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The River in the Mythical and Religious Traditions of the Paeonians

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The research of the mythical and the religious traditions of the Paeonians in Early Antiquity, so far has been mostly directed towards gathering, analyzing and interpreting the written sources regarding this matter and towards their linking to the respective archaeological and linguistic material. The comparative studies have focused on comparing these traditions to the analogical phenomena within the Ancient Hellenic and the neighboring Balkan cultures.¹ Contemporary research of myths and religion in the Ancient and Archaic cultures is not exhausted with this approach; moreover, it is deepened with new, mostly inter-disciplinary concepts which introduce methods of anthropology, ethnology, ethno-linguistics and especially semiology and analytical psychology. This paper is also dealing with such a research, in this case of the water, more precisely the river in the mythical and the religious traditions of the Paeonians.

The Paeonians and the river Axios in the Iliad

Lauding the Paeonians in the verses of the Iliad, in several occasions Homer points to their strong relation to the water, and indirectly to the mythical characters associated with this element. Upon mentioning them for the first time he determines the territory where they live with the name of the river Axios, complementing this hydronym with various elements, which despite their seemingly purely poetic-aesthetic character, have confirmed their factographic dimension in the research so far, especially defining this people's homeland and the early phases of its history (Петрова 1991, 11-13).

*Pyraechmes led the Paeonians, reflex bows in hand,
hailing from Amydon far west and the broad river Axios,
Axios, clearest stream that flows across the earth. (2. 848-850)
(...) round the stern of Protesilaus' blazing ship—
and hit Pyraechmes, firebrand who led the Paeonians,*

¹ Attempts for a comprehensive review on this subject: Петрова 1999, 127-142; Битракова Грозданова 1999, 147-183; Соколовска 1997, 61-62; Пеонийский язык 2011.



Fig.1



Fig. 2

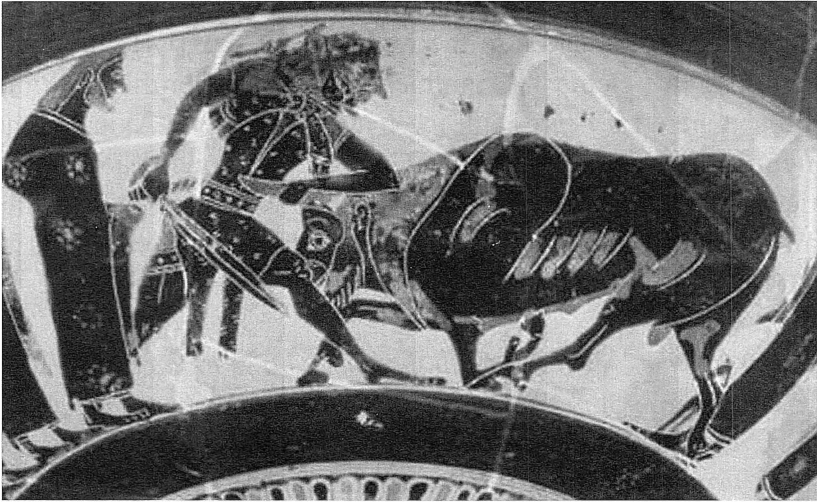


Fig.3

Fig. 1-3. Motives from Greek painted vases: 1. Stamnos, Cerveteri, 520 BC; 2. Krater, 450 BC, Musée du Louvre; 3. Cup, 560-550 BC

the master riders from Amydon, from Axius' broad currents. (16. 287-288)²

Such an important character of the Axius stems from the genealogy of the Paeonian rulers which is also linked with this river (Axius being the father of Pelegon and grandfather of Asteropaeus). He was introduced in the laud of the duel between Asteropaeus and Achilles.³

*Achilles went for Asteropaeus fresh from the ford,
braced to face him there and brandishing two spears
and the Xanthus filled the Trojan's heart with courage,
the river seething for all the youths Achilles slaughtered,
chopped to bits in its tide without a twinge of pity.* (21. 164-168)
*But now Pelides shaking his long-shadowed spear
was charging Asteropaeus, mad to cut him down—
Pelegon's son, himself a son of the Axius River
broad and fast and Aecessamenu's eldest daughter,
Periboea, loved by the deep-swirling stream.* (21. 159-163)

And here Asteropaeus addresses Achilles:

*I hail from Paeonia's rich soil, a far cry from here; (...)
My birth? I come from the Axius' broad currents—
Axius floods the land with the clearest stream on earth
and Axius fathered the famous spearman Pelegon.
Men say I am his son.
Now on with it, great Pelides. Let us fight!* (21. 176-183)

After killing Asteropaeus, Achilles speaks:

*"Lie there with the dead! Punishing work, you see,
to fight the sons of invincible Cronus' son,
even sprung from a river as you are! You—
you claimed your birth from a river's broad stream? (...)* (21. 208-211)

Furthermore, he compares the dominant force of Zeus regarding the power of Axius, along with the other river gods as well as the mythical river Ocean:

*And as Zeus is stronger than rivers surging out to sea,
so the breed of Zeus is stronger than any stream's.*

² All quotations from: The Iliad 1998.

³ This and the following verses, so far have been subject of certain historical-culturological analyses: Зоровик 1991; Петрова 1991, 11-13; Гиндин - Цымбурский 1996, 205; Blanco López 2002; Brewster 1997, 9, 31, 40-43; Клейн 1998, 271-273, 274-279.



