



**Kernos**

Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion  
grecque antique

**24 | 2011**  
**Varia**

---

## The Thracian Cult of Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans*

Vayos Liapis

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/kernos/1938>

DOI: 10.4000/kernos.1938

ISSN: 2034-7871

**Publisher**

Centre international d'étude de la religion grecque antique

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 January 2011

Number of pages: 95-104

ISSN: 0776-3824

**Electronic reference**

Vayos Liapis, « The Thracian Cult of Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans* », *Kernos* [Online], 24 | 2011, Online since 01 February 2014, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/kernos/1938> ; DOI : 10.4000/kernos.1938

---

## The Thracian Cult of Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans*\*

**Abstract:** A survey of the available evidence for the Thracian cult of Rhesus, mainly on the basis of the pseudo-Euripidean *Rhesus* and of Philostratus' *Heroicus*, shows that the identification of Rhesus with the so-called *Heros Equitans*, or "Thracian Horseman" (first proposed almost a century ago by G. Seure) rests on firmer ground than is sometimes assumed. The paper also reviews significant portions of the pictorial and epigraphic evidence for the *Heros Equitans*. It concludes that the parallels between Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans* are too striking to be ignored.

**Résumé :** Un relevé analytique de la documentation disponible sur le culte thrace de Rhésos, se fondant surtout sur le *Rhésos* du pseudo-Euripide et sur l'*Heroikos* de Philostrate, montre que l'identification de Rhésos avec le prétendu «Heros Equitans» ou «Cavalier thrace» (d'abord proposée, il y a près d'un siècle, par G. Seure) repose sur des fondements plus assurés qu'on ne le pense parfois. Cet article passe également en revue des parties significatives de la documentation iconographique et épigraphique pour le Heros Equitans. On en conclut que le parallélisme entre ce dernier et Rhésos est trop frappant pour être ignoré.

### Introduction

The tragedy of *Rhesus*, traditionally attributed to Euripides,<sup>1</sup> provides the oldest extant evidence on the cult of Rhesus in the Balkan peninsula. The rest of our information must be pieced together from late literary sources, which are not always above suspicion, and from the archaeological record. Fragmentary and open to doubt as it is, the evidence does nonetheless suggest that the cult of Rhesus, or of a figure closely related to him (specifically, the so-called *Heros Equitans*, on which more in section 2 below), was indigenous to ancient Macedonia and Thrace. To the extent that they can be reconstructed, matrices of Rhesus-cult that appear to be epichoric in that area are incompatible with the standard modalities of, at least, Athenian hero-cult – although they do bear comparison with some Greek cults for denizens of subterranean chambers. The

---

\* I am grateful to Pierre Bonnechere and to an anonymous reader for *Kernos* for their criticisms and suggestions. All errors are mine.

<sup>1</sup> On the question of the authenticity of *Rhesus* see most recently (with further bibliography) V. LIAPIS, "Rhesus Revisited: The Case for a Fourth-Century Macedonian Context," *JHS* 129 (2009), p. 71-88; for a full-scale commentary on the play see again LIAPIS, *A Commentary on the Rhesus Attributed to Euripides*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2012.

topic has been dealt with in detail in an earlier article of mine;<sup>2</sup> here I shall supplement that paper's argument with considerations on the possible affinities between Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans*.

## 1. The Thracian cult of Rhesus: insights from *Rhesus* and elsewhere

In her aetiological narrative towards the end of *Rhesus* (962-973), Rhesus' mother, a Muse, describes her son's posthumous fate, and declares that he will not 'go under the black earth' (962) but will rather continue his existence by assuming a new identity as ἀνθρωποδαίμων, 'man-god', namely an entity betwixt and between man and deity (971).<sup>3</sup> In this new interstitial capacity, the Muse says, Rhesus will inhabit forever a subterranean cavern somewhere in Mt. Pangaeum, and will act as 'prophet of Bacchus' (970-973). All of this has been sometimes dismissed as poetic fancy, most vehemently perhaps by W. Leaf,<sup>4</sup> who invoked Cicero's statement to the effect that there was no cult of Rhesus anywhere in the ancient world.<sup>5</sup> However, apart from the fact that this can at best have been valid only for Cicero's own time,<sup>6</sup> there is no evidence that Cicero founded his statement on serious Alexandrian scholarship, as Leaf thought.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, the *De natura deorum* contains a number of misunderstandings and false assumptions, and Cicero does sometimes seem to have given himself a free hand in the treatment of his sources.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, Cicero's sweeping statement is contradicted by Philostratus (probably L. Flavius Philostratus), who gives in his *Heroicus* an account of Rhesus' cult as it obtained apparently in his own era (3rd century A.D.).<sup>9</sup> According to it, Rhesus was a hunter, a warrior and a horse-breeder (ἵπποτροφεῖν τε γὰρ φασιν αὐτὸν καὶ ὄπιλιτεῖν καὶ θήρας ἄπτεσθαι). Moreover, his altar on Mt. Rhodope was frequented by wild animals that offered themselves willingly to be sacrificed to

<sup>2</sup> V. LIAPIS, "Zeus, Rhesus, and the Mysteries," *CQ* 57 (2007), p. 381-411, esp. 408-411.

