The Lesicheri Pillar and the Transfer of Funerary Architecture Trends from Bithynia to Roman Thrace

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Abstract: Ever since its first scholarly publication in 1882, the so-called Lesicheri Obelisk located not far from Nicopolis ad Istrum has been discussed in literature as a component of a greater complex of cultic or sepulchral character. The present paper studies the monument as an autonomous structure and attempts to offer a more precise dating for it. The authors discuss the pillar from the perspective of transfer of knowledge and patterns from Bithynia to Thrace in funerary context in the 2nd century AD, and explore the possible connection with elite families involved in emperor worship in both provinces.

Key words: funerary pillar, Roman imperial cult, transfer of patterns, Thrace, Bithynia, Lesicheri.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the landscape some 18 km west of the Roman city of Nicopolis ad Istrum has been dominated by an impressive funerary pillar known as the Lesicheri Obelisk. Unparalleled in the Eastern Balkans today, the monument had been the subject of popular writing for a while, before it was scientifically described and sketched for the first time by Austro-Hungarian explorer Felix Kanitz in the late 19th century (fig. 1). Back in his day, the structure was surrounded by numerous burial mounds and other significant architectural remains, including the base of a second identical pillar (Kanitz 1882, 4-7). Kanitz's observations, largely confirmed and supplemented by excavations conducted in 1987-1990, gave grounds for several interpretations and hypothetical reconstructions of this remarkable archaeological area. While research focused primarily on the pillar's surroundings, the monument itself was regarded mostly as an element of secondary importance within a larger complex, rather than an entity on its own.

By contrast, the present paper intends to focus specifically on the Lesicheri Obelisk as an individual structure and offers an interpretation of the monument as a funerary pillar with possible origins in Bithynia, through a comparative analysis of similar structures. Furthermore, the article attempts to discuss the possible connection between the transfer of funerary architecture trends and the novelties of the imperial cult in the two neighbouring provinces.

THE MONUMENT AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

The Lesicheri Obelisk (fig. 2), also known as Markov Kamak, Dikilitaş, and Stalbo throughout its existence (Шкорпил / Шкорпил 1898, 57;
Църов 1996, 111), is located about 3 km south-east of the contemporary village of Lesicheri in the vicinity of the ancient city of Nicopolis ad Istrum. Its remarkably well-preserved height measures ca. 12.6 m (fig. 3)\(^2\). Small differences in its overall elevation are visible on each side and are due to the slight northwest slanting of the monument nowadays. The base of the second pillar recorded by Kanitz, its shaft now lost, is situated some 8 m to the east of the first one (fig. 4).

The surviving pillar consists of a four-stepped fundament and a vertical body made of rectangular stone blocks of varying height\(^3\) (Kanitz 1882, 4-7) placed atop each other, with no mortar binding. The stone used is of the local Hotnitsa type, originating from the homonymous limestone quarry located nearby (Бешевлиев 1939, 11).

All steps of the fundament are heavily ruined and significant conclusions about their possible decoration cannot be drawn. The only fact that can be certainly observed is that the edges of the middle two fundament steps have some moulding.

The body of the monument features two distinct parts. The lower section (ca. 3 m high) occupies almost one third of its currently preserved size and is shaped like a base. It consists of a profiled socle, a five-ashlar shaft, and a Doric cornice on top. While the Doric cornice can be observed on all four sides, the socle profiles are finished on three of them only: the northern side is only roughly treated, which might indicate its function as the rear of the monument. The Doric cornice also plays the role of a fundament for the upper section of the monument.

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\(^2\) The most recent measurements and documentation of the monument were initiated by the authors and conducted in April 2017 by architect Milena Kamenova, to whom they express their sincerest gratitude. The task would not be completed without the kind cooperation of Kalin Chakarov (Pavlikeni History Museum). Acknowledgements are also due to Ivan Tsarov (Veliko Tarnovo History Museum), Lyudmil Vagalinski (NAIM-BAS) and Nicolay Sharankov (Sofia University) for their support.

