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Attributes of the Mother of the Gods on Terracottas from Olbia Pontike and Asia Minor

Tetiana SHEVCHENKO*

Abstract

This study examines local and imported terracottas discovered in Olbia Pontike depicting the Mother of the Gods seated on a throne. Two of these were produced in a west Pontic centre from a single mould imported from northwestern Asia Minor, while the third was produced in Olbia based on these two. In the original, a lion cub was placed beneath the goddess's feet, while in the Olbian version the cub was shown in the goddess's lap. Sphinx images were also included in similar figurines as throne ornamentations. This motif had roots in Asia Minor and the western Black Sea region. Design peculiarities find parallels in northwestern Asia Minor. On a figurine produced from a Pergamon mould, the goddess has seated sphinxes on either side. This style originates in monumental images of the goddess with sphinxes from Lydia and Cyprus. The process of diminishing the sphinxes's size, as well as of their significance in the goddess's iconography, can be followed from south to north in the 4th century BC, as such elements become more decorative in Olbia and Callatis. Versions of this simplified model began to be produced in ancient Greek centres in Asia Minor in the 3rd-2nd centuries BC.

Keywords: Olbia Pontike, Hellenistic period, terracottas, cult of the Mother of the Gods, sphinxes

Öz

Makalede, Olbia Pontike kentinde keşfedilmiş, tahtta oturan Meter Theon tasvirli yerel ve ithal *terrakottalar* ele alınmıştır. Bunlardan iki tanesi Kuzeybatı Anadolu'dan ithal edilen tek bir kalıpla Batı Pontos merkezinde, üçüncüsü ise bu ikisine dayanarak Olbia'da üretilmiştir. Orijinal tasvirdeki aslan yavrusu tanrıçanın ayağının hemen altında yer alırken, Olbia versiyonunda tanrıçanın kucagında görülmektedir. Meter Theon'a ilişkin *terrakotta* tasvirlerindeki bu motif Küçük Asya ve Batı Karadeniz'de de ortaya çıkmaktadır. Diğer detayların ve aslan tasviri figürlerinin oluşturduğu tasarımdaki benzerlikler Küçük Asya'nın kuzeybatı kesimindeki örneklerle çok yakın bağlantılara sahiptir. Pergamon'daki kalıptan üretilmiş bir heykelcik üzerinde Meter Theon'un her iki yanında sfenksler oturur vaziyettedir. Sfenkslerin boyutlarındaki küçülme süreci ve Meter Theon'un ikonografisindeki önemi, bunların artık MÖ IV. yy.'da Olbia ve Kallatis'te süsleme motifi içerisinde sunuldukları örnekler özelinde güneyden kuzeye doğru takip edilebilmektedir. Böylesi bir modelin sadeleştirilmiş versiyonları MÖ III-II. yy.'da Küçük Asya'daki antik Yunan merkezlerinde de üretilmekteydiler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Olbia Pontike, Hellenistik Dönem, Terrakottalar, Meter Theon Kültü, Sfenksler

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Olbia Pontike was one of the key ancient Greek centres on the north coast of the Black Sea. Vast archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic collections obtained during excavations there from the 19th century to date are stored in many Ukrainian and overseas museums. Olbia was founded at the turn of the 7th and 6th centuries BC, occupied a large territory at the Buh River estuary with its chora, and played a significant role in the region's history.

In the Hellenistic period, the Mother of the Gods was one of the most widely worshipped deities in the *polis*. She had a sanctuary on the western *temenos* that was modestly arranged as compared to others, but was the largest in terms of territory.¹ This cult existed in Olbia from the time of the city's foundation to the first centuries AD. The goddess was depicted on 1st-century BC coins. Images of her in marble and limestone reliefs, terracottas, and graffiti with dedications were found in both private houses and public sanctuaries.² It should be noted that the archaeological and epigraphic sources found in Olbia do not provide evidence that the Mother of the Gods was called Cybele here. Her most widely used name in dedications was Mater (Meter), shortened from *Μήτηρ θεῶν*. She was sometimes called the Phrygian Mother in the Hellenistic period.³

This goddess is featured on more terracotta votives from Olbia than the rest of the gods and goddesses. More than 100 fragmented statuettes and at least 6 moulds for statuettes production are known, dating to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. Many of these were uncovered in a *botros* on the eastern *temenos* situated close to the coroplast's workshop,⁴ and only the best preserved have been published so far.

Images of the Mother of the Gods sitting on a throne are the most numerous terracottas from Hellenistic Olbia, as well as from other ancient Greek centres in the Black Sea region. The goddess is most often shown with *phiale* and *tympanon* in her hands and a lion cub on her lap (fig. 1). Other versions of the depiction of her typical attributes are extremely rare here, such as with her feet on a lion cub. Adult lions are also uncommon in her iconography in Olbia.

In this regard, especially interesting are fragments of two terracottas made in the same mould. These fragments were parts of a depiction of the Mater sitting on the throne with *tympanon* and *phiale* in her hands and trampling a lion with her feet. Analysis of the peculiarities of these depictions and the technique of their production allows us to trace the influence of Asia Minor on Olbian coroplastics, which is often mentioned in the literature.

One of the figurines is preserved in three fragments and features a depiction of the goddess' head and the lateral parts of her throne. The other is preserved in two fragments and includes the throne's decoration and the head of a lion cub under the goddess' foot. The front side of the goddess' throne on both terracottas is decorated with depictions of seated sphinxes (fig. 2). The common elements of these depictions and the similar clay that was used provide evidence that these terracottas were produced in the same workshop, and perhaps even in the same mould. In other words, it can be presumed with a high probability that both figurines included the same depiction of such important attributes of this goddess as the *corona muralis* and a lion cub under her foot. Their combination and a comparison with traditional depictions

¹ Древнейший теменос 2006, 21ff.

² Русяева 1979, 101–14; Шевченко 2012.

³ Русяева 1979, 104.

⁴ Леви 1985, 82–3.

of the Mother of the Gods of this period resulted in the reconstruction presented in fig. 2.⁵ This reconstruction is based on a drawing with features of similar figurines, which are discussed below.