<sup>3</sup> On Rhesus' intermediate state, betwixt and between mortality and immortality, see also C. PLICHON, "Le Rhésos et l'orphisme," *Kernos* 14 (2001), p. 11-21, here 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> W. LEAF, "Rhesos of Thrace," *JHS* 35 (1915), p. 1-11, here 4.

<sup>5</sup> See *De natura deorum* III, 45.

<sup>6</sup> For this obvious criticism cf. e.g. E. ROHDE, *Psyche. The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, transl. W. B. Hillis, London, 1925, p. 143 n. 36; P. PERDRIZET, *Cultes et mythes du Pangée*, Paris/Nancy, 1910, p. 20; I. MALKIN, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece*, Leiden, 1987, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> See on this point J. REMPE, *De Rheso Thracum heroe*, diss., Münster, 1927, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. R. DYCK (ed.), *Cicero: De Natura Deorum Book I*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 9, 129 (*ad* 50a), esp. p. 143 (*ad* 62), etc.

<sup>9</sup> *Her.*, 18, 3-6 (p. 18 de Lannoy). That Philostratus' account pertains to contemporary Rhesus-cult is argued by G. SEURE, "Le roi Rhésos et le héros chasseur. Études sur quelques types curieux du cavalier thrace : troisième série," *RPb* 54 (1928), p. 106-139, here p. 118 n. 1.

him; indeed, Philostratus explicitly mentions a βωμός –i.e. sacrificial cult– for Rhesus on the Rhodope mountains.<sup>10</sup> As a local deity, he was also thought to ward off pestilence (λέγεται δὲ ὁ ἥρωος οὗτος καὶ λοιμοῦ ἐρύκειν τοὺς ὄρους).<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, with Philostratus it is never easy to disentangle factual information from fictional elaboration,<sup>12</sup> and it was recently argued that the author of the *Heroicus* subsumes factual accuracy to literary or philosophical concerns more often than not.<sup>13</sup> But even his detractors do not doubt the essential premise of Philostratus' account, namely that a cult of Rhesus did obtain in Thrace;<sup>14</sup> and specialist scholarship on the *Heroicus* has recently rehabilitated Philostratus as a connoisseur of local and regional lore, traditions, and ritual practices, which he sought to reassert as against the Panhellenic uniformity imposed by, mainly, Homeric epic.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, as we shall see in the following section, Philostratus' account of Rhesus' cult at Rhodope has a lot in common with what we know about the cult of the indigenous *Heros Equitans*; and even if Philostratus is merely confusing the *Heros* with Rhesus, this could be due at least partly to genuine cultic affinities between the two figures.

We saw earlier that, according to his mother the Muse, Rhesus will posthumously become a 'prophet of Bacchus' (*Rh.*, 972), and will presumably have a privileged role in Bacchic mysteries celebrated locally in the Mt. Pangaeum area by 'those who have knowledge' (973), i.e. the initiates.<sup>16</sup> Assuming a special role for Rhesus in the mystic cult would be consistent with the play's insistence both on Rhesus' being a cousin of Orpheus (*Rh.*, 944, 966), famously an expounder

---

<sup>10</sup> *Her.* XVII, 5 (p. 18 ed. DE LANNOY); cf. SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 120 n. 2; P. GROSSARDT (ed.), *Einführung, Übersetzung und Kommentar zum 'Heroikos' von Flavius Philostrat II*, Basel, 2006, p. 439-440.

<sup>11</sup> Philostr. *Her.*, 18, 3-6 (p. 18). See also SEURE's, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 117-119 minute analysis of the passage, with discussion of textual difficulties on his p. 118 n. 5. In an earlier publication, SEURE ("Étude sur quelques types curieux du cavalier thrace", *RÉA* 14 [1912], p. 137-166, 239-261, 382-390, here 382-390) had considered the Thracian cult of Rhesus as a 'fétiche prophylactique'. For further (indirect) evidence on the cult of Rhesus in Macedon and Thrace see LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 395-396, 408.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. G. ANDERSON, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, London, 1986, p. 241-57, esp. 253-4; see also E.L. BOWIE, "Philostratus: Writer of Fiction", in J.R. MORGAN & R. STONEMAN (eds.), *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, London, 1994, p. 181-99.

<sup>13</sup> GROSSARDT, *o.c.* (n. 10) I, p. 35-7, 115; vol. II, p. 438-41. Principally, Grossardt is suspicious of Philostratus' account because of the impossibility of checking its validity against independent evidence.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. GROSSARDT, *o.c.* (n. 10) II, p. 438 (comm. on *Her.*, 17, 3).

<sup>15</sup> See J.K. BERENSON, E.B. AITKEN (eds.), *Flavius Philostratus: Heroikos*, Atlanta, 2001, p. lx-xxvi, esp. p. lxxi, lxxiv-lxxv.

