

Return from the Hunt: a Re-Discovered Votive Relief from Northern Moesia Inferior

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Abstract. Recent archival materials brought to attention a fragmentary marble votive relief found near Tulcea depicting the so-called Thracian horseman as a hunter with the prey in his raised right hand. This iconographic variant is very rare outside Thracia and the Balkans region. The evidence of the votive reliefs of the Thracian horseman in the northern Moesia Inferior is not rich but features a great iconographical variety, hinting at an intended choice from the part of the dedicants of the votives and great awareness of the iconographical composition. The material (imported marble) and the dimensions of several of the reliefs uncovered up to now in the region are quite large and make plausible the idea of votives intended for cult places/sanctuaries. The relief discussed is singular among the similar finds in the region, for it bears also an inscription on its upper border.

Rezumat. Materialele de arhivă recente au adus în atenție un relief votiv fragmentar de marmură găsit în apropiere de Tulcea, înfățișând așa-numitul călăreț trac ca un vânător cu prada în mâna dreaptă ridicată. Această variantă iconografică este foarte rară în afara Traciei și a regiunii Balcanilor. Dovezile reliefulor votive ale călărețului trac din nordul Moesia Inferioară nu sunt bogate, dar prezintă o mare varietate iconografică, sugerând o alegere intenționată din partea dedicanților votive și o mare conștientizare a compoziției iconografice. Materialul (marmură de import) și dimensiunile câtorva dintre reliefulile descoperite până acum în regiune sunt destul de mari și fac plauzibilă ideea votivelor destinate locurilor/sanctualelor de cult. Relieful discutat este singular printre descoperirile similare din regiune, deoarece poartă și o inscripție pe marginea superioară.

Keywords: votive relief, Tulcea, Moesia Inferior, Thracian horseman, *kyrios*.

The collections of the Archaeological Museum in Odesa included in the first half of the last century a fragmentary marble² relief with the depiction of the so-called Thracian horseman returning from the hunt (**Fig. 1**), with the pray in his raised right hand. Preserved is the upper left part of the relief³. The depicted subject was not recognized; the records used

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² The inventory number around 1942 was II^b-75 (according to the inventory sheet MNA Archive D43/1942/Fișe cu proveniență Muzeul Odessa, sheet 110). From the available image, it seems probable that the relief is carved in marble, as described by the inventory sheet. However, in the register entry from the time the relief was in Bucharest, it is stated that it was of limestone (MNA General register, entry 132/15.04.1942).

³ Dimensions: preserved height 20 cm, preserved width 16 cm, thickness of the plate 2 cm (according to the inventory sheet MNA Archive D43/1942/Fișe cu proveniență Muzeul Odessa, sheet 110).

a neutral description like “young man riding”. Rests of a Greek inscription are mentioned on the upper, rounded border of the relief⁴. The publication of this find with its comparanda is now enabled through the recently found photograph, taken in April 1942, as the relief was in Bucharest⁵.

The finding place and context of the relief are not known, only its provenance from the surroundings of Tulcea⁶. The history of the monument was not possible to trace back, as it seems not to be mentioned in the short catalog of the Museum of the Odesa Society of History and Antiquities⁷.

The dating of the relief, in the late second century but most likely in the third century AD, can be based only on the available analogies⁸. This can be only a *terminus post quem*, especially in the region considered to be the provenance of the find, where the practice of use of earlier monuments, even with the iteration of the initial function or as building material, is both common⁹.

The depiction of the rider is placed in a slightly deepened field with a narrow border and a rounded upper edge. It shows him galloping to the right, facing the viewer, and presenting his prey (hare or more likely a fawn or deer calf), which he grasps with the raised right hand by its back legs. He has a curly hairdo, wears a long-sleeved tunic and a cloak, fastened on his right shoulder with a brooch, and flutters in the wind, filling the background of the field with representation. The surface seems to be quite damaged; however, the rendering of details was not great to begin with, the carving being not very deep and limited to a minimum, with the exception of the rendering of the curly hair.

