

Nade Proeva,

Faculty of Philosophy

University Sts Cyril and Methodius, MK–1000 Skopje

The Phrygian legend of Philemon and Baucis and Roman tombstones in Macedonia

The topic of my presentation is the legend of Philemon and Baucis that is to say, the funeral belief that this legend reflects, which I believe can be found on the tombstones of Roman times in Upper Macedonia.

Namely, two groups of monuments confirm the survival and revival of that funeral belief.

As we know, the literary form of this legend, which is a part of the ancient Phrygian myth of the flood was transmitted much later by the Roman poet of the Augustan era Publius Ovidius Naso in his narrative poem, with a mythical-historical framework, and that is *Metamorphosis* (book VIII, 628 – 730)

no 1 Cover page of the Ovidius work

The story is told at the dinner table of the god of the river Achelous with the heroes. The narrator is Lelex, the Locrian hero of Troisen, otherwise unknown but according to some, it seems that he was among the Calydonian boar hunters, which is an indication of the oldness of the myth. According to the words of Lelex he heard the story from reliable old people from the region, who, as Lelex points out, had no reason to lie and deceive anyone (*Metamor.* VIII, 721 - 724).

Here I will briefly recall the legend:

Two Gods, Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury in *interpretatio romana*) disguised as mortals descended on the earth, in Phrygia. When wandering the region, from house to house, no one would receive them until they knocked on the door of the last humble home - a cottage of the very poor and old couple Philemon and Baucis, who welcomed them.

No 2 Phrygian hut (Reconstruction of a Phrygian hut 19th century drawing based on reconstruction by Vitruvius, *Bibliothèque des Arts Decoratifs Paris France De Agostini Picture Library G Dagli Orti Bridgeman Images* (Perrault, *Dix Livres d'Architecture de Vitruve* (Paris, 1694)

The peasant's couple, Philemon and Baucis received them kindly and unasked; they offered their presumably starving guests all they had with the most engaging hospitality. It was a humble meal - fresh and dried fruit, olives, eggs, and wine. Soon, the old couple notice that no matter how often they poured the wine, the pitcher was never empty and begin to suspect that their guests could be more than just mortals. After revealing themselves the Gods took this honorable, dignified and just human pair to a mountain from which they could see the punishment their neighbors had suffered - a devastating flood: the whole country flooded with water.

All drowned in the marsh, only their home remains. Before their eyes, it turns into a marble temple with a gilded roof and carved doors. The gods, than asked them, what divine favor they wanted. The couple requested that they wished to be the priests of the temple and to die together - since they had spent their whole lives together in harmony. Praying to die at the same time, Philemon said:

"...that I may never see my wife's tomb, nor be buried by her." (Metamor., VIII., 710).

Their wish was granted. After spending many years guarding the temple, in extreme old age they were turned into trees.

No 3, the metamorphosis of Philemon and Baucis in front of the temple
illustrations Antonio Tempesta (1585-1606), Johan Wilhelm Baur, Ovidii Metamorphosis (1703). Virgil Solis (1563)

One evening, standing in front of the temple, they begin simultaneously to turn into trees, she in the linden and he into the oak: the leaves and branches grow from their bodies:

frondere Philemona Baucis, Baucida conspexit senior frondere Philemon./ iamque super geminos crescente cacumine vultus / mutua, dum licuit, (Metamorphosis, VIII 714-17)

and they have just enough time to embrace each other in farewell:

reddebant dicta "vale"que / "O coniunx" dixere simul, simul abdita textit ora frutex (Metamorphosis. 718 – 19)

They become sacred trees on which the faithful came to hang garlands. And this is, for my concern, the point of this legend.

The Phrygian legend of Philemon and Baucis is usually connected with a deluge myth associated particularly with Phrygia (Calder, Hollis, Chuvin) interpreted as divine test and punishment, while metamorphosis as a reward for humans.

It had to be stressed that in this myth, we have both: a metamorphosis of the landscape (the continent becomes a swamp, the village is swallowed up and the couple's cottage becomes a temple), and the metamorphosis of humans. The poor couple who after having been guardians of the temple (priest and priestess), turn into trees. Their wish was to die at the same time, but in addition they were transformed into trees, by the will of Gods.