Fig.4



Fig.5

Fig. 4-5. Bronze figurines – Krater applications, Trebenishte; 1. Archaeological museum, Sophia (Кузман 1997, XXVI); 2. National museum, Belgrade (drawing: N. Čausidis).

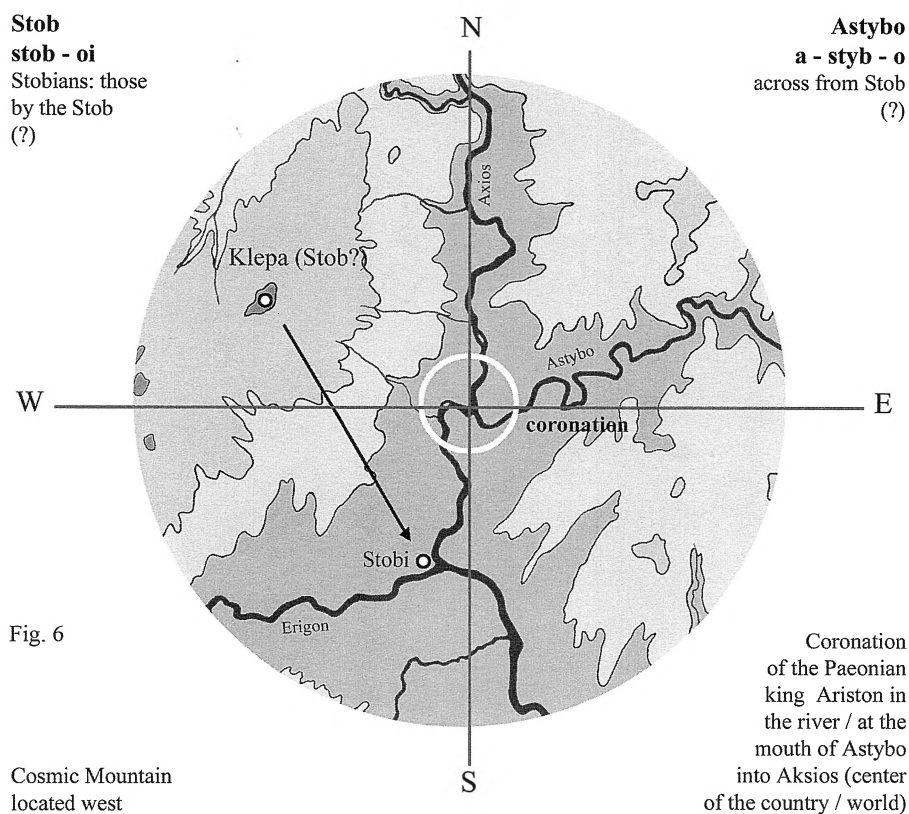


Fig. 7

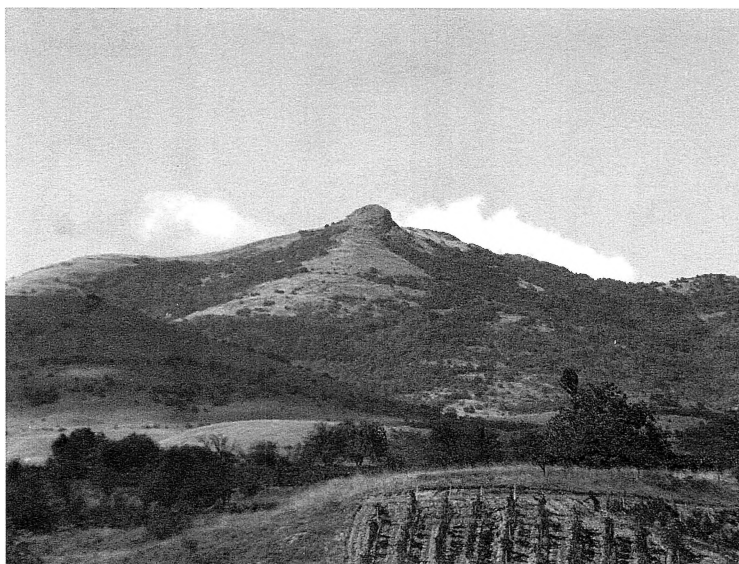


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the sacred topography of the Paeonians, connected with the rivers Axios, Astybo and Erigon, the sanctuary on Klepa, the town of Stobi and the Coronation of the Paeonian king Ariston (Čausidis 2008, 291 - Pl. IV: 1).

Fig. 7. The peak of the Klepa mountain (photography: Viktor Lilčić, Faculty of Philosophy).

