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Artistic Bilingualism in the Greek Poleis of the Northern Black Sea: a Note on the Olbian Kouros in the State Hermitage Museum

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Abstract

The contact between Greek artistic tradition and that of the local populations in the Northern Black Sea area has traditionally been addressed in oppositional and hierarchical terms, often employing categories determined by ethnic criteria. This trend is not only limited to this specific area, but is a phenomenon that concerns the so-called “frontiers” of the Greek world, such as Magna Graecia and Sicily. By adopting a non-hierarchical perspective, the well-known kouros from the gymnasium of Olbia is here reconsidered as case-study. This object has always puzzled scholars, often leading to rather bizarre interpretations. By contextualizing it in the local panorama and comparing it, in particular, with the kurgan stelae, the hybrid status of this artefact is highlighted, both from a formal, technical, and iconographic point of view. Since this conclusion suits better the archaeological evidence of Archaic Olbia, this analysis ultimately prompts a reconsideration of the materials from the Northern Black Sea poleis according to more flexible paradigms, enabling the dialectical exchange between various languages developing within the same “artistic space”.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Greek colonization, with its movement of people and artefacts, led to the spread of artistic traditions developed in Greece over a wide area, ranging from Spain to the Near East, from Italy to the Black Sea. In most cases, the territories involved in this migration were themselves occupied or close to those inhabited by local populations, who also had their own artistic or craft traditions that the Greeks inevitably came into contact with. Defining the nature of this contact and interpreting the artistic production of these areas at the edge of the Greek world has often been a challenging issue. As Caspar Meyer has recently pointed out in relation to the Northern Black Sea area, the reason for this difficulty lies in the binary model with which Greco-Scythian art is often approached, build as it is on a series of essentialist categories, such as naturalism and abstractness, intimately bound to the two ethnic poles involved, Greeks and indigenous populations, respectively.¹ It is therefore not surprising that the interaction between “Greek” and “local” artistic practices has mainly been delineated in oppositional and conflictual terms.² This is particularly clear when it comes to iconographic and stylistic issues regarding the materials produced in the Greek cities on the Northern Coast. Indeed, most scholars emphasize the incompatibility between the two languages:

«In terms of style there is no real compromise [...] there was no way in which two such strong and opposed aesthetic principles could combine»;³

«Thus, the Scythian Animal Style in its formal features and semantic content may be considered a direct opposite of the Greek art of the Archaic and Classical periods»;⁴

1 Meyer 2013, 1–37.

2 Bothmer 1962, esp. 162–164; Blawatsky 1965; Farkas 1977; Stähler & Nieswandt 1991/1992, esp. 102; Boardman 1994; 1996; Jacobson 1995; Andreev 1996; Oppermann 2004, 37 (in relation to sculpture); Butyagin 2007; Trofimova 2007; Morel 2010; Redfern 2012, 96. See also the catalogue entries of Piotrovsky *et alii* 1986; Aruz *et alii* 2000. A relative exception is represented by Reeder 1999, 50–56.

3 Boardman 1996, 217.

4 Andreev 1996, 9.

«There was also significant incompatibility of the artistic systems of these worlds»;⁵

« [...] mais les caractéristiques des arts indigènes n'affectent guère l'art grec an lui-même ».⁶

When dealing with materials coming from kurgan burials in his seminal *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, John Boardman provides a consistent overview of Greco-Scythian art.⁷ However, this binary approach re-emerges when he arranges the record into three groups: Greek objects of purely Greek style and inspiration; objects of Greek manufacture but Scythian shape; and objects of local type «among which we find examples which seem Greek in both subject and execution, or Greek in subject but *not* execution, as well as the purely Scythian».⁸ Without entering into the discussion on this partition, it is nevertheless undeniable that the proposed framework is strictly dichotomous, since it is above all focused on revealing what is in fact ascribable to the single artistic strands, clearly labelled in ethnic terms, and not the hybrid interaction between them.⁹ A similar approach emerges from Esther Jacobson's analysis of the evidence, which leads her to conclude that all objects from the kurgans were made by Scythian craftsmen who gradually incorporated Greek forms and iconography into their language.¹⁰ The aim still remains to assign an identity (again, ethnic) to the artists, and to define what is "Scythian" and "Greek".¹¹ The non-dialectic character of this dichotomy is often the consequence of a hierarchization between the two languages. Although this is an area of great interaction between different cultures, the artistic manifestations of this *milieu* have mostly been analyzed according to the paradigm of "Hellenization", at least since the first seminal account of Rostovtzeff.¹² Greeks are portrayed as

