

# Greek poetry in the Bosporan Kingdom

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Not unlike other states in principle, the Bosporan Kingdom had its specificity and local colour which needs to be considered in any analysis of the finds. Foremost, the kingdom lay on the peripheries of the Graeco-Roman world, where the Cimmerian people were said to be “hidden in fog and cloud”<sup>1</sup>. From the start research on the subject has raised questions about how Hellenic their culture was and what was the extent of acculturation in their territory. The question is all the more relevant when considered in the light of processes occurring in other centers of Greek civilization which found themselves in a similar situation. The case of the Seleucid state has been examined in depth,<sup>2</sup> especially with regard to Bactria, but the same pertains to Egypt of the Ptolemies and other centers in the western part of the Mediterranean (e.g. Massalia and Gauls). The uniqueness of the Bosporan Kingdom drew primarily from the nomadic character of neighboring tribes, the most important of these being the Scythians and later the Sarmatians. An added factor was the kingdom’s longevity as a state, lasting unimpeded for almost a millennium, from about 480 BC to the 4th and perhaps even the 5th century AD, as recent scholarship has suggested. Judging by the official titulature of Bosporan kings, these tribes were united with the Greek *poleis* under one rule, although the form and content of this millennium-long coexistence largely escapes us. Because of a scarcity of literary sources, most modern scholarship has been focused on understanding the degree of acculturation of the Bosporan Greeks and nomads, based mainly on an analysis of archaeological and epigraphical data.

This paper sums up what is known about Greek poetry created in the Bosporan kingdom, paying particular attention to poetic epitaphs found on tombstones, which to date have been considered mostly as sources of prosopographic material. Despite the inextensive number of existing epitaphs, it has proved possible to evaluate the literary standards of the authors and their evolution over time. In a sense, faced with a modest quantity of literary sources, the present study attempts to establish the literary character of Bosporan society, having naturally in mind education in the Greek spirit and only with regard to epitaphial poetry. Apart from excerpts from Diodorus, which most likely concealed under the form of a historical chronicle some kind of panegyric to the Spartocid dynasty ruling the Bosporan kingdom, poetic inscriptions are the only other testimony of Greek literature in the Pantikapaion and its environs. As a matter of fact, epitaphs constitute an overwhelming majority of poetic texts from the Bosporus (44 out of 49), the remaining ones being of a votive nature. Literary sources also speak of the popularity of drama in the Bosporan *poleis*, although we know little about the repertoire. Recitals of epic and perhaps also lyrical poetry can be assumed, based on mentions in Polyainos.<sup>3</sup> All things considered, Greek epitaphial poetry remains the best known and most extensive set of poetic texts from the Bosporus,

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<sup>1</sup> The Odyssey 11, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Kuhrt-Sherwin –White 1996.

<sup>3</sup> 5, 44.

justifying its use as a source for studying the level of Hellenic education among the Bosphoran elite.

For the purpose of this study I have adopted the historical division into three periods developed for the Greek epigram. The first of these periods ended in the late 4th century BC with the limitations enforced at this time on the erection of tombstones in Athens. The end of the second period corresponded to the major geopolitical changes in the Graeco-Roman world at the close of the 1st century BC and the third period lasted through the end of the antiquity.

Poets in the Cimmerian Bosphorus grew out of an Ionian cultural environment — most of the colonies here had been established by Miletus or its colonies — and the surviving inscriptions leave no doubt as to this. A relatively large share on non-Ionian names can be found in Gorgippia, but in other towns on the Taman peninsula the Ionian dialect clearly prevailed. Epigraphic sources from the Hellenistic period demonstrate the emergence of a local dialect, but it is not clear to what extent the dialect was adopted by inhabitants of the Black Sea region outside the Bosphoran state.

Therefore, ionicisms in the texts of Bosphoran epitaphs could derive from a historical background in the sense that they originated from a region colonized mainly by Ionians starting from the 7th century BC, where the Ionic dialect remained in dominance probably through the 5th/4th century BC, to be pushed out ultimately in the 3rd century BC. On the other hand, the background may have been purely literary in that epitaphial poetry largely inherited the traditions of Ionian lyric poetry with the characteristic elegiac distich and epic hexameter that were the conventional metre of Ionian epic. The case of doricisms is less doubtful. Historical factors were of lesser significance in the Bosphoran kingdom (very few colonies established not by Ionians), hence the doricisms in Bosphoran epitaphial poetry should be seen as deriving from Hellenistic epigrams which were characterized by borrowings from literary Doric. Thus, contrary to what has been said about ionicisms, doricisms can be considered as testimony of the literary education of the authors of Bosphoran epitaphs. The level of this education cannot be easily adduced as in some cases one gets the strong impression of a fairly mechanical copying of literary models.<sup>4</sup>

It should be said that of the 44 steles presented in this study only 11 were made of marble<sup>5</sup> and the rest were of local limestone. The stele CIRB 123 is presumably also the first example of a tombstone decorated with a relief,<sup>6</sup> although the state of preservation of the stone

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. CIRB no 132.