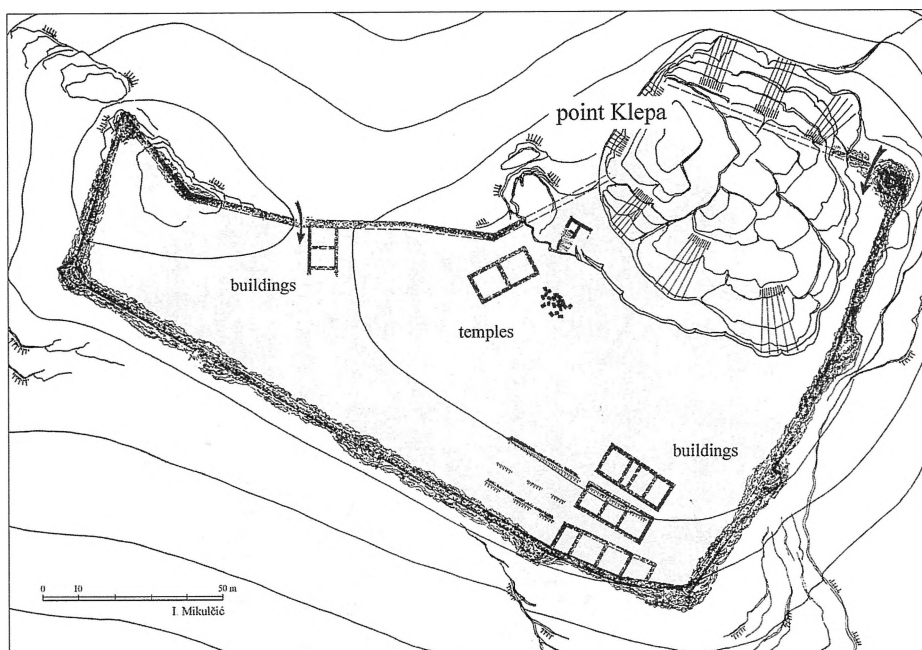


Fig. 8

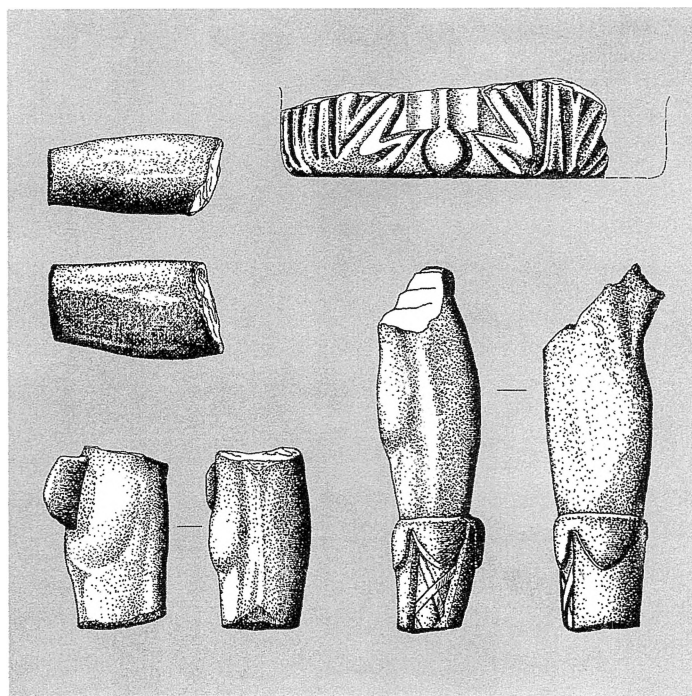


Fig. 9

Fig. 8. The peak of the Klepa mountain.
Plan of the antique sanctuary. (Микулчиќ 1983, Т. 5).

Fig. 9. Stone monuments from the antique sanctuary on the peak
of the Klepa mountain (Микулчиќ 1983, Т. 3).

*Here is a great river flowing past you, look—
 What help can he give you? None!
 Nothing can fight the son of Cronus, Zeus,
 not even Achelous king of rivers vies with Zeus,
 not even the overpowering Ocean's huge high tides,
 the source of all the rivers and all the seas on earth
 and all springs and all deep wells—all flow from the Ocean
 but even the Ocean shrinks from the mighty Father's bolt
 when terrible thunder crashes down the skies!" (21.215-225)*

Achilles then leaves his body into the river Xanthos, i.e. Skamander:

*(...) Achilles pulled his bronze spear from the river bluff
 and left him there, the Trojan's life slashed out,
 sprawled in the sand, drenched by the black tide—
 eels and fish the corpse's frenzied attendants
 ripping into him, nibbling kidney-fat away. (21. 226-230)*

Several conclusions can be drawn from these verses. First, it is the undoubtedly strong connection of the Paeonians and Axios as a symbol which in this work determines their identity and the territory of their descent. Nevertheless, some verses demonstrate that not only it is a formal and poetic connection, but rather an essential one which has a mythological-genealogical ground and which was truly present in the Paeonian traditions. Asteropaeus himself declares **he 'hails** from Paeonia's rich soil', while he **'comes** from the Axios' broad currents'. This paragraph clearly depicts the patrilineal concept of determination, Paeonia being only the **land where Asteropaeus lives** (= the mother), while his **identity** stems from the male component (= the father), herewith manifested by the river Axios.⁴ This mythologized patrilineal genealogy, according which Asteropaeus is son of Pelegon, who Axios had with Periboea (the eldest daughter of Aecessamenus), is given in more details in the same poem.⁵ Based on this quotation the mythical action of her conception (by Axios) can be reconstructed; it probably happened after she entered the river Axios to have a bath.⁶ It is important to emphasize that Rhesus, the mythical king of the Edoni is also a son of a river god, Strymon (or river Hebros) and the muse Euterpe.

It is very probable that in the Paeonian tradition Axios was personalized in a male character with zoomorphic, zoo-anthropomorphic or anthropomorphic features, whereas his male fertilizing component (the sperm) was implicitly equalled with the water of the very river. Taking realistically the metaphors of this poem, the fertilizing power of Axios can be seen in the following verse: *'Axios floods the land with the clearest stream on earth'*. Hence, one can assume the existence of a **mythical married**

4 The presentations of rivers as primogenitors and bearers of the kinship, i.e. the ethnic identity are universal for different cultures (other examples: Топоров 1982, 374; Анисимов 1959, 34, 75, 76).