5 Trofimova 2007, 22.

6 Morel 2010, 287.

7 Boardman 1994, 192–217.

8 Boardman 1994, 196–197.

9 On this methodological issue, cf. Jacobson 1995, 4–8; Meyer 2013, 2.

10 Jacobson 1995.

11 Caution in using these categories is equally expressed by Braund 2005, 7; Meyer 2013, 3, 121.

12 Rostovtzeff 1922, *e.g.* 102–104; Boardman 1996, 217: «[...] for the most part what narrative there is appears in Greek form and was presumably intelligible to any Scythian who had become Hellenized to an adequate degree»; Trofimova 2007, 22: «The ability to adapt only confirms the fact that the Greeks were the *Kulturträger* (carriers of culture) from the beginning to the end of the existence of the northern Pontic cities, in spite of the gradual increase in local influence». Before Rostovtzeff, a major publication in this sense is Farmakovskii 1914, who advanced the theory that the Scythian Animal style is of Greek Ionic origin. See also Wasowicz 1980 for the application of this concept as

the *Kulturträger*, while in most cases a receptive role is reserved for the native artistic language, which in several reconstructions assumes the connotations of a progressive path of adaptation to the Greek forms.¹³ This interpretative framework is in no way isolated, and permeates art historians' attitudes in defining the interaction between Greek and non-hellenic art in other areas of the Greek world. Piero Orlandini's answer to the question of whether it is possible to recognize the presence of an indigenous, Italic stylistic component in the artistic production of the Greek cities located in Magna Graecia is illustrative:

«However, it does not appear that these indigenous artistic manifestations influenced the art of the Greek cities of Southern Italy, especially in the Archaic or Classical period. Too great was the superiority of the Greek artistic culture and too profound were the stylistic and spiritual divergences».¹⁴

Though some sporadic points of contact regarding artefacts produced in Greek contexts have been noted in more recent times, current systematic analyses still tend to delineate the essential characteristics of Italic art by contrasting it to the principles of the Greek art, which is characterized – unlike the former – by a coherent internal development and creative independence.¹⁵ And again, as we have seen for the area around the Black Sea, the need arises to read this dichotomy in an ethnic sense when, for example, it is expressed that we are still looking for an understanding of the boundary between what we can consider “Greek” and “Italic” in nature.¹⁶

historical category within this area. Among the scholars who have recently questioned this approach, see Podosinov 2000; Braund 2001; Meyer 2013, 5, 8–21.

13 Piotrovsky *et alii* 1986; Jacobson 1995, 65–79, *e.g.* 67: «It is true that, with time and with the Hellenization of taste and craftsmanship, the archaic respect for monumental, simple forms was threatened, if not overwhelmed by Hellenistic elaborations», and 69: «During the middle period, that of the latter sixth and fifth centuries, when one may perceive a steady evolution of Scythian styles and objects, that specific vitality was weakened, unquestionably as a result of the slow transformation of the archaic style into more Hellenized forms».

14 Orlandini 1972, 307 (but see also 1983, 542–543).

15 A paradigmatic case is De Juliis 2000, 10–28. For some timid attempts towards a mitigation of this approach, see Rizza & De Miro 1985 in relation to Sicilian sculpture.

16 Rolley 1996, 378: «This complex poses a question that may also be asked with regard to much older works: in southern and central Italy, where exactly is the border between what we may call “Greek” and what is Italic in nature?». This attitude gained popularity in particular with the works of Langlotz 1970 (*esp.* 218) and Pace 1955, who both explained the distinctiveness of the South Italian and Sicilian sculptural panorama on the basis of the intermingling with local populations, or an alleged, not systematically surveyed, influence of the Italic artistic tradition, respectively. See Settis 1989; Adornato 2019 on this ethnic-driven approach in relation to South Italian and Sicilian art.

This unilateral, top-down, and often ethnically connotated model, which characterizes these areas at the border of the Greek world, is problematic, however.¹⁷ Reflecting on the social and cultural contexts to which Greco-Scythian metalworks belong, Caspar Meyer has instead pointed out how Greek craftsmen in the Northern Black Sea area developed a new idiom which «resists easy classification into Greek and Scythian cultural categories» and is ultimately successful in communicating across cultural boundaries.¹⁸ Since most scholars have paid attention to materials coming from the kurgans, consideration should also be given to the archeological evidence found within the Greek poleis of the coast. The potential sensitivity of the monuments found in the latter towards Scythian stylistic and iconographic formulas has seldom been questioned.¹⁹ By adopting a non-hierarchical perspective between artistic languages, it is my intention to raise this question, focusing on a well-known kouros statue from Olbia, currently exhibited at the State Hermitage Museum.

