

Research report – Samothrace 2004

Samothrace - Sacred island of the »Great Mother«

In regard of our research the Greek island Samothrace is of great importance, because on account of the ancient tradition the famous sanctuary on this island was founded by the Amazon queen Myrine. Furthermore, it was our concern to investigate if there exist parallels to the southern neighboring island Lemnos - a stronghold of Bronze Age matriarchal civilization.

Samothrace is situated in the northeastern Aegean sea between the island Lemnos and the Greek mainland (Eastern Thrace). The island stretches about 21 km in length and about 12 km in width. For the most part Samothrace is mountainous. The highest peak is the huge Fengari with 1611 meters above sea level. There are numerous springs in the mountains, and there are some nice water-falls.

Mythology:

Diodor (III,55) gives us following account in connection with the conquest campaign of the Libyan Amazons under their queen Myrine:

And selecting in the territory which she had won by arms sites well suited for the founding of cities, she built a considerable number of them and founded one which bore her own name, but the others she named after the women who held the most important commands, such as Cyme, Pitana, and Priene. These, then, are the cities she settled along the sea, but others, and a larger number, she planted in the regions stretching towards the interior. She seized also some of the islands, and Lesbos in particular, on which she founded the city of Mitylene, which was named after her sister who took part in the campaign. After that, while subduing some of the rest of the islands, she was caught in a storm, and after she had offered up prayers for her safety to the Mother of the Gods, she was carried to one of the uninhabited islands; this island, in obedience to a vision which she beheld in her dreams, she made sacred to this goddess, and set up altars there and offered magnificent sacrifices. She also gave it the name of Samothrace, which means, when translated into Greek, 'Sacred Island'.

Kabiroi sanctuary and Mysteries:

Throughout the whole antiquity Samothrace was famous for its Kabiroi sanctuary and the associated Mysteries.



The Hieron – the main temple of the Kabiroi sanctuary

It was forbidden for the adepts to tell about the content of the Mysteries and the details of the proceedings. That is why the following outline bases on scanty sources:

The name »Kabiroi« comes from the Semitic Kabir, pl. Kabirim, which means the »Almighty«.

The Kabiroi were simply called »Gods« or »Great Gods«. Only one literary source of the Hellenistic period gives the names of the Samothracian Kabiroi, apparently the secret names of the Great Gods: Axieros, Axiokersa, Axiokersos and Kasmilos (Kadmilos). The Greeks identified them with Demeter, Persephone, Hades and Hermes, and they were associated with death and afterlife.

Axieros (or Axiokersa), the »Great Mother« was the major figure of the cult and very similar to Kybele of Asia Minor. The fourth Kabiros, Kasmilos or Kadmilos, was an ithyphallic fertility god attached to the Great Mother, and was possibly her subordinate spouse. The three god names Axieros, Axiokersa, Axiokersos presumably represent the three aspects of the »Great Mother«, which symbolize the cycle of life - the virgin goddess as huntress and warrior woman, the dominating mother goddess in the prime of life, and the old goddess associated with death.

The »Great Mother« was the main goddess of matriarchy – that's that level of civilization where women had the predominating position in society. The Amazons represent the last, extreme phase of matriarchy. To save their unique form of civilization which became more and more threatened by neighboring patriarchal tribes they chose a society without men which they defended - very successfully - with warlike means.

Their goddess - the »Great Mother« was worshipped at sacred rocks, where sacrifices were brought to her.

In this respect there are obvious parallels to the Amazons of Lemnos, but also to the Thermodon Amazons, where numerous sacred rock monuments have been discovered (e.g. the sacred hill of

Richa Nera on Lemnos, and the sacred rock on the Amazon island Giresun Adasi in the Black Sea which is still a place of worship).

Alongside the worship of sacred rocks sacred springs were important. In Therma at the Samothracian north coast which is famous for its hot sulfur springs there was a sacred spring (ayiasma), the waters of which were believed to possess healing powers.

On Lemnos at the church Panagia Charalampos near the village Plaka there is a sacred spring which is still used today.

