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The Triad Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos A Contribution to the Study of Ancient Cults in Upper Moesia

Abstract: The triad Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos has been attested in Upper Moesia by the relief from the village of Bukovo near Negotin, eastern Serbia. The Roman supreme god was frequently shown in association with other deities, but the presence of Bacchus and Hercules in such associations is Greek rather than Roman in origin. The association of Liber and Hercules was promoted by the emperor Septimius Severus, a native of the city of Leptis Magna whose patron gods were concurrently Liber and Hercules. Septimius even granted the *dii patrii* a sort of official recognition as patrons of the dynasty he founded. The village of Bukovo where the relief was found had not been known as an archaeological site. There is no specific evidence for the worship of Jupiter in that area, while the worship of Herakles is attested on the sites of Rovine and Tamnič near Negotin. The relief is close to north-Macedonian reliefs in style, and reflects Hellenistic and Thracian influence in associating the cults of Dionysos and Herakles. The depicted deities are compatible and close to Septimius Severus' official religion. The central position of the supreme god indicates his importance as well as the fact that the other two deities are associated to him, as his children, patrons of nature and fertility in the underground and aboveground worlds. It is also important to note that the relief confirms Hellenistic religious influences in the area of the Upper Moesian limes.

Keywords: cults, triad, Zeus, Herakles, Dionysos, eastern Serbia, Upper Moesia, Hellenistic and Thracian influences

The sacred association of Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos¹ has been attested in Upper Moesia by a relief discovered in the village of Bukovo near the town of Negotin, eastern Serbia. It seems necessary at this point to warn about the confusion surrounding the findspot. Namely, S. Düll included the relief in her book on the monuments from the north of the Roman province of Macedonia,² probably misled by the existence of two identical place names (Bukovo), one situated some ten kilometres south of Negotin in what is now eastern Serbia, and the other, southwest of Bitola, near Negotino on the river Vardar, in what is now the FYROM. What may have added to the confusion is the markedly Hellenistic style of the relief and its similarity to the finds of north-Macedonian provenance. N. Vulić, who first published the relief, specified Bukovo “near Negotin in [Negotinska] Krajina” and

¹ The Greek and not the Roman names of the deities are used because the relief, as research has shown, was created under Hellenistic and Thracian religious influences.

² Düll 1977, 317, cat. no 89.

expressly reiterated that locality in another text published some ten years later.³ His location has been accepted by other interested scholars.⁴

In spite of mutilations, the relief from Bukovo clearly shows three standing deities: Herakles on the left-hand side, Zeus in the middle, and Dionysos on the right. It is now difficult to tell whether Herakles had something in his right hand, perhaps a club, but he obviously holds the apples of the Hesperides in his left. Zeus holds a sceptre in his left hand, pouring out a patera over an eagle with his right. With his left hand resting on the thyrsos, Dionysos pours out a kantharos over a panther with the other hand. The scene is well-proportioned and balanced in composition, and markedly Hellenistic in style.

Given that the Roman supreme god was frequently shown in association with other deities, we shall first take a look at the nature of the connection between Dionysos and Herakles.⁵ The two were held in high reverence by Alexander the Great, impressed with their semidivine nature.⁶ In a way, they inspired the Stoics as well, and thus Virgil likens Augustus to them.⁷ Their semidivine nature is referred to in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, where Bacchus is described as belonging to the group of human beings whose virtue earned them a place on Olympus.⁸

The iconographic association of Bacchus and Hercules is not Roman in origin. Dionysos and Herakles appear together in drama and art from ancient Greek times.⁹ Herakles is a favourite character in satyrplay, lending it a burlesque or a grotesque touch.¹⁰ The markedly bacchantic dimension attached to Herakles in ancient Greece is observable even in later periods, as a reminiscence of his involvement in the thiasos. Roman Hercules is also

³ Vulić 1931, no 630; Vulić 1941–48, 308, cat. no 8.

⁴ Petrović 1968, 52 ff, identifies the relief as Upper Moesian in his study on the provincial depictions of Hercules, as well as Jovanović 2005, 519–520, in his text on the link between Jupiter and Liber, and Bošković-Robert 2008, 212, cat. no R3.

