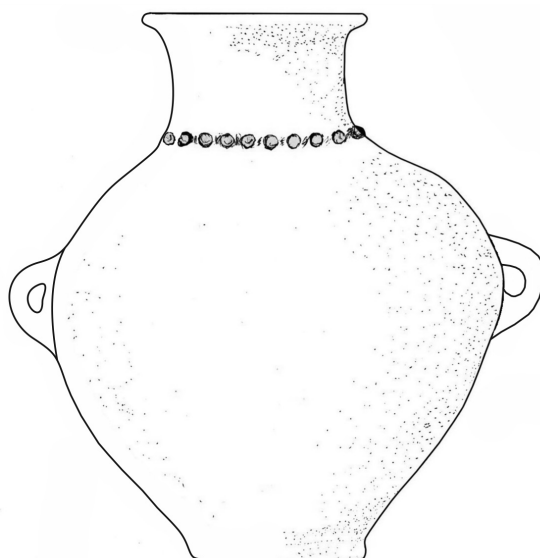


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River-gods in the Milesian colonies on the coastline of Propontis and Pontus Euxinus: myths, cults and iconographic depictions

Remus Mihai Feraru

Abstract: We propose here to address the mythological traditions related to the river-gods (Aisepos, Ryndakos, Istros, Tyras, Borysthene, Phasis) in the pantheons of the Milesian colonies located on the coastlines of Propontis and Pontus Euxinus, the cults devoted to these river deities, as well as their iconographic depictions. The investigation is based on the premise that river deities were both the subject of beliefs and ritual practices and also closely linked to the natural environment. The research here relies on the analysis and interpretation of the information provided by literary sources, as well as epigraphic and numismatic documents. Deification of main waterways occurred only after the establishment of the Greek colonies on the coastline of Propontis and Pontus Euxinus. A number of river deities such as Istros, Tyras, Borysthene and Phasis had probably been incorporated into the pantheons of eponymous polis sometime between the mid-6th and mid-4th century BC.

Keywords: river-god; myths; cults; iconographic depiction; Milesian colonies.

Water is a key element of the Greek religion, both a symbol of purification and life origin and a means of contact with the divine world, as well as a gateway to the realm of the dead. Greek poets and philosophers awarded water diverse and complex meanings and populated it with supernatural and legendary creatures.

Water and ablutions are part, as purifying elements, of almost all rituals preceding sacrifices; no one could approach the sacred until once having completed purifying ceremonies. Spiritual purification was accompanied by physical purification, as water had healing properties: immersion in water was believed a way to cure bodily diseases. According to Pausanias, water pools able to heal the body were found in sanctuaries dedicated to Asclepius¹. Equally, water could increase fertility. Thus, in addition to purification, water symbolised fertility of earth, animals and humans².

Water is central to the Greek mythology as a symbol of the origin of life. Okéanos, water deity by excellence, is considered “father to all gods”³, was a primordial god, who created all things⁴. According to the ancient Greeks, earth was encircled by the cosmic river Okeanos, husband of Thetys and father of rivers and female water deities (Oceanides)⁵.

Water is the medium to enter in contact with the divine world; it is inhabited by numerous nymphs (Naiads, Nereids and Oceanids), mythological creatures that may be found in springs, lakes, rivers, seas, as well as in the ocean⁶.

1. Notes on the origin of river god cults and their iconographic depictions

River and stream cults were general among the Greeks and Romans, similarly to most ancient peoples. Although river deification and worship are attested in the Greek world since the Archaic period, their beginnings can be traced in the Homeric epics. An example of such piety can be found, as early as the Homeric period, in the worship that Achilles and his father Peleus offered to river

¹ Pausanias, II, 27, 6.

² Ferrari 2003, 83, 129.

³ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XIV, 201, 246.

⁴ Ferrari 2003, 83.

⁵ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XIV, 200-201; 245-246, 302; Hesiod, *Theogony*, (1993), 337-370; for water topic in the Greek mythology, see Rudhardt 1971.

⁶ Ferrari 2003, 83.

Spercheios in their homeland. Achilles' father had promised that his son would only cut his hair in honour of Spercheios if he returned safe and unharmed to his homeland after the war. In addition to this hair offering, Peleus had also made a vow to the river-god that Achilles would make a solemn sacrifice in his honour.

Achilles himself mentions the sacrifice of fifty goats to Spercheios by immersing them into the river, which he would offer to the river-god upon the return to his homeland. The Peleian also mentions a sanctuary (*temenos*) and an altar (*bômos*) not far from the river waters⁷. Otherwise, the *Iliad* presents the river-gods attending the council of gods summoned by Zeus in Book XX, during which the "Father of Gods" decrees that they may return to the battlefield and help the sides they support⁸. Their presence among all assembled gods places them on equal footing with the other deities. Far from seeming "less important", they are an integral part of the Homeric pantheon, as established around 800 BC.

According to the same Homer, rivers are of divine origin: they either descend from Okeanos⁹, river Achelous¹⁰ or from Zeus (like river Xanthos in Troade)¹¹. Furthermore, Hesiod presents the divine couple Okeanos and Tethys as the origin of the river-gods¹². As divine beings, the river-gods themselves have descendants of divine origin. Some ancient authors present the nymphs as daughters of the Panhellenic god Achelous¹³ or of local river deities. In his *Metamorphoses*, Antoninus Liberalis, who lived in the second half of the 2nd century or early 3rd century AD, presents the nymphs as daughters of river-god Askanios¹⁴ or Kios, named after hero Kios, the founder of the namesake Milesian colony¹⁵.

In general, river deities have numerous descendants who are integrated into the local genealogies of the poleis. Among river-gods' successors count a number of mythical kings and heroic city-state founders. In the *Odyssey*, Homer lists Amphion and Zethos, the founders of Thebes in Boeotia, as descendants of the local river deity Asopos¹⁶. According to Diodorus of Sicily, the Scamander (today Karamenderes)¹⁷, the most important river of Troade, lay at the origin of the royal family of Troy¹⁸. Pausanias reports that the civic community of Phoroneus was founded by Phoroneus¹⁹, son to river-god Inachos.

Deification of waterways broadly coincided with the founding of Greek colonies. Fresh water, fundamental to the Greeks arriving from the sea when choosing the location of their future colony, was often "deified". Such water deification, a founding act specific to a Greek colony, is mirrored in the embodiment of springs, rivers or watercourses crucial for agriculture, animal husbandry, trade and water supply of each poleis. This special relationship between the Greek settlers and the "beneficial" water led to its deification, while it was awarded a special name. Thus, the stream became a "river-god" worshipped by the entire population living on its banks. This explains why rivers had given their names to colonies founded in their vicinity or at their mouths.

The use of waterway names as place names is specific to the Greek colonial world. Plato specifies there are various ways to name new poleis. Their names may be borrowed from founding circumstances or a particular geographical feature. The polis could also be named after a river, a well or local deities

⁷ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XXIII, 141-151.

