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## Mountain Goddesses in Ancient Thrace: The Broader Context

The ancient writers often connect the cult of Phrygian Cybele with mountains and rocky highlands. The goddess was even called Μήτηρ Ὀρεία or 'Mountain Mother', as attested in both literary sources and epigraphic evidence. However, other records give us information that similar religious ideas were not confined to Asia Minor and two female deities in ancient Thrace were also associated with mountains, similarly to Cybele. And although there is no written source testifying that these Thracian goddesses were called 'Mount Mother', some evidence might support the conclusion for their appearance as a mountain.

Most important here is the cult of the goddess Ῥησκυνθίς associated with Greek Hera, who was celebrated on the sacred mountain Ῥησκύνθιον close to the mouth of Hebros in Southeastern Thrace, as attested by Nicandrus and his scholiast<sup>1</sup>. This mountain goddess was worshipped together with her male companion Ζηρύνθιος (Zerynthius), called Apollo by the Greeks, and this took place in a temple located on Mount Rheskynthion<sup>2</sup>. The cult of Rheskynthis and Zerynthios was obviously related to the worshipping of another female deity – the goddess Ζηρυνθία known from a number of ancient literary records and identified with Hecate, Aphrodite or Rhea<sup>3</sup>. She was a chthonic deity who was honored with dog sacrifices that were performed in a sacred cave called Ζήρυνθον (Ζηρύνθιον, Ζήρυνθον), located by the ancient authors in two different places – on Samothrace or in the opposite mainland near the mouth of Hebros<sup>4</sup>. Similar conflation between the names of the female deities, the sacred mountain and the cave reminds us of the information of Hesychius who explained Κύβελα like "a mountain in Phrygia, and caves and graves"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> NICANDR., *Ther.* I, 459-462 Gow-Scholfield; *Schol. in NICANDR., Ther.*, I, 459-462 Gow-Scholfield.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; T. LIV., XXXVIII, 41, 4 Müller.

<sup>3</sup> The main sources on Zerynthia are collected in: D. DETSCHEW, *Die thrakischen Sprachreste*, Wien, 1976<sup>2</sup>, p. 184-185; cf. also LYCOPHR., *Alex.*, 72-80 Scheer; NICANDR., *Ther.*, I, 462-463 Gow-Scholfield; *Schol. in ARISTOPH., Pax*, 277-278 Koster; NONN., *Dion.* XIII, 400 Keydell.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> HESYCH., *s.v. Kybela* Alberti.

The second deity in Thrace who was associated with a mountain is the goddess Γανηα known from a votive inscription on a small altar dated to the Roman Imperial period<sup>6</sup>. It was dedicated to the goddess by Apollonios son of Seuthes, obviously a man of Thracian origin considering his father's name<sup>7</sup>. It is most significant that the altar was found exactly in the region of Γάνος<sup>8</sup> – the famous sacred mountain in Southeastern Thrace, called Ἴερὸν ὄρος by the Greek writers and first attested by Xenophon in the beginning of the 4th century B.C.<sup>9</sup> In this case the goddess and the sacred mount have identical names again, which supports the conclusion for a mountain aspect of the female deity. At the same time, the important nature of the site is attested by Demosthenes<sup>10</sup> and Aeschines<sup>11</sup> who described a residence and treasury of the Odrysian kings Kotys and Kersebleptes located in Hieron Oros. And even more: in a later period Strabo<sup>12</sup> wrote that the local people worshiped the sacred mountain. This information probably reflects the cult of Ganea.

Actually, a couple of literary records give clear information about other mountains in ancient Thrace that were known as sacred highlands where different cult activities took place. Amongst the most famous ones is Kogaionon, a sacred mount in Northeastern Thrace where the male deity Zalmoxis was worshiped<sup>13</sup>. Another important mountain was Pangaion located in Southwestern Thrace, strongly related to the cult of Orpheus and the Edonian mythical king Rhesos<sup>14</sup>. Of special interest also is Saon (Saos, Samos, Saoke), the high mountain of Samothrace where the mysteries of the Great Gods were celebrated besides other deities that were worshiped on the island<sup>15</sup>. The list of mountains related to different cults in ancient Thrace

<sup>6</sup> A. DUMONT, *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'épigraphie*, Paris, 1892, p. 420, n. 88a.