<sup>16</sup> As was seen already by A. MATTHIAE (ed.), *Euripidis tragoediae et fragmenta VIII*, Leipzig, 1824, ad 969, the reference here is to the Dionysiac mysteries, since 'the mystery cults offered their adepts a supposedly potent kind of knowledge, from which the profane were excluded' (quotation from DODDS on Euripides, *Bacchae*, 72-75); cf. Eur., *Ba.*, 73-74: τελετὰς θεῶν εἰδῶς; 472-474: ἄλλοι τ' ἀβακχεύουσιν εἰδέναι βροτῶν ... ἔστι δ' ἄξι' εἰδέναι; SEAFORD on Eur., *Ba.*, 73. See further LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 397 n. 83.

of mystic lore and rites,<sup>17</sup> and on his being a posthumous denizen of the caves of Mt. Pangaeum (*Rb.*, 970), which is also where Orpheus' dwelling was located according to certain versions of the myth.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, according to an attractive hypothesis, Rhesus may have been considered the mythical ancestor of the Thracian Bessoï, who acted as prophets in the oracular shrine of Dionysus located in all likelihood on Mt. Pangaeum.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans*

What little is known about Rhesus' cult in Thrace has sometimes led scholars, beginning with G. Seure, to identify Rhesus, however tentatively, with a divinity whose cult was extremely widespread in the whole Thracian region, namely the so-called *Heros Equitans*, or 'Thracian Horseman', thus named by modern scholars for lack of evidence for a more specific appellation.<sup>20</sup> Scholarly opinion on the identification of Rhesus with the Thracian Horseman is anything but unanimous: on the contrary, it ranges from unconditional acceptance<sup>21</sup> through cautious speculation<sup>22</sup> to descriptive non-committalism;<sup>23</sup> there are, of course, many who simply reject the equation on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

---

<sup>17</sup> As early as the late 5th century, the Aristophanic 'Aeschylus' could name Orpheus as the originator of, generally, 'rites' (Aristophanes, *Ranae*, 1032 τελετάς), which *could* be mystery rites, although certainty is impossible (see DOVER *ad l.*; F. GRAF, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, Berlin/New York, 1974, p. 31-33). In the 4th century, Orpheus is more explicitly associated with the founding of the 'holiest of rites' (IDEMOSTH., 25.11), probably the Eleusinian Mysteries (GRAF, *o.c.*, p. 33); *cf.* also Plutarch, fr. 212 (ed. SANDBACH). Further on Orpheus' broad associations with mystic rites in general see I.M. LINFORTH, *The Arts of Orpheus*, Berkeley, 1941, p. 27, 38-104, 169-71, 189-232, 264; *cf.* LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 398-401.

<sup>18</sup> *Cf.* Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorae* XVIII, 146 (p. 107, 3 ed. NAUCK); Maximus Tyrius, XXXVII, 6 (p. 300 ed. TRAPP = 440 ed. KONIARIS); Himerius, *Oratio* XLVI, 3 (p. 185-186 ed. COLONNA).

<sup>19</sup> Thus A.D. NOCK, "The End of the *Rhesus*," *CR* 40 (1926), p. 183-186, here 186. V. LIAPIS, "Epicharmus, Asclepiades of Tragilos, and the *Rhesus*: Lessons from a Lexicographical Entry," *ZPE* 143 (2003), p. 19-22 suggests that Rhesus' prophetic function may also be alluded to in Epicharmus, fr. 206 (ed. KASSEL-AUSTIN) and in Asclepiades of Tragilos, *FGH Hist* 12 F 5 (ed. JACOBY); *cf.* also LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 397. For epigraphic evidence on the Bessoï see P.A. DIMITROV, *Thracian Language and Greek and Thracian Epigraphy*, Newcastle, 2009, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> See *imprimis* SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), esp. p. 113-139. On the *Heros Equitans* in Thrace see also G. KAZAROW, *RE Suppl.* III (1918), p. 1132-1148; V. VELKOV & V. GERASSIMOVA-TOMOVA, *ANRW* II 18.2 (1989), p. 1322-1330. For bibliography see A. CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *LIMC* VI.1 (1992), p. 1019-1081 (here 1021). Selection of basic literature also in R. TURCAN, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, transl. A. Nevill, Oxford, 1996, p. 371 n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. F. BENOÎT, *L'héroïsation équestre*, Paris, 1954, p. 60: 'Rhésos [...] n'est que la personification du "héros chasseur", auquel la légende attribuait une individualité'.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 20: 'peut-être Rhésos est-il, je ne veux pas dire le vrai nom, mais l'un des surnoms du personnage divin figuré sur ces stèles' [*i.e.* the *Heros Equitans*].

<sup>23</sup> E.g. W. BAEGE, *De Macedonum sacris*, diss., Halle, 1913, p. 201 who limited himself to identifying the *Heros* as a *deum a Thracibus cultum*.

