

# Unpublished relief of Attis from the “Roman bridge” in Blažuj – Ilidža near Sarajevo

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*The bridge in the village of Blažuj in Ilidža Municipality, near Sarajevo, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, consists largely of stone spolia from the nearby Roman archaeological site. A stone bearing a relief was built into the parapet, with the relief facing outwards. Though this Roman relief has long been known, it was never the subject of archaeological analysis. This paper determines, from a study of the iconographic content and comparison with other monuments, that it represents the cult of Attis, a Phrygian deity, which reached the province of Dalmatia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The relief from Blažuj displays most of the typical iconographic features of Attis. These include the crossed legs, the naked belly, the navel, and probably the long curly hair or a Phrygian cap, and a cornucopia or wings. He is leaning on a shepherd's crook, suggesting that the relief is of "Attis tristis." The relief dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century.*

**Key words:** Attis, Cybele, stone relief, Roman cults, iconographic analysis, Ilidža – Aquae S....

## **Circumstances surrounding the relief of Attis**

The Ottoman-period bridge in Blažuj, Ilidža Municipality, is known colloquially as the Roman bridge (Ćeman 2000: 207–209), probably because it was largely built of stone spolia brought from the nearby Roman site belonging to the urban settlement of Aqua S.... (Sergejevski 1936: 1–3). Considerable evidence of the Roman presence has been found at the site: a villa urbana (Busuladžić 2011: 158–159), a Roman hospicium (Pašalić 1959: 113–136), and quantities of movable artefacts – jewellery, weapons, pottery, coins (Kellner 1895: 161–198), lamps<sup>1</sup> and other everyday objects. The nature of the site as a whole is also revealed by the discovery of large mosaics (Busuladžić 2008: 38–45), evidence of its status and importance and of the way of life of the people who lived there.

When the need for a bridge became apparent, the shortage of building materials was compensated by using worked stone from the nearby Roman settlement. The bridge dates roughly from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, and was perhaps built, or simply restored, by Grand Vezir Rustem Pasha or Gazi Ali Pasha (Ćeman 2000: 207). (Fig. 1–2).

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<sup>1</sup> Busuladžić 2007: 107, nos. 20 and 21, 109, no. 28, 111, no. 38, 121, no. 67, 142, no. 143, 145, no. 159, 146, nos. 160 and 161, 151, no. 186, 182, no. 306, 184, no. 314.

