



# Iconography of the Hero Horseman Evolution and continuity of the imagery of the horse rider in the plain of Philippi and Drama in northern Greece

**Georgios Iliadis**

Social Cooperative Enterprise "ERGO CULTURE HUMAN TRACES" Krinides-Kavala, Greece  
email: gsilidiadis@yahoo.com

**Summary** - The evolution of the iconography of the Hero - Horseman is discussed in the current study. Even though representations of the Hero are depicted on marble funerary stele in specific iconographic types, the majority of which is dated to the end of the Roman period, we should seek those types in earlier iconographies. Several examples are given after studying the rock art engravings in northern Greece and more specifically through the study of the rock art sites located in the plain of Philippi. The figure of the horseman, either as a hunter or a warrior, prevails. Equestrian themes can be identified in sites such as "Prophet Helias" in Philippi, at Mt. Pangaion and along the river valley in the Agitis Gorge in Serres. The representation of the horse rider and its wider cultural and iconographic context probably survived during the Macedonian and later Roman years where under the general spirit of religious syncretism, he was identified with local Thracian deities and others of the Greek Pantheon.

**Keywords:** Petroglyphs / North Greece / Funerary Stele / Horse Rider / Sanctuaries

**Riassunto** - L'articolo tratta dell'evoluzione dell'iconografia del cavaliere-eroe. Anche se tali rappresentazioni sono presenti su steli funerarie in marmo con un'iconografia propria e una datazione al periodo romano, possiamo cercare anche attestazioni precedenti. Alcuni esempi documentati si riscontrano sulle incisioni rupestri nel nord della Grecia, in particolare nella zona di Filippi. La figura del cavaliere, sia cacciatore che guerriero, è diffusa nel sito di "Profeta Elia" a Filippi, sul monte Pangaion e nella gola Agitis a Serres. L'iconografia del cavaliere è presente in ampi contesti culturali e iconografici, sopravvivendo dalla fase macedone a quella romana, di volta in volta in volta identificata sia con divinità locali che con figure del Pantheon greco.

**Parole chiave:** Petroglifi / Nord della Grecia / Stele funeraria / Cavaliere / Santuari

## INTRODUCTION

The chronological tracing of the domestication and the use of the horse is presented analytically throughout the literally review. Even though it is a subject of great interest, it seems to have provoked polemic among the researchers. The main debate is focused in the social, economic and cultural implications of the domestication of the horse in the 3<sup>rd</sup> mil. prehistoric societies of the Eurasian steppes.

In addition, a question that still puzzles the researchers is the earliest artistic depiction of the man and the horse. Although the depiction of the horse in Pleistocene art, both in cave art and in open air sites in Asia and Europe, is widespread, the figure of the horseman is emerging after several millennia into art. In south east Mediterranean basin, the earliest examples of horse riding can be found in decorated pottery from geometric period and through clay figurines from Cyprus and Crete which are dated to the archaic period.



Fig. 1 - Prophet Helias, rock 3, panel 2. Battle scene with horseriders. Source - Georgios Iliadis 2010.



Fig. 2 - Mana, rock 3. Hunting scene on horseback. Source - Georgios Iliadis 2011.



Fig. 3 - Deer hunting scene on rock segment. Source - Georgios Iliadis 2015.

The current paper examines the figure of the horseman in rock art and on marble funerary stele in archaeological sites within the Philippi plain in northern Greece. The selection of the site is justified due to the high concentration of engraved horsemen motifs and the numerous stele depicting the Hero Horseman.

#### ROCK ART OF PHILIPPI

For the scientific study of Philippi rock art we were granted with research permission ΥΠΠΟ/ΓΔΑΠΚ/ΑΡΧ./Α2/Φ63/24422/716/3-5-2010 issued by the Ministry of Culture and accompanied by the no 1998/13-5-2010 document of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kavala.

Two rock art sites have been studied in the area of Philippi, the site of 'Prophet Helias' which took its name after the nearby chapel of Prophet Helias and 'Mana'. 'Prophet Helias' constitutes a cluster of four rocks scattered along the hill road that connects the village of Seliani with the village of Kryoneri. The site is located on a hilltop while overlooking the plain of Philippi. The site of 'Mana' is located at the north of the village of Seliani, along a small river valley. The local people refer to this place as 'Mana' due to its proximity to a water spring, the 'Mother of water'. We have recorded and studied three rocks at this site.

The main theme in Philippi rock art is constituted by representation of horses and warriors riding on horseback. This is a common theme which can be traced not only at the site of 'Prophet Helias' and 'Mana' but also across the major rock art sites located in the plain of Philippi and Drama such as the sites around Mt. Pangaion and the ones along Agitis gorge. Characteristic are the examples of horse riding in battle and hunting scenes on rock 3 at Prophet Helias (Fig. 1). The clash between two horse riders and the outcome of the battle is narrated through the en-



Fig. 4 - Agitis gorge. Horseman with spear. Source - Georgios Iliadis 2012.