⁸ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XX, 5-13.

⁹ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XIV, 245-246.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Iliad* (1999), XXI, 194-197; for Alexandrian philological debates on verses 194-197 in Book XXI of the *Iliad*, see D'Alessio 2004, 16-37. According to D'Alessio, river Achelous is at the origin of all waters on earth, thus replacing what was commonly ascribed to Okeanos, D'Alessio 2004, 16-37.

¹¹ Homer, *Iliad* (1999), XIV, 434.

¹² Hesiod, *Theogony*, (1993), 337-340.

¹³ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 520-525; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 263d; Pausanias (1821), X, 8, 9.

¹⁴ Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* (1968), XXVI, 3: "The boy Hylas went carrying a pail to the River Ascanius to fetch water for the leaders. And when the nymphs, who were the daughters of this river, saw and fell in love with him, they pulled him in, dragging him down into the spring."

¹⁵ Schol. Apoll. Rhod, I 1346: "Τὸ δὲ ἐπώνυμον, ἀντὶ τοῦ ὁμώνυμου. Ὁμωνύμως γὰρ Κίος καὶ ἡ πόλις καὶ ὁ ποταμὸς ἐκαλεῖτο".

¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 260.

¹⁷ Scamander (now Karamenderes) and Simois rivers flow through north-western Anatolia and join in the area of the ruins of Troy.

¹⁸ Diodorus Siculus, IV, 75, 1.

¹⁹ Pausanias (1821), II, 15, 4; see also Dan 2018, 54.

that “would associate the newly established polis with their own fame”²⁰. In this passage, the river and headwaters, usually under the patronage of a nymph are mentioned alongside eponymous deities. In other words, poleis may have as their eponymous one of the great deities of the Greek pantheon, a local deity or legendary figure. In turn, rivers and riverheads or their patron nymphs count among the eponyms of a polis²¹. Ancient authors have repeatedly reported the links between river names and place names²². Along the coastlines of Pontus Euxin there are poleis named after rivers; these are Istros near the Danube (Istros or Ister), Tyras on the Dniester (Tyras), Tanais on the Don (Tanais) or Phasis on the Rhioni (Phasis). Some of these poleis minted coins with the image of the eponymous deified river which is depicted in the form of a river-god.

As early as the Archaic period river deities had been depicted on coins issued by the Greek poleis. Monetary iconography associates the river-god with the androcephalic bull, animal that embodied water, fertility and power²³. In fact, the most ancient evidence of a river-god rendered as an androcephalic bull on a coin dates from the first half of the 6th century BC and comes from Miletus. The animal steps to the forefront with the right leg bent and is winged (Fig. 3)²⁴. All studies to date agree that the androcephalic bull is one of the major iconographic types of river deities²⁵ (Fig. 4). The river-god is represented as a human-head bull or a man with bull-like attributes²⁶. This iconographic type, which appears in the first half of the 5th century BC likely under the influence of theatre, is an intermediate phase between purely zoomorphic and anthropomorphic depictions of river deities²⁷.

Between the Classical and Hellenistic periods, the iconography of the Panhellenic river-god Achelous - which is very likely the most frequently depicted river throughout Antiquity - functions as an archetype of all iconographic representations of Greek river deities rendered on coins²⁸. The most common image of Achelous shows it as a young man or, rarely, as a bull-horned and bull-eared bearded old man²⁹.

The iconographic type of the elongated river-god appears in the Hellenistic period at Alexandria and would be highly successful during



Fig. 3. Achelous winged androcephalic bull, (coin of Miletus, first half of the 6th century BC, *apud LIMC* 1981, I/2, 21, no. 14)



Fig. 4. Androcephalic bull representing a river-god, (Greek silver tetradrachm coin from Gela, Sicily, circa 420 - 415 BC, *apud Pinterest*)

²⁰ Plato, *Leges*, IV, 704a.

²¹ Lacroix 1953, 5-6.

²² Thucydides, VI, 3-4; Stephanus Byzantius (2006), *s.u.* Ἀκράγαντες (= *FGrHist* 76, fr. 59); Strabo, VI, 1, 2 (262).

²³ Weiss 1984, 59 sq., 70 sq., 82, 100-101.

²⁴ Isler 1981, 14, no. 14; see also *LIMC* 1981, I/2, 21, no. 14.

²⁵ In this respect, voir Molinari, Sisci 2016.

²⁶ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 133 with notes 32 and 33.

²⁷ Weiss 1984, 110 sq., 120, 124.

²⁸ Dan 2018, 50.

²⁹ Weiss 1988, 142-146.

Roman times. According to R. M. Gais, the depiction of revellers and more specifically of feasting Herakles lies at the origin of this type of iconography³⁰. The use of Achelous's image stemmed from a need inherent in Greek culture to embody abstract and hitherto aniconic forces of nature³¹.

This introduction serves as a starting point in the research of the mythological traditions related to the river-gods in the pantheons of the Milesian colonies along the coastlines of Propontis and Pontus Euxinus, the cults devoted to these river deities and their iconographic representations (Fig. 1, 2).



Fig. 1. General map of the Greek cities on shores of the Hellespont and Sea of Marmara (*apud* Robu 2012, 195).