It must be admitted that the identification of the *Heros* with Rhesus is wholly uncertain. It is hardly made more credible by the fact that the *Heros*, although often identified on figured monuments with various divinities (e.g. Apollo, Asclepius, Dionysus, the Dioscuri),<sup>24</sup> is never *explicitly* associated with Rhesus. On the other hand, positive evidence for such an association would be extremely hard to come by if, as has been suggested, ~ ἦσος is not a divine *name* but (perhaps in accordance with Thracian custom)<sup>25</sup> a vague designation meaning ‘lord’, ‘sovereign’ or the like. Indeed, a widely accepted etymology associates the name of Rhesus with the Indo-European root \*(H)reǵ-, which has produced Latin *rex*, Vedic *ráj-*, Gallic *-rix*, and Gothic *reiks*.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting that the *Heros Equitans* is sometimes addressed in inscriptions merely as *κύριος*, *δεσπότης* or *ἡρώς*,<sup>27</sup> while on several occasions the dedication *ἡρώι* is accompanied by a (presumably indigenous) designation, such as Α̃ ΖΗΝΩ, ΔΩΣΑΗΝΩ, ΕΙΣΑΣΗΜΗ,

<sup>24</sup> Dionysus: KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1144; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), no. 374; Dioscuri: KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1143-1144; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), no. 456. For Apollo and Asclepius see below n. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 17-21, esp. p. 20-21.

<sup>26</sup> For this etymology – which goes back to W. TOMASCHEK, “Die alten Thraker: Eine ethnologische Untersuchung. II. Die Sprachreste. 1. Hälfte: Glossen aller Art und Götternamen,” *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historische Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 130, II. Abhandlung, 1-70, Vienna 1893, p. 53f. – see esp. P. KRETSCHMER, *Einleitung in die Geschichte der griechischen Sprache*, Göttingen, 1896, p. 126; SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 106-112; PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 17-18 with n. 7, p. 20-21; KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1147; É. BOISACQ, “L’étymologie du grec Πῆσος,” *REG* 39 (1926), p. 332-334 ≡ ID., *RBPb* 6 (1927), p. 231-232; D. DETSCHEW, *Die thrakischen Sprachreste*, Vienna, 1957, p. 393 *s.v.* “ἠσκου-”, who further points out that ~ ἦσ(σ)ος and *Rhesus* are also attested epigraphically as personal names; P. WATHELET, “Rhésos ou la quête de l’immortalité,” *Kernos* 2 (1989), p. 213-231, here p. 222 with n. 38; Y. USTINOVA, “Either a Daimon, or a Hero, or Perhaps a God? Mythical Residents of Subterranean Chambers,” *Kernos* 15 (2002), p. 267-288, here p. 283 n. 153; for discussion cf. also REMPE, *o.c.* (n. 7), p. 26; K. MCCONE, “King’ and ‘Queen’ in Celtic and Indo-European,” *Ériu* 49 (1998), p. 1-12; M.L. WEST, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 2007, p. 412-413. Later, however, P. KRETSCHMER, “Das *-nt*-Suffix,” *Glotta* 14 (1925), p. 84-106 (here p. 103), changed his mind, and suggested that ~ ἦσος derives from a root \**reǵku-* meaning ‘brisk, spirited, vigorous’; cf. such proper names as ~ ἠσκυθός, ~ ἠσκυπορίς, ~ ασκυόπορίς, ~ ασκυόπορίς etc., on which see W. TOMASCHEK, “Die alten Thraker: Eine ethnologische Untersuchung. II. Die Sprachreste. 2. Hälfte: Personen und Ortsnamen,” *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historische Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 131, I. Abhandlung, 1-103, Vienna, 1894, p. 27-28; also DIMITROV, *o.c.* (n. 19), p. 104. This no doubt holds good for the river name (~ ἦσος in the Troad), but hardly for the hero: see DETSCHEW, *o.c.*, p. 393. For a more recent challenge to the canonical etymology see R. SCHMITT, “Bemerkungen zu den Namen des Thrakerkönigs Rhesos und seines Vaters,” in M. FRITZ & S. ZEILFELDER (eds.), *Novalis indogermanica: Festschrift für Günter Neumann zum 80. Geburtstag*, Graz, 2002, p. 443-452, here p. 443-448, with the rather flimsy argument that ~ ἦσος has yielded derivatives (~ ἠσίδιχος, ~ ἠσίμαχος, ~ ἠσισθένης, ~ ἠσώ) which can be paralleled for incontestably Greek names in *-σος* (e.g. Λύσος > Λυσίδιχος, Λυσίμαχος, Λυσώ).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. e.g. SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 122-127; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 123, 170 (H̃ ΩΙ ΠΙ̃ ΟΠΥΛΑΙΩ), 252, 298, 299, 304, 322, 454, 501 (H̃ ΩΙ ΠΙ̃ ΟΠΥΛΑΙΩ), 522 (DEO SANCTO HERONI, cf. σερμόνς ... θεός said of the ἀνθρωποδαίμων Rhesus in *Rh.*, 973f), 548, 589 (ΚΟΙ̃ ΙΩ̃ ΘΕΩ̃ ΕΠΙΠΠΙΟ = κύριφ θεῶ̃ ἐπιπίφ), 591.

