

## *Guram Lordkipanidze (Tbilisi)*

### COINS FROM VANI (SURIUM) BEARING THE REPRESENTATION OF A STYLIZED LOTUS

In 1967, a hoard of copper coins was discovered at the monolithic cylindrical altar located in the central part of the megaroni type temple dedicated to the goddess of fertility. The coin was revealed by me on the acropolis during the archaeological excavations in Vani site.

126 coins were scattered in the radius of 20 cm. The site of the find leaves no doubt that the hoard constituted an offering. Since their discovery these unepigraphical coins were determined as the hoard struck under Mithradates VI in the kingdom of Pontus. A coin of the same type was found in Vani in 1952 as well. Their obverse bears a stylized lotus bud relief representation - the head-dress of Isis, the goddess of fertility, while their reverse shows an eight-pointed star relief characteristic of the coins of Mithradates VI Eupator. The gross weight of the hoard coins is 185, 270 gr; but its material value is not high.

According to the stratigraphic data, the temple with a mosaic floor was destroyed in the middle of the first century B. C. The scientific researches of the famous numismatist G. Dundua give us ground to consider the above-mentioned copper coins, bearing symbolics of Isis, to have been struck in Georgia, namely in Vani during the brief reign of Mithradates (Philopator Philadelphus) the Young (83-80 B. C.), the son of Mithradates VI Eupator. His unepigraphicalness was most probably due to the political situation then obtaining in Western Georgia. This hypothesis is dictated by the fact that so far as we know, coins of this type have not been discovered outside Georgia. Coins of the same type were found on the city site of Eshera and Tsebelidza burial dating from the first century B. C. as well. Actually, the symbol of Isis - the type similar to the representation of stylized lotus head-dress of Isis, was not alien to the Hellenistic period; so, for instance, it has been traced on the bronze coins of Ptolemy dating from the end of 2-1 cc B. C. The appearance of Isis' symbols - the Egyptian goddess of fertility - on the coins struck in the kingdom of Colchis requires detailed explanation. Evgeni Pokhitonov, the Czech numismatist dealt with this problem in his special work *The Hoard of Antique Coins from Vani* (Georgian SSR).<sup>2</sup> Having motivated the alleged lack of archaeological material and written sources, he completely ignored the spread of distant Egyptian cults of fertility in Colchis of Mithradates. In the author's view, the coin from Vani should be linked to Cleopatra - the queen of Egypt, known as "the new goddess Isis". However, the topography of coin find excludes Pokhitonov's hypothesis; the detailed analysis of the written sources throughout the new interpretation of Professor R. Gordeziani, throws additional light on this issue and leaves no doubt in the correctness of G. Dundua's and our definition. Similar to the Hellenistic world, the Egyptian cults, most likely, were not alien to the kingdom of Colchis, which is attested by a number of sources.

Herodotus, called "φιλοβάρβαρος," who had been both to Egypt and Colchis (Phasis) as well, on the basis of his ethnographical observations assumed (supposed) - "Colchians seem to be Egyptians". They showed not only the similar way of life, but close language affinities as well (Herod., II, 106). One of the arguments suggested by Herodotus is the similar technology of Colchian and Egyptian flaxlinen production. According to Herodotus, the Colchian flax production was known as Sardonian, which was undoubtedly in some way connected with "Shardana" - the name of one of the tribe communities being reckoned among the "Sea peoples". It is true that the issues about their settlement in Colchis still remain uncertain, but the standing tradition about their kinship reflected in Strabo's *Geography* as well, proves to be interesting. Despite some kind of scepticism, Strabo adds: "Some are eager even to point out the close affinities between the Colchians and Egyptians (Strabo, XI, II, 17) All this, naturally, makes for the considerable interest towards the fact. Why did Herodotus - "the father of history and ethnography" link Egyptians to Colchians? Could there have been any literary tradition (legends, epic,

popular prose) in relation with this fact in early times? How had he guessed it prior to hearing it from others? It must be presumed that some kind of mythological imaginative beliefs about these affinities really existed in Colchis, which in our opinion, found certain reflection in the symbolics of hoard discovered in Vani Site (Surium). These copper coins struck in Surium in the middle of the first century B. C. bear the representation of lotus bud - a stylized head-dress of Isis - Egyptian goddess of fertility and an eightpointed star. From the methodological point of view, their connection with each other may not justify itself, but the fact itself - the appearance of the symbol of Egyptian goddess on the coins struck in Colchis - needs to be explained. If we perceive Osyris beyond an eight-pointed star, then we must assume that Colchians were well aware of mysterial beliefs about the death and resurrection of these gods. Vani site (Surium) cultural layers dating from - II-I cc B. C. first centuries B. C. suggest the Ithiphal iron images of the fertility gods buried in pairs in exclusive privilege, which most probably, were the component parts of above-mentioned mysteries. The interpretation of gold floral head-dress found in Vani site as the bud of lotus seems quite assumable. Especially as a roselike lotus, which became extinct as the time passed, had been available in ancient Egypt. The choice of lotus as a symbol of Isis was not accidental. When the Nile started rising and the valleys were covered with water, there appeared a great number of water lilies on the surface, which were called lotuses by Herodotus in Egyptian (Herod. II, 92). He identified Isis with Demeter the same way as the Egyptians believed Osyris to be Dionysus (Herod. II, 42). Isis was believed to be the greatest god in Egypt and the most significant holiday in Egypt was connected with her name. The offering animal for Isis was a bull. In after-life, pharaohs were believed to unite with Osyris (Herod. II, 122). Isis - Demeter and Osyris - Dionysus were supposed to be the rulers of the underground world. Similar belief-imaginings have been traced in the archaeological materials of Vani site Hellenistic layers. This throws additional light on the symbolics of coins struck in Vani.

Ritual loaves were baked from the seeds of the Nile lotus (botanical variety of lily) fruit. According to Herodotus the mysteries of Isis were secret and only the confidants were allowed to know the rules of mystery (Herod. II).