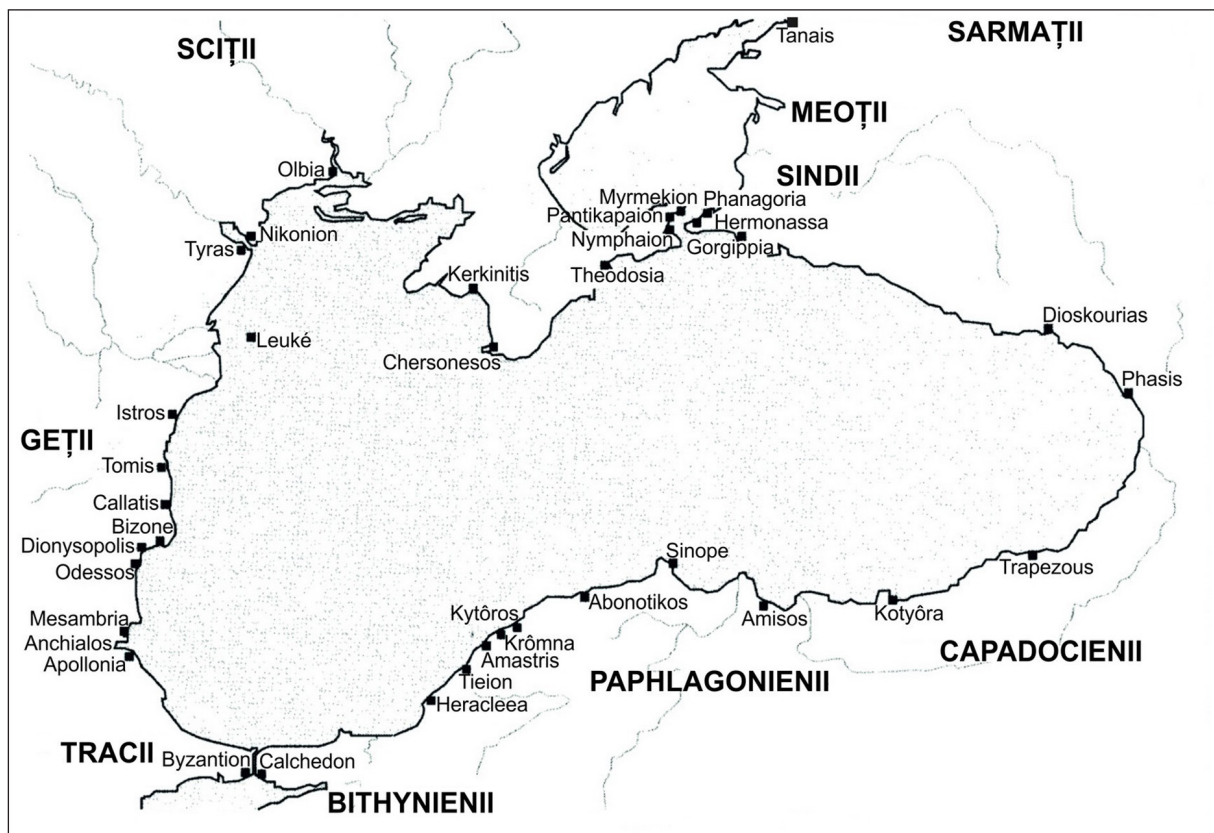


Fig. 2. General map of the Greek cities on the shores of Pontus Euxinus (*apud* Dana 2011 – with our editing)

³⁰ Gais 1978, 362-369.

³¹ Mussini 1999-2002, 116.

The investigation here is based on the premise that river deities were both the subject of beliefs and ritual practices and also closely linked to the natural environment. The research relies on the analysis and interpretation of information provided by literary sources, as well as epigraphic and numismatic documents.

2. River-gods depicted on Cyzician coins

The reverse of a Cyzician coin, dated to the second half of the 5th century BC renders the protome of a running androcephalic bull, accompanied by a fish – likely a bluefin tuna - depicted vertically, with downward tail. The protome exhibits all characteristic attributes of the representation type of river-gods: bearded, human head with bull horns and ears and bent front right leg (Fig. 5)³². It is possible that the androcephalic bull protome depicted on the Cyzician coin represents the personification of one of the two rivers Aisepos or Ryndakos, which delimit westward and eastward the territory of Cyzicus, although their courses do not lie in the immediate vicinity of the Milesian colony³³ (Fig. 1). According to the representation type, the bust of the river deity figured on the Cyzician coin reproduces the archetype of the Panhellenic river god Achelous³⁴. Moreover, it is often difficult for the Archaic and Hellenistic periods to distinguish between the iconographic representation of Achelous and that of another local river-god emergent on the coins struck by the poleis of Asia Minor; the latter is represented in such a manner as to resemble Achelous³⁵. The figure of the fish associated with that of the bull reminds the importance of the aquatic nature of the androcephalic bull protome. It should also be noted that in Cyzicus, as in Phocaea, the fish is rendered vertically, behind the bull protome, with upward tail³⁶. The association between the fish and the androcephalic bull seems to be almost an iconographic stereotype, as it seems to have exceeded much beyond the limits of a single polis or region, diffusing throughout the Greek world. In fact, these fish are mainly associated with androcephalic bulls in order to render their full river dimension. Indeed, such coin users could recognise in these androcephalic bulls a river deity.



Fig. 5. Androcephalic bull accompanied by a fish representing a river-god
(Gold coin of Cyzicus, second half of the 5th century BC., *apud*
https://manfacedbullsau.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/an00687616_001_1.jpg)

³² https://manfacedbullsau.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/an_00687616_001_1.jpg; see also Mani-Hurter, Liewald 2004, 27-44; Isler 1981, 14, n° 20; Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 223-224, n° 127 (pl. IV, 25).

³³ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 224.

³⁴ An iconographic representation of the same Achelous type emerges on a tetradrachm discovered at Gela (Sicily) dating from 490/85-405 BC, see Isler 1981, 15, n° 33. The bull head, which could be reduced to the present horns, is of Eastern origin, Dan 2018, 50, n. 83; D'Alessio 2004, 16-37 (with bibliography).

³⁵ Dan 2018, 49-50.

³⁶ <https://manfacedbullsau.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/582037.jpg>

The obverse of another Cyzician coin, dated to the first half of the 4th century BC, depicts a full androcephalic bull, facing left, superimposing a fish; it is undoubtedly the body of a large tuna fish, which was heavily fished in the Sea of Marmara (Fig. 1) and the Black Sea (Fig. 2) during Antiquity³⁷. The bull's head is a mixture of human and bull features: the bearded human head and the bull horns and ears (Fig. 6). The androcephalic bull embodies a river-god; this iconographic representation reproduces the archetype of the river deity Achelous, similarly to the coin discussed above; the presence of the fish under the bull references the river fauna, which confirms that the androcephalic bull embodies a local river deity, possibly one of the two river-gods Aisepos or Ryndakos³⁸.



Fig. 6. Androcephalic bull representing a river-god (Gold coin of Cyzicus, first half of the 4th century BC., *apud* http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/mysia/kyzikos/VonFritzeI_178.jpg)

3. River-god Istros

Istros (Ἰστρος), today's Danube, is the eponymous river of the namesake Milesian colony founded by the Milesians on the western shore of the Black Sea (Fig. 2). River Istros sparked the interest of the historians especially at the time when the Greeks arrived at the Black Sea and founded city-states on its western coastline. Herodotus gives us the first detailed description of the course of Istros, which he considers the longest river in Europe: "The Ister, then, flows clean across Europe and ends its course in the Euxine sea, at Histria, which is inhabited by Milesian colonists"³⁹. In Strabo's *Geographia*, Istros plays the role of cartographic or horographic axis of Europe⁴⁰.

The Greek mythological tradition reports the myths about the origin and divine genealogy of river-god Istros; he is first mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony* as the son of Okeanos and Thetys: "And Thetys bore to Ocean eddying rivers (...) Strymon, and Meander, and the fair stream of Ister"⁴¹. According to Philostratus of Athens (ca. AD 170-240), Istros's sons were Aktaios and Heloros⁴².

The personified river Istros is worshipped as a deity during the Classical Greek period and especially throughout the Roman period, when the Danube becomes a natural frontier of the Roman Empire. River-god Istros may be recognised in the bearded, horned figure depicted on coins minted in the city-state on the shores of the Sinoe lagoon from mid-4th century BC onwards. Two series of

³⁷ Isler 1981, 14, n° 21; Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 224, n° 128 (pl. IV, 26).