Furthermore, there is an interesting detail. There have been found some inscriptions in Greek characters of an unknown language. This was the lingua sacra (sacred language) of the Samothracian Mysteries. It is not clear if it was the language of the matriarchal pre-inhabitants or that of the later immigrated Pelasgians.

Archaeology:

In Mikro Vouni - in the fertile southwestern part of the island, there was discovered a Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement which was inhabited nearly without break from the 6th millennium BC until about 1700 BC. Only between the Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age there exists a gap. At the beginning of the Early Bronze Age the place was resettled by immigrants. This incident can easily be connected with the mythological tradition (see above).

When the Amazon queen Myrine was carried to Samothrace the island shall have been uninhabited. This perfectly conforms with the settlement gap between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Due to this fact the resettlement can be connected with the conquest campaign of the Amazon queen Myrine which chronologically fits into the beginning of the third millennium BC.

So owing to the archaeological research results combined with the mythological tradition we can assume that after the conquest of Asia Minor and of the Aegean islands Lemnos and Lesbos the Amazons had been cast to Samothrace by a storm. To mark her saving the Amazon queen Myrine founded a sanctuary dedicated to the »Great Mother« on this uninhabited island. At this point we are again on secure historical ground, for Samothrace was famous for this sanctuary throughout the antiquity till the beginning of Christianity.

In the Early Bronze Age there existed a highly developed culture on the neighboring island Lemnos with its flourishing cities Poliochni and Myrina.

In Mikro Vouni there has been unearthed pottery which is very similar to pieces found on Lemnos. It clearly proves that these islands had an identical culture.



Early Bronze Age face vase



Vase with incisions

Amazingly, there have been found Minoan sealings (19th/18th century BC) on Samothrace - an obvious hint that this island had connections with that women predominated culture of Crete. One sealing shows the double axe, a symbol which is characteristic for Bronze Age Crete but also for the classical Amazons.



Sealing with double axe

About 1700 BC Mikro Vouni had been abandoned - a further remarkable parallel to Lemnos, where Poliochni had been abandoned at the same time.

I associate this incident with the partial emigration of the matriarchal inhabitants to the much safer region at the Thermodon in the remote part of northern Anatolia. (-> the classical Amazons at the Thermodon river).

In the north of Samothrace at Palaiopolis there are the ruins of the famous Kabiroi sanctuary (see above about this cult).

The impressive monuments you see today - the Hieron, the Rotunda of Arsinoe II, were for the most part erected in the Hellenistic period (400 - 100 BC), but we focus our research on those traces which belong to an earlier period - the time before the Greek immigration.

At first, the sacred rock is of great importance, which is a tall blue-green porphyry in the center of the sanctuary near the foundations of the Rotunda of Arsinoe II.



Sacred stone in the Kabiroi sanctuary

This rock has never been overbuilt during the long period the sanctuary existed, therefore it must have been of prominent religious significance.

The »Great Mother« - the major goddess of matriarchal people - was worshipped at rocks, so it is obvious that this rock dates from the very beginnings of this sanctuary - the Early Bronze Age when Samothrace was inhabited by matriarchal people.

A rather mysterious monument is situated in the western part of the sanctuary. There are two monuments which completely differ to the surrounding buildings.



Sacred stone and sacred niche

The one monument on the left side shows a roughly round monolithic rock - again a blue-green porphyry, which is framed by boulders in a stone wall. Obviously it is again a sacred rock - a monument of the pre-Greek period, dating from the Early Bronze Age (3rd millennium BC).



Sacred stone

Beside of it to the right there is a curious niche in the shape of a Mycenaean tholos tomb.



Sacred niche in the shape of a Mycenaean tholos

Because of its likeness it can be dated to the second half of the second millennium BC - so this construction must have been erected by the Pelasgians who inhabited Samothrace in the time from the end of the matriarchal period (about 1700) till the immigration of the Greeks (about 700 BC).

At this the continuity of the very ancient cult of the »Great Mother« becomes manifest.

On the one hand this goddess was worshipped at shapeless sacred rocks in the tradition of the matriarchal people of the Early Bronze Age, then the cult was continued by the immigrated patriarchal

Pelasgians who built a Late Bronze Age shrine, and later around those monuments the Greek had constructed their temples.

Next to the sanctuary there was the ancient city which was enclosed by a Cyclopean city wall.