The stylistic features of these terracottas allow us to presume that this image was created in one of the ancient centres of Asia Minor. The shape and the clarity of the details—especially the hairstyle, the round concave earrings, and the artistically arranged folds of the himation's edge—very much resemble items from Myrina and Amisos dated to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC.⁶ However, the characteristics of the fabric (5 YR 7/6, with coarse admixtures of quartz and traces of mica) bring these terracottas closer to the features of materials found on the west coast of the Black Sea.

These fragments are valuable not only because they belong to two rare terracottas from the Hellenistic northern Pontic region, but also because they were imported during a period when depictions of the Mother of the Gods were being more and more widely produced in local workshops. The image of the Mother of the Gods sitting on a throne, which was widespread in 3rd-century BC Olbia (fig. 1), was based on images from Asia Minor. It can be seen in the stylistic and iconographical peculiarities of the depiction that were accepted by the Olbian coroplasts and the consumers of their products.

The main stylistic similarities between locally produced and Asian Minor images of this goddess are, firstly, in the treatment of the details of the goddess' clothes; secondly, in the presence of double rounded projections on the throne's back; and thirdly, in the way in which the throne's back almost merges with the goddess' back, as well as in the depiction of the throne's armrests as massive structures, etc. Among the iconographic features, especially important is the preference for images of a lion cub on the lap with almost no images of adult lions.

Adult lions were usually depicted in ancient Greek sculptures of the Mother of the Gods with either one or two sitting frontally near her throne. This type of depiction is the most common one in the coroplastics of Attica and Boeotia.⁷ Standing lions on both sides of the throne were also common in Phrygia. Although this goddess was sometimes called the Phrygian Mother in Olbia, iconography of this sort is little known there. Exceptions are depictions found on a marble relief and on a lamp, both of which are late (2nd century AD) and neither of which are terracottas.⁸

Lions near this goddess were also depicted turned to opposite directions⁹ or with their heads turned to the throne¹⁰; sitting on the armrest, predominantly on the left one¹¹; standing with the goddess riding them (most widespread in Egypt,¹² with a single example believed to be from Olbia¹³); or lying at the feet of the goddess. Depictions of an adult lion placed under

⁵ Further see: Шевченко 2014а.

⁶ Higgins 1967, pl. 53.B, C, E; Besques 1971, pl. 103.a, c, e; 106.a, h.

⁷ Vermaseren 1982, 3–97; 123–35.

⁸ Kobylina 1976, no: 12, pl. IX; Кобылина 1978, 72, no: 17; Vermaseren 1989, 152; 154, no: 516; 526.

⁹ Vermaseren 1987, no: 302; Vermaseren 1989, no: 340; 359.

¹⁰ Vermaseren 1977, no: 203; 340; 397.

¹¹ Schwertheim 1978, Taf. CXCI–CXСII, no: 17, 21; Vermaseren 1982, no: 356; Vermaseren 1987, no: 871; Vermaseren 1989, no: 199; 372.

¹² Vermaseren 1986, 3–11; also Vermaseren 1982, no: 43.

¹³ Кобылина 1978, 35, no: 9.

the feet of the Mother of the Gods appear to be exceptions.¹⁴ A small lion cub is more frequent in such images; these are known predominantly from ancient centres of Asia Minor.¹⁵

Terracotta figurines with a lion cub at the goddess' feet are not numerous in the Pontic region. The most vivid example of imported ones is a 2nd-century BC statuette from Amisos found in Myrmekion in the Crimea.¹⁶ Fragments of locally produced terracottas of this type are also known in Olbia, though in very low numbers. For instance, among the hundreds of terracotta fragments depicting the Mother of the Gods found in the *botros* of the eastern *temenos*, only a few depict the lion cub not on the lap, but under the foot of the goddess.¹⁷

The most typical Olbian images of the Mother of the Gods feature a *tympanon* in the left hand and a *phiale* in the right (fig. 1). There are also more precise features that evidence the influence of Asia Minor upon Olbian coroplastics. One of these is the depiction of the *tympanon* as situated across the throne's back, more rarely with a slight inclination. Unlike this tradition, a *tympanon* placed in strict perpendicularity to the throne's back is preferred in Attic sculpture both small and large. This is how the Mother of the Gods was depicted in the marble and limestone sculpture of Olbia.

In Mysia and Troas of the period studied, *phiales* with a round omphalos in the centre and lines radiating out from it to the edges of the vessel were the most widespread on figurines depicting the Mother of the Gods. Apparently, terracotta depictions imitated metal *phiales* with fluting and a spherical projection in the centre, which were imported from the east in the Archaic Period and were known in the Black Sea region in the 5th and 4th centuries BC.¹⁸ Such vessels were called *pateras* in the Roman period. This shape of *phiale* was convenient for holding during libation rites. Gods making the libation, in particular the Mother of the Gods, were often depicted with such fluted *phiales* on vase paintings and in bronze.¹⁹ They hold the vessel in their right hand, often while also sitting on a throne.²⁰ Libation scenes are also known from stone relief depictions of the Mother of the Gods found in ancient Greek centres of Asia Minor. An altar is placed near the right hand of this goddess on many pieces from Mysia. The *phiale* in her hand appears to be almost above the altar, as if the goddess is being shown during the performance of this ritual.²¹ On some reliefs from Lydia, the adherents making the libation over the altar are located to the right of the goddess. They hold a *phiale* of a shape typical for the images of the Mother of the Gods.²² The above features clearly indicate that the *phiale* was used for libations during the worship of this goddess.

Consequently, there are features that draw the imported statuettes discussed here closer to the Olbian traditions of coroplastics. These are the depiction of certain peculiarities of the goddess' clothes and the handmade *phiale* and the thumb of the right hand. On the other hand, the features that are uncommon for the local coroplastic tradition are the placing of the lion cub under the foot of the goddess and the cub's depiction with a grinning snout, as well as

¹⁴ Vermaseren 1982, no: 457; Vermaseren 1989, no: 124.

