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## ***Reflexions on a group of terracotta altars with representations of Greek gods***

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I am grateful to the organisers of this conference to give me the opportunity to give a paper on an aspect of cultural contacts of Romania and the Black Sea world with the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic period.

In 2002 the Danish National Research Foundation established an interdisciplinary research centre in Denmark that has as its aim to make basic research into the Black Sea region as a part of the Greek and Roman world. Our work the past two years have underlined to us how important it is to integrate the knowledge and perspectives of eastern colleagues with the knowledge and perspectives of western scholars primarily trained in Mediterranean archaeology and history. Even though the Black Sea region constituted a closed unity held together by the sea, the two worlds were at the same time closely interlinked. In this paper I shall offer some considerations that will show how not just fruitful but also necessary it is to integrate the perspectives from both sides of the old Iron Curtain. I view this conference as a splendid opportunity to enforce existing scholarly networks and create new ones. So thank you again to the organisers.

After this preamble, let us turn to the subject itself. I should like to take a look on a group of small terracotta altars furnished with relief decoration of standing and sitting figures, presumably deities, on all four sides. The altars have been found in the Black Sea region as well as in the Mediterranean. Much has been written on the altars as a group, especially by western scholars, but it is a characteristic that researchers with a Mediterranean outlook does not know or only know inadequately the material from the Black Sea region and viceversa. This has led to misconceptions on a number of important issues such as production place, distribution and interpretation.

The altars are made in moulds, and their interior is hollow. They are almost quadrangular in shape, and normally not over 11 cm high. Their composition is identical from one altar to the next. It draws heavily on the ornamentation of the Ionic order: a top moulding ("sima") with a frieze first of beads and reels, then of two rosettes flanking a central palmette at each side situated on top of a band of lying S-spirals of alternating direction. The four corners are occupied by large "acroteria" in the form of sprouting acanthus. The altar itself consists first of a flat band beneath which is a dentil frieze. Beneath the dentil frieze is the main block of the altar, which is tapering slightly. This block is decorated with a figural frieze. This is in turn resting on a broad base ornamented with an ovolo frieze. Even though the altars are quite small they do convey a certain aura of monumentality. Some researchers have even proposed that they copied directly monumental marble altars or sculptural groups.

The upper part behind the "sima" is concave at the interior. The concavity functioned as receptacle for the offering. There has been no analysis of the clay which

could give an indication of the altars proper function. But offerings of dry and liquid non-bloody goods as well as burning of incense are equally possible.

As far as we can gather from the completely preserved altars, they have a fixed iconography. Their four sides present each one figural scene: three two-figure groups and one three-figure group.

Scene A features a standing female (A1) with pony-tail. She wears a chiton and is wrapped in a himation. She extends forward a wreath towards a *tropaion* (A2). The *tropaion* is erected on a wooden pole supported by a heap of boulders. It consists of a Corinthian helmet, a round shield and a cuirass and occasionally a spear.

Scene B shows a standing female (B1) clad in a peplos carrying a vessel in her right hand. Her left hand is raised to the shoulder as a gesture of female modesty. She is depicted almost frontally but there is a slight movement towards a standing man (B2). His torso is naked, but his lower torso and left shoulder is wrapped in a himation. He carries a (long-) shafted object in the left hand. The man extends his right hand to the woman's left shoulder.

Scene C features a young male (C1) sitting on a rock. His left thigh is covered by a mantle, which is further draped over the rock. On the head he wears a pronounced wreath. He is playing a chitara and is facing a standing female (C2). She is dressed in a chiton and a himation with a veil and a low polos on her head. The female holds a long-shafted object in her right hand.

Scene D discloses in the centre a standing male (D2) wearing boots and a garment across the chest. He turns back to receive a kiss from a standing female (D1) clad in a chiton and a himation. She extends forward her arms to embrace D2. A smaller standing naked youth (D3) supports D2.

We shall later return to the interpretation, but for the moment we shall keep the neutral lettering of the figures.

