

# The Roman Altar Dedicated to Zeus from Velico Târnovo – Bulgaria: Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

Asher OVADIAH  
Tel Aviv University, Israel  
asher.ovadiah@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This Roman altar, dedicated to Zeus, was found among the ruins of a Roman civil building of the Late Empire, near the Ottoman Firuz Bey Mosque on the Carévéc hill in Velico Târnovo, Bulgaria. It is dated to the second-third century CE.

The relief depicted on the altar is a sophisticated combination of a stylized and schematic thunderbolt and ant. Both are forming one entity with a dual significance and associated from the mythological point of view with Zeus.

**Key words:** Altar, Ant, Metamorphosis, Thunderbolt, Zeus.

## El altar romano dedicado a Zeus de Velico Târnovo - Bulgaria: Reconsideración

## RESUMEN

Este altar romano, dedicado a Zeus, fue encontrado entre las ruinas de un edificio civil romano de época Bajo Imperial, cerca de la mezquita otomana Firuz Bey en la colina de Carévéc en Velico Târnovo, Bulgaria. Está datada entre los siglos II y III d.C.

El relieve que presenta el altar es una combinación sofisticada de un estilizado y esquemático rayo y una hormiga. Ambos están formando una entidad con un doble significado, asociado desde el punto de vista mitológico con Zeus.

**Palabras clave:** Altar, hormiga, metamorfosis, rayo, Zeus.

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**Fig. 1:** The altar (after Vaklinova 1972: 184 [Fig. 1])

An early article by Margarita Vaklinova, published in Bulgarian in 1972,<sup>2</sup> attributes the altar to Zeus κεραυνοβόλος or κεραυνοφόρος or κεραύνιος<sup>3</sup> (*Jupiter fulminator*), since the author identified the relief on one side of the altar as a thunderbolt (κεραυνός, *fulmen*) (Figs. 1-2). Based on paleographic and epigraphic grounds, the altar was correctly dated to the second-third century CE.<sup>4</sup> The word ΔΕΙ (Δεΐ), incised below the cornice of the altar, indicates unequivocally that it was dedicated to Zeus by a certain ΕΛΙΟC (Ἐλιος) ΕΥΜΟΥCOC (Εὐμουσος) in fulfillment of a vow (ΕΥΧΗ – Εὐχή[v]).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the dedication to Zeus in dative form, namely ΔΕΙ, is unusual in Greek epigraphy. This form is equivalent to Δί, that is Δύ.<sup>6</sup> Vaklinova is correct in stating that the name Ἐλιος is a Greek form or transliteration of the Roman name Aelius (Ἀέλιος or Αἴλιος).<sup>7</sup> She also refers to the cult of *Zeus Keraunobolos* or *Keraunios* (Ζεὺς Κεραυνοβόλος or Κεραύνιος), contend-

<sup>2</sup> Vaklinova 1972: 183-187; see also Robert VII, 1973: 121, No. 297; Mihailov 1977: 121-122, No. 5252. The altar was found in 1966(?) on the Carévéc hill in Velico Târnovo, among the ruins of a Roman civil building of the Late Empire, near the Ottoman Firuz Bey Mosque, dated to 1435. For the measurements of the altar and other technical informative details, including the epigraphic analysis of the Greek inscription, see Vaklinova's article.

<sup>3</sup> Vaklinova 1972: 185; see also *LIMC*, VIII.1: 319-320, 338-340, 346-347, 358, 362-367, 485 (No. 75\*); *LIMC*, VIII.2: 319, No. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Vaklinova 1972: 186-187. For the square, monumental and round forms of the letters, see Welles 1938: 359 (Fig. 8), 361-362 (Figs. 9-10), 364 (Fig. 13).

<sup>5</sup> Vaklinova 1972: 185.

<sup>6</sup> See Mihailov 1977: 122; see also Liddell-Scott-Jones, *GEL*, 754, s.v. 'Ζεὺς' (late Δεῖ); 381, s.v. 'Δεὺς' (for Ζεὺς in Boeotian).

<sup>7</sup> One of the names of the Emperor Hadrian was Aelius (Publius Hadrianus) and the Roman name of Jerusalem was derived from his second name, that of Aelia (Capitolina).

ing that this was practiced among the population of the region of Nicopolis ad Istrum in the Roman period.<sup>8</sup>

From the iconographic point of view, the relief on the altar, in connection with the Greek dedicatory inscription to Zeus (ΔΕΙ, Δεΐ), raises a basic question: does it represent a stylized and schematic thunderbolt (κεραυνός) or a sophisticated combination of a thunderbolt with a certain animal associated with Zeus?