⁵ Both were sons of Zeus born by mortal women and both were persecuted by Hera; see Galinsky 1972, 81.

⁶ Dušanić 1995, 77–98, with a bibliography.

⁷ Virg. Aen. VI, 789, 804, 805; cf. Bruhl 1953, 134.

⁸ Boyancé 1937, 306.

⁹ Galinsky 1972, 81 ff.

¹⁰ Dionysos and Herakles were often depicted on Greek vases. Galinsky 1972, 46 ff, 81 ff, cites a number of painted vases showing Herakles and satyrs, or satyrs in the image of Herakles. One of oft-shown scenes is the Feast of Dionysos and Herakles or of Herakles and satyrs. At times a curious substitution occurs and Satyr assumes the role of Herakles as slayer of the dragon guarding the Hesperidean tree whose fruit evokes grapes rather than apples.

a wine lover and is depicted in that context.¹¹ Hercules *Bibax* is frequently shown in thiasic scenes on the sarcophagi, but Collins-Clinton draws attention to the funerary dimension of his presence in such contexts.¹²

In the Roman Empire, the association of Liber and Hercules was fostered by Septimius Severus¹³ and, as a result, his reign was quite propitious for the spread of the Bacchic cult. Namely, the emperor was a native of Leptis Magna, a city in north-African Tripolitania whose patrons were at once Liber and Hercules. Septimius remained devoted to the patron gods of his birthplace, *dii patrii*, and even granted them a sort of official recognition by proclaiming them patrons of the dynasty he founded.¹⁴ He dedicated a temple in Rome to them and put their images on his coins.¹⁵ From the Secular Games (*ludi saeculares*) held in 204, the names of Bacchus and Hercules were introduced into the *carmen*, a hymn sung on that occasion.

Inscriptions testifying to the joint cult of Liber and Hercules have been found in Tripolitania (Leptis Magna),¹⁶ Germania,¹⁷ Italia,¹⁸ Dacia,¹⁹ Lower Moesia,²⁰ Macedonia²¹ and, in particular, Thrace.²² There are two inscriptions from Philippi that, besides Liber, refer to Hercules and a thiasos of maenads,²³ and to Libera and Hercules (*Herculi sacrum*) respectively.²⁴

¹¹ Many such scenes in mosaic are known from Antioch, cf. Collins-Clinton 1977, 25.

¹² Collins-Clinton 1977, 25.

¹³ Bruhl 1953, 167.

¹⁴ Under Septimius Severus, Liber Pater was one of the supreme gods of the Empire, cf. Bruhl 1953, 191; Beard, North and Price 2004, 255 ff.

¹⁵ Excavations at Leptis Magna have discovered Dionysiac motifs in the decoration of the monuments erected by Septimius Severus and his children. After his victory over the Parthians, the emperor had a massive temple built to Liber and Hercules on the Quirinal at Rome. The temple was believed to be the second largest ever built in Rome and, according to the court historian (Cassius Dio, LXXVII, 16.3), a prime example of extravagance, cf. Bruhl 1953, 191; Beard, North and Price 2004, 255 ff.

¹⁶ *IRT*, 289: *Herc[ul][i et] / Libero patri [3] / diis p[at]rii[s] / [*

¹⁷ *AE* 1929, 107.

¹⁸ The inscription from Pompeii: Jupiter, Venus, Liber and Hercules (*AE* 1922, 101); from Rome: Hercules, Liber and Silvanus (*CIL* VI, 294, p. 3756 = D 3464).

¹⁹ *CIL* III, 7681.

²⁰ *AE* 1901, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1939, 192; 1939, 196; 1924, 53.

²² Serafov 1963, 177–178; Jovanović 1974, 60.

²³ *AE* 1939, 192. The inscription was discovered, together with the other inscriptions dedicated to the triad Liber, Libera and Hercules, in the ruins of a structure overlaid by the *thermae*, cf. Jaccottet 2003/II, 60–61, no 25.