The Thracian horseman/Hero equitans is found in the northern Moesia Inferior¹⁰ on several, although not many, examples of small to medium-sized marble reliefs (**Fig. 2**), with preference for the depiction of the wild boar hunt and with examples of shallow but also quite skillfully carved reliefs, with complex iconography and details hinting at the awareness of the customers and the availability of a quite wide iconographic spectrum within the

⁴ “KVNIWS”: MNA Archive D43/1942/Fișe cu proveniență Muzeul Odessa, sheet 110.

⁵ MNA Archive D43/1942/MNA vol. VII. Inventory, sheet 32, annex 3. - For the historical context of this action, see DRAGOMAN 2016.

⁶ MNA Archive D43/1942/Fișe cu proveniență Muzeul Odessa, sheet 110.

⁷ YURGEVICH 1890. The Odesa Society of History and Antiquities, established around 1840, was a public organization that included scientists, local historians, and collectors of antiquities. It also had a museum and a journal. For the time being, it is unclear if the relief to be presented here was part of the collection before 1877 or entered it during the early 20th century.

⁸ See GEORGIEVA 1965; CERMANOVIĆ-KUZMANOVIĆ *et al.* 1992, 1072 (in Thracia), 1076 (eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula), 1078 (middle and northern parts of the Balkan Peninsula); OPPERMANN 2006, cat. no. 931-943.

⁹ See also BOTEVA 2017.

¹⁰ A fragment of a further marble relief from this region, but without documented or recorded provenance, is kept in the collections of the museum in Tulcea (stand 2023); it is located in the lower middle part of the rather small-sized plate; only the boots of the horseman riding to the right are recognizable.

province. The iconographic analysis is a matter of discussion, which cannot be approached here. The motif depicted on the relief from Tulcea could be included in group C in the classification of G. Kazarow¹¹, was analyzed in more detail by Georgieva¹², corresponds to type C2 by M. Oppermann¹³ and needs to find its place in one of the representation-narrative as defined by D. Boteva¹⁴.

The question of the production of those reliefs remains open, especially given the, in some cases, remarkable differences between the pieces. Based on several criteria, hypotheses can be advanced, but without direct evidence of the production site etc., more cannot be safely stated. The fact that marble was imported to northern Moesia Inferior through the harbor in Tomis, together with the finds from this city, makes it probable that a production existed there. If in another ancient center, along the Danube, for instance, such a workshop functioned, it is also probable, but without archaeological evidence up to now. Furthermore, when looking at the finds of marble votive reliefs from the region, it is remarkable that there are certain similar characteristics (like shape and dimensions of the slab, the general layout) to be observed on reliefs with different subjects (Thracian rider, Mithras, Bacchus/Dionysos, etc.). Thus, it is quite possible that the sculpture workshop worked on demand quite different subjects. The rarity of the finds compared to the geographic area and the number of ancient sites hints toward this. To be highlighted is the basic shape of the plates: rectangular, preference for 2 registers, and the red frame of the main register, – common for Bacchus/Dionysos¹⁵, Thracian horseman but also Mithras reliefs. In some cases, – more frequently related to Mithras and the Thracian horseman – the reliefs have a rounded top¹⁶. One hypothesis, based on occurrence and production details (like reuse or recarving¹⁷) – is that the production occurs in one center, like *Tomis*, *Troesmis* or even *Axiopolis*/ near Cernavodă, the latter being one of the main Odressian military centers before becoming a strategic Roman one. Its location would have easily enabled material supply as well as distribution of products, and marble was certainly worked there, as the finds of reliefs, sculptures etc. attest.

There is up to now no evidence of a main cult place that would require and make profitable a workshop nearby providing votive reliefs specialized on a particular

¹¹ KAZAROW 1938, 5-9; BOTEVA 2017, 95-96.

¹² GEORGIEVA 1965, 113-115.

¹³ OPPERMANN 2006, 74.

¹⁴ BOTEVA 2017, 95-97.

¹⁵ DRAGOMIR 1969; ALEXANDRESCU 2017.

