (e.g. the ending), the exact provenance and / or etymology of this name should be noted with a question mark until new evidence is brought forward⁵ (see also Alev 1983, 105, who mentioned this name, as well as Negyn, as still unexplained ones).

The next word or name to be discussed is ΝΕΓΥΝ. The new photographic documentation revealed that the *nu* was followed by a letter which looks like yet another *nu*, of which only the left vertical and diagonal hastas are visible. It is of exactly the same size as the letters before it, but since the rest of the word or text is missing, one cannot say whether this letter was part of ΝΕΓΥΝ or a following word. Due to this uncertainty, the reading should be restrained to ΝΕΓΥΝ without considering the second *nu*.

The word or name ΝΕΓΥΝ was considered by Stancho Stanchev (Станчев 1955, 216 – 217) to be the last part of the text inscribed at the top of the stone, while the other two “names” (Poumir and Petros) refer to the figures. According to all other scholars, all three names should be linked to the inscription. In fact, the characters forming the word or name ΝΕΓΥΝ have been carved with a different instrument (or at least one with a thicker point, which is visible even to the naked eye) compared to the others on this stone. Unfortunately, ΝΕΓΥΝ contains only one letter – the *epsilon* – which is repeated in another word. Comparison of the *epsilons* shows three different types: the two used in the long text are very similar to each other, while the ones used in ΝΕΓΥΝ and ΠΕΤΡΟΣ vary. Moreover, if the character in the upper line is an *upsilon*, then it differs considerably from the form of the *upsilon* in ΝΕΓΥΝ. Similarly, if it is a *tau*, it varies from the form of the *tau* in ΠΕΤΡΟΣ. This evidence, along with the fact that ΝΕΓΥΝ has been written with another instrument, as well as the large size of the letters compared to all the others on this block, point to the conclusion that, most likely, the word ΝΕΓΥΝ was written by a different person. It is not clear whether it was written at a different time, or whether it is related to the other words or the images.

There is little doubt that the word ΝΕΓΥΝ – again a hapax – is a personal name, probably of Turkic origin; alternatively, it could be a noun (it was considered a noun by Георгиев 1991, 204 – 205. On the use of *upsilon* for /ou/ and the sound between “i” and “u” in Greek in the middle period, see Lauritzen 2009). Stanchev was the first to associate the initial letters NE- with the beginning of other names such as ΝΕΒΟΥΛΟΣ, ΝΕΑΝΤΖΗC etc. (Станчев 1955, 217; the Bulgarian / Turkic etymology and origin of some of these names has been contested with serious arguments in scholarly literature, but for the sake of brevity we shall not discuss it further here).

In the high quality RTI photos of the stone, it becomes evident that two straight lines have been added to the *gamma*, connecting and making it look like a rectangle. These lines have been scratched with a very thin instrument. Moreover, on top of the same character, a cross has been added, this time with a thicker instrument. It remains unknown why one would decide to insert a Christian element in this name (or noun). If it was the person who carved the word Negyn, then the scratches would have been made with the same instrument, unless the thinner lines suggest that the letter *gamma* should remain recognizable. The same applies to the cross, which was carved with a thick instrument, yet different from the one used for the character *gamma* and the rest of the letters.

The research team are unaware of the exact original place of this block and the density of graffiti around it. If it was part of a wall full of graffiti, it is not impossible that somebody simply wrote their name wherever there was free space. This, most likely, seems to be the case with ΝΕΓΥΝ, considering the way it clearly stands out from the other writings. The name Petros might also have been

⁵Khazar names (aside from Germanic and Slavic) also feature endings in -ir. It is important to consider the possibility that Bulgar and Khazar may belong to the same group of languages, and the appearance of this name may suggest there were shared names.

added by yet another person because of the different lettering, especially the *epsilon* (and, perhaps, the Christian name). This, however, is not so clear in the case of ΠΟΥΜΙΡ, because of the letters used – the form of the *pi* is very simple and common in that period, and for this reason it cannot help to distinguish a different hand from the one that inscribed the upper continuous text.

Interpretation

Last but not least, some remarks on the date of the textual graffiti in question:

