

The Cult of Sabazios The Cult of a Gallo-Roman God on a Relief from Arlon/Aarlen (Belgium)?

The Luxembourg Museum in Arlon (in Belgium) gathers the unique Gallo-Roman sculptured monuments which were discovered in some tombstones and civilian buildings of the ancient vicus in Orolaunum (today Arlon, Aarlen).

One of these sculptured stones represents a very interesting scene of a man with his hands raised up while a huge horned snake is twisting around his hands and his body. The scene was shortly described by L. Lefébvre in the official Catalogue of the Luxembourg Museum in Arlon. He mentioned some different opinions on this representation which was once explained as a snake charmer, another time as an allusion to the cult of a Celtic god and finally as a symbol of the cult of Sabazios. Lefébvre supposes that M.E. Marien came with the most valuable interpretation of this scene. He associated a horned snake on this scene with the cult of the Phrygian-Thracian god of vegetation - Sabazios. Lefébvre's positive standpoint to the idea of Marien was based on a supposition that Sabazios could be worshipped in Orolaunum because the cults of the Oriental mysteries were formally established in Orolaunum in the period of the Roman emperor Claudius (41-54 AD).



A scene of a man encircled by a horned snake, relief, Luxembourg Museum Arlon

Firstly, I also excepted that Sabazios'cult could be symbolized on this relief scene from Arlon. But I changed my opinion after some period of making the iconographical comparisons on this theme. Sabazios and his symbols were usually depicted in different ways in various regions absolutely in another manner than we can see on the relief from Arlon. The god was represented on a horseback battling the chthonic serpent or he was often sitting on a

throne holding his staff of power. His appearance was a majestic one, another time a soft and an effeminate one because a part of his myth and cult was his self-castration, including the god's annual death and revival. Sabazios was often surrounded by the goddess Cybele or (especially in Greek iconography) by Demeter and Persephone. His cult (similarly, like the one of Cybele or Dionysos) was also accompanied by some musicians and ecstatic dancers who were keeping the small snakes with heads raised up. Sometimes we can even observe a snake twisting near the god's throne. The chthonic animals (including a horned snake, a frog, a tortoise, a lizard), as well as the triple Hecate, the bust of Mercury and the caduceus, the symbols of the sun and the moon, the zodiac symbols, and even a head of a ram on an altar, as a pine cone and some Greek inscriptions, appeared around the god on some representations. These attributes often decorated the reliefs and small votive hands which are associated with the cult of Sabazios in the Roman sites.



Sabazios and his symbols, relief, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Copenhagen

This above mentioned description of Sabazios's symbols gives us a proof that fundamental iconographical differences between the scene from Arlon and the iconography of Sabazios exist. The older opinion of some relation between the representation on this relief from Arlon and the cult of Sabazios is totally wrong. It is a true, that the Oriental cults (of the Great Mother Cybele and Attis, Sabazios, Isis and Sarapis) spread from Phrygia, Thrace and Italy into the Roman provinces and their unusual character of rites with a belief in rebirth became a successful idea among the people. But these cults flourished in the provincial towns like

Orolaunum mainly during the Flavian and Antonine dynasties at the period when above mentioned relief was already created.

Hence, I would like to present the interpretation of this scene on a relief from the museum of Arlon. I analysed different kinds of sources from the ancient history, the history of art and iconography as well as from the ancient religion and mythology related to the region of the ancient Orolaunum just before and during the Roman time when the province Gallia Belgica existed. I studied the Celtic iconography in the Museums in Copenhagen and the Gallo-Roman stone collections in the Museums in Arlon, Brussel, Luxembourg, Trier, Reims, Metz and London to gather some information on preferred motifs and symbols. On this base, I believe, we can give a correct answer on our question of the interpretation of this interesting and unique relief from Arlon.

The Description of the Relief Scene from the Luxembourg Museum at Arlon

The scene is depicted in a low relief on the upper part of a stone fragment (57cm x 114cm x 38cm) which is according to Lefébvre coming probably from a pillar of an indetermined form. M.E.Marien supposes that it was a part of a decoration on a small eight-sided monument which was later secondaryly used in Arlon's enclosure wall. In the modern time it was discovered on the street of the barracks in Arlon.

