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INSCRIPTIONS AND ICONOGRAPHY IN THE MONUMENTS OF THE THRACIAN RIDER

ABSTRACT

The Thracian rider monuments are either funerary or dedicated to various deities. The inscriptions provide the only certain way to identify the deities or the monument's type. After examining the relationship between inscriptions and iconography, I suggest in the present study that the horseman is an iconographical convention for a god/hero, and that his iconography is borrowed from Greek art. Interpreting the horseman as a conventional image obviates the current view that he represents a multifunctional god conflated with nearly every Greek, Roman, Thracian, or Eastern divinity, and produces a better understanding of both the monument type and cult.

The monuments of the so-called Thracian rider present an extreme case of the relationship between epigraphy and art: the inscriptions are the only certain way to clarify the iconography, identity, and cult of the Thracian horseman.[1] Moreover, the inscriptions frequently provide the only reliable evidence to determine the type of monument (votive or funerary), since in many instances the findspot is of little help—most reliefs are found in a secondary context, and their function is unclear.[2]

The term "Thracian rider" relief is used to describe monuments of varying size, most typically stone slabs 30–40 cm wide and 20–30 cm high, which depict a rider, turned to the right (seldom to the left), his horse

1. The present study originated as a seminar paper for Carol Lawton's course on votives, given at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens in the spring of 2000. An abridged version was delivered in San Diego on 6 January 2001 at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, as part of the joint APA and AIA panel "Epigraphy and the Arts."

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All translations are my own.

2. See the discussion of specific monuments and their findspots below, pp. 211–220.

walking, galloping, or standing still. The rider is called "Thracian" because he appears on more than 2,000 reliefs[3] from at least 350 locations in Thrace, its neighboring territories, and other places characterized by Thracian presence.[4] The earliest surviving monuments are Hellenistic, but the majority date to Roman times. The most popular scenes have been classified as A) the horseman facing a woman, an altar, and a snake-entwined tree, his horse walking or standing still; B) the horseman galloping and attacking a boar; and C) the horseman returning from hunting, carrying a deer.[5] In addition, there are many variants, and type C can be viewed as a subtype of type B. There is no strict geographical or temporal pattern in the distribution of these types.

The identity of the depicted horseman is unknown. Fortunately, approximately a third of the monuments have inscriptions. They are typically below the relief, in Greek or Latin, and are generally straightforward in meaning and form: the name of the deity in the dative, usually followed by the name of the dedicant(s) in the nominative; or the name of the deceased, sometimes preceded by *Dis Manibus* or Θεοῖς Καταχθονίοις, and followed by typical epitaphial information. The inscriptions are either votive (about two-thirds of the sample) or funerary. The votive examples exhibit an unparalleled variety of names and epithets, all referring to the rider. He is called θεός, ἥρως, κύριος θεός, κύριος ἥρως, Apollo, Hades, Asklepios, Hephaistos, Sabazius, Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, Silvanus, and the Dioskouroi, in addition to numerous local names and epithets,[6] such as Karabasmos, Keilade(i)nos, Manimazos, Vetespios (Outaspios), Aularchenos, Aulosadenos, and Pyrmeroulas. The words θεός and ἥρως are often used interchangeably or both together.[7]

Scholars have remarked on the extraordinary variety of attributes apparently possessed by the Thracian horseman. Ivan Venedikov's description is representative: the Thracian horseman appears with the attributes of nearly every Graeco-Roman deity, ranging from Aphrodite's shell to Ares' helmet, from the Sun's radiate crown to Asklepios's serpent staff, from Apollo's lyre to Silvanus's saw, to name only a few.[8]

3. This number is based on published monuments; since many others are as yet unpublished and others are being excavated, a precise total is impossible to calculate. The main collections (corpora and catalogues), which complement each other, include Kacarov "Denkmäler"; *CCET*; *LIMC* VI.1, 1992, pp. 1018–1081, pls. 673–719, s.v. Heros Equitans (H. Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, V. Machaira, P. Pantos, et al.); *IGBulg;* Gerov, *Inscriptiones.* Subsequent references to Koukouli-Chrysanthaki et al. in *LIMC* VI.1 are abbreviated as *LIMC* VI.1.

4. Thracians served in the Roman army and are attested in Pannonia, Britannia, southern Russia, Egypt, Asia Minor, Tunisia, and Rome; see *CCET* I, p. 1.

5. These types are defined and applied by Kacarov, "Denkmäler," passim. They are by no means strict categories, but used for convenience by Kacarov and the editors of *CCET*. This classification is not used in the present paper.

6. On the epithets of the Thracian horseman, see especially Gočeva 1992.

7. E.g., *CCET* II.1 335 is a dedication θεῷ ἥρωι Ἀπόλλωνι; 331 θεῷ Καπρηνῷ; 365 ἥρωι Καπρηνῷ; II.2 655 and 656 θεῷ ἥρωι Βασκιδιθιᾳ.

8. Venedikov 1979, p. 2: "Obwohl er nur auf wenigen Reliefs drei Köpfe hat und von dem dreiköpfigen Hund der Unterwelt begleitet wird wie die trikephale Göttin des Todes, Hekate, so trägt er auf anderen—allerdings äußerst selten vertretenen Denkmälern—eine Strahlenkrone auf seinem Haupte und ist flankiert von den Büsten des Sol und der Luna. In anderen Monumenten wird der Thrakische Reiter aufgefaßt als Gott der Fruchtbarkeit und hält wie Aphrodite eine Muschel oder hat sie als Nimbus hinter seinem Kopfe. Er kann ferner angetan sein mit dem Helm des Ares, kann in seiner Hand den für Asklepios typischen Schlangenstab halten, erscheint mit der Kithara des Apollon, dem Waldmesser

The prevailing hypothesis is that the Thracian rider is an advanced case of religious syncretism, conflated with nearly every Greek, Roman, Thracian, or Eastern divinity.[9] In most of the relevant scholarship he is viewed as an all-purpose god, a significant step on the way to monotheism, if not monotheism per se.[10] The main problem with the concept of religious syncretism in this case is that, although one can easily understand the phenomenon whereby two or three deities from different cultures, but with more or less similar functions, are conflated as a result of historical interaction, it is much more difficult to imagine one deity being merged with numerous other gods or heroes, whose cults and traditions are hardly compatible. How did this religious concept function? How did worshippers who set up a thank-offering or made a vow in hope of well-being, or individuals who erected a grave monument, perceive this deity?

INSCRIPTIONS AND ICONOGRAPHY

My approach to the problem outlined above is based on a monument-by-monument examination of the relationship between inscription and iconography. The difficulties encountered can be illustrated by two groups of examples: Group I consists of different types of monuments with identical iconographical features; and Group II exhibits the same divinity's name on monuments with different iconography.