The altars occasionally preserve traces of polychromy on top of a white engobe. Red, vermillion, pink, brown, grey, (light) blue and bluish-green have been noted, much in keeping with the taste of Hellenistic terracottas in general.

There is no consensus on the date of the altars. Dates varying from the second half of the 4th century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries of the Roman period have been proposed, but most commonly they are dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC.

The first to discuss these altars was Deonna in 1907 in connection with the find of an altar in Delos. In 1929, Wuilleumier extended the evidence to include the site he was particularly concerned with, namely Tarantum. The theme was taken up again in his monograph issued 10 years later on the same locality. Since Wuilleumier's two contributions, this group of altars has featured in the research predominantly as Tarentine.

However, it was quite clear that the same scenes were also found on mouldmade pottery, first of all on so-called Megarian bowls, but also on Calenian and related Black Gloss pottery with moulded or applied figural decoration. The first to discuss this phenomenon at length drawing on both the altars and the mouldmade vases was Schwabacher. He published a large number of bowls from the Athenian Kerameikos,

among these five bowls and a crater with the scenes known from the altars. After Rotroff in 1982 published a number of Agora deposits, further 20 bowls and fragments of bowls could be added to the list.

Apart from the bowls and related vases, the altar scenes are also found on the tall headdresses of several rather large terracotta figures found in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore in Corinth.

Based on the Mouldmade bowls already Schwabacher argued that the figural types were Attic, not Tarentine. This has since been accepted by a number of scholars. It is beyond doubt that some of the Mouldmade bowls with scenes similar to the altars were, in fact, produced in Athens. Not alone typology proves that but two moulds of such bowls were actually found in the Athenian Agora. However, as attested by further moulds, found in Argos and in Corinth also in those cities bowls with altar scenes had a certain popularity.

What is the relationship between the bowls and the altars? This has never been convincingly clarified, but it is normally assumed that the bowls precede the altars. None of the altars found in the Mediterranean has been dated by means other than style. The bowls are better dated. They were apparently produced over a long period, though they most commonly belong in the earlier part of the series, 225-175 BC, e.g. the Athenian Workshop of Bion and Workshop A. A good example is P 28100 made in the workshop of Bion. It retains the complete altar decoration including "sima" and base ornaments. But the narrative sequence of the scenes is different: C1-2 B C2-1 B1 D // C1-2 B C2-1 B1 D //B1//. B1 is repeated no less than five times.

Related bowls are, though, produced at least as late as the second quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Class 1). In general, the figural decoration of the bowls is characterized by piecing together of the scenes known from the altars with addition of further scenes not known from the altars. This suggests to me that the bowls are later in the series, rather than earlier. And the fact that the early bowls even depict the architectural framing more at home on a piece of architecture such as the altars, is to my mind, also indicative of the altars inspiring the bowls and not viceversa.

But what about the Black Sea region, the focus of our work today? In the 1980s a highly interesting building complex was excavated in Albe\_ti in the *chora* of the Greek *polis*, Kallatis, today Mangalia. The building is a fortified collective farm with a square tower and series of rooms grouped around a large courtyard (ca. 45x45 m). The building was constructed in the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and modified several times. It was still in existence in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

Inside the courtyard was built a two-room structure (11.5x5 m) with a hearth in each room. The two rooms functioned during the period between the first decennia of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BS and ca. 240/230 BC. Inside both rooms were found terracotta figurines and altars of our type. The excavators suggested that the two-room structure was a sanctuary, perhaps a house sanctuary.

A total of seven altars were found in Albe\_ti, four of these in the two-room structure. The authors of their publication suggested, that they derived from a North Pontic workshop.

In the mother-city of Albesti, namely Kallatis just 15 km further east fragments of at least four more altars were found in what has been thought to be a huge coroplast workshop. The site was never properly excavated, and the preserved finds are today scattered between private and public collections.