\(^3\) Approximate average dimensions: height: between 0.40 and 0.60 m; width: ca. 1.60 m; thickness: ca. 1.20 m. Cf. also Kanitz 1882, 6.
monument – the obelos – that comprises a profiled socle (as a base) and a shaft, 11 stone blocks high⁴ (ca. 7 m). The first ashlar on top of the socle further features a fillet and its lowest portion is a prolongation of the socle-base profile. At the same time, it serves to ‘regulate’ the width and thickness for all of the following ashlars that construct the obelos, slightly narrowing towards the top. In contrast to that, the first stone block of the lower section does not feature any fillet, but is placed roughly cut directly on the socle and differs from it with its smaller dimensions. On the south side of the second ashlar from top to bottom a small empty niche of unclear function is visible. Apart from the described profiling treatments and the niche, there are no other architectural decorations visible on the monument, nor are there any traces of inscriptions. Having in mind the roughly profiled socle of the northern side and the niche on the opposite one, it can be assumed that the main approach to the front of the monument must have been from the south.

According to the description and drawings by F. Kanitz (1882, 4-7), the pillar once stood among several tumuli, some of which contained stone-built tombs, and was also surrounded by fragments of monumental architecture⁵. Furthermore, the traveller sketched the base of a similar pillar ‘dessen herabgestürzter, aufgelöst in die einzel-
nen Steinwürfel, sich merkwürdig in regelmäßiger Linie staffelförmig ins Erdreich eingebohrt hatte’ (Kanitz 1882, 4-5) close to the monument and whose base only is visible today6. Finally, some inscribed stones with partly readable texts were in sight as well.

There is not much to see around the pillar today7. The first planned excavations in this location were conducted over a century after Kanitz’s visit, in the period 1987-1990, by I. Tsarov. They confirmed to a great extent the observations of earlier scholars. The investigation revealed the foundation of the twin-pillar recorded in Kanitz’s sketch (Първов 1988, 104; 1989, 104), as well as some other architectural fragments, among them an impressive pediment-corner with an acroterion base, and a sizeable fragment of the coffered ceiling (2.70 x 1.60 m) cut from a single stone block (Първов 1996, 112). Further finds were a frieze-architrave ornamented with Ionic and Lesbian cymatium, fragments of an Ionic base and a capital, a lion statue and a shattered sculpture of the Thracian rider (Първов 1996, 112-113, 118, figs. 5-8)8. Finally, according to the reports of 1990 and 1991, two badly damaged bases have been revealed, one of them measuring 4.50 x 3.80 m (cf. Първов 1990, 75; 1991, 106).

Early interpretations

For the very early interpretations of the monument and the area, scholars referred solely to the drawings and the descriptions by Kanitz and the Škorpil brothers. Emphasis was put mostly on the challenging reconstruction of the surroundings. The Lesicheri pillars were regarded by Kanitz himself as the piers of the aqueduct identified nearby, remains of which were visible to the traveller (Kanitz 1882, 7). The Škorpil brothers perceived the monuments as a remains of which were visible to the traveller (Kanitz 1882, 7). The

Nobody has been revealed, one of them measuring 4.50 x 3.80 m (cf. Първов 1990, 75; 1991, 106).

6 The fallen ashlars from the second pillar most likely collapsed due to an earthquake, which would explain the linear manner they came down. Similar examples can be observed at the Apollo sanctuary in Didyma where columns have fallen due to earthquakes and have been preserved in their damaged condition (cf. Knackfuss 1941, 21-22, F 53 Pl. 39, F 54 Pl. 166, F 55 Pl. 185). The ‘domino-effect’ is also visible in the fallen pyramidal-like tomb in Hierapolis (Nyquist 2014, 10).

7 In the course of the 20th century many of the objects once surrounding the pillar disappeared, probably reused in the nearby country road. Similarly, from the several tumuli reported by F. Kanitz (1882, 4), only one located ca. 70 m south of the monument is still visible today. An unknown number of them disappeared over the last century, mainly due to regular agricultural activity.

8 According to I. Tsarov, the rider statue is an individual monument and has to be regarded separately from the pediment with a rider image seen in the sketch by Kanitz. Furthermore, the author believes that the statue was drawn by F. Kanitz deliberately in the tympanum, thus seeking an additional artistic effect (cf. Първов 1996, 113).