Group I

The first group includes the two most popular scenes in the Thracian rider's iconography: the horseman facing a snake-entwined tree and the horseman as a hunter. The first of these scenes is illustrated by *CCET* I 34, 40, 162, IV 29, and *IGBulg* IV 2134 (Figs. 1–2). These monuments share identical iconographical elements: the horseman, wearing a chlamys and holding the reins in his right hand, is turned to the right, facing a snake-entwined tree and an altar; the horse is walking (not standing still or galloping, as on other monuments). Normally such similarity would suggest that the figures depicted are one and the same.

The inscriptions, however, reveal a different picture. *CCET* I 34 from Odessus, northeast Bulgaria, is a dedication to the hero Karabasmos:

Ἀγαθῇι τύχ[ηι]
Ἥρωι Καραβασμῳ εὐχαριστήριον κοινωνοὶ οἱ περὶ
Μένανδρον Ἀπολλωνίου καὶ Θεόδωρον Θεοδώρου
[καὶ Ἀπολλ]ώνιον Θεμιστᾶ καὶ Φιλόξενον Φιλοξένου
[καὶ - - -]ρα Ξένωνος καὶ Ἀρτεμίδωρον β΄
ἀνέθηκαν.

The monument was found in a Late Antique necropolis in the vicinity of Pazaren ploshtad ("Market Square"), apparently in a secondary context. If it had lacked an inscription, scholars would reasonably have considered it a grave monument.

des Silvanus und dem Szepter des Zeus. So erscheint dieser eigenartige und recht ungewöhnliche thrakische Gott in Funktionen und ausgestattet mit Attributen fast aller gräco-römischen Göttheiten."

9. The extensive literature in which the Thracian rider is considered a result of syncretism is not quoted here for purposes of economy. One of the earlier and briefer accounts can be found in Venedikov 1963. For a more recent discussion, see Werner 1999, pp. 59–121. This is also the view expressed in *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1066, n. 28.

10. E.g., Fol and Marazov 1977, p. 17: "One wonders if this hero was not the representation of a universal god, revered by all the Thracian tribes, each of which gave him a local name."

Figure 1. Thracian rider relief. *CCET* I 40, Odessus. National Archaeological Museum, Sofia, inv. 180. Courtesy Museum

CCET I 40 (Fig. 1), also from Odessus, is a dedication to the hero Manimazos:

above relief: Ἥρωι Μανιμαζωι
below relief: Ἑστιαῖος Νεικίου ὑπὲρ
τῶν υἱῶν Νεικίου καὶ Ἀγα-
θήνορος χαριστήριον.

The monument was found at 8 Noemvri Street, near the ruins of the Roman thermae, and dates to the late 2nd century A.C.[11]

CCET I 162 (Fig. 2) from the Burgas region, southeast Bulgaria, is a Latin grave inscription dating to ca. A.D. 150–200:

above relief: D]is Manibus
below relief: L. Titovio L. lib(erto) Diadu-
meno Flavia Vera
coniugi bene merenti
et sibi et suis viva fecit.

The inscription was found in a secondary context, in the vineyards north of the village of Bâlgarovo.

CCET IV 29 (Tomis, southeast Rumania) is a *eucharisterion* for good fortune:

Ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ
εὐχαριστήριον Ἥρωα ἀνέθηκαν . . .
(list of 27 names)

Its findspot is not specified.

11. See *IGBulg* I 78 (= *CCET* I 40). Mihailov considers the suggestion that the ruins in question belonged to a sanctuary of Apollo Karabasmos far from certain.

Figure 2. *CCET* I 162, Burgas. National Archaeological Museum, Sofia, inv. 618. Courtesy Museum

IGBulg IV 2134 (Pautalia region, southwest Bulgaria) is a dedication to Asklepios:

Ἀσκληπιῷ Βειθυς Διζαζεν[εος]
εὐξάμενος καὶ ἐπιτυχ[ὼν ἀνέ-]
θηκε.

The monument was found near the village of Dolna Dikanja, but the exact location of the findspot is controversial.[12] In this example, as in the others listed above, if there were no inscription, one would not know to whom the monument was dedicated or if it was votive or funerary.

The snake-entwined tree is one of the major iconographical features of the Thracian horseman reliefs. In *CCET* it appears on at least 33 of the roughly 340 monuments with inscriptions published in this corpus (a precise figure is impossible to determine, since some reliefs are broken).[13] The inscriptions list a great variety of names to whom these reliefs are dedicated: Karabasmos, Manimazos, Propylaios, Dosaenos, Katoikadios, Asklepios, Apollo, Paladeinenos, Tato. In addition, many of these 33 monuments are funerary.

A natural approach that scholars have taken in order to explain the tree and the serpent on these reliefs has been to examine each particular case and try to understand the symbolism of the image in its various contexts. Thus the snake has been interpreted in one way in a dedication to

12. See Mihailov's commentary on *IGBulg* IV 2134.

13. *CCET* I 30, 31, 34, 40, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 111, 158, 162; II 200, 534, 586; IV 3, 5, 26, 30, 48, 63, 64, 108; V 23, 25, 65, 71, 72.

Asklepios—as one of his attributes—and in a different way in a grave monument—as a "chthonic" symbol.[14] The tree, on the other hand, has been interpreted as "a tree of life" symbolizing the rebirth of nature,[15] a sacred tree,[16] or a landscape background.[17] There seem to be two problems with this approach. The first is the lack of good evidence for Thracian religion and especially the cult of its numerous local deities. This gives free room for speculation, and little can be proved (or, of course, refuted) with certainty. The other difficulty is the presence of the snake-entwined tree on similar-looking rider monuments from the same region and the same period. Why should one then assume that it meant different things in each case?

Another way to look at this problem is to consider the snake-entwined tree not as an organic element of the ideology behind each scene, but as an imported iconographical detail. The image of a horseman facing a snake-entwined tree is well known from earlier monuments found throughout the Greek world. It occurs on a 3rd-century B.C. relief from Athens, a 2nd-century B.C. grave relief from Pergamon, a 2nd-century B.C. relief from Ephesos, and many others.[18] It seems logical to assume that the image was borrowed by Thracian artists under the strong and well-documented influence of Greek culture and did not evolve by itself from a native tradition. If the image of the horseman itself was borrowed from Greek art,[19] then it is not surprising that it appears in Thrace together with one of its most common iconographical attributes.

