

# Travelling Stone Masons in Roman Thrace – New Evidence for the Distribution of Marble, Architectural Traditions and Sculptural Models during the Principate

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For several decades scholars (e.g. M. Squarciapino, J. Toynbee, J. B. Ward-Perkins, K. T. Erim, T. Ivanov, Y. Mladenova and M. Tacheva) have devoted much of their time to studying the transfer of architectural and sculptural models in the Roman Empire by focusing on the distribution of marble.<sup>1</sup> The ideas and stone carving techniques were spread by travelling groups of stone masons, primarily from Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup> Masters from *Aphrodisias*, *Nicomedia*, *Ephesos*, and *Pergamum* worked on commission in various zones of the Roman world – Italy, Greece, North Africa. There is also plenty of evidence for this in Roman Thrace. Today we can trace this phenomenal distribution not only of stone materials, but also of architectural models, ideas and workmanship, by furthering the research through the analysis of a number of new finds unearthed during archaeological excavations in Bulgaria.

In Thrace, works of Anatolian masters were found in the Roman colonies of *Ulpia Ra-tiaria* and *Ulpia Oescus*, in the Thracian cities of *Odessos*, *Tomis*, *Marcianopolis*, *Abritus*, *Augusta Traiana* and *Philippopolis*, and above all in Roman villas in Southern Bulgaria – Kasnakovo and Armira (fig. 1).

Prof. Theophil Ivanov and Prof. Yanka Mladenova started the archaeological studies in the present-day Bulgarian lands in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> They focused on the archaeological excavations in the colony of *Ulpia Oescus*, in *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, and especially on the villa Armira. The latter was just discovered at the time of their investigations and is located near Ivaylovgrad, which is very close to *Hadrianopolis*.

The studies of Prof. J. B. Ward-Perkins along the western Pontus coast are of great importance. Trying to trace the distribution of marbles from Asia Minor to Thrace and other European territories of the Empire, he came across epigraphic and archaeological finds evidencing the presence of Anatolians in the following Roman cities: *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, *Marcianopolis*, *Odessos*, and *Tomis*.<sup>4</sup> Similar data was found by Prof. Tacheva as well, who is interested particularly in the Anatolian settlers in Roman Thrace in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>5</sup>

The newly uncovered archaeological finds confirm the prolific work of the travelling Anatolian masters who worked on commission. This is an essential aspect of the Roman economy in the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and developed on the basis of the active distribution of stone materials, especially marble and limestone.

The problems examined in this paper are directly related to the above research. On the other hand, there is a good deal of new data available from archaeological excavations. Many new materials have been unearthed. This in turn opens new vistas to broaden the