9 That interpretation was introduced by I. Tsarov based on the results of the British-Bulgarian survey in the area, which may suggest the existence of a villa, cf. Първов 1996, 113, with footnote 20. It was accepted also by Poultier 2002, 19; Vladkova 2012, 195 and Чакъров 2014, 54. The villa identification is however refuted by V. Dintchev with the argument that a villa complex would not contain a public sanctuary (Динчев 2006, 101, note 5).
Obelisk as a funerary monument was also supported by S. Conrad (Conrad 2004, 20) and M. Scholz (Scholz 2012, 218-219). Finally, in his recent study K. Chakarov (Чакъров 2014, 53-54) accepted a function of the two pillars as gate posts and also paralleled them to the funerary monuments in North Africa. As for the date, he related the obelisk to the Libyan specimens and accepted the 2nd – 3rd century AD.

THE PILLAR AS A FUNERARY MONUMENT AND ITS ORIGINS

The interpretations of the Lesicheri Obelisk as a structure other than a sepulchral monument are not substantiated by much solid evidence. Against its assumption as an aqueduct pier is its unusual form, slightly narrowing towards the top, as well as its location away from the water supply course specified later by G. Seure (Seure 1915, 82-83). Furthermore, no features suggest any analogy to a victory monument (e.g. an inscription or a historical relief), nor did Tsarov's excavations of the environs in 1987-1990 (Църов 1988, 103-104; 1989, 104-105; 1990, 75; 1991, 106; 1996, 112-113) reveal any indications of such there. In the same way, there is no structural evidence that would suggest any architectonic connection between the pillar and the surrounding ruins; or its function as either an ante of a temple, or a monumental gate post.

To the contrary, given that the surrounding landscape was covered by *tumuli* (of which only one of considerable size survives today due to the continual cultivation of the land – fig. 5) and the epigraphic evidence of funerary character that shall be discussed below, an explanation for the Lesicheri Obelisk in a sepulchral context appears most reasonable (Бешевлиев 1939, 12-13; Църов 1996, 114; Conrad 2004, 20; Scholz, 2012, 218-219). Still, it is not clear whether the monument(s) served as the actual resting place of human remains, or rather as a memorial; the foundations of a small building discovered next to them gives reason to Tsarov to propose that a small family mausoleum may be related to it (Църов 1996, 112-113). Regarding the so far proposed analogies (Бешевлиев 1961, 14, fig. 4; Vladkova 2012, 195; Чакъров 2014, 53-54, 68-69, figs. 20-21) – the obelisk-shaped tombs of Wadi Merdum (Msletten north), Wadi Ghirza and Wadi el-Amud – some important considerations must be outlined. Unlike the Lesicheri Obelisk which was built as a solid pillar-shaped monument without any hollow space inside, the Libyan examples (Scott et al. 1996, 173; 178, fig. 26/7, cat. # Md 1 (Wadi Merdum); 119-120, cat. # Gh 128 (Ghirza), 165; 167, fig. 25/3, cat. # Lm1 (Wadi el-Amud))10 are, above all, constructed as tombs and contain a burial chamber. Moreover, the North African tombs feature a different silhouette. They consist of a socle-base, most often two storeys high, and a pyramid-shaped top. Finally, they often display architectonic decoration, such as columns, pilasters, busts, reliefs and freezes with floral motifs and tendrils (Mattingly / Dore 1996, 146) – ornamental trends characteristic of Western Roman iconography11, none of which traceable in the Lesicheri pillar.

M. Scholz was the first scholar to propose that the parallels for Lesicheri are to be sought in Asia Minor. The absence of reliefs and other forms of embellishment directly applied on the monument, as well as the fact that the pillar does not imitate a building, such as a mausoleum or an *aedicula*, are interpreted by the author as indications of an affiliation to Eastern Mediterranean funerary monuments.