<sup>7</sup> On the Thracian personal name Seuthes, cf. DETSCHEW, *o.c.* (n. 3), p. 434-437.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99 with the sources on the mount Ganos and the surrounding region called Ganiada; on Ganiada and a settlement called Ganos cf. XENOPH., *Anab.*, VII, 5, 8 Masqueray and AESCHIN., *Kata Ktesiph.* III, 82, 6 Blass.

<sup>9</sup> XENOPH., *Anab.* VII, 1, 14 Masqueray; cf. also N. THEODOSSIEV, "The Sacred Mountain of the Ancient Thracians", in *Studia in honorem Alexandri Fol*, Serdicae, 1995 (*Thracia* 11), p. 371-384.

<sup>10</sup> DEMOSTH., *Contr. Aristocr.*, 104 Blass; *Philip.*, III, 15 Croiset.

<sup>11</sup> AESCHIN., II, *Peri tes parapresb.*, 90 Martin-Budé.

<sup>12</sup> STRABO, VII, fr. 56 Meineke.

<sup>13</sup> DETSCHEW, *o.c.* (n. 3), p. 273 on Kogaionon mount and p. 173-175 on the cult of Zalmoxis.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349-350 on Pangaion mountain and p. 395-397 on Rhesos; cf. also [EUR.], *Rhes.*, 963-973 Ebener on the cult of Rhesos in Pangaion and AESCHYL., *Bass.*, fr. 83 Mette on Orpheus celebrating Helios-Apollo in Pangaion.

<sup>15</sup> N. LEWIS, *Samothrace. The Ancient Literary Sources*, New York, 1958 (*Samothrace* I), p. 4, n. 7, p. 7, n. 16-18, p. 18-19, n. 39, p. 20, n. 42, p. 21-22, n. 45-46 and p. 38-39, n. 83 on the mount Saon and *passim* with ancient literary records on the cults of Samothrace; on the mysteries of the Great Gods see: S.G. COLE, *Theoi Megaloi. The Cult of the Great Gods at Samothrace*, Leiden, 1984, *passim*.

could be prolonged, but there is not any clear information that they were directly associated with female deities. So, one can only speculate that these mountains might represent aniconic images of mountain goddesses similarly to Rheskynthion and Ganos. In the context of all these written sources, very significant is the great number of Thracian sanctuaries located in mountains and rocky highlands that clearly show the sacred nature of the places<sup>16</sup>. Also, it is possible to suppose that the numerous tumuli of ancient Thrace might symbolize sacred mountains and if so, these burial constructions could be related to some cults of mountain goddesses besides their funerary functions<sup>17</sup>.

Similar religious ideas in ancient Thrace should be studied in a broader context. Of course, the closest parallels might be found in the cult of the Phrygian Great Goddess Cybele, usually identified with a Mountain bearing the same name<sup>18</sup>. In a number of epigraphic records from Asia Minor dated to the 4th – 3rd centuries B.C. and to the Roman Imperial period the goddess was called Μήτηρ Ὀρείᾳ<sup>19</sup>. Diodorus also testified that Cybele was known as 'Mountain Mother'<sup>20</sup> and he described a mountain called Κύβελος while the goddess was named after this mount<sup>21</sup>. Κυβέλοι Mountains are reported in *Orphei Argonautica*<sup>22</sup>, besides that Herodianus described Κύβελα like a "polis in Phrygia and ὄρος ἱερόν"<sup>23</sup> and mentioned the sacred mountain of Κυβέλοι<sup>24</sup>, too. Later on, Herodianus' information was repeated by Stephanus Byzantius<sup>25</sup> and Hesychius explained Cybele like "a mountain in Phrygia, and caves and graves"<sup>26</sup>, as cited above. All these sources clearly show the mountain aspect of the goddess.