Stancho Stanchev dated the figures (and the text) on the block to the 9th c., possibly in the first half (Станчев 1955, 217), a view adopted by later scholars (e.g. Георгиев 1991, 198. See also: Karadimitrova 2017, 113). The date provided by Stanchev is based on the evidence of archaeology: this type of scene with horse-riders could have been drawn on a wall of the palaces in the citadel of Pliska. Since the final stage of monumental construction in Pliska is dated in the first half of the 9th c., the graffiti should belong to this same period. However, recent research has shown that this is not the case: this type of stone may not have come from a monumental palace building of the citadel. One argument against this is the considerably smaller size of the block as compared to those from the superstructure of the Small Palace, the Small *kapishte* or Krums's Palace and the Throne Hall. It is highly unlikely for it to originate from the wall of the Citadel as well, as it was thoroughly made of bricks and so far there is no data for dismantling its stone plinth. It is not to be excluded that the primary location of the block was the rows of rooms, north of the Bolyar residence (fig. 1: 3), which are close to the north of the tripartite building excavated by Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov). Epigraphic criteria and lettering do not allow for a precise date: the types of characters featured on the block are attested in the first half of the 9th c., but also in the second half, as well as in the early 10th c. A similar possible dating – in the broad borders of the 10th century – was suggested also by the discoverer, Stancho Stanchev (Vaklinov), based on some "Magyar" analogies from the decoration of the chest piece of the horse in the centre, as well as the strongly curved outwards back frame of the saddle (Станчев 1955, 212, 214). Graffiti and inscriptions in Greek language (or Bulgarian written with Greek characters) appear throughout this period. Nonetheless, there is at least one element on the stone that might be dated, even approximately: the Christian element – the cross (and, perhaps, the name Petros). If one accepts that Negyn and Poumir are personal names, then they could have been in use by Bulgars either before or after the Christianisation; the name Petros, though, suggests Christian background.⁶ This name – Petros – is attested several times in graffiti and other inscriptions from Pliska and Ravna, usually on stones with other textual and pictorial graffiti directly or indirectly related to Christianity (a study of this material is under preparation). For this reason, it is difficult to explain how and why the name Petros would be included in a pre- or non-Christian graffiti, unless this person – a Christian – happened to be in Pliska, for whatever reason, before the Christianisation of the Bulgars.

In fact, as mentioned above, there can be certain doubts whether the name Petros is related to the rest of the graffiti on the stone, either textual or visual: aside from the lettering and the Christian element, the name Petros has been inscribed over a presumably older, faded graffiti of a horse, which was following the horse and the shielded horse-rider at the centre. If the name Petros was in anyway associated to the horses and/or the human figures, it would have been placed in a clean, empty area of the stone, perhaps with smaller letters, like the name Poumir. The fact that it is on top of a faintly seen horse means that the pictorial graffiti had already started fading, thus creating the area for more graffiti; the person who added Petros (perhaps himself?) took the opportunity and

⁶ In Mihailov 1998, 4, 6, Petros is mentioned as being of Slavic origin. There is nothing to suggest such an assumption.

scratched the name. Besides, the half-preserved figure of yet another horse under the name Petros shows that, most probably, the entire scene with horses and horse riders occupied a larger area than the one preserved today.

The second Christian element on this stone is the cross added on top of the *gamma* in Negyn. Again, the time of its appearance on the block cannot be dated for certain but more probably after the Christianisation of Bulgaria. It could not have been carved while the stone was upside down, and it must have been added after the word Negyn was inscribed (dated probably after the pictorial graffiti), but before the final use of the stone (see also below).⁷

The pictorial graffiti and the textual graffiti on the stone under examination are not necessarily connected. It is possible that the scene with the horse riders predated the continuous text above and the names and/or nouns scratched between the figures. Besides, the pictorial graffiti must have been made on the stone before any accompanying text or captions were added, even if they were related to the images. In this way, by differentiating the visual from the textual, it is easier to accept the date which would otherwise not make sense (Rashev also wrote about two different layers of graffiti on this stone. See: Пашев 2008, 227 – 228, 304). Moreover, the textual graffiti on the stone seem to be of more than one chronological layers, meaning they were scratched with different instruments, at different times, most probably by different people. Still, there are some questions left to be answered: if the scene with the horse-riders was carved when the stone was in its original position, possibly on the wall of a monumental building,⁸ where was this stone placed when other people scratched the text and the names? And when did this happen? According to Stancho Vakinov, the stone was discovered placed upside down, but still the graffiti were facing outwards, so they were visible. If the stone was upside down, it is impossible that anyone would have written any words there. And since it is very likely that the text was put there after the stone was moved from its very original position, it means that between the original position and the place where it was discovered, it was used somewhere else, perhaps even multiple times (see also: Mihailov 1998, 3). This is certainly a hypothesis worth exploring, but challenging to prove, due to the lack of information on the use and re-use of this kind of stones in general, and, of course, of this exact stone in Pliska.

The updates and visualisations obtained in the latest photographic documentation of the drawings and inscriptions on the limestone block found in 1948 north of the Citadel in Pliska are a first step towards the promulgation of the results from the documentation of the graffiti drawings and inscriptions from the Round Stone Platform. The application of contemporary techniques for photographic and graphic documentation presented here allows an entirely new approach in the work with graffiti drawings and epigraphic monuments. Despite the fact that so far they have remained beyond the periphery of “superior” academia, their significance will increase from now on. Certainly, the greatest challenge still remains the goal of the research team – a full report of the graffiti from the Round Stone Platform and their meaning for the clarification of the relative chronology of the structures north of Pliska’s Citadel, and how the stone platform corresponds to them.