## **Introduction**

Attis was a Phrygian (Roller 1994: 245–265), oriental (Frazer 1907) deity, directly associated with the goddess Cybele (Cumont 1959), Magna Mater (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 129). Originally worshipped in Phrygia (Vassileva 2001: 51–64), her cult spread westwards, becoming widespread, as attested by the many monuments to her that have been found (CCCA I – VI). This divine couple was also worshipped, in various manifestations, in the Greek (Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 49–56) and later in the Roman world (Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 56–64). The cults of Cybele and Attis<sup>2</sup> were the oldest oriental cults in Rome.<sup>3</sup> Cybele was a goddess of life as a whole, of motherhood, and the protectress of cities (Schwenn 1922: 2250–2297). It is said that Attis (Cumont 1896: 2247–2251), was her consort (Ciglencčki 1999: 21–31) and favourite (Osvalt 1980: 181–183; Miletić *et al.* 2014: 129). Attis is best known for his self-castration (Vermaseren 1977: 96–101; Karković-Takalić 2012: 93; Miletić *et al.* 2014: 132). He grew to become a handsome youth, and fell in love with the nymph Sangaride; but jealous Agdistis/Cybele caused him to lose his mind, running wildly before stopping under a pine tree and cutting off his genitals (Vermaseren 1977). He died of this act of self-mutilation, and violets sprang from his blood. The anniversary of this tragic event, 24 March, was celebrated as part of the Megalasia. It was common for the Corybantes, the priests of Cybele, when in a state of ecstasy, to perform the same act of self-castration (Vermaseren 1977: 113–125). The essence of this myth and its various features were to be found in many other myths in a variety of civilizations, including those of Orpheus (Roscher 1897 – 1902: 1058–1206.), Tammuz (Roscher 1915: 46–71), Zagreuz and Adonis (Uranić 2005: 12 and 24). The festival of the Megalasia included periods of grieving and of joy, a feature that has given rise to different interpretations. One view is that it was a celebration of the rebirth or resurrection of Attis (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 132). Some hold that after his death Attis survived in some mystical manner like the evergreen pine beneath which he emasculated himself, and which later became one of his symbols (Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 125). The cones produced by the pine, perpetually growing, became the symbol of his eternal life (Colin 2004: 43). Another myth relates that he lived on after his death. He is also associated with Zeus, who, when asked to bring Attis to life, agreed only that his body should remain incorruptible, his hair should always grow and his little finger be endowed with everlasting movement (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 132). Another myth relates that Zeus himself was hostile to Attis, who introduced the cult of Cybele to Lydia, where she was greatly venerated. Her popularity aroused the jealousy of Zeus, who sent a boar to destroy the Lydian crops, but the boar killed Attis. The cult spread in Phrygia, Lydia, Bithynia and the island of Rhodes. However, its spread was limited by the custom of castration, which was alien to Greek culture and to human sympathies in general. For this reason it was not much favoured on the Greek mainland.<sup>4</sup> In Hellenistic and later in Roman times Attis became popular. The iconography of Attis became somewhat standardized in Rome, where he was typically shown standing, with legs crossed, leaning on a pedum and holding a syrinx or a tympanum,<sup>5</sup> often wearing the typical Phrygian pointed cap, sleeved tunic and long trousers (Srejšević & Cermanović 2004: 64). This figure on funerary monuments is identified by many as Attis symbolizing eternal life and the hope of life after death (Graillet 1912: 412; Sergejevski 1934: 30; Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 92–98). It is said that Attis had a funereal countenance, and was regarded as the guardian of the grave, hence his depiction on sepulchral monuments (Nikoloska 2013: 523). The interpretation is further complicated by the fact that the cult of Attis underwent a degree of syncretism with indigenous cults in Liburnia and Dalmatia (Turković 2006: 7). This was particularly the case with Silvanus, who wholly replaced Attis in the case of the dendrophori, who carried the sacred pine of Magna Mater (Villogorac-Brčić 2012: 135–136). As a result of these polysemic processes the cult of Magna Mater (Cambi 1993: 33–44) and Attis was quite well represented in the eastern Adriatic coastal region (Villogorac-Brčić 2014: 119–134; Karković-Takalić 2015: 371–391), whence it spread into the interior (Medini 1993: 1–32; Nikoloska & Villogorac-Brčić 2014: 103–128).

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<sup>2</sup> For their presence in the Balkans, see Marić 1933: 73.

<sup>3</sup> Sanader 2008: 181–182; for oriental cults in the Roman world see Vermaseren 1981.

<sup>4</sup> For its present in Attica see Frapiccini 1987: 12–26 and Fontana 2001: 92–124.

<sup>5</sup> For iconography, see Vermaseren 1976: 47–62; 1966.



1.



2.

*Fig. 1. The Ottoman-period bridge in Blažuj, Ilidža Municipality, colloquially known as the Roman bridge (Photo: Adnan Busuladžić, 2015).*

*Fig. 2. The position where the relief of Attis is located (Photo: Adnan Busuladžić, 2015).*



### ***Analysis of the relief***

Among the many worked stone blocks used to build the bridge was spolia in the form of a relief of Attis in typical pose, legs crossed. The block was laid, doubtless deliberately, with the relief on the outer face of the parapet, so that for many years those who crossed the bridge did not notice it. The relief, which is 87 cm long and 54 cm wide, shows a nude figure with a prominent belly, leaning on a pedom or shepherd's crook. The legs are crossed, the characteristic pose of Attis and the main reason the relief is identified as of that deity. The scene is set on a plinth. The relief is of rustic, local provincial work; the head, body and extremities are noticeably out of proportion. A further dilemma is created by the objects to left and right of the figure – probably a cornucopia, but possibly a syrinx, or a poorly carved cloak. It is impossible to be sure, given the poor state of preservation of the head, whether the figure is wearing a Phrygian cap, though one can make out what may be the conical top of the cap, falling to one side. Another view is that the head may have had long, curly hair, another attribute of Attis, but the damage is such that this is mere conjecture. (Fig. 2.)



