

Beyond iconography. Notes on the cult of the Thracian Rider in Apulum

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Abstract. The article deals with an unpublished relief of the Thracian Rider, discovered on the territory of the conurbation of Apulum, presenting also the catalogue of the finds and some important features related to the cult. Interpreting the cult as part of religious individuation one can attest the «lived religion» of ancient people in the context of a Roman province.

Keywords: Dacia, Apulum, Thracian Rider, relief, Roman religion

Rezumat. Note despre cultul Cavalerului Trac la Apulum. În acest articol este tratată problema unui relief inedit al Cavalerului Trac, descoperit pe teritoriul aglomerării urbane de la Apulum. Este prezentat de asemenea catalogul pieselor cultice și câteva trăsături importante ale acestui cult. Interpretarea cultului ca parte a individualizării religioase în antichitate va deschide noi perspective asupra religiei romane «trăite» în context provincial.

Cuvinte cheie: Dacia, Apulum, Cavaler Trac, relief, religie romană

In this article I will present an unpublished relief of the so called Thracian Rider¹ from Apulum (Alba Iulia, Gyulafehérvár) emphasizing through this object and the repertory of this cult in the conurbation also some notable problems, which appears in the literature. The cult of the Thracian Rider can raise some questions regarding the problematic relation between ethnicity and religion, the dynamics and social network of the worshippers of Apulum and the, «lived» religion of the soldiers.

The find: description and iconographic features

¹ The conventional denomination of this iconographic type is a modern construction, which doesn't necessary reflect the ancient religious views on these objects or divinities.

The fragmentarily preserved limestone relief (cat. nr. 6) has the following dimensions: 25 cm length, 18 cm high. At the superior part, the thickness is between 8 and 10 cm. The fragment presents the left – upper part of the relief (Pl. I/2). On the left the relief is framed with an elaborated column. The *corona* is slightly decorated with two rectangular motives, the abacus and the necking is disproportionally emphasized. The superior part of the rectangular relief is unusually thin, a clue for the unepigraphic nature of the monument. The inner part represents the beautifully elaborated *chlamys* of the divinity, with carefully carved pleats. The form and dynamic shape of the *chlamys* suggest, that the horse and its rider are in movement. The head of the god is missing, however its form is clearly visible. The breakline follows the shape of the horse. The backside of the relief is rudimentary, without traces of elaboration, which indicates, that as the great majority of the reliefs dedicated to this divinity, was designed only for a frontal view (pl. I/1). Based on the analogies and on a hypothetical reconstruction, the original size of the relief could be between 35 cm x 40 cm. The relief has no inventory number, which makes impossible to establish the provenience of the monument.

The relief represented probably the Thracian rider in gallop walking or riding to the right, returning from the hunt, represented in a rectangular frame marked from both sides with columns. This type (Oppermann Ac²) is often associated with an altar and a snake – entwined tree (CCET IV 6, 7, 10, 11, 26, 27, 28, 45, 51, 58, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 71, 72, 108, 118, 124, 127, 135, 143, 173, 181), however there are analogies without these attributes (CCET IV – 102, 104, 128, 152, see fig. 4. for analogies)³. In some rare cases, the rider is represented in gallop or in a standing position in an *aedicula – naiskos* frame, associated with different divinities (CCET IV 37, 53, 88, 92, 93, 112, 117 – Oppermann Ae), although there are no analogies for this type in Dacia⁴. The majority of the representations of the Thracian Rider from Dacia – and from Apulum too – are belonging to the Oppermann B type, representing the Thracian Rider as a hunter with several attributes. The fragmentary state of the relief can't offer a more precise iconographic determination.

² About the typology and iconographic problems of the Rider, see Boteva 2011, 95-96.

³ I present only the analogies from Dacia and the Romanian part of Moesia Inferior (CCET IV).

⁴ About CCET IV, 139 and 150, see Nemeti 2000, 328. The interpretation of CCET IV 155 and 163 is also very problematic.

