



**CULTS OF THE GREEK CITIES *EN ARISTERA TOU PONTOU*:  
INTERACTION OF GREEK AND THRACIAN TRADITIONS**

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The cities on the Western Black Sea Coast, or as the Greeks refer to *en aristera tou Pontou*, are from north to south Tyras, Istros, Tomis, Callatis, Bizone, Dionysopolis, Odessos, Mesambria and Apollonia. The Ancient Greeks call the western Black Sea Coast “the left side of the Pontos”, *en aristera tou Pontou*, because it is situated on the left side to the navigators sailing from Aegean to Pontos Euxeinus via the Straits. It is a complicated task to draw geographical boundaries in the domain of religious and cultural interrelations: the model of a “regional pantheon” is a modern construct and not historical reality. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this model is a valuable methodological approach for depiction of regional cultural traits. The cults of the colony were connected with the pantheon of its *metropolis* and the contacts with the local tradition influence the religious sphere. These two aspects enable us to isolate several common characteristics.

Ovid describes in bitter verses the place of his exile Tomis, frozen by eternal winter, wild, and inhabited by ferocious people. He complains that Greek and Barbarian tongue were mixed; he had even composed a poem in honor of Augustus in Getian language and recited it in public (*Ex Ponto*, IV, 13). That very characteristic deplored by Ovid, engaged my interest: the existence of a bi-lingual, bi-cultural area on the Thracian coast of Black Sea between 7<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE.

Istros is the first settlement on the “left side” of the Pontos Euxeinos, established around 650 BCE. Apollonia Pontica follows, around 610 BCE and Odessos, at the beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Tyras is founded at the beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> or at the end of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. All four cities are *apoikiai* of Miletus. The foundation date of Tomis is subject of controversy, but it was certainly a Milesian settlement. The two Dorian western Pontic colonies are Kallatis and Mesambria. Colonists from Heraclea Pontica, a Megarian colony, founded Kallatis in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. According to one version, Kalchedonians and Megarians founded Mesambria at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (513 BCE), or, according to another, the *apoikoi* came from the Megarian cities Byzantion and Kalchedon at the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (493 BCE). Dionysopolis and Bizone were late establishments, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE respectively, and the origin of the colonists is uncertain.

The relations—economical, political, demographical, and cultural—between the colonists and the local population represent an important and complex aspect of the phenomenon of the colonization. The names of most of these cities are of Thracian origin: Istros, Tomis, Kallatis, Bizone, Odessos, Mesambria. Thracian settlements existed before the foundation of some of them and a significant stratum of pre-colonial occupation was discovered at Mesambria. The archaeological and epigraphic evidence supports the conclusion that since the foundation of the Greek colonies on the western Black Sea Coast, the peace and the concept of mutual interest prevails in the political relations between the colonists and the Thracians versus the hostilities attested for certain periods. An eloquent example is provided by the excavations of two Thracian necropoleis near Odessos with vestiges of non-interrupted occupation from 7<sup>th</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>1</sup> The foundation of Odessos about 10 km away didn't disrupt the existence of the local settlement. The discoveries of Greek ceramics there suggest the presence of commercial relations between the Thracians and the colonists. We don't yet have an exhaustive study concerning the Thracian presence in these cities. It is important to note that a reliable documentation is still lacking and the archeological data, including the onomastic evidence, rarely provide unquestionable proofs as to the “ethnic identity” of the persons.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Isaac, B., *The Greek Settlements in Thrace until the Macedonian Conquest*, Leiden 1986, p. 256 et n. 272 et 273.

In the present study I will discuss specifics for the region's religious choices and will argue that the preference for particular cults was a consequence of an interaction with the Thracian cultural traditions. This feature, in my opinion, is evidenced in two ways: through direct "loans" of local gods and heroes, albeit in a Hellenized form, and through the predominance and the popularity of certain cults versus others.

### Θεὸς Μέγας Ὀδησιτῶν

The most important deity in Odessos, at least since the Hellenistic period, *Theos Megas*, the Great god is known to us through the coins of the city. In the Roman period the Great God bears the Thracian name Derzalas/Darzalas and his portrait was the dominant type on the coins.

