

## The Power of Zeus Bronton: Notes on a New Miracle Narrative

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In recent pages of this journal, N. Eda Akyürek Şahin and Hüseyin Uzunoğlu have published an interesting dedication to Zeus Bronton (“Weihung an Zeus Bronton”) dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD.<sup>1</sup> The stone on which it was inscribed is a relatively large rectangular altar of which only the upper part survives; a male bust is depicted in relief at the top of the accessible face of the altar, between a pair of akroteria—probably this carried the portrait of the brother mentioned in the text.<sup>2</sup> The stone was apparently located at a house in the village of İlyasça, about half-way between Iznik and Bilecik. The editors have well underlined the prominence of Zeus Bronton—a god connected with storms but also with agricultural prosperity and many other aspects—in the region of Bithynia, specifically in Phrygia Epiktetos. There were probably many local sanctuaries of the god in the area, attested for the most part through relatively laconic dedications, but a possible origin for the stone could be the major temple of Zeus Bronton which has been located in the village of Ahmetler in Pazaryeri District near Bilecik and from which numerous inscriptions have now been recovered.<sup>3</sup> The inscription joins a growing body of evidence

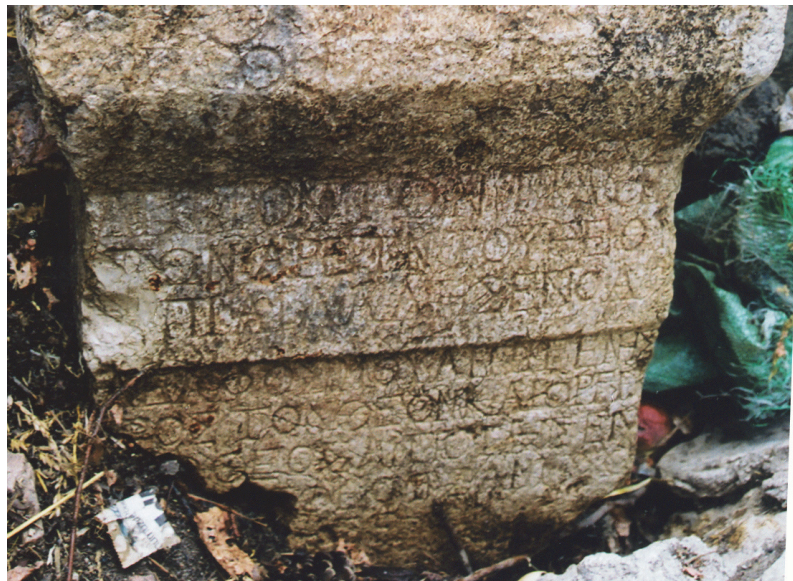


Fig. 1) *The inscription on the altar*  
(photo by the courtesy of N. E. Akyürek Şahin)

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I have greatly benefitted from exchanges with Angelos Chaniotis, though of course I bear sole responsibility for any mistakes herein. The epigraphic abbreviations used derive from the “GrEpiAbbr” list of AIEGL. For the term “miracle narrative” used here for a wider genre of texts, rather than the misleading category of “Beichtinschrift” or “confession inscription”, see the conclusion of this note.

<sup>1</sup> Akyürek Şahin – Uzunoğlu 2022, 119-120 no. 19.

<sup>2</sup> For further details, see edd.pr. and the published phs.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. esp. the overview of multiple possible centres of worship in Akyürek Şahin 2012, 346-347. For the site of Ahmetler, see Öztürk et al. 2020. Older finds from the area of Ahmetler: I.Mus. Iznik 1504-1511; Akyürek Şahin 2012 (SEG 62, 981-1012). More recently published ones: Öztürk 2022, 88-89 nos. 7 und 42.

about this cult and its importance in the region,<sup>4</sup> but it appears to be distinctive – at least thus far, in the current state of the evidence – in providing more significant details about the context in which the dedication was made.

