

## BOUNDARIES OF RELIGIOUS LIFE: GONIO-APSAROS AS A MEETING PLACE OF CULTURES

გონიო-აფსაროსი– რომის იმპერიის კულტურათა შეხვედრის ადგილი

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**Abstract:** The Gonio-Apsaros fortress is located in the southwestern region of Georgia, an area where an independent Colchian Bronze Age culture first emerged. Subsequently, this territory became a significant point of convergence for various cultures. Recent archaeological research confirms that the first settlements within the fortress appeared in the 8th–7th centuries BCE. Intensive habitation continued throughout the Classical (5th–4th centuries BCE) and Hellenistic (4th–1st centuries BCE) periods. The construction of the Gonio-Apsaros fortress itself, however, is attributed to the Romans.

According to Flavius Arrian, among the Roman fortresses of the eastern Black Sea coast, Apsaros appeared particularly impressive. He also reports that five cohorts of the Roman army were stationed there. Even more remarkable are the archaeological findings—primarily epigraphic—which confirm that the garrison at Apsaros included two cohorts named after Claudius (*Cohors II Claudiana*), a specialized unit of archers (*Sagitarii*), and a cohort named after Emperor Aurelius (*Cohors Aurelia*). The presence of such a substantial military force at Apsaros was determined by its geostrategic location: it directly bordered the territory of the Didrites and served as a key outpost against Iberia.

Decades of archaeological work at the Gonio-Apsaros fortress have uncovered the remains of numerous monumental structures and a diverse array of material culture, corroborating historical sources that describe Gonio-Apsaros as an important strategic and, arguably, cultural center. Among the discoveries, the following are particularly noteworthy: the principia, praetorium, barracks, baths, industrial and craft quarters, water supply systems, and, most importantly, various material artifacts.

Among the various archaeological finds, those related to the beliefs and religious practices of the Roman army are especially significant. It appears that soldiers recruited from the region of Asia Minor to the Gonio-Apsaros fortress venerated the cults of Serapis and Jupiter Dolichenus, both of which reached the zenith of their development—particularly Jupiter Dolichenus—during the Roman period. Furthermore, the study of archaeological evidence allows us to hypothesize that these imperial deities exerted a tangible influence on the local pagan pantheon.

**Keywords:** Gonio-Apsaros; Roman Empire; Roman syncretic deities; Serapis; Jupiter Dolichenus; Colchis.

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**აბსტრაქტი:** გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხე-სიმაგრე მდებარეობს სამხრეთ-დასავლეთ საქართველოს იმ არეალში, სადაც აღმოცენდა თვითმყოფადი კოლხური ბრინჯაოს კულტურა. შემდგომ კი, ეს სივრცე სხვადასხვა კულტურათა თანხვედრის ერთგვარ მნიშვნელოვან ცენტრსაც კი წარმოადგენდა. უახლესი არქეოლოგიური კვლევებით დასტურდება, რომ პირველი სამოსახლოები ციხის ტერიტორიაზე ძვ.წ. VIII-VII საუკუნეებში გაჩნდა. ინტენსიური ცხოვრება გრძელდება კლასიკურსა (V-IV) და ელინისტურ (IV-I) ეპოქაშიც. უშუალოდ გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხე-სიმაგრის აგება კი რომაელებს უკავშირდებათ.

ფლავიუს არიანეს ცნობით აღმოსავლეთ შავიზღვისპირეთის რომაული ციხე-სიმაგრეებიდან განსაკუთრებით შთამბეჭდავად სწორედ აფსაროსი გამოიყურებოდა. მისივე ცნობით, აქ რომაული ჯარის ხუთი კოჰორტა მსახურობდა. კიდევ უფრო საინტერესოა არქეოლოგიური მონაპოვრები (ძირითადად ეპიგრაფიკული), რომლებიც ადასტურებს, რომ აფსაროსში მდგომი გარნიზონის შემადგენლობაში შედიოდა – კლავდიუსის სახელობის ორი კოჰორტა („*Cohors II Claudiana*“), სპეციალური აღჭურვილობის მშვილდოსანთა რაზმი („*Sagitarii*“) და იმპერატორ ავრელიუსის სახელობის კოჰორტა („*Cohors Aurelia*“). აფსაროსში ამდენად სერიოზული სამხედრო ძალის ყოფნა განპირობებული იყო მისი გეოსტრატეგიული მდებარეობით – იგი უშუალოდ ესაზღვრებოდა ძიდრიტა ოლქს და წარმოადგენდა ძირითად ფორპოსტს იბერიის წინააღმდეგ.

გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხის ტერიტორიაზე განხორციელებული მრავალწლიანი არქეოლოგიური სამუშაოების შედეგად აღმოჩნდა არაერთი მონუმენტური ნაგებობის ნაშთები და მრავალფეროვანი ნივთიერი მასალა, რომელიც ცხადყოფს წყაროებში მოცემულ ინფორმაციას გონიო-აფსაროსის, როგორც მნიშვნელოვანი სტრატეგიული და, შეიძლება ითქვას, კულტურული ცენტრის შესახებ. აღმოჩენებს შორის უნდა გამოვყოთ: პრინციპია, პრეტორიუმი, ყაზარმები, თერმები, სამეურნეო-სახელოსნო უბნები, წყალგაყვანილობის სისტემები და, რაც მთავარია, სხვადასხვა სახის ნივთიერი მასალა.

სხვადასხვა სახის არქეოლოგიურ მონაპოვრებს შორის, ძალზე საინტერესოა რომაული არმიის რწმენა-წარმოდგენებთან დაკავშირებული ნივთიერი მასალები. ჩანს რომ, მცირე აზიის რეგიონიდან გონიო-აფსაროსის ციხე-სიმაგრეში რეკრუტირებული სამხედროები თავიანთი სცემდნენ სერაპისისა და იუპიტერ-დოლიქენუსის კულტებს, რომლებმაც თავიანთი განვითარების ზენიტს (განსაკუთრებით იუპიტერ-დოლიქენუსმა) სწორედ რომაულ ეპოქაში მიაღწიეს. ასევე, საინტერესოა ისიც, რომ არქეოლოგიური მონაპოვრების

კვლევებით შეგვიძლია ვივარაუდოთ, რომ აღნიშნულ იმპერიულ ღვთაებებს ნამდვილად ჰქონდათ გავლენა ადგილობრივ წარმართულ პანთეონზე.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** გონიო-აფსაროსი; რომის იმპერია; რომაული სინკრეტული ღვთაებები; სერაპისი; იუპიტერ-დოლიქენუსი; კოლხეთი.

**Introduction:** The Gonio-Apsaros fortress is located in the southwestern region of Georgia, an area where an independent Colchian Bronze Age culture emerged. Subsequently, this space became a significant point of convergence for various cultures. Recent archaeological research confirms that the first settlements within the fortress territory appeared in the 8th–7th centuries BCE. Intensive habitation continued through the Classical (5th–4th centuries BCE) and Hellenistic (4th–1st centuries BCE) periods. The construction of the Gonio-Apsaros fortress itself, however, is associated with the Romans. According to Pliny, it was built in 77 CE. Accordingly, during the 1st–3rd centuries CE, Gonio-Apsaros functioned as a strategic, political, economic, and cultural center on Rome’s eastern frontier.

Of particular interest is the account of the 2nd-century historian and statesman Flavius Arrian, which indicates that among the Roman fortresses of the eastern Black Sea coast, Apsaros appeared especially impressive. At the time of his journey, it already represented a permanent castrum of the *Castella Murata* type, designed for long-term use. According to him, five cohorts of the Roman army were stationed there. Even more remarkable are the archaeological findings - primarily epigraphic - which confirm that the garrison at Apsaros included two cohorts named after Claudius (*Cohors II Claudiana*), a specialized unit of archers (*Sagitarii*), and a cohort named after Emperor Aurelius (*Cohors Aurelia*). The presence of such a significant military force at Apsaros was determined by its geostrategic location: it directly bordered the territory of the Dzidrites and served as a key outpost against Iberia (Mamuladze Shota, Kakhidze, Emzar, Mamuladze Sulkhan, 2021).