Fig. 5 - Horseman located at the north of Hero's sanctuary. Pieria valley, Mt. Pangaion. Source - Georgios Iliadis 2007.

graved images (Iliadis 2015: 2547-2559). This particular moment between the two rivals, the virtuosity in equestrian skills and archery of the winner and the loss of the control of the horse of the defeated warrior, is captured in detail. The horse rider on the right of the panel turns to the opposite direction of his horse and shoots back the enemy. This galloping battle technique refers to the 'Parthian shot', a tactic designed to give the warrior on horseback a clear advantage over his enemies. If both the horseman and his pursuer were riding at a gallop, such as the scene on Rock 3, the first would in effect be shooting a bow with a wind at his back, while the pursuer would be shooting into the wind. Shooting while in retreat was essential when hunting dangerous animals. Although the skill was probably perfected for the hunt a more significant application was in combat with other horsemen. After tracing and analyzing several rock art panels, we drew conclusion that the horse riding techniques presented both in 'Prophet Helias' and 'Mana' are attributed to light cavalry warfare. Apparently those galloping techniques are also applied to several hunting scenes in rock 3 of 'Mana' (Fig. 2) and a rock segment which was found in a private property and now is exhibited in the school of environmental education of Philippi (Fig. 3).

#### AGITIS GORGE

The gorge of Agitis river extends from the village Symvoli to the village Lefkothea in Serres and covers 9 km in length. It is a narrow river valley in the basin area of Serres and Drama and between Pangaion and Menikio mountains. The gorge is a result of geological processes which have created vertical slopes of 50-70m high. Caves, arches and several rock shelters can be found along the valley.

Numerous rock carvings on marble surfaces are located in several rock shelters depicting warrior horse riders, several animal images and geometrical or abstract patterns. In many cases older rock art images are overlapped by newer ones thus showing the continuous and dynamic use of the landscape by humans. Direct pecking, using stone or metal tools, is the most used engraving technique. In some other cases, we can notice surface scratching on the rocks by tools (filiform rock art) and then polishing of the engraved surface after engaging repeated retrogressive movements. Among the Agitis gorge rock art figures, the most common is the figure of the horseman (Fig. 4). We studied the rock art of Agitis during 2008- 2010 and we revisited the area in 2012 in the frame of the project 'Prehistoric & Contemporary Interventions in the Landscape, Rock Art & Land Art' (Iliadis, Kotsala 2015: 2561-2570).

## MT. PANGAION

Mt. Pangaion extends between the prefecture of Kavala and Serres and is divided to specific archaeological zones due to its rich archaeological, historical and ecological importance. The rock art site of Chortokopi (prefecture of Kavala) is a well known site to researchers and visitors of the area and is located on the eastern slopes of the mountain around the abandoned village of Chortokopi. In 2007 we identified a cluster of four rocks located within Pieria valley, the valley that extends between Pangaion and Symvolu mountains. The site is located in the north of the sanctuary of 'Hero Avlonites'. The attribution 'Avlonites' to 'Hero' emerges him as the guardian of the passage (Avlona). Several horsemen figures were identified in this area (Fig. 5).

## HERO HORSEMAN

The representation of Hero of Thrace is very frequent in marble funerary stele as a bas-relief (Fig. 12). Usually accompanied by the words 'Lord Hero' or simply 'Lord'. Then it follows the name of the one that dedicates and the sign ends with the word 'wish'. The expression 'Lord' is frequent in the Thracian marbles where it usually accompanies names of big deities, Lord Zeus, Lady Ira, Lord Apollo, Lord Dionysus. Funerary stele depicting the Thracian Horseman can be found mainly in the countryside. The 'Hero' was the god of agriculture, the god of hunting and the underground world (xthonios). His adoration was widespread in Thrace and very beloved among common people. The horseman is portrayed in many iconographical types, riding a horse in scenes of sacrifice, or as a hunter in the pattern of hunting a boar in front of the altar (Fig. 6). The iconographic type of hero-horseman passed from the Greek cities of Thrace at the Black Sea and the Aegean in the interior of Thrace. During the latter Roman era, under the general spirit of religious syncretism, he was identified with local Thracian deities and others of the Greek Pantheon.

## OVERLAPPING ICONOGRAPHY

The methods of dating open air rock art petroglyphs render difficulties for rock art researchers. Consequently, it is impossible to apply absolute dating methods in Philippi rock art. The location of the rocks, the extreme weather conditions, the unregulated visits and the illegal excavations have already altered and almost destroyed any important information relating to the age of the petroglyphs. For this reason it is necessary to limit our research within conventional methodologies. We can analyze any given information through the detailed recording of the engravings, the available bibliography and the petrographic analysis of the engraved rocks in order to draw safe conclusions about the archaeological and cultural context in which the engravings were produced.