The editors have only been able to read the inscription from the photograph (fig. 1). One can merely do the same and under these conditions any decipherment must remain provisional. The following attempt at an improved text is offered in the hope that it may at least begin to provide some sense to the narrative behind this dedication:

ἀγαθῆ <sup>ν</sup> τύχη·	“With good fortune.
Δι̅ Βροντῶντι· λιπ̅-	To Zeus Bronton.
{π}ῶν ἀρετῆν τοῦ θεοῦ,	Having neglected the miraculous
[νή]πια ἐλάλησεν ὁ ἀ- <sup>ν</sup>	power of the god, my brother Archi-
5 δελφός μου Ἀρχιγένης (?)	genes (?) spoke foolish words against
[π]ρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ ὀργισ̅-	(or: with reference to) the god and,
[θεῖς] ὁ θεὸς ἀνηρώτησεν	having become angry, the god asked
[... ca. 6 ...] ὉΕΟ . ΣΑΝΤΛΣΟ	[...]”
[ - - - - - ] ΣΕ [ - - - - - ]	

Line 1 is inscribed on the top moulding below the bust; lines 2-4 are carved in a protruding field below the moulding; the remaining lines continue in a recessed field below that.

1. ἀγαθῆι τύχηι edd.pr. | 2-3. ΛΙΠ|ΠΩΝ edd.pr., suggesting another epithet of the god | 4-5. [.]ΠΙΑΓΛΑΔΗΣ ἔνθα | ἀδελφός μου ΑΡ Εὐγένης? edd.pr., suggesting Α(ὕ)ρ(ήλιος) Εὐγένης | 6-7. ὀργισ̅|[θεῖς] or perhaps ὀργισ̅|[ας] in a passive sense: ὀργῆ|[v?] edd.pr. | 8-9. [.....]ΘΕΟΙ[.]ΑΝΟ[.]Ο | [- - -]Ε[- - -] edd.pr.

Evidently, there remain several problems in understanding the text: the name of the brother in line 5 is very insecurely reconstructed; the syntax of lines 6-7 involves an intriguing change of subject; and the final lines (7-8) of course remain to be improved. But the reading offered here is nonetheless suggestive: as preserved, the narrative in the text bears a strong resemblance to the so-called Beichtinschriften or “confession stelai” from Lydian Katakekaumene, though it also contains some distinct expressions.

First, as in the “confession stelai”, a transgression is reported to have been committed by the brother of the dedicant. This consisted, we are told, of an error in judgement: neglecting (λιπών), i.e. ignoring, the power of the deity.<sup>5</sup> The verb λείπω only appears once in the Beichtinschriften,

<sup>4</sup> For the founders of individual cults of Zeus Bronton, as well as their familial and commemorative aspects, see Parker 2017, 113-119; Carbon - Chaniotis forthc.; and Pañeda Murcia forthc.

<sup>5</sup> For this sense of λείπω, cf. LSJ s.v. I.3.

in the context of a day of service omitted,<sup>6</sup> but a general neglect of the divinity or claims of ignorance in having caused offense are very common in these texts.<sup>7</sup> Amply paralleled elsewhere, the god's power, his capacity for benefaction and miraculous intervention, is defined as ἀρετή.<sup>8</sup> At the same time and more concretely, the brother spoke out in an insulting manner against the god or said foolish things with regard to Zeus Bronton. Verbal errors of this kind are also paralleled in the “confession stelai”—and still more broadly—as mistakes for which one would be punished and need to atone.<sup>9</sup>

As the end of line 6 makes clear, the god evidently responded to this behaviour with anger. The words ὀργή and ὀργίζω are not found in the “confession stelai”, but divine anger is of course inherent in the dominant theme of punishment found in these texts: the gods there—just like everywhere else in ancient polytheism—are presented as vengeful, bearing grudges, and punishing mortals accordingly.<sup>10</sup> In the present case, the manifestation of this anger may have taken the form of the thunderstorm with which the god was so explicitly associated.<sup>11</sup> The punishment of the individual concerned is likely to have been more tangible than this divine sign, involving some form of physical affliction or even death, as we can often glean from the “confession stelai”. The exact sense of the last legible word, ἀνηρώτησεν, if it has been correctly deciphered, is perhaps more problematic. The subject of this verb is most naturally interpreted as the god, ὁ θεός, who

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<sup>6</sup> Petzl, Beichtinschriften 19.3: λειπούσης ἡμέρας.

