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The God of Earthquakes: Several Hypotheses Related to One Dedicatory Inscription to Poseidon Asphaleios From Mesambria on Pontus

Deprem Tanrısı: Pontus Mesambria'da Poseidon
Asphaleios'a İthaf Edilen Bir Yazıtla İlgili Çeşitli
Hipotezler

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THE GOD OF EARTHQUAKES: SEVERAL HYPOTHESES RELATED TO ONE DEDICATORY INSCRIPTION TO POSEIDON ASPHALEIOS FROM MESAMBRIA ON PONTUS

ABSTRACT

This article aims to present to the scientific community a dedicative inscription to the God Poseidon in his capacity as Asphaleios -Securer, embedded in one of the churches in Nessebar (Bulgaria)–St. Paraskeva Church. The inscription was found in 2013 during conservation-restoration works in the church. It is published for the first time here, and comments have been made on its connection with earthquakes and seaquakes in Southeastern Europe during so-called Hellenistic Period. The inscription is in the Doric dialect in four lines built in as a *spolium* on a recess above the altar apse on the church's southern side in an upside-down position. Based on specific features of palaeography and orthography of the letters, the suggested dating is the second half of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC. The epithet of the god in this inscription–Asphaleios is attested in other Dorian poleis; however, here, it cannot be connected with a temple to Poseidon. It was probably brought to Mesambria on Pontus from somewhere else; as exemplified with similar inscriptions originating from Kallatis (present-day Mangalia, Romania) and Dionysopolis (present-day Balchik, Bulgaria). The *epiklesis* in the mentioned inscriptions hints at the consequences of the seismic activity during the period comprising roughly the second quarter to the middle of the 3rd century BC that swept across Southeastern Europe and caused severe damage. Therefore, this inscription is another example of Poseidon being worshipped in his capacity of Securer and Earth-Stayer and being recognized as a symbol of hope for ancient people.

Keywords: Dedication, Poseidon Asphaleios, Black Sea, Earthquake, Epiclesis.



DEPREM TANRISI: PONTUS MESAMBRIA'DA POSEIDON ASPHALEIOS'A İTHAF EDİLEN BİR YAZITLA İLGİLİ ÇEŞİTLİ HİPOTEZLER

ÖZ

Bu makale, Nessebar'daki (Bulgaristan) kiliselerden biri olan Aziz Paraskeva Kilisesi'nde bulunan ve Tanrı Poseidon'a Asphaleios-Koruyucu sıfatıyla ithaf edilen bir yazıtı bilim camiasına sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kilisedeki restorasyon ve konservasyon çalışmaları sırasında 2013 yılında bulunmuştur. Şimdi ilk kez yayınlanmakta ve Helenistik Dönem olarak adlandırılan dönemde Güneydoğu Avrupa'daki

depremler ve deniz depremleri ile bağlantılı olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Yazıt, Dor lehçesinde dört satır halinde, kilisenin güney tarafındaki sunak apsisinin üzerindeki bir girintiye *spolium* olarak baş aşağı yerleştirilmiştir. Harflerin paleografisi ve imlasının belirli özelliklerine dayanan tarihlendirme, M.Ö. 3. yüzyılın ikinci yarısı ile 2. yüzyılın başlarına dayandırılabilir. Bu yazıttaki tanrının sıfatı Asphaleios diğer Dor kentlerinde de görülmektedir, ancak burada Poseidon'a ait bir tapınakla ilişkilendirilmesi mümkün değildir. Büyük olasılıkla Pontus'taki Mesambria'ya başka bir yerden getirilmiştir; Kallatis (bugünkü Mangalia, Romanya) ve Dionysopolis (bugünkü Balçık, Bulgaristan) kökenli benzer yazıt örnekleri verilmektedir. Söz konusu yazıtlardaki *epiklesis*, kabaca M.Ö. 3. Yüzyılın ikinci çeyreği ile ortasını kapsayan dönemde Güneydoğu Avrupa'yı kasıp kavuran ve burada ciddi hasarlara yol açan sismik faaliyetin sonuçlarına işaret etmektedir. Dolayısıyla bu, Poseidon'a Koruyucu ve Yeryüzü Düzenleyicisi sıfatıyla tapınıldığının ve antik insanlar için bir umut sembolü olarak kabul edildiğinin bir başka örneğidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Adanmışlık, Poseidon Asphaleios, Karadeniz, Deprem, Epiclesis.