³⁸ Cf. Dan 2018, 49-50.

³⁹ Herodotus (1998), II, 33-34: "τελευτᾷ δὲ ὁ Ἰστρος ἐς θάλασσαν ῥέων τὴν τοῦ Εὐξείνου πόντου διὰ πάσης Εὐρώπης, τῆ Ἰστροίην οἱ Μιλησίων οἰκεῖουσι ἄποικοι" (trad. A. Dan); on how Herodotus viewed river Istros, see Dan 2011, 25-56.

⁴⁰ Strabo, VII, 3, 2-15; on Strabo's view of river Istros, see Counillon 2020, 7-21.

⁴¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, (1993), 337-339: "Τηθὺς δ' Ὀκεανῶ ποταμούς τέκε δινήεντας, (...) Στρυμόνα, Μαϊάνδρον τε καὶ Ἰστρον καλλιρέεθρον (...)"

⁴² Philostratus, *Heroicus*, 23, 13-14: "(...) ὄνομαστότατοι δὲ ἦσαν Ἐλωρός τε καὶ Ἀκταῖος ποταμοῦ παῖδες τοῦ κατὰ Σκυθίαν Ἰστροῦ"; voir aussi Ferrari 2003, 465 (s.u. Istros).

Istrian coin issues, totalling 146 coins, present on the obverse the bearded and bull-horned head of the river deity Istros (Fig. 7) and on the reverse the eagle on dolphin accompanied by legend ΙΣΤΡΠΙ engraved in the upper part of the coin field⁴³. The first coin series comprises coins with irregular and thick flans, on which the head of the river-god is rendered slightly from profile and placed in the left field of the coin⁴⁴. The other series includes coins with a thin, circular flan on which the head of river Istros is depicted more from the front than from profile⁴⁵. According to Constantin Preda, the coins with the head of river-god Istros in the first coin series seem to have been minted between the middle of the 4th century and early 3rd century BC; this coin series certainly includes some of the early coins struck at Istros, if not the earliest. In contrast, the coins part of the second series, were issued during the 3rd century BC.⁴⁶ The iconographic representation of river-god Istros on the Histrian coins reproduces the archetype of the Panhellenic river deity Achelous.

River-god Istros may be recognised on a series of Histrian coins dated to the imperial period. Istros is depicted on the reverse of a coin issued under Iulia Domna (AD 187-217): the river-god is rendered as a bearded figure leaning left, with a half-nude torso; he holds a dolphin in the right hand and a reed in the left; the god leans with the left arm on a hydria, a vessel used to carry water⁴⁷.

On the reverse of a Histrian coin dated during the rule of Elagabalus (AD 218-222), river-god Istros is portrayed as a bearded figure leaning left, with half-nude torso; the god wears a reed crown; he holds a fish in the right hand and a reed in the left, resting his left arm on a hydria. A lighthouse is rendered in the coin field (Fig. 8)⁴⁸.

The reverse of a Histrian coin issued during the reign of Gordian III (AD 238-244) figures the bearded river deity Istros; the god is lying to the left, half-naked; he holds a reed in his right hand, resting his left arm on a hydria (Fig. 9)⁴⁹.



Fig. 7. The bearded and bull-horned head of the river deity Istros, (Bronze coin of Istros, mid-4th century BC, *apud* Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218-219, nos.110 et 111 pl. IV, 3 et 4)



Fig. 8. The River-god Istros, (Bronze coin of Istros, the reign of Elagabalus AD 218-222, *apud* Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 230, n° 142, pl. V, 1)

⁴³ Preda, Nubar 1973, 38-40; 110-119, n^{os} 333-474, pl. V, 2; see also Talmaçhi 2017, 396; Pick 1898, I, 167, n° 468 (pl. II, 26); 179, n° 530; Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218-219, n^{os} 110 et 111 (pl. IV, 3 et 4).

⁴⁴ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 219, n° 111, pl. IV, 4.

⁴⁵ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218-219, n° 110, pl. IV, 3.

⁴⁶ Preda, Nubar, 1973, 39; see also Poenaru-Bordea 2001, 17, 32, who believes that coins with the head of river-god Istros of the first monetary series were issued between ± 380 or 360/350 BC and 313/280 BC, while those in the second coin series between - 313 - 280 BC or even 339 BC or earlier and 313 BC; Pick 1898, I, 152, according to whom the coins in the second series were minted slightly prior 200 BC.

⁴⁷ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 230, no. 141; see also Bărbulescu 1990, 805, no. 21.

⁴⁸ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 230, no. 142 (pl. V, 1); Bărbulescu 1990, 805, no. 22; Pick 1898, I, 176, no. 511.

⁴⁹ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 231, no. 143 (pl. V, 2); Bărbulescu 1990, 805, no. 23.

On the reverse of a coin from the time of Empress Tranquillina (241-244 AD), the river-god Istros is depicted with a beard; the god is leaning left, his torso half-nude; he rests the right hand on a ship's prow⁵⁰.

The comparison between the iconographic depictions of river-god Istros emerging on coins dated to the early Hellenistic period and those issued during the imperial period evidences that in more time distant times, namely the 4th - 3rd century BC, Istros was depicted according to the Achelous type, bearded and bull-horned. Instead, the coins struck in the imperial age, the iconographic representation of the river-god is rather different, according to an iconographic type widespread since the Hellenistic period and highly successful in the imperial period: a bearded Istros, with nude torso, seated or extended, leaning on a vessel from which water gushes⁵¹. Sometimes he wears a reed crown; he holds dolphins, fish or reeds. In the coin field emerge ship prows on which the god's hand rests and lighthouses.



Fig. 9. The River-god Istros, (Bronze coin of Istros, the reign of Gordian III, AD 238-244, *apud* Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 231, no. 143, pl. V, 2)

4. River-god Tyras

Tyras (Τύραξ), today's Dniester, is the eponymous river of the namesake Milesian colony founded by the Milesian settlers by the river's flow into the Black Sea (Fig. 2). The personified Tyras river was worshipped as a river deity as early as the Hellenistic period. River-god Tyras is depicted on the obverse of bronze coins minted by the homonym city-state in the second half of the 4th century BC, in the form of a beardless youth wearing a pair of small horns (Fig. 10)⁵².



Fig. 10. The River-god Tyras, (Bronze coins of Tyras, the second half of the 4th century BC, *apud* Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218, nos. 108 et 109, pl. IV, 6 et 7)

⁵⁰ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 231, no. 144; Bărbulescu 1990, 805, no. 24; Pick 1898, I, 179, no. 530.

⁵¹ Gais 1978, 355-370.