The Thracian Rider in Apulum: some reconsiderations

There was no comprehensive study on the cult of the Thracian rider in Apulum till now⁵. The numerous studies regarding the cult in Dacia – but generally, in the whole Empire – is stressfully focusing only on the iconographic features, neglecting numerous other aspects regarding the functionality, dynamics, workshops and dedicators of the *ex-votos*, analyzing the artifacts as agents in religious communication⁶. The recent studies on the dynamics of Roman visual culture, the role of the votive reliefs and statues (*signum*) abandoned the classical approach of the long, art historian tradition which focused on typology, iconography and sometimes, epigraphic details of these objects⁷. Recently, a semiotic approach and discourse appeared, which deals what is beyond the picture, the narrative and its phenomenological evolution. Introducing the theory of role identity of objects and the cognitive approach of the religious studies⁸, studying a Roman votive monument must consider the effect of an object on space and spatiality⁹, the relationship between object and owner or dedicator¹⁰, movements, rituals and «acting» with objects¹¹ or the visual / psychological role of votive dedications. In this new perspective, the study of the Thracian Rider must be reconsidered too. As Boteva already proved, the iconographic variations of the Thracian Rider represent not only local workshops, but a personalized narrative and religious choice of the worshipper¹². Every single *ex-voto* represents a sequence from an unknown mythological narrative, personalized and modified by the worshipper. It is not necessary to differentiate two types of narratives (representation effigy and representation narrative) as Boteva stated, based on the attributes or their absence on the relief: it could be more an individualized choice and

⁵ The cult and its monuments were mentioned shortly in some general works about the city: Popa 1975, 98; Ota 2012, 106.

⁶ On the rich bibliography of the Thracian Rider in Dacia, see BRRD II, 420-442. On the neglected aspects of the cult: Boteva 2011, 95.

⁷ About the historiography of this process, see Gordon 1996. For a new approach on votive offerings: McCarty 2015.

⁸ On role theory see Weiss 2012, 185-205; Hodder 2012.

⁹ Auffarth 2009, 307-316.

¹⁰ Mylonopoulos 2010, 1-19.

¹¹ Madigan 2013.

¹² Boteva 2011, 96-97.

sign of religious individuation¹³. Her analysis – however is the most comprehensive study till now on the visual material of the cult – doesn't deal with those neglected aspects which were mentioned by herself¹⁴. First of all, the representation of the Thracian Rider with a lyre, a Sabazios gesture or an egg must have a wider, more comprehensive narrative behind the presented sequence, which breaks the main groups of Boteva. However she mentions the importance of the dedicators / donors, her typology doesn't really change the traditionalist concepts which still focus exclusively on iconography¹⁵. An important aspect what she omits is the communication between dedicator / donor and divinity and the personal, intimate nature of this cult. The few number of the epigraphic monuments, the small size and the natural location of the sanctuaries in Thracia, the large number of funeral depictions, the great topographic variety of the finds and the small size of the ex-votos suggests, that this cult was a highly personalized, individualized cult¹⁶. It was inevitably influenced of course by the narratives and visual culture («knowledge»)¹⁷ of the small group – religions of that time¹⁸ and also by a strong, ethnic narrative of «being Thracian»¹⁹. The literature emphasize two aspects of the cult: it appears as a *par excellence* military and Thracian cult, a kind of *dii patrii* of the Thracian soldiers²⁰. The epigraphic evidence partially sustain these statements, however further studies should be more careful also with these aspects of the cult, which

¹³ Gordon 2015.

¹⁴ Boteva 2011, 97: «an exhaustive study of the votive plaques should investigate five different aspects: the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the votive reliefs, their dedicators and their addressees».

¹⁵ Although one of the most important advantage of the iconographic typologies would be to identify the local and regional workshops and the economic dynamic of these, it has been never done for Dacia.

¹⁶ On religious individualization: Rüpke 2013; Woolf 2013, 137-138.

¹⁷ Gordon 1996, 7-8.

¹⁸ On the concept of group – religion in the Roman Empire: Rüpke 2004, 235-258; Rüpke 2007, 1-6, 113-126. On the common visual knowledge of the 2-3 rd centuries A.D. see: Faraone 2013.

¹⁹ On the Thracian nature of the cult and the ethnicity of it, see Boteva 2011, 99-100; Dana/Ricci 2014, 1-30.