<sup>7</sup> Claiming ignorance as a reason for ritual errors or other transgressions is a common trend in the “confession stelai”, see e.g. Petzl, Beichtinschriften 10.3: διὰ τὸ ἀγνοεῖν αὐτόν (cf. also Petzl, Beichtinschriften 11.4-5, 34.6-8, 76.2-3; Petzl, Beichtinschriften Suppl. 155.3-4, 161.3-4). On this and other forms of “forgetfulness” (λανθάνω), as well as the rationale for such excuses, see Thonemann 2022, 59 and 263.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. still the helpful literature collected in LSJ s.v. ἀρετή Ib. For a wider discussion of ἀρετή and aretalogy, see notably Petridou 2016, 3, 78-79. The sole example from the “confession stelai” appears to be Petzl, Beichtinschriften 50.7: ἐνέγραψα τὴν ἀρετὴν (“I recorded the power (of the gods)”; δυνάμις is the more common word used in these texts to express divine power in the “confession stelai”. Compare also the formulation at Petzl, Beichtinschriften 59.15-16: περικρυβούσης τε αὐτῆς τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ θεοῦ (the guilty party was “trying to conceal entirely the power of the god”).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. esp. Petzl, Beichtinschriften 95.4-5: δι’ ἁμαρτίαν λόγον λαλήσασα κτλ. There, Petzl supposes that an ἀπόρητος λόγος was spoken by the guilty woman; Thonemann 2022, 59 n. 71, thinks of a false oath. In light of the present text and taking into account the vagueness of the word λόγος, some sort of offensive or disrespectful kind of speech may have been involved instead. For a case of slander against the gods and/or their human agents (a ναύκορος in this instance), cf. the use of λοιδορέω in the fragmentary Petzl, Beichtinschriften 25.5. The word νήπιος is usually found of unfortunate children in funerary epitaphs and especially funerary epigrams. Yet for a similar phrase to the one found here, see already Pindar fr. 157 (Maehler): ὦ τάλας ἐφάμερε, νήπια βάζεις, “O wretched creature of the day, you babble nonsense...” (transl. W. H. Race). The use of νήπιος here might allude to the childishness of the brother as well as perhaps to his misfortune, e.g. death (see below).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. the uses of νεμεσάω in Petzl, Beichtinschriften 3.5, 15.3, 69.8; νέμεσις in Petzl, Beichtinschriften 57.12; Petzl, Beichtinschriften Suppl. 56.10.

<sup>11</sup> For thunderstorms, see esp. Steinepigramme II 265 no. 09/12/02 (Iuliopolis); this invokes Zeus as Ktesios, but evokes the power of the god in a storm. Compare possibly the epiphany experienced by Menophilos and recorded by the Daokometai: SEG 56, 1434, face A, with the comments of Carbon – Chaniotis forthc.

immediately precedes it. But, in the “confession stelai” and elsewhere, questions are normally asked by humans of the gods—in an oracular or divinatory context, regarding the cause of a certain punishment, regarding the correct means of propitiation, etc.—not *vice versa*.<sup>12</sup> A divine question remains somewhat surprising and difficult to understand, unless the verb should be taken to mean something like “demand” or even “command”. This would be much more suitable in terms of sense: as often found in the Beichtinschriften, the god asked—i.e. demanded or ordered—that the brother somehow atone for his mistake.<sup>13</sup> As we have it, the narrative seems perhaps to be compressed—which is not unusual in the Beichtinschriften also—and to have elided an important step: the actual punishment of the brother. It appears to skip directly from the anger of the god to the divine request that there be some form of atonement for his crime. Regrettably, the details of how this atonement was to take place and the continuation of the story are no longer clear. Given that the brother of the guilty party set up this inscription, one might reasonably wonder what actually happened: did the one making foolish utterances die and did responsibility for setting up a dedication to Zeus Bronton pass on to his relatives, namely his brother? In the “confession stelai”, this is not an uncommon scenario; there, as elsewhere, religious faults were thought to have considerable ramifications for the kinship group.<sup>14</sup>