¹⁵ Vermaseren 1987, no: 203, 442, 689, 700, 749; Vermaseren 1989, no: 328, 329; Шевченко 2015.

¹⁶ Денисова 1981, 53 with lit., table. XVa.

¹⁷ Леви 1985, 82–83 with lit., fig. 74, 2; Шевченко 2015.

¹⁸ Культура 1983, no: 80; 477; Picón *et al.* 2007, no: 172.

¹⁹ van Straten 1995, no: 8; ThesCRA pl. 58–60, no: 2b–33, 2b–39; Bowden 2010, fig. 62.

²⁰ Vermaseren 1989, pl. LXXXIV, no: 213; ThesCRA no: 2b–26; 2b–29.

²¹ Schwertheim 1978, Taf. CXCIV, no: 28–31 Abb. CXCVIII, no: 38, 41; Vermaseren 1987, no: 285.

²² Schwertheim 1978, Taf. CXCVIII, no: 39; Vermaseren 1987, no: 485.

peculiar decorations on the sides of the throne. As for the presentation of the animal, it should be noted that on all images from Olbia, and disregarding the placement of the lion on the lap or at the feet, the snout reminds one of a pet (fig. 1). A grinning lion with its tongue thrust out had an apotropaic significance. Such depictions of the lion on images of the Mother of the Gods find analogies in Troy, and especially in Smyrna.²³ Finally, concerning the decorations on the throne, it should be noted that the depiction of sphinxes on the throne is unique to the iconography of the Mother of the Gods in Olbia (fig. 2). It can be assumed that these new features drew the attention of the Olbian worshippers of this goddess who bought such imported figurines.

This type of depiction was created in Asia Minor in the second half of the 4th–beginning of the 3rd century BC, as analysis of stylistic and technological peculiarities shows.²⁴ The question, however, is when such terracottas appeared in Olbia. They were found in houses situated close to each other with another house between them, and all were near the agora. House E-1, where a terracotta preserved in three fragments was found, was built at the end of the 4th century, while most of the materials have been dated to the 3rd century BC. House E-10 contained many cultic depictions, five of which were related to the cult of the Mother of the Gods. The already discussed depiction preserved in two fragments was found in the basement of this house. This basement was constructed in the 5th–4th centuries BC, while the materials found upstairs have been dated to the period from the 4th to the 1st centuries BC. The materials in this house, including the marble depiction of the Mother of the Gods, terracottas, and altars, indicate that there was a family sanctuary in this building. A dedicative inscription on a marble plate was also found there. It mentions the name “Agrota,” known from other inscriptions of the same period.²⁵

A fragmented terracotta found in house E-10 was produced in the mould earlier than the figurine from house E-1. This can be traced by peculiarities in technology: insignificant differences in the size of the details and the clarity of the depiction, etc. However, they apparently arrived to Olbia at the same time, probably at the end of the 4th or in the first half of the 3rd century BC. House E-10 probably belonged to Agrota, who was a priest of the *polis* cult and a representative of famous kin in this *polis*.²⁶ It seems that he was also a priest of the cults performed in his own house in a small sanctuary. Apparently, then, he had influence over the religious preferences of the civic community of Olbia.

While it is difficult to prove archaeologically the influence of a personality, the influence of the terracotta found in Agrota’s house upon the locally produced images in Olbia is evident. The point centres on a local terracotta depiction of the Mother of the Gods that was produced in a manner similar to those seen in terracottas found in houses near the agora (fig. 3). This was found in the *botros* near the sanctuary of Hermes and Aphrodite in the western *temenos*.²⁷ It is 22.8 cm high and made of brown clay (7,5 YR, 5/3). The common features are as follows: the front side of the throne is decorated in the same way; the footstool has an analogous structure and is also based on stylized lion’s paws; the cloth folds are arranged in a similar manner; the himation’s border comes down to below the knees and the chiton is shown by dense

²³ Burr Thompson 1963, 78; Besques 1971, pl. 255.c, no: D1311.

²⁴ Шевченко 2014а.

²⁵ See: Шевченко 2014б, 34–35 with lit.

²⁶ Русяева 2005, 187.

²⁷ Русяева 1979, 106, fig. 51; Русяева 1982, 83, fig. 33; Древнейший теменос 2006, 154 with lit., fig. 158.

vertical folds; and the advanced right foot is on a high sandal sole. Despite such similarities, stylistically this depiction is quite distinct from the two fragmented terracottas discussed above. It is of a later period and imitates the earlier type. This figurine is dated to the first half of the 3rd century BC,²⁸ while it was assumed that the coroplast who produced it “was acquainted with the art of the second half of the 4th century BC.”²⁹ Analysis of the stylistic peculiarities and traces of the production technology of this figurine have allowed me to presume that there are reasons to date it to the upper border of the period suggested earlier; namely, by the middle of the 3rd century BC.

The imported figurines were slightly larger than the local one. This is seen from the preserved height of the armrests. The height of the right armrest is 1 cm more, while the height of the left one is 0.2 cm more. Technical moments in terracotta duplication have been examined not once.³⁰ Each following statuette produced in a mould was of a slightly smaller size than the original. In addition, the matrix made of an original terracotta did not always strictly correspond to this original, as it would be developed according to local taste. Here we can see an example of just such a situation.

Differences in the technique of depicting himation folds can be seen on the Olbian figurine. It seems that the lower part of the imported terracotta was used for making the matrix. The upper part, though, was where the coroplast showed his own creativity, while still in accord with the spirit of his time, of course. In other words, the image type taken from Asia Minor was remade according to the tastes and needs of local worshippers of the Mother of the Gods after several decades, or maybe half a century, had passed. The most significant change was the depiction of a lion cub not at the goddess' feet, but on her lap.

A figurine from Chobrucha in the Dniester River's lower region appears to be the closest analogy.³¹ Here, based on a published photo, the feet of the Mother of the Gods also rest on a lion cub, and the reliefs on the armrests remind one of sphinxes. These reliefs are called lion cubs in the literature, and since there has been no opportunity to examine this terracotta in detail, I believe that such an interpretation is the most appropriate for the time being. However, further analogies of the depiction of sphinxes as part of the throne of the Mother of the Gods will perhaps result in some changes in the traditional interpretation of these attributes.