²⁴ *AE* 1939, 196.

The association of the cult of Hercules with that of Liber-Libera seems to derive from the association of the cult of Hercules with Dionysos, which had been known in Thrace from pre-Roman times.²⁵ Given this Thracian origin, the triads from Philippi may be seen as transcriptions of the cult of Dionysos the Thracian.²⁶

Bacchus and Hercules were shown together, but such images were thiasic rather than cultic,²⁷ whereas their paired images on reliefs or coins convey a different theme.²⁸ By way of illustration, only some of their joint depictions will be mentioned here. A relief from Napoca in Dacia shows Liber, Hercules and Mercury.²⁹ Herakles and Dionysos were frequently depicted together in Thrace, which has yielded many reliefs showing either both mythological personages or Herakles alone holding a cup in his hand.³⁰ A votive relief from Rome shows Jupiter and Herakles;³¹ one relief from the Vatican Museums depicts Bacchus and Hercules,³² another one shows Jupiter, Mars, Mercury and Herakles,³³ while an intaglio shows Jupiter, Mars and Herakles.³⁴

Apart from the Bukovo relief, the triad Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos has been registered in other parts of the Empire too. An inscription from Dacian Potaissa shows Jupiter in association with Liber and Hercules.³⁵ S. Popescu and M. Popescu explain this association by compatibility between the two deities, while seeing it also as an expression of affinity for Septimius Severus' official religion. From Tropeum Traiani in Lower Moesia comes an inscription referring to Jupiter in association with Liber Pater, Hercules the Invincible (*Herculi Invicto*) and Ceres.³⁶

To better understand the nature of the triad shown in the Bukovo relief, the various aspects of these deities should be looked at. As has already

²⁵ Cf. Jaccottet 2003/II, 60–61

²⁶ Jaccottet 2003/I, 73.

²⁷ *LIMC* V, s.v. Herakles, nos 3246–3252; *LIMC* III, s.v. Dionysos/Bacchus, nos 106–108 (Bacchus and Hercules); nos 108–112 (Bacchus and Hercules in the feast scene).

²⁸ *LIMC* V, s.v. Herakles, nos 3377–3385.

²⁹ Bodor 1963, 226–227, fig. 9.

³⁰ Serafov 1963, 177–178; Jovanovic 1974, 60.

³¹ *LIMC* V, s.v. Herakles, no 3377.

³² *LIMC* III, s.v. Dionysos/Bacchus, no 106.

³³ *LIMC* V, s.v. Herakles, no 3378.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no 3379.

³⁵ Popescu and Popescu 1995, 230.

³⁶ *AE* 1901, 40 = *CIL* III, 14214, 1; here the military aspect of Hercules is emphasized, cf. Ariescu 1977, 186.

been noted, the Bukovo relief is similar to north-Macedonian cult reliefs in style. This is particularly obvious from two differently interpreted reliefs from the borderland region between the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Upper Moesia: one, from Rudnik near Veles, showing the triad Zeus, Hera and Dionysos (Zeus, Liber, Libera or Terra Mater?), the other, from Vataš near Kavadarci, showing Dionysos and Hera (Liber and Libera?).³⁷ The reliefs may be seen as associating Dionysos with the supreme deity.

As for the deities in the Bukovo relief and their worship in Upper Moesia, it should be noted that the supreme god was held in high reverence in the province under his various aspects — Roman, Greek, Oriental or local — and in various combinations with other deities.³⁸ Given the vastness of the subject, we shall only remark that an inscription from Guberevac near Belgrade (Singidunum) refers to Jupiter and Hercules,³⁹ while another one, from Prizren, refers to Jupiter, Hercules, Minerva and Neptune.⁴⁰

Hercules too was worshipped in various contexts in Upper Moesia. His aspects are best reflected in such epithets as *Conservator* (apotropaic aspect),⁴¹ *Kypw* (master),⁴² *Invictus* (invincibility and triumph),⁴³ *Hercules Naisas* (*Herculi Naisati*, toponymic epithet).⁴⁴ His iatrical aspect has been attested at Mediana, a late antique villa near modern-day Niš (Naissus);⁴⁵ and possibly also in two inscriptions from Lece, which may have been a natural healing site,⁴⁶ although, on the other hand, the two inscriptions may be understood in an apotropaic context relating to mining.⁴⁷ The chthonic

³⁷ Düll 1977, nos 104 and 111, figs 32 and 33; Jovanović 2005, 509 ff; on the different interpretations of the reliefs, see Pilipović 2006, 86–87.