The other extremely popular scene in the first group of examples represents the Thracian rider as a hunter.[20] Typically he carries a spear and is accompanied by a dog and other animals associated with hunting: boar, hare, deer, lion. As in the case of the snake-entwined tree, hunting attributes are seen on various monuments, with no apparent connection to a specific cult.

For instance, *CCET* I 54 (Fig. 3), dating to the late 2nd century A.C., is a grave monument found in a secondary context, on the corner of Pop Chariton and Knjaz Čerkazki Streets in Odessus:

Διονύσιος Ἀντιφίλου ὁ καὶ Σκωρις.

It is noteworthy that the back of the monument is decorated with another relief, exhibiting a funeral banquet. This is one of the few cases in which the type of monument can be surmised from information other than the inscription.

CCET I 85, from the Odessus region in northeast Bulgaria, is a dedication to the hero Karabasmos:

Ἥρωι Καραβασβῳ [*sic*] Ἐσ[τιαῖος] Ἀγαθήνορος
ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρίας τῆ̃[ς ἰ]δίας καὶ τῶν
ἰδίων ἀνέθηκεν *vacat*
εὐχαριστήριον.

The dedicant may have been the grandson of Ἑστιαῖος Νεικίου mentioned in *CCET* I 40 (Fig. 1), whose son was named Ἀγαθήνωρ. The monument was found in the Early Christian basilica in Galata. This basilica was built upon the ruins of a pagan sanctuary, where 16 rider reliefs had been found

14. See, e.g., Georgieva 1965, pp. 119–120. She interprets the serpent in the Thracian horseman reliefs as a symbol of the forces of nature, fertility, the underworld, and healing deities.

15. Fol and Marazov 1977, pp. 18–19.

16. Georgieva 1965, p. 121.

17. Georgieva 1965, p. 121.

18. For the reliefs from Athens, Pergamon, and Ephesos, see *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1025, nos. 6, 8, 9, pl. 674. See also *LIMC* VI.1, pp. 1031–1032, nos. 113–129, pls. 680–681, which include examples of the snake-entwined tree from Rhodes, Kos, Thessaly, and Troadic Alexandreia, in addition to those from Thrace and its immediate vicinity.

19. See the discussion below, pp. 220–224.

20. Cf. Dečev 1945.

Figure 3. *CCET* I 54, Odessus. Archaeological Museum, Varna, inv. 1545. Courtesy Museum

(*CCET* I 80–95). Numbers 83–89 are inscribed and dedicated to the hero Karabasmos; 80–82 and 90–92 are uninscribed; 93 is corrupt; 94 is a thank-offering Ἥρωι Προπυλαίῳ, while 95 is a dedication Ἥρωι Τασαγει. The remains of the sanctuary are so meager that no meaningful information can be derived from them; the only information about the names or epithets of the worshipped deities derives from the inscriptions. The authors of *CCET* conclude that the hero Karabasmos was worshipped in this sanctuary, since most of the inscriptions reveal his name. This conclusion seems logical, and one would be inclined to think that the uninscribed monuments were dedicated to Karabasmos as well. Yet, surprisingly, reliefs 94 and 95 bear other deities' names. Thus, one cannot rely completely on the findspot to indicate the deity worshipped, even in cases where the monuments come from a specific sanctuary.

CCET I 123 is a dedication to the god Eisenos, 147 to Apollo, II 246 θεῷ ἥρωι, 415 to the god Eitiosaros, 457 to Apollo Aulosadenos, 458 θεῷ Αυλοσαδι, 483 to Apollo, 612 to Asklepios, 655 θεῷ ἥρωι Βασκιδιθια, IV 1 Dis Manibus, 48 Ero et D[omno], 52 and 105 are epitaphs, V 53 a dedication to Artemis, and 65 a grave monument. All of these monuments portray a hunting rider, but his identity is known only through the inscriptions.

Group II

Let us consider now the second group of examples, in which the same divine figure—as identified by the inscriptions—appears on different reliefs. One of the most frequently named deities in the monuments of the Thracian horseman is Apollo. Among the better-preserved dedications to him are *CCET* I 33, II 200, and 445. *CCET* I 33, from Odessus, has the following text:

[θεῷ Ἀπόλ]ονι [*sic*] [Καρ]αβα̣[σμῳ]
Προμαθίων Α[- - - - -]
Ἀμύντωρ ΜΕΝ[- - - - -]
[- - - - -]της Ἀρτεμ̣[ιδώρου- -]
[ἀνέθηκ]α̣ν̣.

The relief depicts a horseman dressed in a chiton and chlamys, facing an altar and a tree and holding a patera, his horse walking.

CCET II 200, from Marcianopolis, northeast Bulgaria, reads:

Ζενις Αυλοζενεος
θεῷ Ἀπόλλωνι εὐχα-
ριστήριον ἀνέθηκεν.

This relief represents a hunting rider wearing a chiton and chlamys, holding a spear, his horse galloping; a dog, lyre, tree, snake, and altar are also portrayed.

CCET II 445, from the Târgovishte region, northeast Bulgaria, reads simply:

Διογένης . . . . .
Ἀπόλλω[νι].

It portrays a rider wearing a chiton, his right hand in the gesture of "benedictio latina," facing a woman, his horse walking.

These monuments do not exhibit an identical iconography. More significantly, they do not depict an image of Apollo as distinct from any other Thracian rider.

These observations also apply to monuments dedicated to other frequently named deities or heroes: Asklepios (e.g., *CCET* I 8, 111; II 542, 612; V 23, 24); Karabasmos (e.g., *CCET* I 28, 30, 33, 34, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87); Aulosadas/Aulosadenos (e.g., *CCET* II 457, 458, 460, 483, 484); Pyrmeroulas (e.g., Kacarov, "Denkmäler" 375, 602, 603, 608); Manimazos (e.g., *CCET* I 31, 40; IV 36). All these deities are represented as riders, with no discernible iconographical patterns that might reveal their identity in contrast to other Thracian horsemen. Only the inscriptions permit recognition of the addressee of the vow or the type of the monument, whether votive or funerary.[21]

Reliefs dedicated to Asklepios are especially illuminating. *IGBulg* II 569 (Fig. 4) is a thank-offering to Asklepios and Aphrodite:

[Ἀσκλη]πιῷ καὶ Ἀφροδείτῃ χαριστήρ-
ιον.

21. The picture is further complicated by the fact that sometimes a foreign god receives a local name or epithet: thus one can see dedications to Apollo Karabasmos, Asklepios Keilade(i)nos, Apollo Aulosadas/Aulosadenos, Apollo Tetradeenos, and so on.