<sup>16</sup> M. DOMARADZKI, "Sanctuaires thraces du II<sup>e</sup> – I<sup>er</sup> millénaire av. n.è.", *Acta Archaeologica Carpathica* 25 (1986), p. 89-100; *id.*, "Les lieux de culte thraces (deuxième moitié du II<sup>e</sup> – I<sup>er</sup> mill. av. J.-C.)", *Helis* 3, 1 (1994), p. 69-108.

<sup>17</sup> For such a possibility, cf. THEODOSSIEV, "The Sacred Mountain" (n. 9); *id.*, *North-Western Thrace from the Fifth to First Centuries BC*, Oxford, 2000 (*BAR Inter. Ser.* 859), p. 53-55.

<sup>18</sup> C. BRIXHE, "Le nom de Cybèle", *Die Sprache* 25 (1979), p. 40-45; L. ZGUSTA, "Weiteres zum Namen der Kybele", *Die Sprache* 28 (1982), p. 171-172.

<sup>19</sup> M.J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque*. I. *Asia Minor*, Leiden, 1987, p. 79, n. 242 from Calchedon; p. 186-187, n. 616-617 and p. 188-189, n. 625, 627 from Ephesus; p. 214-215, n. 723 from Apollonia Salbake; p. 217, n. 729 from Oinoanda; p. 218, n. 731 from Nisa; p. 226-227, n. 751, 754 from Ariassus; p. 230, n. 764 from Bağlı.

<sup>20</sup> DIOD. SIC., III, 58, 3 Vogel.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 58, 1 Vogel.

<sup>22</sup> *Orph. Argonaut.*, 21-23 Abel.

<sup>23</sup> HERODIAN., *De prosod. cathol.*, I, 381 Lentz.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 322 Lentz.

<sup>25</sup> STEPH. BYZ., *s.v. Kybeleia* Meineke.

<sup>26</sup> HESYCH., *s.v. Kybela* Alberti.

Following these ideas, some epithets of the Great Goddess in Asia Minor are also important. Strabo wrote that on a hill close to Lampsakos there was a sanctuary of Meter Theon called Τήρεια<sup>27</sup>. At the same time, the mountain of the goddess Tereia was located near Kyzikos, being known to Homer<sup>28</sup> and described again by Strabo<sup>29</sup>. Later on, Hesychius wrote that Tereia was a mountain in Troas<sup>30</sup>. Very clear evidence comes from some epigraphic records, too. Thus in numerous inscriptions Meter Theon was called Σιπυληνή<sup>31</sup>, obviously a name that originated from Sipylos mountain, and in a similar way the Great Goddess was called with another mountain epiclesis: Δινδυμήνη<sup>32</sup> coming from Dindymon (Dindyma). Actually, this way of giving the goddess a name derived from different mountains in Asia Minor is well described by Strabo<sup>33</sup>.

All these testimonia concerning the cults of mountain goddesses probably reflect some relations between ancient Phrygians and Thracians, and even may show that the origins of the Phrygian people lay in the Northern Balkans, as attested in literary records and recently confirmed in archaeological material from Gordion<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, the Phrygian Μήτηρ Ὀρεία seems to influence strongly Greek literature and cult, most clearly attested in the image of goddess Rhea being called 'Mountain Mother'. A similar syncretic process could be traced back in the literary works of the late 5th century B.C. Thus Aristophanes<sup>35</sup> and Euripides<sup>36</sup> described Rhea (associated with Cybele) as Μήτηρ (Μάτηρ) Ὀρεία and in another Euripides' tragedy the goddess was called Ὀρεία Μάτηρ θεῶν<sup>37</sup>. In fact, the literary image of Rhea as a 'Mountain Mother' was probably created in the interaction zones of Asia Minor, where the idea had been borrowed from the

<sup>27</sup> STRABO, XIII, 1, 17 Meineke; cf. A.B. COOK, *Zeus. A Study in Ancient Religion*. II, Cambridge, 1925, p. 697.

<sup>28</sup> HOM., *Il.* II, 828-830 Ameis-Hentze.

