

Ancient southeastern Europe and the classics.

Traditions and transformations of cultural phenomena (The Thracian Horseman)

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One of the most fruitful ideas stemming from the links between classical studies and anthropology is the complex research of different life phenomena on the basis of the interactions of the different cultures, each of them being viewed as a specific system of models. In this way, the old research pattern with Hellenocentric orientation remained in the background, having proved to be rather ineffective. The classical disciplines, such as history and philology, had to accept the challenge of the new methods of comparative analysis. This is why, very fruitful proved to be the methods using the so-called comparative phenomenology, being mainly based on the comparison of different phenomena in a broad perspective, and deriving the transformations which appear in the course of their transmission.¹ Thus, every borrowing through cultural contacts essentially meant transformation. The identification of differences in separate and ostensibly identical phenomena is an expression of the specificity of their historical content or ideological charge.

A special place in classical studies was allocated to rites, being an underestimated phenomenon in the life of society, as a key phenomenon in human culture and its principles. In practice, almost all components of ancient culture: myth, history, literature, philosophy etc. were re-evaluated through the prism of the rite. Although the early studies in this field convey the rush of the first discovery, they must be highly appreciated. On their basis, present-day research in the sphere of the rite is introduced in a "calmer" and more profoundly differentiated context, which applies more sophisticated methods in working with ritual practices, taking into account the extremes of ritualism.²

Since in the proposed work the figure of the Thracian Horseman is perceived in the context of the ritual reality and of essentially different narratives, generated by it, I have accepted some postulates of a more general nature, which have emerged precisely as a result of the "calmer" and more profoundly differentiated context of research today. I accept that the ritual action is above all a human activity embodied in a socially significant act, therefore it brings a historical and ideological charge. The narration is a sequence in time, linking different stages by virtue of an inner necessity. The narrative is entirely in the past. Reality, however,

does not automatically generate the legend, i.e. the narrative. Moreover, the form of the narrative is not created by reality, but by language, therefore every narrative invariably comprises the *poiesis* element.³

One of the major figures that crystallized in the culture of Southeastern Europe is that of the Thracian Horseman, which has collected many functions and which brings many ideas, this in itself being sufficient reason for studying the individual aspects of that figure. One of its numerous aspects is the link between the Thracian Horseman and a female figure.

The Thracian Horseman has been analysed so far predominantly in iconographic terms and only recently it was placed in a broad Indo-European context.⁴ According to V.N.Toporov, the reliefs of the Thracian Horseman reveal a concrete image, a concrete function and a concrete meaning (although they may remain unknown to the researcher), on the one hand, but on the other hand they propose a universal aspect of the problem, general and typological, an accumulation of functions and meanings, unified in a synthetic model. Analysing the Thracian Horseman in terms of its composition, the cited author has found the existence of the common pattern of the world tree, while at the same time highlighting a number of essential deviations which make up the historical content of its transformation in the Thracian religious and cultural tradition. Thus, V.N.Toporov perceives in the images of the Thracian Horseman the projection of the archaic king-priest who takes part in the sacrificial rite, interpreting the horse as a sacrificial animal and as an essential element of the ritual situation. In the context of the comparative analysis, the author brings to the foreground the life-death-immortality theme, which is new with respect to the pattern of the world tree. What is more, he also launches the idea that a female figure corresponds to the Thracian Horseman, which also suggests a link with the horse, and that the names "Ἡρώς and "Ἡρα are not only etymologically related, but are derived from a common stem to denote a pair of deities representing a provisional pair of spouses, developing at different levels. Toporov does not comment interpretations, such as female assistant, servant, perceiving in her the female correlate of the king, being also connected with horses of the type of the Celtic Epona and the Mycenaean Πότνια ἱππεία.