ΖΕΙΝΔ' ΟΥΜΗΝΩ, ΚΑ' ΑΒΑΣΜΩ, ΠΗ' ΜΗ' ΟΥΛΑ, ΣΑΛΔΟΚΕΛΗΝΩ  
etc.<sup>28</sup>

This plurality of names calls for a brief digression. Are we dealing with different appellations of a single god or hero? And if yes, do these appellations correspond to different avatars of the god/hero, or are they simply evidence of a god enjoying his *πολυωνυμία*, or multitude of names/attributes, like Artemis in Callimachus' Third Hymn? The latter seems more likely, in view of the fact that a high degree of individualization, such as would perhaps befit individual avatars, is precluded by the observation that the Hero's appellations, for the most part, do not evince any individual characteristics. They are by and large generic names singling out or invoking some of the functions a hero is expected to perform (Ἀρχαγέτας, Ἐπιφανής, Σύμμαχος, Σωτήρ).<sup>29</sup> In other cases, they serve as localizers, pinpointing the hero's epichoric influence (Ἀύλωνεῖτης, Ἑλλησπόντιος, Μακεδών, Πέργαμος, Προπύλαιος),<sup>30</sup> or they underline the hero's especial association with horses ("Ἴππαλκμος, Ἴππότης).<sup>31</sup> Finally in a number of instances, the Hero's appellations evince a special connection with healing gods, notably Apollo and Asclepius,<sup>32</sup> which is hardly surprising given the healing powers attributed both to the Hero (see next paragraph) and to Rhesus (see p. 97 above). In a few cases, it appears that dead (presumably heroized) *individuals* are depicted in the guise of the *Heros*, but such cases are not numerous (no more than five or six, cf. n. 30 above). The crux of the matter lies, of course, in such undecipherable appellations of the Hero as those mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph. Given the current state of the evidence, it is simply impossible to ascertain whether they refer to aspects of the same deity or to different deities.

Nomenclature aside, Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans* share striking similarities. To begin with, both of them are healing deities. For Rhesus we have Philostratus' evidence that he was thought to ward off pestilence (see p. 97 above); the *Heros* assumes, in a number of artistic representations, the features of Apollo or of

---

<sup>28</sup> For a list of these appellations see CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 120, 126, 179, 210, 305, 309, 310-12, 446, 494, 506, 529, 576, 584. For the epigraphic evidence see DIMITROV, *o.c.* (n. 19), p. 39, 40, 42, 44, 48, 49, 53, 54, 70, 74, 76, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 92, 93, 98, 100, 101, 102, 103, 106, 109, 111-15, 118.

<sup>29</sup> See CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020.

<sup>30</sup> A few of these appellations, e.g. Ἑλλησπόντιος or Πέργαμος, may perhaps point to the name of a heroized dead person; after all, personal names like Ἡφαιστῶν, Ἰάσων, and Θεόδωρος are found on depictions of the Horseman; cf. CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 8, 33, 40, 76, 170, 230, 501, 537.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and no. 518.

<sup>32</sup> In these instances, the Hero is often identified simply as "Apollo", "god Apollo", "Asclepius", "Lord Asclepius" and the like; in many cases, however, the dedication ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙ or ΑΣΚΛΗΠΙΩ is accompanied by undecipherable (presumably indigenous) names, e.g. ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙ ΓΕΙΚΕΣΗΝΩΙ / ΖΓΟΥΛΑΜΗΝΩ / ΣΚΟΔ' ΗΝΩΙ, or ΑΣΚΛΗΠΙΩΙ ΣΑΛΔΗΝΩ / ΚΕΜΠΗΝΩ / ΣΑΛΔΟΚΕΛΗΝΩΙ; etc. See further CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 464 (cf. 593), 511, 480; 211, 315, 508.

Asclepius.<sup>33</sup> Albeit representing a fairly rare motif, Rhesus' transformation from killer to healer is by no means anomalous. One need only think of Amphiaraus, a warrior as well as a seer, whose shrine at Oropus was a popular healing oracle;<sup>34</sup> and of Achilles (with whom Rhesus has several striking resemblances),<sup>35</sup> who had been taught the art of healing by Chiron (*Iliad* XI, 831-832). The motif has several parallels in Old Irish epic, especially in the case of Finn mac Cumail, a warrior who was trained as a seer (cf. Rhesus' posthumous status as 'prophet of Bacchus', *Rh.*, 972) and was in possession of a healing drink.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Rhesus is famously the master of marvellous steeds,<sup>37</sup> and Philostratus, as we saw (p. 96 above), tells us that in actual Thracian cult he was worshipped, among other things, as a horse-breeder; the *Heros Equitans* is also typically depicted as a rider (hence his modern, *faute de mieux* name). Further, on a great many reliefs the 'Thracian Horseman' is shown as a hunter,<sup>38</sup> which is another point of contact with Rhesus, an accomplished hunter in Philostratus' and Parthenius' accounts.<sup>39</sup> Remarkably, images of the 'Thracian Horseman' as a hunter are often accompanied by representations of wild animals (boars, hares, deers etc.) near altars, no doubt as a sign that they are about to be sacrificed;<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Identification with Apollo: KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1143; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 178, 220, 302, 465, 466, 480, 497, 499, 511, 587, 592, 593, 620, 622; *Heros* holding a lyre, like Apollo: CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), nos. 262-265; cf. G. SEURE, "Musée de Belgrade. Reliefs votifs inédits et disparus," *REA* 26 (1924), p. 30-67, here p. 61. Identification with Asclepius: KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1143; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1020, and nos. 124, 162, 180, 182, 211, 266, 301, 315, 369, 370, 448, 498, 504, 508-10, 523, 543, 575-6; for early findings of *Heros*/Asclepius see SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 135-136; cf. also PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 19-21. For a comprehensive treatment, with a study of the evidence bearing on Asclepius' syncretism with the *Heros Equitans* in iconography, see I. DONTCHEVA, "Le syncrétisme d'Asclépios avec le Cavalier Thrace," *Kernos* 15 (2002), p. 317-324. On the *Heros*' healing properties see also TURCAN, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 249.