3.



4.



5.

*Fig. 3–5. The relief of Attis from the “Roman bridge” in Blažuj – Ilidža (Photo: Adnan Busuladžić, 2015).*

There are doubts among scholars even as to the interpretation of such reliefs. Most believe that they represent the Phrygian deity Attis (Nikoloska 2007: with other literature; 2010: with other literature; 2013: 507–527, with other literature), but several scholars of repute hold that these reliefs merely relate to the deceased, in the case of funerary monuments, or are purely decorative (Cambi 1960: 55–67; 2003: 511–520). In the former view, these figures would be popular on account of their sorrowful appearance, either directly associated with the death of the deceased (Schröder 1902: 75), or representing servants at the funerary banquet (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 134). In another, similar view, Attis tristis was a symbol of those who died in alien lands (Landskron 2005: 121–130). A third group of scholars believe that a long and complex process was at work, involving changing beliefs and iconography and, consequently, the interpretation of reliefs with such figures. In this view, they would originally have been Metroac in nature, later becoming decorative (Hepding 1903: 212). A similar view is that at first the reliefs were unrelated to the Phrygian Attis, but were later equated with him (Struveras 1968: 39). Some scholars, analysing images the iconography of which belongs to this phenomenon in the light of the context in which they were found, such as military stelae, believe that they represent Roman military triumphal iconography, or a simple shepherd, or a sorrowing Eros (Cambi 1991: 473; 2002: 158; 2005: 102–105 and 188–189).

The iconographic features of Attis on Roman monuments include not only the crossed legs, the shepherd's crook or pedum, the Phrygian cap,<sup>6</sup> trousers and shoes, but also in most instances a tunic and a cloak of some kind (Cumont 1896: 2247–2251). Analysis of the images of Attis reveals that his cult was very diverse iconographically (LIMC III/1: 23–44 and LIMC III/2: 15–45). Our relief clearly shows a nude figure, with a somewhat rounded belly, which could be interpreted as an image of Eros (Busuladžić 2016: 142), especially since a significant number of figures of Eros with legs crossed have been recorded (Paškvalin 2001: 39). The rounded belly could also suggest Eros (Osvald 1980: 133–134). Despite these doubts, based mainly on this particular iconographic feature, most other features support the conclusion that the relief is of Attis. The absence of garments may be directly associated with his self-castration, the more so since no genitalia can be seen on our relief from Ilidža, whether on the figure itself or any of his attributes, not even in stylized form. Such nude figures of Attis, though not common, are not unknown (Medini 1980: 118; Tadin 1979: T. XXVIII, fig. 62, T. XXXIX, fig. 97; Paškvalin 2001: 33, T. I). The relief could depict Attis resting immediately after emasculation. Furthermore, along with the typical stone reliefs of Attis with narrow trousers, tunic and cloak, a few mainly bronze statuettes have been recorded where the garments are lying discarded to one side. In these instances the deity is naked, with a prominent belly (Tadin 1979: 31, 39). The characteristic iconographic feature of Attis's shepherd's crook or pedum also, in the case of our relief, points to the conclusion that it represents his cult. Attis is often depicted holding a pedum, lowered or raised; other images show him leaning on his staff. Scenes of Attis with his staff lowered were found in Fojnica, for example (Paškvalin 2001: 37, fig. 1). On the other hand, Attis is typically shown leaning on his staff, as in the relief from Blažuj near Ilidža. A pensive Attis in this pose is known as Attis tristis. Many comparable examples have been found in the Roman province of Dalmatia (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 129–144). The closest analogy to Attis leaning on his staff is the figure of Attis on a cippus from Rogatica (Paškvalin 2001: 35, fig. 1). Another comparable specimen that must be mentioned here, on account of its proximity, was found in Ilijaš Municipality, north of Sarajevo, which displays very similar iconographic features – in particular the absence of garments, the figure being naked apart from pleats on the shoulders indicating a chlamys or cloak. Another feature of the Ilijaš Attis that matches ours is the absence of genitalia. The main feature that identifies the figure on the Ilijaš relief as Attis is the crossed legs (Paškvalin 2001: 33, fig. 1). Another significant feature of the Ilijaš Attis is the manner in which the stone was worked. As already noted, the relief from Blažuj displays all the characteristics of rustic provincial workmanship, with its obvious shortcomings. The one from Ilijaš is also of rustic workmanship, probably by an indigenous sculptor executing works in the spirit of Roman ideology, mythology and culture. It is very possible, given their relative proximity, that the same person made both, a conjecture supported by the absence of garments, the disproportion between the head, body and extremities, and the clumsy workmanship of both. As a result, the relief of Attis from Blažuj may be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the same as the Ilijaš relief. The evidence of numerous archaeological excavations and the analysis of the material found has shown that Romanization was at its height in this period. Once the Romans had conquered the region and consolidated