The author's theses are essential for the further studies of the Thracian Horseman in the context of the problems related to the Heros. Since the Heros in Thrace is known with epithets like *Kyrios Heros*, *Theos Heros*, *Kyrios Theos* or simply *Theos*, it can be considered in connection with two types of *heroes* in the Hellenic cultural tradition, who are believed to be of a cult origin. Both types of *heroes* are related to the female figure, which gives an opportunity to study the links between them. The cult practices inherent to that type of heroes and heroines are basically connected with the underground world.⁵

Some of the essential examples are presented by the figure of Trophonius/Trephonius who was buried in Lebadeia (Boeotia). He is a chthonian deity and has a sacred grove. He is worshipped as a great deity, being also known as a prophet (soothsayer), being associated with a rite of a mysterial nature. A characteristic feature of that rite is the special purification and the dressing in white clothes. In some sources he is referred to as Zeus-Trophonius, while others associate him with some personality about whom curious stories are being told, but they have nothing in common with the cult figure of Trophonius.⁶

The figure of Amphiaraos is another essential example. He was also solemnly worshipped in a sanctuary close to Oropos (Boeotia). He was also known as a prophet, and those who wished to speak to him had to become pure first by refraining from food for one day, from wine for three days, and after offering a ram as a purification sacrifice, to sleep for one night on the ram's skin. Only then they could expect prophetic dreams. Some legends are also connected with Amphiaraos. When he was banished from Thebes, the earth opened below him and swallowed him together with his chariot. According to another legend, there is a sacred place surrounded by columns on the road from Thebes to Potniai. It was there that the earth opened to swallow Amphiaraos. The narratives contain the idea about the descent to the nether-world, in the concrete case with a chariot, which bring him close to the figure of Trophonius. The Hero is also worshipped as Zeus-Amphiaraos.⁷ Aristaos is another Heros connected with Boeotia. Although his figure is rather obscure and tends to be associated more with Apollo, he was also referred to by the appellation of Zeus-Aristaios.⁸

Here we shall add two more figures with which another characteristic features of mysterial rites is associated: the periodic appearance and periodic quests. Hyakinthos, a young *heros*, loved and killed by Apollo, buried and mourned, but returning periodically. The figure of the Bithynian Hylas is also typical in this respect: the Bithynoi organized the periodic search for him, roaming in the forests and mountains.⁹

The *heroes* from the Greek tradition, presented above, are depicted with stable characteristics of chthonian deities, with their prophetic talents and being worshipped with mysterial rites. They are invariably associated with Zeus and bear names with a concrete meaning: Trophonius (who feeds), Amphiaraos (surrounded by something sacred) and Aristaos (probably connected with the notion of "the best"). These appellations are definitely related to others of this type: Zeus Eubuleos (who gives good advice), Zeus Meilichios (benevolent), or Pluto/Pluteus (god of wealth). The terrestrial deity is very rarely associated with Hades. In Homer the chthonian deity is 'Αἰδης, brother of Zeus Καταχθόνιος, husband of Persephone and in a certain sense - god of revenge.¹⁰ In Hesiod Zeus is referred to

as καταχθόνιος and χθόνιος.¹¹ However, already in *Theogonia* that chthonian Zeus is already not the severe, grim and awesome master of the dead, but that benevolent god to whose generosity, as well as to the generosity of Demeter, the farmers appealed in their prayer for an abundant harvest.¹² Thus, the Greeks after Hesiod started avoiding the name of the chthonian deity and started replacing these names by others that suggest more benevolence on his part: Trophonius, Pluto and Meilichios. In this way the name Hades gradually disappeared, remaining more like a taboo-name, without being adapted to a deity requiring a specific type of worshipping, except in Elis. There the temple in which the chthonian deity Hades was worshipped was shrouded in awe and mysteriousness, it was opened only once a year, and no one except the priest was allowed to enter there.¹³