Figure 4 *(left)*. ***IGBulg*** **II 569, Glava Panega. National Archaeological Museum, Sofia, inv. 3906.** Courtesy Museum

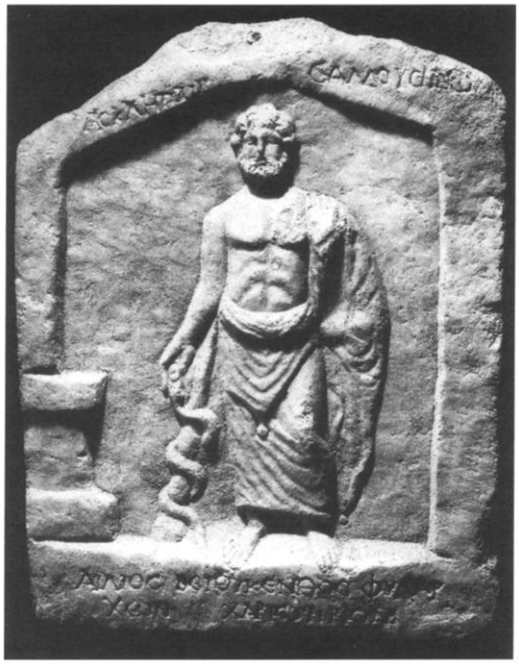

Figure 5 *(right)*. ***IGBulg*** **II 512, Glava Panega. National Archaeological Museum, Sofia, inv. 3739.** Courtesy Museum

The relief shows a rider, turned to the right, wearing a chlamys and holding a patera, and a standing female figure of the same height, clad in a chiton and mantle. The monument dates to the 3rd century A.C. and comes from the Asklepieion at Glava Panega in the Vraca region of northwest Bulgaria. It was found together with numerous dedications to Asklepios, some of which represent him as the Thracian rider, others in his traditional iconography, such as *IGBulg* II 512 (Fig. 5):

above relief: Ἀσκληπιῷ Σαλδηνωι
below relief: Ἰούλιος Κενσου εὐχαριστή-
ριον.

The standard interpretation of these reliefs is to suppose that Asklepios has been conflated with the Thracian rider, who was worshipped locally as a healing deity.[22] There seems to be no difference, however, in function, meaning, and date between the two kinds of depictions of Asklepios. If his iconography were ideologically meaningful in each particular case, then one would have to assume that only for some of the worshippers at this Asklepieion was he a product of syncretism with the Thracian rider, while for others he was still the traditional Asklepios in his traditional iconography. Such a situation does not seem plausible. If, however, one supposes that the image of the horseman was simply a convention, then only those reliefs in which Asklepios is represented in his traditional iconography, without a horse, should be considered as especially significant—perhaps an expression of greater care on the part of the worshippers, who did not set up a standard image used for other gods as well. The above examples can thus be explained by the hypothesis that the horseman is an iconographical convention for a god or hero, and that the inscriptions serve to personalize (and identify) this otherwise nameless conventional image.

22. See, e.g., Fol and Mihailov 1979, pp. 260–261. Other examples of the same phenomenon are found in the Sanctuary of Apollo at the village of Trud, Plovdiv region: *IGBulg* III 1458 shows Apollo in his traditional, horseless iconography, while *IGBulg* III 1457, 1460–1466, 1468–1470 show a rider.

Figure 6. *CCET* V 23, Krupac. Ethnographical Museum, Pirot.

This hypothesis also accommodates *CCET* V 23 (Fig. 6), a late-2nd-century A.C. dedication to Apollo and Asklepios found in Krupac, in eastern Yugoslavia. The relief depicts two identical horsemen facing each other, while the inscription beneath the relief reads:

Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ Ἀσκληπιῷ
Βερακεληνοις Γάιος Πρόκλου
εὐξάμενος ἀνέθηκε.[23]

Thus one horseman is presumably Apollo, and the other Asklepios. The relief is most easily understood if we explain the rider as a convention for a divinity of some kind, personalized only by the inscription.

IGBulg III 1467 is a very interesting case: it shows Apollo standing (in his traditional iconography), and next to him a horse—as though the dedicant felt that a relief portraying a deity would be somehow incomplete without it. The monument comes from the Sanctuary of Apollo at Trud, where Apollo is depicted in other reliefs on horseback and—only rarely—in his traditional imagery.[24]

The rider occasionally assumes features and attributes of the deity from whose sanctuary the relief derives: thus, in a sanctuary of Apollo one might find riders with a lyre.[25] Sometimes the rider is represented as a

23. This example rules out the possibility that the Thracian rider might have been the dedicant himself. If the horseman were the dedicant, then we would have to assume two dedicants for this particular relief. The inscription, however, clearly tells us that the dedicant is one, and the gods two: "Gaius, son of Proclus, dedicated [this monument] to Apollo and Asklepios Berakelenoi, having made a vow." Another eloquent piece of evidence is *CCET* IV 29. The text reads: "So-and-so dedicated a ἥρως to (or for) good fortune." The number of the dedicators is 27, so it is impossible to identify them with the single rider depicted. Moreover, the text says that "they dedicated a hero," and not "themselves." Another counterargument is the frequent presence of adorants on the reliefs. Their figures are significantly smaller in scale than the horseman, and this speaks in favor of his higher status.

24. See above, n. 22.

25. See, e.g., the discussion of the Sanctuary of Apollo Aulosadas in Konstantinov et al. 1980, pp. 142–172. On sanctuaries of the Thracian horseman see, among others, Končev 1941; Boteva 1985; Koukouli-Chrysanthaki and Malamidou 1989; Ovčarov 1972. A very helpful summary of sanctuaries in the Roman province of Thrace is given in Gočeva 2000.

bearded man, usually in the context of a sanctuary of a named bearded deity.[26] It is impossible, however, to see a clear pattern in the adoption of attributes, or to understand why in some cases figures with attributes were preferred over unspecified stylized images of horsemen. The occasional presence of riders with specific attributes is perhaps a sign of a rather carefully done and expensive relief.

Sometimes the inscription appears incompatible with the image depicted. *IGBulg* III 1319 shows only one Thracian rider, represented as a hunter, while the text reads θεοῖς Διοσκόροις. What seems to be even more surprising is that on a few Thracian rider reliefs only female deities such as Artemis (*CCET* V 21, 53) or the nymphs are inscribed as receiving dedications. In *IGBulg* III 1368, for example, the relief represents a horseman, but is dedicated to the nymphs, as the inscription tells us. The relief comes from a sanctuary of the nymphs at Bourdapa (Plovdiv region), where numerous votive reliefs have been found, the most common type of which represents three female figures. In such cases it appears that iconography was of even less importance—perhaps because of ignorance or economic reasons related to mass production.