Cyclopean city wall



Door of the Cyclopean wall

The excavators suggested that this wall dates from the beginning of the Greek immigration about 700 BC but in my judgement this construction is much older. The structure of the wall consists of huge boulders piled up without mortar. This kind of construction is called the Cyclopean style because of its mighty boulders.

Just in the Early Bronze Age this style was wide-spread, so there are remains of a Cyclopean wall on the hill of Myrina on Lemnos as well as in the Thermodon region in Northern Turkey (Kaledorugu, Kocamanbasi, Akalan).

Beside the large sanctuary of the »Great Mother« in Palaiopolis in the north of Samothrace there have been discovered several small sanctuaries dedicated to her in the south of the island. Characteristic for all of them is the existence of a sacred rock or a rock monument. Near Profitis Ilias at Mandal Panagia there has been discovered such a site. As votive gifts there have been found female figurines - a clear hint to the matriarchal emphasis of this cult. East of this place at the locality of Kerasoudha there has been uncovered an open-air sanctuary with a sacred rock dedicated to the »Great Mother«.

Quite to the south there is the sandy beach of Pachia Ammos. The eastern enclosure of this bay - it is the southernmost spot of Samothrace (Akrotiri Malathriá), there is a peculiar rocky hill. On the top I found a uterus-like shaped artificial niche. Its opening is orientated to the east.



Hill with uterus-like niche at Pachia Ammos



Western enclosure of the bay Pachia Ammos

Up to this place there leads a rock-cut path with ruts.

Here there is an analogy to the rock fortress of Tekkeköy in the Thermodon region, where a broad rock-cut path leads up to the platform.

Also the craggy rock formation at the western enclosure of this bay might be of prehistoric significance, its jagged shape reminds of the sacred hill of Richa Nera on Lemnos.

Historical outline:

The results of archaeological excavations combined with historical facts and the mythological tradition allow to reconstruct following chronological outline:

- 1) In the Neolithic period Samothrace was inhabited by Mediterranean people with presumably matriarchal social order. Archaeologically it is documented by the site of Mikro Vouni.
- 2) About 3000 BC foreign people immigrated into Samothrace. Archaeologically it is documented by the resettlement of the ancient site Mikro Vouni. Historically it can be connected with the conquest campaign of the Amazon queen Myrine and the foundation of the sanctuary for the »Great Mother«. There developed a sophisticated Early Bronze Age culture - in correspondence to the highly developed culture of Lemnos with its flourishing centers Poliochni and Myrina. This 'Golden Age' lasted until about 1700 BC. It was a civilization predominated by women. In the last centuries they became more and more threatened by their patriarchal neighbors so in reaction it came to a partial emigration to the remote region at the Thermodon in Northern Turkey.
- 3) About the middle of the second millennium BC the patriarchal Pelasgians came from the Thracian mainland to Samothrace. On account of the Greek historian Herodotus prior to the Greeks the Pelasgians were the inhabitants of Samothrace. These immigrants adopted the very ancient matriarchal cult of the »Great Mother«.
- 4) About 700 BC the Greeks started to settle on Samothrace. They too adopted the Samothracian cult of the »Great Mother«. At that site where since the matriarchal period the »Great Mother« has been worshipped at sacred rocks they built their famous sanctuary for the »Great Gods« with the main goddess Axieros (Pelasgian name?) respectively Demeter (Greek name) in immediate succession of the matriarchal »Great Mother«. The ancient sacred rocks were still worshipped in the new-built sanctuary. The worship of the »Great Mother« lasted without break till the beginning of the Christian period.

Conclusions:

- The famous Kabiroi sanctuary with its enigmatic Mysteries were dedicated to the »Great Mother« who was the major figure of worship. This goddess has its origin in matriarchal religion. Sacred stones had been the place of worship.
- The archaeological research results corroborates the mythological tradition about the Amazons on Samothrace.
- The early Bronze Age monuments and artifacts are very similar to contemporary finds on the neighboring island Lemnos which had been a stronghold of matriarchal civilization (see the reports about our Lemnos research campaigns). This proves that these two islands had the same culture and the same civilization - a civilization predominated by women.