



Setting up sacred sites within the civic space. Urban shrines and temples in Roman Thrace

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Summary - The urban sacred space in the Roman province of Thrace was being continuously constructed and reconstructed in the imperial period. It was ideologically and culturally loaded not only with the traditional local cults but also molded by the Roman domination. The imperial cult, inextricably entangled in all parts of the Empire, was weaved into the city's sacred perimeter. The significance of worshipping the Roman emperor proved to be determinative for the layout of urban sacred landscape in terms of geographical and political configuration. The present paper approaches the question on a broader plane and offers some of the most significant numismatic and epigraphic evidence for the spatial distribution of sacred buildings embedded into the city fabric in line with the local traditions as well as with the purposes of the imperial propaganda in the province of Thrace.

Keywords: Sacred space / Roman Empire / Thrace / Urban shrines

Riassunto - Nella provincia romana della Tracia, in epoca imperiale, lo spazio sacro urbano è stato progressivamente ridefinito, caricandosi di significati ideologici e culturali che rimandano sia ai culti tradizionali locali, che ai modelli della dominazione romana. Il culto dell'imperatore, diffuso in tutti i territori, si è rivelato determinante per il layout del paesaggio urbano sacro in termini di configurazione geografica e politica. Questo studio approccia la questione su un piano più ampio e offre alcune delle più significative testimonianze numismatiche e epigrafiche per la distribuzione spaziale degli edifici sacri incorporati nel tessuto della città, in linea con le tradizioni locali, nonché con gli scopi della propaganda imperiale nella provincia di Tracia.

Parola chiave: spazio sacro / Impero romano / Tracia / Santuario urbano

The incorporation of Thrace into the Roman Empire as an administrative unit entailed changes reflecting new political, social and religious reality. The transition, as fully expected, was clearly discernible in the major urban centers where direct links between local citizens and the official Roman authorities were most evident. These places were considered particularly important to receive signs from the ongoing "dialogue" between local elites and the Roman rule. The cults designating the formal processes of worship in the cities were recognized as a key communication "tool".

Excavations at ancient settlements hidden beneath modern cities are seriously hampered and mostly fragmentary. Thus, the archaeological research of sacred places within the ancient urban space was greatly impeded for many years. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account different kind of sources to provide and/or supplement data for reconstruction, general appearance, architecture, etc. of sanctuaries and sacred buildings in the ancient cities. Researchers are not unanimous about the authenticity of coin images and there is still a concern to what extent the numismatic evidence can be a reliable source for reconstruction of urban space, i.e. to what



Fig. 1 – Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius, reverse image of monopteros, mint of Topeiros (after Домкоба 2009, table IX, 9)

extent coin images directly correspond with reality, even though the image is full of precisely rendered detail. Although the opinions on the issue are quite controversial, sometimes diametrically opposed, numismatic and epigraphic data are frequently required for interpretation of the unearthed architectural structures.

The increasingly monumentalized sacred landscape found expression on the reverse images of the autonomous city coins. Depictions of temples were mostly instigated by the following: 1) the statues of deities displayed between the columns refer to the official worship of their cults in the cities; 2) these architectural images were symbols of common religious identity, which is an important element of the urban identity; 3) to this should be added the “designation” of sacred places portrayed on coins, where the local deities, protectors of the cities, were worshipped. These particular places kept deeply rooted traditions dating back to the pre-Roman period, which explains their significant role in the provincial cities’ life during the Roman imperial period. 4) The importance of the imperial cult justifies the presence of its temples among the “architectural” images on coins from the province of Thrace. Moreover, such kind of images “declared” not only the loyalty of the citizens to the Roman emperor, but also they were a symbol of prestige.

Temples appear to be the most common architectural category displayed on coins in the province of Thrace. The prevalence of temple images on coin reverses clearly indicate that the worshipped deities were regarded as a key element of urban identity and formed the framework of the religious city life. Cult buildings are even the sole architectural representation on emissions struck by one of the city mints – the mint of Topeiros. It is worth noting that the earliest round temple presented on pseudo-autonomous coins in the province of Thrace, is depicted on coins of the emperor Antoninus Pius, struck by the mint of Topeiros. It belongs to the monopteros type and consists of a row of columns arranged in a circle upon the stylobate which wear curved beams supporting the dome (rotundum). The standing statue of a deity is centrally placed between the columns (Fig. 1).