<sup>6</sup> For details of the Phrygian cap, see Medini 1976/77: 197.

their authority, the adoption of Roman culture and the Roman way of life began, reaching a peak in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Archaeological evidence reveals that the cult of Cybele and Attis was already present in the 1<sup>st</sup> century in the province of Dalmatia (Sanader 2008: 181–182).

The rustic workmanship allowed for various interpretations of the part of the relief to the left of Attis. One is that it probably represents part of a fluttering cloak on the deity's back. This most closely resembles a dadophorus of Mithras (Paškvalin 2001: 35, figs. 3 and 4), or Mithras himself,<sup>7</sup> though bronze statuettes of Attis with a cloak are known (Tadin 1979: T. XXVIII, fig. 62 and 63, T. XXXIX, fig. 97). When these are compared with the Iližna relief, however, it is apparent that the object on the latter is very unlikely to be a cloak. It is not worn on the figure's back, but merely has a single point of contact with his shoulder. This allows for the view that the object represents a cornucopia, which occurs along with fruit and grain on Roman figures of Attis (LIMC III/1: nos. 132–140, 151–153, 291–296). The fact that it is touching his shoulder may be due simply to the limitations of space. The object has three longitudinal grooves and one transverse line clearly separating its upper and lower sections, suggesting that it is a syrinx, which is also a symbol of Attis, though less commonly seen (Tadin 1979: 31). The cuboid projection at the top of the object, probably a ring used to hang it, could equally feature on a cornucopia, however. Together with the barely decipherable right-hand section of the relief, this could realistically suggest wings. Winged figures predominate in the large group of Attises classified by J. Medini (Medini 1984: 34–44). Any one of these interpretations is more or less likely, given the difficulty of making out just what the objects are. What they have in common is that in every comparable example, they are symbols associated with Attis.