³⁸ Bošković-Robert 2008, as the supreme Roman deity (182 ff), with markedly Greek and Oriental (208 ff), and regional elements (238 ff).

³⁹ *IMS* I, 103.

⁴⁰ Vulić 1931, 135, no 325.

⁴¹ *IMS* VI, 51.

⁴² *Ibid.* II, 15.

⁴³ Ratiaria: *CIL* III, 8082; *AE* 1905, 219; Lece: *IMS* IV, 111.

⁴⁴ *IMS* III/2, 102.

⁴⁵ Jovanović 1974, 65–78, suggests that some aspects of the connection between Dionysos and Heracles may be sought for in their soteriological-iatrical connection.

⁴⁶ *IMS* IV, 107 and 108; Petrović 1968, 55.

⁴⁷ Hercules might have been worshipped as patron god of miners, mostly because of his stamina, cf. Dušanić 1999, 33; he is also known to have been the patron of quarries, as attested in Dalmatia, Dacia and Germania, cf. Jeličić 1981, 97–103; Munteanu 1973, 73–86.

aspect of Hercules has been attested by a stele showing the return of Alcestis,⁴⁸ but also by, for example, the lamps excavated at Viminacium.⁴⁹

Even the third deity from the Bukovo relief, Bacchus, was worshipped in various contexts in Upper Moesia. The surviving inscriptions and depictions suggest that he was worshipped primarily as patron god of agrarian fertility and vegetation, or of wine and vine-growing. This is most explicitly shown by Liber's epithet *laetus* in an inscription from Pusto Šilovo near Leskovac⁵⁰ and by Libera's appellation *Hilara* in an inscription from Naisus.⁵¹ It has been suggested that Liber was the patron god of mines and ores,⁵² and that he was also worshipped in iatrical contexts.⁵³ Liber's chthonic aspect has been attested both by funerary monuments⁵⁴ and by many cult objects recovered from burials.⁵⁵

The location where the relief showing the triad Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos was discovered — the village of Bukovo a few kilometres south of Negotin in eastern Serbia — cannot be described as a well-known archaeo-

⁴⁸ Ladek, Premerstein and Vulić 1901, 124, fig. 4; *LIMCI*, s.v. Alkestis, no 27; Pilipović 2008, 343, fig. 6.

⁴⁹ Korać 1995, scheme on p. 408, cites nine lamps showing the mask of Hercules and eight lamps with his mask on an altar.

⁵⁰ *IMS IV*, 109.

⁵¹ *IMS IV*, 25. That vine-growing was well developed in that area is suggested by the surviving grape presses, cf. Jović 2002, 38, no 9; Petrović 1976, 125–126; Pilipović 2006, 84 ff.

⁵² In Illyricum and in mining districts across the Roman Empire, Liber was worshipped as one of the deities from the heterogeneous miners' pantheon (Terra Mater, Roma, Tellus, Ceres, Diana etc). Thus Liber and Libera may be assigned to the subgroup of deities of nature (e.g. Silvanus, Diana and Ceres). There is also the subgroup of underworld deities (e.g. Dis Pater, Terra Mater, Orcia, Aeraura), and the one comprising patron gods of mining and metallurgical *officinae* (e.g. Hercules, Vulcan, Neptune), Dušanić 1980, 13, note 28; cf. also Dušanić 1999, 131; and 2003, 259, note 56, and 264, note 107; Pilipović 2006, 91.

⁵³ The iatrical aspect of Dionysos is best evidenced by the statuary from the late antique villa at Mediana, cf. Jovanović 1974, 61 ff.