5 More on the origin and the kinship relations of the characters mentioned: Зоговиќ 1991, 171, 172.

6 On the mythical conceptions through water and bathing: Matić, 61, 62, 76, 186, 187, 204, 205; Чаусидис 2010, 95-98.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Fig. 10-12. Paenonian coins: 10. Teutaos (Соколовска 1997, 51 - Сл. 9); 11. Bastareus (Микулчиќ 1984, 34); 12. Deroni (Маразов 1999, 95).

Fig. 13. A coin from the town of Stobi (reverse), 1-3 c. (Микулчиќ 2003, 58).

couple in which the Paeonian land was represented as a Mother-Goddess and Axios, the main Paeonian River, as a **husband who fertilizes it with his waters**. Therefore, it is possible that in an older version of the notional myth, this goddess had the place of Periboea.⁷

Asteropaeus goes into a duel with Achilles **from the river Xanthos**, which encourages his heart. This particular detail demonstrates that the Paeonian leader considers the local Trojan river as his protector and supporter, obviously relating it to the native Axios. Such liaison can be based on the concept of identification between these two rivers, namely the 'river' as common component and the 'water' (Axios = Xanthos, both being rivers; Axios = Xanthos, both made of the water as element). In the same paragraph, Homer himself suggests this claiming that all rivers, seas, springs, and deep wells in the world, actually flow from the mythical river Ocean (21. 221-223).⁸ Therefore, besides as mythical **progenitor** and probably **soil fertilizer**, regarding Paeonian men Axios was a **supporter**, i.e. the one who **gave strength, courage and protection**, which in this case refer to the military domain. The quoted details demonstrate that those functions could be performed through immediate contact of the warrior with water (immersing the feet or the whole body).

The combat between Achilles and Asteropaeus has its cosmological dimension, if we consider both warriors as representatives of cosmic elements through their divine parents: Achilles through his father Zeus represents the **celestial**, while Asteropaeus represents the **chthonic**, through his grandfather Axios. In this context, their dual in the Iliad is only an earthly and human manifestation of the myth for the **cosmic combat among the gods-opponents** which is universal for the whole human kind, which most probably served as a paradigm of this very scene. Further in the verses, Xanthos, angry for Achilles having desecrated his waters with bodies of slaughtered warriors, attacks him with powerful waves. Achilles manages to save himself with the help of Hephaestus (**the fire** as opponent of **the water**).⁹ The same concept can be seen in the combat of Heracles (another son of Zeus) against the river god Achelous (Fig. 1-3) and not far from the Axios Valley – in the myth of the combat of Heracles and the river god Strymon, while the first crams the riverbed, throwing huge rocks in it (Маразов 1992, 19, 134).

Asteropaeus, as other warriors from the Iliad, after being killed, remains lying on the river send, while his asunder body nourishes the eels and other fish. This paragraph, a very strong one from an epic point of view, also has a mythical background – **returning the dead body of the leader into the river's 'black waters'**, the same element of his descent, as we have seen. Thus, it implicates its **resurrection** or becoming a **hero** i.e. **immortal**.¹⁰ The water creatures eating the body

7 On the rivers personalized as female, but also male characters giving birth to children: Matic, 43, 44; Holmberg 1997; Neumann 1963, 211-267. On the water-rain-sperm relation: Чаусидис 2010, 95-98.

8 On Ocean as a parent of all rivers, as well as gods: Топоров 1982, 374; Дув 2010, 75, 76.

9 On the deities-opponents: Иванов - Топоров, 1974; Маразов 1994, 11-30, 149-156. On the given interpreting concept regarding these verses: Гиндин - Цымбурский 1996, 205.

10 Tiberinus was taken by the river Tibar, so therefore its name, Orpheus – by Hebros (Маразов 2006, 230-235), while Strymon jumped into the eponymous river. In the Pythagorean-Orpheic teaching, 'the water of memory' (represented by a spring or a lake) provides the immortality of the soul (on this and other aspects of travelling of the deceased through water: Kukoč 2009, 45, 46, 79).

of Asteropaeus, from a mythological point of view could also be seen as sacred animals that enable the decomposition of the sovereign and his union with the animal totem to which he belongs, or with the water as its primordial element. Here, we have in mind the **eels**, which seem to have been sacred animals and zoomorphic ancestors of the **Enchelei**, the Paeonians' neighbors, thus becoming a part of their ethnonym (Gr. *εγγελος*, L. *anguilla*; Enchelei = people-eels). This can be confirmed with the myth of the transformation of Cadmos and Harmonia into snakes which happened after their residence with the Enchelei and in their afterlife. Considering the morphological and the semiotic relationship of the snake and the eel, this metamorphosis could also be understood as their transfiguration into eels, i.e. returning to corporality of the Encheleic totemic animal. For a further confirmation of these interpretations we took the pair of zoo-anthropomorphic figures with legs shaped as serpent protomes (or perhaps eel protomes?) represented on both kraters from Trebenishte (Fig. 4,5) in the vicinity of Ohrid, which is considered as homeland of the Enchelei.¹¹ It seems that this relation could be established with the Paeonians, based on a recent archaeological find.

