

THE CULT OF POSEIDON *HELIKONIOS*: FROM HELIKE OF ACHAEA TO ASIA MINOR AND THE BLACK SEA

O culto de Poseidon Helikonios: Da Helike da Acaia à Ásia Menor e ao Mar Negro

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ABSTRACT

The cult of Poseidon *Helikonios* is associated with his primeval aspect of a powerful god of earthquakes and waters. His most antique cult in this capacity, dating from the Mycenaean times, originated from Helike of Achaia on the southwest shore of the Gulf of Corinth, the place known to Homer as the centre of this worship. The sanctuary of Poseidon *Helikonios* located in Helike, was the holiest sanctuary to all Ionians and even contained the ancient ancestral altars of the Ionic race. When the Ionians were expelled from Helike by the Achaeans at the end of the Mycenaean times, they settled in Asia Minor and carried with them the cult of *Helikonios*. In the paper, the spread of this particular cult to the coast of Asia Minor and from there to the Black Sea region is discussed based on literary, archaeological and numismatic evidence available in the places where the cult held a prominent position.

Keywords: Poseidon *Helikonios*; Panionion; Helike; Achaia; Priene; Black Sea.

RESUMO

O culto de Poseidon *Helikonios* está associado ao seu aspecto mais antigo de um deus poderoso, controlador dos terremotos e das águas. Seu culto mais antigo nessa capacidade, datado dos tempos micênicos, origina-se de Helike da Acaia, na costa sudoeste do Golfo de Corinto, local conhecido por Homero como centro desse culto. O santuário de Poseidon *Helikonios*, localizado em Helike, era um dos lugares mais sagrados aos jônicos e continha, inclusive, os antigos altares ancestrais desse povo. Quando os jônicos foram expulsos de Helike pelos aquéias no final dos tempos micênicos, eles se estabeleceram na Ásia Menor e

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levaram consigo o culto a *Helikonios*. Neste artigo, a disseminação desse culto da Helike para a costa da Asia Menor e de lá para a região do Mar Negro, é discutida com base em evidências literárias, arqueológicas e numismáticas disponíveis nos locais onde o culto ocupava uma posição de destaque.

Palavras-chave: Posêidon *Helikonios*; Panionion; Helike; Acaia; Priene; Mar Negro.

Introduction

Poseidon in his primeval aspect is featured as the Lord of the Earth and the earthquakes, the Earth Holder (γαῖήοχος) and the Earth Shaker (ενοσίχθων), exerting power over the sea and all types of waters above and below the earth. In the *Iliad* (XV, v. 187), Poseidon himself explains that when the world was apportioned, the three sons of Kronos - Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades - received the sky, the sea, and the underworld respectively. The three held in common the earth and the mountain Olympos. Poseidon's epiphany is marvelously described in the *Iliad* (XIII, v. 17-38) where the god, after having returned from Olympos to his golden palace in the depths of the sea, appears in all his glory driving his golden chariot across the sea over the waves, accompanied by his sea-thiasos. The god's powers over waters and the sea are clearly presented also in the *Odyssey* (V, v. 282-381; IV, v. 499-511), when Poseidon sends a gigantic wave to smash Odysseus' boat to pieces or to swallow up the arrogant Aias of Oileus.

A unique depiction of Poseidon in this primitive capacity was recognized on a clay seal from Kydonia of Crete, dated to the LM IB (ca. 1500-1450 BC) (TZEDAKIS ; HALLAGER, 1987). The representation shows a deity (Fig. 1), clad in a short kilt, with long flying hair in the back, standing on a shrine by the shore, in front of a coastal temple or city, overlooking the sea. In his right hand, he holds a curious banner ending in the shape of a stylized fish. He bears a ring on his left upper arm and a collar around his neck. Behind him, on his right, is seen clearly, almost floating in the sky, a symbol which looks like the head of a bull or a swine. Before him, in the foreground, sea waves are breaking against the city or the temple, and in the center of the icon is represented a strange formation of a waterfall, interpreted as a possible representation of sea waves (CASTLEDEN, 1990).