10 In the Libyan valleys similar tombs appear also in Wadi Umm el-Agerem (Scott et al. 1996, 20, 25 fig. 1/8, cat. # Ag 2), Wadi Antar (Scott et al. 1996, 33, 38 fig. 3/6, cat. # An 1a), Wadi Migdal (Scott et al. 1996, 200, 204, fig 27/4a, cat. # Mg 1), Wadi NTd (Scott et al. 1996, 261-262, fig. 33/7, cat. # Nf 30-31).

11 Cf. for instance a richly decorated funerary pillar in Basel / Schmidt 1967, 96 figs. 1-2. Furthermore, one exceptional example in this regard is the cenotaph in Limyra that belonged to C. Caesar, the adopted son and designated successor of Augustus, who died in AD 4. Monument and pillars have been deliberately ornamented by following decorative patterns originating and widely spread in the city of Rome (cf. Plattner 2012, 249-256 with fig. 1).
In fact, funerary pillars have long traditions in Asia Minor. In Central Lycia, for instance, 50 monuments have been attested so far, dating from the Late Archaic to the Hellenistic period (Marksteiner 2002, 219-225). Therefore, the monument type consisting of a stepped fundament and a pillar appears to be a rather common funerary feature, although mostly made of monolithic blocks (Schürr 2015, 154-155, 161, fig. 1/3 – for a specimen from Isidna).

The authors of this paper would like to propose another parallel for the monument, located much closer geographically and more similar in appearance, that has somehow remained outside the discourse on the origins of the Lesicheri pillar so far. The structure under discussion (fig. 6a) is a funerary pillar situated 5 km north-west of Nicaea in Bithynia (modern-day Iznik in Turkey), popularly known as the Nicaean Obelisk, or (again) Dikilitaş (Schneider 1943, 7, Pl. 1-2; Merkelbach 1987, 33-34, Pl. 4; IK Iznik 85). The Bithynian monument, like the one at Lesicheri, never toppled down and accordingly inspired travelogues and scholarly curiosity for ages – cf. Dr. John Covel’s 17th-century description and sketch (Covel 1676-1679, folio 9r) and many others. The obelisk near Nicaea is ca. 12 m tall in total and shows an identical structure to that at Lesicheri: a three-stepped fundament and a pillar divided into a lower (‘base’) and an upper part – the obelos, here of a triangular cross-section (Schneider 1943, 7, Pl. 1-2). Likewise, the Nicaean monument was not cut from a single block, but was erected by mounting grey-whitish marble blocks on top of each other without mortar12. Some decoration was applied at the uppermost step in the form of lion paws, much like the widespread theatre or stadium seat ornaments. On the socle cornice there is a palmette motif, still visible today. Furthermore, holes on the socle and on the second block of the obelos have been interpreted as intended for metal clamps that supported bronze statues or other decoration that cannot be identified today (Schneider 1943, 7). According to an inscription placed on the first obelos-ashlar (fig. 6b), the monument was erected for C. Cassius Philiscus from Nicaea, possibly in the first half of the 2nd century AD (Schneider 1943, 7, Pl. 1-2; IK Iznik 85, Pl. 9). The dating of the monument rests on the reconstruction of the family tree of the deceased, based on his relatives known from earlier monuments (IK Iznik 85; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 110; Nyquist 2014, 14-15; also see text below). Like in Lesicheri, it remains unclear where the actual body of

12 The monolithic blocks used here were of greater height. The base (height: 2.70 m; width: 2.03-2.30 m), besides the socle and the cornice-stone, was made of two tiers, and the obelos part above the socle-stone – of five (Nyquist 2014, 15).
the Nicaean deceased was kept – whether it was interred in an underground chamber, or if the ashes were put in an urn and built-in the obelisk (Nyquist 2014, 15).

Similarly to the Lesicheri Obelisk, the Nicaean pillar did not stand alone. A now lost second obelisk was also set up near Lake Ascania. What remains today is only the record of a remarkable inscription once visible on it (Anth. Gr. 15.4-8 = IK Iznik 85; Merkelbach / Stauber 2001, 159-163) – five epigrams for the priest Sacerdos and his wife Severa that date the monument to ca. 130s AD (see below about this date). With regard to its structure, one cannot say more than what is already suggested in the epigrams: they emphasize the outstanding height of the monument and its gilded sharp end, οὐράνιον τὸ μνᾶμα καὶ ἁ χρυσῆ λατος ἀκτίς (IK Iznik 85, second and third epigram). The mention of the pillar as a tall ‘pyramid’ – τὰν ἀελίῳ γείτονα πυραμίδα (IK Iznik 85, first epigram) may suggest a pointed top of the structure or, perhaps, a triangular cross-section for its obelos, identical to the Philiscus monument. There are indications that other funerary obelisks were also visible in the same area at Lake Ascania by the road to Nicomedia (Anth. Gr. 7.701).