The Olbian Kouros as Case-Study

The kouros is only half-preserved, from the hip upwards (fig. 1).²⁰ The arms, of which only the humerus remains, descend along the sides attached to the body. The hair, clearly distinguished from the facial surface, consists of an unarticulated mass that descends to the shoulders, creating the characteristic triangular arrangement. The facial features are highly stylized: arched eyebrows, eyes rendered only by means of the very prominent eyelids, a flat, profiled nose, semi-circular mouth with very prominent lips, and barely noticeable chin. The torso shows no anatomical details and presents only a V-shaped incision below the neck. The essential frontality was likely originally enlivened by the advancement of the left leg, to which the slightly receding right shoulder corresponds.²¹

Discovered in 1969, the kouros was installed in a niche in the northern wall of room 586 (dated to the fourth century) belonging to the Olbia gymnasium, which was built in the fifth century and was probably still in use until the third

17 Cf. Muratov 2017, 174.

18 Meyer 2013, 21.

19 Langner 2008 and Muratov 2017 are recent exceptions, especially in terms of iconography.

20 H. 0.55 m; H. head 0.25 m. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. No. OL.69.3470. On the left shoulder, there is a rectangular hole (5 × 5 cm), certainly added in a later phase, whose function is unknown.

21 Cf. Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 210; Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 98.



FIGURE 1 Kouros, from Olbia. Limestone. Height: 55 cm. Inv. No. OL-18243. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
 PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM / PHOTO: OLGA LAPENKOVA, INNA REGENTOVA

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FIGURE 2
Findspot of the kouros. Room 586,
gymnasium, Olbia (after Koshelenko
et alii 1984, 109, pl. XI, fig. 7)

century (fig. 2).²² As has been pointed out several times, it is likely that the statue was accidentally broken into two parts at an undetermined time before being placed in the gymnasium.²³ This hypothesis is favored by the two cylindrical supports once placed underneath the arms, specifically created for the new display.²⁴

The rough workmanship of the piece, and above all its peculiar features, have always puzzled scholars. In a recent overview of the kouros found in the Black Sea area, Veronika Sossau remarks that “the well-known upper part of a *kouros* discovered in a later context at Olbia, for instance, served as an inspiration for very diverse (sometimes even contradictory) approaches and hypotheses regarding both its date and its interpretation/function.”²⁵ There is in fact no agreement on the dating or the training of the sculptor, since it is not possible to establish accurate stylistic and iconographic comparisons with the “canonical” production.²⁶ For instance, Chubova and Lesnitskaya point to

22 Karasev 1972, 43–44, figs. 11, 3–4, 12; Koshelenko *et alii* 1984, 37, pl. XI, fig. 7; Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, fig. 96, 1. On the gymnasium, see Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 37, 51; Kryzhytskyy *et alii* 2003, 424–425.

23 Karasev 1972, 44; Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 217; Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 99.

24 See Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, fig. 1. This case is not isolated in Olbia: a head of an Archaic kouros, possibly reused as a millstone, was found on the floor of a fourth century house in 1979; see Rusyaeva 1987, 155–156.

25 Sossau 2021, 154.

26 Alexandrescu Vianu 1999, 35 (600–575 BC); Oppermann 2004, 37 (advanced sixth century); Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 99 (late sixth century); Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 216, and Kryzhytskyy *et alii* 2003, 458 (end of the sixth–beginning of the fifth century); Karasev 1972, 43 (beginning of the fifth century BC). Cf. Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 215, on the chronological uncertainty.

formal consonances with Attic, Samian, and Beotian production, but without isolating a specific artistic horizon.²⁷ Vianu suggests that the piece could be the work of a Rhodian artist, mentioning a kouros found at Kamiros as a parallel.²⁸ However, the outline of the eyes, the anatomical definition of the nose, and the horizontal course of the mouth all differ from the Olbian example.

Indeed, its formal and iconographic features set it apart from the other kouros found in this area and, more generally, the canonical representation of this statuary type.²⁹ This peculiarity has often led to rather bizarre explanations. In relation to the facial features, it has been suggested that the statue fell, the face became damaged, and the features were re-carved by an inexperienced artist.³⁰ However, the marble surface does not seem to bear any signs of this event. Another feature that has been variously interpreted is the V-neckline on the upper chest (fig. 3). Comparing it to the clavicle delineation in vase-painting and statuary from the Archaic period, the first editors considered it to be an anatomical demarcation.³¹ However, the stylized and eminently vertical outline, with the pointed lower end reaching to the center of the chest, seems to have little in common with the rendering of the clavicle in the suggested parallels. Much more convincing is the interpretation by Vinogradov and Kryzickij, who consider it to be an indication that the kouros is dressed.³² However, their explanation for the presence of this element – suggesting that it represents an adaptation of the kouros typology to the local harsh climatic conditions – is rather unsatisfactory.

