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ON ONE FORGOTTEN OLBIA RELIEF

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The article is devoted to a marble relief from Olbia, which was published by A.S. Uvarov in 1851 and has since been almost forgotten. This monument belongs to the fourth century B.C. Aspects of the religious procession presented in the relief are explored. The article argues that there is a reason to believe that the deity whom this procession is approaching is neither Asclepius nor Zeus, but Achilles.

Keywords: Greek colonies, Northern Black Sea region, Olbia, votive reliefs, religion

The history of ancient archaeology of the Northern Black Sea Region names quite a bit of outstanding archaeological discoveries made at the very beginning of the archaeological investigation of a particular monument. Two examples are the discovery of the Kul Oba burial mound on Bosphorus (1830) and the discovery of Decree in Honor of the Citizen Protogenes in the Context of the History of the Olbian polis. In their way, these monuments have marked a place in history books. Still, in the history of science, one can point to other outstanding discoveries that were regrettably long forgotten. In the latter category is the Olbia relief (see figure), published by S.A. Uvarov 170 years ago¹. The author of the publication described it as follows: “The bas-relief<...>, presenting the sacrifice to Asclepius, is in poor condition but remains essential for us: first, as the greatest of the Olbia monuments of its kind; secondly, despite the damage, it gives evidence to the artistic work of the sculptor with its distinct decoration and flawless drawing of faces, clothing and its composition in general.”

Unfortunately, this relief, which no one brought up until very recently, is most likely lost. Anyway, it is not in the State Hermitage Collection. As a result, we can only judge

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¹ Uvarov 1851, 126, table XIII.

it by the trace drawing available. We agree with S.A. Uvarov that this relief is the greatest of the Olbia monuments or at least one of them.

Having had a thorn to place it in a pedestal, the relief depicts a solemn procession of people heading towards a character sitting on a throne (there is no doubt that this is a deity). The figures represented on the relief with its emphasis on the classical art of Hellas can be confidently dated to the 4th century B.C. German researcher Anja Klöckner has recently taken notice of this monument. She believes that the procession depicted here bears a resemblance to the Parthenon frieze, suggesting that, found in Olbia, the relief could have been brought from Athens². However, this resemblance seems very formal, and the badly damaged monument doesn't give a clear idea about where it was created based on its drawings. Moreover, the monument's origin is not essential; the central question of concern is which deity the Olviopolites wanted to honor with this relief.

In the relief drawing, we can see the procession that has already approached the altar, located in front of the figure of God. God is presented as an athletically built man sitting on a chair with curved legs, leaning back slightly on its back. He greets the approaching people with his left hand and holds a vial on a high stem in his right hand, lowered down. To the right of him is a big serpent, twirled up and standing upright. A woman with a large basket on her head (*canephora*) approaches the altar, followed by an ox with a figure on each side it. In contrast, the woman depicted in the foreground plays the flute, followed by a bearded man with an unclear object in his left hand (a pot?), the procession is complete with three women and a child (probably an image of a slave).

Judging by the six letters that survived in the upper-left corner of the plate above the image of God (the shape of the letters does not contradict the dating of the relief), the monument apparently has a dedicatory inscription. However, by the time the relief was discovered, the inscription had gone, and the surviving letters ... Σ(?)ΑΤΟΜΝ(?)... prevent you from reading anything plausible here (the first and the last letters were most likely severely damaged). In any case, they do not help to interpret the image anyway.

We should note that this relief was well known during the first decades of the 19th century. So, its description is available in *Antiquities of the coast of Pontus* by Peter Köppen. We're reading: "In *Stol'ny*³, there is another bas-relief from this colony depicting a sacrifice, where most of the Olbia monuments were transported to, as can be seen from the above. Here, behind the altar, the deity is seen sitting with his left hand raised; a serpent twirls under the throne. The deity puts a vial to it with his right hand. To the side, on top of the wall, is an ugly head. Before the altar, *canephora* stands with a vessel on the top of her head. Behind her, a young ox is seen, accompanied by several figures playing on pipes. Then comes the bearded figure (a priest?) and finally two more figures are seen, a woman with a child. Nevertheless, this marble is in such a bad condition that, unfortunately, not even a single face remains on it, which is why we do not consider it

² Klöckner 2019, 11.