A comparison between the two surviving obelisks in Bithynia and Thrace reveals similarities not only in the general appearance of both monuments, but also in their architeconic execution. In both cases the lower part is ca. 3 m high and seems to follow the same construction scheme: plainly profiled socle, basic shaft, and profiled cornice, on which lies the base for the obelos. Furthermore, one should note the crafting of the fillet-detail at the lower portion of the first stone block of the upper section (the obelos) as an extension of the socle that appears identical. The dissimilarities between the two monuments are in terms of the cross-sections of the obeloi – triangular for Nicaea and rectangular for Lesicheri – as well as the utter lack of decoration on the Lesicheri shaft in comparison to the Nicaean pillar. The suggested existence of attached sculptural decoration to the obelos cannot be certainly proved either for the Nicaean pillar, or for the Lesicheri monument (cf. Scholz 2012, 218). Another discrepancy can be seen in the fact that while the two (or more) Nicaean obelisks appear to be erected for and by separate individuals, were placed slightly apart from each other and perhaps differed some in their appearance, the two pillars near Nicopolis ad Istrum seem to be designed as twin monuments, erected simultaneously and right next to each other.

From a typological perspective, however, there is unmistakable similarity between the monuments in Lesicheri and Nicaea. Both surviving pillars were probably set up at approximately the same time (Hadrianic 2nd century or slightly after, as suggested by the Nicaean piece) and their shape belongs to the same Egyptizing trend in architecture of the time. Despite the different cross-sections and minor ornamental divergences, the construction technique and the remaining physical features are identical: the general size and silhouette, the tripartite structure, the architectural details. These observations allow us to consider the example(s) of Nicaea as the closest so far known parallel for the Lesicheri Obelisk(s), and respectively, to narrow the date of the latter down to the decades between the 120s and the 140s AD.
Epigraphic evidence

The epigraphic evidence related to the pillars both in Lesicheri and Nicaea may shed some light on further possible connections between the two monuments in terms of their social and cultural context. A fragmentary inscription found near the Lesicheri pillar was sketched by Kanitz, but was eventually lost. It provoked various readings and interpretations by later scholars, and is recorded in *IGBulg* II 701 as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Κ<λ>(αύδιος) Οὐά}[λ]<η>ς(?) \text{ βουλ(ευτής) καὶ ἱερεὺς Ῥώμ[ης ζ]ῶν καὶ φρονῶν ἐαυ[τοῦ] | καὶ τοῦ πατρός καὶ μητρὸς μνίας χάριν \text{ ἐποίησ[α].}
\end{align*}
\]

This funerary inscription was set up by a Claudius Valens or a Quintus Julius (cf. G. Mihailov’s commentary in *IGBulg* about variant readings) for himself and his parents. He was a member of the city council, most likely in the nearest city of Nicopolis ad Istrum, and a priest of the goddess Roma, an office closely related to emperor worship. Due to the circumstances of discovery and the fact that it seemingly belonged to a horizontal architectural feature, there is no definite evidence about the original location of the inscribed stone and its connection to the pillar. The surface of the surviving obelisk does not bear any ancient inscriptions – perhaps it was once faced with slabs, or it did not have any at all, or perhaps it was the twin pillar that originally bore some epitaphs. All authors so far have generally accepted a link between the text and the pillar \(^{13}\) because of the insignificant distance between them. Some attribute both the inscription and the obelisks to the small building right next to them that has been interpreted as a family tomb (cf. Πιστροφ 1996, 112-113). As long as the pillar shows no constructive bond to the structures of its environment, this interpretation remains tentative, and we should refrain from identifying with certainty the ‘owner’ of the pillars with the person who set up the funerary inscription. Moreover, the shape of letters in Kanitz’s drawing would suggest an inscription later than Hadrianic times, towards the

\(^{13}\) Following G. Mihailov’s entry in *IGBulg* II, the inscription has been widely considered to pertain to the construction of the pillar by all later scholars who dealt with the monument, including one of the authors of this article in a previous study – see Raycheva 2015, 27.