²⁰ Pettazzoni named the cult of the Thracian Rider as «the expression of the most genuine national spirit» and considered it as the ancestor of the whole people, similarly to Dis Pater, as ancestor of the Gaulish nation: Pettazzoni 1954, 91.

seems to have broken its ethnic barrier and received a regional, extra-provincial and interethnic popularity²¹.

From the conurbation of Apulum with the recently identified monument, we know six reliefs and a statue representing the Thracian Rider (cat. nr. 1 - 7)²², most of the pieces coming from civilian context, from the *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*, one of them probably was found in the *castra legionis* (cat. nr. 1.) and one in the *praetorium consularis* (cat. nr. 2.)²³. The topography of the finds shows a great variety, which could indicate a more complex social structure and dynamic of the worshippers. All of the monuments are small sized ex votos, none of them were found in the same spot, which exclude the possibility of a sanctuary²⁴. The divinity – or divinities – were worshiped in small, primary places, associated always with other gods, like in the proximity of the *thermae* in the *praetorium consularis*, where votive monuments of Minerva and Nemesis were found²⁵ or in the shrine and sacred district of Liber Pater, where monuments of numerous divinities - Serapis, Mithras, Hercules, Venus, Danubian Riders - were attested²⁶. The Thracian Rider appears numerous times in association with Liber Pater (CCET IV, 33, 34, 56, 92, 115) and in rural context, with Silvanus and Pan too (CCET IV 33)²⁷. The curious case of Philippi and other analogies from the Greek speaking world of the Empire show the coexistence of Liber Pater, Silvanus and the Thracian Rider²⁸. In all of these cases, the worship of the Thracian Rider is manifested in a modest, syncretistic manner in small sized rural shrines or urban, convivial halls. There is only one epigraphic monument from Apulum related to this cult (cat. nr.

²¹ On the epigraphic sources of the Thracians, see: Dana 2015. On the military dedications, see Boteva 2005, 199-210.

²² This number is higher than similar urban centers, as Aquincum or Carnuntum.

²³ Two other monuments (CCET IV 173, 174) from the Museum of Alba Iulia have an uncertain iconography, however could represent the Thracian Rider in funeral context. See also Nemeti 2003, 294-320.

²⁴ The existence of central workshops related to a sanctuary is highly possible in Dacia too. These centers – religious focus points and places of ritual density and intensification – could monopolize the spread of the portable ex-votos and votive souvenirs related to the so called small group religions.

²⁵ Cserni 1897, 47-48.

²⁶ IDR III/5, 370-372; Haynes 2005.

²⁷ See also a case study from Sălașu de Sus: Oltean 2007, 189. On the relationship between Liber Pater-Dionysos see Covacef 1978, 122-123.

²⁸ This phenomenon is mentioned even by Polycarp: Hartog 2002, 55-56.

7.) mentioning the name of a father and his son, Aurelius Taciturnus and Aurelius Tacitus²⁹. However they have a Latin name, the Greek text makes obvious that they came from a Greek speaking province of the Empire, possibly Asia Minor and Syria, as the Liber Pater community from the *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis* suggest³⁰. The small relief dedicated by Aurelius Tzolutus for Liber Pater sustains also the hypothesis, that, the presence of the Thracians, was dominant in this community³¹. The presence of the Thracians in Apulum is attested also in numerous other cases (IDR III/5, 156, 193, 383). As the dedications of Aurelius Renatus *miles legionis XIII Geminae* (IDR III/5, 236), Claudius Atteius Celer *veteranus legionis XIII Geminae* (IDR III/5, 240) or the *Cohors I Sagittariorum Tibiscensium* (IDR III/5, 371) show, the small group of the Liber Pater community was a mixed, civilian and military one, which dissolve the omnipresent discussion of «military contra civilian» narrative of the historiography³².

It is hard to establish the frequency, use and functionality of the small size ex-votos. We don't know, if they were portable or used in multiple, repetitive rituals or just one single time, but as we highlighted already, the unepigraphic nature of them, the context of the finds in syncretistic milieu and the personalized iconography of these reliefs prove obviously the more «private», intimate nature of these dedications.

²⁹ OPEL IV, 105.

³⁰ Schäfer 2004, 183. See also IDR III/5, 371.