In the region of the village of Koreshnica, near Demir Kapija, during revision excavations of a recently looted rich tomb, which most probably belonged to some Paeonian dignitary, among other finds there were many thin silver-plated semicircular leaves. Sewed together on some kind of mantle, they composed a **silver breastplate**, which due to the tenuousness of the plates could not have had a military, but only a ceremonial character (Јованов 2008). Continuing the above mentioned interpretation of the myth of Cadmos and Harmonia, we assume that it was a ritual funerary garment made of shiny silver scales. The deceased (probably a sovereign) wore it so he could symbolically **transform into a fish** (perhaps exactly an eel) and thus **returning to the 'fish totem' of which he originated** (Чаусидис 2010а, 168, 170). The above mentioned pair of figures of the kraters from Trebenishte, the ones that wear precisely scale breastplates, are in favor of this theory (Fig. 4, 5).¹²

Coronation of the Paeonian ruler Ariston in the river Astibo

In his work, Polyaeus shortly depicts an event that reveals one more connection of the Paeonians with the river. It is the ritual of coronation of the Paeonian ruler Ariston in the river Astibo, which was dated in 284 BC.

'Lysimachus conducted Ariston, son of Autoleon, to his father's kingdom in Paeonia; under pretence that the royal youth might be acknowledged by his subjects, and treated with due respect. But as soon as he had bathed in the royal baths in the river Arisbus (Astybus), and they had set before him an elegant banquet, according to the custom of his country, Lysimachus ordered his guards to arm. Ariston instantly mounted his horse and escaped to the land of the Dardani; and Lysimachus was left in possession of Paeonia'. (Polyaeus, 4, 12, 3)¹³

¹¹ Details on this interpretation: Чаусидис 2010а; Чаусидис 2005, 173-180.

¹² According to oral information, a krater with such figurines was found in the mentioned tomb from Koreshnica (Јованов, 2008).

¹³ Polyaeus, 2011.

This quotation only adds to the emphasized symbolic relations among the Paeonians and the river presented in the Iliad. Also, they offer an opportunity for a mythical and a symbolical interpretation of this ritual as establishing a connection with the river Astibo, conceived as a mythical ancestor and as deity which determines the Paeonians as ethnos and **legitimates the inauguration of Ariston into the primordial genus of the Paeonian rulers**. The only difference is that now it is not about Axius, but for another Paeonian river. One can assume quite rightly that it was not an exception, but a common ritual also practiced for the coronation of the other Paeonian rulers (perhaps not always in this very river). In that context, the entering of the future king into the Astibo could be interpreted and thought over in several ways:

On a basic level, the value of this act could be justified with the future ruler making a **contact with water** (entering, immersing?), conceived as primordial cosmic element.¹⁴

As any other transition from one status into another, the coronation also means **death of the 'human Ariston'** and his rebirth as **'Ariston the ruler'**.¹⁵ The water could be understood in several ways. First, it is a **substance of the chthonic**, i.e. a **substance of the death** or **chthonic space**, i.e. a **death space**, or underworld challenging the death, but also the birth, or in this case the rebirth into a higher stadium. Moreover, it classifies the **border between the worlds** (the pragmatic one 'here' and the sacral one 'under').¹⁶ Due to this transitory state, but also the absence of clothes (and thus absence of identity), in the ancient culture bathing was often represented as a dangerous condition which is fatal for the one who bathes (Маразов 2009, 67, 68, 121,122).

Comparative analyses point to a possibility that earlier the holy Paeonian river was personalized into a female mythical character, i.e. female deity.¹⁷ In such a constellation, entering of the one who pretends to be a ruler into the river, besides the afore mentioned, could also bear another significance, namely of his **sexual contact** with the goddess based on the fact him becoming a **husband of the goddess** who symbolizes the territory i.e. the land with which he is about to govern (governing the spouse = governing the land).¹⁸

Through the contact, i.e. immersion into the river/water, the candidate becomes a **part of the mythologized genus of the Paeonian rulers**, i.e. establishes a connection with the foremost ancestor Axius, the father/the grandfather of the primordial Paeonian rulers (Pyraechmes and Asteropaeus) who we can trace back to

14 Despite the imprecise character of the text, it is hard to believe that the bathing of the future king was not preformed through his entering into the river, but by sprinkling him with water from the river.

15 On the river as a factor of transition of man from one condition into another: Топоров 1982, 376.

16 On the river as a frontier: Маразов 1994, 22, 176; Виноградова 2009, 417.

17 On the female aspects of the river and the other water objects understood as female characters or genitals: Elijade, 1983, 41; Matic 1976, 43, 44; Чаусидис 2010.

18 In the ancient cultures there is a semiotic identification among the goddesses of earth and the goddesses of water (Маразов 1999, 205, 206). The upper discussed relation reflects the myth of the epicene Agdistis who, with his bodily fluids, fertilizes the daughter of the river god Sangarius (who probably was once a personification of some water flow).

the time of the Trojan war or the Iliad. This relation with Axios, despite him not being mentioned in the text, could be justified in several manners, among which is the fact that Astibo is a tributary of Axios (Fig. 6).

Several facts justify our assumption that this (or some other act of coronation of the Paeonian rulers) could have taken place at the confluence of Astibo into Axios, even though it is not mentioned in the sources. These facts were more thoroughly discussed in our previous works, so here they are given only briefly. First, it was the proximity of Axios, which, as we have already seen, has been confirmed as the oldest mythical river of the Paeonians. Second, in the time of the coronation of Ariston, but also prior to it, the confluence of Astibo into Axios was the **centre of Paeonia**, which is suitable for such a sacralized state act which, according to the concepts of the mythical thought must take place at the symbolical '**centre of the world**', which in a certain state corresponds to its sacralized centre, i.e. the capital (Fig. 6). In such a presumed mythologized Paeonian topography these two rivers determine the sacral transversals of the world. Axios was the vertical axis, North-South (most probably having character of a cosmic axis), while Astibo was the axis East-West, their confluence defining the **Centre**, holding the highest sacral status.¹⁹