![Fig. 6. a The so-called Nicaean obelisk today; b the inscription – a detail (photos: M. Raycheva)](image)
end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd century, and if related to the pillar, it was then set up some decades after its construction.

It appears safe to suggest that due to the immediate proximity, the pillars, the inscription and the small building belonged to the same premises, perhaps as monuments within the burial plot of the same family, but may have served different members of that family. Unfortunately, the scant evidence and the fragmented state of the name do not allow for much deliberation on the ancestry of Claudius Valens / Quintus Julius. He apparently possessed Roman citizenship and certainly held at least two public offices – one administrative, one religious, and probably owned some land outside the city. The choice of language rather points to a non-Roman origin of the person, and perhaps to a local, Greek-speaking (Asia Minor?) family. It is worth to observe his involvement in the cult of Dea Roma which is comparatively rare for Thrace, but nevertheless practiced in some places, such as Augusta Traiana (Raycheva 2015, 29-30).

As for the Nicaean obelisk, the very short inscription on it informs us that it was built for C. Cassius Philiscus who died at the age of 83 (IK Iznik 85; Merkelbach 1987, 20; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 110; Nyquist 2014, 14-15). Although not much is known about his own life, other epigraphic and literary sources from Nicaea indicate that the deceased belonged to a family of dedicated citizens. Many Cassii were active in the public affairs of Bithynia from the mid-1st century on, and especially in Nicaea, where at least six of them are known by name (Fernoux 2004, 175-176; Madsen 2005, 9-10; 2009, 94-95). The Nicaean Cassii branch included an older distinguished relative of Philiscus (most likely an uncle), C. Cassius Chrestus who, in the late 1st century AD, was an epimeletes, but most importantly – an archpriest and a sebastophantes (IK Iznik 25, 51, 116; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 112; Madsen 2009, 90) – both offices tightly linked to the imperial cult. The probable date of Philiscus’ death has been calculated to ca. AD 120, based on the epigraphic evidence of his father’s career (Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 110).

Further information about the social standing of the owners of funerary obelisks in Nicaea is offered by the now lost second monument. It bore five epigrams (Anth. Gr. 15.4-8 = IK Iznik 89) for the priest Sacerdos and his wife Severa (Merkelbach / Stauber 2001, 159). The lengthy metrical inscription related the life and career of Sacerdos as prominent benefactor and hereditary ‘celestial orgiophantes’ – in all likelihood, a poetic way of denoting a priest of the imperial cult15. The ‘Ausonian (i.e. Roman) Zeus’ (Αὐσονίοιο Διός) mentioned in the inscription is perhaps a reference to the emperor Hadrian himself, whom Sacerdos met personally, possibly while serving as ambassador for Nicaea during the Panhellenic games in Athens (Fernoux 2004, 404-405; Nyquist 2014, 11-14). It is worth to note that the deceased is known by his cognomen only, the very matching Latin Sacerdos, but no proper name and filiation are mentioned (possibly due to his wide popularity and the demands of metrics). His wife’s name implies Roman roots or at least a family in possession of Roman citizenship. This circumstance is interestingly combined with the Doric Greek used in 3 out of 5 epigrams, interpreted as various poets contributing to a deserving citizen (Bowie 2016, 16, 20). We can assume that here as well we are dealing with

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14 For the title and its connection with the imperial cult see Nilsson 1950, 19; Robert 1960, 322; Pleket 1965, 340-346; Friesen 2001, 114-115.

