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OLBIA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON NERONIAN EVIDENCE

This paper addresses a theme that was central to the work of Valentina Krapivina, namely the Roman period in Olbia and around the Black Sea in general. As Rostovtzeff observed long ago, and as Valentina and others have often insisted, Olbia is special in many ways, but we cannot hope to understand Roman Olbia without engaging seriously also with the larger issue of the Black Sea under Rome, Roman concerns there and indeed Olbians' dealings with the region and with the imperial power alike.¹ These are enormous themes, burdened with a great weight of modern scholarship. And these are also themes upon which I have written elsewhere.² Here, therefore, I shall focus sharply on parts of the ancient evidence that have been claimed as important for the Neronian period. In fact, in recent years the honorand and I had begun slowly to plan a joint study of some of that evidence, but we were unable to finish that work.

Keywords: Olbio, terracotta eagle, Rome, Zeus Olbios, Plautius Silvanus.

We began with the fine terracotta eagle which is displayed in the Archaeological Museum of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Examination together of this eagle and invaluable advice from Donald Bailey of the British Museum, established that it has no bearing on the issue of Olbia and Rome. It had often been adduced as

evidence of a Roman military presence, but it was never clear why such a terracotta eagle indicated the Roman army. After all it was a terracotta, not part of a legionary standard or the like. In fact, it is an incense burner, hollow and with a substantial hole in its back which is evidently ancient.³ Thanks to the expertise of Donald Bailey with such objects, we were able to conclude that the eagle was probably made in a workshop of Cnidus in western Asia Minor, well known for such artefacts. Bailey gave a date in the late first or first half of the second century AD. Attempts, therefore, to connect this supposedly military eagle with Roman military activity in Olbia under Nero were therefore also implausible on grounds of chronology: the object seems to be too late, even if it did have a military connection. Inevitably, such finds are not easily located in civic history, practice or ideology, but we began to wonder whether this incense-burner might be associated with the cult of Zeus in Roman Olbia c. AD 100.

Zeus' cult there is well attested epigraphically (cf. SEG 47. 1186), while it has been suggested that Zeus might also be evoked by eagle-iconography on Olbian and other Black Sea coinage.⁴ Of his various cult titles there, we may note the inscription of the second century AD wherein brothers erected a tower "for Zeus Poliarkhes and the Demos" (IOSPE i² 183). A few decades later Kallisthenes, son of Dades, re-

1. Vinogradov 1997, 341-5 discusses Rostovtzeff's contention in the history of scholarship of these matters. Accordingly, the present paper will not be larded with footnotes packed with modern scholarship, but will centre upon the ancient sources and will cite modern works only where necessary.

2. Most recently, Braund Nero.

3. I am grateful to T. Shevchenko for helpful correspondence on these matters.

4. So, rather ambitiously, [Hind, 2007].

ceived an honorific decree from his fellow Olbians which stressed his descent from men who were “known to the emperor” (*sebastognwstoi*) and who had “founded the city” in the sense that they had made substantial contributions to its success (IOSPE i² 42). In summarizing Kallisthenes’ career in the city, the decree mentions that he was “priest of the protector of our city, the divine Zeus Olbios”. The citizens’ insistence that their city was called Olbia (however much Greeks more generally tended to call it Borysthenes) sharpens the question of the nature of the link between Zeus’ cult title and the name of the city. All the more so, when Zeus here is characterised as the city’s protector. In all probability much would be clearer if only we had some sense of the foundation myth of Olbia.⁵ However, it is very clear that Zeus was identified in Roman Olbia as the protector of the city and possibly also was given a key role in the city’s traditions of its foundation. The eagle terracotta may well have been a small part of that. Be that as it may, all these considerations accord well enough with Dio’s statement that the Olbians of the late first century AD were accustomed to deliberate on civic matters by the temple of Zeus (Dio Chrys. 36. 17).

Encouraged by the “demilitarization” of the terracotta, Valentina Krapivina set about locating other objects which had been brought to bear in attempts to support a Roman military presence at Olbia in the mid-first century AD. Her enquiries established that the bits of supposedly military accoutrements of this period that have been brought into the debate either are not military artefacts at all or cannot be located. These small and very dubious objects had become part of the notion of a Roman military presence at Olbia largely because of the famous inscription of Tiberius Plautius Silvanus Aelianus. His grand epitaph has been the basis and focus of the longstanding scholarly debate on these matters. However, it is still worth looking closely at its text, because we must be clear about what it actually says and what it does not say.