The repertoire of the mint of the Roman colony of Deultum, founded in AD 70 by Roman veterans, included images of sacred buildings on coins of all imperial families, except for that of the emperor Philip I (AD 244-249). Temple images seem to appear on coins of Deultum as early as the first regular city coin emission struck under the emperor Caracalla in AD 212/213, as the standing statue of Concordia is depicted between the columns of the earliest temple (Драганов 2006: 145). It is however argued, that the design of temple buildings on the Deultum coins is relative rather than realistic because of the uniformity of images creating the impression of using one established model of a Roman temple, as only the cult statue between the columns was changed (Драганов 2006: 147).

In contrast to the coins of Deultum, the temple images appeared as part of the repertoire of the Hadrianopolis mint as late as the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus (AD 198-211). Unlike the researchers who have considered these images conventional, lacking any connection with the destroyed architectural prototypes, J. Yurukova is willing to consider some interesting constructional and decorative details as a source for the spatial character of the urban space (Юркуова 1987: 78). The nymphaeum of Hadrianopolis, for example, reflects the popularity of the cult of the nymphs in the religious life of the city. The building appears on coins of the emperors Septimius Severus (AD 198-211) and Gordian III (AD 238-244). The coin images are the only documentary sources that give an idea of what it looked like. The nymphaeum has no parallels in the provincial coinage and, according to the researchers, this is one of the four architectural buildings of a similar nature erected outside Rome, in the eastern Roman provinces. The nymphaea took shape as early as the Roman period, as these buildings had several purposes: 1) sacred buildings dedicated to the nymphs; 2) a preferred place for relaxing and carrying on conversations; 3) water tanks. The cult character of the building was gradually replaced by the utilitarian functions. The image of the nymphaeum of Hadrianopolis on coins of Septimius Severus is considered as *terminus ante quem* for its construction, i.e. it was built prior to the reign of the Severians. The nymphs were worshipped as goddesses of the morning dew, the rain and the springs, and hence of the vegetation associated with them. Their relationship with the healing mineral springs also defined them as health goddesses. It seems that the mint of Hadrianopolis began to depict the three nymphs on coins of the emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 118-136). They are portrayed wearing long, girdled chitons. Besides the jug held by each of them, the central figure has an additional attribute – ears of wheat. The same image identified with three small-scale marble figures representing the three nymphs occurs on coins struck by the mint of Pautalia under the reign of the emperor Antoninus Pius (Юркуова 1987: 76). It could be assumed that both cities had similar statuary groups of the three nymphs which represent an older concept, not yet influenced by the iconography of the three Graces of the Roman mythology.

It is noteworthy that the above-mentioned statuary group of the three nymphs from Pautalia can be seen as a part of the image of an amphitheatrically arranged temple complex laid



Fig. 2 – Bronze coin of Caracalla, reverse image of the Hisarlak Hill, mint of Pautalia (photo by Krasimir Georgiev, NIAM-BAS)



Fig. 3 – Bronze coin of Commodus, reverse image of the Dzhambaz tepe (drawing), mint of Philippopolis (after Kolev 1998: 368)



Fig. 4 – Bronze coin of Caracalla, reverse image of the Dzhenem tepe (drawing), mint of Philippopolis (after Kolev 1969: 7)

out on the natural terraces (probably the Hisarlak Hill) on coins of the emperors Caracalla and Geta (Fig. 2). The engraver depicted the hill, overgrown with forest. Five temples can be distinguished on it. In fact, because of the numerous specific details, it is argued that a geographical reality is presented on the coins. The unearthed structures at the Hisarlak Hill are associated with the buildings displayed on the reverses, which gives grounds for the hypothesis that a temple complex was formed there (Кацарова 2005, 126). It is believed that the Asklepiion was localized at the foot of it, in the area of the thermal springs (Кацарова 2005, 49). The main temple of the city which operated in the 2nd – 3rd c. AD was built on top of the Hisarlak Hill. There are two assumptions about the gods worshipped in that temple: Zeus and Hera or Asclepius and Hygeia. The epigraphic monuments encountered in the sanctuary on the hill seem to imply that the main protective deities of the city were Zeus and Hera, although, at this stage, additional arguments are needed to support such a hypothesis.