The striking fact that the human couple turns into trees, is a mythological element which had to be explained.

Why they are transformed in a tree?

It's simply because in the oldest Indo-European mythology it was believed that humans originally generated from trees. Concerning ancient Greek mythology, this belief is adapted later - earliest in the Bronze Age, and relatively rarely attested in the myths. In the Greek myth of deluge the humans are recreated by Deucalion and Pyrrha from the stone (age of the Titans). Only later, in Hesiod's "*Works and Days*", the Bronze Race, third in time after those of Gold and Silver Age, is said to have been created by Zeus "*ek melian*" from ash trees (143-145). No need to recall that Hesiod's roots are from Asia Minor - his father originated from Kyme in Aeolis, Asia Minor.

It is obvious that it is not a Greek legend, but a Phrygian-Brygian myth in which the reasons for the Flood is associated with the punishment and with the heroization of two mortals, which is quite different from the Greek myth of the flood.

The transformation of Philemon and Baucis obviously is a reflection of funeral beliefs, which can be observed on some funerary monuments from Roman times spread in Upper Macedonia: across the Middle Axios valley (present day Vardar River) which is the region of Paeonia from pre - roman time, as well in Pelagonia region.

4. MAP of the two regions

In this Phrygian myth, two facts should first be emphasized

- that this is the only case of transformation of a human couple/pair – all others transformation in Ovid are individual transformations

- the transformation of Philemon in an oak trees – namely in the classical Greek mythology the men are always turned into a flower, except Cyparissos, a descendant of the Titans (*Metamorphosis*, 107-142)

Many years ago, my concern was the typology and iconography of the funeral monuments of Roman time in Upper Macedonia. I was confronted with an unusual iconography of two groups of stelae with the motif of the tree that I had to explain. These monuments are concentrated in Pelagonia -Prilep group stelae, (the treatment of the tree, is actually a human silhouette) and in Paeonia from pre-roman time – the stelae of so-called Tikveš type (tree stylized beyond recognition)

It should be noted that these two patterns of display have no analogy in the Roman world

No 5. Prilep group stelae: deceased in the form of a tree

The pine tree is represented in such a way that it is obvious that the motif evokes the human figure. The pine cone represents the head, and the trunk of more or less accentuated conical shape represents the body. Branches, rather very short stumps, always two in number, are supposed to represent the arms. It is obvious that the deceased are displayed in the form of an evergreen tree (most often in a pine-tree).

That the images of the pines-trees are in fact human figures emerge/stand out clearly from some representations as it is the case of one stele from the village of Volkovo.

No 5a, the deceased holding hand

The branches of three pines- trees are curved and decorated with parallel incisions: regular striations evoke folds of clothes. Even more, the branches that touch give the impression that the three human figures are held by the hands. It is more than obvious that we have here a display of a human figure. Such an intimate display, although rarely, is found on funerary monuments - as it is the stele from **Skelani, No 5b**.

Stelae of so called Tikveš type, deceased in the form of a stylized tree - No 6a, b Stelae from Kavadarci region

On gravestones of the co-called Tikveš type we find a schematic display of trees which are equivalent to the Prilep group stelae - the deceased in the form of a pine tree.

The stelae of this group are characterized by striking / outstanding stylization and schematization of figures and motifs. The figures of the deceased in the shape of a tree are stylized beyond recognition. The examples with less stylised motifs and figure are found, which allowed us to see the human figure (Proeva, 2017)

One stele with two relief fields had a display of the trunk with three bare roots shown between the two human figures which are the deads, mentioned in the epitaph (**No 6a**). On these stelae, dead persons are presented as heroes (sometimes labelled as hero in epitaph). That it is about heroization it is obvious from the myth Philemon and Baucis which become sacred trees on which the faithful came to hang garlands. As is known, garlands are often displayed on the funeral monuments.

Except in the relief field, deceased in the form of a tree are displayed in the gables of the stelae. It is obvious that the display of the tree in the relief field symbolizes heroized deceased, while trees in gables which is in turn reserved for the heroized ancestors, represent heroized ancestors (Proeva, 2015).

7 subgroup stelae of the Prilep group - pinecone as a substitution of the pine tree

Some stelae of Prilep group have pinecones in a relief field or in the arched pediment.