Mass production may have played an important role. In many instances it seems that dedicants chose a relief that had been made earlier, adjusting it for the specific purpose they wanted it to serve. Unfortunately, it is impossible to establish a chart of workshops that specialized in producing certain kinds of reliefs, since most monuments are found in a secondary context, and we possess no evidence about specific ateliers. In general, images of riders facing a snake-entwined tree are more common along the Black Sea coast than are those of hunting riders, but no strict patterns can be established. It is also difficult to discern particular chronological patterns in the distribution of iconographical types, since most reliefs are by no means securely dated.

Bearing in mind the role of mass production and related factors, we must nevertheless remark that the few monuments dedicated only to female deities are difficult to interpret because the reliefs are broken, and one cannot determine whether a female figure was depicted apart from the horseman, or whether the inscription included a male deity's name as well. Other, better-preserved reliefs show both a male and a female deity, and in those cases only the male deity is represented as a rider: see, for example, Kacarov, "Denkmäler" 301 (Silvanus and Epona); 309, 331, 345 (Asklepios and Hygieia); 310 (Asklepios and Aphrodite); 318 (Silvanus and Diana). These reliefs confirm the natural assumption that the rider was typically a convention for a male deity.

The Thracian practice of using a standard image for different divinities occurs in other contexts as well. The above-mentioned Asklepieion at Glava Panega, for example, contains an abundance of votive reliefs depicting a god and a goddess. These deities have been identified as Asklepios and Hygieia (see, e.g., *IGBulg* II 514–525), and indeed many of the reliefs bear dedications to them and exhibit their typical iconography: Asklepios as a bearded man, holding a serpent-staff, with Hygieia frequently holding a snake. They are usually accompanied by the subsidiary healing deity Telesphoros, represented as a minuscule figure between them or in one of

26. E.g., Silvanus: *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1046, no. 371, pl. 697; Asklepios: *IGBulg* II 529, 535.

the composition's corners. Some monuments in the same sanctuary, however, depict Asklepios and Hygieia, but are dedicated to Silvanus and Diana, who were worshipped by the Romanized population in the region (Gerov, *Inscriptiones* 197, 208). This suggests that the original iconography was not overly important to the dedicants: they used an already-made relief showing Asklepios and Hygieia, but invested it with new meaning, thereby satisfying their need for a dedication to Silvanus and Diana. What mattered was only the basic formal resemblance, consisting in the depiction of a male and a female deity. A similar phenomenon occurred centuries later, when Thracian rider reliefs were used by Christians in the cults of St. Demetrius and especially St. George.[27]

THE THRACIAN RIDER AND GREEK HERO RELIEFS

Understanding the rider as an iconographic convention for a divinity is generally consistent with the suggestion that the image is borrowed from Greek art and, more precisely, from funerary reliefs of the heroized dead. Moreover, the word ἥρως, which is so characteristic of Greek epitaphs, is frequently associated with the Thracian rider. One of the most detailed and important discussions on the subject was provided in 1955 by Ernest Will, who demonstrated that the image of the Thracian rider with his main attributes is a later variant of the Greek hero reliefs, which had already become a widespread iconographic convention.[28]

The ubiquity of rider images can be illustrated by numerous examples. Pannonia, Dacia, and Moesia are rich in monuments of the so-called Danubian riders, dating from the 1st (or early 2nd) to the 4th century A.C.[29] The extreme scarcity of inscriptions impedes precise analysis of their nature, but three iconographical elements clearly distinguish the Danubian riders from the Thracian riders and other deities on horseback: the prostrate enemy trampled by the horse's hooves, the fish, and the ram.[30] Dumitru Tudor viewed the Danubian riders as mystery cult deities of Dacian origin.[31] I would not venture an opinion on the complicated issue of their origin and nature, but only mention that the notion of victory played a significant role in the cult and that the monuments' iconography and distribution share noteworthy similarities with Mithraic religion. For our purposes, it is important to emphasize the fact that images of deities on

27. See Hoddinott 1981, pp. 174–175: the reliefs of the Thracian rider were considered icons of St. George or Demetrius; one tablet was used as an icon in a private house in Plovdiv, and as late as 1907 pilgrims sought a cure at Glava Panega on St. George's Day.

28. Will 1955, pp. 78–79: "Avant de devenir le motif le plus banal de l'iconographie thrace de l'Empire, l'image du Heros cavalier était déjà banale dans le monde grec sur les deux rives de l'Égée. Aux fausses précisions fournies en général dans ce débat, on peut substituer une formule simple et nette: en définitive, le motif thrace ne représente qu'une variante tardive d'une série plus vaste dont on ne saurait le détacher, celle du Héros grec." Will further concluded (pp. 105, 116) that in Thrace and Moesia there were no rider-gods, but only gods depicted on horseback and gods of rider peoples. Cf. also Kacarov, "Denkmäler," p. 1; Fol and Mihailov 1979, pp. 261–262.

29. Tudor 1976, pp. 78–84.

30. Tudor 1976, pp. 58–59.

31. Tudor 1976, pp. 232–276.

horseback were widespread on monuments from Thrace's neighboring provinces.

Images of horsemen also occur throughout the Aegean, across a wide geographical area. Photios Petsas, for example, interpreted certain rider reliefs in Macedonia as "prototypes" of the Thracian rider.[32] Indicative of the monuments' geographical range are examples from Asia Minor, on the one hand, and Crete, on the other, which add weight to the assumption that the Thracian rider's iconography is borrowed from Greek art.

The examples from Asia Minor include reliefs of Herakles and Kakasbos represented as rider gods. Their cult probably existed in the 1st century A.C., and reached its acme in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.[33] The Herakles and Kakasbos reliefs were popular in Lycia, Pisidia, and Pamphylia.[34] A recent study on the subject has been provided by G. H. R. Horsley, who discusses in detail the "Rider God" stelai at the Burdur Museum in southern Turkey.[35] These stelai, numbering over 100, are predominantly images of Herakles and the indigenous god Kakasbos, as the inscriptions, present on roughly half of them, indicate. In addition to appearing on votive reliefs, riders were commonly depicted on gravestones, especially in the western part of Asia Minor, as is evident, for example, from Ernst Pfuhl and Hans Möbius's published collection of reliefs.[36]