³ We express our gratitude to A.I. Ivanchik, who pointed out to us that *Stol'ny* is the estate of A.G. Kushelev-Bezborodko, the owner of the village of Parutino located near Chernihiv. This estate retained many Olbia antiquities collected by Kushelev-Bezborodko, including Decree in Honor of the Citizen Protogenes. P.I. Köppen and E.E. Koehler saw them over there. Some of these antiquities were transported to St. Petersburg later, and some disappeared. See also Tunkina 2002, 76, 436, 443, 444, 621.

necessary to inform⁴. Let us only note that above the relief are the following letters ... OΞATOMHI ..., which were the beginning of some inscription⁵.”

This description is somewhat different from what we see in the drawing in the book by A.S. Uvarov. First, P. Köppen noticed several flutists next to the ox on the relief, not just one. It is entirely possible that there were two of them, and they marched on either side of the sacrificial animal. Secondly, Köppen saw two figures at the end of the procession (a woman and a child), and there are four of them in the drawing (three women and a child). Third, he also read the letters of the inscription in the drawings slightly differently, but even now, they do not allow us to at least come close to understanding the inscription. We have to admit that the preservation of the relief was very poor indeed. Still, nevertheless, in the main details, the description made by Köppen and the drawing reproduced in the book by Uvarov do not contradict each other.

The main character of the relief is a god sitting on a throne with a twirled serpent next to it. This character deserves special attention. The serpent belonged to the paraphernalia of several gods of Ancient Greece – mainly Athens, Demeter, Apollo, Zeus, Dionysus, Asclepius⁶. For obvious reasons, it is impossible to visualize the female deity on the Olbia relief. The central character has nothing to do with Apollonian too. Only the vial in the deity's hand can be considered a Dionysian attribute, but this is clearly not enough. In theory, one can assume the presence of Zeus Meilichius, Philia, or Ctesias, whose image was sometimes accompanied by a serpent, considered as his incarnation⁷. However, this assumption does not hold up to reality.

It is well known that in ancient Greece, the serpent was an incarnation and then an attribute of Asclepius (the god of healing)⁸, and this symbolism has retained its significance in the medical field to this day. As noted above, A.S. Uvarov clearly recognized that the relief depicts Asclepius. You could accept it⁹ if you ignore the objects hanging on the temple wall above the deity's head, and they are vital. P. Köppen concluded that “there was an ugly head” on the wall, and the reason for this erroneous conclusion was definitely the poor preservation of the relief. In fact, a muscular cuirass and a round Hoplite shield are hung next to the deity¹⁰. Anyway, this military paraphernalia does not correspond in any way to the image of Asclepius or Zeus. In addition, on the reliefs known to us, there is always Hygieia standing next to Asclepius seated¹¹. Two further points do not match the iconography of these gods – beardless. Zeus and Asclepius were invariably depicted

⁴ “The best image of this bas-relief, two feet and ten inches long and one foot and six inches high, is in an unpublished journey through Russia by Messers Borozdin and Yermolaev; the drawing of bas-relief is kept at the Imperial Public Library in St Petersburg (P. Köppen's Note). If we can take any of these measurements, the relief dimensions were approximately 0.86 × 0.46 m.

⁵ Kyoppen 1828, 141–142.

⁶ Küster 1913, 104–119, 133–137, 140; Hoffmann 1997, 135.

⁷ Küster 1913, 105–106; Cook 1925, 1107–1112; Tiverios *et al.* 1997, no. 202.

⁸ Cook 1925, 1082–1087.

⁹ Klöckner 2019, 11.

¹⁰ A piece of a similar shield was discovered in Olbia during archaeological excavations, see Rusyaeva, Nazarov 1994, 45–52; Treister 1994, 52–53; Vinogradov 2006, 29–30.