Sphinxes were clearly depicted on a figurine found in Gordion in Phrygia and dated to a later period (fig. 4). This piece was imported and made of red clay with a great deal of mica as well as a small amount of white and black admixtures. Considering the clay composition, the author of the publication broadly defined the place of its production as the coast of the Black Sea, possibly one of the west Pontic centres.³² The clay of imported statuettes from Olbia is different in terms of colour, though its composition also reminds one of the west Pontic examples. It can be presumed with a high level of probability that the coroplast producing the statuette from Gordion in one of the Pontic centres would have been acquainted with the same image that appeared in Olbia. First of all, in both cases the lion cub is situated under the feet of the goddess, though with its head turned to different sides. In addition, some parallels are seen in the depiction of the clothing, although the opening around the neck, the sleeves, and

²⁸ Русяева 1982, 83.

²⁹ Древнейший теменос 2006, 154.

³⁰ Винницкая 1959; Higgins 1967, 2–5; Т. Ильина 2008, ch. 3.

³¹ Фидельский 2016, 219, fig. 1, 1, б.

³² Bald Romano 1995, 27; 80, no: 60, pl. 60.

the drapery system on the figurine from Phrygia looks somewhat simpler. Nevertheless, there are equally artistically modelled folds under the left arm of the goddess. The most important fact is that the himation here, as on the local Olbian terracotta, covers the back of the throne. It was stated before that there are no analogies to this feature of the Olbian figurine.³³ Even so, the himation was shown in the same way on the discussed imported figurines found in Olbia, and both coroplasts in the Pontic *poleis* depicted it in the same way, based on the same example of earlier terracottas. Fragments of two of these were found in Olbia. Unfortunately, the throne back has not been preserved on either of them. Nor have the head of the goddess and the attributes of her hands been preserved on a statuette imported to Gordion (fig. 4). Therefore, it is not known whether the himation also covered the headdress in the way it is shown on Olbian figurines (figs. 2, 3).

One more detail important for our purposes here is a depiction of sphinxes in the decoration of the frontal part of a throne on a figurine from Gordion. The author of the relevant publication was not sure about this interpretation, but taking into consideration the analogies seen here, this decorative motif could be positively defined. There are in fact no other decorative elements on armrests, unlike on Olbian analogies, with the exception of a single horizontal line under the sphinxes on both armrests. Judging from stylistic peculiarities, it can be concluded that this figurine from Gordion is of a later period. As is known, an entire century might sometimes pass between the time of the creation of a certain image type to the production of a concrete terracotta.³⁴

A 4th–3rd century BC figurine from Callatis³⁵ is close in time to Asia Minor terracottas found in Olbia (fig. 5). There is a series of stylistic features common to these images: the facial features of the goddess; the shaping of the hairstyle with short, shallow lines horizontal above the forehead and vertical on the strands of hair falling on the shoulders; and also the sharpness in the depiction of the himation folds down below. The Olbian finds contain a part of the preserved depiction of cloth around the foot resting on a lion cub's head. This uncovers a complicated system of quite varied and sometimes contradicting drapes. On a statuette from Callatis, the folds hanging under the left arm are not so delicate. The depiction of the throne is also different: it is separated from the goddess' shoulders; the double projections on the back are almost round; and there are no decorations on the frontal part, either on the armrests or on a footstool. An exception is a depiction in a low relief, which is not clear on photo, placed on the sides of a throne directly under the arms of the goddess. This is close to the schematic depiction of the sphinxes on Olbian terracottas. Unlike the statuettes imported from Asia Minor, a figurine from Callatis shows a lion cub on the goddess' lap, but stylistically it is very similar to them. The lion here is grinning and showing its tongue. Consequently, the type of image imported from the western part of Asia Minor developed in the same period both in centres on the west coast of the Black Sea and in Olbia.

A model for the reconstruction of this image is another figurine from Gordion (fig. 6).³⁶ This differs in terms of its stylistic peculiarities, which allow it to be dated to the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 2nd century BC. There is also a difference in that the back of the throne, with rounded double projections, is separated from the goddess' back, as on the

³³ Древнейший теменос 2006, 154; Bilde 2010, 448.

³⁴ Burr Thompson 1963, 23.

³⁵ Vermaseren 1989, 125, no: 422, pl. CI.

³⁶ Vermaseren 1987, no: 52, Taf. VIII; IX; Bald Romano 1995, 24 f, no: 52.

terracotta from Callatis, and the lion cub is absent. Nevertheless, the similarities are important: the sphinxes on the armrests and a footstool near the throne formed by a massive transverse beam (that can be profiled as on Olbian terracotta or simply as on the one from Gordion) laying on the lion's paws with clearly shown phalanxes.

Also similar is the depiction of the left hand placed over the *tympanon*. This detail of the figurine from Gordion was already considered rare in the literature, as usually the Mother of the Gods supports the *tympanon* with her hand below.³⁷ There are exceptions in sculpture from the Roman period.³⁸ It can be concluded that this manner of depiction was not rare in Olbia.³⁹ Perhaps the reason for this was the early importation of figurines of this type, which gave impetus to the development of new images based on a compositional scheme that included the corresponding position of the goddess' arms. Such Hellenistic terracotta from Olbia presents the position of the *tympanon* perpendicularly to the throne's back, in the manner in which it is shown on terracotta from Gordion.⁴⁰ Here, Attic influence is felt, as was noted above. Due to the state of preservation, it is not known whether the *tympanon* on the imported terracottas from Olbia was also positioned perpendicularly, or obliquely, in the manner in which it was copied by the local coroplast, the creator of fully preserved terracotta (fig. 3).

