
A NEW RELIEF OF THE THRACIAN HORSEMAN FROM HALMYRIS

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Abstract: *The article analyzes a fragmentary marble relief of the Thracian Horseman, discovered in 2003 in the ancient city of Halmyris (Tulcea County, Romania), and dated to the beginning of the 3rd c. AD. Even if – taken separately – the iconographic elements (the horseman hunting and impaling the boar with a spear, the dog, the serpent coiled on a tree, touching a burning altar with its tail, the lion and the bull) appear on many other monuments dedicated to the god, their combination and the manner in which they are represented make this a unique relief.*

Rezumat: *Articolul analizează un relief fragmentar de marmură, cu reprezentarea Cavalerului Trac, descoperit în 2003 în Cetatea Halmyris (jud. Tulcea, Romania) și datat la începutul sec. al III-lea p.Chr. Deși – luate separat – elementele iconografice (cavalerul la vânătoare, împungând cu sulița un mistreț, câinele, șarpele înfășurat pe un pom, cu coada atingând un altar care arde, leul și taurul) apar pe multe alte monumente dedicate zeului, combinația și modul în care acestea sunt reprezentate dau reliefului un caracter unic.*

Keywords: *relief, Thracian Horseman, Halmyris, Severan period.*

Cuvinte cheie: *relief, Cavalerul Trac, Halmyris, perioada severică.*

The object of this paper is a relief, depicting the Thracian Horseman, which was discovered in 2003, during systematic archaeological excavations in Halmyris. This is the southeastern end of the Danubian limes, the last fort before the Danube Delta (Fig. 1).

The stone was identified in the debris formed between the western side of the fortification and the side of the western gate's northern bastion (Fig. 2), during an excavation aimed at uncovering the small gate between the bastion and the defense wall, in an area that will most probably be part of the visiting itinerary and therefore will have to be restored.

The massive, compact debris that descended westwards at an angle of approximately 45° was formed mainly of large and medium, well-cut blocks of stone that broke off from the external facing of the defense wall and the bastion, but also of smaller stones, fragments of roof tiles, bricks and mortar from the wall's filling. In these conditions, the relief fragments were identified with difficulty at a depth of approximately 1.20-1.30 m from the preserved upper side of the defense wall. The

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relief was probably broken in Antiquity and was reused as construction material during the massive reconstruction of the *limes* during Emperor Justinian's reign.



Fig. 1. Location of Halmyris.

The cult of the Thracian horseman was an extremely popular one, as indicated by the over two thousand monuments in connection with it. Although the earliest monuments depicting the Thracian horseman are dated to the Hellenistic period (3rd c. AD), the cult reached its highest popularity during the Principate (especially starting with the second half of the 2nd c. AD)¹ and lasted up to the 4th c. AD.²

¹ Oppermann 2006, 1.

² For the earliest and latest examples in Moesia Inferior see Hampartumian 1979, 8.