**Figure 1 – Clay sealing from Kydonia, Crete
(from Castleden 1990, 130, fig. 41).**

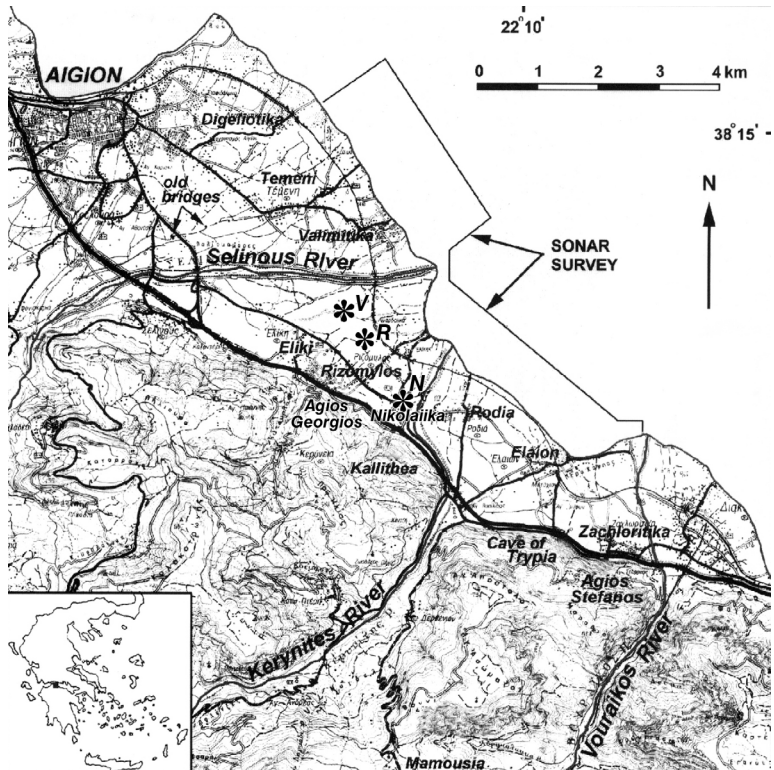


The cult of Poseidon Helikonios in Helike

The most ancient cult of Poseidon *Helikonios* known comes from Helike of Achaea on the southwest shore of the Gulf of Corinth (Fig. 2), where his famous Panionian sanctuary was located. Homer, our first authority of this cult epithet of Poseidon, knows Helike as a centre of this worship. The Homeric reference to the sanctuary more than once indicates the importance

and fame it enjoyed among the Greeks who, in honor of the god, offered there ‘many and beautiful gifts’ (*Il.* VIII, v. 203-4) and bull sacrifices (*Il.* XX, v. 403-5). As I have suggested elsewhere (KATSONOPOULOU, 1998a), the god’s epithet in Helike derives from *Ελικών* (Helikon), that is, the place in Helike where the sacred tree *ελίκη* (willow tree) grows, and not from the mountain in Boeotia as interpreted in the past. The water-loving tree *ελίκη*, sacred symbol of a nymph of the waters of the same name, is firmly connected to Poseidon in his capacity as god of waters and leader of the nymphs, and thus creator of springs, earthquakes, and floods.

Figure 2 – Map of the Helike search area, including the 1988 sonar survey. Asterisks indicate the Helike sites discussed in the text. Adapted from the Greek Army Geographic Service 1:50,000 map.



The prevalence of Poseidon's worship in Helike is evident throughout the long and prosperous life of the city, even in the way it was destroyed in 373 BC (KATSONOPOULOU, 2005). The location of the city itself in a high seismicity zone would support Poseidon's particular worship in this region as god of earthquakes and waters. Indeed, earthquake phenomena have occurred repeatedly in the Helike area since prehistoric times, as shown by our investigations (SOTER and KATSONOPOULOU, 2011; KATSONOPOULOU, 2015; KATSONOPOULOU and KOUKOUVELAS, 2019). The god's capacity of the Earth Shaker (ἐνοσίγθων, ἐννοσίγαιος) in Helike is symbolized by his main attributes - the trident and the dolphin - portrayed in the city's coinage. The trident flanked by two dolphins swimming upwards is depicted on the reverse of the five known coins of Helike, four bronzes (Fig. 3a) and a lone silver (Fig. 3b), the entire representation drawn within a laurel wreath tied at the bottom. On the obverse, a fine diademed head of Poseidon in a Classical manner is shown to the left with inscription ΕΛΙΚ written retrograde (Fig. 4a, b). As I have proposed elsewhere (KATSONOPOULOU, 2013), the rare Helike coins of Poseidon were most probably struck in connection with his cult, the inscription indicating his cult epithet *Helikonios* rather than the ethnic name of the city. The coins are traditionally dated to the early 4th century BC, mainly because of Helike's natural destruction in 373 BC. However, a recent study suggests a date of about 300 BC for their production (WEIR, 2017).