The most important part of this scene is placed in a small niche. There is a representation of the upper body of a bearded man with his hands upraised to heaven. The palms of both of his hands are turned to us in a typical gesture of praying. His arms are nude but we can see some garment like a mantle used by the Romans around his neck. Over the upper body of this prayer and around both of his hands a huge horned snake is crawling. The snake is raising its head above the head of the man who is turning to his left. The face of the man (with a gloomy expression and with the eyes looking to indefinite future) is giving evidence about his strong individuality, power and masculinity. It is depicted in a characteristic Roman realistic manner.

There is a part of an animal under the right hand of this man. Lefébvre describes it as a head of a dog but this head with an open muzzle and with wildly gazing eyes looks more like a wolf than a dog. Certainly, it has not the features of a house pet usually which accompanied an old man on some Greek ancient steles. It looks like a wolf or a special kind of a wild dog.

Just above this central scene a large half oval motif (with two volutes on both upper sides) is creating a background. This form known from the Gallo-Roman and Celtic art as a pelta is placed exactly above the head of the praying man. It seems, that a pelta motif was used there not only for creating a background for this scene but it also carried some meaning.

The main composition is surrounded from every side by one pilaster with vertical lines and composite capitals without an architrave. This architectural framework was a typical decoration on Roman steles and urns mainly from the late Augustian and the early Tiberian periods. Finally, there is a part of the decoration (close to the left hand of the worshipper) which seems to be destroyed. It could content a floral motif with some vegetation (leaves?) which was often used in iconography during the early imperial period.

The Interpretation of the Relief-Scene from Arlon

There is no doubt that the above described composition carried some meaningful message. The main accent was put to the central scene in the niche where a worshipper is located and surrounded by the attributes with a symbolic meaning. These symbols (a horned snake, a wild dog and a pelta) could explain a purpose of man's praying and they could help us to interpret the scene.

The most important symbol with a multiple significance on this scene is the huge snake. This reptile was associated with the earth (as a chthonic symbol), the growth of vegetation, fertility, rebirth and resurrection as well as with good fortune, healing and spirits of the departed or with aggression and power. Snake figures often accompanied some of the ancient gods from the Oriental, Greek, Celtic or Roman mythology. A snake with a horn (or with a crest like a dragon) was a companion of the Oriental gods as well as a companion of the Celtic god Cernunnos. It also became one of the symbols of Gallo-Roman gods, above all Jupiter but also Mercury and Mars.



A detail of a head of a dog from Arlon's relief

The second symbolic attribute - a wild dog (called „cu“ or „cou“) became, in Celtic mythology, a guard of The Other World something like Cerberos in the Greek myths. It could be a companion of a dead person or a messenger of the gods. In the Celtic iconography this image belonged to the motifs with a various meaning. The Celtic god Cernunnos was usually surrounded by some wild animals including a dog. A wild dog often accompanied the gods in function of a hunter, a healer or a warrior. Due to this reason the Gallo-Roman god of war Mars could also appear with a wild dog. This wild dog was often related to a fighter because during their fights the Gauls used a special sort of big, strong and aggressive dogs.



A detail of a wild dog on a scene on the Gundestrup cauldron, Nationalmusset Copenhagen