Before doing so, however, we must pause to consider another piece of evidence on Rome and the northwest Black Sea which is, in fact, not evidence at all. For a papyrus (so-called Hunt’s Pridianum) has enjoyed a role in the debate which it should never have had. The poorly-preserved text of this papyrus has often been cited according to an old reading which made it mention Tyras and locate that city outside the *provincia*. If that reading were right, it would be important, albeit complex to interpret for many reasons (especially because of the double meaning of *provincia*, which denotes either the area of a province and/or the sphere of command of a

Roman commander or other magistrate). The papyrus has gained an established place in modern scholarship on Roman Tyras and Olbia, and is therefore repeatedly cited as a key text. However, it was established many decades ago that the papyrus does not mention Tyras at all, let alone anything about its location with regard to a *provincia* (in any sense). In fact, the papyrus was at this point misread. The words that were once taken to mention Tyras refer in fact to a camp, with no indication of Tyras or any other location.⁶ Meanwhile, there is another kind of evidence which deserves more attention than it has often received. For it remains interesting and potentially important that Tyras adopted a new civic era early in the reign of Nero. Since Olbia did not use this kind of era and dated by magistrates, we cannot know whether it also made some civic innovation or otherwise celebrated Nero’s accession, while the reasons for Tyras’ change of era are also unclear in detail.⁷

With that in mind, we may now turn to the central piece of evidence in the whole debate about the Neronian period in the north Black Sea, namely the epitaph of Tiberius Plautius Silvanus Aelianus. It hardly needs to be said that the purpose of this and other such epitaphs was not to preserve for us a balanced account of the man’s life and career. Rather, the purpose was of course to present him in as impressive a manner as possible, for the greater glory of himself, his family and his associates. The point is not that these epitaphs contain naked untruth (though perhaps they may from time to time), but that the presentation is very imbalanced. By its very nature, such an epitaph will seek to present the life of the deceased in as impressive a manner as possible for a Roman reader. When we read such inscriptions, therefore, we should expect to hear of the greatness of the deceased and his various achievements, which are themselves couched in the ideology and value-system of Roman imperial culture. This was a culture which particularly valued military success. Accordingly, the real shock in this particular epitaph is that there is no clear statement of any military success at all. There is no claim to a battle won or enemies slaughtered. There is nothing about booty or about captives taken. We regularly find in the epitaphs of Roman commanders (as also in literary works in their praise) clear statements about such matters. But in this case we have at most the **suggestion** of military conflict and a presentation of success without any specific claim to battles and victories in the field. In this case the achievements gained are such as might, in principle,

5. See further [Hind, 2007], with bibliography. In general, e.g. [Rusayeva, 1992].

6. The correct reading was already stressed by [Fink, 1958, p.107; Conole and Milns, 1983, p. 186] and others are misinformed in citing it.

7. See further [Leschhorn, 1993, p.77].

have involved military success in battle, so that we may well understand why scholars have routinely assumed that Plautius Silvanus led his army hither and thither as far as Chersonesus. However, it must be important that his epitaph does not say as much:

As legate of Moesia...he brought across more than 100,000 of the Transdanubians, along with their wives, children, chieftains and monarchs, to become tax-paying subjects. He suppressed an incipient disturbance of the Sarmatians, although he had sent a great part of his army to Armenia to the expeditionary force. He brought across to the river-bank which he protected, in order to pay homage to the Roman standards, kings hitherto unknown or hostile to the Roman people. To the kings of the Bastarnae and of the Rhoxolani he sent back their sons, (to the kings) of the Dacians he sent back their brothers, who had been captured or rescued from their enemies. From some of them he received hostages. By means of these actions he both secured the peace of his province and prolonged it. The king of the Scythians also was removed from his siege of Chersonesus, which is beyond the Borysthenes. He was the first person to help from that province the grain-supply -of the Roman people by means of a large quantity of wheat. (ILS 986)⁸

