

The Rupite Protected Area, Bulgaria: Construction of a Landscape

Violeta Periklieva

Assistant professor, the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Moskovska 6A, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

Email: vioperi@yahoo.com

Abstract: By examining the different layers and roles of related actors, this study aims to reveal the ways in which the local people view the locality of Rupite in southwest Bulgaria and in which the landscape is constructed. The construction of Rupite as a landscape and tourist destination is mainly happening from the bottom up, through separate initiatives of different actors rather than following a certain vision or development plan created by the responsible institutions. Rupite is being constructed as a multi-layered landscape of sacred, cultural, historical and natural significance, on which different actors draw to develop various forms of tourism: religious, cultural and historical, spa. The inextricable connection, which was built between the image of the prophetess Vanga and Rupite, leads us to think about the locality as an extremely sacred place. Vanga and the sacrality form the main layer of the landscape. The rest of the elements (cultural, historical and natural) characterising the landscape, on the one hand serve as additional 'evidence' of the sacrality, and on the other, win recognition by means of the image of Vanga. Each actor related to Rupite constructs the place in a specific manner. However, all of them use one main mechanism and draw symbolic capital (and thus legitimise their positions and activities, even though these are often contradictory) from one main source – the image of Vanga.

Keywords: cultural and historical heritage, landscape construction, legitimisation, nature, prophetess Vanga, protected area, Rupite, sacrality, tourism

Introduction

As industrialisation and urbanisation threatened to obliterate both the natural environment and the remnants of the ancient past, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries concerns for their preservation increased in Europe and the United States (Lowenthal 2005: 84). Despite the parallel existence and development of an awareness of the importance of nature and of culture preservation, to a great extent the Western imaginaries of nature and culture and the division between them are still heavily present (see West et al. 2006). From an anthropological perspective, nature and culture are viewed as interconnected and indivisible. People are in a constant relationship with their surroundings. As David Lowenthal says, “[e]very human relic is also a relic of nature and every aspect of nature is altered by human action” (2005: 85). By using the term ‘surroundings’ instead of culturally biased terms such as environment, nature, natural resources, or wilderness when it comes to studying the relationships between people and protected areas, West, Igoe and Brockington merge the two competing understandings of the social construction of nature and of the material nature of the environment: “the world is out there, and we interact with it in ways that reproduce it, often altering it in the process, yet the world only has meaning for us as language-using and symbol-making animals owing to how we intellectually apprehend it” (West et al. 2006: 252). This “world around us that we, as human beings, have material, intellectual, and symbolic access to and that we work to alter and make sense of through our daily actions” is termed surroundings (West et al. 2006: 252). Very close to this definition of surroundings is the concept of landscape as “an active foreground that is created by and creative of life-worlds... a medium that reflects material, spiritual, and cultural activities of communities in the past, present and future... created through... interactions among communities, and between communities and the physical world” (Katić et al. 2018: 9–10), “ever-changing, always in the process of being and becoming” (Tilley & Cameron-Daum 2017: 20). In order to put in a theoretical framework the study of a locality that is a protected area of great historical, cultural and religious significance, I find appropriate to merge these definitions into a working concept of landscape.

The object of this study is the locality of Rupite in southwest Bulgaria. It is located on the right bank of the Struma River, some 10 km from the town of Petrich, on the territory of the village of Rupite. In the course of its development, the landscape of Rupite acquired a multi-layered character, that of great natural, ecological, historical, cultural and religious significance. By examining the different layers, and the roles of related actors, the study aims to reveal the ways in which the local people view Rupite and in which the landscape is constructed.

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2021–2022. The data was mainly collected using in-depth interviews and informal conversations with representatives of the local population and authorities, local and outside eco-activists, ornithologists and botanists. As an additional source, materials from the electronic media and social networks were analysed. The study is also grounded on many years of ethnographic research, which allows me to trace out the processes.

Nature and Its Preservation

Rupite is part of Natura 2000, listed under both the Birds Directive (Directive 79/409/EEC) and the Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC). One-hundred-and-forty-one species of birds have been found in the area, of which 33 are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria, and 63 are of European nature conservation importance. One can find olive tree warbler (*Nippolais olivetorum*), masked shrike (*Lanius nubicus*), lesser grey shrike (*Lanius minor*), and during seasonal migration and wintering the globally endangered pygmy cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*). In order to preserve the characteristic landscape of a natural riparian floodplain forest composed of white poplar, and due to the large concentration of birds during their migration along the traditional Via Aristotelis route, part of the area (20 ha) was declared protected in 1980. Within the frames of Rupite there are hot mineral springs, the area around which has been a sanitary protection zone since 2019. To the west, Rupite borders Kozhuh Hill, a natural landmark since 1962. The area of the hill is characterised by a large diversity of flora and fauna. Rare and endangered plant species included in the Red Book of Bulgaria have been established here: dragon lily (*Dracunculus vulgaris*), crown medick (*Medicago coronata*), hairy ironwort (*Sideritis lanata*), hairy plantain (*Plantago bellardii*), wild almond (*Amygdalus webbii*),