The Rumanian finds just mentioned were not the only ones made in the Black Sea region. In Amisos at the southern coast one altar has been found, and in the Bosporan Kingdom this type of altar was equally scarce. One altar in the Moscow Pu\_kin Museum was allegedly found in the kingdom's capital, Pantikapaion, one altar was found in the town closest to Pantikapaion, namely Myrmekion and one fragment was found in Nymphaion, in the Sanctuary of Demeter, in the horizon dating to 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

Closer to the area of Kallatis and Albesti the scatter intensifies. In Olbia, "a considerable number of fragments [not catalogued]" were found in the large cistern in the central temenos, where a large number of terracottas and pottery dating to the 4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC were found between 1955 and 1956. Also earlier finds have been made in various quarters of the city attesting to their popularity. And yet another fragment has been recently found in the lower city of Olbia.

The largest number in a single locality was found in Chersonesos. 20 altars have been individuated in many different contexts in the city as well as in the home chora: in houses, farmhouses and in tombs.

As was the case with the Rumanian colleagues, also \_ev\_enko, who collected the Chersonesean altars, is of the opinion that we are dealing with a local production and due to the many finds in Chersonesos, she attributes the workshop to that city.

Mouldmade objects are obviously tricky. Unless analyses of the clay are at hand, provenance is difficult to ascertain, since moulds could be moved over long distances and new moulds easily produced by taking moulds of existing objects. No such analyses have been made, and fabric descriptions are - if available at all - not very helpful. However, four moulds for producing the mentioned altars have actually been found. Two of them do not have a known provenance. One is kept in Athens, in the Kannelopoulos' Museum, one is in Boston's Museum of Fine Art. But of the other two, one is known to come from Delos and one was found in Syracuse. These moulds beyond doubt testify to several production places.

Of 70 known altars, 65 have a known provenance. A brief look at their distribution is of some interest:

Black Sea region		Magna Graecia		Mainland Greece		Greece, other	
Northwest		Capua	1	Athens	5	Delos	1+1 mould
Albesti	7	Cumae	1	Corinth	4	Samos	1
Chersonesos	20	Syracuse	1 mould	Eretria	1	Troas	1
Kallatis	4	Tarentum	8	Mykenai	1	Troy	1
Olbia	5++	Italy?	1				
Bosporan Kingdom							
Myrmekion	1						
Nymphaion	1						
Pantikapaion	1						
Black Sea, other							
Amisos	1						

The very distribution pattern does not, I believe, support the assumption that the altars were primarily an Athenian product. An analysis of the size of the available complete altars points in the same direction.

Black Sea region	Magna Graecia	Mainland Greece
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Albesti	8-9.5 cm	Capua	10.3 cm	Athens	None complete, but small
Chersonesos	9.5-9.7 cm	Cumae	10.5 cm	Mykenai	9 cm
		Tarentum	14.7*-10.5 cm		
		Italy?	10 cm		

Since the size of an object decreases each time a mould is made from an existing object due to the shrinkage of the clay when dry, at least hypothetically the hierarchy and sequence of the products can be deducted from the object's relative size. This would suggest the following reconstruction: the altars were first made in Magna Graecia (as already proposed by Wuilleumier but on an inadequate basis). Soon after they were produced also in the Black Sea region and finally they were made in Greece proper including Athens too.

### *Interpretation*

The basic interpretation of the altar scenes goes back to Deonna's article from 1907. His interpretation has not really been challenged by later researchers. Two of the scenes are quite unproblematical: scene A with a girl (or Nike *apteros* as some prefer) crowning a trophy and scene D: a pyramidal group with Dionysos supported by one of his male followers and kissed by Ariadne or a female follower, a Maenad or a Nymph. This last-mentioned scene is the best known and most widely distributed of the four groups also in other media such as bronze.

Concerning scene B, the interpretation by Deonna as Poseidon and the Nymph Amymone has been universally accepted with the exception of some of the Black Sea researchers suggesting B1 to be Amphitrite instead of Amymone.