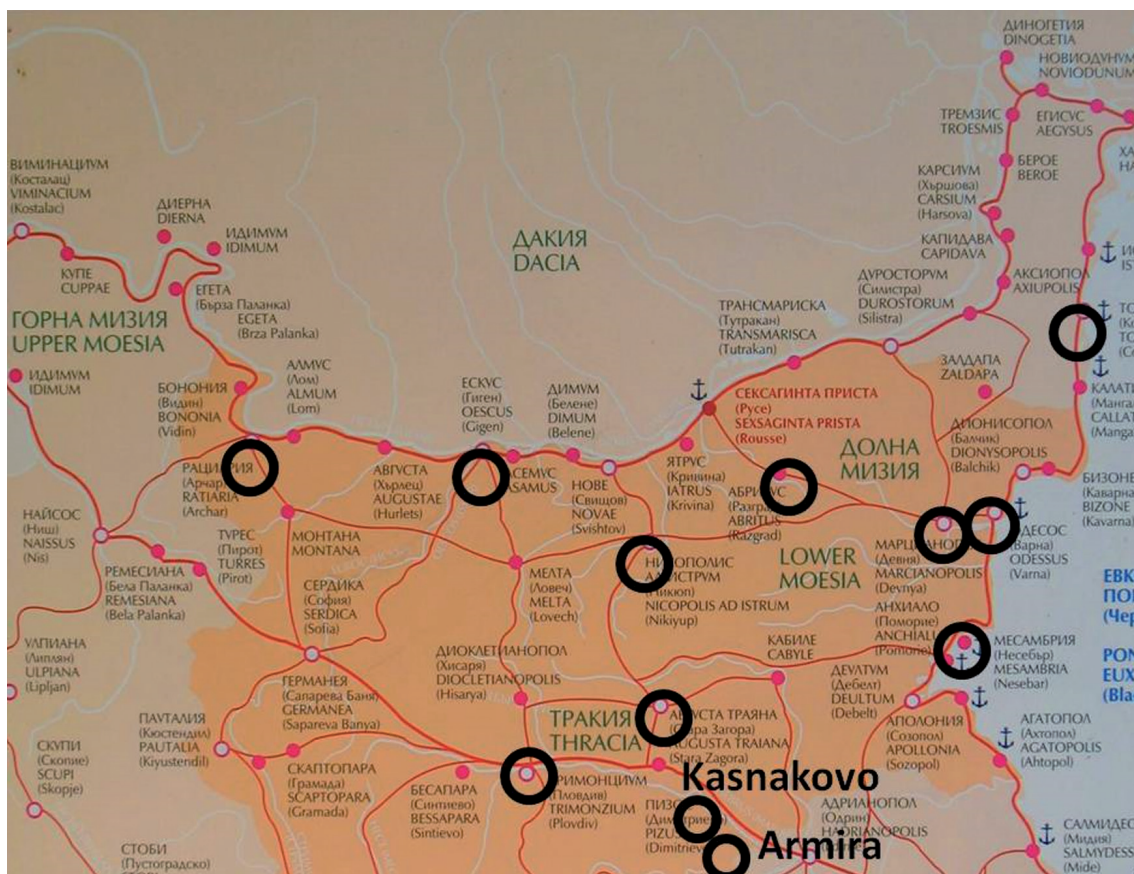


Fig. 1: Map of Roman Thracia with the towns and places with possible evidence of Anatolian stonemasons.

scope and further the progress of the research conducted by professors Squarciapino, Ivanov, Mladenova, Perkins, and Tacheva. Moreover, some of these early studies were presented at the Classical Archaeology congresses in the 1960s (for example, the study of the works of Anatolians in Roman *Leptis Magna*).<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this study is first to highlight not only the existing architectural decorative monuments, but also the recently identified finds. These are predominantly architectural details after Anatolian models, and were most probably carved by Anatolian stonemasons. They had either settled in Roman Thracia or remained there only to produce the ordered details.

Secondly, the study attempts to shed light on certain imported materials – in particular marbles, which indicate the way in which the Anatolian craftsmen entered Thracia. A completely new project is in progress for the establishment of the origin of marbles in the province of Thracia.<sup>7</sup>

**Roman Monuments from the Lower Danube Limes Zone,  
Produced by Anatolian Masters**

The most famous and most extensively explored Roman city (enjoying the rank of a colony) in the Bulgarian section of the Lower Danube is *Ulpia Oescus*. More than 200 architectural details have been found during the excavations at *Oescus*, which have been running for over 113 years.<sup>8</sup> They are mainly in the Corinthian order.<sup>9</sup> Their chronology is diverse. Moreover, many of them belonged to different architectural complexes, such as temples, a civil basilica, tombs, and mausoleums. But the central monumental buildings in *Oescus* date to the time of Trajan and Hadrian, when the city was already a Roman colony. Particularly important for our study is the architectural detail from *Oescus*, which is made of marble.