⁷Yet another element that potentially perplexes the date of this graffiti, or at least the upper text line, is the character Ъ, which – if read correctly – means that the inscription could not have been placed on the stone before the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet. It must be admitted, though, that even in high quality photos, the exact form of this character is not certain and, more likely, it is an imperfect *omicron*.

⁸Although the stone’s and the figures’ small size does not indicate that this pictorial graffiti – even partially preserved today – was itself of a monumental or official character.

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„ХАНЪТ“ И НЕГОВИТЕ „КУМИРИ“ (НОВИ ДЕТАЙЛИ ОТ ЗАСНЕМАНЕТО НА ГРАФИТИ ОТ РАЗКОПКИ НА СТАНЧО ВАКЛИНОВ СЕВЕРНО ОТ ЦИТАДЕЛАТА В ПЛИСКА)

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Настоящата статия е първа в публикационната програма по оповестяването на резултатите от научноизследователския проект „Кръглата каменна площадка в Плиска: строителни материали, графити, знаци и надписи“. Целта ѝ е да представи методиката и съвременните техники за документиране на графити, както и резултатите от тяхното приложение. Същите техники бяха използвани освен при заснемането на рисунки, надписи, фрагменти от стенописи (общо 72) от площадката в Плиска, още и при документирането на сравнителната база на нашето изследване – графитите от манастирите в Равна, община Провадия и Басараби-Мурфатлар (Базилики № 1 – 4, Галерия Е), област Констанца, Република Румъния. Броят на заснетите по проекта паметници е над 300.

Изборът на рисунката-графит с надписи от варовиковия блок, намерен северно от Цитаделата в Плиска, за онагледяване на приетата от екипа методика на документиране, не е случаен. От една страна, този графит е сред най-разпознаваемите за широката научна аудитория и в известна степен една от емблемите на българската „езическа“ култура, от друга – той, също както и графитите от блоковете от Кръглата каменна площадка, е вграден – вторично или третично – като сполия в сграда, разположена в западната периферия на площадката. Блокът е намерен през 1948 г. от Станчо Станчев (Ваклинов) при проучването на „гражданска“ постройка с верижен план, с три помещения, „североизточно от Малкия дворец“ (обр. 1, обр. 2: 2).

Основна причина за няколко „прочита“ на тази така богата на детайли сцена са липсващите или слабо различни подробности по повърхността на камъка, особено в лявата му половина. За периода от откриването на паметника преди около 75 години досега са осъществени две заснемания, първото от които е извършено от неговия откривател (обр. 3: 1). През 1991 г. Павел Георгиев прави второ заснемане (обр. 3: 2) и именно то му дава основание за ново тълкуване, различно от това на

откривателя. Според Павел Георгиев ключова за осмислянето на рисунката е думата, врязана между правата човешка фигура вляво и ездача, която той разчита като КОУМІР, вместо ПОУМІР, какъвто е прочитът на Ваклинов и Бешевлиев. Оттук цялата сцена се интерпретира като момент от церемония, свързана с „добре известния у турците“ култ към предците. В така представената сцена правата фигура се идентифицира като статуя на идол, символизиращ някои или повече от мъртвите предци (Георгиев 1991, 205).

Извършеното от екипа по проекта заснемане на паметника се явява трето поред (обр. 4). То се осъществи през март 2022 г., непосредствено след последното почистване и консервация във връзка с включването на рисунката в изложбата „Конните номади в Европа“ (Шалабург, Австрия, 09.04 – 06.11.2022 г.). Целта беше да се съпоставят няколко техники, от които да се избере максимално ефективната, тоест тази, в която субективното зрително възприятие е сведено до минимум и същевременно такава, която отчита най-много детайли, останали незабелязани при изследователското наблюдение в последните десетилетия. Избраните техники са рефлексно-преобразователна фотография (RTI) и 3D лазерно сканиране, чиито резултати, както се оказа при обработката на данните, са отлично допълващи се един друг.

RTI представлява серия от стандартни кадри на даден обект, всеки един заснет с помощта на стационарна камера и насочен светлинен поток. Обектът трябва да е осветен от поне 24 (в нашия случай те са 69) равномерно разпределени позиции, които се онагледяват чрез т. нар. „Карта на нормалите“. Тя, съответно, с помощта на софтуера RTI Viewer и компютърно симулирани светлинни източници и филтри може да бъде манипулирана чрез светлинните позиции и отражения върху изследвания обект, откроявайки различни участъци от повърхността. На финала векторното графично изображение се изчертава върху „Картата на нормалите“ и избраните изгледи от RTI Viewer, които всъщност служат за негова подложка и по този начин отразяват обективното състояние на паметника.