The horseman iconography, so popular in Asia Minor, was not restricted to lapidary monuments, but appeared also on coins and terracotta plaques. Coins with rider images were minted in Dardanus, Magnesia-on-the-Meander, Colophon, Skepsis, and elsewhere.[37] At Troy deposits of several hundred terracotta plaques have been found, depicting a hero on horseback.[38] They represent a beardless rider mounted on a rearing horse, with a snake beneath the horse,[39] and are dated on stylistic grounds from the 3rd to the 1st century B.C. It is unclear whether there was a specific hero associated with the plaques from Troy. Amy Barr concluded that the plaques themselves were a local phenomenon, while their iconographical tradition belonged to a much larger context, and cannot be explained satisfactorily, "since we find images of horse, rider, and snake in so many different topographic areas without an explicit pattern."[40]

Similar terracotta plaques have been found at Knossos, in the so-called shrine of the hero Glaukos.[41] They are Hellenistic in date and portray a rider (armed or unarmed), typically mounted on a rearing horse, with a snake beneath. P. J. Callaghan viewed the plaques as elements of an initiation cult for youths in honor of the foundation hero. He also noted that such images were found in "widely scattered parts of the Greek world and have long been recognized as representations of heroes."[42]

The broad territory and time span over which one can find reliefs of heroes on horseback can be further illustrated by a few other examples: a 5th-century B.C. relief from Cumae (Fig. 7) with a riding hero, dressed in a short chiton and chlamys, turned to the left, his horse galloping, accompanied by a heroine and facing six adorants;[43] a 4th-century B.C. relief from Peiraeus with a hero, dressed in a short chiton and chlamys, turned to the left, his horse galloping, facing a bearded adorant and an altar, accompanied by two dogs;[44] a 3rd-century B.C. relief from Athens showing a

32. Petsas 1978.
33. Horsley 1999, p. 43.
34. See, e.g., Metzger 1952; Robert 1946.
35. Horsley 1999.
36. See Pfuhl and Möbius 1977.
37. See, e.g., *LIMC* VI.1, pp. 1032, 1037, nos. 134–136, 229–230, pls. 681, 686. Coins depicting riders were also common in Macedonia and Thessaly.
38. See Thompson 1963, pp. 56–57, pls. XXVII–XXVIII; Barr 1996, pp. 133–157.
39. Barr 1996, p. 133.
40. Barr 1996, p. 138.
41. Callaghan 1978, p. 21.
42. Callaghan 1978, pp. 21–22.
43. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1043, no. 345, pl. 695.
44. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1061, no. 597, pl. 715.

Figure 7. *LIMC* 345, Cumae. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz inv. SK 805. Courtesy Museum

hunting horseman, wearing a chlamys and armor, turned to the right, holding a spear and attacking a boar, his horse galloping;[45] a 2nd-century B.C. relief from Ephesos (Fig. 8) showing a horseman, turned to the right, holding a spear, clad in a chiton and a chlamys, facing a round snake-entwined altar and a tree, his horse walking;[46] and a 1st-century B.C. relief from Pergamon depicting a hero turned to the right, dressed in a chiton and chlamys, with his horse walking, facing a round table and a snake-entwined tree.[47] H. Koukouli-Chrysanthaki et al. have adduced votive offerings to heroes on horseback both in cult places dedicated to heroes alone (Sparta, Knossos, Corinth, Pylos) and in sanctuaries of many gods (e.g., Artemis Orthia in Sparta, Athena in Lindos and Ilion, Demeter in Pergamon).[48]

The above examples reveal the widespread iconographical connection between horse and hero. It must be noted, however, that the image of the horse was not part of the specific cult associated with a particular hero, but rather a general attribute indicating superior status. In many societies the horse was a symbol of nobility. In discussing aristocratic constitutions of military origin in Eretria, Chalcis, Magnesia, and "many others throughout Asia,"[49] Aristotle wrote that only the wealthy could rear horses (*Pol.* 1289b, 1297b, 1321a). It was no accident that *hippeis* was a term applied to the Spartan elite or an Athenian property class. The horse was a signifier of a higher status, whether a member of the social elite or a hero. The significance of the horse as a heroic attribute is lucidly summarized in *LIMC*: "One of the characteristic iconographical types of the hero is the riding hero: its iconography is found from the Iberian Peninsula . . . to

45. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1052, no. 457, pl. 704.

46. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1038, no. 254, pl. 688.

47. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1034, no. 167, pl. 683.

48. *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1065. The authors continue with the following observation: "Als sich die Heroisierung der Toten seit der hellenistischen Zeit verallgemeinerte, wurde das Grab des Toten zum Heroon, zu seiner Kultstätte."

49. See Arnheim 1977, p. 54. The author cites further a fragment of Heraclides Ponticus, according to which each member of the ruling class in Cumae was obliged to keep a horse.

Figure 8. *LIMC* 254, Ephesos. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz inv. SK 810. Courtesy Museum

Asia and from Central Europe to North Africa, and comprises two basic iconographical types: I. the hero leading a horse, II. the hero on horseback."[50] These two types appear in the Greek world in the late 6th century B.C., and crystallize in the 4th century B.C. Together they form an ideal image for depicting the heroized dead all over the Greek world—even on islands with poor conditions for horse-breeding.[51]

There can hardly be any doubt, therefore, that the iconography of the Thracian horseman belongs to Greek artistic tradition. It might be assumed that since most of the reliefs date to the Roman period, we should look for their origin in Roman sculpture. Hellenistic examples exist as well,[52] however, and given the exact iconographical parallels with Greek hero reliefs, it is impossible to justify a Roman *origin* of the Thracian horseman reliefs (without ruling out iconographical similarities and artistic influence). This is consistent with the special position that Greek culture held in Thrace. The preserved Greek and Roman inscriptions from Thrace show that Roman civilization was never as wholly embraced by the local

50. *LIMC* VI.1, pp. 1065–1066.

51. *LIMC* VI.1, pp. 1065–1066. As far as the Thracian rider is concerned, however, the authors believe that he was a deity with a specific cult, and not an anonymous hero (p. 1066). Additional support for perceiving the horse as a typical element in Greek hero reliefs has recently been provided by Larson (1995, pp. 43–53), who cites the following examples: a relief from Rhodes, ca. 400 B.C., showing a female figure meeting a hero on horseback; a contemporary relief from Tanagra depicting a heroized woman pouring wine to a hero leading a horse; a 5th-century B.C. relief from Cumae (see above, Fig. 7); and a relief from Pharsalus, with youth, horse, and a heroine. Larson too regards the image of the horse as a symbol of nobility and draws parallels with the "hero stones" from India. The *Totenmahl* reliefs, on which horses are frequently depicted, were dedicated first to heroes. After the 3rd century B.C. they were typically set up for dead people as well, and so the horse, having originated as an element of aristocratic iconography, eventually became a common funerary symbol (Larson 1995, pp. 43–53; cf. Dentzer 1982, pp. 429–452).