This figurine from Gordion is of a later period than those imported to Olbia. It appears that a certain type of the Mother of the Gods image extant in Asia Minor changed depending on the time and place of its development. The Asia Minor image, two samples of which were produced in the west Pontic region and brought to Olbia, was created first. The goddess' foot is placed on a lion cub here. At approximately the same time, another version of this image with the goddess holding a lion cub on her lap emerges in Callatis. The lion cub continued to be depicted at the goddess' feet, as on the figurine from the west Pontic region that emerged in Gordion,⁴¹ or could be entirely absent, as on a terracotta made in a mould from Pergamon and found in Gordion; otherwise, the cub could be presented on the goddess' lap, as with the local Olbian terracotta.

One can agree with the idea that less attention was paid to the lion's image than to the other attributes of the Mother of the Gods. However, the interpretation stating that the lion cub's being situated under the goddess' feet implies diminished importance in the cult of the Mother of the Gods cannot be accepted.⁴² On the contrary, placing the feet on a lion—and on some examples not a lion cub but an adult animal⁴³—was a very specific symbol.

The goddess standing with her feet on a lion is an ancient scene among the religions of the populations of Asia Minor. She had various names and attributes in many cities of the pre-Greek states in this region. Her permanent features were her relation with the fertility of nature, specifically wild nature,⁴⁴ and her marriages with gods and heroes. It is this latter feature that caused her to be traditionally compared with the ancient Greek goddess Aphrodite. The

³⁷ Burr Thompson 1963, 78; Nankov 2007, 50.

³⁸ Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. 1907, pl. XIII no: 333.

³⁹ Леви 1970, 44 no: 18, pl. 17.2; Русяева 1972, 38, fig. 1.4.

⁴⁰ Drawing published in: Русяева 1972, 38, fig. 1.4; picture including a not known before fragment with description published in: Шевченко 2012, 76, fig. 2.

⁴¹ Bald Romano 1995, pl. 19, no: 60.

⁴² Burr Thompson 1963, 77.

⁴³ Vermaseren 1987, no: 204.

⁴⁴ Фармаковский 1914, 21, pl. VII, fig. 3; Денисова 1981, 52 f.

myth of the relations of Ishtar with Adon (“god” in the Semitic language) in Mesopotamia has received the most attention. The roots of the myth of Aphrodite and the “dying Adonis” are seen in this.⁴⁵ The one who is loved by Ishtar will be poor, as he will lose his strength. Even the animals under her patronage become as if domesticated—in particular, the lion, which is her symbol. In all this there are clear parallels with the cult of the Mother of the Gods. The most evident, though not the only one, is the symbol of the lion. On depictions of this goddess the lion gradually turns from a grinning wild animal to a peaceful pet. Even within the framework of Olbian coroplastics, the last stage of this change can be traced between the 4th and the 2nd centuries BC. Moreover, the deity who lost his strength because of his relationship with the goddess was Attis, who emasculated himself for the sake of the Mother of the Gods. Consequently, a widespread conclusion in the literature on the features of Aphrodite in the cult of the Mother of the Gods should be looked at critically, inasmuch as the roots of this influence go much deeper. More precise would be the statement that both of these ancient Greek cults were influenced by more ancient pre-Hellenic religious traditions.

Apparently, the Olbian population perceived the notions of a goddess/patroness of animals and of nature in general as majestic and desirable but dangerous, as was the case with the pre-Greek goddess in Asia Minor. This cult was present in Olbia in an already developed Hellenized form. In the goddess of nature, they saw the mistress of the outer world and of chaos surrounding the cosmos inside the *oikos* and inside the *polis*. Chaos, the world beyond the walls, was also associated with the world beyond the borders of life. Therefore, a chthonic aspect of the Mother of the Gods’ cult was intrinsic, and learning about and placing in order the other world and defining someone’s future place in it would be performed with the help of the mystery cult performed in honour of this goddess.

The symbols of ritual practice within the mystery cult were above all the *tympanon* and *pbiale*, while the mythological symbols included the lion and, in some cases, the sphinx. Lions and sphinxes often appeared in the cultic depictions of pre-Greek states in Asia Minor. Images of sphinxes with raised and curved wings were typical of the palace style of the Achaemenid Empire,⁴⁶ which, prior to the Hellenistic period, encompassed ancient Greek cities of the region. The terracottas found in Olbia show the sphinxes in the same pose. Incidentally, the peculiarities of the image of a grinning lion are also similar to archaic examples as well as to Persian traditions.⁴⁷ The sphinxes on the armrests of the throne remind one of types known from the archaic period on vase paintings,⁴⁸ Attic sculpture, jewellery, and later on the coins of many *poleis*.⁴⁹

In Cyzicus, where Anacharsis observed the cult of the Mother of the Gods,⁵⁰ the sphinx was depicted on coins in various ways. It had curved wings when standing on its four paws or sitting.⁵¹ It was also depicted with its wings down.⁵² Cyzicus is believed to be one of the most

⁴⁵ Mackenzie 1915, 84.

⁴⁶ Rehm 2010, 167, fig. 3.

⁴⁷ Rehm 2010.

⁴⁸ Шауб 1979; Simon 1981, 46, no: VI; Ю. Ильина 2008.

⁴⁹ Скржинская 2010, 215–17.

⁵⁰ Hdt. IV. 76.

⁵¹ Абрамзон et al. 2006, pl. I; II, no: 9; 10; 52; 53.

⁵² Абрамзон et al. 2006, pl. VI, no: 98.

important centres of the mystery cult of the Mother of the Gods.⁵³ Therefore, the depiction of a sphinx on its coins might be related not only to the borrowing of this image from Chios minting, and less definitely to Dionysus,⁵⁴ but also to the worship of this goddess.

There are various depictions of sphinxes as separate figurines on plastic vases in the Archaic and Classical periods in the northern Black Sea region.⁵⁵ Most of these finds are related with necropolises. However, this study concentrates on images of these mythological creatures exclusively within the context of the cult of the Mother of the Gods.