It has been argued that the rock art of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace is a product of Thracian tribes that occupied this region before the Greeks (Dimitriadis 2006: 45-63). This argument is based on the descriptions of Herodotus and Thucydides as well as the geographer Strabo. Those populations came in contact with the Greek settlers and coexisted with them (Papadopoulos, Zanis 2009: 99-107). However, until now, the study of Philippi rock art hasn't drawn any iconographic parallel with the archaeological material of the archaic or classical period in this territory. Although the historical testimony that connects the Thracians with the extensive use of horses does exist, the archaeological evidence is missing. In order to set a chronological frame for Philippi rock art, we should examine the very figures of the horse and the horseman. The figure of the horseman, throughout every site we studied, is represented carrying range of weapons such as bows, swords, spears and slings. The identification only of offensive weapons and not defensive, such as shields or horse armour, has led us to conclude that we refer to light cavalry themes. In addition, the galloping and horse battle techniques refer to skirmishing bat-





Fig. 6 - Hero Horseman depicted on marble funerary stele. 2nd c AD. Source - Ephorate of Antiquities of Kavala - Thasos.

tles, thus giving reference probably to a small group of horse warriors and hunters or mercenaries and not an organised part of an army. Furthermore, the typology of the horses follows what frequently occurs in Philippi rock art: it consists of two parallel lines which start on the head, leaving the mouth open, and continue to represent the neck, the body and sometimes the legs and the tail. The same style appears in the depiction of horses on an amphora from the middle Bronze Age at Vel'ke Raskovce, in Slovakia (Iliadis, Coimbra 2011: 83-92). We should also remark that the already known iconographic depictions of warriors on horseback coming from archaeological sites in south east Europe (ceramics, stamps, sculptures, votive figurines) can't be later to 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> c. BC. In addition, the integration of the cavalry to the organised army should be placed during the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BC (Drews 2004: 88-89). Throughout the studied sites, there are continuous, variable and overlapped iconographies of the horseman figure. This is evident from the different patina of the petroglyphs, their engraving technique and their style.

The earliest depictions of the 'Hero' on funerary stele in eastern Macedonia are dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC coming from the city of Avdira. The large iconographic tradition of the mounted Hero's monuments is an indication of his great importance in this area. Its two iconographic types belong to two different periods. In the earlier, the Horseman is presented as a heroic hunter who gallops from left to right towards a tree around which a serpent is entwined. A dog accompanies the horse, ready to attack the prey which is emerging from the roots of the tree. The horseman

holds a spear and is ready to attack the prey, which is usually a boar. In the later iconographic types, the dog and the prey are omitted and the horseman gallops in a ceremonial manner towards the tree. Both these iconographies, and their variations, seem to have a powerful Thracian tenet (Hoddinott 1963: 54-55) and reflected indigenous religious aspirations which were strong to survive the new ideas and religious concepts following the Roman conquest of AD 46.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is very interesting to identify iconographic types between the horseman representations in rock art along the Philippi plain and the horseman depictions on marble funerary stele from the same region. We should note that horseman representations in rock art were found only in this region. Through our rock art studies in other parts of Thrace, such as the region of Evros, we found out that the engraved themes are dissimilar (Iliadis, Dotsika 2014: 105-120). The horse, the tree and the horsemen who are engaged in hunting scenes with dogs attacking the prey are identified in rock 3 in 'Prohet Helias'. A tree, which is reminiscent of a pine tree, was carved on the left of the victorious horseman. Similar tree typology is also identified on the same panel of the horseman figures in 'Grammeni Petra', a large rock located near the village Folia in the municipality of Pangaion. Tree depictions are eminent throughout the main, earlier and later, iconographic types, of the Hero Horseman. In addition, horseback hunting representations in rock art, such as the hunting scene in rock 3 of 'Mana', recalls the Thracian hero's sacred hunt. The horsemen in rock art are depicted galloping in a ceremonial way like the galloping Hero on the stele. If we also consider that this territory was as a Thracian populated region then we can justify the high concentration of horseman depictions. Rock art iconography along with the 'Hero' iconography probably coexisted and reproduced in the time period and lasted until the early Christian era when the Hero was identified with the warrior saints of the Greek orthodox iconographic tradition, such as Saint George.