etc. The natural landmark status of Kozhuh is essential for the conservation of rare and protected amphibians and reptiles such as leopard snake (*Elaphe situla*), cat snake (*Telescopus fallax*), worm snake (*Typhlops vermicularis*), four-lined snake (*Elaphe quatuorlineata*), as well as Hermann's tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*) and Greek tortoise (*Testudo graeca*), all of which are included on the IUCN Red List.

As a subject of nature protection, the management and control of Rupite is divided between the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water – Blagoevgrad, which has control over Rupite as part of Natura 2000, over the protected area of Rupite through Petrich State Forestry and over the natural landmark of Kozhuh, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Municipality of Petrich to which the hot mineral springs are granted for management and use by the Basin Directorate, although they are exclusively state property. However, there are no management plans for the protected areas within Rupite, and the exercising of control over them stirs up arguments between the various actors.

According to Petrich State Forestry, which manages the forest in the protected area, and to local ecologists, ornithologists and botanists the negative changes observed in Rupite are due to both natural processes and human influence. Global warming has a key role in the gradual extinction of a number of plant and animal species. The rise in temperatures is one of the main reasons for the drought in the area, which is the most important factor that practically destroys Rupite. The level of the Struma River is currently five metres lower than it was 40 years ago. Subterranean water is declining and animals withdraw. In the past over 100 pairs of bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) have nested in Rupite, while in 2021 only 10-15 pairs were registered. They mainly feed on dragonflies, but there are hardly any of them because there is no water. Due to the drought, the white poplar in the protected area is drying up, and the dried trees attract the local Roma community, whose illegal logging is a major problem for State Forestry officials. At the same time, as a result of the drought, the forest in the protected area is changing and new tree species appear (oak, acacia, ailanthus). One of the few activities the authorities perform to help preserve the protected territories within Rupite, apart from exercising control, is the Restoration of Priority Habitats of Riverside Wet Areas Type in the Protected Area of Rupite along the Birds' Migratory Route, Eco-corridor "Via Aristotelis" project (2012–2014). This project is funded to a total of almost one million leva and is aimed at white poplar afforestation. Regardless of the

experts' opinion that this is futile, white poplars were planted, although in fact they soon died because of the lack of water.

In the last few decades, human intervention has also contributed to change in Rupite. The drop in the level of Struma River is also a consequence of the extraction (according to some, unauthorised) of inert material from the riverbed. The mass year-round access of people (coming by cars and buses), which drives the animals away, is also a problem. The long-legged buzzard, which nested on Kozhuh, has not been seen for two years because there are regularly tourists on the hill. Another threat for Rupite are the domestic cats released into the area, which reproduce very quickly and are already present in the forest. Their population threatens animal species, as cats often kill for pleasure.

Against this background, representatives of the Forestry Department, as well as local ecologists, ornithologists and botanists take a rather interesting position regarding the growing tourism in Rupite: given that the area has already suffered for both natural and human reasons, at least make use of it. That is why they agree with the new construction of a spa centre (see section Hot Mineral Springs and Spa Tourism) and do not see a problem in the large number of people that Vanga's complex generates daily (see section The Cult of Vanga and Religious Tourism).

The Cult of Vanga and Religious Tourism

Today, Rupite is invariably associated with the famous prophetess Baba Vanga. She was born on October 3, 1911 in Strumica, in today's Republic of North Macedonia. A turning point in her life occurred when a 'tornado' allegedly lifted her into the air and threw her into a nearby field. The accident resulted in a gradual loss of sight and acquisition of abilities of clairvoyance. In 1942, Vanga married Dimitar Gushterov from Petrich, Bulgaria, and moved to live with him there. Soon after that she became well known and her house in the town of Petrich turned into a popular destination for a great number of people from across the country and even from abroad who sought help. Thus, Vanga began her 'career' as an alternative religious specialist¹. After Vanga's death in 1996, the process of turning her into a 'folk' or 'living' saint² began in the region of Petrich and soon expanded in the whole country and even abroad.