³¹ IDR III/5, 245. The relief was found in 1868 during the building of the railway system in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) which cut the *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*, probably affecting also the shrine of Liber Pater and its surroundings: Szabó 2016, 106-113.

³² IDR III/5, 558, 559. On the presence of the Thracian militaries in Dacia: Varga 2010, 110-111, Zahariade 2009. See also: Schäfer 2004, 180-181. In his important summary on the research priorities of religion in Roman Dacia, the author underline the importance of individualization within the process of colonization in Dacia, but mentioning also, that «scholars also did not take into account whether Roman soldiers or municipal dignitaries worshipped different gods from those worshipped by craftsmen and traders».

Catalogue of finds

1. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 31,5 x 23, 5 x 3,5 cm. Place of discovery: *castra legionis*. Description: slightly trapezoid plaque in marble with a plain frame. The upper side is arched, the plaque is restored from two fragments. The superior side is damaged and the relief is worn. The Thracian Rider is galloping toward the right, presented in a rising position in the so called *benedictio Latina* position. His *chlamys* is beautifully carved, with undulating folds. Under the rider a dog hunting a rabbit. Bibliography: Cserni 1901, 219-221, Hampel 1903, 313-314 nr. 8, Hampel 1905, 5; Russu 1967, 99, nr. 24; CCET IV 138; Lupa 19330.

2. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 17 x 14 x 5 cm. Place of discovery: *Praetorium consularis*. Description: rectangular marble plaque with a plain frame. The sides are damaged. The Thracian Rider in gallop with the spear in his right hand. Under the horse a hunting dog and a boar. In the right a female figure is represented. The tail of the horse is willed by a *camillus*. The relief is rudimentary elaborated. Bibliography: Cserni 1897, 47-48; Cserni 1901, 219-221, Hampel 1903, 313, nr. 7; Hampel 1905, 6-7; Russu 1967, 98, nr. 22; CCET IV 137; Lupa 19329.

3. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 10 x 13 cm. Place of discovery: Kutyamál – probably the extra mural territory of the *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*. Description: rectangular marble relief with a plain frame. Only the upper part has survived. The Thracian Rider is represented as a young person with a spear in his right hand and a *khitara* in the left. The head and headdress of the person have Apollonian features. Bibliography: Hampel 1905, 5, nr. 69; Russu 1967, 98, nr. 21; CCET IV 139.

4. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 18 x 17,5 cm. Place of discovery: 1830, probably from the territory of the *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*. Description: fragmentarily preserved relief. Only the inferior part of the short chiton and the horseman and a part of the horse is survived. Bibliography: ArchÉrt 25, 1905, 6, nr. 70; Russu 1967, 99, nr. 23; CCET IV 140.

5. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 26 x 21 x 3,4 cm. Place of discovery: Dealul Furcilor, probably the territory of the *Municipium Septimium Apulense*. Description: fragmentary relief, the central part preserved. Due to the severely damaged nature of the

monument, it is impossible to reconstruct the form and shape of the relief. The Thracian Rider is in gallop toward the right side, under the horse a fragment from the dog is preserved. The belt of the horse is emphasized. Bibliography: Ciobanu/Gligor/Drîmbărean/ Rodean 2000, 318-319, nr. 3.d, fig. 11.

6. Anepigraphic relief

Dimensions: 25 x 18 x 8 cm. Place of discovery: unknown. Description: rectangular limestone relief, partially preserved. The carefully elaborated *chlamys* of the Thracian Rider is survived. The horseman is looking to the right side.

7. Statuette with inscription

Dimensions: 17 x 19,5 x 5 cm. Place of discovery: shrine of Liber Pater, *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*. Description: fragmentary marble statuette (or *alto relievo*), representing the Thracian Rider in gallop, heading toward right. The belt of the horse is carefully presented, similarly to the cat. nr. 5. Under the horse a dog in hunt is represented, probably with a boar. The head of the Rider is missing. Bibliography: IDR III/5, 370.

Inscription: *Αυ(ρηλιος) Τακτιουρους κέ Αυ(ρηλιος) Τακτιους υιος*

Illustrations

Pl. I/1-2. The relief from Apulum (photo Cs. Szabó).

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Pl. I