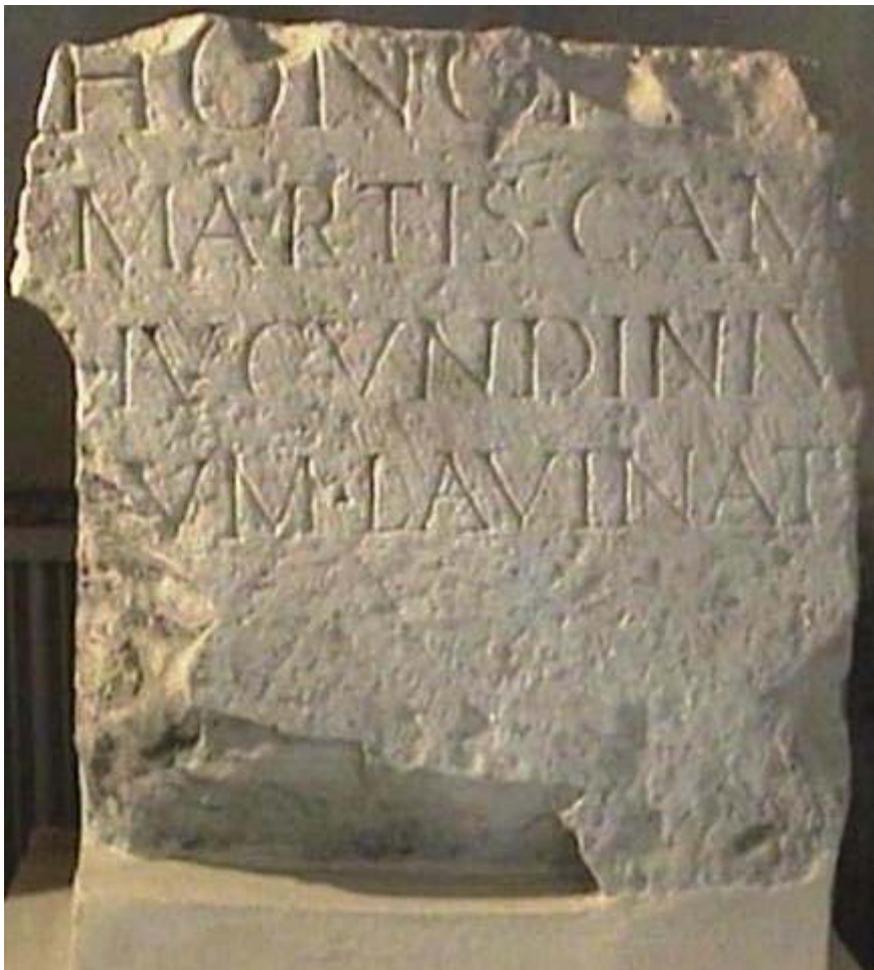
Finally, there is a motif placed above the head of the prayer called pelta (from the ancient Greek word „pelté“ = a small shield). Originally, a pelta was a light shield in a shape of a crescent, made of wood or wicker-work covered with a skin or leather and decorated with a Thracien design. It was used in Thrace and later on by the Greek and Roman troops, too. This form belonged to one of the typical decorative motifs of the late Celtic art.

All of these symbolic attributes - a horned snake, a wild dog, a pelta - on this relief from Arlon could be associated with - power, aggressivity, some struggle, war and with death. The question is who was represented on this scene as a worshipper with such symbols? Could not it be a prayer with those symbols related to the Gallo-Roman god of war Mars?

The region of ancient Orolaunum (before the Roman conquered the Gauls) was inhabited by the Treveri, a tribe of mixed Celtic and Germanic origins while the land around Durocortorum (Reims) was inhabited by a Gallic tribe of the Remi. When the Romans reached these regions (59-52 BC) local people firstly defend themselves against the newcomers. The Roman province Gallia Belgica with its capital in Durocortorum existed from 16 BC. After this period, local people adapted themselves relatively quickly to the Roman culture which began to flourish on the old roots. Elsewhere in the Gallo-Roman art can be seen that the familiar Celtic subject fused with classical Roman theme. Similarly, in their religion a large number of Celtic divinities equated (in the inscriptions) with classical beings can be found.

The tribal god of the Treveri was Lenus, originally a Celtic healer-god, who fused with Roman Mars. Lenus Mars was worshipped in his sanctuaries and temples located around Augusta Treverorum (Trier) and Pommern. The Treveri also worshipped Iovantucarus, a protector of youth as well as Loucetios and Camulus, the local gods who were also identified with Mars and perhaps even with Lenus.

Camulus was originally a Celtic god of sky and war and he became a tribal god of the Remi. He was honoured as Camulus Mars (or Mars Camulus) in his sanctuary at Durocortorum as well as in many places of this region, including Orolaunum. His name was mentioned on a stone in Durocortorum (Museum Saint-Remy Reims, 200 AD), in Orolaunum, Kruishoutern, London or even in Rome and Solin in Dalmatia ... He was also portrayed with a ramhorned head or with an attribute of a horned snake. Unfortunately, his representations were not common in the region of Orolaunum.



An inscription of Mars Camulus on a stone discovered in Durocortorum, Museum of Saint-Remy, Reims

Nevertheless, it seems that Mars with his various surnames occupied an important role in the religion of the ancient Orolaunum and its surroundings mainly in the first and second centuries AD. Mars became the Gallo-Roman god of war and tribe and he was a protector of the dead and the most prominent of the military gods that were worshipped by the Roman legions.