The development of cult of Vanga has been a fact for quite some time. As the place of this cult stands out the locality of Rupite, which she considered very special, sacred³ and energetic and where she went often to relax and energise. In 1994, Vanga built the St Petka of Bulgaria church, next to which two years later she was laid to rest. With the construction of the church and the subsequent creation of the complex around it, religious and pilgrimage tourism began to develop rapidly in Rupite. The complex was created and is managed by the Vanga Foundation, which became the main 'manager' of the developing cult of the prophethood. It is precisely because of this role that the Foundation is often at the centre of scandals that develop between the various parties claiming a close relationship with Vanga, all pretending to know the 'truth' about her and asserting their right to manage her legacy. Although most of the local people dislike the foundation, only few have a negative attitude towards the complex. According to them, Vanga did not own anything in Rupite. The municipality gave her permission to build a small house where she could rest, and later land for the construction of a church. After the construction of the church, Dimitar Valtchev, the alleged adopted son of Vanga and a prosecutor in Petrich at the time, established the Vanga Foundation, which managed to acquire more land in the area of the church and subsequently built the complex. The method of acquisition of the land is not entirely clear, which gives reason to opponents of the foundation to look for illegal actions on its part. The main part of these opponents are Vanga's relatives and people from her closest circle. They also question the authenticity of the words and 'prophecies' attributed to Vanga by the foundation as these prophecies are often used by the management of the complex to legitimise new initiative. An example is the stone cross consecrated in 2009, built on one of the slopes of Kozhuh, directly opposite the church. The cross was inaugurated on St Petka's Day (October 14), on the fifteenth anniversary of the construction of the church in Rupite. Its construction is considered a fulfilment of a previous instruction from Vanga. According to what Vanga is alleged to have said, during the eruption of the one-time Kozhuh volcano, the lava covered the ancient majestic city of Petra and took the lives of thousands of its inhabitants. In memory of this event, which happened on October 14, St Petka's Day, and the victims, the stone cross was erected. The cross is built in the frames of the Kozhuh natural landmark, outside the borders of the Foundation's property, which raises the question of how permission was obtained for it and to what extent it was in accordance with the prohibition regime. However,

since the construction of the cross is related to Vanga's will, most of the people never questioned the legality of its existence.

Hot Mineral Springs and Spa Tourism

The development of tourism in Rupite is also related to the hot mineral springs (75°C) in the area. For decades the water and the mud have been used by the local people for healing, although only in the last 20 years has the spring become popular with tourists, who arrive with tents and caravans. Due to the large number of people, and because there have been many complaints, in 2020 the Municipality of Petrich began to gradually 'refine' the area around the hot pools, putting up wooden fence, benches, changing cabins, lighting and video surveillance. About 20 years ago, the private Rupite Mineral Baths, which had several pools and a restaurant, was founded directly next to the pools. In 2017, a scandal broke out around the complex because allegedly it was operating illegally, without the necessary permits to use the mineral water and without a land lease. Although in 2018 Petrich's chief architect issued an order for the demolition of the complex, it still functions, and its owner states that by creating the baths he fulfilled Vanga's will.

In 2018, a local businessman got permission to build guesthouses and a spa centre within meters of Vanga's complex and the hot springs. The proposed new construction alarmed environmental organisations and the Save Rupite civil initiative and caused a wave of protests. According to environmentalists, the construction is illegal and threatens the habitats of plant and animal species, as well as the mineral springs. Protesters recall Vanga's alleged warnings that if you build near the mineral water, it will disappear. Despite the complaints before the competent authorities, eventually, in 2021, construction work began. Heavy construction equipment worked all day around the hot pools and enveloped tourists in clouds of dust, but surprisingly, at that very moment, the protests stopped as well as the media coverage. In reality, very few local people had participated in them, and among those present were mainly eco-activists from various organisations. According to the majority of my local respondents (especially those from the village of Rupite), the construction of the spa centre is a positive thing, because it will attract more tourists to the region. They consider the protests to have been initiated outside the local community

by environmental organisations doing someone else's bidding. According to some, behind the protests is a local businessman who also has aspirations to build a similar complex in the area.

Heraclea Sintica and Historical and Cultural Tourism

After the accidental discovery in 2002 in Rupite of a marble stela with an official letter from Emperor Galerius and Caesar Maximian Daya, dating to 308–309, cultural and historical tourism gradually developed in the area. Until this discovery there had been an assumption in science that the Middle Struma region was inhabited in ancient times by the Medes, a Thracian tribe. The city of Petrich was pointed out as the successor of the Thracian settlement of Petra, located by historians and archaeologists in the area of the Rupite village, at the southern foot of Kozhuh Hill. According to this hypothesis, the small Medes settlement was established in the 4th century BC. In the 1st century BC this was conquered by the Romans and turned into a well-fortified Roman city fortress, which guarded the middle course of the Struma River and Rupel Gorge. The city existed until the 6th century AD, when it was burned by the Slavs, after which the remaining living inhabitants left and settled at the foot of Belasitsa Mountain, thus establishing the present-day town of Petrich, the name of which is believed to have been formed by adding to the old name Petra the Slavic ending “-ich” (Milchev 1960: 362; Bachvarova 1999: 16).