INTRODUCTION

In 2013, during conservation-restoration works performed at the church of St. Paraskeva in the old town of Nessebar (Bulgaria), workers came across a marble block with an inscription in the Greek alphabet¹. Two years later, the same inscription was mentioned in the book written by Ms. Evtelva Theoklieva-Stoicheva². There, she does not comment on the inscription itself but speculates on the presence of a temple of Poseidon in Mesambria -at the site of the later church. However, there is no archaeological evidence so far of an ancient sanctuary at or near the site in question. Without presenting any arguments, she dates the inscription back to the 5th century BC, concluding that among the temples in Mesambria, “*the most ancient one was dedicated to god Poseidon Asphaleos—protector of the polis from natural disasters, most of all from earthquakes*”. After that, she cites other examples of temples dedicated to this god in the Aegean. I would like to quote verbatim her

¹ The circumstances surrounding the discovery of the inscription in question, as far as it is possible to understand from media publications, are as follows: In the first half of February 2013, in the church, which is a museum, the workers of the contractor company placed a metal scaffold and noticed the inscription. They notified their supervisor, and he, in turn, informed Evtelva Teoklieva-Stoicheva, who at the same time was the Chief Expert at the World Heritage Department of Nessebar Municipality. Museum specialists were not notified, although archaeological research was being conducted simultaneously on the territory of the Architectural and Historical Reserve-Nessebar, and archaeologists from Nessebar, Burgas, and Sofia were present. In the press release, apart from the dating - “5th century BC, “the lady alleged that a temple had existed on the site of the church, and the epiklesis of the god was translated as “Protector of the polis.” (A Nessebar archaeologist discovered and deciphered a valuable ancient Greek inscription (nessebar-news.com).

² Theoklieva-Stoycheva 2019, 29-30.

account related to the place of the epigraphical monument in St. Paraskeva Church³: *During conservation-restoration activities, a marble block bearing an ancient Greek inscription in Doric dialect, embedded into the eastern part of the temple [St. Paraskeva Church–author’s comment], left of the apse, at a height of about 4 meters, was revealed. The inscription is dedicated to god Poseidon Asphaleos–Protector of the polis from natural disasters -earthquakes. Embedding the marble element into the newly built church is a ritual act related to the preserved ancient tradition commonly observed in Mesemvria-Nessebar in the Middle Ages. The medieval churches were erected upon the ruins of the ancient temples [sic]. And the embedding of older architectural elements is a phenomenon often occurring in Mesemvria. Analogical is the example with the embedding of the marble block with inscription, comprising Psalm 101, at the same place in the St. Sophia Basilica [it is not exactly in the same place, and as a Christian text, it was probably deliberately embedded during the construction of this Nessebar basilica -author’s comment]. From a contemporary viewpoint, the marble block with inscription fits into the interior of the church as a ritual element of continuity between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.* I leave aside these far-reaching conclusions, paying attention only to the fact that the inscription -this “ritual element of continuity”, is located 4.28 metres from the floor of the apse, i.e. relatively high above the usual height for the people of modern times and even more so for those of the Middle Ages, which in turn limits to a great extent its functions postulated in this way. Moreover, it is built-in in an upside-down position. In addition, its upper (now lower) part had suffered so much from the chisels of the mediaeval stonemasons (directly responsible for the implementation of the “continuity”) that only separate letters had survived from the first line of the inscription. Furthermore, traces of mortar used to plaster the stones of the church wall are still present in the inscription field.

EVALUATION OF THE INSCRIPTION

Our observations revealed⁴ the inscription to be written in ancient Greek in four lines. It is so severely damaged in its lower part that the inscription field at that specific spot was effaced. In addition, when it was built into the wall of the church, it was abundantly covered with mortar, which, falling away nowadays, has revealed the writing. It is a rectangular block of marble (Fig. 1). Its metric characteristics are as follows: length: 0.51m; height: 0.15m; width: 0.18m; letters: alpha-0.02m; omicron-0.015-0.016m. The size of the inscription field cannot be determined precisely due to the damages the monument has suffered. Therefore, none of the photographs taken is good enough to show the inscription in its entirety. The text, in its present state, provides the following reading:

³ Theoklieva-Stoycheva 2019, 158.