The interpretation of the last scene, scene C, also varies. Western scholars, again, slavishly follow Deonna in seeing Apollon and Leto, whereas Black Sea scholars agree on C1 as Apollon, but believe C2 to be Artemis.

Even though the above-mentioned interpretations may seem straight forward, the problems start, when one attempts to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the scenes by interpreting them in their context. Then the scenes to the researchers simply do not make any "sense". And since the scenes were also known from other object types such as e.g. the mouldmade bowls already mentioned, they are therefore valued as "stock scenes" only.

This attitude I have found very provocative. It is difficult for me to believe that an object with a ritual function context did not have a "meaning". Due not only to the function of the altars but also to their iconographic consistency, there must have been an inner coherence, which escapes us today (also hinted at by Schwabacher 1941, 193).

The key to the interpretation, I believe, we may find in the Black Sea region. In Olbia, not just altars, but also vases with mouldmade decoration employing the altar scenes have been found. From the lower city (sector NGS) come three fragments of such bowls (unpublished), at least one of which is a local product. Best known is a situla found in a tomb in the city's necropolis and published by von Stern in 1902. It features no less than 21 figural scenes in a continuous frieze, 15 of which are identical to the four altar scenes. A closer look employing a semiotic approach reading the main figural frieze and its individual elements, their sequence and interrelation as a narrative text may help us to penetrate further into the significance of the altar scenes.

The 21 scenes each containing two or three figures are not placed haphazardly but regularly, as the same sequence is repeated three times:

Scene D framed at both sides by the same antithetic group mirror reversed (scene E)

Scene A

Scene B

Scene C

Scene D with the kiss-group is surrounded by a scene (E) not known from the altars featuring a female sitting on a rock. She is dressed with a cloak draped around her lower body. Next to her leaning against a tree? is an elderly, fattish male with a mantle over his left shoulder. This pair is probably also followers of Dionysos: a Silenus and a Maenad or a Nymph. Scene D framed by the two scenes E make up a unity with the same thematics. This can without problem be identified as Dionysiac. This corresponds well with the context of the frieze: the vase itself. It is a situla, which was an important element in the symposion and is also well known from other Dionysiac scenes (PGB).

The question is, whether also the scenes B-C constitute a unity with two males in the centre framed by two standing females? If so, scene A may be viewed as the central scene framed by the groups D+E and B+C.

Let us first look at scene C. C2 is evidently a matronal figure tightly wrapped in clothes: chiton and himation, and polos or crown combined with a veil. It is to my mind completely unlikely that this figure can be interpreted as Artemis as is commonly done by Black Sea researchers. Her attribute may vary being either a scepter or a torch or it may be the condition of the mould that provides the uncertainty. Proposing Leto is alone based on the interpretation of C1 as Apollon. But can we be certain of the interpretation of that figure? Let's first look at scene B then we may return to C1, as I believe the scenes B and C are to be interpreted as a unity.

Scene B is by far most tricky of the scenes to understand. The iconography of B2 can without any problem be grouped with the Vatergöttern. But who is he? Apart for in very early publications, there are hardly any researchers working with either the altars or with the mouldmade bowls who has questioned the interpretation of B2 as Poseidon. However, this is too simple, as his attribute is not constant. It sometimes looks like a trident and this may sometimes be modified into a scepter. The two are, thus, interchangeable. Unfortunately too few of the altar sides with scene B are published in adequate quality if at all, wherefore it is difficult to be certain how the ratio is between the two. We shall return to the identification of B2 in just a minute.

The young female wearing a high belted peplos has as mentioned been interpreted almost unanimously as Amymone, a Nymph Poseidon fell in love with, due to the vessel, variously understood as a hydria, an oinochoe or a situla, she carries in her right hand. But if my theory is correct that the scenes B and C are to be interpreted as a unity, a different interpretation of the figures may be proposed: the two females flanking the scene could at least as well be Kore and Demeter. This would be well in keeping with the traditional iconography of the two deities.