Figure 3 – (a) Reverse of bronze coin of Helike, Munzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (b) Reverse of silver coin of Helike, auction 15 October 2013. Image courtesy of Gorny and Mosch GmbH.



**4 – (a) Obverse of bronze coin of Helike, Munzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (b) Obverse of silver coin of Helike, auction 15 October 2013.
Image courtesy of Gorny and Mosch GmbH.**



A third attribute of the god in Helike was the hippocamp. From Eratosthenes (in STRABO, 8.7.2), we learn of a bronze statue of Poseidon standing upright in the *poros* in Helike - a lake/lagoon, according to my interpretation (KATSONOPOULOU, 1995) - holding a hippocamp (sea horse) in one hand being perilous to the nets of those fishing in the area. The hippocamp appears as a symbol of Poseidon on the coinage of a number of cities that worshipped him, such as Priene, Syracuse and Messana, and is a usual attribute of his son, Taras, depicted on the reverse of the coins of the city of Taras in southern Italy since early in the 5th century BC (KRAAY, 1976). Especially, in Priene's coinage from its beginnings in the last quarter of the fourth century BC, all three symbols: the dolphin, the trident and the hippocamp are shown, emphasizing the city's strong ties with Poseidon.

To the above symbols, the bull, whose sacrifice to Poseidon was central to the festival of Panionia celebrated in Helike of old times (*Il. VIII*, v. 203-204; *XX*, v. 404), should also be added. The bull, a sacred animal to Poseidon with which the god is identified, is the main symbol of the early incuse coinage of Sybaris (STAZIO, 1998), the most important Achaean colony in Magna Graecia founded by Helike ca. 730 BC. It is also the emblematic symbol on the reverse of coins of the early fifth century BC of Poseidonia, a daughter colony of Sybaris. And it is depicted again on the

reverse of the coins of Sybaris after the refoundation in 453; on the obverse of these coins, Poseidon is depicted in action, following the types adopted by Poseidonia around 500 BC (KRAAY, 1976).

Another symbol of the god especially associated with his worship as god of waters and earthquakes, is the horse. Poseidon has strong and close ties with this animal more than any other deity. The horse is the god's offspring; appearing from the earth, it is seen as a chthonic creature connected with both the fresh and sea waters. The god himself is represented as a horseman and in his honor chariot races were performed. His identification with the horse, as well as with the bull, is evident in his widespread cult of Poseidon *Hippios*. Although the typical sacrificial animal to Poseidon is the bull, the sacrifice of horses to him is also attested. In the Argolid, the Greeks of old times sacrificed horses with beautiful bridles to Poseidon, by drowning them in the area of Dine (Whirlpool), according to Pausanias (8.7.2). During chariot races performed in the sacred grove of Poseidon in Onchestos, Boeotia, a very interesting horse sacrifice to the god was included (*Hom. Hymn to Apollo*, 229-238). The presence of most of the above attributes of Poseidon in Helike - the trident, the dolphin, the hippocamp, the bull - strongly suggest the principal association of his cult with his primitive quality as water-god, that is, with his mastery over all types of waters on earth and beneath, his terrestrial aspect symbolized mainly by the bull and his subterranean manifestation by the horse.

The cult of Poseidon Helikonios in Asia Minor

Following the arrival and settlement of the Achaeans in Helike and the region of Aigialeia (later Achaea) at the end of the Mycenaean era, the defeated Ionians sought refuge in the Asia Minor coast (Paus. 7.24.5; Strabo 8.7.2; Diod. 15.49.1), together with their fellow Ionians of Attica, and there they transferred the antique cult of *Helikonios* Poseidon. Pausanias in his journey through the Helike's region in the second century AD (7.24.5) notes that the sanctuary of *Helikonios* in Helike was the holiest for all Ionians and always remained strong with the Ionic race, even after the Ionians, expelled by the Achaeans from the area, settled in Asia Minor.