⁵² Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218, no. 108 et 109 (pl. IV, 6 et 7); Zograph 1977, II, 173, Pl. XXVIII, 6-7; Pick 1898, I, Pl. XII, nos. 11-13 et 14; see also Caltabiano 1997, 152, nos. 1 and 2, which dates the two coins with the image of river-god Tyras to late

5. River-god Borysthenes

Borysthenes (Βορυσθένης), the current Dnieper, is the most important river in the Black Sea area after Istros. Ancient geographers named Borysthenes the city-state of Olbia, although this ancient Milesian colony had been established on the right bank of the Bug (*Hypanis*), nearby its flow into the Dnieper (Fig. 2). In fact, during a first phase, the Milesian settlers founded the settlement of Berezan located in front of the Dnieper's flow (Borysthenes) into the Black Sea; this settlement was termed Borysthenes, after the homonym river. In a second phase, sometime between 620/610 and 590 BC, the Milesian settlers originally established at Berezan or those arriving directly from Miletus and aided by their fellow countrymen already settled at Berezan founded the city-state of Olbia on the Bug (*Hypanis*) bank⁵³.

Herodotus stressed the importance of river Borysthenes for the lives of those who lived near its banks. What makes the Borysthenes a river worth notice is the quality of its drinking water, which concurrently ensured abundant food thanks to the fertile lands nearby its banks and the multitude of fish. The river waters, rich in fertile silt, played an important role in the development of agriculture on its banks. The salt-rich waters of the Dnieper favoured fish conservation and export in very good conditions. The river was navigable for a considerable distance inland⁵⁴. The Borysthenes-Dnieper would be praised again more than five centuries later in Dion's of Prussia, also called Dion Chrysostom, Borysthenitic discourse, an author native to Asia Minor⁵⁵. Offering the best conditions for the inhabitants of Olbia, Borysthenes was perceived as a life giver and community protector. This is why the city of Olbia chose to mint coins with the effigy of the benefactor river-god, whom was also devoted a cult likely since the first half of the 6th century BC. Thus, the importance of Borysthenes-Dnieper and *Hypanis*-Bug for both the homonym Greek polis and the local population, had favoured the river's embodiment in two local river deities.

The cult of river-god Borysthenes was integrated into the local founding legends. It seems that river-god Borysthenes had played an important role in the local mythology of Olbia, as Herodotus reports the legend according to which Borysthenes's daughter united with Zeus to give birth to the first man of Scythia, named Targitaos: "The Scythians say that their nation is the youngest in the world, and that it came into being in this way. A man whose name was Targitaüs appeared in this country, which was then desolate. They say that his parents were Zeus and a daughter of the Borysthenes river (I do not believe the story, but it is told)"⁵⁶.

The cult of river-god Borysthenes is recorded at Berezan as early as the middle of the 6th century BC, as evidenced by a graffito carved on a bone plate – likely an amulet - dedicated to the river deity: "Βορυσθένηςός έμου [Βορυσ]θένηςός [μεδέων] Ήητρος" ("I belong to Borysthenes. The physician, master of Borysthenes")⁵⁷. The first Βορυσθένης mentioned in the graffito is undoubtedly the river-god's name, to whom the amulet was dedicated; but the second Βορυσθένης, if the reading of the verbal form which precedes it is accepted, is the name of the island of Berezan itself, whose master was Apollo *Ietros*⁵⁸.

As early as the late 5th century BC or even earlier, the cult of river-god Borysthenes is attested at Olbia and in the Hylaia region - situated along the left bank of the Dnieper and under Olbian influence - where there apparently existed an altar erected to the god; this altar is mentioned alongside the altars of the Mother of Gods and Herakles in a letter carved on a pottery fragment of an amphora or *oinochoe* wall dated, according to the script specificities, around 400 BC: "[---έκπ]ληϊ ένθευθεν ές την Ύλα[ίην--] / [---] αυτις οι βωμοι βεβλαμμένο[ι είσι-] / [---Μ]ητρος Θεων και Βορυσθένηςος και Ηρακλ[έος--]"⁵⁹.

4th and early 3rd century BC.

⁵³ The tradition regarding the name change from Borysthenes to Olbia is reported by Pseudo-Skymnos, vv. 809-813 (éd. Diller).

⁵⁴ Herodotus (1999), IV, 17-18; IV, 53.

⁵⁵ Dio Chrysostomus, *Or.* XXXVI, 2-3.

⁵⁶ Herodotus (1999), IV, 5, 2-6: "Ὡς δὲ Σκύθαι λέγουσι, νεώτατον πάντων ἐθνῶν εἶναι τὸ σφέτερον, τοῦτο δὲ γενέσθαι ᾧδε. Ἄνδρα γενέσθαι πρῶτον ἐν τῇ γῆ ταύτῃ ἐούση ἐρήμῳ τῷ οὐνομα εἶναι Ταργιτάον· τοῦ δὲ Ταργιτάου τούτου τοὺς τοκέας λέγουσι εἶναι, ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιστὰ λέγοντες, λέγουσι δ' ὧν, Δία τε καὶ Βορυσθένηςος τοῦ ποταμοῦ θυγατέρα".

⁵⁷ *IGDOP* 90, p. 142-143.

⁵⁸ See L. Dubois's interpretation in *IGDOP*, 142-143.

⁵⁹ *IGDOP* 24, p. 56, l. 6-8; 57; cf. A.S. Roussiayeva and I. G. Vinogradov, who believe that the inscription text dates from early the second half of the 6th century BC, as does the vessel on which it is carved, see Rusjaeva 1992, 124, 136, 145-146; Vinogradov



Fig. 11. The River-god Borysthenes, (Bronze coin of Olbia, 330-320 BC, <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/sarmatia/olbia/sg1685.jpg>)

A black-varnished vessel discovered at Olbia was offered to the river-gods Hypanis (Southern Bug) and Borysthenes, as recorded by a votive graffito engraved on its support from around 400 BC: “[----] ποσ Ὑπάνι Βορυσθένει” (“[----]pos (as an offering) to Hypanis and Borysthenes”)⁶⁰. Moreover, E. H. Minns mentions a late Roman date relief containing the image of one of the two local river deities⁶¹.

In fact, the image of one of these river deities may be recognised on three bronze coins struck by Olbia between late 4th and mid-3rd century BC⁶². On the obverse of the first coin, the river-god’s head is depicted from profile, facing left; the god has long hair, a long wavy beard and a pair of horns. The reverse renders a quiver, a bow and an axe, which seem to echo the weaponry of the steppe nomads, as well as the city-state ethnicity (Fig. 11)⁶³.

The obverse of the second Olbian coin, dated to 330-320 BC, depicts the bearded head of river-god Borysthenes, facing left, with two horns above his forehead and long hair falling in locks down his neck (Fig. 12)⁶⁴.

Lastly, the obverse of the third coin discovered in Olbia, dated to 260-250 BC, portrays the head of god Borysthenes according to the same iconographic type: bearded head, facing left, with two horns above the forehead and long hair falling in locks down the neck; in this case though, the river deity is more coarsely



Fig. 12. The River-god Borysthenes, (Bronze coin of Olbia, 330-320 BC, *apud* Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218, n° 107, pl. IV, 5)

1981, 14-18; Vinogradov 1989, 65-66 et n. 156.