This is a corner acroterion from a temple building (or from a mausoleum complex) (fig. 2). It was published by Eugen von Mercklin in 1962 in the catalogue of figural capitals as an analogy of the images of figures of naked women in acanthus decoration from Asia Minor.<sup>10</sup> There is no description or analysis of the monument. It was my pleasure to publish it with a complete analysis in 2011.<sup>11</sup> Beyond any doubt, this monument was made of imported marble and was carved by Anatolian masters – most likely Aphrodisians by origin. The acroterion consists of infinite compositions of acanthus



Fig. 2: Acroterion from *Ulpia Oescus* (Ghigen village, Pleven region).



leaves and stems, which are shaped in fine flutes and floral cups. The entire detail is carved around a central figure, which is the focus of the composition. This is a figure of a naked woman. The type of this architectural detail is well-known: these are details ornamented with floral motifs and human figures (peopled scroll works). These models are purely Anatolian by origin. They are best known from the Hadrianic *thermae* in *Aphrodisias*.<sup>12</sup>

The detail from *Oescus*, apart from being a decorative model, must have been produced by Aphrodisian masters, as exhibited by the craftsmanship of the work. There are three reasons substantiating this finding: the entire floral ornamentation and the female figure are three-dimensional; all the elements are shaped in fretwork and are carved with a drill at each centimeter; exact parallels are found in the works of Aphrodisian masters. These parallels are found precisely in the baths in *Aphrodisias*, in Rome, and in the monuments from the Severan Forum of *Leptis Magna* (again pillars decorated with human and animal figures in the acanthus decoration).<sup>13</sup>

The acroterion from *Ulpia Oescus* is an absolutely convincing example: this is an architectural detail belonging to a monumental complex from the reign of Hadrian, which was made of imported marble and by travelling stonemasons, most likely coming from *Aphrodisias*. Unfortunately, the monument from *Oescus* was unearthed as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century by V. Dobruski and it is impossible to identify its location in the Roman city. It might have belonged to the roof decoration of a mausoleum structure in the necropolises of *Oescus* or from the temple in the town. Roman Thrace abounds in monuments produced by Aphrodisian masters, yet, there are two absolute analogies of this acroterion from *Oescus* – a marble frieze from *Anchialos*, and the statue of *Fortuna* and *Pontus* from *Tomis*.

### **The Roman Frieze from a Tomb Complex (mausoleum) from Anchialos**

An entire architrave from a tomb complex was identified in *Anchialos*, which is shaped as a frieze detail, decorated with acanthus leaves and rosettes (fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> The decorative scheme itself consists of gracefully scrolling stems, rotating in circles in the acanthus foliage. Large rosettes are positioned in the center of the composition. Similar to the example from *Ulpia Oescus*, here again, all the elements are three-dimensional and shaped in fretwork. Dense drill-work is evident everywhere, even at a centimeter distance.

The marble from which this frieze is made is pink-beige and is Anatolian by origin. It was imported to *Anchialos*, and the decorative motifs were, in any way, carved by masters coming from Asia Minor. Considering the carving technique and the craftsmanship of shaping the motifs, this detail must have been produced by Aphrodisian masters.



Fig. 3: Frieze from *Anchialos* (Pomorie, Black Sea coast).

### **The Statue of Fortuna and Pontos in Tomis**

Another monument made of marble that convincingly exhibits all the distinctive features of Anatolian craftsmanship is the well-known statue of Fortuna and Pontus from *Tomis*. This detail provides more grounds to associate it with works produced by Anatolian masters (fig. 4). Their style can be detected in the acanthus leaves at the base of the sculptural composition. Every single leaf was shaped with fine drill-work. The marble is again imported. Moreover, the technique of the sculptural composition resembles the technique of the Aphrodisian School, which was highly specialized precisely in architectural decoration, and also in the carving of three-dimensional figures – the so-called round sculptures.

### **Odessos and Marcianopolis**

There is an exceptional diversity of unpublished elements carved by Anatolian masters after stone masonry models from *Aphrodisias*, *Ephesos* and *Pergamum*. These can be found in the modern Bulgarian towns of Varna and Devnya (Roman *Odessos* and *Marcianopolis*).