To Poseidon *Helikonios* was dedicated an altar before the city of Miletos, and a second in Teos, where there was also a sanctuary worthy of being seen (Paus. 7.24.5). Poseidon *Helikonios* was strongly worshipped in Priene, where the Ionians performed the Panionia festival and offered bull sacrifices until late antiquity, according to the old tradition from Helike. For as Strabo notes (8.7.2), it is said that the Prienians themselves came from Helike: *επί και αυτοί οι Πριηνεΐς εξ Ελίκης είναι λέγονται*. In this regard, it is worth noting that the close ties between the two places are eloquently shown in a certain type of coin from Priene of the third century BC, depicting on the obverse the head of a helmeted Athena and bearing on the reverse the inscriptions ΠΙΠΗ and ΕΛΙΚ (Fig. 5). On the obverse of bronze coins of Priene also dated to the third century BC, Poseidon *Helikonios*' head is shown to the right, wearing a wreath, and behind his neck the harpoon of a trident; on the reverse, an owl is depicted to the right, with closed wings, seating on olive branch (HEAD ; POOLE, 1876).

5 – Bronze coin of Priene (from Regling 1927, 149, no. 126, pl. 2).



The Panionion in Asia Minor, where all Ionians held their assemblies and offered sacrifices to Poseidon, was originally located in a lonely region near Mykale, but later, because of the outbreak of wars in the area, the festival meeting was transferred to a safer place near Ephesos (Diod. 15.49.1). Recent research and new studies on the location of Panionion resulted in the reinterpretation of the ancient remains discovered in the last century on the Otomatik Tepe hill of Mykale mountain, as representing the younger Panionion and the attempt of the Ionian League to revive the cult

of Poseidon *Helikonios* in the late fourth century BC (LOHMANN, 2017). This new evidence supports the attempt to transfer the sanctuary from its original location to another place closer to Ephesos mentioned by ancient sources, and thus offers a new date for the mission of the Ionian envoys to Helike in Achaea associated with this transfer (Strabo, 8.7.2; Paus. 7.24.6; Diod. 15.49.1-3).

According to the story narrated by the ancient sources (see above), the envoys were instructed to request permission for sacrifices at the ancestral altar of Poseidon in Helike and to take the sacrificial relics back to Ionia (BRUNEL, 1953; KATSONOPOULOU, 1998a). The Achaean council granted the requested permission but the Helikaeans refused to allow the sacrifice, emphatically maintaining that the sanctuary was *their own* particular property and not of the Achaeans (Diod. 15.49.2). Strabo makes it clear that the Ionians first asked the Helikaeans and after they refused, then they addressed the Achaean *koinon* and although the assembly voted in favor, the Helikaeans still refused to obey (8.7.2). These events are generally placed some time before the destruction of Helike in 373 BC, an opinion I also followed in my earlier interpretations of the story (KATSONOPOULOU, 1998a). However, a new examination of the ancient testimonies combined with recent archaeological evidence suggests that the Ionian mission must have occurred sometime later in the fourth century. Given that the city of Helike was of old times the unambiguous seat of the Achaean *koinon* (Diod. 15.48.3) until its destruction in 373 BC, the tension and opposition mentioned between the Helikaeans and the Achaean council about the sanctuary is not quite understandable, if the mission had occurred before 373. On the contrary, if it had occurred after 373, the strong opposition of the people of Helike against the decision of the Achaeans described by ancient sources could be interpreted from a whole new perspective.

Recent archaeological evidence from our investigations in the Helike area has shown that in the western part of the Helike plain (Fig. 2, V) a new settlement was established before the beginning of the third century BC, its earlier phases of occupation dating back to the second half of the fourth century. Generally, the evidence suggests that the site of Helike was never entirely lost and abandoned, as it was believed until now, but on the contrary, the survivors were able to rebuild a new settlement in the western territory of Helike that was not affected by the catastrophic floods. By the beginnings of the third century, the settlement had grown well and prospered to include in its area a large complex of well preserved and fully equipped workshops

associated with fulling, dyeing and weaving activities (KATSONOPOULOU, 2011). From this time on, life continued to late antiquity, as other findings from our excavations in the area indicate (KATSONOPOULOU, 1998b).

From the above it becomes evident that in the period following the 373 BC earthquake, Helike, although economically and politically weakened, continued to control Poseidon's old cult in the area as its sole possessor since Mycenaean times, and thus the rightful one to grant permission for sacrifices. This would satisfactorily explain the opposition emphatically described by ancient writers between the Helikaeans and the Achaean council in the period following the catastrophe of 373 and until 280 BC, when the neighboring Aigion was finally able to overcome its old rival and take its place in the chairmanship of the Achaean *koinon*.