Decades of archaeological work within the Gonio-Apsaros fortress have uncovered the remains of numerous monumental structures and a diverse array of material culture, corroborating historical sources that describe Gonio-Apsaros as an important strategic - and arguably cultural - center. Among the discoveries, the following stand out: the principia, praetorium, barracks, baths, industrial and craft quarters, water supply systems, and, most importantly, a variety of material artifacts (Shota, 2009) (Mamuladze Shota, Kakhidze, Emzar, Mamuladze Sulkhan, 2021) (Lortkipanidze O., Mikeladze, T., Khakhutaishvili D., 1980).

Among the various archaeological findings, those related to the beliefs and religious practices of the Roman army are particularly noteworthy. It appears that soldiers recruited from the region of Asia Minor to the Gonio-Apsaros fortress venerated the cults of Serapis and Jupiter Dolichenus, both of which reached the zenith of their development - especially Jupiter Dolichenus - during the Roman period.

**Methods.** The study carried out for the preparation of the paper is mainly based on proven methods in the disciplines of history and archaeology. Based on the specificity of the research topic, preference was given to the use of the universal methodology of historicism and objectivism. In relation to the research issue, we used analysis and synthesis, critical-analytical methods.

**Discussion.** The archaeological evidence from Gonio-Apsaros provides important insights into the religious practices of the Roman army stationed at the fortress. Soldiers recruited from Asia Minor appear to have venerated the cults of Serapis and Jupiter Dolichenus, reflecting the transmission of imperial religious traditions across the Roman Empire. The prominence of Jupiter Dolichenus in particular corresponds with its peak development during the Roman period, highlighting the cult’s

popularity among military units. Inscriptions and cultic artifacts recovered at the site indicate that these deities were actively worshiped within the garrison, suggesting an organized practice of religious rituals.

The adoption of these cults by soldiers in a frontier region underscores the role of religion in maintaining morale, cohesion, and identity within the army. Moreover, the presence of foreign deities in Colchis probably implies a degree of cultural and religious interaction between the Roman garrison and the local population. Material evidence suggests that imperial cults may have influenced the indigenous pagan pantheon, leading to forms of syncretism unique to this region.

Religious artifacts are often concentrated in specific parts of the fortress, indicating designated spaces for ritual activities, which mirrors patterns observed in other Roman military sites. The combination of epigraphic and material evidence demonstrates that the military's religious life was complex and multifaceted, integrating both personal devotion and official cult practices. The continuity of these religious practices across the garrison suggests that they were an established and enduring part of daily life. This evidence highlights Gonio-Apsaros not only as a strategic military outpost but also as a site of cultural and religious exchange. Overall, the study of these religious practices illustrates how the Roman army contributed to the diffusion of imperial cults and facilitated local adaptation of foreign deities.

**Serapis.** In the Roman period, in the eastern provinces of the Empire, including Asia Minor and the southeastern Black Sea region, particularly interesting processes of religious cult practice took place. During this time, a variety of pagan deities were worshiped, among which Serapis and Jupiter Dolichenus were the most popular. From the 1st century CE onwards, the cult of Serapis spread actively to the western regions of the Empire and even established a presence in the imperial center itself (Shota, 2009) (Beard, *Religions of Rome*, 1998). Furthermore, recent archaeological discoveries suggest that the cult of Serapis has numerous parallels with the ancient Georgian pagan pantheon. Of particular interest are the monumental architectural remains found within the Gonio-Apsaros fortress, which may even represent a sanctuary dedicated to Serapis.

Serapis (Greek: Σέραπις) was a syncretic deity whose cult originated in Egypt during the reign of the Ptolemaic dynasty (3rd century BCE). Serapis represents a synthesis of Egyptian and Greco-Hellenistic religious traditions. Its creation is associated with Ptolemy I Soter (305–282 BCE), who sought to foster cultural and religious connections between the Greek and Egyptian populations. Serapis was depicted as a bearded Greek-style god, seated on a throne, with a basket-like symbol on his head - a representation linked to fertility and abundance (Franz, 1911).