<sup>29</sup> STRABO, XII, 4, 6; XIII, 1, 10 et 17 Meineke.

<sup>30</sup> HESYCH., s.v. *Tereia* Alberti.

<sup>31</sup> VERMASEREN, o.c. (n. 19), p. 31, n. 80 from Geveze; p. 161-163, n. 543-546, p. 164-165, n. 549-551, p. 167, n. 555, p. 169, n. 564, p. 171-172, n. 571, p. 172-173, n. 575-576, p. 174-175, n. 580, p. 175-176, n. 582-584 from Smyrna.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81, n. 251 from Apamea Myrlea (?); p. 96, n. 290 from Cyzicus; p. 230-231, n. 765 from Çarik Saray; p. 238-239, n. 791 from Laodicea Combusta; cf. HERODIAN., *De prosod. cathol.*, I, 333 et 382 Lentz and STEPH. BYZ., s.v. *Dindyma* Meineke.

<sup>33</sup> STRABO, X, 3, 12 Meineke.

<sup>34</sup> L.E. ROLLER, "The Phrygian Mother Goddess and her Thracian Connections", in *Eight International Congress of Thracology. Thrace and the Aegean* (Summaries), Sofia – Yambol, 2000, p. 76-77; O.W. MUSCARELLA, "The Iron Age Background to the Formation of the Phrygian State", *BASOR* 299-300 (1995), p. 91-101.

<sup>35</sup> ARISTOPH., *Ornith.*, 746 Hall-Geldart.

<sup>36</sup> EUR., *Cret.*, fr. 472 Nauck<sup>2</sup>; *Hippol.*, 143-144 Nauck.

<sup>37</sup> EUR., *Hel.*, 1301-1302 Kannicht.

non-Greek people. A similar proposal might be supported by a scholion to Apollonius Rhodius<sup>38</sup>, referring to a sanctuary of Ὀρείᾱ Μητέρα at Sangarios, which was described by the Greek logographer Xanthos from Lydia who lived in the 6th-5th centuries B.C. The literary image of the 'Mountain Mother' survived into the Roman Imperial period, as attested by Antistius<sup>39</sup>: Ὀρείᾱ Μητέρα θεῶν, and in the Orphic Hymns<sup>40</sup> where Rhea is described as Μητέρα Ὀρειομανῆς. It is interesting that in another Orphic Hymn<sup>41</sup> Gaia was also considered in a similar way: Μητέρα Ὀρέων, and in a later period Eusebius<sup>42</sup> called the goddess Παμμήτηρ Ὀρέων.

At the end of this paper, another epigraphic record should be mentioned. On a Late Hellenistic silver bowl from Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Collection a brief inscription is incised: Κοτεους Μητρὸς Ὀρέας – in translation "Koteous [son/servant] of Mountain Mother"<sup>43</sup>. And although the provenance of the hoard is unknown, it is possible to suppose that the vessel comes either from Asia Minor or from ancient Thrace. In both cases however, this inscription is remarkable evidence for religious ideas and cults related to the mountain appearance of the goddess. A future comparison between the written sources mentioned here and the archaeological material may help to define more clearly the cult of the mountain goddesses in ancient Thrace and their relationship to other female deities worshiped in Asia Minor and Greece.

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<sup>38</sup> *Schol. vet.* in APOLL. RHOD., *Argon.*, II, 722 Wendel.

<sup>39</sup> ANTIST., *Ep.*, 1-2 Waltz.

<sup>40</sup> *Orph. Hymn.* XXXI. *Hymn. curet.*, 5 Quandt.

<sup>41</sup> *Orph. Hymn.* XV. *Dios*, 4 Quandt.

<sup>42</sup> EUSEB., *Praep. evang.* III, 9, p. 100a-105d Dindorf.

<sup>43</sup> *A Passion for Antiquities. Ancient Art from the Collection of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman*, Malibu, 1994, p. 229-231; cf. a detailed study of the inscriptions in N. THEODOSSIEV, "KOTEYOYK HAIYOY and KOTEYOYK MHTPOC OPEAC", *Hermes* 129, 2 (2001), p. 279-283.