Silver tetradrachms of Odessos from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE present the portrait of a bearded god, with a ribbon in the hair, on the reverse—the God is standing, clad in a long chiton, turned to the left, holding a patera in his folded right hand and a cornucopia in his left hand. On his right side is the legend: ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ and on his left side, the *ethnikon*: ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ, under him is the name of the magistrate responsible for the coinage, ΚΥΡΣΑ.<sup>2</sup>

A different image of the God appears on bronze coins of Odessos from 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE: on the obverse is present a portrait identified by some numismatists as Apollo and by others as an anonymous Goddess, peer of the Great god; on the reverse the Great God is half-laying on a *kline*, with naked torso, holding a *cornucopia* in his folded left hand.<sup>3</sup>

On coins of Gordian the portrait of the god is facing the portrait of the emperor, on the obverse is presented a *corona donatica* with the name of the penteteric festival consecrated to Darzalas: *Darzaleia*.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> Pick, B., Regling, K., *Die antiken Münzen von Dacien und Moesien II*, Berlin 1910, n° 2141-2144, Pl. IV, 3; cf. L. Robert, "Les inscriptions grecques de Bulgarie", *RPhil* 33, 1959, pp. 165-236, p. 228, n. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Pick, B., Regling, K., *op.cit. supra* n. 2, pp. 522-523 et n° 2177-2184, IV, 4-7; *Sylloge nummorum Graecorum*, vol. IX, The British Museum, Part I, The Black Sea, red. by M. J. Price, London 1993, Pl. XI, 294-300; *Sylloge nummorum Graecorum*, vol. XI, The William Stancomb Collection of Coins of the Black Sea region, Oxford, New York 2000, Pl. XII, 253-257.

<sup>4</sup> Pick, B., Regling, K., *op.cit. supra* n. 2, n° 2370-2372, Pl. V, 3.

Great God Darzalas had at Odessos a temple for which a *neokoros*, elected by the *Boule* and the *Demos* of the city, was taking care.<sup>5</sup>

Among the monuments related to the cult of the Great God, a group of reliefs comes from sites more than 100 km away from the Black Sea Coast, the territory included between Nicopolis ad Istrum and Markianopolis in Moesia Inferior. On a marble plaque with dedication to God Darzalas, is engraved an image closely resembling the one on the coins of Odessos: a bearded God standing and clad in a long chiton, holding in his right hand a *patera* over a blazing altar, and in his left hand, a cornucopia:<sup>6</sup>

[Κ]υρίω Δαρζαλα Τούρβων  
βου(λευτής) εὐχαριστήριον ἀνέθ-  
[ε]κεν.

To Lord Darzalas, Tourbo, *bouleutes*, dedicated as thank-offering.

Another relief with the Thracian Horseman bears the following dedication:<sup>7</sup>

Θεῶ ἐπηκόω Δερζει Αἴλιος Διογέ-  
νης ἵππικὸς εὐξάμενος ἀνέθηκα.

To god Derzis who gives ear (to prayers), I, the *eques* Aelius Diogenes, offered while making a vow.

A bearded Horseman with a cornucopia is figured on a third relief from the same region: his horse is charging against an altar and his dog is chasing a boar.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria Repertae* I, Ed. by G. Mihailov, Sofia 1970<sup>2</sup>, 230 bis\*: ..εω....(.) / ἀγοραν[ομή]- / σας καὶ ἄρ- / ξας πιστῶς / καὶ γενόμε- / νος Θεοῦ Με- / γάλου Δερ- / ζαλα νεωκό- / ρος ὑπὸ βου- / λῆς καὶ δῆ- / μου τειμῆς / [χάριν- - -].

<sup>6</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria Repertae* II, ed. by G. Mihailov, Sofia 1958, 768.

<sup>7</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria Repertae* II, 770 = Gocheva, Z., Oppermann, M., *Corpus Cultus Equitus Thracii* Leiden 1981, II, 2, 444.

<sup>8</sup> Gocheva, Z. und Oppermann, M. (*op. cit. supra* n. 7), 1, 379 (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD).

The specific figure of *Theos Megas* in Odessos is subject to many interpretations. There is however an aspect on which the different interpretations agree: the chthonic character of the deity, as expressed by the iconographic type of its images.<sup>9</sup>

In the heart of the debate remains the question of the origin—Greek, Thracian or product of syncretism—of this chthonic cult.

Pick supposes that the designation *Theos Megas* is a euphemic name given to the “Herrscher der Unterwelt”, the Greek Pluto. This supposition is supported by the iconographical type known from coins of Odessos, presenting the divinity laying on a *kline*, position typical for the representations of chthonic divinities, while his attribute, the cornucopia, characterizes these divinities as givers of fertility. Pick associates *Theos Megas* with the anonymous Theos from Eleusis and identifies the portrait of the Goddess on the 4<sup>th</sup> century bronze coins of Odessos with the Eleusinian Thea, whose image we see on the relief of Lysimachides discovered at the *Plutonion* in Eleusis.<sup>10</sup> On the right side of the relief of Lysimachides (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) are represented, within the iconographic pattern of funerary banquet, Theos and Thea as identified by inscriptions.