Sphinxes are present on the throne decoration in several Attic stone relief depictions of the Mother of the Gods.⁵⁶ Here, however, the throne is presented in profile and is decorated with entirely different ornamentation. The armrest, in the shape of a thin crosspiece, is on the top of a miniature figurine of a sphinx. An adult lion is depicted sitting near the throne, and the *tympanon* is directed perpendicularly to the throne's back. Standing near the goddess are shown a *Kore* Persephone with Hermes in one case, and a group of worshippers in the other case. The style of the sphinx's depiction is also different, as the long wings are down. However, its place in the composition is identical, on the front of the throne in the armrest area. This is also the way it is presented on the throne of a woman found on an Attic gravestone.⁵⁷

A sphinx with its wings curved in the Archaic manner sits under the crosspiece of the armrest on a monumental image of the Mother of the Gods from Panticapaeum (fig. 7).⁵⁸ The statue is late, of the Roman period, although it was made after an example of the image from the last quarter of the 5th century BC. Its Attic origin is evidenced, apart from the stylistic features, by its depiction of a lion, the main attribute, as an adult animal sitting near the goddess' throne, as well as by the *tympanon* perpendicular to the throne's back. The placing of the *tympanon* against the lower part of the throne is unusual, and was mentioned in the relevant publication.⁵⁹ However, the depictions of sphinxes on the throne's armrests have not yet been discussed. There were two of them, with the forepaws and a part of the torso remaining from the sphinx near the right arm. The miniature sphinx near the left arm of the goddess is seen on neither the drawing nor the photos in the publications.⁶⁰ A recently published photo of the reconstruction of this sculpture is the only exception.⁶¹ Having examined this sculpture in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, I realized that the small figurines of the sphinxes joined the crosspiece of the armrest with the armrest itself. It was also clear that the sphinx under the left arm of the goddess was depicted sitting, while the other—which was almost entirely broken off, together with the crosspiece of the armrest—was lying with its head raised. Its torso and forepaws have been preserved. This means that only the first sphinx is analogous to the sphinxes seen on terracottas from Olbia.

There is a small fragment of stone sculpture in the National Historic and Archaeological Preserve "Olbia" which contains the depiction of an animal's paws (fig. 8). Considering the size

⁵³ Bowden 2010, 87.

⁵⁴ Абрамзон et al. 2006, 16.

⁵⁵ Winter 1903, 229 f; Фармаковский 1921, 37 with lit.; Simon 1981, 125, no: XXXVIII.

⁵⁶ Collignon 1883, 231, pl. 88; Vermaseren 1982, no: 409.

⁵⁷ O'Neill 1987, 66–7, nr. 48.

⁵⁸ Саверкина 1986, 128–130, no: 53.

⁵⁹ Саверкина 1986, 130.

⁶⁰ Ашек 1849, XCIX; Саверкина 1986, no: 53.

⁶¹ Толстиков and Муратова 2017, fig. 1.

and the nature of this image, it can be presumed that it was a part of the armrest of a throne on which the Mother of the Gods may have been depicted sitting. The armrest was decorated with the image of a seated sphinx. An equivalent decoration was made on the side parts of a stone throne from Mysia.⁶² Here, similar to Attic relief depictions in monumental sculpture, the sphinxes were used as supports for the upper crosspiece of the armrest.

In small-sized sculpture, the sphinxes closest in style are depicted on the armrests of the throne of the Mother of the Gods on the terracotta from Gordion, discussed above (fig. 6), as well as on the throne of a half-nude goddess of the Classical period from Thebes.⁶³ In both cases, they were made as separately standing figures, rather than being a part of the throne's decoration. The wings of the creatures are down on a Phrygian example, while they are raised and rounded on the item from Thebes—the same as on the depictions found in Olbia. On both of these statuettes, the side parts of the throne are not decorated at all, while the Olbian sphinxes are just a part of the elaborate carving on the frontons. However, the terracotta from Thebes can hardly be an analogy, since the goddess is depicted without the other attributes and with movable arms; thus, apparently, it was not an image of the Mother of the Gods. In this case, sphinxes reminded the guardians of the city of Thebes, directly related to the myth about them.

Sphinxes were also depicted as large figures standing on both sides of the throne of the goddess, without any other attributes, in a terracotta from Cyprus.⁶⁴ In fact, here they take the place of the lions of the Mother of the Gods. A stone relief of the 4th century BC from Magnesia ad Sipylum in Lydia depicts them in the same manner, but turned towards the goddess.⁶⁵ Their wings are raised, as on the decoration of the throne of the terracottas discussed. The goddess is presented standing between the sphinxes with the attributes in her hands, and there is a figure of Hermes on the side.

It is quite logical to presume that the last type of the depictions changed over time towards a decorative role for the sphinxes. Initially, the lion-sized sphinxes standing near the goddess were diminished to the size of squeakers sitting on the throne armrests and, finally, they became a part of the decoration of these armrests. Territorially, such evolution can be traced from the south to the north: first in Cyprus, Lydia, and the western part of Asia Minor, where the examples of terracotta depictions were produced, then, in the north, such terracottas were developed in the west Pontic region and in Olbia (fig. 9).

The figurine from Gordion dated to the period later than the Olbian examples (fig. 6) is located to the east from the belt indicated above. In the last publication of this terracotta, it was determined that it was made in the mould from Pergamon.⁶⁶ The author relates the peculiarities of this depiction with Pessinus, an important centre of the worship of the Mother of the Gods, and dates it to the late 3rd or early 2nd century BC. The clothing of the goddess, especially the wide opening around the neck, was often used in depictions of the last quarter of the 3rd century BC. Even if the lower border of the dating is accepted, Olbian imported terracottas would have been made almost a century earlier. Apparently, the author of the Pergamon image was influenced by the statuettes similar to the Cypriot and Theban examples. Repeated in

⁶² Schwertheim 1978, Taf. CXVIII, no: 40.

⁶³ Winter 1903, 88, no: 5; Vermaseren 1987, no: 52, pl. VIII; IX; Bald Romano 1995, 24 f, no: 52, pl. 15; 16.

⁶⁴ Winter 1903, 90, no: 4.

⁶⁵ Vermaseren 1987, no: 450.