<sup>5</sup> CIRB. no 120 (Lysimachus, 2nd-1st cent. BC), CIRB 132 (Antipater, 1st cent. BC), SEG 50 (2000), 709 (wife of Dios, mid 1st cent. BC), CIRB 119 (Apollonios, 1st cent. BC), CIRB 121 (Hekataios, 1st cent. BC), CIRB 124 (Cleopatra, 1st cent. BC), CIRB 130 (Theophila, 1st cent. BC – 1st cent. AD), CIRB 910 (Glykareia, 1st cent. BC), CIRB 128 (Tryphonis *et alii*, 1st-2nd cent. AD), SEG 45 (1995), 987 (Diodotos, 1st cent. AD), CIRB 1057 (Teimotheos, 1st-2nd cent. AD).

<sup>6</sup> Kalous, 3rd cent. BC.

excludes certainty in this respect. Altogether there are 26 steles with relief decoration,<sup>7</sup> three representing a man and a woman,<sup>8</sup> four a standing man,<sup>9</sup> three a standing woman,<sup>10</sup> two depicting two men,<sup>11</sup> one two men and a woman,<sup>12</sup> one a resting man (funerary banquet scene),<sup>13</sup> one a man and a seated woman (funerary banquet scene)<sup>14</sup>, one a bust of a woman,<sup>15</sup> three a horserider,<sup>16</sup> and one a man making an offering on an altar.<sup>17</sup> There are three examples of relief decoration occurring in more than one level as was typical of Asia Minor tombstones.<sup>18</sup> The small number of surviving tombstones precludes any general conclusions of a statistical nature or a discussion of the relation between the form of the tombstone and the content of the epitaph.

The oldest known epitaph (CIRB no. 114) is that of a Hellenized Taurian, already attesting to extensive acculturation processes in the region. This and the other of the oldest epitaphs (CIRB no 115) are very brief and, especially the latter one, quite simple in structure, but they testify to the civilizational and cultural ambitions of the deceased and their families. The next epitaph (CIRB no. 116, 4th-3rd cent. BC) presents a characteristic feature of Bosporan poetry – an accumulation of hiatus. Such an accumulation can be found in Greek poetry practically only in the works of Pindarus who is rightly believed to be one of the most sophisticated and metrically most difficult of the Greek poets. In the case of the Bosporan epitaphs, however, it is not sophistication that we are dealing with, but rather awkwardness in composition and metrics, caused possibly by a desire to refer to Archaic poetry much exceeding talent in these examples. Clearly, the oldest epitaphs from the 5th century BC are proof of fairly modest abilities on the part of the local poets, but testify to the Hellenization of neighboring tribes like the Taurians, for example. The latter is confirmed also by other poetic epitaphs (e.g. CIRB no. 122 – Kpeethyres, son of Kabathaxes, 4th cent. BC).

A study of later material, however, leads to conclusions that speak well of the level of education of members of the elite at least in the period from the 4th century BC through the 1st century AD.<sup>19</sup> Epitaphs of earlier and later date, two from the 5th century BC and three from the 2nd-3rd cent. AD respectively, are very few, the latter ones being even doubtful as regards dating and provenience. Dating is indeed the biggest challenge faced by researchers studying Bosporan epitaphs due to the common practice of secondary use of tombstones.

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<sup>7</sup> CIRB nos 123, 132, 138, 146, SEG 27, 436; 50, 709, CIRB 119, 121, 122, 125, 127, 129, 141, 143, 992, SEG 45, 1012, CIRB 126, 134, 135, 139, 140, 144, 145, 1192, SEG 45, 987, Boltunova 1968, CIRB 1057.

<sup>8</sup> CIRB nos 132, 138, 135.

<sup>9</sup> CIRB nos 146, 119, 129, Boltunova 1968.

<sup>10</sup> SEG 27, 436; 50, 709, CIRB nos 143, SEG 45, 1012.