Hemberg supposes that Theos Megas in Odessos was one of *Theoi Megaloi* from Samothrace.<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis however is weakened by the fact that the Great Gods of Samothrace possess their own important worship in Odessos and in most of the western Pontic cities. J. Zelazowski sees Theos Megas as a deity created in the Hellenistic period, similar to Sarapis.<sup>12</sup>

In my view, the dominating position of *Theos Megas* in the pantheon of Odessos suggests ancient roots, although any attestation before 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE is lacking, which provides the strongest argument in favor of late creation of his cult. It is plausible that *Theos Megas* is a god with chthonic functions and this explains the analogy with Pluto, Sarapis and the Thracian Horseman. On the other hand, the anonymity expressed by the name *Theos Megas*, too common and widespread, suggest identification with the Gods of Samothrace. In my opinion, *Theos Megas*

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<sup>9</sup> A more detailed discussion on the subject will offer the chapter *Theos Megas* in Chiekova, D., *Cultes et vie religieuse des cites grecques du Pont Gauche* (VII<sup>e</sup>–I<sup>er</sup> s. av. J.-C.), Peter Lang, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Pick B., “Trakische Münzbilder”, *JDAI* 13, 1898, pp. 158-162.

<sup>11</sup> Hemberg, B., *Die Kabiren*, Uppsala 1950, pp. 224-231.

<sup>12</sup> Zelazowski, J., “Le culte et l’iconographie de *Theos Megas* sur les territoires pontiques”, *Archeologia Warszawa*, 43, 1992, pp. 35-51.

was by origin a local divinity, adopted by the Greeks at their arrival. He probably occupied a secondary position in the pantheon of the city in the Classic period when the patron deity, likewise the other Milesian colonies, was most likely Apollo. Then only in the Hellenistic period Theos Megas became the City God. At that moment, at latest, this local divinity will be worshipped as Theos Megas and will adopt the iconographical traits of the Greek chthonic divinities. Nonetheless, I would not assume that only at that time Theos Megas was created or introduced. The presence of the *ethnikon*, *Odessitôn*, next to his image on the silver tetradrachms of Odessos portrays Theos Megas as the patron deity of Odessos and a similar importance points toward a cult with ancient roots. Similar emissions consecrated to a divinity and with *ethnikon* are known for Illion—to Athena Illias, for Maroneia—to Dionysus, for Thasos—to Heracles Soter, all ancestral cults in these cities.<sup>13</sup>

It is more difficult to explain why in the course of the Hellenistic period this cult became important. I am inclined to believe that it was at the outcome of a military crisis. With use of little imagination, I would even see in this “apparition” of the Great God in Odessos a story of theophania similar to the story of Phosphoros’*epiphania* at Byzantium during the siege of the city by Phillip II.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Thracian Horseman**

The western Black Sea cities and mainly their *chora* have provided a considerable number of monuments of the Thracian Horseman: around 300 to date. The majority of these monuments are dated to the Roman period, and only few to Hellenistic times (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE). The vestiges of at least 10 sanctuaries of the Thracian Horseman have been identified in the region.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Robert, L., *Monnaies antiques en Troade*, Genève, Paris 1966, p. 44, regarding the coinage of Thasos, Maronea et Odessos: “le dieu principal est ainsi mis à l’honneur dans la légende”.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Robert, L. in: N. Firatli, *Les stèles funéraires de Byzance gréco-romaine*. Avec l’édition et l’index commenté des épitaphes par L. Robert, Paris 1964, p. 155.

I will not discuss in the following pages the complex problem of the origin and the nature of the Horseman, which would require a thorough examination of vast material. I will summarize the iconographic particularities of his monuments.

The reliefs of the Horseman can be divided in two functional groups, votive and funerary, which are united by an iconographic pattern embracing several variants. The main elements are: the Horseman is hunting or coming back from hunt; usually he carries a spear in his hand; he is accompanied sometimes by a dog and the hunted animal is generally a boar. The representation is limited on the right side by a tree with an intertwined snake and/or by an altar. On several monuments the Horseman is moving toward a female figure, whose hand is raised in a gesture of benediction or salutation, or she is holding a *patera*. Sometimes the female figures are three—the three Nymphs.<sup>15</sup>

In the dedications on some monuments, the divinity is referred to as Ἡρώς (latin *Heron*), or Θεὸς Ἡρώς or Κύριος. Sometimes the deity is identified with Greek divinities, like Apollo, Zeus, Sarapis, etc. Often the Horseman is worshipped with Thracian epithets: Karabasmos, Perko, Karsenos, Mursine, Manimadzos, etc.