⁶⁰ *IGDOP* 82, p. 131; see also Arnold-Biucchi 1986, 143 (with earlier bibliography).

⁶¹ Minns 1913, 479 et n. 1.

⁶² Anokhin 1989, 39-40; Arnold-Biucchi 1986, 142, no. 1.

⁶³ <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/sarmatia/olbia/sg1685.jpg>; Arnold-Biucchi 1986, 142, n° 1.

⁶⁴ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 218, no. 107, (pl. IV, 5); Arnold-Biucchi 1986, 142, n° 2; Pick 1898, I, pl. IX, n° 26 et 27; Minns 1913, 479 (pl. III, 4.5).

rendered⁶⁵. The three bronze coins from Olbia evidence the same iconographic type: a bearded head with bull horns, with a wild appearance, undoubtedly the river deity Borysthene; the beard and hair braided into long locks exhibit the same “watery” appearance typical of river-gods who seem to suddenly emerge from the waves.

River-god Hypanis is represented by theophoric names attested at Olbia. The theonym-hydronym Ὑπανίς is used as theophoric anthroponym on an Olbian inscription dated to the imperial period; it appears in the Genitive: Ὑπάνεος⁶⁶. Similarly, another Olbian inscription dated to the 5th century BC mentions the theophoric name Ὑπάνιχος, composed on the root of theonym-hydronym Ὑπανίς⁶⁷. It is not excluded that river-god Hypanis is also figured on Olbian coins like Borysthene.

6. River-god Phasis

Phasis (Φᾶσις) is the eponymous river of the homonym Milesian colony located on the river's left bank near its flow into the Black Sea⁶⁸. In Greek, Roman and Byzantine sources, Phasis is frequently mentioned as the most important river of Colchis⁶⁹. Phasis is identified with the middle and lower reaches of Rioni river and its tributary Quirila in western Georgia⁷⁰. The waters of Phasis, rich in fertile silt, had played an important role in the development of agriculture in ancient Colchis. The river was navigable and served as main trade route between the Greek world and the Colchis inland. At the flow of Phasis into the Black Sea, in the vicinity of today's port city of Poti, lay the Milesian colony of Phasis, which, similarly to other Greek colonies, was named after the river⁷¹. Situated on the eastern shore of the Black Sea (today's western Georgia), the city of Phasis was famous in the Greek world since Antiquity owing to the famous accounts on the Argonauts' expedition in search of the golden fleece (Fig. 2). The importance of river Phasis for both the homonym Greek city and the local population had favoured its embodiment as river-god.

River-god Phasis is first mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony* as the son of Okeanos and Thetis: “And Tethys bore to Ocean eddying rivers (...) and Phasis, and Rhesus, and the silver eddies of Achelous”⁷². According to Pseudo-Plutarch, who compiles the legends of river deities, Phasis would have been the son of Helios and Oceanid Ocyrrhoe, daughter of Okeanos⁷³. Thus, according to the genealogy accounted by Pseudo-Plutarch, different from that provided by Hesiod, Phasis was the son of Helios, like Aietes, king of the Colchians, and his sister Circe⁷⁴; Phasis was therefore grandson to Okeanos, father of all river gods. This indirectly evidences a late personification of Phasis, after the establishment of the colony of Phasis by the Milesians (earliest in the first half of the 6th century BC)⁷⁵, on the other, the worship of this river deity of local origin, closely connected to the mythical history of Colchis, as it appears in Greek tradition and especially in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes⁷⁶.

In a fragment preserved in Theocritus, Mnaseas, a 3rd – 2nd century BC writer, considers Phasis as the father of Colchos from whom the Colchians derive their name⁷⁷; this fact is recorded in a note

⁶⁵ Arnold-Biucchi 1986, 143, no. 3; Pick 1898, I, pl. IX, n° 29.

⁶⁶ *IOSPE I*², 134, l. 8.

⁶⁷ *IGDOP* 101, p. 168; for the relationship between theophoric anthroponyms and river names, see Knoepfler 2000, 92-93 and Parker 2000, 53-80.

⁶⁸ Strabon, XI, 2, 16-17; XI, 3, 4; Pomponius Mela, *Chorographia* I, 108; Stephanus Byzantius (2006), 660-661; Ammianus Marcellinus, XXII, 24; « Périples » anonyme du V^e siècle ap. J.-C., § 44: “by the river entry, on the left side of Phasis, there is a Greek polis founded by the Milesians, called Phasis”, *apud* Lordkipanidzé 1974, 906 et 907, n. 31; see also Avram *et al.* 2004, 953, [s.u. Phasis (n° 711)].

⁶⁹ Herodot, I, 2, 104; II, 103; IV, 37-38, 45; Ps.-Skylax, *Asia* 81; Apollon., II, 401, 1261, 1278; III, 57, 1220; IV, 134; Strabon, I, 2, 39; I, 3, 7; VII, 3, 6; XI, 2, 17; XI, 3, 4; Plin., *Nat.*, VI, 52; Agathias, *Du règne de Justinien*, II, 18-22; III, 19-21.

⁷⁰ Dan 2016, 247, 250; Lordkipanidzé 1994, 368.

⁷¹ Agathias, *Du règne de Justinien*, III, 19: “The fact that the city of Phasis got its name from the river is, I believe, a well-known fact. This river flows through the city and discharges into the Black Sea. The city lies near the coast and the river mouth”; see also, Lordkipanidzé 1974, 905-907.

⁷² Hesiod, *Theogony*, (1993), 337-340: “Τηθύς δ' Ὀκεανῶ ποταμούς τέκε δινήεντας, (...) Φᾶσιν τε Ῥησόν τ' Ἀχελῶν τ' ἄργυροδίην (...)”.

⁷³ Pseudo Plutarch, *De fluviis*, V: “Φᾶσις Ἡλίου καὶ Ὀκυρροῆς τῆς Ὀκεανοῦ παῖς...”.

⁷⁴ Cf. Homer, *Odisea*, X, 136-139; Hes., *Th.*, 958.

⁷⁵ Tsetskhladze 2019, 27, 31 (Table 6); Avram *et al.* 2004, 953, (s.u. Phasis, n° 711).

⁷⁶ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 131.

⁷⁷ Schol. in Theocr., *Hylas*, (1914), p. 269, XIII, 75c: “Μνασέας δὲ Κόλχους φησὶ κληθῆναι ἀπὸ Κόλχου τοῦ Φάσιδος”.

preserved in Eusthatus of Thessalonica: “the Colchians get their name from Colchos, son of Phasis ...”⁷⁸. This information reports the idea widespread in the Greek world that river gods are the ancestors of local heroes⁷⁹, either as clan founders, closely linked to the beginnings of the history of their own city-states, as in the case of Inachos, the first king of Argos⁸⁰, or as fathers of the founding heroes of the city-states; this is the case of Phoroneus, son of river-god Inachos⁸¹ or Olynthos, son of river-god Strymon⁸². According to Herodotus, the Scythians consider themselves descendants of Targitaos, son to Zeus and the river-god Borysthenes’s daughter, who would have been the first man born in the Scythian land⁸³.