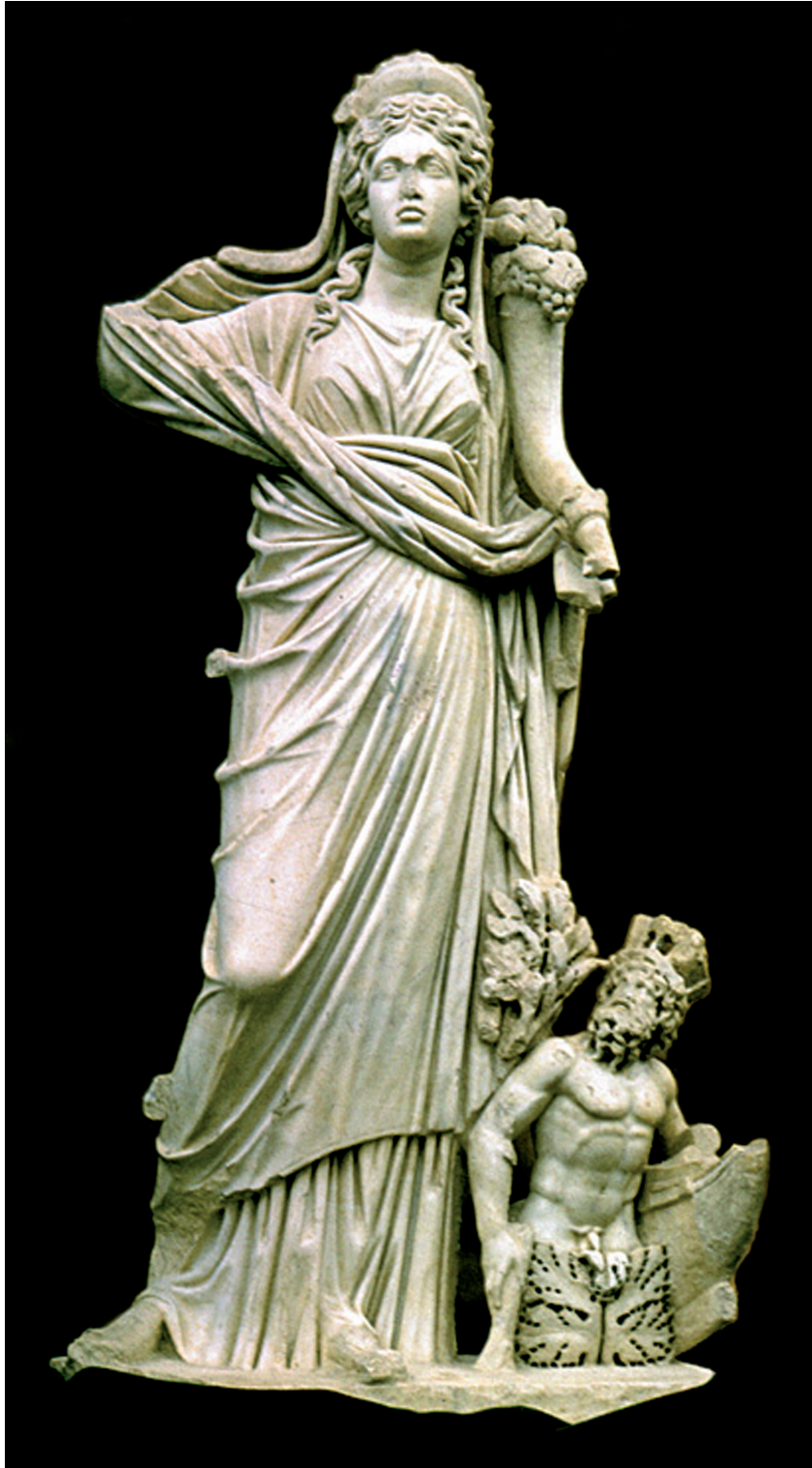


Fig. 4: Statue of Fortuna and Pontus from *Tomis* (Constanta, Romania).



### The Roman Baths in Odessos

These are the most famous thermae from the Roman period within the present-day territory of Bulgaria.<sup>15</sup> The baths in *Odessos* were decorated in the Ionic and Corinthian orders, and are dated to the late Antonine rule (i.e. around the 60s–70s of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century). The Corinthian capitals from the thermae exhibit all the distinctive features of the Pergamum Corinthian capital in terms of: an overall appearance and decorative scheme; the styling and shaping of the acanthus leaves; and the elements in the upper third of the calathos – cups, caulices, helices, volutes, and abacus flowers (fig. 5).