Oppermann and Butyagin have proposed that the Olbian kouros may reflect an influence of the “indigenous” art produced in the region, without developing this hypothesis.³³ By adopting a local perspective and contextualizing the sculpture in its artistic panorama, I will try to substantiate this suggestion in order to frame this case more adequately.

27 Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 213–216. Cf. Kryzhytskyy *et alii* 2003, 459.

28 Alexandrescu Vianu 1999, 35. London, British Museum, inv. No. 1864.1007.316 (Richter 1970, 57–58, No. 27, figs. 126–128).

29 Cf. Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 213; Kryzhytskyy *et alii* 2003, 458.

30 Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 99. Supported also by Meyer 2013, 191, note 5, who suggests that the ‘clothing’ was added through reworking.

31 Chubova & Lesnitskaya 1976, 211, 213.

32 Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 99.

33 Oppermann 2004, 37; Butyagin 2007, 66.



FIGURE 3
Kouros, from Olbia. Detail of the
V-neckline. Inv. No. Ol.-18243.
The State Hermitage Museum,
St. Petersburg
PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE
HERMITAGE MUSEUM /
PHOTO: OLGA LAPENKOVA,
INNA REGENTOVA

Hybridizing Style and Iconography in the Black Sea Poleis

One of the most widespread artistic phenomena in the Asian steppes are the so-called “kurgan statues” or “kurgan stelae”,³⁴ These are vertical slabs, planted either in the ground or placed on a base, which were displayed either on top of or around kurgans and sanctuaries. These statues show varying degrees of anthropomorphism.³⁵ They can depict full or torso figures, or merely the outline of the human body, exhibiting different levels of detail in the rendering of anatomical features. Most of the statues portray standing men and women, while only a small group depict seated figures.

They were realized between the seventh and the third century BC, but the corpus testifies to different chronological developments in the areas of the Scythian territory. Several specimens have been found in the hinterland of Olbia, on the eastern banks of both the Southern Bug and the Inhul, but most have been located along the course of the Dnieper.³⁶ From a formal and iconographic point of view, these statues display a certain homogeneity in depicting physiognomic features, regardless of the specific areas of production. As pointed out by Ol'khovskii and Evdokimov, the facial features are either worked out in relief or engraved, resulting in a sharply geometric appearance: noses are straight and rectangular, with an acute outline; the eyebrows linear and semi-circular; the eyes sockets always distinguished by a contour relief, while the eyes are often not depicted at all, nor the ears; the mouth is highly

34 Popova 1976; Rolle 1989, 36–37; Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994; Ol'khovskii 2005; Gleba 2008, 18–19.

35 Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, fig. 7.

36 Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, 42, fig. 2.

stylized and shown as straight or slightly curved, either rendered by impression or by highlighting the lips.³⁷ This technical and iconographical treatment is definitely comparable to that shown by the Olbian kouros.³⁸ A Scythian statue from the Kirovograd region, approximately coeval with the Olbia example, is paradigmatic from this point of view, displaying a similar shape of eyebrows and eyes, a long, flat nose, and a small mouth (fig. 4).³⁹ Although in this case the latter is horizontal, there are also examples in which it tends to assume a semi-lunate shape, with the corners turned downwards (fig. 5).⁴⁰

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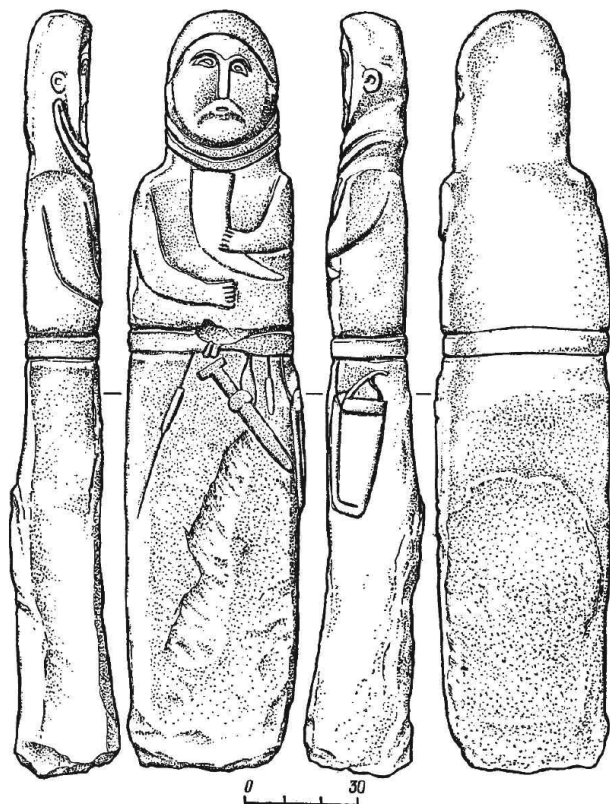