¹¹ Holtzmann 1984, 892.



Fig. Olbia relief with the image of a religious procession (according to Uvarov 1851, table. XIII)

as adult men with abundant facial hair¹². As for the serpent's position, the god of healing usually has it twined around his staff. Finally, there is no reliable data on the cult of Asclepius in the pre-Getae Olbia (as in its metropolis)¹³. And this point is important, considering that Olbia has been thoroughly studied. Of course, given the beardless and emphasized bodily power of the main figure of the composition and the presence of weapons in it, one can assume that the procession is heading to Ares, the god of war. But his veneration in Olbia is not attested¹⁴, and he was not popular in Greece, and the monuments of his cult are very rare¹⁵. Also, women and a child participating in the procession is not in line with the cult of the god of war. The image of the serpent is not much more associated with his veneration. Though, to be fair, it should be noted that

¹² However, Asclepius has several beardless images, but he is always bearded on the dedicatory monuments.

¹³ Rusyaeva 1992, 130–132.

¹⁴ Rusyaeva 1992, 132. Even if the name of Ares reconstructed by Yu.G. Vinogradov on the heavily damaged Olbian construction inscription of the Mithridat VI era (Vinogradov 1989, 257) corresponds to reality, the dedication of the tower to the god of war cannot be considered as evidence of its Olbia cult. A.S. Rusyaeva, who accepts the version of Yu.G. Vinogradov without confidence, believes that the dedication, most likely, could have been made by the soldiers of the Pontic king who were in Olbia (Rusyaeva 1992, 132). By the way, the publishers of this inscription read not a Greek theonym, but “probably a non-Greek” personal name in it, noting that “the similar name *ασαρος* is attributed to Iranian by Zgusta” (*I. Olbia* 75).

¹⁵ Nilsson 1967, 517–519; Burkert 2004, 276–278. For the iconography of Ares, see Bruneau 1984, 490.

some kind of link between Ares and the serpent is still traced. This is evidenced by the fact that he was considered the father of the serpent killed by Cadmus (Apollod. III 4.1; Hygin. *Fab.* 178). However, his images with a snake are not attested¹⁶.

In our view, the image of the serpent on the Olbia relief should primarily indicate the connection of the main character with the chthonic world. It is no accident that images of rampant serpents can be seen on some of the dedicatory reliefs of the heroized dead¹⁷. In this context, the image of Achilles, the great hero of Hellas, who became very popular on the Periplus of the Euxine Sea¹⁸ and was revered as a god in Olbia, is obviously at issue.

In addition to the monument under review, the serpent is present on another Olbia relief which is a marble slab, probably from the end of the third century B.C., with an inscription dedicated to the Kindly Heeding Hero¹⁹. However, it is Asclepius who appears in his image as A.A. Beletsky believed²⁰. The interpretation of the Kiev scientist was almost immediately challenged by J. and L. Robert²¹. Their criticism was supported by Yu.G. Vinogradov, who suggested that there is just a “chthonic genius”²² depicted here, but his interpretation looks too vague. Most probably, this relief is dedicated to Achilles²³. It is worth noting that the publisher of this monument attributed it to Asclepius but did not exclude the possibility that Achilles Pontarchus²⁴ might be hiding under the name of a Benevolent Listening hero.

Based on the works of P. Kretschmer and I.I. Tolstoy²⁵, as well as some other researchers, H. Hommel convincingly proved the presence of the god of the underworld's features in the image of Achilles²⁶, and V.N. Toporov clearly demonstrated the chthonic-serpentine real cause of this image²⁷. Having analyzed the evidence of ancient authors about the Black Sea Achilles, and archaeological finds associated with his cult, one of the authors of this article concluded that this Homeric hero is originally typical for the religions of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, a dying and resurrecting deity – a companion of the polyonymous Great Goddess of all things²⁸. The main theriomorphic chthonic symbol of Achilles in Olbia was undoubtedly a serpent, evidenced by its repeated images on numerous graffiti dedications to this divine hero²⁹. N.V. Pyatysheva suggested that on Levka, “there was a dwelling, perhaps mythical, of a giant serpent, worshipped by local tribes, long before the arrival of the Greeks here³⁰.”