No 7a, pincone as substitution od pine treefrom Prilep; 7b stele from village of Beleshtevica

It is obvious that, the pinecone is a substitution of the pine tree.

Reinventing tradition

Sometime a pinecone stands on a small altar. Such motif is found on the stelae from the valley of the river Po, in Italy. The motif of a pine cone is generally considered a typical Roman motif, neglecting the fact that it was widely spread in Asia Minor –

especially in Cappadocia. It is taught that the pinecone was "brought" to Macedonia by Italic emigrants who are attested in the region of Peonia, especially in Stobi (the oppidum civium romanorum, later elevated to the rank of municipium) but "processed" in such a way to be adapted to convey local beliefs of the immortality of pre-Roman time. So, instead of talking about the appropriation of the motif, we should talk about the new and original iconographic style, prompted by the motif used by the Roman immigrants, but created by the local stonemasons who revealed the old belief. Namely, the revival of domestic beliefs and traditions was a general tendency of the late Roman period (third century) in the whole Roman Empire among the conquered peoples.

This kind of original and peculiar manner for displaying dead persons is not found in the provincial art of the Roman world and it is typical of Macedonia. We can rightly say that this iconography reflects the ancient beliefs preserved in legend of Baukis and Philemon, so the meaning of the trees shown on the gravestones becomes all the more understandable.

This shows that each iconography must be interpreted and judged according to the local conditions of its environment and on its own terms.

This myth of Philemon and Baukis in Macedonia survived to the end of the common era, which can be seen from the welcome shown to Saul (St. Paul) and Barnabas called Zeus and Hermes by the delighted people who were shouting: "*The gods came to us in a human form.*" (Acta Apostolorum, 14: 11 – 12)

The Brygoi / Phrygoi were the oldest inhabitants in Macedonia, and thus a substratum in ethno genesis of the ancient Macedonians. If we recall that in Macedonia, the Brygian enclaves are witnessed from the river Strymon on the East to the river Erigon on the west even in classical times (Her., VII, 73; Strab., VII, 337, fr. 8; Ps.-Scymn., *Periegesis*, 4. 37; Plut., *Brut.*, 45; Proc., *De aed.* IV, 4) we can understand the survival of this legend in Macedonia.

Relevant bibliography,

Proeva Nade

Les stèles funéraires décorées de pins et de pommes de pin en Haute Macédoine, Arles et Aix-en Provence, 21-23 mai 2007, *Actes du Xe colloque international sur l'art provinciale romain : Les ateliers de sculpture régionaux : techniques, styles et iconographie*, Aix-en-Provence, Centre Camille-Jullian/Arles, Musée départemental de l'Arles antique, 2009, pp. **363 – 375**, fig. 1-5, V. Gagagis-Robin, A. Hermary, M. Reddé, Cl. Sintès (eds)

Sur l'iconographie des stèles funéraires du "type Tikveš" en Macédoine à l'époque romaine, in proceeding *Funerary sculpture of the western Illyricum and neighbouring regions of the Roman Empire*, (Split 2009), Književni krug, Split, 2012, pp. 679 – 708 = Иконографија на тиквешкиот тип надгробни стели од римско време, Патримониум III/7–8, 2010, стр.93 – 108

Les croyances funéraires des Macédoniens: l'héroïsation et la divinisation des défunts à l'époque romaine (The funerary beliefs of the Macedonians: the heroizing of the deceased in Roman times), *Proceeding of the XIII th International Colloquium on Roman Provincial Art, Cult and votive monuments in the Roman province: Bucharest - Alba Iulia – Constanța* (27th of May – 3rd June 2013) Cluj –Napoca: Mega Publishing House Publ., 2015, p. 149 – 160.

Non – figural motifs on the Roman funerary stelae from Upper Macedonia, (Dating and Interpretation Problems). in *Art and Artistic Culture of the Ancient World. Archaeological Object and a Work of Art: Their Similarities and Differences*, VII, “**The Actual Problems of History and Theory of Art**”. Octobre 11 – 15, 2016, **Saint Petersburg**, 2017, pp. 147 – 158.

On the allegedly manicheic funerary stelae of “tikvesh type” from roman province of Macedonia, in *Ante portam auream, studia in honorem professoris Aleksandar Jovanović*, Beograd, 2017, str. 177 -192