FIGURE 4
Drawing of a Scythian
statue from the
Kirovograd Region.
Sixth–fifth century
BC. Kirovograd,
Regional Museum
(after Ol'khovskii &
Evdokimov 1994, pl. 42)

37 Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, esp. 50, 55.

38 Compare also the absence of any signs indicating the ears.

39 Kirovograd, Regional Museum, no inv. No. (Popova 1976, 110; Petrenko 1986, 168–169; Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, 27, No. 75, 130, pl. 42). Compare also Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, Nos. 1 (seventh century BC), 4 (fifth–fourth century BC), 8 (second half of the sixth–early fifth century BC), 71 (end of the sixth–early fifth century BC), 78 (seventh or third quarter of the sixth century BC), 126 (end of the seventh–early sixth century BC), 128 (end of the sixth–early fifth century BC).

40 Cf. Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, Nos. 8, 64, 71, 82.

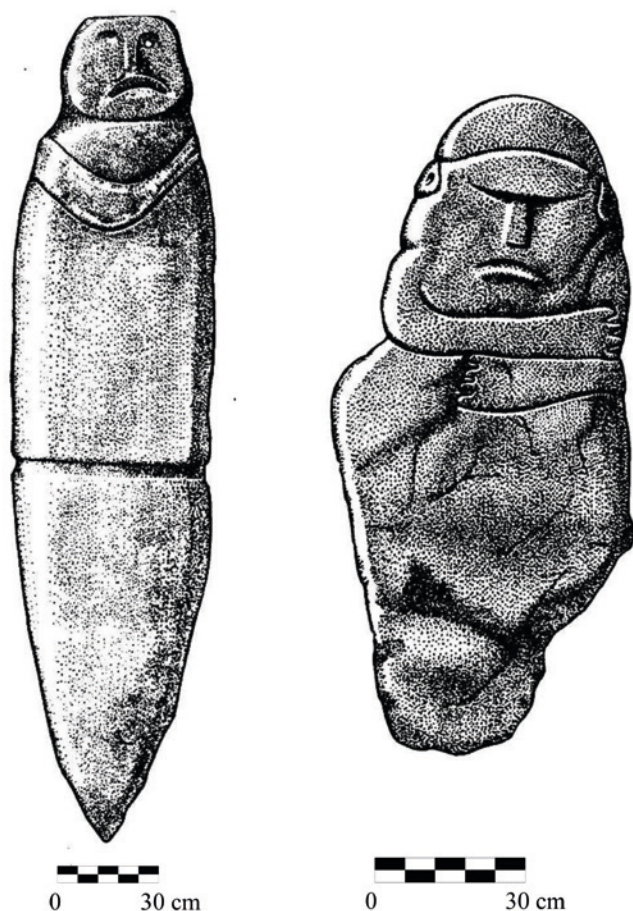


FIGURE 5 Drawing of Scythian statues from the Black Sea Area. Left: Sixth century BC, from Krivoy Rog, Kherson Regional Museum; right: fourth–third century BC, from Novoamvrosiiv's'ke, Donetsk State University (after Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, pls. 35, 49)

Besides the formal and technical aspects, the Scythian statues offer a good parallel also on an iconographic level, particularly in relation to the V-neckline below the neck. Although chronologically later than the kouros, some statues provide valuable insight for interpreting this motif:⁴¹ they wear “kaftans”;

41 Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, Nos. 85 (fifth century BC), 105 (second half of the fourth century BC), 106 (fourth century BC), 107 (fourth century BC), 110 (second half of the fifth–early fourth century BC), 118 (fourth century BC), 124 (second half of the fourth century BC).