If this interpretation can be accepted, I would propose that the figure B2, who with his gesture almost appropriates Kore, to be Hades. What looks as a trident was in its origin the eagle scepter, which he frequently carries on South Italian Red-figured vases of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. This is, however, too complicated to be visualized in the

small scale medium of the altars, wherefore it may take a slight trident shape - or be shaped into a plain scepter. The best specimens even show the volutes of the Ionic capital on which the eagle is normally standing. This interpretation also explains the shortness of the object (much shorter than a trident, which is normally at least as long as the person carrying it), and the way he carries it. The fact that some of the Mouldmade bowls evidently shows a trident also point to them being later than the altars. Whether the figural scenes on the bowls have been subjected to reinterpretation or whether the change is due to the fact that the original scepter was misunderstood is not certain.

What then about C1? Viewing the scenes B and C as taking place in the Underworld, an interpretation of C1 as Orpheus is close at hand. Also this would fit nicely within the standard iconography of Orpheus, that of course borrows from Apolline imagery.

Finally, scene A signifies victory or triumph - not in a mythological sense, but in a real sense (the figure crowning the trophy with a wreath is not a Nike or another deity). But who is honoured? The fallen enemy or the victor. Or is it a generic triumph e.g. over death that the scene tries to connote?

After three repetitions of the six stamps, space runs out for the situla craftsman. Which stamps does he pick for filling the last gap? Does he continue the sequence starting it over again a fourth time?, does he pick the stamps coincidentally?, or is there a rationale behind what he chooses? Three stamps fill the gap. Should he have continued the sequence, it would have been with scenes E, D, and E. Instead he uses: A, D and C. They fit finely into the proposed reading with A being the main stamp, flanked by one (the main?) stamp of the two flanking groups: D and C.

Time does not permit to fold out the arguments concerning the interpretation further. However, the mentioned interpretation would be a *lectio facillior* as all the elements would make sense in the context. Moreover, this interpretation would also explain, why exactly the same scenes feature on the crowns of at least three large terracotta figures found in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore in Corinth. And it would prove that the scenes on the crowns were not just repetitive stock scenes, as has been suggested by Merker publishing them.

I believe that this interpretation can be extended to the altars too. They would thus constitute a condensed version of the situla frieze: Dionysos, the Eleusinian deities and Orpheus plus the concept of victory. It is difficult not to interpret the four scenes as a unity situated based on the eschatological cult of Dionysos/Bakchos and Orpheus, a cult which acknowledges precisely the mentioned deities in their interaction with the Eleusinian deities of underworld. This would correspond extremely well with the distribution of the altars with a group (probably the earliest) in Magna Graecia and a large group in the northwestern part of the Black Sea region, where we know from both literary and archaeological sources that exactly this cult was very popular as early as in the 5th century BC. In fact, Olbia provides the earliest evidence at all for the existence of a group of Bachkoi orphikoi already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC as evidenced by the find of a number of bone plaques in Olbian tombs. It was probably the same cult that attracted the Scythian prince Skyles so much that he was initiated into the mysteries, an accomplishment that was punished with death by the hand of his kinsmen.

The Bacchic/Orphic cult was an international one. However, it seems to have been particularly dominating in the colonial milieus of Magna Graecia and the northwestern corner of the Black Sea region, whereas it was less visible in mainland

Greece itself, also reflected in the distribution of the altars. In fact, with some precaution the distribution pattern of the altars may even to a certain extent recall that of the cult itself. That would explain, why the same altars were produced over so large distances - and it would prove that at least this group of ritual objects did, in fact, have a "meaning" for the group of people that used them.

The Hellenistic world in which these altars were created, were an open, almost international world, where people, goods and ideas travelled over long distances. The fact that we are here today is a token of a world that is again equally becoming open to exchange. This is worth mentioning, I think, and celebrating. Thank you for your attention.