The discovery and subsequent analysis of the text of the stela provide an impetus to examine the history and geography of the Middle Struma in a new light. On the site of the ancient settlement in the area of Rupite is located the city of Heraclea Sintica, which arose at the end of the 4th century BC in the Sintian tribal areas. During the time of Philip V (221–179 BC) Heraclea Synthica was permanently included within the Macedonian Kingdom until it was conquered by the Romans in 167 BC (Mitrev 2005: 263–272; Ivanov 2016). The settlement probably ceased to exist sometime around the 6th century AD after raids by the Slavs. So far, however, the assumption that the inhabitants of the ancient city who remained alive moved to the foot of Belasitsa Mountain and laid the foundation for the present-day city of Petrich, is not based on serious arguments.

Despite the new data from the archaeological surveys, the old story of Petra continues to prevail as the most common narrative. Today it can be heard in various variants among the majority of the inhabitants of the region. According to the narrative, during the eruption of the one-time volcano, lava covered the ancient majestic city of Petra and took the lives of thousands of inhabitants, described as tall, large, unusually enlightened and religious. In support of the extraordinary stature of the city's former inhabitants, local people who participated as general labourers in excavations in the late 1980s tell of the discovery of a 2,500-year-old skeleton of a man over 2.10 m tall. Among those more familiar with the new scientific hypotheses, this skeleton is associated with the story of the two sons of Philip V, Perseus and Demeter, the latter extremely large. Towards the end of their father's life, the two brothers began to contend for power. Perseus organised a religious feast in the city in Rupite, at which he planned to poison Demeter. After the poisoning attempt failed, he ordered his brother suffocated with a pillow. Thus, Demeter died and was buried in the former city at the foot of Kozhuh Hill. Another story, popular among local people and especially among treasure hunters, tells of a golden horse buried somewhere on top of the Hill.

A closer look at the available scientific information about the region, at individual local stories and legends, and at the 'testimonies' of Vanga's stories and prophecies disseminated through various electronic and printed publications shows that the prophetess's words sanction scientific facts in the minds of people, confirm various legends and are interpreted in different ways, often adapting to actual events or to existing legendary stories (see Periklieva & Hristov 2017). Vanga's prophecies legitimise the story of the ancient city of Petra, inhabited by large people in shining clothes who perished under the lava of an erupting volcano. Vanga told of a great golden horse that stood before the entrance to a majestic temple towering atop Kozhuh Hill. In an attempt to popularise the results of their work, even among archaeologists and historians working in the region, there is a tendency to resort to the name of Vanga.

The socialisation of Heraclea Sintica is a priority for the Municipality of Petrich in order to develop tourism in the region. In 2020, an asphalt road was built from the Rupite village turnoff to the archaeological site. There is also a plan to build an asphalt road that will connect Heraclea Sintica with the Vanga complex and the mineral springs. However, after a protest by environmental protection organisations and the Save Rupite civil initiative, construction was

stopped and the district prosecutor's office in Blagoevgrad was involved. According to environmentalists, the construction of the road will destroy a number of endangered species by disrupting their habitats.

Conclusion

As the presentation above shows, Rupite is being constructed as a multi-layered landscape of sacred, cultural, historical and natural significance, on which different actors draw to develop various forms of tourism: religious, cultural and historical, spa. The connection of Rupite with the image of Vanga following the prophetess' attachment to the place, the construction of St Petka of Bulgaria church and the complex around it, changes the way the locality is perceived and thought of by local people and how it is presented to tourists. This inextricable connection, linking the image of the prophetess with Rupite, leads us to think about the locality as an extremely sacred place in which Vanga and sacrality form the main layer of the landscape. The rest of the elements (cultural, historical and natural) characterising the landscape, on the one hand serve as additional 'evidence' of the sacrality, and on the other, win recognition by means of the image of Vanga. Each actor related to Rupite constructs the place in a specific manner. However, all of them use one main mechanism and draw symbolic capital (and thus legitimise their positions and activities, even though they are often contradictory) from one main source, the image of Vanga, which is inextricably linked to Rupite and has proven dominant among the constellation of natural, cultural, historical, etc., elements at this site. As seen above, the image of the prophetess is present in one way or another in the representation of all layers of the landscape of Rupite. Her commands and prophecies legitimise construction (such as the Rupite Mineral Baths or the cross on Kozhuh Hill) or serve as grounds on which to demand that construction be stopped (such as the new spa complex). Vanga's words can also be used to sanction or reject in people's minds scientific facts and local legends. Often this use of her image leads to controversy. For example, despite the existing conflicting opinions about the Vanga Foundation and its attempts to monopolise the cult of Vanga, in general none of the local people questions the sanctity of the place around the church of the prophetess or the appropriateness in terms of nature preservation of her cult being located in Rupite. Although there were protests