i.e. long jackets that have long sleeves and trousers, characterized in the upper part by a neckline in the form of a V-seam (fig. 6).⁴² This comparison confirms that it is highly unlikely that the sign on the kouros should be interpreted as an anatomical notation. Broadening the perspective to other types of materials, and in particular to the toreutic production of the Northern Black Sea area, we see that such a neckline is a constant feature of Scythian clothing. Margarita Gleba observes that particular attention is paid to the seams, which are often emphasized by embroidery or different types of decorations.⁴³ The well-known bowls from Kul Oba (fig. 7) and Gaimanova Mogila (fig. 8) are emblematic from this point of view: all the Scythians represented wear kaftans that clearly feature a V-neckline.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is very likely that the V-shaped mark on the kouros indicates the presence of a garment, and more specifically a kaftan, like those frequently found in Greco-Scythian metalwork.⁴⁵ Kouroi wearing himatia are found almost exclusively in Ionic environments and even in the Northern Black Sea region, as indicated by the examples from Apollonia Pontike, Bisanthe, and Korokondame.⁴⁶ Even if this typology is not attested for Olbia, it is suggestive to view the statue from the gymnasium as a sort of alternative version, developed in this specific context, of the draped kouros. The development of a bilingual language embodying distinctive features – compared to those of the Motherland – can indeed be seen in Olbia through sculptural monuments such as the Late-Archaic funerary stele of Leoxos, an *amphiglyphon* depicting a nude athlete on one side and a warrior in local dress

42 Rolle 1989, 57–60; Gleba 2008, 19.

43 Gleba 2008, 21–22.

44 Kul-Oba: St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. No. GE KO II (Simpson & Pankova 2017, 292, with previous bibliography); Gaimanova Mogila: Kiev, Museum of Historical Treasures, inv. AZS 2358 (Meyer 2013, 218–222, figs. 78–79, 81–82, with previous bibliography).

45 Although they are chronologically distant, one would be tempted to associate such evidence with the well-known passage by Dio Chrysostom who, in the *Oratio Borysthenitica*, reports that during a visit to Olbia (late first century AD) he encountered the young Callistratus dressed in “Scythian” fashion (7: ἀναξυρίδες εἶχε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην στολὴν Σκυθικὴν). This has traditionally been read as an indication of the “barbarization” of the local population. But as Podosinov (2009, 151) has convincingly shown, such a style of dress does not pertain to the majority of the population and can be explained by Callistratus’ membership of the city’s cavalry, as well as the latter’s adaptation to the characteristics of the nomadic cavalry. On this text, see also Bähler 2002.

46 For these marble kouros, most likely imported from Ionia, see recently Sossau 2021, 154–156, with previous bibliography. On the draped kouros type, the standard reference is Barletta 1987. On this point, cf. Meyer 2013, 191.

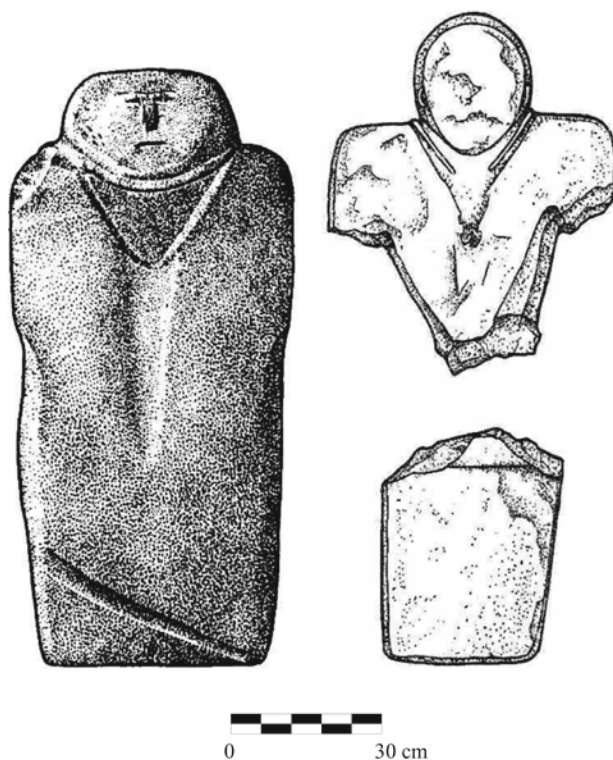


FIGURE 6 Drawing of Scythian statues wearing the kaftan. Left: fifth century BCE, from Vesele, Charkiv Regional Museum; right: fourth century BC, from Prývitne, Eupatoria Museum (after Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, pls. 50, 64)