52. E.g., *CCET* I 28, 29, IV 61, 77. See also *CCET* IV, pp. 7–8, with n. 2.

population as was Greek: it was considered much more an alien element than the traditional Hellenic cultural presence, which dates back to the times of Greek colonization on the Black Sea and Aegean coasts. The Sapaean royal line, for example, was especially Hellenized: Rhoemetalces III was eponymous archon in Athens in 36/7 and financed bull-wrestling contests there.[53]

IMAGE OF THE HEROIZED DEAD

A natural question that arises is why the image of the heroized dead was especially attractive to the Thracians. An answer can be found in the evidence for the Thracian attitude toward death. The most famous literary account is found in Herodotos 4.94:

> ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον· οὔτε ἀποθνήσκειν ἑωυτοὺς νομίζουσι ἰέναι τε τὸν ἀπολλύμενον παρὰ Σάλμοξιν δαίμονα· οἱ δὲ αὐτῶν τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον νομίζουσι Γεβελέϊζιν. διὰ πεντετηρίδος δὲ τὸν πάλῳ λαχόντα αἰεὶ σφέων αὐτῶν ἀποπέμπουσι ἄγγελον παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν, ἐντελλόμενοι τῶν ἂν ἑκάστοτε δέωνται. πέμπουσι δὲ ὧδε· οἱ μὲν αὐτῶν ταχθέντες ἀκόντια τρία ἔχουσι, ἄλλοι δὲ διαλαβόντες τοῦ ἀποπεμπομένου παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας, ἀνακινήσαντες αὐτὸν μετέωρον ῥίπτουσι ἐς τὰς λόγχας. ἢν μὲν δὴ ἀποθάνῃ ἀναπαρείς, τοῖσι δὲ ἵλεος ὁ θεὸς δοκέει εἶναι. ἢν δὲ μὴ ἀποθάνῃ, αἰτιῶνται αὐτὸν τὸν ἄγγελον, φάμενοί μιν ἄνδρα κακὸν εἶναι.
>
> They "immortalize" in the following way: they think that they do not die, but the dead person goes to the god Zalmoxis; some of them think that he is identical with Gebeleizis. Every five years they send an envoy, chosen by lot among them, to Zalmoxis, instructing him each time about their needs. They send him in the following way: some of the appointed people hold three spears. Others, having seized the hands and the legs of the person who is being sent to Zalmoxis, throw him on top of the spears, after swinging him to and fro in the air. If he dies pierced by the spears, they say that the god is favorably disposed to them; if he does not die, they blame this messenger, saying that he is a bad man.[54]

53. See Robert 1982.

54. An exceptionally detailed recent discussion of this passage is provided by Boshnakov (2000, pp. 11–93). He favors the reading γε Βελέϊζιν, and interprets the name *Beleizis as meaning "god-king," cognate with Greek βασιλεύς. The reading Γεβελέϊζιν, however, is preferable, since the position and usage of the particle γε would be rather awkward: γε expresses concentration, limitation, and intensification, and is commonly rendered as "at least"; see Denniston 1996, pp. 114–162. Its position is typically after the word it emphasizes, while in the above passage νομίζουσι is the least emphatic word. Furthermore, it seems too bold to deem *Beleizis cognate with Greek βασιλεύς, given the lack of sufficient evidence for Thracian etymology. Boshnakov understands the messenger's death as a "gradual initiation of the young dynast into priestly ranks and his rendering in service to the Goddess and the God during the fifth, sixth, and seventh year, at the end of which he became one of the principal priests of the male deities, i.e. Zalmoxis, . . . worshipped as a 'god-king'" (p. 81). His interpretation is based on the famous passage about mystery initiation in Apuleius's *Golden Ass* (11.23), which he

Later authors, such as Pomponius Mela, supply similar information, with minor variations:

> una gens Thraces habitant, aliis aliisque praeditis nominibus et moribus. Quidam feri sunt et paratissimi ad mortem, Getae utique. Id varia opinio perficit; alii redituras putant animas obeuntium, alii etsi not redeant non extingui tamen, sed ad beatiora transire, alii emori quidem, sed id melius esse quam vivere. Itaque lugentur apud quosdam puerperia natique deflentur, funera contra festa sunt, et veluti sacra cantu lusuque celebrantur.
>
> The Thracians have different names and rites. Some of them are savage and meet death with delight, especially the Getae. This is because of their different beliefs: some believe that the souls of the dead come back, others that they [sc. the souls] do not perish, even if they do not come back, others believe that souls die and that this is better than if they continued to live. For that reason some lament birth and newborn babies; on the contrary—burials have a festive character and are celebrated like sacred rites with songs and games.[55]

Solinus writes:

> concordant omnes ad interitum voluntarium, dum nonnulli eorum putant obeuntium animas reverti, alii non extingui, sed beatas magis fieri.
>
> All Thracians unanimously value voluntary death, as some of them believe that the souls of the dead come back to the upper world, while others believe that souls do not perish, but become happier after death.[56]

Taken by itself, the information given by Herodotos and later sources may be judged as dubious in terms of its historical value. What it says about the Thracian attitude toward death is supported, however, not only by archaeological data, namely numerous and rich grave inventories, but also by epigraphical evidence revealing an unusually strong belief in immortality among the Thracians. A monument from the land of the Getae (Belogradec, northeast Bulgaria) carries the following text:[57]

> Ἔνθα Δινις ἀνέθετο Ρησκουπορεος Ἥρωι
> ὑπὲρ ζωῆς πελλόμενος τέκνοιο Νύμφης [*sic*] τε κούραις
> θεαῖς εὐξάμενος· ἐγένετο γὰρ πολυλάλατος ἥρως
> ἀθάνατος.
>
> Here Dinis, son of Reskouporis, who outlived his child, dedicated [a monument] to the hero and the goddesses nymphs, after praying [to them]. He [the deceased] became a famous immortal hero.

The editor, G. Mihailov, aptly commented: "The deceased has become an immortal ἥρως. The Thracian believed that he became after death a hero or god, i.e., a hero-horseman, and lived the life of that god. Therefore the inscription is at the same time grave and votive."[58] This explains why there is no iconographical distinction between funerary and votive reliefs in the

thinks elucidates the imagery of the Letnitsa plaques (a series of images associated with hunting, on some of which a rider is depicted; see below). This interpretation seems unconvincing, given the lack of evidence to support the idea that either Herodotos's passage or the Letnitsa plaques had anything to do with mystery initiation, and the temporal and geographical divide between the texts of Herodotos and Apuleius.

55. *De chorographia* 2.18.

56. *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* 10.2–3.