against building the spa centre near the hot pools, the actors in which resorted to the prophetess' warnings, no one grumbled at the construction of Vanga's complex, on which territory there are also several puddles. Yet, Vanga herself defined the area as highly energetic and wished to build a temple. Some of my interlocutors – ornithologists and botanists – even expressed the opinion that since much of the land the foundation owns is fenced off and inaccessible, the flora and fauna within it remain protected for the time being. Thus, for the local community the sacred image of Vanga is incompatible with a possible negative influence on Rupite.

As can be seen, the construction of Rupite as a landscape and a tourist destination is mainly happening from the bottom up, through separate initiatives of different actors, rather than following a certain vision or development plan created by the responsible institutions. Since the locality falls within the framework of the Municipality of Petrich, the main institutional initiative should come from this institution. Although in its Municipal Development Plan for the 2014–2020 period (Obshtinski plan 2013) the Municipality of Petrich recognised Rupite's potential to develop various forms of tourism and aims to integrate the various historical and natural landmarks in the municipality within a general tourist product, the action and/or inaction of the Municipality largely contradicts what is formulated. In fact, the Municipality's main priority in terms of tourism development in Rupite and across its territory is the Heraclea Sintica archaeological site. Thus, for example, although there is a Vanga house museum in the town of Petrich, managed by the Municipality, it has for years failed to find a way to work with the Vanga Foundation and the Rupite complex so as to integrate the two sites into one common religious tourist route that would attract the people flocking to the prophetess's church. In the Environmental Protection Program for the 2020–2024 period (Programa 2020), the Municipality links the protection and management of protected areas and the biological diversity of Rupite with the development of balneological and ecotourism. Although this is formulated as a specific goal in the plan, the activity of the Municipality is mainly limited to the improvement of the area around the hot springs. Belying the assertion of West, Igoe and Brockington (2006: 262) that “[e]cotourism enterprises are symbiotic with protected areas. If there is a protected area, some form of ecotourism likely uses it”, although there are various forms of nature protection in the area of Rupite, the development of ecotourism (or nature-based tourism) exists only on paper.

There aren't even any bottom-up initiatives. This fits in with Lawenthal's assertion that most people identify more easily with cultural heritage than with nature, hence local people are more inclined to support the preservation of the former (Lowenthal 2005: 86). In this sense, every effort of the responsible institutions to convince the local population of the importance and benefits of the protected status of their surroundings usually also involves their cultural heritage. However, this is not the case in Rupite.

Notes

¹ The term is used by sociologists and anthropologists and describes an intermediary between man and the divine realm who thinks himself and is regarded as such by various social groups or communities, but who, as a rule, is outside the institution that holds a monopoly over this mediation, i.e. the church (Valtchinova 2002a: 24–25; Valchinova 2002b: 91–92; cf. Christian 1973).

² This term generally refers to alternative religious specialists who are venerated as saints after death, but without official canonisation by the church. During their lifetime, these people have the gift of contacting the other world and thus healing or performing miracles. After their death, they continue to function as mediators between man and the divine realm, and it is believed that they can intervene directly in people's lives, thus becoming their active advocate before God and their helper in times of crisis. This leads to the transformation of these people into objects of mass veneration, around which cults form (Ivanov & Izmirlieva 2000; Romano 1965: 1157–1158, Graziano 2006: 9–77).

³ Allegedly, Vanga often said that three churches from “the old times”, dedicated to St Petka, the Virgin Mary and St Pantaleon, once existed in Rupite. Today, the story is quite popular among local people, some locating the old church of St Petka on the site of today's church of Vanga.

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Violeta Periklieva, PhD, is a philologist and ethnologist, currently an assistant professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She has an extensive fieldwork experience among various ethnic, religious and local communities in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Croatia and Kosovo. Her research interests include migration and mobility, border studies, anthropology of religion, identity, cultural heritage. Violeta Periklieva participated in several research projects on topics in these fields of interest. In 2013, she was awarded the Academician Ivan Evstratiev Geshov Award for Youngest Scientist by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences..

e-mail: vioperi@yahoo.com