The mint of Philippopolis, the main city of the Thracian koinon, provides another illustrative example of the attempt to localize the sanctuary and the temple of the patron deity on the city's highest hilltop based mainly on coin images and epigraphic evidence. It concerns the depictions of the city hills which are included in the repertoire of the Philippopolis coinage as representations of geographic reality. Each of them constituted a separate sacred space in the city for worshipping cults which occupied an important place in the religious life of the citizens of Philippopolis.

Three of the hills, Nebet tepe, Dzhambaz tepe and Taksim tepe, were located in the center of the ancient city forming its natural and further fortified acropolis. A panoramic view of the natural ensemble can be seen on bronze coins of the emperor Antoninus Pius (Kolev 1998: 355–356 and 367). Two of the hills are also independently presented. An image of Taksim tepe with a temple of Dionysus on top of it was recognized on coins of the emperor Caracalla, whilst on coins of the emperor Commodus is depicted Dzhambaz tepe with a standing bronze statue of



Fig. 5 – Bronze coin of Caracalla, reverse image of the statue of Apollo on a high pedestal and the emperor in the act of performing a sacrifice (drawing), mint of Philippopolis (after Κοαβ 1969: 9)



Fig. 6 – Bronze coin of Caracalla, reverse image of two temples, mint of Perinthos (after Schönert-Geiss 1965: Tafel 36, 615)

Apollo Kendrisos set up on the top and a temple of Bendis-Artemis in a 3/4 view with a statue of the goddess positioned halfway up the hill (Fig. 3). The cult of Eumolpus, the mythical Thracian founder of the city, is assumed to be worshipped on the Nebet tepe (Kolev 1998: 362).

The other hills were located outside the fortified city walls, but their place within the sacred space of Philippopolis was undoubted. Dzhendem tepe is represented on coins of the emperor Caracalla. The scholars presume that the tetrastyle temple on top of the hill was dedicated to Apollo Kendrisos, the main deity of the city. A statue of the Thracian horseman on a high stand, which is the only image of the local Thracian deity/heros encountered on coins from the Roman period, can be clearly recognized on the long side of the temple (Fig. 4). Philippopolis became officially neokoros in AD 219 for the temple of Apollo Kendrisos, because the Roman emperor Elagabalus was worshipped in the temple as σύνναος (Andreeva 2014: 62-84). An important detail of the coin image is the statue of Apollo on a high pedestal at the foot of the hill. This statue is also depicted on coins of the emperors Caracalla (Fig. 5) and Geta (Герасимов 1940: 171) struck from the same reverse die. It is part of a scene representing the emperor performing sacrifice before the statue of the deity. That gave good grounds to assume that the scene in question was not a conventional image but an indication of the existence of a particular place for maintenance of the cult, including sacrifices (Andreeva 2014: 162-166).

The above-mentioned examples attest to the attempt of the provincial city mints to include in the image repertoire representations of the geographical reality that were especially important as regards the urban identity. On the other hand, the numismatic data from the city of Perinthos, the headquarters of the provincial governor, can be pointed out as an example for the conditionality of temple images on coin reverses. The emissions of Perinthos with schematically depicted octastyle temple and a legend “neokoros” (Fig. 6) could indicate the completion as well as the beginning of the construction of the imperial temple which made the city neokoros (Burrell 2004, 237). The conditionality of the temple building refers



to the promotion of the neokoria granted by the emperor Septimius Severus in AD 195, and therefore the newly formed sacred space in the city became an important area of the imperial propaganda in the province.

Temples devoted to the worship the imperial cult are also epigraphically attested in the provincial cities of Thrace.

An inscription from the city of Perinthos presents an evidence for a temple built by Larcia Gepaipyris, daughter of Larcus Asiaticus and dedicated to the emperor Hadrian and his wife Sabina (Sayar 1998: 219).

It is epigraphically attested that an Augusteum dedicated to the emperor Severus Alexander and his mother Julia Mamaea was constructed a solo by veterani consistentes in the city of Augusta Traiana. The building of the temple is considered to be motivated by the ambition of the veterans "to push themselves forward" the Roman emperor who passed through Augusta Traiana after the end of the military campaign against the Parthians (Боянов 2008: 207 and 404). There is, however, another hypothesis which more nearly reconciles the facts for that particular time-point stating that the reason for the construction may be sought in the effort of the city to be granted the neokoros title by the emperor (Andreeva 2014: 297-305).