15 This opinion is supported by the majority of scholars – e.g. Merkelbach 1987, 33 and most of the later authors. It has been proposed also that Sacerdos was a priest of a mystery cult – largely due to the English translation used where the term is given as hierophant (Paton 1918) and the ‘lack of reference to the cult’, which ‘fits the pattern of secrecy’ (Nyquist 2014, 18). However, one can argue that precisely the lack of reference may result from the rather well-known occupation and deeds of Sacerdos. The hereditary aspect of the office, the special wording of the inscription and especially the designation of Hadrian as Zeus are also in favor of this idea.
another ‘Romanized’ local or at least a Greek-speaking member of the elite with a stellar administrative and religious career. It has been recently suggested that he may also be related to the Nicaean Cassii, his full name possibly being C. Cassius Sacerdos, although this idea has not been convincingly proven (Bowie 2016, 19). Of significance for the dating of this monument in ca. AD 131-137 is one of the texts praising the extraordinary engagement of Sacerdos in connection with the reconstruction of the city after the earthquake of AD 120-121 (IK Iznik 89, second and fourth epigram).

A third Nicaean obelisk may be indicated in another preserved epigram from Nicaea, mentioning a tall and glittering monument by Lake Ascania set up for an Achaeus (Anth. Gr. 7.701), but unfortunately this cannot be substantiated without further evidence (Merkelbach / Stauber 2001, 164; Nyquist 2014, 9).

It is important to observe the underlying connection between families of Roman citizenship involved in the public sphere and particularly imperial worship in Nicaea, and these imposing funerary monuments that belong to the Egyptizing trend of the 2nd century. It can be suggested that the obelisk in Thrace, so far dated roughly to the 2nd – 3rd century, was probably erected around the same time as the Nicaean one – in the 120s – 130s AD or a little after, as part of the similar political and cultural tendencies occurring in the two neighbouring provinces.

**Bithynians in Thrace**

The Bithynian influence on several spheres of life in Thrace, from architecture to imperial cult practices and beyond, should be viewed in a broader context. Nicopolis ad Istrum and its environs appear as one of the centres in Thrace where many Bithynians are recorded (e.g. IGBulg II 600, 674, 667, 668, 688 (= IGBulg V 5232), 690; Velkov 1993, 212, # 5; Шаранков 2014, 28-31, fig. 1-2).

The significant role of Asia Minor craftsmen in Roman Thrace is frequently noted, especially with regard to stone working and architectural decoration (cf. Dimitrov’s paper in this volume), and many of the documented examples concern settlers namely from Bithynia. This is attested, for instance, by the existence of a collegium of Nicomedian *lithoxoai* (stone craftsmen) in Nicopolis ad Istrum in the 2nd century (IGBulg II 674). Their visible and consistent influence on architecture can be traced not only in public buildings, but also in terms of funerary structures. Bithynian craftsmen were the intermediaries of many fashionable patterns brought from the East, and it is especially true in Hadrian’s time. This is supported by the adoption of terms characteristic for Egypt in the sepulchral language, such as the ‘pyramids’, evidenced both in Nicaea and Nicopolis ad Istrum (IGBulg II 668, IK Iznik 89).

Apart from tangible monuments, the Bithynians in Thrace left a great impact on cultural and religious life as well. At least one cult – that of Zeus Okkonenos – characteristic for the eastern and southern city territory of Nicaea, where 8 dedications have been found so far (Öztürk / Öztürk 2015, 124), was practiced in Nicopolis ad Istrum as well. This is seen in no less than three cases (IGBulg II 599, 718; Velkov 1993, 212, # 5). The dedicator in the last inscription – Πάλουμβος Ἀπολλωνίδου – was a Nicaean who maintained in Nicopolis the cult
so typical of his homeland in the late 2nd – the early 3rd century AD (Velkov 1993, 212, # 5).

It is, then, no wonder that some novelties of emperor worship also reached Thrace namely through the Eastern settlers. Bithynian involvement in imperial cult practices in Thrace can be viewed both in individual careers (as part of civic duties, or spontaneous) and in the form of organized group activity, such as various social clubs or associations.