The achievements may be examined in turn. First, he “brought across” the Danube a lot of people. The grandiloquent epitaph shows him in charge, but did he do any more than agree to their desire to come south of the river? Certainly, there is no hint that he forced them to come: rather, their arrival is presented as a positive achievement in that it swelled the numbers of imperial taxpayers. The lack of any serious military problem under his governorship is indicated by the imperial decision to re-assign a large part of his army to Armenia. Cleverly, the epitaph makes that a positive event, by showing him successful against the Sarmatians even without much of his army. But again we are not told of any battle or victory. Instead he has suppressed a problem that was beginning there. We are not told what that means – what the problem was, how far it had developed, if at all – but again the vagueness gives us no encouragement to suppose that he had ever taken his army into the field against any Sarmatians. Diplomacy may well have been enough, and the “incipient disturbance” may not have required much even of that. Then we are told of another aspect of his bringing over of people, where again there is no sign of battle. Rather the achievement lies in

their homage and their novelty to Romans. Then, further diplomatic activity, entailing the ringing names of the Rhoxolani and Dacians. Here at last there is a hint of conflict, for some unspecified individuals among those involved had been captured by the Romans, it seems. What is strikingly absent, however, is any statement about how and when that had happened. Certainly, if Plautius Silvanus himself had captured them, and not a predecessor for example, we should expect that to have been made very clear and listed as an achievement in its own right. Then we are told of hostages, but once again this need be no more than a matter of diplomacy. In short, this list of achievements does not record a great general, or even a single victory, large or small. Instead it shows a governor busy in his involvement with peoples beyond the Danube and claims credit for his successful dealings there in these various ways – all short of battle.

As we examine the text of the epitaph we see also a break at this point which has usually gone unremarked: “by means of these actions he both secured the peace of his province and prolonged it”. The sentence is surely a summary conclusion to his activities in his *provincia*. And that simple observation explains the formulation that follows: “the king of the Scythians also was removed from his siege of Chersonesus, which is beyond the Borysthenes.” Here there is a real difficulty of interpretation, so that there is no place for dogmatism. However, if the previous sentence is a summary conclusion on the *provincia*, it follows that we have here an additional matter (and another will follow that - on grain supply) beyond the *provincia*. That certainly suits the language of the epitaph, which specifies that Chersonesus and its siege lay “beyond the Borysthenes”. Again we have a genuine problem of interpretation of the name, since Borysthenes may be both the Dnieper river and the city of Olbia (not to mention more recondite usages, happily irrelevant here). However, on balance the river is far more likely here, for it marks a physical border for Chersonesus far better than could Olbia. Further, there is much about the Danube and its crossing implied in this text, so that a river and a location beyond a river would seem to fit rather better. Finally, as Strabo and others make very clear, it is the river that is the more famous of the two in the Roman empire, even if Olbia too enjoyed some significance.

With that in mind, we may also observe that to describe Chersonesus in terms of the river Borysthenes (as also of Olbia, if that is preferred) is very peculiar, not least because a great distance intervenes. It would be clearer and simpler to locate Chersonesus by reference to the Crimea, perhaps as Tauric Chersonesus.

8. The translation is that of [Conole and Milns, 1983], with minor changes.

However, neither clarity nor simplicity were important. For the laudatory purposes of the epitaph “beyond the Borysthenes” sounded far better: Plautius Silvanus’ action had proceeded beyond a major boundary of world geography. What is less clear is whether the Dnieper was also the boundary of the *provincia*. Our hard knowledge is insufficient to allow us to be sure about that, but I am strongly inclined to think so. The Roman frontier in the northwest Black Sea was unusual and a little awkward. The Danube established a line on the landscape, south of which the major Roman positions were concentrated. However, we know enough about Roman frontiers in general and about Roman management of this frontier in particular, to recognize also that that was not the whole story.⁹ Furthermore, the line of the Danube left Tyras and Olbia very exposed, while we should expect Rome to have been concerned with them not only for reasons of their Greekness, but also because they controlled a substantial portion of the coast of the Black Sea (and we may observe the remarks of Agrippa I, as formulated by Josephus and located in AD 66, shortly after Plautius Silvanus’ death: *BJ* 2. 345ff., esp. 366). The fate of Tyras and Olbia must have become an issue for Rome as soon as the kingdom of Thrace was annexed as Moesia in AD 46. In all probability (although there is no direct evidence) these cities were included within the new province soon enough. That would be a very satisfactory explanation as to why Tyras adopted a new era in those years.

There has been much dispute, but these reasons together seem to me to constitute a sufficiently strong case for supposing that Rome regarded the Dnieper as the boundary of the province to the east along the Black Sea coast at least from the early years of Nero. If that is right, the language of the epitaph makes complete sense: events in the province and on the Danube had been covered, the Scythian affair across the Dnieper was an addendum, as also was the rather different matter of grain sent to Rome, another first that might be claimed and might be all the more worth claiming in an epitaph in the environs of Rome, where grain shortage was not unknown in these years. In the Crimea a great success is implied for the governor: he has saved the city from barbarian siege. But again there is no word of any battle fought or victory won, nor even any claim to the major achievement that would have been entailed in taking any substantial force all the way to Chersonesus by crossing the Dnieper and a great deal more. The silence is deafening. And the reason is clear: there was no battle and no campaign.