Some idea of the sacred space in Augusta Traiana can be derived from another inscription found in the present-day village of Stamovo, Stara Zagora region (Najdenova 1989: 1393). The text mentions a man named Aurelius Sabinus Theiophilou Syrus, who was a priest of Dolichenus and negotiator vinarius Daciscus. He funded the restoration of the temple of Dolichenus along with Aurelius Primus, decurio of municipium Septimium Porolissense. The official character of the inscription implies that the restored temple had an important place in the religious life of the city. In general, the epigraphic mention of repairs or restorations of buildings is particularly problematic and in many cases it does not fully meet the architectural reality. Unfortunately, the archaeological research in the province of Thrace and in Augusta Traiana in particular has not yet provided evidence for temples or shrines of Dolichenus and therefore any data on the subject takes into account all the direct and indirect epigraphic references.

The only inscription related to the worship of Dolichenus set up by the army in the province of Thrace, was found in the military camp of Kabyle. The lettering attests for construction or reconstruction of a temple of the deity made by cohorts I Athoitorum. The unit was stationed in the camp as early as AD 193 and during the 3rd c. AD. The inscription and the temple itself refer to the early 3rd c. AD (Велков 1991: 18-20).

Greek inscription engraved on a marble altar in AD 144 and reused in the construction of atrium of the late antique basilica in Kabyle, reads that Greeks, probably tradesmen, built and dedicated a sanctuary to Heracles Agoraios. The agora of Kabyle and the sanctuary of Heracles, respectively, was sought by the archaeologists in the region of the basilica (Велков 1991: 16-18).

An inscribed slab reused as spoliium in the fortress wall of Nicopolis ad Istrum or in a fourth-century building southward preserves an epigraphic record for a temple which undoubtedly formed a sacred space in the ancient city. The inscription begins with the traditional formula dedicated to the victory, health and well-being of the Roman emperor, the emperor Hadrian and his wife Sabina in this particular case, the Senate and the Roman people, the provincial governor of Thrace and the city authorities. The inscription says that Jason, son of Apphus, from Prusias ad Hypium built a temple dedicated to Theos Hypsistos out of his own funds. This inscription is not only the first epigraphic mention of the cult of Hypsistos and the construction of a temple of the deity in Nicopolis, but it is the only persuasive evidence found so far throughout the ancient world for a temple of Theos Hypsistos. Unfortunately, the epigraphic monument was found outside its original context which hinders any identification of the temple of Hypsistos in the city or close to the city walls (Шаранков 2014: 28-33 and 37).

Defining the boundaries of the urban sacred landscape is another question to be considered, already raised by the scholars and complicated by the inclusion of the suburbium, which is a further marker of spatial separation between the city and the extra-urban space. Ancient authors considered the city walls as a crucial divider and therefore deities placed in an extra-urban location were to protect the city walls from an outside enemy. The Hadrianopolis mint included the image of Apollo Propylaios, defender of the cities against epidemics and pests, in its coin repertoire. The citizens of Callipolis in the Thracian Chersonese erected his statue on the city walls on the advice of the oracle of Apollo at Claros. During epidemic outbreak, the city sent a delegation to supplicate the aid of the god. The statue was later taken to Byzantium and placed on a market square, forming in that way another sacred place within the city's pomerium. Reliefs of the Thracian horseman and the three nymphs were placed on both sides of the city gate of Bizye which points to their apotropaic character and divine nature as θεοὶ προπύλαιοι (Юрукова 1987: 75).

Another example of the role of the boundaries of the urban sacred landscape is an inscription found in Augusta Traiana that was set up by a religious association related to a cult building in the extra-urban location (πρόπολις στείρη). The platform unearthed about 200 m west of the western city gate gives grounds to consider that the place is the one mentioned in the inscription (Велков, Николов 1989: 16-19).

Formation of sacred spaces in the city fabrics in the province of Thrace was ideologically and culturally loaded by the preservation of local traditions and the domination of the Roman realm. The urban sacred landscape was not simply a geographical space but also a cultural matrix of time-honored traditions that shaped the social and religious identity of the Thracian population.

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