AQ 4



FIGURE 7 Golden bowl from the Kul-Oba kurgan. Middle fourth century BC. Inv. No. KO.-11. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM / PHOTO: LEONARD KHEIFETS, VLADIMIR TEREHENIN



FIGURE 8 Bowl from the Gaïmanova Mogila kurgan. Silver with gilding. Fourth century BC. Inv. No. AZs.2358. National Museum of the History of Ukraine, Kiev (after Grach 1986, pl. 168)

on the other (fig. 9).⁴⁷ Convincingly arguing that both figures must portray the same person, Jochen and Kirsten Fornasier recently emphasized how the two faces characterize him as a full citizen in line with the Greek tradition, whose readiness for action on behalf of the polis is praised in both the image of the athlete and the warrior, symbolizing physical fitness and military strength, respectively.⁴⁸ However, unlike in the Greek Motherland, where the armored hoplite embodied the military ideal, the sculptor in Olbia conveyed the same statement using a motif understandable to every townsman at the confluence of the Bug and Dnieper.⁴⁹ Although a kouros draped in local fashion might seem strange in relation to our perceptions of this statuary type as expressed by the Motherland, the stele suggests that we should adopt more flexibility in this regard, and not perceive this iconographic choice in strict opposition to what we consider “canonical” or “normative”.

47 Cherson, Museum, no inv. No., found in the Hellenistic necropolis of Olbia in 1895 (Hiller 1975, 154–155, No. O 9, pl. 6, figs. 1–3).

48 Fornasier & Fornasier 2004.

49 Fornasier & Fornasier 2004, 165.



FIGURE 9 Funerary stele of Leoxos, from Olbia. Reconstruction by M.M. Kobýlina (after: Fornasier & Fornasier 2004, fig. 8)

The last point of contact that I would like to stress between the kouros and the Scythian statues is the material employed. As the 62% of the Scythian statues from the Black Sea area,⁵⁰ the first is made of local, granular limestone. This factor distinguishes it from the other kouros found in the Greek cities of the Black Sea shores, which are made of imported marble, since there are no deposits in the Northern Black Sea region.⁵¹ Similarly, the choice of limestone represents an almost unique case in relation to the Olbian sculptural panorama of the Greek period, since large-scale sculpture is carved in marble.⁵² However, it would be misleading to consider the limestone example as being in strict opposition to the imported materials.⁵³ If we take into account two heads found in Olbia in 1906 and 1979, it is possible to appreciate how the kouros analyzed here shares with the first the rather developed skull, the hairstyle consisting of full triangular locks descending over the shoulders, and the fringe rendered through a sharp outline;⁵⁴ with the second, the hair rendered as a continuous mass strictly adhering to the skull and, again, a relief-marked strip which defines the bangs.⁵⁵ All these heads, along with other examples from the Northern Black Sea region, share a certain tendency to keep the degree of anatomical detail to a minimum, although it is not always easy to determine whether this is a stylistic feature, an indication of being unfinished, or even due to the precarious preservation of the pieces.⁵⁶

In the light of this contextual analysis, I argue that the kouros is a local product carved by a local sculptor who was somehow aware of or sensitive to the large-scale sculptural manifestations produced in the Scythian territory, both in terms of style and iconography. Indeed, within the chronological range of development of the kouros typology (between the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century), a true polyadic sculptural tradition had not yet emerged

50 With a progressive increase especially from the sixth century onwards: Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, 46.

51 Muratov 2017, 176; Sossau 2021, 152. Magna Grecia and Sicily is again a comparable scenario in this respect: Barletta 2006, esp. 77; Adornato 2019, 447–451.

52 Kryzhytskyy *et alii* 2003, 460–463.

53 A different methodological approach is adopted by Vinogradov & Kryzickij 1995, 98–101, where they divided the sculptural material between imported objects and monuments produced in Olbia, without clarifying the criteria for distinguishing between these two categories. Ultimately, their analysis only deals with the second one.

54 Moscow, State Historical Museum, inv. No. 11769 (Waldhauer 1924, 46–47, No. 1, fig. 1; Richter 1970, 92; Alexandrescu Vianu 1999, 33, note 84, No. 2; Sossau 2021, 153, note 22).

