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THE TRADITION OF FOSTER ADOPTION IN ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN AREA AND GEORGIA

(TYPOLOGICAL SIMILARITIES)

One Etruscan mirror found in Volterra and dated 350-325 BC, shows Etruscan supreme goddess Uni, who is the equivalent of Roman Juno and Greek Hera, suckling adult bearded Heracle (Roman Hercules and Greek Heracles). The inscription on the picture says that Heracle is Uni's son – *unial clan*.¹ Two gods and two goddesses attend the scene. Such a scene is not the only one ever found.²

Such a theme is unknown to Greek mythology. However, there is one myth about Hera and Heracles, which is somehow linked to this version depicted on the Etruscan mirror. The legend is preserved in works by Diodorus of Sicily and Pausanias. The story is as follows: Fearing jealous Hera, Alcmena left newborn Heracles in the field beyond the walls of Thebes. Instructed by Zeus, Athena called Hera to have a stroll there. The goddess of wisdom made Hera pity the crying and hungry baby abandoned by his mother and asked her to feed the child. Hera breastfed Heracles, but the latter sucked so hard that the embittered goddess flung him aside. Breastfeeding Heracles, Hera made him immortal and, as the myth says, the spilt milk was transformed into the Milky Way.³

According to another version, Hermes took baby Heracles to Olympus and Zeus laid the newborn at Hera's breast while she was sleeping. The

¹ TLE (39) – Pallottino M., *Testimonia Linguae Etruscae*, Firenze 1968.

² Similar scenes can be found on Apulian and Felsinean mirrors (four in all) and a locket from Praeneste. Cf. Van Der Meer L. G., *Interpretatio Etrusca*, Greek Myths on Etruscan Mirrors, Amsterdam 1995, 124.

³ Diodoros Sicullus, *Bibliotheca Historicae*, IV, 9 – Pausania, *Descriptio Graeciae*, IX, 25, 2.

baby sucked the goddess with such force that she woke up and flung him down and a spurt of milk flew across the sky and became the Milky Way.⁴

Despite similarity, there is an essential difference between the Etruscan and Greek themes. In particular, Etruscan Heracles has a beard and he is not a baby like in the Greek myth. It is also noteworthy that in almost all versions of the Greek myth, Hera is Heracles' wet nurse, not mother.⁵

The aforementioned makes it difficult to admit that the theme depicted on the mirror of Volterra was "borrowed" from Greek mythology.

We have devoted a special study to Etruscan Heracle, which made it clear that the image consists of two chronological layers. One of them originates from a later period and is indeed linked to the Greek mythology on Heracles. This layer took shape as Hellenic mythology became more popular after Greek colonists established first settlements in Italy in the 8th century BC. The second layer is more archaic and is linked to the Pre-Indo-European population of the Mediterranean region. Analyzing archaeological data and information from ancient sources, we drew the following conclusions:

1. Heracle is an organic deity for the Etruscan religion;
2. Heracle is the son or an adopted son of a supreme god (possibly Uni);
3. Heracle seems to be linked to the celestial world;
4. Heracle cannot be regarded as the Etruscan interpretation of Heracles.

It is noteworthy that Roman Hercules also proved not to be a simple copy of Greek Heracles.⁶

The etymology of the name – Heracles – also provides information for conclusions. The explanation by mythographers that "Heracles" is derived from "Hera" and "Cleo" ("Hera's glory") seemed unnatural back in ancient times. It is difficult to imagine that the glorification of Heracles through his rivalry with Hera could have contributed to the creation of his name. The "awkwardness" was sensed by authors of antiquity, who referred to the aforementioned episode of breastfeeding and other myths to "settle" relations between Hera and Heracles, noting at the same time that Heracles was called Alcaeus before Hera adopted him.⁷ In our opinion, the fact that the mother (Alcmene) and the son (Alcaeus) bore names derived from one stem points to the matriarchal and Pre-Greek roots of the cult of

⁴ Eratosthenes, 44; Higinus, II, 43.

⁵ The only exception in this regard is the information that residents of Thebes regarded Heracles as Hera's son (Eratosthenes, 44; Higinus, II, 43; Diodorus Sicullus, 4, 10).