It is very likely that the cult of the Horseman is related to the status and the ideology of the Thracian kingship. The Thracian dynasts appear as horsemen on numerous monuments of Thracian toreutics and on monetary emissions of the Odryssian kings.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kazarow, G., *RE Suppl.* III, 1918, col. 1137-1140, s.v. Heros (Thrakischer Reiter). Darstellung des Reiters; *Id.*, *Die Denkmäler des Thrakischen Reitergottes in Bulgarien*, Budapest 1938, pp. 5-10; I. Venedikov, “Der Thrakische Reiter”, in: Gocheva, Z., Oppermann, M., *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii I*, Monumenta orae Ponti Euxini Bulgariae, Leiden 1979, pp. 1-6; Oppermann, M., “Heros equitans”, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, VI, 1, Zürich, München pp. 1073-1077 (*ibid.*, p. 1074: from the Bulgarian territory only originate more than 2000 monuments).

<sup>16</sup> Fol, A., *Politika i cultura v drevna Trakija*, Sofia 1990, p. 154, for the coins cf. J. Juroukova in: *Izkustvo* Sofia, 3-4, 1975, pp. 39-45; cf. aussi Fol, A., “La colonisation grecque en Thrace—croisement de deux cultures”, *Thracia Pontica* 4, 1991, pp. 3-14: “c’est le héros mythologique (le roi-prêtre) qui devient la figure centrale, surtout dans les deux scènes fondamentales dont l’une est la ‘chasse royale’ où l’épreuve axiologique du héros contre les basses valeurs éthiques. Le fait de terrasser la bête (de passer l’épreuve axiologique) permet au héros d’atteindre la perfection, dont l’hiérogamie marque le sommet doctrinal.”; cf. Hocart, A. M., *Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*, Chicago, London 1970<sup>2</sup>, p. 86 sq.

### The eponymous hero Melsas

In Mesambria was worshipped a hero Melsas, who was in all probability of local origin. The evidence of his worship is mainly numismatic: a portrait of a hero with a Corinthian helmet appears on the earliest coins of the city in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The helmet appears separately on coins and on reliefs. The origin of the city's name is found in Strabo and in lexicographic texts as well as in an epitaph from 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD:

εἶτα Μεσημβρία Μεγαρέων ἄποικος· πρότερον δὲ  
Μενεβρία, οἷον Μένα πόλις, τοῦ κτίσαντος Μένα  
καλουμένου, τῆς δὲ πόλεως βρίας καλουμένης  
θρακιστί.

Then Mesembria, a colony of the Megarians, formerly called 'Menembria' that is, "city of Menas", because the name of its founder was Menas, while 'bria' is the word for city in the Thracian language. (Strabo 7, 6, 1)

Μεσημβρία· πόλις ποντική. Νικόλαος πέμπτω·  
ἐκλήθη ἀπὸ Μέλσου· βρίαν γὰρ τὴν πόλιν φασὶ  
Θραῖκες. ὡς οὖν Σηλυμβρία ἢ τοῦ Σήλυος πόλις,  
Πολτυμβρία ἢ Πόλτυος [πόλις], οὕτω Μεσημβρία ἢ  
Μέλσου πόλις, καὶ διὰ τὸ εὐφωνότερον λέγεται  
Μεσημβρία.

Mesembria: pontic city. Nicolaus (Damascenus) in book fifth (says): it is named after Melsa, for Thracians call the city 'bria'. As Selymbria is 'city of Selys', Poltymbria is 'city of Poltys', thus Mesembria is 'city of Melsas', and for better resonance is pronounced Mesembria. (Steph. Byz. s.v. (= *FGrHist* 2 A 90 F 43 [45]))

Ἐνθάδε ἐγὼ κείμε Ἐκάτη θεὸς ὡς ἔσορᾷς.  
ἦμην τὸ πάλαι βροτός, νῦν δὲ ἀθάνατος καὶ  
ἀγήρω·

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Ἰουλία Νεικίου θυγάτηρ μεγαλήτορος ἀνδρός,  
 Μεσεμβρία (*sic*) δέ μου (*sic*) πατρίς ἀπὸ [Μ?]έλσα  
 καὶ βρία:  
 ζήσασα ἔτη ὅσα μοι στήλη κατέχει·  
 τρίς πέντε δὲ [ε]ἴκοσι καὶ δέκα πέντε.  
 Εὐτυχεῖτε, παροδῖται.