<sup>34</sup> See P. BONNECHERE, *Trophonios de Lébadée. Cultes et mythes d'une cité béotienne au miroir de la mentalité antique*, Leiden, 2003, p. 96-97 with n. 4; Y. USTINOVA, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind*, Oxford, 2009, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> On these resemblances see V. LIAPIS, "Rhesus: Myth and Iconography," in J.R.C. COUSLAND, J.R. HUME (eds.), *The Play of Texts and Fragments: Essays in Honour of Martin Cropp*, Leiden, 2009, p. 273-91, here p. 282-283.

<sup>36</sup> See D.A. MILLER, *The Epic Hero*, Baltimore/London, 2000, p. 325-326.

<sup>37</sup> *Iliad* X, 435-437; Hipponax, fr. 72, 5-6 (ed. WEST); *Rh.*, 303-304.

<sup>38</sup> Ample documentation in CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), nos. 444-574, 583-603, and p. 1070-1072. For detailed discussion of ten Belgrade reliefs depicting the Thracian Horseman as a hunter see SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 33), p. 48-67.

<sup>39</sup> Philostr. (p. 96 above); Parth., *Ἐρωτ. Παθήμ.*, 36 (p. 362 ed. LIGHTFOOT): (Rhesus) ἕφα δὲ θέλειν αὐτῆ (sc. Arganthonē) συγκυνηγεῖν.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g. N. HAMPARTUMIAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* IV, Leiden, 1979, nos. 16, 18, 19, 21, 37, 59, 74, 93, 120, 138; A. CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* V, Leiden, 1982, nos. 1, 10, 13, 34, 35, 44, 47, 48, 51, 65, 76, 85, 88; Z. GOČEVA & M. OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* I, Leiden, 1979, nos. 2, 13, 54, 61, 85-7, 92, 95, 123, 128, 151; *idem*, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.1, Leiden, 1981, nos. 175, 224, 244, 260, 273, 281, 313, 328, 361-2, 367, 379, 415-16, 427, 430; *idem*, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.2, Leiden, 1984, nos. 447, 457 (six beasts

and we recall that, according to Philostratus (p. 97 with n. 10 above), Rhesus' altar on Mt. Rhodope was frequented by wild animals that offered themselves willingly to be sacrificed to him. Of special interest in this respect is a relief from Glava Panega (near Lukovit, Bulgaria).<sup>41</sup> The upper register depicts the Hero in a hunter's guise chasing a boar towards the relief's right side, where an altar is shown. The lower register shows four animals (a boar, a doe, a deer, and a bull) running towards the relief's right side. As they do so without being pursued, it has been suggested that they may be offering themselves for sacrifice, especially since the bull is kneeling just underneath the altar depicted above him in the upper register's far right.<sup>42</sup> Others, however, see here merely a variant of the regular, run-of-the-mill animal fight.<sup>43</sup>

There are further similarities. As a cave-dweller, Rhesus is a chthonic figure. By virtue of his disappearing 'inside the caverns of the silver-veined land' in Mt Pangaeum (*Rh.*, 970) while at the same time escaping death, Rhesus the 'man-god' (*Rh.*, 971) appears to be in a position authoritatively to manoeuvre his contacts with the Beyond – hence, presumably, his central role in the Bacchic mysteries of Mt Pangaeum (see above p. 97-98). Likewise, the *Heros Equitans* is extensively associated with the Underworld: stelae bearing his depictions have been found in graves and grave-mounds;<sup>44</sup> he is sometimes associated with *Totenmahl* iconography,<sup>45</sup> or depicted in the company of heroized dead;<sup>46</sup> and he is extremely often shown in connection with serpents, whose chthonic associations are well

---

around the altar!), 458, 464, 469, 470, 484, 524, 560. Cf. also CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1031, nos. 109-112; 1032, no. 126, 126bis; 1033 nos. 146-147; 1034-1036, nos. 161-165, 171-185, 202-203, 206-213; 1037, nos. 235-238, 247-9; 1054-1056, nos. 485-514.