¹⁶ The interpretation of this detail is not conclusive and needs caution; cf. BOTEVA 2011, 96-97.

¹⁷ MOSCALU, PETOLESCU 1972; HAMPARȚUMIAN 1979, cat. no. 13.

iconography, as it seems to have been the case in other regions within the same province¹⁸, not to mention more famous sanctuaries or cult centers¹⁹.

Differences in size, and in the execution of details, and quality of sculpture need to be systematically investigated in order to differentiate between so-called portable votives and those that were part of the inventory of a sanctuary, which are of middle and large sizes. Certainly, this observation may not be generalized, for the situation is different from region to region. This kind of approach requires the systematic and complete investigation of so-called inventories of sanctuaries. For Moesia Inferior, only the southern regions can bring this matter forward, as the northern area lacks such structures.

In the surroundings of ancient Troesmis, finds of reliefs, especially large-scale ones, carved in local stone, although the examples are stray finds without a documented context, can be interpreted as cult reliefs²⁰. The exact location of sanctuaries in the surroundings of Troesmis is difficult to elucidate due to intensive and aggressive agricultural activities of more than 100 years. However, the fact that a relief depicting the Thracian horseman (with military attributes²¹) was uncovered in Traian, quite skillfully executed in local Cerna sandstone, and featuring also rests of its initial elaborated detailing through color²², makes plausible the existence of a local sculpture workshop as well.

To be highlighted is the fact that in the north there are, with this exception, no reliefs depicting the Thracian horseman/Heros equitans carved in local stones, like in the surroundings of Tomis and in the central and southern parts of the province, but up to now they are missing from the northernmost part of the province, an aspect that can be eventually explained as an expression of the state of the research.

Not many finds have been uncovered in the main settlements – military or civilian – but several are reported as accidental ones, brought to the museums by locals, and treated in the literature as individual, exceptional finds. One such case is the otherwise not spectacular fortlet from *Beroe* on the Danube, from where also two exquisite, entirely preserved marble votive reliefs with depictions of Dionysos are known²³. The secondary use as building material was not always properly documented and published, or individual finds might have been

¹⁸ The finds of marble votives with limited iconographic variations should be investigated, also taking into account the question of whether the plates were possibly produced or at least sold on site, being thus a special supply for the sanctuary and not a special choice of the dedicant; this task should be pursued especially if an intensive lithic material provenance survey of the finds is possible; see, for example, the overviews (with previous literature) by GOČEVA 1995 (Glava Panega); BOTEVA 2011, 87–94; BOTEVA 2017 (Slivnica, Sofia region).

¹⁹ For example, see the recent results on the Meter reliefs from Ephesus: ANEVLAVI et al. 2022.

²⁰ ALEXANDRESCU 2017, 15–17.

²¹ On these iconographical aspects, see OPPERMANN 2006, 282.

²² ALEXANDRESCU et al. forthcoming.

²³ DRAGOMIR 1962.

overinterpreted (in identifying the place as a possible sanctuary²⁴). Relevant is the fragmentary marble relief (**Fig. 3**) found most probably reused as building material in the fortification from Murighiol/*Halmyris*²⁵. The relief features a complex layout with two fields with depictions, common for Mithras or Dionysos. Further, the depicted animals (lion and bull, facing each other) are not fighting, which hints at the specific meaning of the representation. The same static lion figure occurs on the entirely preserved and also skillfully executed relief from Casimcea²⁶. The lion as rider's acolyte or help occurs on the reliefs, starting with the early third century²⁷.

The relief from Dăieni²⁸, on the Danube, not far from *Beroe*, through its layout as a naiskos-stele and the featured details (**Fig. 4**) seems to be the product of a workshop from the western shores of the Black Sea and might very well have been a funerary relief, depicting the heroized deceased, and not a votive relief²⁹. The decoration of the pediment (vine) and the rython the rider is holding in his right hand can be simply motifs common to funerary representations, especially in the Greek/Hellenistic iconographic traditions, where the so-called Heros equitans riding towards a snake-coiled tree is no rarity³⁰. The fact that in this region the funerary monuments, mainly tall funerary steles, feature a mainly vegetal and non-figurative decorative repertoire, compared to other areas of the province, is also a characteristic and an expression of the taste and habit of the local society and its deliberate choices.