Indeed, Greek mythology relates to Zeus several animals, used as his attributes, such as an eagle, a bull, a swan and a snake. From time to time the god changed his form, a kind of metamorphosis, into one of those animals, in order to seduce or coerce a particular human being that he desired, such as a young woman or a youth. Thus, for example, he appeared as an eagle to kidnap Ganymede and transport him to Mt. Olympus and to pursue Asteria; as a snake to pursue Persephone; as a swan to accomplish sexual intercourse with Leda; and as a bull to kidnap Europa. In addition, Zeus changed himself into other forms, such as appearing in the shape of Artemis and of Amphitryon, as well as metamorphosing into fog, golden rain, fire, and a satyr, all in order to seduce, coerce and pursue various young women.<sup>9</sup>

On the altar relief one can distinguish a stylized and schematic form comprising two oval parts, connected by a narrower oval, with six legs and two antennae on the front part, terminating in pointed arrows. While this depiction is typical of an ant (**Fig. 3**),<sup>10</sup> the arrows recall Zeus' thunderbolt in the Roman period.<sup>11</sup>

According to Greek mythology, Zeus deceived Eurymedusa (Εὐρυμέδουσα),<sup>12</sup> the daughter of Cleitor, in the disguise of an ant. Her son was consequently called Myrmidon (from μύρμηξ - ant) and was regarded as the ancestor of the Myrmidons in Thessaly.<sup>13</sup>

Two ancient literary sources mention Zeus ironically after his having assumed the form of an ant in order to deceive Eurymedusa. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215 CE) briefly described this curious event and writes: Τί δὲ πάλιν Θετταλοί; Μύρμηκας ἰστοροῦνται σέβειν, ἐπεὶ τὸν Δία μεμαθήκασιν ὁμοιωθέντα μύρμηκι τῇ Κλήτορος θυγατρὶ Εὐρυμεδούσῃ μιγῆναι καὶ Μυρμιδόνα γεννῆσαι (*What else of Thessalians? They are reported to worship ants, because they have been taught that Zeus, in the likeness of an ant, had intercourse with Eurymedusa the daughter of Cleitor and begot Myrmidon*).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Vaklinova 1972: 184-185, 187.

<sup>9</sup> See Stageiritis 1, 1996: 317-320.

<sup>10</sup> See Kugler 3, 1989: 371-389, s.v. 'Formicidae'; *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, cols. 217-223, s.v. 'Ants'. I thank Dr. Tovit Simon and Dr. Armin Ionescu of the Department of Zoology, Tel Aviv University, who drew my attention to the heart-shape of the gaster of the supposed ant, typical of *Crematogaster*. My thanks are also due to Mr. 'Oz Rittner of the same Department, who kindly photographed the ant, from the Collection of the Department, and published hereby by his courtesy.

<sup>11</sup> See above, n. 3.

<sup>12</sup> For Eurymedusa, see Kakridis II, 1986: 81; *LIMC*, IV.1: 106. According to Stageiritis (1, 1996: 319), Zeus seduced Clytoria, a beautiful woman of Thessaly, in the disguise of an ant.

<sup>13</sup> See Smith II, 1867: 1129; Stageiritis 4, 1994: 123-124, 442 (μύρμηξ); see also Eustathius (twelfth century) (499 [#320]), who claims that Μυρμιδόνες δὲ ἦ ἀπὸ μυρμήκων κατὰ μῦθον ἐκλήθησαν, ἢ ἀπὸ Μυρμιδόνοσ ἥρωος υἱοῦ Διός (*the name Myrmidons, according to the myth, was derived from ants, or from the hero Myrmidon, son of Zeus*).

<sup>14</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation*, II.34 (pp. 84-85).



**Fig. 2:** The altar



**Fig. 3:** Ant, typical of *Crematogaster*

Arnobius of Sicca (Tunisia, died *ca.* 330 CE) refers to this event in an even more ironic and sarcastic way: “*Iuppiter ipse rex mundi none a vobis infamis est isse per innumeras species et petulantis amoris flammam servilibus obumbravisse fallaciis? Numquid a nobis aliquando conscriptus est, libidinosa ut perficeret furta, modo esse in aureem versus, modo in satyrum ludicrum, in draconem, in alitem, <in> taurum, et quod omnia genera contumeliarum transiliat, in formiculam parvulam, ut Clitoris videlicet filiam Myrmidonis ederet apud Thessalos matrem?* (Is Jupiter himself, king of the universe, not notorious among you for having assumed countless shapes and for having covered over by mean deceptions the ardor of his wanton love? Has it ever been set down in writing by us that in order to consummate his stealthy lust, he at one time changed to gold, at another into a sportive satyr, into a snake, into a bird, into a bull, and – a thing that outrivals every kind of disgrace – into a tiny little ant, so that, forsooth, he might make the daughter of Clitor the mother of Myrmidon among the Thessalians?).<sup>15</sup>

In sum, it can be suggested that the depiction on the altar from Velico Târnovo, is not only of high iconographic significance, but also unique to date in Roman art. There is reason to believe, on the basis of ancient literary and mythological sources that refer to Zeus’ character, attributes and his various metamorphoses, that the relief is a sophisticated combination of a thunderbolt and ant, forming one entity with a dual significance.

<sup>15</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. Nat.*, IV.26 (pp. 397-398).

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