I rest here, Hecate the goddess, as you see. Before I was mortal, now I am immortal and undecaying, Ioulia, daughter of Nikios, the greathearted man; my fatherland is Mesembria, name formed from Melsa and bria. I lived as many years as the stele shows: 3 times 25 and 15. May you prosper, passers-by. (*Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae* I<sup>2</sup>, 345)

A marble relief from Mesambria presents a scene of sacrifice led by the main magistrates of Mesambria, the six *strategoi*, end of 2nd-beginning of 3rd centuries B.C.: on a second plan, on the left edge is depicted an altar on which is positioned a Corinthian helmet; another helmet is depicted right to the small *naiskos*. The helmet on the altar is the symbol of the eponymous hero Melsas and emblem of the city.<sup>17</sup>

The adoption of local hero cults can be seen in terms of appropriation or adaptation to the sacred heritage of the new homeland.

### **Apollo and Dionysus**

Another mode of interaction with the local religious traditions is perceptible in the popularity of certain cults versus other, although the latter were central to the metropolis. In the pantheons of the Greek cities on the Thracian coast of Pontos Euxeinos two divinities occupy a noticeably dominant position: Apollo and Dionysus.

The various epithets with which Apollo was invoked and worshipped in these cities are eloquent for the Milesian and the Megarian heritage respectively. On the other hand, the cult of Dionysus was brought along from the mother cities by the first colonists. In this my opinion diverges from the view of Bilabel expressed in his *Die*

<sup>17</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae* V, ed. by G. Mihailov, Sofia 1997, 5102.

*ionische Kolonisation*, who believes that Dionysus was a Thracian deity worshipped in the Pontic colonies.<sup>18</sup> However, I interpret the importance and the popularity of Apollo and Dionysus in the pantheon of the western Black sea cities also as a consequence of interaction with local religious values.

The existence of solar cult among the Thracians is related by various ancient sources and is discussed by scholars of the Thracian religion.<sup>19</sup>

Jordanes, the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD author of a History of the Goths reports that Philip II had undertaken a siege of Odessos, during which the priests of the city, referred to as the “priests Goths”, opened the gates and came out clad in white dresses and, with citharas in the hands, with music accompany the prayers to their gods. Astounded and fascinated, the Macedonian army had stopped before those unarmed people.<sup>20</sup>

The historical method of Jordanes is marked by an archaizing tendency and he incorrectly assimilates the Goths with the former inhabitants north and west of the Black Sea, with the Thracian tribe Getae in particular. His objective is to add glare and ancientness to the history of Goths and the name by which his work is known is *Getica* instead of *Gothica*. Taking into account this aspect doesn't make the story on the Priests of Odessos easier to interpret. I refer to this narrative preserved in a rather late source, not as an authentic report of a real

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<sup>18</sup> Bilabel, F., *Die ionische Kolonisation. Untersuchungen über die Gründungen der Ionier, deren staatliche und kultische Organisation und Beziehungen zu den Mutterstädten*, Leipzig 1920, p. 115.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. Soph. *Tereus*, frg. 582 Lloyd-Jones: “Ἥλιε, φιλίπποις Θρηξί πρέσβιστον σέλας.

“O Sun, light highly honored by the horse-loving Thracians”; Kazarow, G., *RE* VIa, 1937 s.v. “Thrake (Religion)”, col. 500-504 and col. 504-505; Fol, A. “Kotys, Son of Apollo”, in: *Studia in honorem Georgii Mihailov*, Sofia 1995, pp. 183-185; Werner, R., “Aspekte der thrakischen Kultur”, *Chiron* 29, 1999, p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Iord. *Get.* X 65: “-qua tempestate Dio storico dicente Philippus inopia pecuniae passus, Odysstanum Moesiae civitatem instructis copiis vastare deliberat, quae tunc propter vicinam Thomes Gothis erat subiecta. unde et sacerdotes Gothorum illi qui pii vocabantur subito patefactis portis cum citharis et vestibis candidis obviam egressi patriis diis, ut sibi propitii Macedonas repellerent, voce supplicis modulantes. quos Macedones sic fiducialiter sibi occurrere contuentes stupiscent et, si dici fas est, ab inermibus terrentur armati. nec mora soluta acie quam ad bellandum construxerant, non tantum ab urbis excidio abstinerunt, verum etiam et quos foris fuerant iure belli adepti, reddiderunt, foedusque inito ad sua reversi sunt.”.

