

Iconography of Thracian Knight. Symbol and significations

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Abstract: *The image and the symbol of The Thracian Knight could be found all over the Greek-Roman world, mainly at Dacians and their successors. Thus, Kernbach mentions deities known as Thracian Knight and The Danube Knights and Mircea Eliade shows that Herodotus, some centuries later the so-called monuments of „knight heroes” flourish in The Balkan area².*

The Thracian Knight shone over The Pontus Euxinus, of the cities of Histria, Callatis, Odessus. We also find him at Romula, in Dacia, where this figure is not exactly associated to Cybele. At Constantza, the knight-god with his spear is represented with wings, like a sort of genius of death, resulting that the figure of the Thracian hero had funeral competences. In the same context, Stela de la Svistov, as a tribute to deceased Heroni offers us the picture of a god facing a sort of huge dragoon that has nothing to do with the saviour snake, solidary to The Life Tree, he rather represents death.

Key-words: *the Thracian knight, the knight-god, iconography, Greek-Roman mythology*

The image and symbol of The Knight-God could be found all over the Greek-Roman world, mainly at Dacians and their successors. Thus, Kernbach mentions deities known as Thracian Knight and The Danube Knights and Mircea Eliade shows that Herodotus, some centuries later the so-called monuments of „knight heroes” flourish in The Balkan area³.

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Most of the stelae containing The Thracian Knight do not have the huge dimensions of own sanctuaries, that have not been identified as such. Many measure between 20 and 30 centimeters, very few exceeding 50 centimeters. Exceptionally, they can have one meter in height. Some of them come from tombs and others must be worshipped like some sort of religious icons⁴. The bas-reliefs belong to 1st-3rd B.C. and are quite small, some on stone stelae of 10-50 centimeters in height, with the superior side in vault or simple arch, portraying a rider with a gown in two states : with a gentle attitude or more rarely, with other deities suggesting a subordination of Greek-Roman and Oriental pantheon to this Thracian God.

Others represent processings from Christianity or from the Oriental common background, sketching signs of blessing or have gentle animals at the horse's feet.

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² Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și a ideilor religioase*, vol. I, București, 1983, p.171.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Robert Turcan, *Culte orientale în lumea romană, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1998*, p. 282.

The knight is faced as a warrior, going on horse ride or trotting on his way back⁵. The image, that portrays the fight with the mythical animal, that pierces with the spear, symbolizes whether the fight of solar gods against Htonians, Zamolxis with Gebelezis or the victory of the solar god against inferno and death. But, it can also be symbolized the victory of the Thracian-Dacian hero, on horseback, flying over the fields, upon the pedestrian Roman army!! We can associate him with the giant rider from Madara, portrayed upon the rock, at the border between Bulgaria and Greece. In comparison to other ancient worship monuments, there can be mentioned a number of bas-reliefs with figures, around 88 moulded in lead, a metal that would represent Inferno and magic, according to ancient people's traditions.

1. Elements of symbolism

A young god, belonging to Thracian mythology from the Balkan and Danube regions, the Thracian knight is represented on horseback, most of the times in hunting context. In spite of the fact that the god's origin and his references are for the time being, rather obscure, it seems that he could be the result of a quite fast syncretism, maybe due to Roman penetration in his spreading area, the Balkans, Dacia, being confirmed starting with 2nd-3rd centuries A.C. The Greek used to call him *Theos Heros* (master, commander and later on, demigod with a mortal origin), and the Romans, *Deus sanctus Heron*.

Some images of the Thracian knight are accompanied by inscriptions where the name (*Heros* in Greek, *Heron* in Latin) is followed by different epithets: *Invictus* (The Invincible), *Aeternus* (The Eternal, The Master of The Dead, People's Founder, mainly *Vetespios*). According to some speculations, it is possible that he might have been patronized by war and funeral cult because he appears on late funeral stelas from the necropolis from The Pontus Euxinus area. Some researchers believe having identified him within local iconography representing Saint George⁶.

A great number of stelas discovered in all Thracian regions plastically and culturally enhance this character on horseback, most of the times, called HERO. We can also see him with his mantle in the wind, advancing with a spear in his hand to hunt the wild boar or riding a lion.

Sometimes, he has some version in his hand, a deer or a hare, and most of the times, accompanied by a dog. Curiously, this god-knight occasionally has a harp in his left hand, and on some monuments, there is a dedication addressed to Apollo designating him as such.

Exceptionally, he appears as a bearded Apollo, accompanied by an ophidian waving between the bucks of the ridden animal. The snake and Apollous make us think of a healing god, and the tree, to which he is juxtaposed, the shrine seems sanctified by the reptile like „a tree of life”

The hunting eliminates the malevolent fauna, ensuring, at the same time the food to people. Sometimes, we can distinguish on the ground the pattern of the reversed urn, compared to the portrayal of a god-river, a picture that we can see on a relief in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, revealing again a topic of health, or at least of the saving waters. It does happen „the hero” to be tricephalic, involving as other divine triplicity, a power „towards all azimuths”,

⁵ Victor Kernback, *Dicționar de mitologie generală*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București 1989, p. 100 și urm.

⁶ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, București, 1985, *passim*.

total and absolute⁷. Some images, like the riding hunting relief, from Constanța, include a baffling marginal element, perhaps biblical, a tree with a folded snake on its trunk.