In the Greek tradition Hera was also considered to be a chthonian goddess, mainly on account of her "vegetative" characteristics. In the legends she is referred to as Euboaea, Prosymna and Acrea. Even the wheat ears are called "Hera's flowers". More serious arguments about her chthonian nature can be found in the myth that she is the mother of the monster Typhoeus,¹⁴ connected with the underground forces and the ultimate enemy of the Olympians. In Hesiod, Ge is the mother of Typhoeus.¹⁵ One of Hera's most important characteristics is that she is the mother of Hekate, whose name, origin and nature remain unclear and rather vague in the Greek tradition. Her name does not occur in Homer and no mythology was generated around her. She lacks a definite genealogy. The legends associated with her are scarce. She is associated with a particularly vague epithet - Angelos - which ranks her next to Demeter and Artemis. The legend which has reached us through the 5th century BC writer Sophron narrates that a young maiden by the name of Angelos hid in a place desecrated by the birth of a child or by the presence of a corpse, in order to protect herself from her mother's anger. The maiden was purified by the Kabeiroi close to the Acheron river, after which a place in the chthonian world was attributed to her. A gloss in Hesychius suggests that Angelos was an epithet of Artemis from Syracuse. The purification of the maiden called Angelos by the Kabeiroi linked her to the Samothracian mysteries in which Hekate also played a definite role, because it is known that they were dedicated to her and to the Kabeiroi. According to Strabo, Hekate belonged to that circle of Thracian-Phrygian cults among which the chthonian goddess was the central figure, the distinctive characteristic being the orgiastic cult.¹⁶

The island of Aegina was attested as central in the worshipping of Hekate, and the mysteries connected with it continued until the 5th century. Their origin is attributed to the Thracian Orpheus. In Samothrace the goddess was an inseparable part of the mystic rites of the Kabeiroi. Hekate's cult is traced along the Aegean islands, in the mainland and along the coast of Asia Minor: Troad, Paphlagonia,

Gallatia, Lydia, Karia and Lykia. The city of Hekatesia is known to be associated to the Karian Zeus - Paramerios. Hekate is believed to have taken the place of the Great Goddess in Asia Minor and of being the wife of Zeus. A major centre for Hekate's cult was the city of Lagina, in which an annual festival called κλειδὸς πομπή was organized - an allusion to the mysteries of the chthonian world.¹⁷ There is also scarce evidence associating Hekate with Zeus-Meilichios.¹⁸ This fact, as well as other testimonies, give grounds for seeking links between the chthonian god and the chthonian goddess.

Within Hellas it is possible to cite examples of the worshipping of a pair of chthonian deities. In Lebadeia (Boeotia), close to the sanctuary of Trophonius, Zeus Basileus is worshipped together with Hera Henioche (holding a bridle).¹⁹ This epithet is not typical of the classical Hera and it occurs very rarely. It may be related to another of Hera's epithets - Hippias ("equine"), who was worshipped together with Poseidon Hippios in Elis.²⁰ Hera is attested with the epithets *basilis* and *basileia* in Argos and in Athens, which are very seldom associated with her, in order to believe that they expressed the classical links between Zeus and Hera. According to some scholars, Zeus and Hera were linked to the ancient tradition of presenting a sacred marriage.²¹ Their characteristics of Zeus and Hera, attested in areas like Boeotia, Elis and Argolis, have a chthonian character, did not develop later and can be considered to be of a substrate nature with respect to the later classical couple of Zeus and Hera. Here it is appropriate to add also the evidence in Pausanias about the so-called Black Demeter.²² Her worshipping has been attested in Phigalia (Arcadia), where the same stories circulated about Poseidon's copulation with Demeter, as in Telpussa (Arcadia). According to the inhabitants of Phigalia, Demeter gave birth not to a horse, but to a goddess whom the Arcadians called Despoina. In Phigalia, where the Azanes settled, there was a cave - the hiding place of the horse-wife Demeter. There was also an old wooden statue depicting Demeter with an equine head, holding a dolphin and a bird in her hands, her mane being intertwined with snakes and images of other animals. This image of Demeter corresponds most accurately to the king's female correlate, who is also associated with the horse: the Celtic Epona and the Mycenaean Potnia Hippias.

Since we are referring to relict phenomena which were widespread in a Palaeo-Balkan context, it would be appropriate to adduce also the evidence about the couple Zeus and Dione, worshipped in Dodona. In the ancient narrative there is a categorical identification between Dione and Hera, which belongs to Apollodorus and was rendered in a scholion to Homer's *Odyssey*.²³ Only in Dodona Zeus is a chthonian deity with prophetic characteristics that bring him closer to Zeus-Trophonius in Lebadeia. It was only in Dodona that he was considered to be the husband of an earthly goddess known as Dione-Hera. This Pelasgian

god of Dodona, around whom the sacred servants Selloi lived and made his will public, is described unambiguously in Homer's Iliad.²⁴ Hera was also attested in the ancient narrative with the epithet Pelasgis.²⁵ With these characteristics, as well as with their marital bond on a chthonian basis, they were alien to the classical Greek Pantheon.

