

“They Make Themselves Immortal”: Worship of the Great God at the Greek colony of Odessos

Archaeological remains indicate that a Thracian deity referred to simply as *Μέγας Θεός* (the Great God) was worshiped at the Greek colony of Odessos, but little attempt has been made to associate the Great God of Odessos with any specific Thracian deity. In passing, Hoddinott (1975, 51) identifies the god as “probably Zalmoxis” but does not provide evidence for this claim, while most treatments of the Great God do not identify him with any specific Thracian deity (e.g. Goceva 1996; Minchev 2003). Another argument is that the Great God was originally a Greek god later syncretized with local Thracian deities and heroes (Burnett, Heuchert, and Howgego 2007, 110). I argue that by comparing epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence with primary sources, the Great God of Odessos can be identified as the Thracian god Zalmoxis.

Inscriptions, coins, and archaeological remains establish the Great God as an important god of Odessos with chthonic associations. Although there is debate on when and if the Great God replaced Apollo as patron deity during the Hellenistic period, he is certainly the city’s patron god by the Roman period (Goceva 1996, 122-125; Minchev 2003, 255). Regardless of when exactly the Great God became the patron of Odessos, his importance is evident by his frequent depiction on coins from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. through the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. (Head 2011, 276; Karayotov 2007; Minchev 2003, 255). On these coins he is usually shown holding a cornucopia, sometimes also holding a patera, and less frequently on horseback throwing a spear. According to Hoddinott (1975, 51) this latter image seems to connect the Great God with the Thracian Hero cult, and is a strong indication of the god’s Thracian background. Epigraphic evidence confirms the Great God’s importance in Odessos in both public and private contexts, with funerary inscriptions illustrative of the god’s association with the afterlife (IGBR, 47, 48,

150). Finally, terracotta figurines matching depictions of the Great God on coins appear in many burials during the Hellenistic period provide further evidence of the Great God's chthonic nature (Hodditt 1975, 51; Minchev 2003, 255). Taken together, this evidence presents a picture of a Thracian deity well-established in a Greek colony and associated with chthonic imagery and contexts.

When compared with ancient textual references concerning Thracian deities and religion, the Great God of Odessos bears several connections with the Thracian deity named Zalmoxis. First, both Zalmoxis and the Great God are chthonic. Herodotus (4.93-96) and Strabo (7.3) both tell stories of Zalmoxis in which he disappears underground for a long span of time before returning to provide sacred insights, and Herodotus provides additional information on how the Getae every four years chose the best man among themselves to be killed and sent to communicate with Zalmoxis in the afterlife. Second, the curious name for the god at Odessos, simply Great God, coincides with Herodotus' account of the Thracians' monotheistic worship of Zalmoxis. Finally, the promise of a blissful afterlife offered by Zalmoxis as recorded in Herodotus would have been popular among Hellenistic Greeks who increasingly joined mystery cults of other foreign gods that offered similar positive views of the afterlife.

Identifying the Great God of Odessos with Zalmoxis has broader implications for the study of Greek colonization and religion. The interaction of the Greeks of Odessos should be incorporated into any analysis or discussion of Greek colonization at large as it provides an example beyond syncretism of the outright acceptance of an indigenous god into Greek religious life. Additionally, understanding more about the cult of the Great God and why it appealed to Greeks may inform our understanding of mystery cults in the Greek world in general and why

they gained popularity during the Hellenistic period. Better understanding these two issues can only help to illuminate the ancient Greek experience.

### Bibliography

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