57. *IGBulg* II 796. For a detailed discussion see Mihailov 1951.

58. See *IGBulg* II, p. 179.

case of the Thracian rider. The grave monuments function as dedicatory; the dead person has been immortalized and is therefore the recipient of the dedication, even though this is not explicitly reflected in the text of most inscriptions.

In Greek grave inscriptions, on the other hand, the word ἀθάνατος (unlike the word ἥρως) is almost never used for a dead person. The only comparable example known to me is *Anthologia Graeca* 16.294, where Homer is called ἀθανάτοις ἶσος ἥρως. This usage, however, is quite different from immortalizing *any* dead person and the expression used is weaker: not "immortal hero," but "hero equal to the immortal [gods]."[59] On the contrary, human mortality is typically contrasted with μνῆμα/κλέος ἀθάνατον.[60] Expressions such as "immortal soul" and "mortal body" are also used infrequently.[61]

An interesting epigram from the Roman period, indicative of Thracian belief, is preserved on a grave stele from Mesambria (Burgas region, southeast Bulgaria); one relief on the stele represents the deceased as Hecate:[62]

Ἐνθάδε ἐγὼ κεῖμε Ἑκάτη
θεός ὡς ἐσορᾷς. ἤμην τὸ
πάλαι βροτός, νῦν δὲ ἀθάνα-
τος καὶ ἀγήρως· Ἰουλία Νεικίου. . .

I, the goddess Hecate, as you see, am buried here.
I was a mortal in the past, but now am immortal and ageless;
Iulia, daughter of Nikias. . .

The strength of the Thracian belief in immortality can be surmised also from reliefs in which the horseman shows individual features of the deceased,[63] for example in *CCET* I 15, 60, and V 32, where the faces of the horsemen bear distinctive characteristics. This phenomenon can be interpreted as an attempt to personalize the impersonal, conventional image of the rider.

THE HERO ON HORSEBACK

If Thracian beliefs in immortality account for the popularity of the iconography of the heroized dead, they do not yet explain why the Thracians chose from the options available to them in traditional Greek art precisely the image of the hero on horseback (and not, for instance, the *cena funebris* or any other stylized representation of the deceased). A reason for this can be found in the important role that horse-breeding had in Thracian culture, richly documented in the ancient sources. Suffice it to recall Hesiod's Θρήκης ἱπποτρόφου (*Op.* 507) or Sophocles' φιλίπποις Θρῃξί (*Tereus,* fr. 523). As noted earlier, horses generally symbolized a superior status. Apart from the literary sources, images of horsemen are found on coins,[64] frescoes (e.g., the newly found Alexandrovo tomb),[65] the Lovec belt,[66] and the Loukovit and Letnitsa plaques, interpreted as depicting the figure of "the tribal ancestor and hero, possessor of many horses, a hunter and mighty warrior."[67] This figure of the (presumably deified) ruler-horseman can be

59. On the difference between Greek beliefs in immortality of the soul and Thracian beliefs in deification of the deceased, see also Popov 1995, pp. 52–53.

60. E.g., *CEG* I 6, 103, 177; II 486, 645.

61. E.g., *Anthologia Graeca* 7.61, 108.

62. *IGBulg* I 345.

63. See *LIMC* VI.1, p. 1067; Fol and Mihailov 1979, p. 263.

64. See, e.g., Fol 1979, pp. 214–215, nos. 5, 8.

65. The discovery of the Alexandrovo tomb was officially announced at the International Symposium "Odrysian Kingship and Nobility," held in Karlovo, Bulgaria, 15–18 January 2001.

66. E.g., Marazov 1979, pp. 244–245.

67. Hoddinott 1981, p. 171. For a new interpretation of the Letnitsa plaques, see n. 54.

traced back to the 5th–4th century B.C. on the basis of the above-mentioned numismatic and artistic evidence,[68] and was later represented through the borrowed pictorial language of the Hellenistic hero reliefs.

The Thracian fondness for horses and horse-breeding has also been seen as support for a local origin of the rider-reliefs.[69] Early Thracian religion, however, was apparently aniconic. Ralph Hoddinott convincingly concluded in the case of the Letnitsa plaques that they "must be the result of mastering the imported fashion of anthropomorphic art."[70] In addition to the absence of a native iconic tradition, the striking similarities between the Greek hero reliefs and the Thracian horseman monuments in terms of iconographical features such as tree, serpent, and hunting attributes strongly argue against a locally evolved iconography.

CONCLUSION

The reliefs of the Thracian rider exemplify important aspects of the reception of Greek art by a neighboring non-Greek population. Such reception is a complex and difficult issue, which has found diverse expressions in a territory extending from Spain to India, and from the Black Sea to Africa, depending on the form of contact between the Greeks and non-Greeks, the stability and nature of local artistic traditions, and the needs and taste of the native inhabitants. The Thracian rider monuments reveal the process by which a certain iconography is adopted, invested with new meaning, and imbued with indigenous beliefs and cultural preferences. As John Boardman observed regarding the way in which non-Greek cultures treated Greek art, "their reactions were determined by their needs, their opportunities, and for many, not least, by the idioms of their native arts."[71] He further remarked that Thracian art was "tinged deeply by the Greek, not least in the ubiquitous reliefs of the Thracian rider hero who appears as a Classical Greek cavalier."[72] At the same time Boardman points out that one should not hastily label Thracian art as provincial Greek, but be aware of its native and Oriental inspiration.[73]

Thracian rider reliefs are dedicated to numerous deities and heroes. They also appear on grave monuments, but function as dedicatory in that context as well, in view of the clearly documented Thracian belief in the immortalization of the dead. The proposal presented here is that the horseman is best understood as a conventional image for a (male) divinity of some sort. The origin of this image is to be found in the Greek hero reliefs. Interpreting the image of the Thracian rider as an artistic convention for a god or hero that does not by itself imply anything about a specific cult challenges the current view that the image represents a multifunctional god conflated with nearly every Greek, Roman, Thracian, or Eastern divinity. Reconsideration of this all-embracing syncretism can produce a better understanding of both monument and cult. I do not intend to imply that there was no earlier Thracian cult connected with riders. The existence and nature of such a cult remain an unsolved problem. Clarifying the iconography of the Thracian rider through inscriptions, however, should facilitate a solution to this problem.

68. I thank Nikola Theodossiev for bringing this to my attention.

69. See, e.g., Marazov 1979, p. 353; Konstantinov et al. 1980, passim; Popov 1993, s.v. Trakijski konnik.

70. Hoddinott 1981, p. 171.

71. Boardman 1994, p. 10.

72. Boardman 1994, p. 192.

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