¹⁶ See Bruneau 1984, 490–492.

¹⁷ Blümel 1966, Abb. 103, 111, 119, 122.

¹⁸ Ivanchik 2005, 68–82.

¹⁹ Rusyaeva 1992, 74, рис. 21.

²⁰ Beletskiy 1969, 155–161.

²¹ *Bull. ép.* 1970, 408.

²² Vinogradov 1984, 59, note 29.

²³ Yaylenko 1980, 88; Rusyaeva 1992, 74–75.

²⁴ Beletskiy 1969, 160.

²⁵ Kretschmer 1913, 305–308; Tolstoy 1918.

²⁶ Hommel 1981, 53–76.

²⁷ Toporov 1990, 64–95.

²⁸ Schaub 2002a; 2002b; 2007, 74–75, 182–198; 2011, 157–167.

²⁹ See, for example, Rusyaeva 2005, 472, fig. 4–12.

³⁰ Pyatysheva 1966, 68.

The rise of the cult of Achilles on Levka, and Olbia and its surrounding area was probably mainly because the archaic Achilles, the serpent, of the Greek colonists met here with a local deity who had similar features. If the chthonic, marine, soterian, healing, and a number of other aspects of the cult of Achilles can be explained in one way or another, based on Greek realities, then it is hardly permissible to interpret the myths about Achilles possessing cannibal horses in a such a way (Philostr. *Her.* XIX. 20; comparison with the mares of King Diomedes of Thrace is hardly acceptable. Especially impossible is to find in them a foundation for understanding the testimony of Achilles the ogre (Philostr. *Her.* XIX. 18)³¹. In this connection, the results of the excavations made by S.B. Buyskikh of the sanctuary of Achilles on Cape Beikush, which dates back to the Archaic period, are significant. The materials obtained here contain graffiti with the name of this deity, images of serpents³², and various magical symbols. This allowed V.G. Lazarenko to more clearly and convincingly demonstrate the ancient local “serpent” real cause of the cult of Achilles in the Northern Black Sea region³³.

In light of the above, it is most logical to assume that our relief represents the scene of the worship of Achilles, who not only in Olbia but also in the territories subject to it, was already revered in the archaic era as a powerful god with various functions, and in Roman times, having received the official epiclesis Pontarches, even took an undivided dominant position in the Olviopolites Pantheon.

The extensive iconography of Achilles, available on the monuments of Greek art³⁴, can neither confirm nor refute our interpretation. Similar images of the seated, half-naked, beardless hero depicted in the Olbia relief are known, but a serpent never accompanies them. At the same time, the permanent attribute of Achilles is a weapon – both offensive and defensive. Therefore, it seems quite natural that one graffiti dedication to Achilles, found in his sanctuary on Beikush (Olbian chora), depicts a hoplite in a helmet with a sword and a round shield³⁵, one we see in the relief under consideration.

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³¹ Shaub 2002a, 356–367.

³² Buyskikh 2001, 38–39, figure. 3, 2, 3, 6; Lazarenko 2018, 372, fig. 2.

³³ Lazarenko 2018, 300–308.

³⁴ See Kossatz-Deißmann 1981, 37–222.

³⁵ The graffiti is made on the turned wall of the Ionian amphora of the second half of the 6th century B.C. It is possible that the creator of the image of a walking hoplite carved on this shard meant Achilles himself (Buyskikh 2001, 37, Fig. 3, 11). The exceptional importance attached to the shield of Achilles in mythology is evidenced by the cosmic scale of the images presented on this subject by Hephaestus: earth, sky, ether, winds, clouds, moon, sun, stars (Hom. *Il.* XVIII. 478–489; Quint. Smyrn. V. 4–10).

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