⁶⁶ Bald Romano 1995, 24 f, no: 52.

this depiction are not only the presence of sphinxes, but also the shape of the double projections on the throne's back and the aforementioned separation of the figure of the goddess from the back of the throne. Thus, placing the sphinxes as separately standing figures on the terracotta found in Gordion could have been a result of borrowing from the earlier prototypes.

As can be seen, sphinxes in the cult of the Mother of the Gods had deep roots and a symbolic meaning. Sphinxes on Olbian terracottas depicting the Mother of the Gods have never been identified and discussed in the literature before; however, the Olbian coroplasts were well acquainted with the attributes of the goddess. Based on the examples of terracottas discussed, it is clear that the producers were familiar with the Hellenistic tradition of Asia Minor. However, images of sphinxes near the goddess had been known in Olbia since the Archaic period: lids of alabaster vases found at the necropolis present the goddess accompanied by figurines of horses, lions, monkeys, and sphinxes. These finds also evidence the influence of Asia Minor.⁶⁷ The sphinxes' wings are curved upwards in the same way. The base of another alabaster vase stands on legs shaped as sphinxes, although they are depicted in different manner.⁶⁸

The luxurious decoration of the throne with sphinxes also has analogies. The furniture on a well-known terracotta from Myrina dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC features an a half-naked youth and a fully draped woman⁶⁹ and is decorated similarly to thrones from Olbia. This time, the *kline* and its legs are also decorated with rounded horizontal projections between which are relief depictions of sphinxes with their wings raised. A low footstool stands near the *kline*, and it is also made of a transverse, profiled beam lying on stylized lion's paws with clearly shown phalanxes. All these details are repeated in the Olbian figurines of the Mother of the Gods. The images of the youth and the woman seem to be far from the cult of the Mother of the Gods, though reminiscent of notions of life in the other world. Not only sphinxes, but the very subject of approaching the nude youth (related to the world of gods and heroes) to the fully draped woman (most often used on gravestones and other depictions connected with funeral cults) is usual for the topic of funerals and the heroization of the deceased in coroplastic art and vase paintings.

The decoration of the side parts of furniture with peculiar horizontal lines is also known from late Hellenistic terracottas from Myrina.⁷⁰ However, the decoration here is simpler and does not include mythological creatures. This ornamentation is seen on the *klines* of symposiasts. Items produced earlier were the terracottas from Pergamon, of which only the decorative elements of the furniture have been preserved.⁷¹ There, the decorative elements are more elaborate, reminding one of the images of sphinxes. They may also have been parts of depictions of symposiasts. Another depiction of a symposiast from Asia Minor is not clear enough, but also appears similar to the sphinx image.⁷²

It should be noted that these were gods and heroes presented in this pose, lying half down during the banquet. In particular, the "Favourably Harkening Hero" is depicted as a symposiast

⁶⁷ Фармаковский 1914, 18–23; Русяева 1979, 101f.

⁶⁸ Фармаковский 1914, pl. III; VIII, fig. 8.

⁶⁹ Higgins 1967, pl. 54.A; Besques 1994, no: 90.

⁷⁰ Winter 1903, 197 no: 3; 4; Schneider-Lengyel 1936, no: 84; Besques 1986, pl. 49, no: D/E 3608.

⁷¹ Töpperwein 1976, no: 593; 594 Taf. 85.

⁷² Winter 1903, 195, no: 4.

on an Olbian marble relief of the 3rd century BC dedicated to this deity by the *sitons*.⁷³ This known stele is indicated as an example because here the *kline* is also decorated in the same manner as the terracottas discussed above. The *kline's* leg is in fact identical to the figurine from Myrina. Only one image of a sphinx is used in the ornamentation, with its bottom narrowed to the end. This detail differs from the decoration of the Mother of the Gods' throne, where there are two sphinxes on each side on the imported terracotta, and three of them on the local Olbian one.

Consequently, terracottas probably depicted the wooden furniture decorated with carving where an image of sphinx was sometimes used. The sphinxes on the Hellenistic statuettes of the Mother of the Gods could hardly have just been a fashionable interior decoration at the time. Following M. Collignon, the presence of a sphinx in the image determines the sense of the whole scene at once.⁷⁴ In addition, it concerns the furniture used in cults, in our case, the goddess' throne. If the throne of the Mother of the Gods was imagined by worshippers like this, or if it were simply repeated after the examples of monumental sculpture, there were grounds for such, seemingly based on the chthonic aspect of the notions of this goddess. This would be the case in particular if the sphinxes were depicted as separately standing figurines near the Mother of the Gods, as illustrated with the aforementioned terracottas from Asia Minor. The presence of Hermes, the guide of souls, on one of them found in Lydia directly points to the relation of this scene with notions of afterlife.

The meaning of these mythological personages had changed very little since the Greeks initially adopted them.⁷⁵ For the Hellenes, sphinxes were best known as the guardians of Thebes' gates killing the youths. However, they also probably served as apotropaic symbols in the cult of the Mother of the Gods. Some written and epigraphic evidence indicates the notion that sphinxes were companions of Hades or embodiments of the souls of the dead.⁷⁶ These creatures were often presented in funeral reliefs.⁷⁷ Consequently, depictions of sphinxes near the Mother of the Gods were related with notions of death and the afterlife.

There could be other formal reasons for usage of the sphinx image in the cult of the Mother of the Gods. As is known, this creature has a woman's head, an eagle's wings, a bull's tail, and a lion's body. This last element is an indispensable companion of this mistress of animals. The sphinx does not displace the lion as a symbol of the Mother of the Gods, nor does it even become her attribute. Moreover, in the religions of epochs previous, from which the image was borrowed by the Greeks, the sphinx and lion coexisted, but were not interchangeable with each other.⁷⁸ The presence of this creature near the goddess was apparently not formal, but it had valid reasons. In concrete scenes, particularly in vase painting, the sphinx is depicted as if accompanying events and images reminiscent of or originating in the afterlife. It thus seems that sphinxes near the Mother of the Gods mark her relation to the afterlife. Without denying the point of view concerning a possible apotropaic meaning behind these creatures' images,⁷⁹

⁷³ van Straten 1995, no: 108; Русяева 2005, 202 f.