incident but in order to evoke ideas and motifs associating it with the Apollonian mythological cycle: with the Apollonian bard Amphion who builds the walls of Thebes by the music of his flute and the magic power of Orpheus, also an Apollonian devotee, to subordinate with his songs the whole nature. Moreover, the existence of music of ‘Apollonian’ type among the Getae is mentioned by Theopompos in a fragment, quoted by Athenaeus.<sup>21</sup> The uncertainties surrounding the passage of Jordanes are abundant, but its overall message is in perfect conformity with the evidence of the importance of Apollo in the western Black Sea cities. The reference to the Getae confirms the existence of synergy between the traditions brought along by the colonists and the religious context in the new homeland.

Another important testimony for my argument comes from Anchialos, a *phourion* of the Milesian Apollonia. Apollonios son of Eptaikenthios, *strategos* of Anchialos, dedicates an altar to Apollo Karsenos in the reign of the Thracian king Rhoemetalkas II (19 BCE-26 BCE):

*Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae* I<sup>2</sup>, 378:

[Ἀπόλλω]νι Καρσηνω θε-  
[ῶι μεγά]λῳι εὐξάμενος  
[καὶ ἐπιτ]υχῶν τὸν βωμὸν  
[ἀνέθηκ]ε Ἀπολλώνιος  
[Ἐπταικ]ενθου Βιζυηνὸς  
[στρατη]γὸς Ἀγχιάλου  
[καὶ Σελ]λητικῆς καὶ Ῥυσι-  
[κῆς ὑπέ]ρ τε ἑαυτοῦ καὶ  
[γυναικ]ῶς Λεοντοῦς καὶ  
[τέκνω]ν ἐπὶ Ροιμηταλκου  
[Θρακῶ]ν βασιλέως.

Apollonios son of Heptaikenthos, from Bizye, *strategos* of Anchialos and of *Selletica*, and of *Rysica*, dedicated the altar to the great god Apollo *Karsenos*, since his prayer was

<sup>21</sup> Theop. *FGrHist* 2 B 115 F 216 (244) (= Athen. XIV 24, p. 627 D-E): Θεόπομπος δ' ἐν τεσσαρακοστῇ ἑκτῇ τῶν Ἱστοριῶν "Γέται, φησί, κιθάρας ἔχοντες καὶ καθαρίζοντες τὰς ἐπικηρυκείας ποιοῦνται. "Theopompos, in the forty-sixth book of his *Histories*, says: "The Getae carry out diplomatic negotiations holding citharas and playing on them."

heard, for him, his wife Leonto and his kids, during the reign of Rhoemetalkas, the Thracian king.

Apollonios son of Eptaikenthos, a Thracian by origin, according to his patronymic, *strategos* of Anchialos, is known from two other monuments: one comes from Byzie and bears a dedication to Apollo *Paktyenos* and a second is a statue of Apollo Kitharedes.<sup>22</sup>

I would like to draw attention to the local epithets Karsenos and Pactyenos and to the fact that the statue of Apollo Citharedes was dedicated in a sanctuary of the Thracian Horseman. It is obvious in my view that Apollonios has been a devotee to a Thracian solar deity identified with Apollo.

The importance of the worship of Apollo in the western Pontic cities is evidenced as well through the fact that the most popular divinity in Thrace, the Thracian Horseman, usually named in different regions of the country after various Greek deities, in the monuments from the Black Sea shore was almost exclusively named (assimilated to) Apollo; a Thracian epithet accompanies sometimes the God's name. On one relief, the Horseman is holding the attribute of Apollo, the lyre.<sup>23</sup>

As a last observation, which seems to support my argument, I will evoke the central position of Apollo in the Megarian colonies on the Thracian coast of Black Sea, Kallatis and Mesambria, versus much lesser importance in the Megarian cities on the northern and southern shore, that is Chersonesos Taurikos and Heraclea Pontica.

It is important to emphasize that the current documentation, epigraphic and numismatic, illustrates in a significant way that Dionysus and especially Dionysus Bacchos was worshiped in all cities *en aristera tou Pontou*.

Lucian, in his treatise *On the Dance* presents eloquently the prevalence of the bachic cult in the Ionian and Pontic cities.