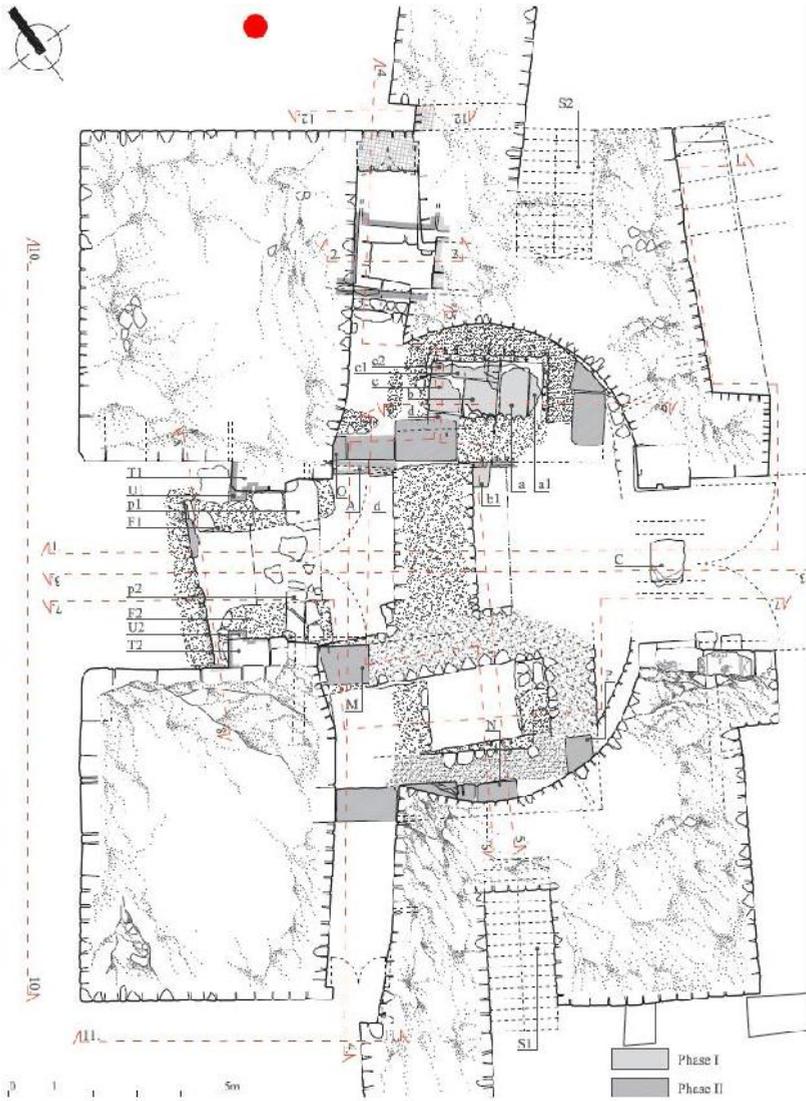


Fig. 2. Place of discovery – red dot (after Mărgineanu Cârstoiu, Apostol 2015, 39).

The large number of monuments attracted early on the attention of scholars, which led to the publication of a series of catalogues, accompanied by iconographical and historical analyses. As the relevant bibliography is extremely rich, we content ourselves to mention the first corpus published by Gawril Kazarow,³ followed by those published

³ Kazarow 1938.

by Nubar Hamparțumian, Zlatozara Gočeva and Manfred Oppermann in the EPRO series⁴ and crowned by the monumental monographic volume published by Manfred Oppermann, which provides an exhaustive description of the cult's iconography.⁵



Fig. 3. The relief (photo Cătălin Bodea).

A central place in the bibliography of the Thracian rider is occupied by the fundamental work undertaken by Dilyana Boteva, who approached the religion of the Thracian horseman through database analysis, treating the significance of the different mythological scenes and the relation between the characters depicted, the dedicants, the foreign artistic influences, as well as the place of the riding hero in the Thracian pantheon, thus taking us forward on the way to better understanding the cult.⁶

The present paper represents a modest contribution to the knowledge on this remarkable religious cult, through the publication of a previously unknown monument.

⁴ Hamparțumian 1979; Gočeva, Oppermann 1979; Gočeva, Oppermann 1981; Gočeva, Oppermann 1984.

⁵ Oppermann 2006.

⁶ Boteva 2011, which also mentions previous relevant bibliography; Boteva 2016a and Boteva 2016b.

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Fragmentary (three preserved fragments), votive, marble relief (Fig. 3-4). Maximum preserved height: 34 cm; minimum preserved height: 18 cm; width: 39 cm. The relief's lower part is preserved entirely, which, besides providing us with its total width, it also shows that the relief was trapezoidal, with a rounded top.



Fig. 4. The relief (drawing by Camelia Geanbai).

The relief is separated into two panels, which is rather rare.⁷ The lower panel is approximately 33.5 × 8 cm; the stripe that separates the two registers and, at the same, the surface of the panels from the relief's margin is 2.5 cm wide, and appears on other reliefs at the beginning of the 3rd c. AD. In the lower panel's left side is depicted a lion (facing right), with two incisions (4 mm in diameter) below its mouth and one in the area of its genitals; to the right there is a bull (facing left), with two incisions in the area where its fore legs join the body, and one under its right ear.

⁷ There are 20 such monuments (Boteva 2016a, 313), but only nine are entirely preserved – Oppermann 2006, nos. 460 (lion fighting human), 467 (unidentified animal, hound chasing boar), 475 (hound fighting boar), 517 (hounds, stag, lion, boar), 531 (hounds chasing stags), 555 (lion fighting boar), 729 (human), 894 (bull fighting lion and human fighting boar), 897 (hound fighting stag, lion fighting boar) and 917 (lion and lionesses fighting bull, boar and stag).