West from the rivers' confluence, there is one more sacred space. It is the **holy mountain**, which as with most ancient people is located on the western side, determining with its position the underworld, i.e. where the sun sets and the deceased part. In this particular case it is the **Klepa mountain**, located approx. 10 km west of the confluence of Astibo into Axios, the highest in the surrounding landscape and wider in this part of Paeonia (1149 m) (Fig. 6, 7). It has a remarkable and relatively regular conic shape with a sharp rocky top and is easily visible from the confluence of the two rivers. This sacral status of Klepa is confirmed with the superficial archaeological finds from the very summit, which point to a **fortified mountain sanctuary** with several cult objects (according to the foundations and the regularly shaped blocks), inscriptions and fragmented **statues of deities** (Fig. 8, 9). Although they originate from the later period (2-4 centuries), these finds indicate the existence of an older Pre-Roman cult complex that was used for the worship of **Artemis and Apollo**, according to the statues' attributes, the location and the contemporary local legends (Микулчиќ 1983, 193-210). Based on these facts and the comparative material, we presume that this holy mountain was once called **Stob**, a toponym present in other Indo-European traditions, mostly defining dominant mountains with regular conic or pyramid shape, often of sacral importance.²⁰ Behind the etymology of this name is the basic mythologized function of these mountains, represented as **axis mundi**, i.e. a **column** or **fulcrum** of heaven. This last assumption is based on the name of the **ancient town of Stobi**, located 14 km south-east of Klepa, whose name was confirmed even in the Pre-Roman period (Fig. 6). According to this hypothesis, the name of Stobi would

19 Čausidis 2008, 272-275; Чаусидис 2008, 183-186. On the river as a cosmic axis (upper flow = heaven; lower flow = underworld): Топоров 1982, 374.

20 Parallels of the root *stob-*: the ancient Prusic *stabis* 'stone', the ancient Islandic *stapi* 'high rock' (Katičić, 1976, 53; Пеонийский язык 2011). Names of mountains: Stob Coire nan Lochan, Glencoe; Stob Ban & Mullach nan Coirean; Stob Dearg; Stob Ghabhar and Beinn Toag; Stob Binnein; Stob, near Kocherinovo (Kustendil, Bulgaria); the islet of Stob (nowadays Stog) near Trpejca, Ohrid.

be based on **stoboi*, as a term for the people (inhabitants of the region or a specific municipality located near the mountain) meaning ‘those from the Stob’. In the same context, the probable interpretation of Astibo as **a-stybo*, meaning a river ‘opposite the stob’, should be verified.²¹

The wealth of the Paeonian king Audoleon buried below the riverbed of Sargentius

One more source refers to the sacral status of the river in the Paeonian culture, and more precisely on the ruler-river relation. It is clear from the following quotation of Diodor Siculus:

‘This Xermodigestus, as Diodorus writes, ranking as the most trusted friend, I think, of Audoleon, king of the Paeonians, reveals the treasures to Lysimachus, or to some other king of Thrace (‘tis difficult for me, without books as I am, to relate all, like a god; you to whom I speak know). He revealed to the crowned head of Thrace the treasures hidden beneath the river Sargentius, which he himself, aided only by captives, had buried, turning aside the river bed, and burying the treasure beneath, then letting in the stream, and slaying the captives.’ (Diod. Sic., 21, 13).²²

This is a disputable quotation and not very esteemed in the science, mostly due to the fact that the same story has been told for Decebalus, the Dacian king and Trajan’s opponent (Dio Cassius. 68, 14, 4-5; Tzet., *Hist.* 2, 61) and for Alarich (Jordanes, *Get.* 158, 30). Since the Dacian river has a suspiciously similar name (Sargetia or Sargentia), it is possible that Tzetes made a false presentation of this story.²³ Despite this, we have decided to include our research, hoping that this Paeonian version is true, which doesn’t necessarily mean the other examples are wrong. For doing so, we were encouraged by the fact that a river has an important role in this story, something which was so typical for the Paeonians, as we have already seen.

Reading this paragraph nowadays from a rational and pragmatic point of view, the act of burying the treasure of a king in the riverbed could be motivated only by safety reasons – to prevent an easy approach and its theft. Nevertheless, from the same rational aspect, this act was pretty vacuous since hiding the treasure also meant that it could not have been used, or at least it was very difficult to perform it. Such a solution could have been meaningful only in two cases: first, if it was buried in extreme conditions, such as an attack or an enemy threat which announced a defeat or temporary departure from the territory; second, if it was done for mythical, i.e. magical and religious motives, as an offering for the deities. Both options were equally possible, but given the subject of this paper we will elaborate and argument on the second.

21 The relationship of Astibo and the three hydronyms that were mentioned by Ptolemy (Ptol. 4, 7) and Strabo (Strab. 17, 2) deserves attention. The hydronyms are Astapus, Astaborus and Astasobas, and they all refer to the upper flow of the Nile or of its upper tributaries (see also: Петровић (Петрушевски) 1940, 25).

22 Diodorus Siculus 2011.

23 Делев 2004, 254, 376, 409, 410; Diodorus Siculus 2011. On the second story and the sunken treasures in general: Маразов 1999, 205-207; Марков 2008. A legend about a church and treasures hidden under the bottom of the lake has been preserved in the village of Bakarno Gumno near Prilep (Čausidis 2008, 271, 272; Чаусидис 2008, 182, 183).