However, the most striking aspect in this case is the dense and easily recognisable drill-work only and solely in the abacus flowers. This seemingly difficult to recognize feature directly points at the style of the Anatolian masters.



Fig. 5: The best-preserved Corinthian column capital from the Roman Thermae in *Odessos* (Varna).

### The Collection in the Varna Museum

The same situation is encountered with the Corinthian pilaster capitals from the wall facing in baths and private houses. All of these are displayed in the Archaeological Museum in Varna. Prof. Perkins was aware of only one of them and he included it in his 1980 study. However, 30 years later the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Varna has four capitals from pilaster facings, which are made of imported marble and contain all the typical Anatolian decorative features. Still, one of the most interesting examples is a capital with open volute scrolls, which is from *Marcianopolis*, and also an antae capital with unique floral decoration on the interior wall of the façade. The latter is a small antae capital in the garden of the museum.

In the Varna Archaeological Museum we have also very important traces of Anatolian stonemasons from an Ionic capital from the mausoleum grave complex from the periphery of *Odessos*, which dates to the Trajanic period.<sup>16</sup> The first element are drillings over the acanthus leaves placed on the lower part of the volute motives. The second element are thin sticks at the top of the *ovulae* (the eggs) on the Ionic cyma ornament.

### The Collection in the Marcianopolis Museum

We witness the same situation when taking a brief “detour” to Devnya, and visit the ruins and the museum collection of ancient *Marcianopolis*. There are indeed data about imported semi-finished sarcophagi, probably Proconnesian, but there are also many new finds.<sup>17</sup> These are Doric capitals made of limestone from the Antonine period and Doric capitals made of marble from the Severan period, which originate from the amphitheater in the city.<sup>18</sup> A whole series of capitals was discovered in the *Nymphaeum* near the mineral springs of Devnya. They are all shaped according to the Anatolian style: more precisely according to the scheme of the Pergamum Corinthian capital. Nevertheless, the most significant data were obtained from the newly unearthed Ionic capital, which at present is displayed in front of the entrance of the Museum in Devnya. This Ionic capital was decorated with acanthus leaves and was shaped entirely with drill-work.

### Abritus

The Ionic capitals from the peristyle building in Abritus also date to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. These are details of exceptionally fine quality, originating from a richly decorated building (perhaps a villa) from the Roman period. The ornamentation of this detail meticulously follows the Aphrodisian decorative scheme of Ionic capitals. Furthermore, there is a lot of drill-work here.



### Details from the Villas in Bulgaria

#### Villa Armira

The luxury in this opulently decorated villa complex in Bulgaria, is definitely at a very high level. As early as the 1970s, Prof. Yanka Mladenova, presenting the finds from her field studies at the Classical Archeology Congresses, conclusively proved that the architectural decoration of the villa was produced by a traveling group of Aphrodisian decorators.<sup>19</sup>

Many Corinthian pilaster capitals were produced here (fig. 6). Today, 24 of them have been preserved. Almost all of them exhibit the decorative scheme of the Corinthian capitals from Aphrodisias. Those, decorated with mythological creatures and reptiles, stand out with their snails, lizards, snakes, and eagles. Above all we can distinguish the typical acanthus leaves and drillwork in the focal places. The little holes from the drill work are almost everywhere on the marble's surface, and the elements are three-dimensional. The same perfect analogies can be seen in the pilaster capitals from *Aphrodisias*.<sup>20</sup> They



Fig. 6: One of the twenty-four wall facing pilaster capitals in the villa at Armira, produced *in situ* from the traveling stonemasons from *Aphrodisias*.



Fig. 7: Newly found capital from the villa of Kasnakovo, Haskovo region.

are originals of the Thracian works, mainly Armira and *Oescus*, not only in terms of the carving techniques, but also the decorative models, such as the naked female figures.