In these regions it was very common to make the grave stones or small memorials with a relief decoration on which a dead person and his profession was honoured and the religious or mythological motifs were depicted. The scenes were usually created by some Celtic symbols and by some typical Greco-Roman motifs which were fused together in the iconography.

According to the presented facts, we could suppose that the worshipper surrounded by the attributes of war and death on the relief from Arlon could represent a



A fibule in a form of pelta, Museum of Saint-Remi Reims

dead person who was in some important function in the army. A pelta shield above the head of the prayer and his Roman type of cloth he is wearing could be related to a professional position of this prayer. We have to mention that even during the imperial period the Romans did not nominate special priests by the army. Due to this reason, a general or a leader of a military regiment was responsible for the religious ceremonies. He could also appear in a role of thanksgiving or praying to the Gallo-Roman god of war, Mars, for some protection. The power of this god is symbolized by his attribute - a horned snake with an erected head placed in a superior position above the head of the worshipper. The head of a wild dog could also be related to the god of war who was (in this region) a protector of the dead.

Conclusions/Content Notes

Concluding, we have to eliminate the opinion associating this representation on relief from Arlon with the Oriental cult of a Phrygian-Thracian god of vegetation, Sabazios. The iconography of Sabazios was based on totally different motifs than we can see on this scene

from Arlon. A horned snake was the only one of the attributes of Sabazios as well as it was the only one of the attributes of the Celtic god Cernunnos and the Gallo-Roman gods Jupiter, Mercury and Mars. The other attributes depicted on the Arlon's relief – a pelta shield and a head of a wild dog - never appeared on the representations of Sabazios or between his symbols. We also have to note that the Oriental cults began to flourish in the Roman provinces mainly during the Flavian and Antonine dynasties (especially during the period of Antoninus Pius 138-161 AD.).



A bronze figure of Mars with horned snakes from Southbroom, Wiltshire, British Museum London

On the other hand, there was an opinion that this theme depicted on relief could be an allusion to some cult of a Celtic god. This idea is not totally accurate but it is close to the truth. The Celtic and Roman components fused on this scene are representing the cult of the Gallo-Roman god of war and tribe, Mars, named by various surnames (Camulus or Lenus). The religious character of the scene is evident from the gesture of the praying man who is pictured with the war-symbol (a pelta shield). This military attribute is pointing up a profession of a prayer who could be a leader of a Roman military regiment. He is praying to the god of war and tribe Camulus Mars. The god is symbolized by a horned snake depicted above the head of the prayer. The horned snake was one of the characteristic attributes of a Celtic god and it also became an attribute of the god of war, Mars, symbolizing his power and his aggressivity. Also a wild dog could be a companion of god symbolizing his protective role above the death.

The cult of the Gallo-Roman god of war and tribe, Camulus Mars, existed in the region of ancient Orolaunum. He was honored by local people as well as by Roman legions. Just outside Orolaunum (and in other places of this region around Durocortorum) Camulus Mars was worshipped in his sanctuaries and he was often mentioned by his name or symbols but it was not common to depict him.

The cult developed from the local and Celtic beliefs and absorbed many Roman ideas. After a long process of Romanization many different features, various motifs and the symbols were mixed together in the iconography. Due to this reason the interpretation is sometimes difficult because some motifs can have more than one meaning. On the relief scene from Arlon the typical attributes of a Celtic god (the horned snake, the wild dog) fused with some Greco-Roman motifs (the pelta shield was originally used by Greek and Roman troops). The scene was largely created on the base of some Roman artistic formal components. We can see a Roman realistic visage of a man and a Roman type of clothing, the location of the main composition in a small niche and an architectural framework of the scene. All of these features belonged to the characteristic form on the Roman steles and urns during the early imperial period.

The scene from Arlon was created probably around the middle of the first century AD or a little later. The style of the scene is earlier but Orolaunum became a commercial and an administrative center of Roman civilization with numerous public buildings and monuments with sculptured stones from the time of Claudius (41-54 AD). In the iconography an eclectic and an original style appeared which was also used on this unique relief exhibited in the Luxembourg Museum in Arlon.

Alena Trckova-Flamee, PhD

formely at Palacky University Olomouc, Czech Republic
alena.flamee@skynet.be

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