The individual stories recorded on stone usually concern Bithynians that moved to (and often settled permanently in) Thrace. These people were involved in emperor worship, either in the framework of their official responsibilities, or on their own initiative. They were traditionally active participants in city administration: some of them held positions on municipal level, predominantly as members of city councils, or took various priesthods. Others were simply private individuals with no indication of public career, who took part in imperial cult activities. An inscription namely from Nicopolis ad Istrum documents the construction of a Hypsistos temple for the health and well-being of Hadrian and Sabina. It was sponsored by a certain Iason, son of Apphus, from Prusias ad Hypium in Bithynia, no later than mid-136 AD (Шаранков 2014, 28-31). The Hypsistos cult points again to a considerable Eastern and particularly Bithynian presence in the city in the second century. The mixed names of individuals of Thracian and Asia Minor ancestry might hint at a Bithynian origin as well.

Organized activity is also evident in Nicopolis ad Istrum. For instance, a society of hymn-singers (ὑμνῳδοί) with at least two native Nicaean members functioned here in the 2nd – 3rd century AD. The collegium's activity involved dedications for the well-being of the emperors, and musical performances in honour of the rulers, as seen in three altars from the 2nd century AD (IGBulg II 666, 667, 668, see also IGBulg V 5219). One of them is set up by the association itself for the health of the emperors, while the other two are dedicated to the collegium by the two Nicaeans. Apart from linking the organization explicitly to imperial worship, these examples also reveal a direct connection with Bithynia. The altars set up for the hymn-singers themselves use epithets such as φιλοσέβαστοι, 'Augustus-loving', and ἱερονῖκαι, 'winners of the sacred games' (although it is unclear whether those games took place in Nicopolis proper or elsewhere). Hymn-singing is attested only once elsewhere in Thrace so far – in a single piece of evidence from Perinthos – a funerary inscription set up for the deceased daughter of one such performer of unknown origin, with a date after AD 212 (Perinthos-Herakleia 158). These societies were popular throughout the Roman imperial age in Asia Minor where they were also engaged in the observances of emperor worship by composing and singing hymns (Oliver 1941, 92-93; Mellor 1975, 192); in Smyrna, they appear to be members of the local gerousia (ISmyrna 109, 161). Their introduction in Thrace possibly happened through Bithynian agents.

Emperor worship institutions and individual offices meant promising career paths everywhere in the Roman East, and Thrace and Bithynia were no exception. These activities provided opportunity for public manifestations both for middle-class people that sought affordable membership in societies like the hymn-singers, and for the elite families that could build imposing funerary monuments. The
Lesicheri pillar indirectly confirms these observations and reveals the deeper cultural impact Bithynians had on Thrace – not only through the replication of architectural patterns, but also in the cultural and religious life, one aspect of which is the transfer of fashionable trends in funerary monuments that mark the social status of the higher classes in the cities.

**Conclusion**

With considerable evidence of numerous settlers from Bithynia (especially Nicaeans and Nicomedians) that came to Nicopolis ad Istrum from the 2nd century AD, the connection between the pillars of Thrace and Bithynia is hardly surprising. The two monuments illustrate another aspect of the transfer of patterns into Thrace, in terms of usage of certain monument forms in the Eastern Balkans.

Apart from their general layout, construction technique and execution, the pillars in Thrace and Bithynia might share another similarity – the individuals that erected them. The obelisks were perhaps used in the first half of the 2nd century as an indicator of high social status by members of rich families in possession of Roman citizenship, very likely engaged in emperor worship offices. The funerary pillars seem to have appeared in Hadrian’s rule and can be therefore regarded as a Hadrianic phenomenon, influenced by the Egyptizing trend of the time, which can establish the date of the Lesicheri obelisk somewhere around the 120s – 130s AD, with a possible delay of a decade. It can be suggested that these fashion novelties among the elites in Nicopolis ad Istrum were perhaps set and executed, or at least strongly influenced by Bithynians settled in the city.

While the phenomenon occurred repeatedly in Nicaea and was performed by a few individuals, it seems that the pillar(s) in Thrace are encountered only once. Therefore, we cannot claim a complete adoption of that sepulchral architecture trend. Strictly speaking, the emergence of funerary obelisks in Nicopolis ad Istrum is rather to be labelled ‘transfer of a pattern’. This contrasts to full ‘adoption’, which connotes a repeated usage and even further development of certain trends.

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