<sup>41</sup> See CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), no. 543. The relief is fully described and discussed in SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 134-136, no. 4.

<sup>42</sup> The interpretation is that of SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 9), p. 135 with n. 3, 4. For further examples see D.C. SAMSARIS, in *Dritter Internationaler Thrakologischer Kongress zu Ehren W. Tomascheks II*, Sofia, 1984, p. 284-289, here 288 n. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Thus G.I. KAZAROW, *Die Denkmäler des Thrakischen Reitergottes in Bulgarien. I Textband, II Tafelband*, Budapest/Leipzig, 1938, I p. 72-3; M. OPPERMAN, *LIMC VI.1* (1992), p. 1058. A relief from Ostia (on which see M. FLORIANI SQUARCIAPINO, *I culti orientali ad Ostia*, Leiden, 1962, p. 67) shows the *Heros* as a hunter, while a boar runs towards an altar with a hound hard on its heels. Despite TURCAN, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 250, however, this does not imply that the boar is willingly offering itself to be sacrificed; for it is very obviously being chased. It is at any rate noteworthy that Ostia, where this *Heros* relief comes from, has yielded several funerary inscriptions documenting the presence of Bessoï (*CIL XIV*, 234, 236, 240; FLORIANI SQUARCIAPINO, *o.c.*, p. 68 with n. 1; TURCAN, *o.c.* [n. 20], p. 250), i.e. precisely of those Thracians who probably claimed Rhesus as their ancestor (see n. 19 above).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1133, 1140.

<sup>45</sup> See HAMPARTUMIAN, *o.c.* (n. 40), index, *s.v.* 'funeral feast'; GOČEVA & OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii I* (as in n. 40), nos. 54, 55, 170, 171; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC, *o.c.* (n. 40), nos. 64, 89.

<sup>46</sup> See CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), nos. 56-60, 388-395, 565-570, 603, 638-639.

known.<sup>47</sup> Finally, depictions of the *Heros Equitans* in Thrace and its environs often show him in association with Dionysus, Sileni, grapevines, and other Bacchic accoutrements,<sup>48</sup> which cannot fail to recall Rhesus' posthumous status as 'prophet of Bacchus' (*Rb.*, 972). Sometimes, the Bacchic and the chthonic are interconnected in the iconography – as indeed they are in the person of Rhesus himself, the cave-dweller who is posthumously assigned a special function in Dionysus' mysteries.<sup>49</sup> Thus, on one occasion, the *Heros* is sculpted on a funerary stela of Bacchic initiates from Mt. Pangaeum, the very seat of Rhesus the 'prophet of Bacchus'.<sup>50</sup> Another funerary relief from neighbouring Thassos, erected in memory of Auphionios and Auphonia (presumably a married couple),

---

<sup>47</sup> See HAMPARTUMIAN, *o.c.* (n. 40), nos. 118, 143, and index *s.v.* 'tree, snake-entwined'; GOČEVA & OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* I (as in n. 40), index, *s.v.* 'Schlange'; *idem*, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.1 (as in n. 40), index, *s.v.* 'Schlange'; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC, *o.c.* (n. 40), index *s.v.* 'Schlange'; GOČEVA & OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.2 (as in n. 40), index, *s.v.* 'Schlange'; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *o.c.* (n. 20), nos. 104-108, 113-126, 145, 148-154, 166-185, 204-213, 231-214, 240-249. Despite BENOÎT, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 57, who is followed by TURCAN, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 249 with n. 5, the serpent depicted under the Hero's horse on the stela from Karaisen in Veliko Tärново (GOČEVA & OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.2 [as in n. 40] no. 674) has nothing menacing; on the contrary, it is peacefully coiled around itself, as in so many other representations; after all, as far as I can see the *Heros* is never represented as a dragon-slayer. For the association between snakes and the chthonic realm see M.P. NILSSON, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* I, Munich, 1967<sup>3</sup>, p. 198-199; E. KÜSTER, *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion*, Gießen, 1913, p. 62-119; S.M. BOCK, "Die Schlange im Traum der Klytaimestra," *Hermes* 71 (1936), p. 230-236, here p. 231 with n. 1-2; J. DIGGLE (ed.), *Theophrastus Characters*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 357; for comparative perspectives see O. WASER, "Über die äußere Erscheinung der Seele in den Vorstellungen der Völker, zumal der alten Griechen," *ARW* 16 (1913), p. 336-388, here p. 354-356; W. WUNDT, *Elements of Folk Psychology*, transl. E.L. Schaub, London, 1916, p. 190-191, 214, 368. Ovid (*Met.* XV, 389-390) and Aelian (*Hist. an.* I, 51) report the notion that the backbones of the wicked dead turn into snakes; a similar belief seems to underlie Plut., *Cleom.*, 39, 3: οἱ παλαιοὶ μάλιστα τῶν ζῶων τὸν δράκοντα τοῖς ἥρωσι συναίειωσαν; cf. also GOW & PAGE on Callim., *Epigr.*, 55 (1319). That serpents had chthonic associations in Thrace too cannot, of course, be proved, although it is argued, fairly tendentiously, by KAZAROW, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 1145.