ἡ μὲν γε Βακχικὴ ὄρχησις ἐν Ἴωνίᾳ μάλιστα καὶ ἐν  
Πόντῳ σπουδαζομένη, καίτοι σατυρική οὔσα, οὔτω  
κεχείρωται τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς ἐκεῖ ὥστε κατὰ τὸν  
τεταγμένον ἕκαστοι καιρόν, ἀπάντων ἐπιλαθόμενοι

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<sup>22</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae* I<sup>2</sup>, 374 (cf. *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae* V, 5132); Kjavkina, P. in: *Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej*, Varna 3, 2000, pp. 106-115.

<sup>23</sup> Go<sup>a</sup>eva, Z., Oppermann, M., *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* I, Monumenta orae Ponti Euxini Bulgariae, Leiden 1979, 173.

τῶν ἄλλων, κάθηνται δι' ἡμέρας τιτᾶνας καὶ κορύβαντας καὶ σατύρους καὶ βουκόλους ὄρωντες. καὶ ὀρχοῦνταιί γε ταῦτα οἱ εὐγενέστατοι καὶ πρωτεύοντες ἐν ἐκάστη τῶν πόλεων, οὐχ ὅπως αἰδούμενοι ἀλλὰ καὶ μέγα φρονοῦντες ἐπὶ τῷ πράγματι μᾶλλον ἢπερ ἐπ' εὐγενείας καὶ λειτουργίας καὶ ἀξιώμασι προγονικοῖς. (Lucian, *De saltat.* 79 Macleod)

“Bacchic dance, which is especially favored in Ionia and in Pontus, though bawdy (*satyrlike*), has so engrossed the people there that all of them at the appointed time forget everything else and sit watching Titans, Corybants, Satyrs and ox herds (*boukoloi*) all day long. And those who perform these dances are the best born and the first people in each of the cities. So far from feeling embarrassment, they take great pride in the matter, more even than in their high birth, public services, and their ancestral reputations.”<sup>24</sup>

This passage raises the question what did Lucian meant by the geographical term "Pontos"?

C. P. Jones illustrated convincingly the rapport between the description by Lucian of the Dionysiac celebrations and an epitaph of 155 BCE for a Dionysiac dancer at Amastris. Jones points out similarity regarding several aspects: the extract of Lucian and the inscription evoke a dance of a specific type, a ‘bacchic dance’, carried out not by professional dancers but by people of noble origin like the late young man Aemilianus, member probably of a Dionysiac association:

Ἔτος μὲν ἦν τριακοστὸν ἤδη μοι τόδε,  
 ἐθῆκε δ' Αἰμιλιανὸν ὄνομά μοι πατήρ,  
 ὃν ἔθρεψε Γέμινος, εἷς ἀνὴρ τῶν εὐγενῶν·  
 παρ' ἐμπύροις δὲ κῶμον Εὐίῳ θεῶ  
 τριετῆρι τελετὴν μυστικῶς ἀνήγαγον. κτλ.  
 (SEG XXXV, 1327)

<sup>24</sup> transl. C. P. Jones, “Lucian and the Bacchantes of Pontus”, *Echos du monde classique* 34, n.s. 9, 1990, pp. 53-63.

This was now my thirtieth year, and my father gave me  
the name Aemilianus, and Geminus brought me up, a man of  
noble birth. Amid incense-vessels (?) I led the revel for the  
biennial god Euhios, (and led) the rite in mystic fashion, etc.

Regarding the term "Pontos" used by Lucian, Jones supposes that it initially refers to the Roman province of the same name, but could include cities of Paphlagonia like Amastris as well. It seems to me, however, considering the epigraphic data revealing the range of Bacchic celebrations and the presence of Dionysiac associations in the Greek cities on the western and northern coasts of the Pontos Euxeinos, that the term Pontos employed by Lucian covers all areas surrounding the Black Sea.

I would like to draw attention in particular to the term *empyra*. Jones proposes to translate *empyra* in the epitaph of Aemilianus as "incense-vessels", since the meaning of offerings, intended to be burned, is not likely. Jones evokes the occurrence of the same term in a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE inscription from Sardis transmitting a prohibition from 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the priests of Ahura Mazda to take part in the mysteries of Sabazios, Angdistis and Ma.<sup>25</sup> F. Sokolowski interprets *empyra* of Sardis as "recipients of incense", while L. Robert proposes "victims intended to be burned."<sup>26</sup> A. Fol saw in *empyra* "different sacred objects carried around in fire". The author evokes a parallel with the modern folk festival of St Constantin and St Helene in Agia Eleni in Thrace and the dance on ember, where the participants carry various sacred objects.<sup>27</sup> This last interpretation is most convincing for me.