⁴ I would like to thank Todor Marvakov, Director of the Historical Museum – Nessebar, for the opportunity I was given to publish this artefact. I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues Konstantin Gospodinov, an independent researcher, Martin Zhelev, and Stoyanka Dimova, both from the Historical Museum-Nessebar.

[..ο.....ο.....]

..τ.χάρης Διονυσίου

Χόρειος Ἡροδώρου

Ποτειδάνι Ἀσφαλεί·

..... / -chares, son of Dionysius / Choreios, son of Herodorus / to Poseidon
Asphaleios



Fig. 1: View of the inscription (photo courtesy of Konstantin Gospodinov).

The Doric dialectic character of the inscription is especially evident in the name of the god. The palaeography and orthography of the source hint at the second half of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC⁵. The spelling of the letters leads us to such a broad dating-e.g. alpha with a broken crossbar, the smaller size of o and ω, and also theta. Evidently, there was an attempt to align the letters, with 15 to 17/18 (?) letters on each line. Regarding the names of the dedicators, if by presumption there were other names and patronyms on the first line, this line is illegible at present. As for the name on the second line, and accepting the existence of the letter τ somewhere at the beginning of that line, the possible variants for restoration of the personal name are still quite a few-e.g. Ἀυτοχάρης or Ἄντιχάρης⁶. The patronym on the second line is theophoric, and as such, it is widespread in the Ancient Greek world⁷. This can also be said about the patronym of the other person -Herodorus, from the following line. However, the name of the other dedicator, Χόρειος, is rare in Ancient Greek onomastics, and as such in the one of Mesambria too, where it is recorded for the first time⁸.

⁵ See Larfeld 1914, 269-270. About palaeography of the Black Sea inscriptions see Boltunova – Knipovich 1962, 15 and Table II.

⁶ See Hansen 1957, 167.

⁷ I should mention that it is the late Prof. Alexandru Avram who gave me a hint about this reading of the patronym, for which I am very thankful.

⁸ See, IGBR I², 255-313; Velkov 2005, 159-191.

The inscription is located in St. Paraskeva Church, which according to a number of elements of its architectural plan, decoration of the facades, etc., with certain stipulations, belongs to the church construction of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century⁹. It is built on a recess above the altar apse on its southern side (Fig. 2), which represents a unique architectural solution in the words of arch. Rashenov: *Dans la partie est de la nef se trouve le presbytère- l'abside de l'autel est circulaire à l'intérieur. La courbe commence à 0.45 m. à l'intérieur, ce qui a été fait peut-être dans le but d'augmenter l'espace du presbytère... L'abside de l'autel a une voûte sphérique qui commence à une distance de 0.45 m. de la paroi est de la nef. Par conséquent, la partie supérieure du mur est supportée par une voûte construite dans le mur même et non pas par la même voûte que l'abside*¹⁰. That is, our marble block was chosen to fulfil the construction goals of the mediaeval builders. A widespread practice in Nessebar churches is the embedding of smaller or larger marble blocks in their walls, which is visible to the naked eye in each of them. In this regard, the statement that there was probably an ancient temple on the site of the mediaeval church with a bell-tower is more than speculative. The same can be said about the original location and overall appearance of the monument itself. As such, to this day it remains just one of the many marble *spolia* used in the construction of the church.



Fig. 2: Interior of St. Paraskeva Church with the position of the inscription (top left).

⁹ The study by architect A. Rachenov is still the most trustworthy one with respect to the churches in Mesambria.

¹⁰ Rachenov 1932 (2006²), 26-27, 28.

However, once embedded in the wall of a mediaeval church, many questions arise regarding what and, above all, why this dedicative inscription appears in the polis of the Mesambrians. A possible answer to the problems posed in this way points us to the last line with the masculine Dative of the initiation –Asphaleios (Ἀσφαλεῖ[ωι]). Notably, his worshipping with this epithet is registered mainly in poleis with Dorian population¹¹, and among them is Mesambria on Pontus¹². However, his cult, especially during the so-called Hellenistic Period, finds reception even outside the Doric cultural and religious circle. It is enough to point out its closest Black Sea parallel –the one from Dionysopolis (now the town of Balchik/Bulgaria). One of the inscriptions from the stone archive of the temple (*metreon*) of the Pontic Mother of Gods, dated back to the 3rd–2nd century BC, is exactly a dedication to Poseidon Asphaleus¹³. In the commentary to the inscription, in addition to mentioning two epigraphic monuments from Kallatis (present-day Mangalia, Romania) with the same epithet of the god, his function as a *protector of sailors* and generally as a *patron of people related to the sea* is highlighted¹⁴. This categorically expressed opinion is essentially true, but the question arises whether, with respect to the Nessebar inscription, only this function of Poseidon in his quality of Asphaleios can be accepted.