<sup>48</sup> See SEURE, *l.c.* (n. 11), p. 240-242; BENOÎT, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 59-60; HAMPARTUMIAN, *o.c.* (n. 40), nos. 33, 34, 56, 92, 293, 115; GOČEVA & OPPERMAN, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* II.1 (as in n. 40) no. 192; CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *l.c.* (n. 20) no. 372-375, 561, 577; cf. also TURCAN, *o.c.* (n. 20), p. 250 with n. 11-13. As early as the early 20th century, PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 21 suggested that the *Heros Equitans* may, like Rhesus, have affinities with Dionysus, and went as far as to suggest that "il se peut que Rhésos et le θεός Ἡρώων [...] eussent avec Dionysos des rapports d'affinité, qu'ils fussent même, en quelque sorte, des hypostases du grand dieu thrace."

<sup>49</sup> On Dionysus' proximity to the Underworld see, in general, H. JEANMAIRE, *Dionysos*, Paris, 1951, p. 268-78; in Macedonia in particular: BAEGE, *o.c.* (n. 23), p. 91-93. For Dionysus' chthonic associations in the pictorial record see H. METZGER, "Dionysos chthonien d'après les monuments figurés de la période classique," *BCH* 68/69 (1944/5), p. 296-339. On Rhesus as a prophetic cave-dweller beyond death, and on other comparable cult figures see ROHDE, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 88-114; cf. NOCK, *l.c.* (n. 19), p. 186; E. VERMEULE, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, Berkeley, 1979, p. 216-217 n. 42; above all, see USTINOVA, *l.c.* (n. 26) and *eadem*, *o.c.* (n. 34), p. 89-109. Cf. also LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 398-406.

<sup>50</sup> See PERDRIZET, *o.c.* (n. 6), p. 23, pl. I; *idem*, "Inscriptions de Philippes," *BCH* 24 (1900), p. 299-323, here p. 304-305 with pl. XIII.

shows the Horseman being given a (Dionysiac?) ivy-branch by a feminine figure, who as has been suggested might be a chthonic figure such as Persephone.<sup>51</sup>

This brief survey of the *Heros'* iconography indicates that, although no predictable or consistent patterns can be established, a relatively small number of basic motifs predominates. As we have seen, the *Heros* is always depicted as a horseman, with further variations including the Horseman as a hunter, a healer, a cult figure associated with sacrificial ritual or with the chthonic realm, or as a warrior.<sup>52</sup> This relatively limited range of iconographic motifs and attributes is consistent with the hypothesis that the *Heros Equitans* represents a single figure of cult rather than a plurality of divinities who simply happen to be depicted, more or less often, as riders. This hypothesis is considerably corroborated by the observation, substantiated in the preceding discussion, that the basic iconographic attributes of the *Heros* are typically associated, in myth or cult, with Rhesus.

In conclusion, the association between Rhesus and the *Heros Equitans*, although unprovable on the evidence currently available, is nonetheless strongly suggested by the parallelisms delineated above. The thesis for their association may be further bolstered, however indirectly, by arguments put forth in an earlier paper of mine,<sup>53</sup> to the effect that what little may be gleaned about the cult of Rhesus in Thrace seems incompatible with the cult of Rhesus as practiced in the Athenian colony of Amphipolis. The latter conformed to well-known patterns of Greek hero-cult: the tomb where Rhesus' talismanic remains were thought to lie was the centre of cultic activity. By contrast, the Thracian cult of Rhesus, as evidenced in *Rhesus* and in Philostratus, seems to have shared none of the essential qualities of this standard type of Greek hero-cult, since he had no visible tomb, merely an unspecified posthumous dwelling somewhere in Mt Pangaeum (*Rh.*, 970-973); indeed, he was not even thought of as being dead, since his mother had arranged for his soul to be released from Hades (*Rh.*, 962-966).

Vayos LIAPIS

Graduate Programme in Theatre Studies  
Open University of Cyprus  
P.O. Box 24801  
CY – 1304 NICOSIA  
E-mail: [vayos.liapis@ouc.ac.cy](mailto:vayos.liapis@ouc.ac.cy)

---

<sup>51</sup> Thus BENOÎT, *l.c.* (n. 20), p. 60 with pl. IX.2, who has rightly seen that the *Heros'* raised right hand does not hold a spear (*pace* CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *l.c.* [n. 20], no. 339: 'die R. mit der Lanze erhoben'); rather, it makes the gesture of *benedictio latina* (*cf.* also the photo in *LIMC* VI.2 [1992] 695). BENOÎT, *l.c.* (n. 20), p. 61-64 also advances the hypothesis that, on funerary reliefs, the *Heros* could represent the heroised dead; *cf.* p. 100, with n. 30 above.

<sup>52</sup> For depictions of the *Heros* as a soldier/warrior see e.g. CERMANOVIC-KUZMANOVIC *et al.*, *l.c.* (n. 20), p. 1062-1064, nos. 604-639.

<sup>53</sup> LIAPIS, *l.c.* (n. 2), p. 408-411.