⁵⁴ The best confirmation for Liber's chthonic aspect is found on the so-called Jason Sarcophagus showing a very descriptive scene of the Bacchanalia, cf. Pilipović 2004, 65–78, with bibliography.

⁵⁵ E.g., the necropolises of Viminacium have yielded, among other finds, a terracotta of Bacchus (Cvjetičanin 1995, 167, fig. 7/2), a mirror showing the hierogamy of Dionysos and Ariadne in relief (Spasić 2001, no 1, figs 2–3), numerous lamps with Dionysiac themes such as the Bacchus mask, satyrs, maenads, sileni (Korać 1995, Pl. on p. 408); Ratiaria has yielded terracotta lamps showing the mask of Bacchus (Kuzmanov 2002, nos 2 and 3), etc.



Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos. Relief from Bukovo, eastern Serbia
(Photo: National Museum, Belgrade)

logical site. So far it has yielded two fragmentary statues and a stamped brick, published by N. Vulić as early as the 1930s.⁵⁶ No evidence for Jupiter's worship in that area has survived into our times, but the worship of Herakles has been attested on the sites of Rovine⁵⁷ and Tamnič in the environs

⁵⁶ Vulić 1931, published the following finds from Negotin: the lower portion of a marble male figure seated on a chair with an eagle to his left, a lamb by the right leg of the chair, and, on the left side, a small and a big ram (no 238); a stone lion (no 239); and a stamped brick bearing *DICI* and *AQUIS* (no 240). An archaeological site that is much better known is situated north of Negotin, at the village of Miloševo, Vidrovac: *Ad Aquas* – a station on the Danubian road.

⁵⁷ A standing bronze statue of naked and beardless Hercules with a club and the lion's skin, cf. Veličković 1972, 50, no 70, fig. 70.

of Negotin.⁵⁸ Moreover, the same area has yielded the fragment of a statue showing Bacchus or a satyr,⁵⁹ and a bronze appliqué showing Bacchus (Prahovo).⁶⁰ Bukovo is in a region known for vine-growing, which may suggest a possible way of looking at the function of these deities or the function of Dionysos. Jovanović has suggested a possible link between the relief and the nearby mines.⁶¹ Bošković-Robert has summed up these ideas in her suggestion that the depicted deities were associated with Zeus in their capacity as patrons of nature and fertility both on earth and in the underworld.⁶²

In conclusion, it may be said that the relief showing the triad Zeus, Herakles and Dionysos is closely related to those from northern Macedonia both in style and in the manner of arranging the deities. It reflects Hellenistic and Thracian influences, as well as influences of the joint cult of Herakles and Dionysos. It shows compatible deities, closely connected with the official religion of Septimius Severus. The supreme god's central position suggests his primacy and, consequently, the fact that Herakles and Dionysos are brought into association with him.⁶³ They are associated as his offspring united by their semidivine nature, as patrons of nature and fertility, but also of physical and moral strength. On the other hand, the relief is important insofar as it confirms Hellenistic and Thracian religious influences in the area of the Upper Moesian limes.

Abbreviations

- ABJ* Lj. B. Popović, Dj. Mano-Zisi, M. Veličković and B. Jeličić, *Antička bronza u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: National Museum, 1969).
AE *L'année épigraphique*.
CIL *Corpus inscriptionum Latinorum*.
IMS *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure* I, II, III/2, IV, VI (Belgrade 1976–1995).
IRT *The Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania*.
LIMC *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* I–VIII. (Zurich–Munich 1981–1997); VIII (Zurich–Düsseldorf 1997).

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⁵⁸ Hercules with the lion's skin seated on a rock, *ABJ*, 96, no 105.

⁵⁹ Tomović 1993, 111, no 157, fig. 41/3.

⁶⁰ Drča 1991, 24, no 14, fig. 14.

⁶¹ Jovanović 2005, 520.

⁶² Bošković-Robert 2008, 212.

⁶³ In a way, this is reiterated in the iconography of the villa at Mediana, whose owner was probably of Thracian origin, see Jovanović 1974, 65–67.

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