The other examples mapped in Fig. 2 make evident that the situation in the northern part of the province is quite particular. As a direct expression of the little advanced state of the research of the settlements in the countryside of the main military and urban centers, the finds of sculpture and especially of marble items (not only those related to the so-called Thracian horseman) highlight the financial means and the taste of the population residing in the area starting with the late second century AD. Furthermore, for this population, the

²⁴ See also the find from Telița-Amza: BAUMANN 1995, 28. 34-35, pl. 35/4-5.

²⁵ BOTTEZ, TOPOLEANU 2021. Almost ten years ago, the find was said to have been found at *Beroe*, but the recent publication provided information on its provenance.

²⁶ OPAIȚ 1973-1975; HAMPARȚUMIAN 1979, cat. no. 10; BAUMANN 1984, 211 no. 11, fig. 12.

²⁷ OPPERMANN, in: CERMANOVIĆ-KUZMANOVIĆ et al. 1992, 1076.

²⁸ It was not possible to localize and suitably analyze the monument. Thus, all details rely on the only available publication, TOROPU 1974. See also OPPERMANN 2006, 99 (with literature, however, going back to the same initial publication).

²⁹ Relevant are also the dimensions of the monument: the thickness of the plate, which, with 7.5 cm, is similar to the funerary steles rather than the votive plates. The preserved height is about 32.5 cm, while the width measures 32 cm.

³⁰ See also the observations on the need for contextual analysis and necessary distinction in the investigation between votive and funerary monuments, as well as between Thracian and Greek/Hellenistic traditions of the motif: BOTEVA 2017, 99; cf. DIMITROVA 2002, 225-226. CERMANOVIĆ-KUZMANOVIĆ et al. 1992, 1078.

Thracian traditions and iconography were significant enough to procure the necessary monuments from imports, distant manufacturing centers or local workshops.

The relief from Tulcea is, for the time being, the most northerly known example of this group of depictions of the Hero Equitans as a hunter, holding his prey in his raised right hand. In his detailed study of the reliefs of the Thracian horseman, M. Oppermann identifies only 13 examples with this gesture of the depicted god holding the prey, none outside the territory of Thracia and the Balkans³¹. This can mean that the fragment does not exist anymore or that it is in Odesa but not on display or in a record available to the public. Oppermann seems to not have visited the museum himself but to have relied on the literature, as he quotes the Thracian horsemen relief finds from Tyras³².

Several of the reliefs from the group bear inscriptions with mentions of the addressed god, which can be a Hero or even Apollo³³. The information on the inscription in Tulcea is too fragmentary for further appreciation³⁴. However, the inscription – most probably *κυρίω* – hints, according to the recent analysis of N. Belayche, at the dedication of the relief within the sanctuary of the addressed divinity³⁵, where “any divine power is implicitly *kyrios* in his/her own sanctuary”. Given the known analogies bearing inscriptions with precise mention of the addressed god, it remains open in the case of the relief from Tulcea to which god it was dedicated. If we accept the demonstration of N. Belayche and the discussion of the epigraphic evidence together with the evaluation of its discussion and interpretation³⁶, the relief from Tulcea is also the first direct information that relates a Heros equitans relief bearing inscription and a sanctuary in the region of interest here.

Worth mentioning is the observation that the example from Tulcea seems to have initially had quite large dimensions, being of middle size, while the other smaller examples could have been not less expensive but also more easily transported by individuals. Expression of such individual choices can also be considered a marble relief featuring a related depiction (**Fig. 5**), said to have been found in *Potaissa/Turda* in Dacia, the headquarters of the legio V Macedonica after its deployment from Troesmis. The relief is much smaller and less carefully executed, but better preserved³⁷.