In the upper panel, we have the classical scene depicted on Thracian Horseman reliefs. Most of the panel's surface was occupied by the rider and his horse; the rider is now lost, and from the horse (striding right) we can still see the legs (with incisions over the hooves) and the head with reins. There is also the often-depicted scene of the boar hunt,⁸ one of the two scenes we find associated with animal-fight friezes,⁹ such as the one in the lower part of our relief. Below the rider's left side, there is a hound, and in front of the rider there is a wild animal, facing right, with one incision between the hind and fore legs, as well as two on his forehead. Usually, two animals are depicted in this position: a boar or a stag. The body of the animal on our relief is depicted as spotted, and a stag is depicted with similar spots on a relief from Marcianopolis, dated to the first half of the 3rd c AD.¹⁰ The two incisions on the forehead¹¹ could also indicate the place where bronze horns could have been fixed. But the clear depiction of a large mane determines us to identify the animal as a boar. The boar is resting on its hind legs (a position attested – as far as we can say – only once, although the boar is facing the hound),¹² with the horse's left hoof set above its head. The boar is also struck by the rider's spear (although we cannot see the continuation of the spear behind the right foreleg), which is also a practically unattested motive (there is a scene where the spear almost touches the boar).¹³ Near the relief's right margin there is a serpent, coiled around the branches of a tree; its tail is hanging down, almost touching the side of a rectangular, burning altar, depicted in a three-dimensional perspective. According to Dilyana Boteva, the altar is the element through which the horseman connects with a higher divinity, namely the serpent.¹⁴

It is very difficult to assign the relief to one of the types established by Hoffiller, Kazarow and Georgieva.¹⁵ It probably does not belong to Type C, as the hound does not leap towards the prey/animal held by the horseman. The main character of the scene, the rider, is depicted striding to the right, and not galloping, which would indicate the Type A, where the horse and rider are either still or striding rightwards.

⁸ For the significance of the boar hunt in the cult of the Thracian Horseman and in the Thracian religious universe in general, see Boteva 2002, 818-819.

⁹ Boteva 2016a, 314.

¹⁰ Gočeva, Oppermann 1981, no. 194 = Oppermann 2006, 32 and no. 350, T. 31.

¹¹ The use of such incisions in the relief is strange; they do not seem to play any aesthetic role, yet there is no clear indication (e.g. metal residue) that they had a practical use, such as for fixing metal attachments. Until there is more information on this issue, we content ourselves with noting these strange occurrences.

¹² LIMC VI, no. 466 = Oppermann 2006, no. 775, T. 66.

¹³ Hamparțumian 1979, no. 18 = Oppermann 2006, 20, no. 166, T. 66.

¹⁴ Boteva 2000, 114-115.

¹⁵ Hoffiller 1902, 194-195; Kazarow 1938, 5-9; Georgieva 1965, 113-115.

Still, at the same time, our relief also depicts a hunting scene, which is a characteristic of Type B reliefs. On type A we do not find the hunting scene, although the hound¹⁶ sometimes accompanies the rider (the lion only four times),¹⁷ and very rarely the boar alone also appears from behind the altar or a group of women, but always facing left.¹⁸ Our relief also does not fit exactly into any of the categories registered in the iconographic lexicon.¹⁹ In Dilyana Boteva's typology,²⁰ our relief would fit into Representation-Narrative III – 1 (the Horseman hunting the boar) type.

M. Oppermann separates the hound/boar fight scene into two types, each with two subtypes. In the first type the hound and the boar run in the same direction, while in the second, the animals face each other. Our clearly belongs to the first type, but the scene on the Halmyris relief does not fit in any of the subtypes, as the hound has not yet reached the boar. It therefore seems to be an exception or to belong to another type/subtype, yet to be defined.

As far as chronology is concerned, given the rather good level of craftsmanship, we propose the relief was created during the first half of the 3rd c. AD, in one of the larger urban workshops in the region, maybe Tomis.

As one can see, there seems to be an endless series of iconographic variations on relief of the Thracian horseman, and the present monument adds to this richness, as its iconography proves to be rather unique. It is also an important monument as it is the first to be found at Halmyris, thus adding another location on the cult's point-of-discovery map.

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¹⁶ Oppermann 2006, no. 14, 15, 21, 26, 123, 297.

¹⁷ LIMC VI, nos 453-456.

¹⁸ Oppermann 2006, no. 8, 117, 118.

¹⁹ LIMC VI, 1019-1081.

²⁰ Boteva 2011, 97.

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