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## *A new look at the rock art on the island of Gökçeada, northeast Aegean*

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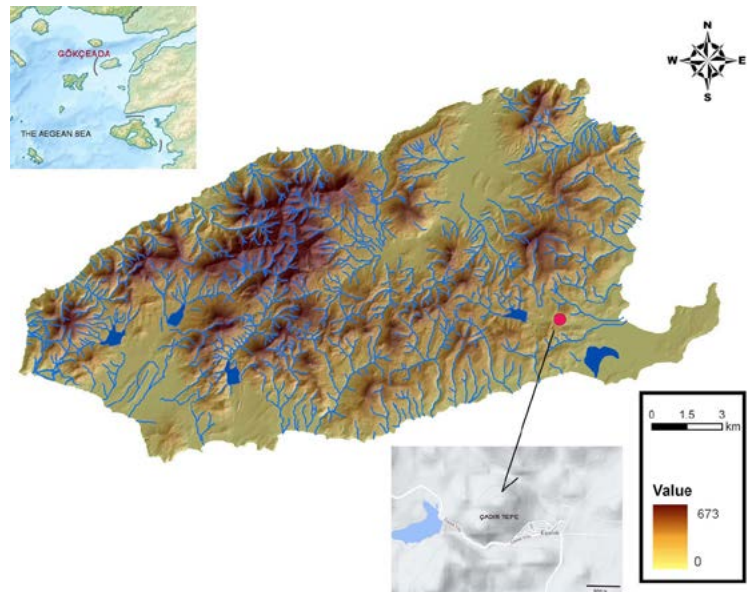
### Introduction

The island of Gökçeada features a unique rock art location in the Aegean. The rock paintings are made with red ochre and include 'human' depictions, geometric designs and abstracts. Some depictions are similar to the Latmos rock art of western Anatolia, thought to be of the 6th and 5th Millennium BCE, while others have no analogues. The rock paintings near the Village of Eşelek, on the Island of Gökçeada (Imbros), northeast Aegean, were first discovered by E. and I. Andreou more than a decade ago (Andreou and Andreou 2017). Some anthropomorphs, geometric designs

and many other indistinct forms of paintings were reported on the walls of a large rock. In the summer of 2022, the site was revisited by the authors to document and study the rock art in detail, and new previously unrecorded motifs were also discovered.

The rock paintings are located on a large block of rock on the western face of the hill called Çadır (Harkovo in Greek), north of the village of Eşelek (Fig. 1). There is a round, niche-shaped recess on the middle of the rock boulder. The paintings are located on the broken and angular rock surfaces next to this recess (Fig. 2). All rock paintings are made from a red pigment, presumably derived from haematite. The rock paintings are difficult to notice because of a thin layer of iron oxide formed on the rock surface. The paint was applied with the use of a brush. There is only a single panel with thick lines indicative of having been painted with fingers rather than brushes. This suggests that the images on the rock walls might have been created at different times.

The rock art can be divided into three panels. Panels 1 and 2 appear to have been made on the same rock surface at different times (Fig. 3). Panel 3 is located on the other side of the round, niche-shaped recess and



**Figure 1.** Location of the Eşelek rock art site in Gökçeada, NE Aegean.



**Figure 2.** View of the large rock boulder with rock art.



Figure 3. Panels 1 and 2.



Figure 5. Checkerboard motif at Panel 2.

consists of a single figure. Very faint traces of red paint can also be seen on the recess.

#### Description of the rock art

Panel 1 is a small collection of paintings located about a metre above the present floor level. It is easily overlooked due to its small size of c. 16×12 cm. The brighter red paint appears to have been applied with fingers. The prominent elements of Panel 1 are two 'human' depictions. A possibly female figure with full buttocks and breasts is seen, apparently depicted from the side. The other 'human' depiction might be of a shaman, possibly wearing a headdress made of deer antlers and a shamanic costume. There are also some abstract and dot-like figures around them (Fig. 4).

Panel 2 covers a surface of 60×60 cm. Many of the paintings are highly faded. On the left is a square checkerboard motif of 14×14 cm made with thin lines (Fig. 5). The filled parts of the checkerboard are formed by vertical lines parallel to each other. Approximately 25 cm above the checkerboard motif are two presumed anthropomorphs with their 'arms' outstretched (Fig. 6). The larger one, measuring c. 13×10 cm, has a rectangular body and

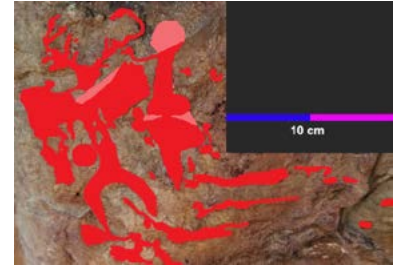


Figure 4. Emphasised anthropomorphs at Panel 1.



Figure 6. Presumed human depictions with outstretched arms at Panel 2.

a round head, and the feet are not depicted. The other 'human' figure, measuring c. 9×4 cm, is depicted with one 'leg' and one 'arm' shorter than the other. It seems to hold an object. On the left side of these figures are two circles with diameters of 20 and 15 cm with a diagonal line through the middle (Fig. 3).

Panel 3 is situated in a remote part of the site. Located about a half metre above the present floor level, it consists of a single figure that vaguely resembles a human form (Fig. 7). The figure, apparently depicted from the side, shows an exaggerated 'buttock' and 'breast'.

#### Discussion and concluding remarks

Eşelek has revealed an important rock art composition on the island of Gökçeada. Although



Figure 7. A possible anthropomorph at Panel 3.

there is no dating for this rock art, it is quite a unique find for the Aegean islands. No archaeological material was found around the block of rock except for a few chipped stones.

The apparently human shapes in Panel 1 are quite interesting. A 'female' figure that is similar to the figure with full hips and breasts in this panel can be found in the Latmos Mountains of western Anatolia (Fig. 8). Although uncertain, the Latmos rock art has been attributed to the 6th and 5th millennium BCE (Peschlow-Bindokat and Gerber 2003). In addition, the checkerboard motif of Panel 2 also appears in Latmos rock art.

The depiction of a 'human' wearing a 'deer head-dress and costume' is also remarkable. There are depictions of human representations wearing deer headdresses in Upper Palaeolithic paintings in Europe (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998). Antlered figures are known in the rock art of pre-Historic Europe (Mykhailova and Garfinkel 2018). Rituals such as deer offerings and the burial of deer antlers are widespread in deer hunter societies. The zooarchaeological data from the excavations in the pre-Historic site of Uğurlu in Gökçeada showed that there was an increase in deer around the 6th millennium BCE (Atici et al. 2017). In this period, deer motifs can be seen on pottery in addition to ritual pits that contain deer antlers. Therefore, we suggest that this figure can be interpreted as a shaman wearing a headdress, possibly made of deer antlers and a costume.

The vaguely 'human' figures in Panel 2 stand out. Below a round head with no detail and a short neck, their torsos are of roughly rectangular shape and arms outstretched. Although the anthropomorph seen in Panel 3 has no analogues, such depictions can be seen on Upper Palaeolithic ivory figurines and Neolithic clay figurines in Europe (see the bird goddess; Gimbutas 1989). In addition, there are no similar examples to the circle motifs with a central line in Panel 2.

Considering that there is no published evidence of



Figure 8. Comparison of presumed female figures in Gökçeada (left) and Latmos (right) rock art.

other rock art made with red ochre in other Aegean islands, the importance of rock art in Gökçeada in the region becomes more prominent. Further research may reveal additional information in the future.

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