³¹OPPERMANN 2006, cat. no. 931-943, style group type C2, p. 73-75.

³²OPPERMANN 2006, p. 266, 284, 293 (the quoted publications were not available to us during the preparation of this note).

³³DIMITROVA 2002; BOTEVA 2011, 86-87 (with literature). - See, for example, MIHAILOV 1997, 5164, but also ISM III 246.

³⁴See above note 3.

³⁵BELAYCHE 2020, 103-106 (for Thracia and its surroundings).

³⁶BELAYCHE 2020, 105-106; cf. TACHEVA-HITOVA 1978; DIMITROVA 2002.

³⁷Dimensions 28 x 22 x 2 cm: BĂRBULESCU 2015, 61, fig. 56, 277 no. 22 (with literature).

The research on the so-called Thracian horseman/Heros equitans reliefs is far from unanimous about any aspect of the iconography, cult, and interpretation/meaning³⁸. At this point, it can only be highlighted that the evidence uncovered in the northern Moesia Inferior attests to a wide variety of iconographic schemata that seem to have been chosen in awareness of the depicted details. Further, the examples are skillfully carved, with reliefs of quite large dimensions, most probably expensive items delivered on special request. As it is quite common, on site the customization of the votive might have been done through the carving of dedication on the specially provided lower border or/and on other places, like the narrow upper border of the relief. This last detail can be appreciated only in the case of entirely preserved examples. The ideal association between depiction and inscription makes evident the wide range of meaning the votive reliefs could receive, especially in the case of the direct statement of the addressed god³⁹. With this one significant exception presented here, the reliefs from northern Moesia Inferior are not inscribed.

The scarce evidence enables, for the time being, only this general overview, to which the presented relief from Tulcea provides a further piece of the puzzle.

Acknowledgements

The research was made within the NCSR Project PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1031 (*Roman Stone Monuments from North Dobruja. Multidisciplinary Recovery of the Loss of Time and Context*). The author would like to thank her colleagues Oana Damian, Roxana Dobrescu and Dragoș Hălmași (“Vasile Pârvan” Archaeological Institute) for the information on the 1942 documentation in the archives of the MNA.

Abbreviations

ISM – *Inscriptions Scythiae Minoris*. Bucharest-Paris.

MINAC – Museum of National History and Archaeology Constanța.

MNA – National Museum of Antiquities, Bucharest, now part of the “Vasile Pârvan” Archaeological Institute.

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³⁸ See, for example, next to the corpora like HAMPARȚUMIAN 1979, OPPERMANN 2006, the overview by BOTEVA 2011.

³⁹ DIMITROVA 2002; BOTEVA 2011.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1 Votive relief from Tulcea (detail from MNA Archive D43/1942/MNA vol.VII.Inventory, sheet 32, annex 3).