His other function, of which we even have direct references in ancient literature¹⁵, allows for another interpretation, namely his perception as the god of earthquakes and protector from them. A possible hypothesis is related to several dedications discovered so far with the same *epiklesis* of the god dated to the time after the middle of the 3rd century BC and in a relatively limited geographical region—the western part of Pontus. What could be the reason for this circumstance? A possible answer could be found in the seismic activity during the period comprising roughly the second quarter to the middle of the 3rd century BC that swept across Southeastern Europe. The hypothesis is supported by archaeological observations covering present-day North-Eastern Bulgaria and Dobrudja territory with the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria and Romania. A direct consequence of the damage inflicted by the earthquake, or rather the series of earthquakes, was the Celtic invasion of the Balkans and Asia Minor in particular. In addition to that, the date of the erection of the temple of the Pontic Mother of the Gods is placed after this destructive period¹⁶.

¹¹ See, Jessen 1896, RE II S. 1725.

¹² Gyuzeleev 2008, 200-201.

¹³ Lazarenko et al. 2010, 26, 34, Fig. 26

¹⁴ Lazarenko et al. 2010, 26, 34.

¹⁵ See, Jessen 1896, op.cit.

¹⁶ Orachev 2012, 66-69.

CONCLUSION

I would also allow myself another assumption based on the appearance of a celebration of Poseidon Asphaleios after the earthquake that was attested for certain, and perhaps also a seaquake in the last quarter of the same century, which struck the eastern part of the Aegean Sea, together with the Propontis, when, among other things, the Colossus of Rhodes crashed down¹⁷. After this devastation, a series of inscriptions dedicated to Poseidon with the same epithet were registered at the end of the century and the following one¹⁸. They probably mark a relatively large geographical area, including Asia Minor, the lands around the Propontis (including, for example, Cyzicus)¹⁹, where the spread of dedications to Poseidon is remarkably distinct²⁰. Therefore, such dedications appeared after catastrophic events both along the Western Pontus and the Aegean and also on the coast of the Propontis. It is possible that Mesambria also suffered from the earthquake, which destroyed or seriously damaged a considerable part of the West Pontic poleis and depopulated their territories.

On the other hand, based on the fact that we have no evidence yet of a temple dedicated to Poseidon in Mesambria and the Doric dialect of the inscription, we may seek other explanations about its presence here—that it was made in another Dorian *apoikia* and brought to the polis of the Mesambrians somehow.

A possible assumption is related to the probability that the inscription belongs to the group of the so-called *pierres errantes*, i.e. brought here in later times -used for ship ballast or as anchors, for example. Its relatively small size and well-worked surface make it suitable for this, which contributed to its being used later in the construction of the mediaeval church and thus surviving till present times. Such late use of artefacts is not uncommon—there is the notorious case of an inscription from the vicinity of Nessebar, originating from Kallatis²¹.

Last but not least, however, I would like to recall Plutarch's words that Poseidon was worshipped in his capacity of Securer and Earth-Stayer on the eighth day of each month, eight reflecting the steady and unshakable power of this god²². Thus, Poseidon was recognized as a symbol of hope for ancient people. Furthermore, whatever the origin of this dedicative inscription is, one thing is certain: it ranks among similar ones and is also dedicated to gratitude for salvation from the wrath of sea and earth elements.

¹⁷ Guidoboniet et al. 1994, 140-142.

¹⁸ See for example, the bibliography provided by Ünver 2020, 469-470.

¹⁹ Ful 2022, 34-35

²⁰ PHI (PHI Greek Inscriptions (packhum.org)); ERC MAP #503 (<https://base-map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/element/503>).

²¹ IGBR I² 311 bis. For more information, see Mihailov 2012, 167-168, 313.

²² Plutarch. *Theseus*, 36.

Conflict of Interest

Within the scope of the study, there is no personal or financial conflict of interest between the authors.

Ethics

Regarding the Ethics Committee authorisation; the authors and reviewers of this study have declared that there is no need for Ethics Committee authorisation.

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