⁷⁴ Collignon 1883, 40.

⁷⁵ Dessene 1957, 175–177.

⁷⁶ Hes. *Theog.*, 326; Aesch. *Sept.*, 539, 776; Eur. *Phoen.*, 810, 1019–20; see: Фармаковский 1921, 38 with lit.; Шауб 1979, 65; Скржинская 2010, 215.

⁷⁷ O'Neill 1987, 18–9, 21, 66–7, nr. 5 and 48.

⁷⁸ Dessene 1957, 178.

⁷⁹ Фармаковский 1921, 39; Скржинская 2009, 15.

it should nonetheless be emphasized that their protection concerned most of all protection from “evil coming from the other world.”⁸⁰ These creatures—called “soul-murderers,” “Hades’ dogs,” etc. by the Greek poets—would sit on both sides of the Mother of the Gods’ throne, thereby contributing to her image as a mistress of the other world.

There are reasons to assume that the chthonic aspect of this goddess’ cult was directly related to the mystery cult. Mysteries in honour of the Mother of the Gods had roots in Asia Minor. They existed in many *poleis* simultaneously with her polis cult.⁸¹ Their performance in Olbia is evidenced by written sources.⁸² Anacharsis, who was mentioned by Herodotus, performed this cult in Gileia. The exact localization of this sanctuary remains problematic, though it has been proven that it belonged to the Olbian *polis* through the second half of the 4th century BC.⁸³ Nevertheless, mysteries in honour of the Mother of the Gods were not tied to any particular place, and they could thus have been continued at any other place. At the same time, there was a *polis* sanctuary of this goddess in Olbia.⁸⁴

To conclude, the depiction of the Mother of the Gods on the terracottas discussed is peculiar given the presence of expressive apotropaic symbols near the goddess; namely, the lion with grinning snout and sphinxes in the throne’s decoration. These protective symbols were related to notions of the afterlife. The goddess, keeping her face calm, holds the usual *tympanon* and *phiale*, in this way continuing to show her adherents how they should worship her. The loud sounds associated with the *tympanon* and the unrestrained dances associated with such music are also reminiscent of mystery cults. The *phiale*, considering its shape, was used for libations in honour of the goddess. Two terracottas with such depictions (fig. 2) were produced in the same mould in the west Pontic region after an example made in Asia Minor in the second half of the 4th–beginning of the 3rd centuries BC. Based on these imported figurines, a new mould and a terracotta found in the *botros* at the *polis* sanctuary were produced in the middle of the 3rd century BC (fig. 3). Some corrections were made; specifically, the facial features and the position of the lion cub were changed according to local tastes, with the grinning lion now turned into a pet sitting on the goddess’ lap. The author of the new image shared the idea that sphinxes should participate in this scene. Therefore, he emphasized their presence on the throne via lines incised into raw clay, because they were almost flattened after the making of a new mould. These technical elements allow us to understand that the peculiarities of the Mother of the Gods’ cult in ancient centres of Asia Minor and the west Pontic region were well known to Olbian worshippers. This is in relation to beliefs in the goddess’ connection with burial cults and the afterlife. However, such beliefs were updated according to the situation in the cultic life of the *polis* and of separate religious groups and families. In the Hellenistic period, a *polis* sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods continued to function, mysteries were performed within a certain circle of participants, and the goddess was worshipped in many home sanctuaries. In this period, a more humanistic image of the goddess with a lion cub on her lap was produced in large numbers (fig. 1). The local figurine absorbed these features of high-volume products (fig. 3). This was found in the *botros* and, prior to getting there, had probably been offered to the goddess in the sanctuary by an ordinary resident of the *polis*. More

⁸⁰ Шайб 1979, 65.

⁸¹ Collignon 1883, 228; Gasparro 1985, 20–26; Bowden 2010, 83–8.

⁸² Hdt. IV. 76.

⁸³ Русяева 1979, 112; Русяева 2005, 154ff.

⁸⁴ Древнейший теменос 2006, 21ff.

expensive imported terracottas were kept in the home sanctuaries of wealthy residents living near the agora. It can be presumed that the goddess—in this very image, with a lion under her feet and sphinxes on her throne—was interesting for her worshippers because of the religious beliefs they shared. It is possible that the residents of neighbouring houses participated in mystery cults. It can be also presumed that one of them was engaged in terracotta production or, in one way or another, was connected with a coroplast who, basing his work on imported votives, apparently developed his own manner of depicting the Mother of the Gods several decades later.

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Fig. 1 Fragments of terracotta of the most common type in Olbia of the Mother of the Gods, found in the botros of the eastern temenos. Excavations by E.I. Levi in 1955, photo by T. Shevchenko, the Institute of Archaeology, National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine.



Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the Mother of the Gods' image as reproduced in two imported terracottas found in houses near the agora, Olbia. Excavations by L.M. Slavin in 1959, photo by T. Shevchenko, the Institute of Archaeology, National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine.



Fig. 3 Locally produced figurine of the Mother of the Gods, found in the botros of the western temenos of Olbia. Excavations by A.S. Rusiaieva in 1975, photo by T. Shevchenko, the Institute of Archaeology, National Academy of Sciences, Ukraine.



Fig. 4
Figurine of the Mother of the Gods from Gordion, imported from a Pontic ancient Greek centre, after I. Bald Romano.



Fig. 5
Terracotta depiction of the Mother of the Gods from Callatis, after M.J. Vermaseren.



Fig. 6
Figurine of the Mother of the Gods from Gordion, produced in a mould from Pergamon, after M.J. Vermaseren and I. Bald Romano.



Fig. 7
Marble statue of the Mother of the Gods from Panticapaeum, after В.П. Толстиков and М.Б. Муратова.



Fig. 8
Fragment of a throne armrest with depiction of a sphinx from Olbia, broken from a stone statue. Photo by T. Shevchenko, the National Historical and Archaeological Preserve "Olbia".



Fig. 9
Map of terracotta finds depicting the Mother of the Gods with sphinxes.