River-god Phasis is mentioned together with Helios in Aietes’s “oath”, king of the Colchians, preserved in Callimachus: “Let Helios know this, let Phasis, king of the rivers of our land, know this.”⁸⁴. In this context, Phasis appears as the lord of all regional waterways, a feature specific to all river deities attested in various ways in literary sources⁸⁵.

Philostratus the Younger gives a description of the river deity Phasis: “the Argo carrying its fifty heroes has anchored in the Phasis after passing through the Bosphorus and the Clashing Rocks. You can see the river itself [i.e. the river-god] lying on this deep bed of rushes; his countenance is grim, for his hair is thick and stands upright, his beard (or chin?: γενειάς) bristles, and his eyes glare (γλαυκιώντες); and the abundant water of the stream, since it does not flow from a pitcher (ἀπὸ κάλιπιδος) as is usually the case, but comes in flood from his whole figure, gives us to understand how large a stream is poured into the Pontus”⁸⁶. This description of Phasis by Philostratus is very close, yet not identical with the so-called Hellenistic-Roman description of the river-god lying on waters’ surface⁸⁷.

Of particular interest for the discussion here is a series of silver coins or Colchian didrachms of type I, dated to the 6th - 4th century BC, known as Kolkhidki (a Russian word that means “originating from Colchis”). Only nine coins from this series have survived and are in museums from Europe and the United States: three coins are in Tbilisi, one in Kutaissi, two in St. Petersburg and one each in London, Berlin and Boston. All coins were discovered in western Georgia; they come from coin hoards found in the area of present-day town of Poti - where the old Milesian colony of Phasis probably stood - or in its immediate vicinity, namely at Akhalsopeli, a village about 40 km east of the Poti port. These nine coins circulated in Colchis and researchers unanimously ascribe them to Colchis numismatics⁸⁸.

The nine coins are oval in shape, with a diameter of 20-21 cm and weigh between 7.8 g. and 11.35 gr. A recumbent lioness with her head turned back is depicted on the obverse of the coins; on their reverse a nude kneeling bull-headed human figure (or with a mask?) is rendered in *quadratum incusum*. It is obviously the figure of a youth with rounded chest - which is why some scholars had mistaken it with a female figure - specific to the archaic art. In all cases, the head is that of a bull, with characteristic horns and ears, although some researchers believe the male is depicted either with a goat’s and even a bear’s head. Around the neck of the figure are visible three rows of plies interpreted as collar, necklace or pearl necklace. According to O. Lorkipanidze, in this case it could be the neck of a typical sketched bull or an actor’s mask⁸⁹.

The kneeling bull-headed nude figure depicted on the nine coins sometimes at times presents its right profile at other times its left profile. It differs from coin to coin in many details. For instance, the

⁷⁸ Eusthatus of Thessaloniki (689): “Καλοῦνται δὲ Κόλχοι ἀπὸ Κόλχου τοῦ Φάσιδος...” *apud* Lordkipanidzé 1999, 131.

⁷⁹ Homer, *Iliada* (1999), V,541-549; XVI, 173-176; XXI, 140-143; 190-197.

⁸⁰ Ferrari 2003, 453 (*s.u.* Inachos); Pausanias (1821), II, 15, 4.

⁸¹ Pausanias (1821), II, 15, 4.

⁸² Ferrari 2003, 97, (*s.u.* Argos); 609 (*s.u.* Olintos); 787 (*s.u.* Strimon); see also Lordkipanidzé 1999, 131.

⁸³ Herodotus (1999), IV, 5, 2-6.

⁸⁴ Callimachus (2012), I, fr. 7c = fr. 7, 34 Pfeiffer, p. 141, l. 15: “Ἥλιος ἴστω καὶ Φᾶσις [ποταμῶν ἡμε]τέρων βασιλεύς”, (“let the Sun be my witness and Phasis, the King of our rivers”).

⁸⁵ In this regard, see Dionys. Per, 350, 19-20: “Θύμβρις εὐρείτης ποταμῶν βασιλεύτατος ἄλλων”; Virgil., *Georgics*, I, 482: “fluviorum rex Eridanos”.

⁸⁶ Philostr. Jun, *Im*, VIII, 3: “(...) ἄγουσα τοὺς πεντήκοντα ἡ Ἀργὼ ἐνώρμισται τῷ Φάσιδι Βόσπορον τε καὶ Εὐμπληγάδας διεξελθοῦσα. Ὅρᾳς δὲ καὶ τὸν ποταμὸν αὐτὸν ἐν βαθεῖ δόνακι κείμενον, ἐν βλοσυρῷ τῷ εἶδει, κόμη τε γὰρ ἀμφιλαφῆς αὐτῷ καὶ ἀνεστῆκυῖα γενειάς τε ὑποφρίττουσα καὶ γλαυκιώντες ὀφθαλμοὶ τὸ τε ἀθρόον τοῦ ρεύματος οὐκ ἀπὸ κάλιπιδος ἐκχεόμενον, ἥπερ οὖν εἴωθεν, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ παντὸς ἐκπλημμῦρον ἐννοεῖν δίδωσιν ἡμῖν, ὁπόσος ἐπιχειῖται τῷ Πόντῳ”.

⁸⁷ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 133; for the iconography of the river-god see also Gais 1978, 355-370.

⁸⁸ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 135-137 et n. 59; Lordkipanidzé 1994, 369.

⁸⁹ *Apud* Lordkipanidzé 1999, 137-138.

body of the figure is depicted slender and well-proportioned with defined, sketched or even undefined torso muscles. The horns are also depicted differently, sometimes curved at the top, but other times straight. Hands are placed on hips or knees; sometimes one hand is raised as if holding an object. On eight coins, the figure is portrayed kneeling; on one coin it is rendered with one knee on the ground and the other leg bent, as if preparing for a running race. However, despite these differences in the iconographic representation of the figure, one image is common to all these coins: a nude, kneeling, bull-headed male, which leads us to believe it is the image of a river-god⁹⁰.

The depiction of a river-god with male body and bull head is attested in figurative art. The most common image is that of river-god Achelous, who is depicted as a youth or, rarely, as a horned, old man. On a coin from Metapontum dated to mid-5th century BC (460-450 BC), Achelous, whose identity is confirmed by legend Ἀχελῷου ἀέθλων is a nude, bull-headed male, but also with a more human beard and appearance⁹¹. Moreover, the three bull-headed and tailed dancers depicted on an Attic black-figure hydria of the late 6th century BC preserved in the British Museum are interpreted as river-gods⁹². As far as the evolution of river-god iconographic representations is concerned, it is assumed that the bull-headed male, similarly to the androcephalic bull, is an intermediate phase between purely zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations, which emerges during the first half of the 5th century BC, likely under the influence of the Greek theatre⁹³.