The quantity of analogous specimens allows for different iconographic interpretations of this relief. A significant number of Attis figures have been recorded in Bosnia and Herzegovina in addition to those from Ilijaš (Paškvalin 2001: 32–41) in Fojnica, Crvica (Bojanovski 1967: 43), several sites around Srebrenica and Višegrad, and in Rogatica (Imamović 1977: 442–444). It is clear even from a glance at the sites where these Attis figures have been found that they are concentrated along the River Drina. This suggests that a significant majority are from sites forming part of or gravitating towards larger urban sites such as Domavia, Col. Ris. . . , and Aqua S..., which in turn reveals that this deity was closely associated mainly with foreign settlers, who could have had some influence on the local population. Much the same is true of the bronze statuettes of Attis found in the city of Siscia, where there was also a clear concentration of this deity (Tadin 1979: T. XXVIII, fig. 62 and 63; T. XXXIX, fig. 97). Other sites in the province of Dalmatia where Attis figures have been found in significant numbers include Gardun, Burnum, Salona, Enona, Blandona (Medini 1968: 141–181; 1984: 107–126; 1986: 109–124; 1989: 19–32; Cambi 1968: 131–140; 1991: 472–473; 2005: 102–105), and Pula (Girardi Jurkić 1972: 37–47; 1976: 209–223; 1978: 175–188; 2005: 57–70).

There are also reasonable doubts concerning the nature of the relief itself. The block bearing the relief would certainly have been reworked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it was incorporated into the Ottoman bridge. The area around the relief, which could have helped to identify it, must have been removed. Figures of Attis tristis<sup>8</sup> could have been part of a sarcophagus (Turković 2006: 7), a funerary altar (Dautova-Ruševljan 1983: 72–73) or monument, a stela, a sacrificial altar, or the architecture or fittings of a temple (Miletić *et al.* 2014: 135). It is our hypothesis that our Attis relief was part of a funerary monument, only part of which has survived.

## **Conclusion**

In Roman times the area of present-day Iližna Municipality centred on the urban settlement or colony of Aqua S... (Kellner 1895: 161–198; Sergejevski 1936: 1–3; Pašalić 1959: 113–136), a significant administrative, economic and cultural centre in this part of the interior of the Roman province of Dalmatia (Pašalić 1960: 35–51). Excavations uncovered a spa and residential quarters, defined as a hospicium,

<sup>7</sup> On Mithraism, see Kosorić 1965: 49–56; Miletić 1996; Medini 1985: 61–72; Selem 1986: 173–204; 2008: 467–471; Gabričević 1987: 161–215; Rendić-Miočević 2015: 403–427 and others.

<sup>8</sup> Other forms of Attis could have been as sculptures. See Nikoloska & Burmaz 2007/2008: 212.



suggesting that a large number of settlers lived and worked here, bringing with them a variety of cults<sup>9</sup> and customs.

Evidence of this was found with the discovery of an altar dedicated to Apollo (Imamović 1977; 429, no. 198), suggesting that several different cults coexisted here. The relief of Attis discussed here falls within this category.

A number of iconographic characteristics may be presented, based on an analysis of the relief. Iconographic features typical of Attis are garments consisting of a tunic, narrow trousers, shoes and a pointed Phrygian cap, together with the pedum or shepherd's crook which Attis holds or leans on as he stands with legs crossed. The figure on the Ilidža relief has no clothes, and it is unclear whether he is wearing a Phrygian cap. He is standing, with legs crossed, leaning on his staff, so if he does have a Phrygian cap on his head, it is likely the figure is of Attis. It is not unusual for Attis figures to have a prominent naked belly and wings, and to be accompanied by a cornucopia or a syrinx, which also reinforces the hypothesis that the figure on this relief is Attis. The figure of Attis tristis found in nearby Ilijaš, like our figure from the bridge in Blažuj, Ilidža Municipality, suggests that this cult was well-established and important to the local population and, very likely, to foreign settlers. Mystical (Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 26–43), soteriological-eschatological (Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 107–119), chthonic properties are attributed to Attis figures of this kind, and in this light Attis also features as the guardian of a grave and of the deceased (Paškvalin 1994: 35). Similar processes in the organization of Metroac cultic communities have been recorded in other provinces (Karković-Takalić 2012: 87–105), and it is realistic to assume that such may also have existed in this part of the world.

## Abbreviations

CCCA	M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), <i>Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque</i> I – VI, Leiden, 1977 – 1989.
LIMC	<i>Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae</i> III, Zürich – München, 1986.

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<sup>9</sup> For Roman religion see Rose 1960: 161–172.

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