⁶ For details cf.: Kobakhidze E., "Italian" Heracles, Logos. The Annual of Greek and Roman Studies, 2, 2004, 178 (in Georgian; Summary in English).

⁷ Homerus, *Ilias*, XIX, 95 ff; Apollod., II, 4, 5; Plautus, *Amph.*, 1096; Diod. Sic., IV, 10.

Heracles. Presumably, the mother of proto-Heracles was quite popular among the Pre-Indo-European tribes of the Mediterranean region. The fact that her name "disappeared" in the new name of her son and was replaced by Hera was probably a manifestation of Greek expansion. In particular, the recognition of Heracles as Zeus' son probably shows that the cult was incorporated in the Greek pantheon (cf. the canonization of Dionysius in a similar manner).

It is clear that the Greek religion and mythology accepted the step, because this cult was highly popular. However, the recognition of Heracles and Dionysius did not imply the recognition of their mothers, as they were mortal women. Moreover, Heracles acquired a new mother – unrivalled Hera. That was why Alcmena's son Alcaeus was called Heracles. At the same time, the same deity, who was believed to be Uni's son, continued its existence in the Etruscan world of ancient Italy. (It is noteworthy that the stem *cl-, *cle- means "son" in Etruscan. Correspondingly, Hera+cleos=Hera's son) As regards Etruscan Uni, the presence of her name on the Bronze Liver⁸ makes it clear that this deity belonged to Etruscan haruspices and worshipping and was organic for the Etruscan religion.

Given the aforementioned, what is depicted on the mirror of Volterra? In our opinion, it depicts the tradition or ritual of foster adoption, which was characteristic of the Pre-Greek and Pre-Italic population of the Mediterranean region and was preserved in the Etruscan tradition. An adult person (presumably, most frequently man) sucked the breast of his foster-mother (possibly in the presence of eyewitnesses), becoming her foster son.

Let us now consider the tradition of foster adoption from the ethnological viewpoint. Ethnography has established three types of kinship: blood kinship, marital kinship, and a third type of kinship created artificially. There is no single term in special literature to denote the latter. Such kinship is called "fictitious",⁹ "spiritual",¹⁰ "artificial", or "milk"¹¹ kinship. Researchers regard as such kinship emerging on the basis of adopting and baptizing children, entrusting babies to wet nurses, entrusting children to other families, and becoming sworn brothers.

⁸ Maggiani A., *Qualche osservazione sul fegato di Piacenza*, SE, voll L, MCMLXXII, serie III 1982, 53-98; Van der Meer. *The Bronze liver of Piacenza*, Amsterdam 1987.

⁹ Ковалевский М. М., *Современный обычай и древний закон: Обычное право Осетии в историко-сравнительном освещении*, Т. II, Москва 1886, 311; 312; 314.

¹⁰ Зелинский С., *Родство*. Известия кавказского отдела императорского русского географического общества, т. XII, 1897, 153.

¹¹ Гардинов В. К., "Кормилице и кормилице" краткой редакции "Русской-правды". краткие сообщения Института Этнографии АН СССР, Вып. 35, 1960, 49.

Artificial kinship can be found in traditions of many peoples of the world (for example, Ossetians, Armenians, Yugoslavs, Russians, Georgians, and others). It is obvious that Hera's breastfeeding baby Heracles, which was mentioned above, is a reflection of such kinship. It probably corresponds to the tradition of entrusting babies to wet nurses.

The theme depicted on the Etruscan mirror is different from the types of artificial kinship found in Greek myths. The former is not linked to entrusting babies to wet nurses. It is rather an example of adoption (and the inscription on the mirror explains this). To be more precise, it is a specific type of adoption – foster adoption.

The tradition of foster adoption depicted on the Etruscan mirror is very specific. It has no analogues in the ancient world. However, it is interesting that it seems to be linked to the specific ethnic version of foster adoption widespread in almost all Georgian regions. Like the theme shown on the mirror of Volterra, it is about the adoption of an adult person by a family with no blood kinship to him. In this case, the mother of a family adopts an alien son, who has his own family.

As artificial kinship, the act of foster adoption implied, as a rule, specific relations not only between two people (in this case, between a foster mother and a foster son), but also between two families.