9. Further, [Paunov and Doncheva, 2013] with bibliography.

Of course, much has been written about the way in which the Roman army might have gone to the Crimea - whether by land or by sea or by both in tandem. However, the silence of the inscription indicates clearly enough that there was no such expedition. Certainly, credit is claimed for Plautius Silvanus with regard to raising the far-off siege, as in his dealings with the peoples of the Danube, but again there is no reason to suppose anything more than diplomacy. The silence of the epitaph suggests that the Scythian king had raised his siege of Chersonesus not because of the arrival of the governor and his army (whether depleted or not), but because he had been persuaded to do so, whether with threats, promises or payments. Moreover, we need not imagine either that diplomatic contact with the governor was the only reason for the king’s withdrawal. If the king had withdrawn after the governor had sent a letter or the like, it was easy enough for him to claim a great achievement far across the Dnieper. However, it is entirely possible if not probable that the Scythian king would have seen the affair very differently. Conceivably he had already wearied of the siege: the great port of Chersonesus was not easily overcome by pastoralists, who could not control the sea and who were not well suited to siege warfare. No doubt, too, the Scythian king had other concerns, including consideration of the passage of the seasons. Accordingly, we may consider that even the diplomacy deployed by the governor may have been less crucial in the Crimea than the epitaph would suggest.

Diplomacy was much more important to Roman imperialism than the imposition of force, so that Plautius Silvanus’ achievements were by no means trivial or unworthy of praise. And of course it was especially military power and potential that gave strength to Roman imperial diplomacy. However, in itself diplomacy was not quite the stuff of greatness by the standards of the Roman elite of the Principate. A glance at the *Res Gestae* of Augustus shows the *princeps* listing the more remarkable aspects of his diplomatic activity, but he also makes very explicit his victories by brute force and the fact that his militarism supported and validated his invaluable diplomacy. In the northern Black Sea we may observe in this regard the busy negotiations - conducted by letter - between Claudius and Eunones, king of the Aorsi, in arranging the handover of Mithridates VIII (*Tac. Ann.* 12. 15ff.). The local elites of the Greek cities of the region might play a role in the wealth of negotiations through which Rome sought to manage the region as a whole. The fragmentary inscription found below Mangup (SEG 46. 947) seems to show that process in action: there we find kings of the Aorsi and what seems to be an hon-

oured diplomat of a local city, evidently with at least an important relevance to Chersonesus, the nearest large city. This is not the place to explore the many problems of this text, and we should hesitate before building such a problematic text, without precise dating, into an historical vision of the region which is already hazy enough.¹⁰

Of course, diplomacy makes a far less attractive story than the now-familiar notion of a warring Plautius Silvanus, deploying his army from south of the Danube to the Crimea. That and the weight of habit and tradition, will probably mean that my re-consideration of his inscription will be unwelcome to many a scholar, even though it is grounded in the actual words of his epitaph. However, it should be understood too that my argument for his governorship as one of diplomacy (not war) has two substantial advantages. For it solves two problems. First, it explains why Tacitus says not a word about his activities, unless we imagine (and there is no reason why we should) that he dealt with all this out of chronological sequence. On the interpretation advanced here, Tacitus' omission is not a problem at all: the diplomacy of the governor was not enough to demand inclusion in the *Annals*. Secondly, the remarks of Vespasian. For, extraordinarily, the epitaph quotes the emperor Vespasian's words in his oration for the deceased, stressing that Nero should have honoured the man for his governorship. Vespasian's words have been taken to show Nero's unfairness or jealousy,¹¹ but these too were laudatory oratory. Plautius Silvanus had become an important man in Vespasian's regime, an imperial favourite. Accordingly, we can hardly regard these words as impartial: the emperor had every reason to criticise Nero and to praise his own man. Of course, his words look very different once we have seen, as Tacitus evidently did, that Plautius Silvanus' governorship was not so remarkable, and that there had been no military victories and at best only some skilled diplomacy, whether in the Danube region or stretching into the Crimea. One may agree with Nero that the governorship was not such a wonderful success and did not require the kind of honours of which Vespasian later spoke. Indeed, the very fact that, exceptionally, the epitaph incorporates Vespasian's assessment, might well be taken as a further indication that Roman admiration of this particular governorship was otherwise lukewarm. It may not only have been

Nero who considered it rather less than great. Vespasian's positive assessment of the past of his favourite added a lustre that would reflect well on the emperor himself, while the quotation of his words offered important support to the rhetorical strategy of the rest of the epitaph.