Large number of depots with precious finds (mostly different objects made of noble metals) originating from the period discussed in this text have been found in the Balkans. For a long time, their deliberate burying in the ground has been associated with some extreme events, such as military combats, sudden migrations and natural disasters. Nevertheless, the analyses of numerous extremely wealthy depots discovered during last century in Thrace demonstrated that most of them had **ritual motives**. Those were treasures buried by rulers and nobles as a sacrifice which could have signified various magical/religious motives. (Маразов 1999, 193-223)

In that context, deposition of Audoleon's treasure in the local river, Sargentius, could be understood as sacrificing a part of the treasure (an income from a certain economic activity or prey captured in a military combat), perhaps, previously promised as a sacrifice.²⁴ In addition to this second option there are the captives, something which could also be understood as a **sacrifice in honour of their military victory**, which was common in the ancient cultures.²⁵ Our previous discussions on the important role of the river in the Paeonian culture and especially in the realm of the ruler, give us the possibility to have a closer look on the motives of such presumably religious act. If the Paeonian rulers **originate from** the river (Axius), if they **become rulers** through bathing into a river (coronation in Astibo) and if they **scoop strength and safety prior to a duel** by standing in the riverbed (Xanthos river near Troy), then, it would be very logical, after a successful battle or some others success they achieve as rulers and warriors, to repay their river and their rulers-ancestors who constitute their dynastic parentage (incarnated in it), by sacrificing a part of the earned or preyed treasure and the blood of the defeated enemies into water. The basic concept of this act can be sought in achieving a **balance between the accomplished and the given** that would provide a support from the ancestors and gods as a condition for a further success.²⁶

* * *

Many Hellenic rivers, as well as the rivers of their neighbors in Antiquity, were mythologized, i.e. personalized as animal, human or zoo-anthropomorphic characters and thus were participants in various genealogical or mythical actions (Brewster 1997; Топоров 1982, 375, 376). So far, there are no concrete facts which would speak of the pictorial presentation of the deified Paeonian rivers, but compared to the neighboring regions, one of the more archaic could be the zoomorphic presentation in a shape of a snake, bull or a composite creature, such as a dragon, which includes the elements of the other two (for example the Hellenic Achelloios – see Fig. 1-3) or some other animals. There are indications that the Strymon river (among the others, inhabited by the Deroni), was personalized as a river deity, probably in the shape of a dragon (Маразов 1994, 23; Маразов 1992, 19, 134). Having in mind these very facts, it is possible to assume (certainly with additional argumentation) that some pictorial

24 Burying in water is equivalent to the one in ground, given the already mentioned identification of these elements and their mythical protectors (Маразов 1999, 205, 206).

25 On human sacrifices to the rivers: Топоров 1982, 375.

26 On the river that gives and gives birth, but also demands sacrificing: Matić 1976, 43-46; on weapons sacrificed to a river in Japods and wider: Kukoč 2009, 128-130; Xerxes sacrificed white horses in Strymon (H d t. VII, 113, 1).

presentations of bulls, which were venerated by the Paeonians could have represented the mythologized rivers (including the role of their ancestors). Here, we primarily think of the bulls from the Paeonian coins (examples: Fig. 10-12) and the bronze head of the Paeonian bison (μόναπος) which was a gift from the Paeonian king Dropion to the Delphic oracle (Paus. X, 13, 1). Even in the Prehistoric cultures the bull was identified with the water that fertilizes the soil, through equalization of the fertilizing role of the water with his sperm.²⁷ In favor of this relation, we could mention the legend of the **water bull** preserved in the Serbian, Macedonian and the Bulgarian folklore. Several elements give us the right to look for the genesis of this mythical character in the Old Balkan traditions: sojourn in the earthly waters (lakes, swamps, rivers); the appearance of a bull, man-bull or dragon (precisely the mythic character ala); the black color of the body; a fight with a smith (equivalent of the heavenly god or god of thunders). One of the legends for this characters originates from the vicinity of Radovish (not far from the rivers mentioned in this text); the legend has it that the water bull came out from the local lake and defeated the bull of the Turkish despots (Раденковић 2001, 88 - 90).

The root *axi-* contained in the name of the Paeonian river Axios (Αξιός), could also be found in some other hydronyms, such as Αξεινος Ποντος (The Black Sea), so there is a possibility that Axios was also considered *black* or *dark*. This meaning can be seen in the most frequent epithet of this river nowadays – 'bleary Vardar'.²⁸ Even more indications can be found in the names of the largest tributary of Vardar, which is called **Crna Reka** (Black River), while it was known as **Erigon** in Antiquity (Ερίγων) (Fig. 6). The same epithet is contained in the names of the three enigmatic deities – the **Cabiri**, whose character can be acknowledged based on a scholion regarding Argonautics (1.917) where they are equalized with three well-known Hellenic deities (**Axieros = Demeter; Axiokersa = Persephone and Axiokersos = Pluto / Hades**). Having in mind that all of the mentioned deities have an emphasized chthonic character and that one of the key elements of these mythical characters is exactly the black i.e. the dark color of the body, one can assume that the three deities, the Cabiri, actually composed a whole, most probably a family of black gods.²⁹ The hydronym **Erigon** fits well in this structure, especially because of its relation to the Greek ἔρεβος, *dark* and the Armenian erek, *dusk* (< Indo-European *eregwō), and another topographic element located inland opposite the island of Lemnos. There, the Tracian river **Erginos** flows into Marica (Εβρος/Hebrus). The name of Erginos, as well as of the nearby ancient town **Ergiske**, is also associated to the significance of 'dark', relating it to the tradition of the Cabiric deities who were worshiped on the nearby island Samothrace.³⁰ In context of this assumption, there is one interesting quotation from Tatian, which was rarely used so far:

27 Noti 1993, 2-42; Маразов 1999, 140-153, 290, 291; Иванов -Топоров 1974, 147, 169, 170.

28 Гиндин 1992; Гиндин - Цымбурский 1996, 205; Венедиков 1992, 162, 163. On the Persian basis of Αξεινος Ποντος and the epithet *black* (Greek, Μελας, Hebrew Šihor) which is contained in the old name of the river Nile identified with Oziris: Петровић (Петрушевски) 1940, 10, 11, 37; on this relation: Топоров 1982, 374, 375.

29 Венедиков 1992, 162, 163. On the epithet 'black' of the three Hellenic deities: Петровић (Петрушевски) 1940, 16, 28; Чаусидис 2010а, 171; Čausidis 2009, 75-80.

30 Трубачев 1992; Гиндин 1992; Маразов 1999а, 42.

‘and Dinomenes, because Besantis queen of the Paeonians gave birth to a black infant, took pains to preserve her memory by his art’ (Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos, 33).³¹

Based on other sources it is known that Dinomenes was a sculptor, a disciple of Polycleitus, who made bronze sculptures in the late 5th century. Tatian, a Christian apologist from the 2nd century used this information as well as similar pictorial works in its critique of the relation of the pagans towards women (including the visual art depicting them). Although he treats the above mentioned sculpture as a pictorial presentation of a real historical person, absence of similar examples of portrayed female rulers within the Balkan cultures from the same period and especially the unusual features of the newborn, force us to presume that it was a **presentation with mythical character**. This becomes even more probable considering the facts that point that **important mythical characters from the Paeonian culture were presented as black**. If we assume that Axius, their mythical progenitor, incarnated in the biggest Paeonian river, was black, then it is very probable that **Besantis** was actually a **mythical Paeonian queen**, perhaps **spouse and/or mother of Axius** or another of his analogues and equivalent to Periboea who was mentioned in the Iliad.³² Having in mind that it wasn't easy to present the black human skin in a bronze sculpture, it is probable that the component 'black child' in this sculpture of Dinomenes signifies a presentation of a **child with negroid face marks**.³³ Being aware of this artist's classical education, it seems as though this sculpture didn't depict the act of giving birth of the queen, but a mild presentation of a mother and a child sitting in her lap or standing next to her legs.³⁴

These relationships suggest that the Paeonian river god Axius, along with Periboea, the assumed mythical queen Besantis (and her black child), or another analogical local goddess, also constituted a more complex **family group of black chthonic deities**. The place of Erigon in this structure, however, remains an open question. Was it a male equivalent of Axius or perhaps originally personified into a female character in which case the confluence of the two rivers near Stobi would indicate their marriage. Several **female mythical characters by the name of Erigona** are in favor of this assumption. One of them is the mythical daughter of Icarius the Athenian, which due to the several chthonic features can be interesting for us: she was hanged on a tree, related to Dionysus, the wine, the ritual swinging of the girl and probably with the epithet 'black' or 'dark' (Чайсидис 2011).

³¹ Tatian 2011.

³² Perhaps the 'queen Besantis' (Bezanth) was equivalent to the Paeonian 'queen Artemis' (H d t., IV, 33, 1) similar to Cybele (Петрова 1999, 135). In this regard, the relation of her name is interesting to the name of the Paeonian tribe **Bisaltians** and with **βιστων**, considering the well-known wild Paeonian ox, probably venerated as a totem or personification of the Paeonian rivers.

³³ On the presentations of the negroid mythical characters in the Republic of Macedonia and wider, emphasizing the components negroid child – dwarf – Cabiri: Čausidis 2009.

³⁴ D. Mitrevski quotes this source, but only in a socially-historical context (Митревски 1997, 220). I. Mikulcic relates Besantis to a female bronze statuette from Drenovo which is depicted naked, kneeling with her hands at her genitals (Микулчиќ 1984, 34).

Several Roman traditions correspond with these interpretations, namely the ones depicting the personalization of the rivers Axios and Erigon in a shape of male mythical characters. We know them through a category of **coins, minted from the 1st until the 3rd century in Stobi**, located on the very confluence (Fig. 13). Two semi-recumbent male figures are presented on the reverse of the coins. They have clothes made of cane or reed and water lily leaves with hats, i.e. crowns made of swamp plants. They are barefoot and hold vessels (a prohos and a hydria) of which flow currents of a certain liquid. There are theories that one of the figures represents the **river Axios**, while the other represents **Erigon**. Between them there is a figure of a **genius**, which in some examples holds a **corona muralis** on his head. It is the protector of the Roman town of Stobi and the enclave of Roman citizens who inhabit it (Микулчиќ 2003, 54, 56, 58). In context of these interpretations this emblematic composition could be understood as a Roman interpretation of some older autochthonic presentations of the two biggest rivers in that part of Macedonia. Despite the given interpretation of a central figure, her crown (analogue to the one of Cybele), the graceful silhouette and the elegant garment do not exclude the possibility that on the older prototype of this scene, its place could have taken the figure of a female mythical character (perhaps the Paeonian 'queen Artemis'), which would signify a certain closer connection of this scene with the Cabiric trias.

Translation into English: Andriana Dragovic

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