Let us now consider concrete examples from the Kartvelian world.

This tradition was quite widespread in Georgia's mountain regions, particularly in Khevsureti.¹² It is noteworthy that this tradition was alive even in the 20th century, which is confirmed by an excerpt from well-known Georgian writer Mikheil Javakhishvili. In his *White Collar*, a young protagonist of the story says: "A great event took place yesterday. The Tsiklauris made me Tsiklauri. The families of Mgelika and Totia adopted me. I touched Nanuka's, Jamze's, and Mzekala's breasts with my teeth".¹³ The same ritual is found in the Svan traditions.¹⁴

In some Georgian regions, specifically in Samegrelo and Lechkumi, a family could adopt a son, because they had lost their own son. The ritual was almost the same as in Khevsureti and Svaneti. Specifically, in Samegrelo, "a mother, who had lost her son, would adopt a son in a ritual that created the full illusion of breastfeeding. A young man would visit his mother-to-be and touch her breast with his teeth, which was called

¹² Javakhadze N., *Ethnic Specificity of Artificial Kinship in Khevsureti*. Georgian-Caucasian Ethnographic Studies (1987), Tbilisi 1990, 100-115 (*in Georgian*).

¹³ Javakhishvili M., *White Collar*. Selected Works in Six Volumes, vol. II, Tbilisi 1959, 509 (*in Georgian*).

¹⁴ Ониани А., *Сванские тексты на Лапхском наречии*, С-Петербург 1927, 43.

dzudzush kibirish gedguma [touching the breast with teeth] in Megrelian. The foster son would then say an oath: 'You are my mother and I am your son' and behave like the son, who had just come back home... From that moment on, the mother, who had lost her son would become his *dida(pu)chapili* and he would become *skuachapili*. The sons of the family would become foster brothers and daughters foster sisters".¹⁵¹⁶

If in Lechkhumi, a woman adopted a son to replace her own son, the foster son would touch her breast with his teeth on the first anniversary of the death of the woman's son.¹⁷

Examples of foster adoption could also be found in Georgian folklore.

In the Georgian fairy tale *Reed Girl*, the prince tells the giant's mother: "Mother, I implore you to give me some water. I am thirsty". The mother of the giant adopts him as her son and helps him, explaining: "Had I wanted, I would have eaten you up immediately, but you called me mother and that saved you".¹⁸

We think it is also important that touching a breast with teeth as described in fairy tales is one of the means of sharing a mystery and a kind of oath. In particular, the protagonist in the well-known Georgian fairy tale *Aspurtsela* finds it to be the only way to make his mother say the truth.¹⁹

As a conclusion, we can say that it is necessary to look deeper into the typological similarity between the traditions of foster adoption of Mediterranean and Kartvelian tribes. Numerous other parallel rituals that may be found during the research may provide an opportunity to draw reliable conclusions. It is of course impossible to make a universal conclusion at this stage of research, but it is obvious that the ethnographic and folklore materials, which ethnological studies are based on, are indeed important in studying relations between various peoples. A number of fundamental works have been created recently²⁰ on Mediterranean-Georgian relations and such materials may serve as an additional argument.

¹⁵ Sakhokia T., *The Cult of the Dead in Samegrelo. Materials for Georgia's Ethnography*, III, Tbilisi 1940, 180-182 (*in Georgian*).

¹⁶ Sakhokia T., *Ethnographic Studies*, Tbilisi 1956, 76-77 (*in Georgian*).

¹⁷ Savakhadze N., *Op. cit.*, 111.

¹⁸ *The Folklore of Caucasus Peoples*. The author of the project and editor-in-chief - Naira Gelashvili. Special editor Lia Chlaidze compiled the collection of works and wrote the Introduction and notes, Tbilisi 2008, 46 (*in Georgian*).

¹⁹ *Aspurtsela*. In: *Beloved Fairy Tales*. Planeta, Tbilisi 2001, 9 (*in Georgian*).

²⁰ Rismag Gordeziani's study in four volumes - *Mediterranea - Kartvelica*, Logos, Tbilisi 2007-2008 - is particularly noteworthy among the Works published on this issue over the past few years.