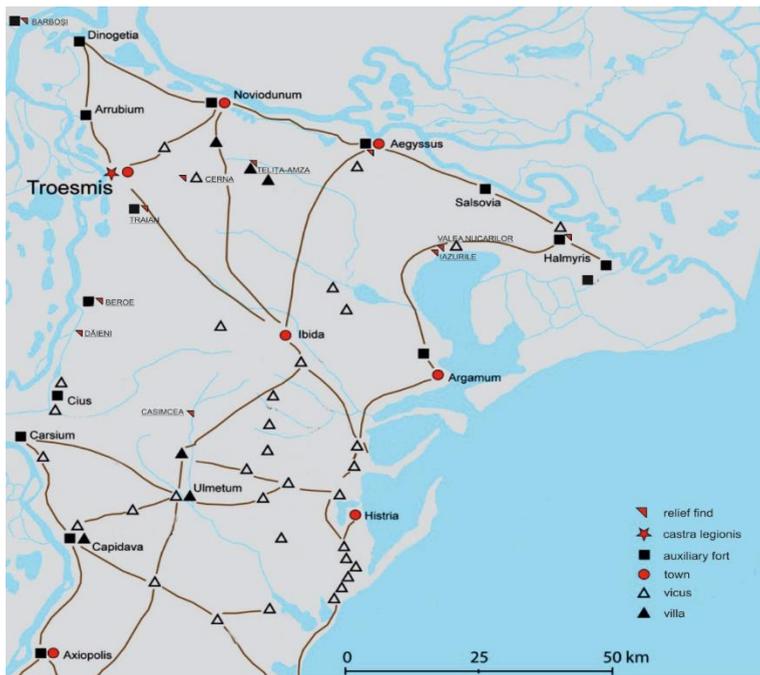


Fig. 2 Northern Moesia Inferior with the finding places of the so-called Thracian Horseman reliefs (map by the author).



Fig. 3 Votive relief from Murighiol, Tulcea county (photo by the author).

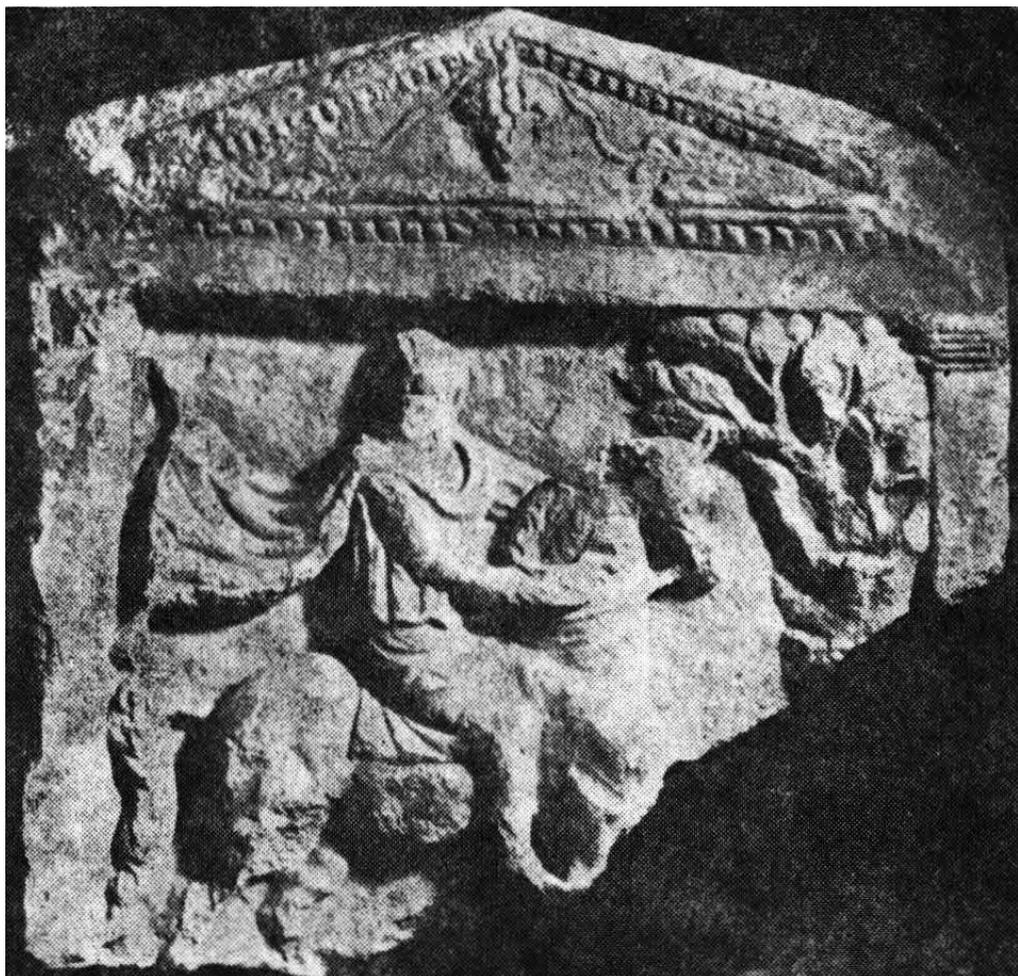


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