Лазерното сканиране се осъществи с помощта на последно поколение лазерни скенери с прецизност до 0,025 мм и с резолюция от 0,050 мм. Уредът работи със 7 лазерни кръста и една допълнителна лазерна линия. Визуалното изследване на 3D модела (обр. 11, 12) ясно показва наличието на изображения и графични детайли, които не са отбелязани в досегашните публикации. За да бъдат потвърдени и за да се улесни сравнението с резултатите от RTI, се извърши т. нар. сегментация. Тя представлява математически алгоритъм за разпознаване на образи от дадено по-сложно изображение. 3D сегментацията се опира на математически анализ на триизмерни бази данни вместо на двуизмерно фотографско изображение. Процесът позволява да бъдат „картографирани“ дълбочините на изкуствените врязвания по повърхността, като за целта е необходим 3D облак от точки с висока резолюция, върху който може да бъде монтирана допълнителна равнина, която да служи като референтна точка за измерване на разстояния между двете повърхности (Longo 2016, 30).

Новите подробности от последното документиране на графита биха могли да се разделят така: една напълно неизвестна фигура и детайли към вече известните персонажи, както и буквени знаци, повечето от които са пред, над и зад фигурата на ездача.

Най-проблематичните и трудни за идентификация детайли от предходните заснемания от 1955 и 1991 г. изглеждат по този начин, сравнени с резултатите от 3D сканирането и RTI – обр. 3: 3, обр. 12. Интерпретираните като втора фигура на „кумир“ врязвания в лявата половина на блока представляват всъщност глава, шия и част от гърдите на кон. Правата човешка фигура – т. нар. първи кумир, представлява изображение на воин с предпазно въоръжение, представен анфас, с несъразмерни пропорции, особено на торса. Части от горната половина на тялото му са покрити с шлем. Начинът, по който той е предаден, предполага, че е бил от две части – твърда и пластична. Напълно нов детайл от последното заснемане е коланът (обр. 3: 3, обр. 9, обр. 12). Той обхваща плътно кръста и се закопчава с правоъгълна тока, значително по-широка от ремъка. Симетрично един на друг – вдясно и вляво – към колана са закрепени кания на меч (или сабя) и еднолезвиен нож, но би било прибързано да се твърди дали те възпроизвеждат конкретно оръжие, защото са нарисувани твърде схематично и без някои типопределящи характеристики, каквито са ръкохватката, предпазителят и върхът на клина.

Блокът съдържа и текстови графити в пет различни зони над и между рисунките. При четири от

тях буквите са врязани с дебел остър инструмент и са по-едри по размер, в петата буквите са от фини линии и нечетими. Четирите видими текста са: гръцки надпис в един ред в горната част на блока със следи от отчупен ред над него и три единични думи. Предложеното ново четене на едноредовия текст след визуализацията чрез RTI и лазерното сканиране (обр. 14: 3, 4): [...]ΔΕΚΑΚΕΠΟΛΑ[.Τ или Υ] Α[Φ или Ι]Ο[С или Ι]С[...] – "[...] десети много... [...]". Поредицата налични букви дава числителното *δέκα* (десет) или негово производно; съюза *κε* – погрешно изписано *κι* (и); наречието *πολλή*, вместо *πολλά* (много). Възможно, но несигурно е разчитането на *τάφος* (гробница, гроб в им. падеж, ед.ч.) или *τάφοις* (дат. падеж, мн.ч.).

Трите единични думи се разчитат, както следва: ΠΟΥΜΙΡ / ΝΕΓΥΝ / ΠΕΤΡΟΣ – Пумир / Негин / Петрос. Личното име Петрос предполага християнско влияние. Пумир е хапакс и вероятно представлява лично име с тюркски корени. Третата дума или име, отново хапакс и навярно също от тюркски произход, е Негин. След нея се наблюдава още една буква Ν (?), възможно част от следваща дума. Името (?) е врязано с инструмент с по-дебел връх. Две прави фини линии са добавени към гамата, оформяйки правоъгълник. Върху същата буква е добавен и кръст с по-груб инструмент.

Станчо Станчев (Ваклинов) датира паметника в първата половина на IX в., като мнението му е възприето и от други. Заснемането показва, че епиграфските данни не позволяват прецизна датировка, а християнските елементи (Петрос, кръст) се датират по-късно от предложената епоха. Рисунките и надписите не са непременно свързани. Възможно е сцената с конниците да е по-ранна. Надписите от своя страна са врязани с различни инструменти, по различно време и вероятно от различни хора.

Ключови думи: Плиска, графити, съвременни техники на документиране