It is assumed that the chthonian Pelasgian couple, later referred to with the names of Zeus and Dione, was related to an old Thracian couple that was identified above all on the territory of Pautalia as Zeus and Hera during the Roman period.²⁶ Inscriptions are known from the Western Thracian lands, associating Ζεύς and Hera with the official cult of Jupiter and Juno. This fact has given grounds to researchers to identify the presence of a cult of the divine couple with Thracian characteristics.²⁷ The inscriptions from the Western Thracian lands with a dedication to Zeus and Hera contain appellations with the local epithet Karistorenoi. In the sanctuary in which these votive inscriptions have been found there are also many votive tablets on which the two deities are designated only as *kyrioi*. It is also believed that this epithet, connected with the divine couple, was a peculiarity of the Thracian lands only.²⁸ The analysis of the epithets originating from the Thracian lands shows that the epithet *kyrios* was most frequently associated with the Thracian Heros, as well as with Apollo, who in turn himself had a number of epithets presenting him as a progenitor god. Similar epithets are also associated with Zeus-Zbelsourdos, with Zeus-Sabazios and with Asclepius, as well as with female deities like Artemis, Hera and Hekate. Particular significance in terms of its content and nature should be attributed to the inscription from Dragoman, in which the dedication is to Κυρία "Ἡρᾷ καὶ κυρίῳ "Ἡρωι.²⁹

It is hardly justified to associate the confines of the cult to the pair of deities with the Western Thracian territories only, although this characteristic feature is most clearly articulated there. In a typological perspective, as well as in the context of relict phenomena, it is also possible to cite a pair of deities known with their epithet "Zerynthian" - along the Hebros river only Apollo and Artemis were known with that epithet. There is another known evidence about the presence of a temple of Hera and of the Zerynthian Apollo in the same area. According to some researchers, these Thracian "Apollo" and "Artemis" had strongly manifested chthonian characteristics. The association of the chthonian deity Pluto with Hera is also known from the area of Byzantion.³⁰

From the above it appears that there was a cult of a pair of deities with a marked chthonian image in the Palaeo-Balkan region. That cult was manifested at different levels. One of its manifestations was in the marital couple that took and organized the so-called "sacred marriage". In the "language" of the image there is a particularly eloquent example in Thracian toreutics: the Letnitsa treasure with the

indisputable image of the sacred marriage. Along these lines it is also possible to decipher the "signs" in the Rogozen treasure, where the deities are denoted as Hyperborean.³¹

The cult of the divine couple demonstrated possibilities of being manifested through different transformations and in mysterial myths which were widespread in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The chthonian deity of the type of Homer's 'Αἴδης or of Hesiod's Καταχθόνιος in Hellas gradually disappeared, being transformed into a male chthonian deity with markedly "vegetative" functions. This is also suggested by the contaminations of the type of Zeus-Trophonius, Zeus-Aristaios and Zeus/Meilichios, as well as by names like Pluteus/Pluto, Eubuleus etc. The chthonian goddess of the type of Hera, Hekate and the Black Demeter also underwent similar transformations. It was predominantly with these characteristics that the divine couple entered the mysterial myths that were widespread in the Eastern Mediterranean cultural traditions.³² Therefore, it is possible to decipher the image on the jug from Borovo as Zeus and his mysterial wife.³³ Reflexions of the mysterial myth can be perceived in the abundance of identifications of the Thracian Heros with Zeus, Hades, Dionysos, with the chthonian god Zalmoxis, with Megas Theos and with the Samothracian Hades. As regards Hera (a name with conditional characteristics), similar reflexions can be detected in the identifications with Artemis-Kyria and Artemis-Hekate, being precisely a sign of the traditional and of the transformed in the cultural phenomena of Southeastern Europe, which is both syncretic and genetic.

The manifestations of the divine couple in its chthonian aspect can also be associated with the varied iconography of the Thracian Horseman, where they shaped that chthonian layer through the language of images and art.

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NOTES

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