### **Villa Kasnakovo**

This Roman villa, situated very close to Armira, is the latest find in Bulgaria. A couple of years ago our colleague Katsarova, studying the villa, unearthed a Corinthian antae capital, which is a perfect replica of the Aphrodisian architectural decorative works (fig. 7).

### **Philippopolis**

Anatolian works also can be found in this major Roman city in the province of Thrace.<sup>21</sup> These are on principle Corinthian capitals and cornices. The best examples are from the *odeon* and theater in the city (fig. 8). The architectural environment of *Philippopolis* during the Roman period and especially the complexes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, when the most impressive public buildings were constructed and decorated, are influenced mainly by the architecture of Pergamum.<sup>22</sup>

In *Philippopolis* we can easily see many common features with the architecture of *Ephesos*.<sup>23</sup> For example, the piers of the arch from the time of Hadrian are very similar to the ornamentation of the Library of Celsus from the same period.





Fig. 8: Corinthian capital from the *odeum-bouleuterium* in *Philippopolis* (found also in the last few years).



In conclusion, the purpose of this paper was to revisit and to highlight the issue of the transfer of traditions and work groups of stonemasons from Asia Minor to the European territories of the Roman Empire. This is easy to trace especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and we could map the route even in greater detail thanks to the many new data obtained from archaeological excavations.

The newly found architectural elements in Bulgaria (e.g. at *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, *Oescus*, *Abritus*, and particularly *Anchialos* and the villas in Armira and Kasnakovo) in the last 40 years have provided ample grounds to continue studying the distribution route of marbles. They also allow us to better understand the input of stone materials, stone-carving techniques, and the craftsmanship of individual sculptural compositions from the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire to Thrace and the European territories of the Empire.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Squarciapino 1943; Squarciapino 1965, 229–233; Toynbee 1934; Erim 1967a, 18–28; Erim 1967b, 233–243; Ward-Perkins 1994; Ward-Perkins 1948, 59–80; Ward-Perkins 1980, 23–69; Ivanov 1986, 498–504; Mladenova 1979, 91–94; Mladenova 1981, 38–48; Tačeva-Hitova 1970a, 115–123; Tačeva-Hitova 1970b, 87–89.

<sup>2</sup> Mladenova 1979, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Ivanov 1986, op. cit.; Mladenova 1979, op. cit.; Mladenova 1981, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Ward-Perkins 1980, 34. 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> Tacheva-Hitova 1972, 17–43.

<sup>6</sup> Squarciapino 1965, 229–233.

<sup>7</sup> This is a research project based on geological and archaeological data, which will be implemented by scientists of the National Archaeological Institute with the Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (NAIM-BAS) and the Austrian Archaeological Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Ivanov, Ivanov 1998, 97–106. 118–125 figs. 61–70.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 100–102. 166–169 figs. 63–68. 75. 76. 133–138.

<sup>10</sup> Mercklin 1962, 39 fig. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Dimitrov 2007a, 218–234.

<sup>12</sup> Ward-Perkins 1980, 58 f. pl. XXIV b–XXVI, Nr. 31–33; Erim 1967a, 26 fig. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ward-Perkins 1980, 59, pl. XXVI–XXVII; Ward-Perkins 1948, pl. VII–VIII.

<sup>14</sup> Dimitrov 2005, 408–423.

<sup>15</sup> Georgiev 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Petrova 1985, 19–23 figs. 7. 10–13.

<sup>17</sup> Dimitrov, kat. Nr. 135 figs. 136. 137.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, kat. Nr. 82–84 figs. 81–83.

<sup>19</sup> Mladenova 1979, 91–94; Mladenova 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Erim 1967a, 26 fig. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Dimitrov 2018, 231–243.

<sup>22</sup> Rohmann 1998, 79–81. 133 Nr. 28–33 Taf. 45–47 (1–3); Heilmeyer 1970, 78–105. 164–172 Taf. 24–28. 32. 33. 36–39.

<sup>23</sup> Strocka 1988, 291–307 Taf. 39–47.

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