<sup>11</sup> CIRB nos 127, 992.

<sup>12</sup> CIRB no. 135.

<sup>13</sup> CIRB no. 134.

<sup>14</sup> CIRB no. 144.

<sup>15</sup> CIRB no. 139.

<sup>16</sup> CIRB nos 140, 145, 1057.

<sup>17</sup> CIRB no. 145.

<sup>18</sup> CIRB nos 144, 145, 1192.

<sup>19</sup> See comment to CIRB no. 118 in Twardecki 2010.

New texts were inscribed on top of the erased older ones and in such instances the dating of the inscription cannot rely on an analysis of the iconography.<sup>20</sup> An overwhelming majority of the Bosporan poetic epitaphs is therefore dated on paleographic grounds, which is always a debatable criterion. Moreover, some of the steles were brought from centers on the southern coast of the Black Sea. This fact is confirmed in some cases by direct mention in the text<sup>21</sup> and is suspect in the instance of all the marble steles<sup>22</sup> or with regard to texts that exceed in quality contemporary Greek inscriptions.<sup>23</sup> Keeping in mind these reservations and the limitations imposed by the scarcity of available sources, I believe it possible to suggest that the Bosporan Kingdom was the most Hellenic in its character and culture in the ages from the 4th century BC through the 1st century AD. The largest number of poetic epitaphs comes from this period and the poetry is of the highest mettle in artistic terms.

First of all, despite the differing levels of poetic art, a large part of the texts presents a literary level that can be described as correct,<sup>24</sup> if not outstanding and even sophisticated.<sup>25</sup> The funerary inscriptions of Hekataios<sup>26</sup> and Glykarion<sup>27</sup> can be taken as excellent examples. The poet was clearly fluent in Greek poetic language and used to the epigram form. At the same time, he was capable in both instances of creating a text with many meanings, interpretable in a variety of ways, having another side to it. Texts that, to put it briefly, are the quintessence of poetry as a literary art form. Recapping, it should be said that during the period under discussion Bosporan Greeks were fully fledged representatives of Greek culture in the acculturation processes ongoing in the region. An analysis of the texts presented in the catalogue justifies the belief that from the 1st century BC people in the Bosporan kingdom looked to models, at least with regard to epitaphial poetry, coming from the shores of southern Asia Minor. This view contributes to the discussion pertaining to the main sources of Greek cultural impact on the Cimmerian Bosporus. Changes can be observed from the 1st century AD when there is a significant drop in the number of surviving poetic epitaphs and of those that exist several could be imports from the southern coasts of the Black Sea. This corresponds to a well studied process of intensive Sarmatization of the Bosporan elite during the Roman period. Starting with the 2nd century AD Greek culture, especially high culture, was in decline and gradually disappeared from the region.

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<sup>20</sup> CIRB no. 143, 1057.

<sup>21</sup> CIRB no. 124 (Cleopatra from Amissos, 1st cent. BC), 129 (Pharnakes from Sinope, 1st cent. BC), 130 (Teophila from Sinope, mid 1st cent. BC – mid 1st cent. AD), 131 (Menodoros from Sinope, 1st cent. BC / 1st cent. AD), 134 (Heliodoros from Amastris, 1st cent. AD).

<sup>22</sup> CIRB no. 120 (Lysimachus, 2nd-1st cent. BC), 132 (Antipater, 1st cent. BC), SEG 27, 436; 50, 709 (wife of Dios, mid 1st cent. BC), CIRB 119 (Apollonios, 1st cent. BC), 121 (Hekataios, 1st cent. BC), 124 (Cleopatra, 1st cent. BC), 130 (Theophila, 1st cent. BC – 1st cent. AD), 910 (Glykareia, 1st cent. BC), 128 (Tryphonis *et alii*, 1st-2nd cent. AD), SEG 45, 987 (Diodotos, 1st cent. AD), CIRB 1057 (Teimotheos, 1st – 2nd cent. AD).

<sup>23</sup> CIRB no. 147 (Kallioteros, Symphoros, Myromene, AD 227) is almost certainly an import from Asia Minor.

<sup>24</sup> CIRB nos 123, 120, 132, 138, 119, 122, 992, SEG 45, 987.

<sup>25</sup> CIRB nos 146, SEG 27, 436; 50, 709, CIRB 121, 124, 125, 128, 131, SEG 26, 849.

<sup>26</sup> CIRB no. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Boltunova 1968.

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