The principal temple of the Serapis cult was the Serapeum in Alexandria, which became one of the most prominent cultural centers during the Roman period. The cult of Serapis soon spread beyond the borders of Egypt, reaching nearly the entire Greco-Roman world, including Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and other provinces. The expansion of Serapis' cult within the Roman Empire was facilitated not only by religious factors but also by political objectives, aimed at promoting the integration of various eastern peoples into the western Roman world.

Regarding Serapis' connection to the Roman world, numerous changes occurred in the political, economic, and social spheres as the Empire expanded. Naturally, these transformations were accompanied by shifts in religious consciousness. The traditional Roman pantheon gradually lost its influence and could no longer shape the spiritual life of the Empire's citizens. In their search for immortality, individuals increasingly turned to astrology, magic, and philosophy. It is also noteworthy that Rome did not recognize Egyptian or other Eastern deities in their original forms; for any cult to spread within the Roman Empire, it had to adopt attributes characteristic of Roman gods (Beard, *Religions of Rome*, 1998).

The widespread dissemination of the Serapis cult began in the Late Republican period. Written sources, as well as archaeological and epigraphic evidence, indicate that the cult of Serapis spread throughout the entire Roman Empire, including the Black Sea region.

The popularity of Serapis within the Empire is exemplified by certain bronze drachmas from 132/3 BCE, which depict Serapis standing within a temple, greeting the emperor with the inscription “ADRIAHON” and presenting him with a globe. This imagery signifies that Serapis, as ruler of the cosmos, acknowledges the emperor as the sovereign of the Earth (Jaime, 2008).

Serapis was often associated with everyday life, serving as a protective deity against various diseases, misfortunes, and dangers. During the Roman period, he also became a patron god of the Roman army, with the motto: “*Serapis conquers all.*”

Particularly noteworthy are the artifacts linked to Serapis discovered within the Gonio-Apsaros fortress, including a statue of Serapis, which, based on its iconographic features, can be dated to the Severan period. In this context, it is significant that a Severan bronze coin was also found near the location of this miniature statue. Another notable example connected to Serapis in the region is the depiction of the god on a silver ring from the Ureki treasure.

The cult of Serapis persisted for a considerable period; however, with the spread of Christianity from the 4th century CE, its temples and cult gradually disappeared (Shota, 2009) (Mamuladze Shota, Kakhidze, Emzar, Mamuladze Sulkhan, 2021) (Robert, 1996).

**Jupiter Dolichenus.** Jupiter Dolichenus was a widely venerated syncretic deity during the Roman period, originating near the city of Doliche in Syria (modern-day Turkey). Initially, he was a local Semitic god of storms and the sky, but during the Roman era he was merged with the Roman Jupiter, forming a new deity - Jupiter Dolichenus (Beard, Religions of Rome, 1998).

Analysis of various written sources and archaeological data indicates that the cult rapidly gained popularity during the 2nd century CE, reaching its peak in the first decades of the 3rd century CE, although many of its temples ceased functioning by the late 3rd century. Jupiter Dolichenus was considered an invincible god of the sky, the cosmos, rain, and thunder, and due to these attributes, he was associated with the Capitoline Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Clifford, 2008).

Depictions of Jupiter Dolichenus present him as a Jupiter-type god: a bearded, robust male figure wearing Eastern-style clothing, often with a Phrygian cap. In his right hand, he holds a double-headed axe or a sword, and in his left, a thunderbolt. He is frequently shown standing on a bull, symbolizing his strength and celestial sovereignty. Overall, his iconography exhibits remarkable consistency. He is typically depicted with a beard and curled hair, wearing the Phrygian cap, but often also in Roman military attire, including a cullis, paludamentum, belt (balteus) across the chest, and armed with a sword or dagger. Footwear varies between short boots, sandals, or even bare feet.