The cult of Poseidon Helikonios in the Black Sea

Poseidon was worshipped in cities of the southern Black Sea, in particular Sinope and Amisos, the most important ports in the region. Especially in Sinope, he was worshipped in his temple under the evocation of *Helikonios* and his cult held a prominent position in the city's life. Epigraphic evidence from Sinope dated to the fourth century BC (FRENCH, 2004), provides detailed information on the sacrifices offered to the god under his priest's responsibility who was in charge of public and private sacrifices and was appointed by the city to hold his priesthood for life. Two months in the city's calendar were named after the god: the months of *Poseideon* and *Taureon*, when the festival of Tauriai was performed. From Sinope, the cult of Poseidon also spread to other places, including Sinopean colonies such as Kerasus. The information that horse sacrifice was offered to Poseidon by Mithridates VI of Pontos (App. *Mithr.* 70) by throwing a pair of white horses into the sea, is in keeping with the old Greek tradition of horse sacrifice to the god in association with his capacity as god of the waters and the Deep (see above p. 127). The cult statue of Poseidon *Helikonios* in his temple at Sinope is most probably reproduced on the reverse of coins of the early third century BC. The god is shown to the left, seated on a throne, holding dolphin in his right hand and leaning with his left hand on the trident (Fig. 6). On coins of

the Roman period, Poseidon is shown standing, holding the same attributes (SAPRYKIN, 2010). The type of *Helikonios* represented in Sinope's coinage can be paralleled to the enthroned Poseidon shown on coins of other Greek cities associated with his worship, for example, Corinth (HEAD ; POOLE, 1889) or the island of Tenos (WROTH ; POOLE, 1886).

6 – Poseidon *Helikonios* on coin of Sinope; on the countermark, a diademed radiant head of a god (Zeus or Poseidon) is depicted to the left (from Saprykin 2010, 507, fig. 3).



The type of a seated Poseidon *Helikonios* is also suggested for his cult statue in Helike. As first Marinatos (1960) noticed, the fine Classical head of Poseidon on the Helike coins (Fig. 4) finds its best parallel in the representation of Poseidon on the Parthenon frieze (Fig. 7). In fact, the superb head depicted on the coins can only be paralleled to the Parthenon's head, in the stylistic treatment of the hair and the beard, the eye and the brow, the nose, and the strongly marked cheekbones. Marinatos had wondered if the cult statue of Poseidon in Helike had been made by Pheidias himself. His hypothesis may well be justified, for it is said (Pausanias, 7.27.2) that the famous Athenian sculptor created the gold and ivory statue of Athena for her temple in another Achaean city, Pellene, before making the statues of Athena for the Athenian Acropolis and the town of Plataea. It would be no surprising then, if the capital city of the Achaeans had commissioned the great Pheidias to make the cult statue of Poseidon *Helikonios* for his temple in Helike.

7 – Poseidon from the Parthenon frieze. Photo Archive: DAI, Athens.



A final observation regarding Poseidon's worship in the Black Sea concerns his cult of *Asphaleios* (The Securer) known from a number of Greek places: Athens, Sparta, Tainaron, the Cycladic islands of Syros and Paros, the island of Rhodes. This epithet is coupled in ancient literature with the γαίηχος and ενοσίχθων Poseidon, the water-god who creates the earthquakes. To Poseidon *Asphaleios*, people start singing his *paean* when an earthquake occurs, according to Xenophon (*Hell.* 4.7.4), hoping to appease his wrath and ensure the safety to their homes. In the Hellenistic Dionysopolis (earlier Krounoi) on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, Poseidon was worshipped as *Asphaleus*, according to the inscriptional evidence found in the temple of the Pontic Mother of the Gods, constructed in the Early Hellenistic period (LAZARENKO et al, 2010). From the inscription dated to the third and second centuries BC (Fig. 8), we learn that the priest of Poseidon *Asphaleus* served the god for life, as was the case with his priest in the city of Sinope. Among the marble dedications found in the temple of Dionysopolis is a fine marble head of Poseidon (Fig. 9) showing the god with a benevolent mood, as would be appropriate for *Asphaleios/Asphaleus* Poseidon, called upon by people to offer protection and safety to their cities and ports.

**8 – Inscription of dedication to Poseidon *Asphaleus* from Dionysopolis
(from Lazarenko et al. 2010, 59, fig. 26).**



**9 – Marble head of Poseidon from Dionysopolis
(from Lazarenko et al. 2010, 58, fig. 25).**



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