The purpose of this paper has been to develop my part of the discussions which I enjoyed with Valentina Krapivina. I do not mean to suggest that she agreed with all my ideas, for in fact she did not even know in detail of much of my thinking on these topics. However, I have tried here to continue on the path which we had begun to travel together, looking hard at each element of the evidence for Rome and the north-western Black Sea in the first century AD. This paper has not addressed everything, of course, but in tackling anew the famous epitaph and touching upon the Mangup inscription, the papyrus (Hunt's Pridianum) and the largely irrelevant set of objects that have been brought into consideration, I think it has given an indication of where our joint work might have gone, if untimely fate had not made that impossible. The upshot of all this for Neronian Olbia is rather negative. For, although there are other reasons to suspect a Roman presence at Olbia under Nero, the epitaph of Plautius Silvanus certainly does not say that he or his army visited Olbia and neither does it say anything that implies as much.

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10. V.M. Zubar [Zubar, 2007, p.173-178] provides a bold account, including Pharzoios' coinage and Olbia, though all is speculation.

11. [Griffin, 1984, p.118; Levick, 1999] too.

Дэвид Браунд

**ОЛЬВИЯ
В РИМСКОЙ ИМПЕРИИ:
НЕКОТОРЫЕ ЗАМЕЧАНИЯ
ПО АКТИВНОСТИ НЕРОНА
В ОЛЬВИИ**

Рассматривается тема, которая занимала центральное место в работе Валентины Крапивиной, а именно, римский период в Ольвии и в Северном Причерноморье в целом. Ранее в качестве доказательства присутствия римлян в Ольвии рассматривалась терракота орла из Ольвии, хранящаяся в Археологическом музее ИА. По мнению Дональда Бейли, эти находки датируются в пределах конца I – первой половины II в. н.э. и уже поэтому не могут быть доказательством присутствия римлян в Ольвии во времена Нерона. Однако орел был символом Зевса. В римской Ольвии он считался защитником города. В этой связи можно вспомнить, что дела города обсуждались в храме Зевса.

Привлекаются данные эпиграфики, в первую очередь эпитафия Тиберия Плавтия Сильвана, которая была фокусом давней научной дискуссии о роли римлян в жизни Ольвии. Исследование текста эпитафии и сравнение его с данными Тацита позволяет заключить, что не военные успехи покойного, а тонкая дипломатия позволили ему обеспечить успех своей Провинции. Однако, эта эпитафия, как и надпись с Мангупа и особенно папирус Ханта, которые оказались в сфере нашего внимания.

Ключевые слова: Ольвия, терракота орла, Рим, Зевс Ольвийский, Плавтий Сильван.

Девід Браунд

**ОЛЬВИЯ
В РИМСЬКІЙ ІМПЕРІЇ:
ДЕЯКІ ЗАУВАЖЕННЯ ВІДНОСНО
АКТИВНОСТІ НЕРОНА
В ОЛЬВІЇ**

Розглядається тема, яка займала центральне місце в роботах Валентини Крапівіної, а саме, римський період в Ольвії і у Північному Причорномор'ї в цілому. Раніше для підтвердження присутності римлян в Ольвії розглядалася терракота орла з Ольвії з матеріалів Археологічного музею Інституту археології. Аналогія їй знайшлася у Британському музеї. На думку Дональда Бейлі, вона виготовлена в майстерні на Кніді і датується у межах I – першої половини II ст. н.е., і вже тому не можуть слугувати доказом присутності в Ольвії римлян за часів Нерона. Однак, орел був символом Зевса, який у римській Ольвії вважався захисником міста.

Залучено дані епіграфіки, у першу чергу епітафія Тіберія Плавтія Сільвана, яка була центром давньої наукової дискусії про роль римлян у житті Ольвії. Дослідження тексту епітафії, порівняння його з повідомленнями Тацита, дозволяють заключити, що не військові успіхи, а тонка дипломатія покійного сприяла вдалим діям у Провінції. Одна ця епітафія, як і напис з Мангупу і папірус Ханта, які опинилися у сфері нашої уваги, не можуть остаточно вирішити наш спір відносно взаємовідносин Ольвії і Риму за часів Нерона.

Ключові слова: Ольвія, терракота орла, Рим, Зевс Ольвійський, Плавтій Сільван.

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