A plausible interpretation of the river deity image depicted on the reverse of the Colchian didrachms is provided by O. Lordkipanidzé. Accordingly, the river-god figured on these coins reverse,.....is about to perform a jump-dance and prepares to jump; the same scene may be noted on an ivory statuette discovered at Samos, dated to the last quarter of the 7th century BC, which renders kneeling youths, with hands on their hips; in this respect, the black-figure hydria dated to late 6th century BC presented above is also relevant, as it features three dancers portrayed as river deities⁹⁴.

The same O. Lordkipanidzé notes the specific influence of the Greek theatre on the iconographic representation of river deities on the reverse of Colchian coins, as actors increasingly appeared on stage wearing animal masks personifying various deities, especially river-gods⁹⁵. In this regard, the Georgian archaeologist refers to Julius Pollux, a 2nd century AD philologist and rhetorician; in a section devoted to the theatre, entitled *Catalogue of Masks*, in book IV of his dictionary *Onomasticon*, Julius Pollux lists seventy-six animal masks personifying various deities, among which river gods occupied a prominent place⁹⁶. Dances inspired from animal movements, symbols of various deities, played an important role on the Greek stage and are called by Julius Pollux *μορφασμός*⁹⁷, which means dance mimicking animal gait or movements⁹⁸. River deities about to dance, imitate animals and water⁹⁹. If the bull-headed kneeling figure on the reverse of type I Colchian didrachms is undoubtedly about to perform a ritual jumping dance, it can be seen as mimicking water flows, more precisely its gushing. Either way, whether about to jump or run, the human figure on the reverse of the Colchian didrachms is the image of a river-god. One may therefore presume that the river deity depicted on the coins known as *Kolkhidki* is Phasis, about which above literary sources provide a number of interesting insights. Considering the evolution of iconographic representations of river deities under the influence of the Greek theatre, we agree, together with O. Lordkipanidzé, that the silver Colchian didrachms with the image of a bull-headed, kneeling male - identified as the river deity Phasis - on the reverse were minted during the first half of the 5th century BC.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁰ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 138.

⁹¹ Gais 1978, 135.

⁹² *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, British Museum, 6, III, He, pl. 81 (340); see also Weiss 1984, 119, pl. 10, 2.

⁹³ Weiss 1984, 120, 124.

⁹⁴ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 139.

⁹⁵ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 139; voir aussi, Weiss 1984, 110 sq.

⁹⁶ Poll., *Onom.*, IV, 133-154; Weiss 1984, 110, 118.

⁹⁷ Poll., *Onom.*, IV, 103: “Ο δὲ μορφασμός παντοδαπῶν ζώων μίμησις ἦν”.

⁹⁸ The term *μορφασμός* derives from the verb *μορφάζω*, “gesticulate, make grimaces or imitate”, Chantraine, *DÉ III*, (1974), 714, (s.u. *μορφή*); cf. *LSJ*, 1147 (s.u. *μορφάζω*): *gesticulate, make grimaces*; *μορφασμός, gesticulation*: hence, name of a *dance* in imitation of animals.

⁹⁹ Weiss 1984, 120 sq.

¹⁰⁰ Lordkipanidzé 1999, 141.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the mention in Hesiod's *Theogony* of rivers flowing into the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea and the popular Argonaut legends in the Greek literature of the 8th - 6th century BC mirror the Greeks' knowledge of the Propontis and Pontus Euxinus coastlines prior to the Greek colonisation. Deification of main waterways occurred subsequent to the foundation of the Greek colonies on the shores of Propontis and Pontus Euxinus. Literary sources and especially numismatic documents indicate that a number of river deities such as Istros, Tyras, Borysthenes and Phasis had been likely integrated into the pantheons of the homonym poleis sometime between mid-6th and mid-4th century BC. A cult devoted to river-god Borysthenes is attested at Berezan around mid-6th century BC. Around 400 BC, the cults of river-gods Borysthenes and Hypanis are attested in Olbia and the Hylaia region, which lay in the Olbian sphere of influence, where likely existed an altar to the river-god Borysthenes. River-god Phasis is depicted on coins minted by the city-state of Phasis during the first half of the 5th century BC. The effigies of river-gods Istros and Tyras appear on bronze coins issued by the two homonym Milesian colonies by mid-4th century BC.

The river deities (Kios, Istros, Borysthenes and Phasis) were incorporated in the founding legends of the Milesian colonies. In this case, it is a practice that may be placed in the context of the founding myths and creation of a local identity of the Milesian colonies. To the Greeks, the river is an integral part in the definition of a local landscape, so the latter would be defined by the river itself. On numerous occasions, records clearly identify the river-gods as the ancestors of mythical kings or founding heroes. Once more, they are the wellspring of life, as they stand at the origin of the community and this tradition testifies to the primacy of rivers over the peoples in the territories. These stories further unite the river and the land and make the river-gods particularly ancient powers living in mythical times. This explains why a number of Milesian colonies by the Black Sea are named after rivers flowing in their vicinity.

The iconographic representations of the river deities that appear on the coins issued by the Milesian colonies reveal the nature and functions of these river-gods. Between the Classical and Hellenistic periods, coin iconographies associate river-gods with the androcephalic bull, an animal that personifies strength, fertility and vitality. The depiction on coins of reed, fish, dolphins and ship prows allude to the aquatic environment animated with divine power. So it would seem that river-gods worshipped in the Milesian colonies were perceived as divine powers at work in the agricultural field: the river had the power to increase fertility of the land by its banks. Headwaters explicitly turn river-gods into a masculine principle that fertilises the land, when directly associated with the lush vegetation or farming crops which their waters make possible, thus ensuring the prosperity of the territory. These deities are intimately linked to vitality. Just as they feed the earth, they also feed the youth, both literally and figuratively. Thus, river-gods allow the peaceful and complete growth of the youth, "making men vigorous and purifying and fertilising women"¹⁰¹. Thus, we believe that river-gods depicted as youths allude to their function as nurturers of the young. Likewise, the iconographic depictions of river deities contribute to the construct and display of a local civic identity of the Milesian city-states. This important role in the design of civic identity is also underlined by the frequent eponymy of territories and cities with the rivers that cross them. In this last aspect, numismatic sources have allowed us to highlight how frequently the Greeks chose to depict river-gods on their coins, as means of display of a local identity specific to the issuing community.

In one word, the cults devoted to river-gods in the Milesian colonies, incorporation of river deities in the local founding legends and their depiction on coins mirror the close identity relationship between the rivers themselves and the inhabitants of the poleis founded in their vicinity or at their mouths. Ensuring well-being and prosperity for those who lived on its banks, the river is perceived as a local deity, protector and guardian of the community.

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¹⁰¹ Dan 2018, 67.

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