While some of the details of this account of the miraculous power of Zeus Bronton remain elusive, it nonetheless represents an important piece of evidence for our understanding of religiosity in Anatolia and beyond. Many studies have sought to emphasise the regional specificity of the so-called “confession stelai”.<sup>15</sup> Yet, without denying that we are dealing with a particular epigraphic habit in Katakekaumene and its surroundings, the inscription revised here—coming from about

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. e.g. the uses of ἐρωτάω in Petzl, Beichtinschriften 17.4-5, 13-14; 22.9-11; 38.1; 57.7; 61.5-6; 97.2-3; Petzl, Beichtinschriften Suppl. 129.9, 146.3, cf. 149; ζητέω and its compounds ἀναζητέω / ἐπιζητέω are also frequently found in this context in the “confession stelai”, as are a number of other related verbs.

<sup>13</sup> ἀνρωτάω might then best correspond to the use of ἀπαιτέω found in Petzl, Beichtinschriften 62.9-10: νῦν ὁ θεὸς ἀπήτησε τὴν εὐχὴν, “the god now asked for the vow”, or to similar instances of ἐπιζητέω, e.g. 4.4-6: ἐπεζήτησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ ἀμάρτημα, “the god requested the penalty” (among many such cases in the Beichtinschriften; cf. also, more strongly, παραγγέλλω and κελεύω). Cf. also the following Lydian texts using ἀπαιτέω: SEG 57, 1224 (Silandos, dedication); 67, 853 (Saittai, fragmentary); and there are a few other texts that employ αἰτέω of a divine request outside of this area: e.g. SEG 55, 685 II (Herakleia Lynkestis, dedication of a slave). Many dedications to Zeus Bronton (see note 3 for some references) were required to be made according to a divine command, using the very common phrases κατ’ ἐπιταγὴν or κατὰ κέλευσιν, though further details about this are usually lacking.

<sup>14</sup> Relatives often set up the Beichtinschriften, whether for those who had died (i.e. who were thought to have been punished with death) or in other circumstances. For a brother fulfilling the ritual obligation after the death of the guilty person, cf. Petzl, Beichtinschriften 68.19-24 (along with the guilty party’s wife and children); for a sister, see Petzl, Beichtinschriften Suppl. 125.6-10. More generally, on familial collective responsibility in these texts, see Thonemann 2022, 66-70; on the notion of ancestral fault in Greek literature, see Gagné 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Petzl, Beichtinschriften p. VII: “Die in dieser Sammlung vorgelegten Inschriften stammen überwiegend aus einem einheitlichen geographischen Raum, dem Bergland beim Oberlauf des Hermos unter Einschluß der nördlich und südlich angrenzenden Gebiete... *Andere pagane Beichtinschriften der griechisch-römischen Antike sind nicht bekannt*” (my emphasis). Cf. now Thonemann 2022 and his idea of a special “Hieradoumia”.

200 km away, in Phrygia Epiktetos—contributes to stretching those supposed geographic limits as well as the terminology employed in referring to these texts. The term “confession stelai” is widely held to be a misnomer, since its misleading focus on “confession” is not well evidenced in the text themselves.<sup>16</sup> Like the Lydian stelai, this text from Phrygia Epiktetos would in fact be better seen as part of a wider picture, which includes many analogous accounts of divine power.<sup>17</sup> Explicitly, these texts are all accounts of the ἀρετή or the δύναμις of a divinity or group of deities, which is instantiated in the narrative by miracles of different kinds (punishment, salvation, etc.). A more encompassing account of aretalogies or miracle narratives, that sets these texts—from Anatolia and beyond—against their normative religious background, remains to be written.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. esp. the acute and incisive critique of Belayche 2006. Efforts to replace the term *Beichtinschrift* or “confession stele” have included “propitiation stele” or “propitiatory inscription” (cf. recently Thonemann 2022, building on many other studies) and a variety of other unsatisfactory – not widely adopted – terms.