55 Rusyaeva 1987, 155–156, fig. 48, *l*.

56 *Cf.* Burgas, Museum, inv. No. 615 (Oppermann 2004, 37, note 325, pl. 6.3a–b) and the well-known kouros from Histria, Museum, no inv. No. (Laubscher 1963–1964, 81; Sossau 2021, 153). On these aspects, see Sossau 2021.

in Olbia. It is probable that whoever carved this statue in the first phase of the city's history adhered only loosely to the canonical kouros model, and therefore, in a sort of creative eclecticism, incorporated various influences (and thus different languages) into a single work. Unfortunately, the data at our disposal do not allow us to further define the training of our artist, nor to better establish the statue's chronology or the circumstances of its re-use. However, it is worth pointing out that the hybrid character of the kouros suits rather well the panorama of Archaic Olbia. This is illustrated to various degrees by the Leoxos stele already mentioned, but also by the high number of mirrors of the Scythian type that can be found in the necropoleis,⁵⁷ the production of handmade pottery using different shapes, decorations and technological innovations taken from local craftsmen,⁵⁸ and, as suggested by many scholars, the production of metalworks for the non-hellenic population. Most likely, these include the fish from the Vetersfelde treasury, which undoubtedly testify to the extraordinary skill of local craftsmen in blending heterogeneous motifs, stylistic features and compositional arrangements into a new idiom (fig. 10).⁵⁹

Conclusions

Recently, there have been attempts to dismiss stylistic analysis as a tool for interpreting materials from the Black Sea area. Some claim that style as a heuristic device «is deceptive, and can lead to conclusions ripping objects out of both particular and general context».⁶⁰ Others argue that stylistic issues should not be raised because peoples belonging to this multi-ethnic society did not give primacy to aesthetics.⁶¹ Methodologically, however, this approach tends to overlook how objects are made. Precisely because we are dealing with “contact zones”, stylistic analysis can help us to understand the formal features (which are often not self-evident) of the archaeological material, and thus the actual interpenetration of different cultures on an artistic level, which otherwise, as in the case of the kouros from Olbia, would have been ignored or left unexplained. This does not mean that the formal and iconographic treatment of the kouros should be interpreted in ethnic terms, trying to label the

57 Skudnova 1988, 24–27.

58 Gavriilyuk & Otreshko 1982, 88–89.

59 Berlin, Altes Museum, inv. Misc. 7839 (Nebelsick 2014, esp. 57, and more recently Topal 2022). For archaeological evidence of metalwork production, see the Archaic casting moulds excavated on the island of Berezan: Treister 1998, 182, figs. 3–6.

60 Skriver Tillisch 2008, 24.

61 Muratov 2017, 190.



FIGURE 10 Golden fish from the Vettersfelde hoard, today Witaszkowo, Poland. Shield decoration. Around 500 BC. Inv. Misc. 7839. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung / Johannes Laurentius, CC BY-SA 4.0

PHOTOGRAPH © STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, ANTIKENSAMMLUNG

identity of the sculptor or suggesting the presence of non-Greeks in Olbia, as has often been done in relation to handmade pottery or dugouts.⁶² The kourou can be better interpreted as the product of a polyadic *milieu* still in the making, in which Greek and Scythian languages merge.⁶³ Although this single case should not be overestimated, it is nevertheless significant to point out how the polyadic artistic production bears witness to this dialectical exchange on an iconographic level, as evidenced by the representation of the kaftan, and on a formal level, which is most evident in the definition of the facial features. And this interaction does not cease. Indeed, it is bidirectional. As has already been noted in literature, the kurgan stelae, especially from the end of the fourth century BC onwards, also show the creative intermingling, in terms

62 For critical assessments of this evidence, see Buyskikh 2007 and Kryzhytskiy 2007.

63 For economic and cultural exchanges between the Olbian community and the Scythian population in the sixth and fifth centuries, cf. Gavriluk 2007, 631–640. For the history of Olbia in the Archaic period, see Bravo 2021, 7–46.

of iconography and style, of both the features peculiar to this production and the traits belonging to the sculpture of the Greek poleis.⁶⁴ This case-study is therefore ultimately an invitation to avoid the creation of modern frontiers and to instead connect the different types of materials that interact in the same *artistic space*.⁶⁵ This will hopefully lead to a systematic analysis of the artistic production of each Greek polis of the Northern Black Sea by adopting a contextual/geographical and non-hierarchical approach. As in our case, the picture is likely to be more articulated, eclectic, and dynamic, enabling us to better define the features that are specific to each community's artistic production and, ultimately, the perception of local populations elaborated *in loco* by the Greeks.⁶⁶

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64 Ol'khovskii & Evdokimov 1994, 51, 59, 76; cf. e.g. 31–32, No. 105, pl. 105.

65 For concepts such as “frontier” and “artistic space” in the history of art, see Castelnovo 1987; DaCosta Kauffman 2004.

66 Also suggested by Braund 2001, 38.

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