Regarding his iconographic attributes, studies of various archaeological finds indicate that Jupiter Dolichenus almost always appears with three key symbols: the thunderbolt, the double-headed axe, and the bull. The thunderbolt, held in the left hand, represents the god's power over weather and destructive forces, while the double-headed axe, held in the right hand, signifies his authority. The depiction of the bull alongside Jupiter in ritual imagery emerges from the late 3rd century BCE and appears influenced by Hittite and Hurrian traditions associated with their deities Teshub and Hadad, which the Romans later adopted (Clifford, 2008).

Jupiter Dolichenus enjoyed particular popularity within the Roman army. His worship often involved secretive rituals, and his followers performed ceremonies, swore oaths of loyalty, and conducted sacrifices and sacred meals. Numerous artifacts related to Jupiter Dolichenus have been discovered across Roman fortresses in both the western and eastern provinces of the Empire, attesting to the widespread diffusion of his cult. In this context, recent excavations at the Gonio-Apsaros fortress have revealed a range of related artifacts - including miniature statues, ritual ladles (*simpulums*), coins, and more - highlighting the broad reach of Jupiter Dolichenus' cult in this region.

One particularly remarkable example is a miniature statue depicting an eagle and a goat. In this case, the eagle symbolizes the god Jupiter, while the goat represents his consort Juno. The depiction of Jupiter Dolichenus as an eagle has Syrian origins and embodies his eternal celestial omnipotence. The eagle is



often shown in association with Jupiter Dolichenus, positioned beneath the bull, emphasizing a direct symbolic link to the deity (Beard, *Religions of Rome*, 1998).

The cult of Jupiter Dolichenus reached its peak of popularity in the 3rd century CE; however, with the spread of Christianity, his following rapidly declined, and by the 4th century, even his temples were closed, leading to the eventual disappearance of the deity from memory.

**The Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux).** Another deity associated with the Roman army is the twin sons of Zeus and Leda, represented in artistic depictions connected to Jupiter Dolichenus. They are thought to symbolically represent the two hemispheres of the world. Known as the Castores Dolicheni, these deities were also linked to victory and served as protective gods for soldiers.

The twins are frequently depicted in diverse artistic forms: often riding horses, each in their own chariot, or in semi-aniconic forms, with human upper bodies attached to pyramids or rocks. Another notable variant shows them in a Near Eastern style, as bearded elder men wearing armour similar to Jupiter Dolichenus and Phrygian caps (Shota, 2009) (Mamuladze Shota, Kakhidze, Emzar, Mamuladze Sulkhan, 2021). These figures often carry the same attributes, including the double-headed axe. Some scholars suggest that these older, more primitive personifications may themselves represent Jupiter Dolichenus.

In this context, one particularly intriguing artifact from the “Gonio Treasure” is a miniature gold statue of a youth (Lortkipanidze O., Mikeladze, T., Khakhutaishvili D., 1980). The figure wears a conical headdress and a cloak draped over the shoulders, holding a small cup in the right hand. The conical headdress, the shoulder-draped cloak, and the overall iconographic features of the statue correspond closely to those associated with the Dioscuri, providing a basis for identifying this figure as one of the Dioscuri.

It is also noteworthy that numerous rituals implement associated with these religious traditions have been found within the territories of Roman castella. These include the *sēcespita* - a bronze fragment of a Roman sacrificial knife - and the *simpulum*, a ritual or sacred cup used during cultic ceremonies.

**Conclusion.** The findings at Apsaros, along with other evidence, strongly suggest that the various deities popular in the Roman period were widely venerated by the soldiers stationed there. Regarding the popularity of the cults of Serapis and other syncretic deities in Colchis, the situation appears somewhat different from that in the Empire’s major provinces. In fact, the process of Romanization was generally less pronounced in Colchis. Specifically, Serapis and Jupiter Dolichenus appear less frequently in the local pagan pantheon along the western Georgian coast. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that these cults were likely familiar to the local population in the eastern Black Sea region.

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