On Romania territory, there had been found 200 ancient images, certifying the cult of the Thracian knight in Dobrogea, Oltenia, Transilvania. Some archaeologists, like Radu Florescu and Ivan Venedikov admit the possibility of identifying the Thracian knight with the Geto-Dacian god Zamolxis.

But, none of these ancient resources do not actually refer to the picture of Zamolxis, on horseback or to a ritual connection between the god of Dacia and horses, established or sacrificed to the god, so the identification proposed by the two archaeologists is risky.

According to some hypotheses belonging to a series of historians, this god represented the riders of the Getic Burebista and of the great priest Deceneu, that used the flag wolf head belonging to the god Zamolxis, symbol of the warriors' freedom and bravery.

The horse, a solar animal, was a symbol of immortality. Perhaps the rider might have represented Burebista himself, a symbol and an idol of the Balkan Thracians. The cult knew an increasing expansion in the province of Thracia, South-East Macedonia and in the 2nd and 3rd centuries in the Moesias and Dacia. Initially, the cult belonged to settled Thracian-Romans, in time becoming the god of the soldiers recruited within the local population.

2. Some typologies and representations of the Thracian knight

1. This picture represents a marble relief of the Thracian knight, well-preserved, the scenery being quite very well-known, resembling most representations of *The Thracian Knight*. The character is represented going fast on horseback, with his mantle on his back. In front of the horse, we can see a part of the shrine as well as the tree with the folded snake. With the right hand raised, the rider holds a long spear. Under the horse, we can see the wild boar. The image as such is quite simple, the rider, the wild boar and the snake folded around the tree being the only elements in it.



Fig. 1. Marble relief representing the Thracian knight (Muzeul Național de Arheologie, Constanța)⁸.

⁷ Robert Turcan, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁸ După <http://clasate.cimec.ro/Poza.asp?k=9A2F03B392E74F8283C76E9B0200D16D>, accesat la data de 16.06.2017, ora 7:23.

2. A more complex representation of the Thracian knight can be regarded in this relief, made in marble, too. This time, too, the character is represented going on horseback towards the right side, dressed in his short frock with the cape flaunting on his back. His right hand raised, he is ready to launch his spear towards the wild boar, depicted under the horse. In front of the horse, there is a shrine and the tree with the folded snake. Behind the horse, there is portrayed a worshipper, dressed the same like the knight.

Cu mâna dreaptă ridicată, se pregătește să arunce lancea spre mistreț, care este figurat sub cal. În această imagine apare și câinele, reprezentat tot sub cal. În fața calului este reprezentat un altar și copacul cu șarpele încolăcit. În spatele calului este figurat un adorant, îmbrăcat la fel cu cavalerul.



Fig. 2. Marble relief representing The Thracian Knight (National Museum of Archaeology, Constanța)⁹.

3. This relief, made in marble, is the very simple representation of the Thracian knight. The character is on ride towards the right, and in front of him is the representation of an altar and the tree with the snake. The dog but also the wild boar lack from the respective image and actually they have not been pictured from the very beginning, because the relief seems in good shape.



Fig. 3 Marble relief representing The Thracian Knight (National Museum of Archaeology, Constanța)¹⁰.

⁹ După <http://clasate.cimec.ro/Poza.asp?k=CB8D148CF8624735926D6C2D0F809E78>, accesat la data de 16.06.2017, ora 7:30.

¹⁰ După <http://clasate.cimec.ro/Poza.asp?k=21DCDB16ADB64CCF943EB0AA7BCD844C>, accesat la data de 16.06.2017, ora 7:36.

4. This is probably one of the oldest representations of the Thracian knight, very simple and stylized. This image is carved in a rock and the character appears on his horse. There is no other representation of a human or animal. The respective image is engraved in the rock behind the cave situated in the neighborhood of Cetățuia Negru Vodă monastery. The legend says about this monastery that it was built during Negru Voda's times, the first hermits living here cannot be traced. Yet, there are proofs that here it used to be a Dacian shrine, that here Zamolxe's priests felt their god close to them.

There is no spring, the water is gathered within a pit in the rock, close to the summit, a pit that is more than 2500 years old. The cave is small, with only two tiny chambers, nevertheless there we can encounter two shrines of different cults: a catholic one and an orthodox one. Behind the cave, in the wall of the rock, the Thracian knight seems to watch the peace of the few monks.



Fig. 4. Representation on the rock of the Thracian Knight¹¹.

3. Conclusion

It is not known the official name of this local god or the representation of his worshipping, the ceremonies and rituals, his worship being done in great secrecy, also including a form of opposition against Rome and everything originating there. At present, understanding this kind of cult involves studying and interpreting 225 representations of this god, incarnated upon stone tablets, that are 114 in number, 95 in metal, 4 in terracotta and 13 engraved stones¹².

We do not have any literary mention concerning this cult or some inscription mentioning his name. In seven cases we can see them on relieves honoring this god through short inscriptions looking as cryptograms with Greek characters, texts that turned completely undecipherable.

To sum up, firstly, it was completely prohibited to his adepts to speak about this religious ritual, about the way it developed and mainly about the knowledge offered by priests.

¹¹După <http://coltul-adevarului.blogspot.ro/2010/07/cavalerul-trac-si-dacia-cea-veche-cat.html>, accesat la data de 16.06.2017, ora 7:42.

¹² Vezi *Inscripțiile din Scythia Minor grecești și latine (ISM)*, I și II, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1983.

Secondly, it was about a secret religion, completely particular from others, that did not allow speaking about it publicly or even worse, the names of the adored gods to be written.

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