#### References

- ANTHONY, David (2007). *The horse, the wheel, the language. How Bronze Age riders from Eurasian steppes shaped the modern world*. New Jersey. Princeton University Press.
- CHRISANTHOS, Stefan (2008). *Warfare in the ancient world. From the Bronze Age to the fall of Rome*. London. Praeger Publishers.
- COLLART, Philippe (1937). *Philippes, Ville De Macedoine depuis ses origines jusqu'à la fin de l'époque romaine*. Paris. E. De Boccard (ed).
- COIMBRA, Fernando Augusto; ILIADIS, Georgios (2011). The hunting scene on rock 3 from Mana. In OOSTERBEEK, Luiz; NASH, George (eds). *Landscape within rock art*. Tomar. Ceiphar, Arkeos, perspectivas em dialogo, vol. 29: 83-92.
- DREWS, Robert (2004). *Early riders. The beginnings of mounted warfare in Asia and Europe*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. New York & London.
- DIMITRIADIS, George (2006). Assessing natural and human hazards on Greek rock art. In CRUZ, Ana Rosa; OOSTERBEEK, Luiz (eds). *Arkeos, perspectivas em dialogo*. Tomar. Ceiphar, Vol. 16: 45-63.
- DIMITRIADIS, George; ILIADIS, Georgios (2007). An ethnological flashback on Horse-Rider cult in open air sanctuaries in Eastern Macedonia, Greece. In *XXII Valcamonica Symposium Proceedings*. Papers. Capo di Ponte. Ed. del Centro: 107-113.
- FURMANECK, Vaclav (2000). Interaction between the Carpathian Region and the Eastern Mediterranean during the mid- 2<sup>nd</sup> Millenium B.C. In *Gods and Heroes of Bronze Age Europe, the Roots of Odysseus*. 25<sup>th</sup> Council of Europe Art Exhibition. Copenhagen, Bonn, Paris, Athens: 29-30.



- HODDINOTT, Ralph Field (1963). *Early Byzantine churches in Macedonia and southern Serbia*. Pallgrave Mcmillan UK.
- ILIADIS, Georgios (2015). The horse in Philippi rock art. From the Iron Age petroglyphs to the late Roman and early Christian funerary Stele. In COLLADO GIRALDO, Hipolito; ARRANZ, Jose Julio Garcia (eds), *XIX International rock art conference proceedings IFRAO 2015, Symbols in the Landscape, Rock art and its Context*. Arkeos vol. 37, ITM: 2547-2559.
- ILIADIS, Georgios; KOTSALA Katerina (2015). Prehistoric and contemporary interventions in the landscape. Rock art and Land art. In COLLADO GIRALDO, Hipolito; ARRANZ, Jose Julio Garcia (eds). *XIX International rock art conference proceedings IFRAO 2015, Symbols in the Landscape, Rock art and its Context*. Arkeos vol. 37, ITM: 2561-2570.
- ILIADIS, Georgios (2015). Rock art of Philippi: Enhancement of the rock art sites through night lighting. In *Proceedings of the Balkan Light 2015*. Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs. . Athens. National Technical University of Athens: 305-310.
- ILIADIS, Georgios; DOTSIKA, Elisavet (2014). Rock art from Evros region in northern Greece. In *Antrope*. N. 1. Tomar. CEIPHAR- ITM: 105-120.
- ILIADIS, Georgios (2007). *The figure of the horseman in Philippi rock art. Rock 1,2,3 and the rock of 'Mana'*. Master thesis dissertation. UTAD-IPT, [www. repositorio.utad.pt/bitstream/10348/171/1 msc\\_ggiliadis.pdf](http://www.repositorio.utad.pt/bitstream/10348/171/1/msc_ggiliadis.pdf).
- KOUKOULI-CHRYSSANTHAKI, Chaido; MALAMIDOU, Dimitra (1989). The Sanctuary Of Hero Avloneites on Mt. Pangaion. In *Aemth* vol 3. Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace. Thessaloniki. Hellenic Ministry of Culture: 553-564.
- LAZARIDIS, Dimitrios (1973). *Filippi-Roman settlement*. Athens. Center Of Ekistics.
- PAPADOPOULOS, Stratis; ZANIS, Angelos (2009). Greeks and Thracians coexistence on the island of Thasos during 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In BONIAS & PERREAULT (eds), *Proceedings of the International Symposium Greeks and Thracians in Coastal and Inland Thrace During the Years Before and After the Great Colonization*. Thasos: 99-107.
- POWELL, Thomas (1971). The introduction of horse riding to temperate Europe. A contributory note. In *ProcPS*. vol 37: 1-14.
- TSOHOS, Charalambos (2003). The religious topography of Philippi in the second and third centuries. In *Aemth* vol. 17. Ministry of Culture. Thessaloniki. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki: 71-85.
- VELENI, Polixeni Adam (1983). Cavaliers sculptes sur des autels en relief de Veroia. In *Makedonika* vol. 23. Thessaloniki. Etairia makedonikwn spoudwn: 172-190.