In connection with Dionysus and the fire rites, an epigram from Tomis reveals the epicleris *Pyribromos* of Dionysus and suggests in particular that rituals related to fire have been performed in this western pontic city. The dedication presents the devotees of Dionysus organized in a *thiasos* named after a woman Paso, its founder or priestess:

Ἄγνὸν ὑπὲρ θιάσοιο πυρίβρομέ σοι τὸ [δ  
ἄγαλμα]  
δῶρον ὑπὸ σφετέρας πασεν ἐργ[ασίας]  
[μ]υστικὸν ἐμ βακχοῖσι λαχῶν στέφος. . . .

<sup>25</sup> *SEG XXIX*, 1205, l. 8-10.

<sup>26</sup> Sokolowski, F., *ZPE* 34, 1979, pp. 65-69; Robert, L., *CRAI* 1975, p. 325.

<sup>27</sup> Fol, A., *Trakijiskijat Dionis*, Book II *Sabazios*, Sofia 1994, p. 77 et pp. 250-252.

Πάρμιδος, ἀρχαίην δεικνύμενος τ[ελετήν]  
'Ἄλλὰ σύ, ταυρόκερως, Ἑρμαγένεος χε[ρὸς]  
ἔργον  
[δέ]ξαι καὶ Πασσοῦς σῶζε ἱερὸν θίασον.  
(*Inscriptiones Scythiae Minoris* II (ed I. Stoian, 120))

In the name of the hallowed *thiasos*, to you, *Roaring with fire*, he offered from his own atelier, after obtaining the wreath of *mystes* among the bacchants, Someone son of Parmis, performing an ancient ritual. And you, *Bull-horned*, receive the oeuvre of Hermagenes' hand and grant salvation to the sacred *thiasos* of Paso.

In my view, the epiclesis *Puribomos* 'Roaring with fire' echoes the fact that rites related to fire formed part of the Dionysiac celebrations in Tomis. This indication offers a link with the term *empyra* in the epitaph from Amastris and with the passage of Lucian and seems to complement my interpretation that the term Pontos Lucian includes the western Pontic shore as well.

The worship of Dionysus incontestably formed part of the heritage of Miletus and Megara. However, it seems to me that local religious traditions were particularly favorable to the prominence in these colonies of the bacchic Greek worship, closely related to them.

### **The popularity of Kybele**

Another indication of contact with the Thracian religion I would see in the popularity of Kybele in the western Pontic cities attested to since the Archaic period. Again, this importance can be explained at least on two levels. On the one hand, it is a sign of the place occupied by the Anatolian traditions in the religious sphere of these cities. On the other hand, I am inclined to assign the popularity of the Great Anatolian Mother to the worship of a Great Goddess Mother by the Thracians.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> On the Great Thracian Goddess cf. e.g. Fol, A., *Trakijiskijat orfism*, Sofia 1986, *passim*; Rostovtzeff, M. I., *Rozpis Kerchenskoi j grobnitzy otkryty v 1891 godu*, St-Petersbourg 1911, *passim*; *Id.* "Le culte de la Grande déesse dans Russie méridionale", *REG*, 31, 1919, pp. 462-481; I. Marazov, "The identity of the Triballian Great Goddess", *Talanta* 20-21, 1988-89, pp. 41-51; Werner, R., „Aspekte der thrakischen Kultur“, *Chiron* 29, 1999, p. 87 sq. On the importance

A group of monuments with the Thracian Horseman offers support to this suggestion, where the goddess in front of the hero resembles Kybele but must be interpreted, most likely, as the Thracian Goddess which representation adopts the iconographic type of Kybele.<sup>29</sup>

There are without a doubt numerous features and aspects in the religious tradition of these cities, which I didn't include in the present discussion. My goal was not to exhaust the subject but to call attention to the richness of their cultural legacy. In my view, the Greek inhabitants of the cities *en aristera tou Pontou*, remaining faithful to the ancestral *nomoi* inherited by the metropolis, were in the same time able to embrace religious values of their "Barbarian" neighbors.

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of Kybele, Demeter and Artemis-Hekate-Phosphoros in the western pontic cities cf. Chiekova, D., *Cultes et vie religieuse des cités grecques du Pont Gauche* (VIIe-1er siècle av. J.-C.) Bern 2008), ch. 3,4 and 7.

<sup>29</sup> Tacheva-Hitova, M., *Eastern cults in Moesia Inferior and Thracia* (5th century B.C.-4th century AD), Leiden 1983: n° 39, 40, 55 a, 56, 74, 75, 82.