<sup>17</sup> For other texts potentially stretching these boundaries, see the examples mentioned and discussed in SEG 57 1833. Miracle narratives can be thought to range from e.g. the brief account of the cult foundation in SEG 56 1434 (see fn. 11 above) to the *ιάματα* of Epidauros, e.g. the highly comparable story in one of these accounts, Li Donnici 1995, B16 (adapted): “Kaphisias [- -] he laughed at the treatments of Asklepios [- -] he paid no heed, saying that if he had the power [- -] he suffered punishment for this outrage (...) [- -] he was wounded] in the foot [- -] later, after he had much supplicated [the god, he became well]”. There are of course many other kinds of aretalogies in a variety of contexts and it is impossible to do justice to the breadth of this genre in this short note.

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### **Zeus Bronton'un Gücü: Yeni Bir Mucize Anlatısı Üzerine Notlar** **Özet**

N. Eda Akyürek Şahin ve Hüseyin Uzunoğlu yakın zamanda bu dergide MS 2.-3. yüzyıllara ait Zeus Bronton'a adanmış ilginç bir yazıtı yayımladılar (Gephyra 23, 2022, 119-120 no. 19, fotoğraflarla birlikte). Makalede, metni daha anlaşılır yapmaya yönelik bir girişimin ardından, yazıtın Zeus Bronton'un gücünü anlatan hikayevi bir tasvir olduğu belirtilmektedir. Yazıt, Phrygia Epiktetos'unda bu tanrıya tapınmayla ilgili giderek artan sayıda belgede kendine yer bulurken, yaklaşık 200 km öteden gelmesine ve biraz farklı sözcük dağarcığı kullanmasına rağmen, Lydia'daki "itiraf stelleri" ile önemli paralellikleri yeniden ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu yazıda daha genel olarak, bu metnin Anadolu'daki epigrafik kanıtlarda özellikle öne çıkan, ancak Anadolu'ya özgü olmayan daha geniş bir mucize anlatısı veya aretaloji türü içinde konumlandırılması gerektiği savunulmaktadır. Yazıtın Türkçe çevirisi şöyledir:

*İyi şansla. Zeus Bronton'a. Tanrının mucizevi gücünü göz ardı eden kardeşim Arkhigenes (?) Tanrı'ya karşı (ya da ona atfen) aptalca sözler söyledi ve kızdı, Tanrı sordu [ . . . ]*

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Zeus Bronton; Bithynia; Phrygia Epiktetos; "itiraf stelleri"; mucize anlatısı; aretaloji.

### **The Power of Zeus Bronton: Notes on a New Miracle Narrative** **Abstract**

N. Eda Akyürek Şahin and Hüseyin Uzunoğlu have recently published an interesting dedication to Zeus Bronton from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. in this journal (Gephyra 23, 2022, 119-120 no. 19, with phs.). Following an attempt to further elucidate the text, this inscription is here identified as a narrative account of the power of Zeus Bronton. While the inscription finds a place in a growing number of documents about the worship of this god in Phrygia Epiktetos, it also reveals important parallels with the so-called "confession stelai" from Lydia, though it comes from about 200 km away and employs somewhat different vocabulary. More broadly, I argue that the text is to be situated within a wider genre of miracle narrative or aretalogy that is particularly prominent in the epigraphic evidence from Anatolia, but far from unique to it.

*Keywords:* Zeus Bronton; Bithynia; Phrygia Epiktetos; "confession stelai"; miracle narrative; aretalogy.