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ULPIA TOPEIROS. THE IMPERIAL NOMEN GENTILICIUM IN A CITY-TITLE IN ROMAN THRACE

Abstract

On the 211-212 coinage from the Thracian peregrine city of Topeiros, the city-title featured the Trajanic *nomen gentilicium* Οὐλπία. This offers an opportunity to study the reasons behind this practice in Thrace as Topeiros had obtained municipal status long before the Trajan's times. The inquiry leads to the conclusion that it is linked to the imperial visit of Caracalla and Julia Domna, also involving local propaganda advertise restoration of lands which had been incorporated into the city's territory during the reign of Trajan.

Keywords

Imperial *gentilicium*, epithet, Trajan, Thrace, propaganda, city-title

One of the most widely spread practice in the Roman Empire was the use of the imperial name – *nomen gentilicium* or *cognomen* as epithet in the city-title¹. The reasons vary from the foundation of the city itself to the successful hunt in the neighborhood or even creating a fictive establishment of the city. The studies

¹ This article was presented at the Eleventh International Congress of Thracology that was held in Istanbul in 8th-12th November, 2010 and it has been more than decade since the article awaits its publication. In the meantime, however, the idea advanced in it has gained acceptance among the scholars that were at present at the congress citing this article in print. As no sign of this publication is expected in the near future, I decided to publish it as it was submitted in 2011.

provided by B. Galsterer-Kröll² and D. Magie³ reveal the importance and features of that problem. It is accepted that the cities in the Western provinces in general as well as the colonies and *municipia* accepted the gentile name of the emperor in their titles, while those from the Eastern provinces – his cognomen. The latter is also characteristic for the peregrine cities. The peregrine cities in Roman Thrace are not exceptions to that rule. What makes them different from the other cities in the Eastern provinces is that they used the imperial *nomen gentilicium* instead of *cognomen*⁴.

According to the epigraphic sources and provincial coinage some of the peregrine cities in Thrace used the gentile name of Trajan Ulpia as the epithet in their title. This is logical having in mind the idea that gained wide acceptance among the scholars on the so-called “Trajanic urbanisation” of Thrace. Given the nature of sources where Ulpia is attested, we may distinguish three main group of cities; the first one concerns the existence of Ulpia in the praetorian *laterculi* and inscriptions set up in Rome as well as military diplomas⁵, the second one – Ulpia is found on the local coins also⁶, and the third one consists of cases where Ulpia is attested on inscriptions erected by the civic magistrates⁷. Some praetorian *laterculi* also reveal several other imperial *gentilicia* such as Flavia, Iulia, Aelia, and Claudia that were used as pseudo-tribes by the Thracian praetorians⁸.

The case of the town under consideration Topeiros belongs to the second group with the epithet Οὐλπία that is found only on the coins issued for the city⁹. The town itself was of small size located on the west bank of the river Nestos near the border between the province of Thrace and the province of Macedonia. It seems that it was an important center on the via Egnatia since Topeiros is mentioned in all “Itineraria”.

The reasons why the Trajanic *gentilicium* was included in the title of Topeiros already have been discussed in the bibliography and three main solutions were suggested.

The first one was advanced by B. Gerov who believes that the used of Οὐλπία is to be regarded as a consequence of the promotion of municipal status of Topeiros

² Galsterer-Kröll 1972, pp. 44–145.

³ Magie 1950.

⁴ See Galsterer-Kröll 1972, pp. 55-56.

⁵ Bizye, Traianopolis, Hadrianopolis, Perinthus, Augusta Traiana (Beroe), Philippopolis, Marcianopolis.

⁶ Serdica, Pautalia, Anchialos.

⁷ Nicopolis ad Istrum, Anchialus.

⁸ On the use of *Ulpia* as an epithet in the city-title in Thrace see Topalilov 2007, pp. 400-421.

⁹ See the summary and bibliography in Loukopoulou, Parissaki, Psoma and Zournatzi 2005, pp. 261-265 (henceforth – I Aeg. Thrace).

during the reign of Trajan¹⁰. I could guess that the grounds for this thesis lay in the suggested massive use of Ulpia in the city-titles in Roman Thrace and the aforementioned “Trajanic urbanization” and B. Gerov automatically added Topeiros to these cases. The evidence by Plinius the Elder, however, shows that Topeiros had municipal status long before the time of Trajan. Thus, in his „Naturalis Historia” he mentions *Topiros civitas* alongside with *Abdera civitas libera*¹¹. This evidence undisputedly shows the presence of municipal life in Topeiros during the time of the Flavians and makes pointless the idea that Οὐλπία was used as a mark for a Trajanic promotion in status. A recent study on the pre-Roman and Roman cities in Asia Minor clearly revealed that the cities such as Topeiros received only these magistrate offices required by the Romans and their system, without re-establishment or re-urbanizing of the already existed cities¹². It is true that some of these cities honoured the emperors as “κτίστες”, but this was mainly connected with the local propaganda dispute between the cities in the region.

The second thesis on the addition of Οὐλπία in the title of Topeiros was suggested by B. Galsterer-Kröll. According to her, this title should be regarded as a consequence of the reorganization of the province of Thrace during the time of Trajan¹³. The thesis sounds logical and we may add that this was available after the promotion of the provincial governor in rank from *procurator Augusti* to *legatus Augusti pro praetore*¹⁴. P. Iuventius Celsus T. Aufidius Hoenius Severianus is the realiest known so far *legatus Augusti* and its praetorship is dated to 110-112¹⁵. As a consequence of this promotion, it seems that the new cities were founded in Thrace, some of which *ex novo*, others by promotion of civic status of already existed settlements, with their territories that let to the gradually elimination of the existed pre-Roman *strategiaia* by the end of Trajanic – the beginning of Hadrianic time. I believe this is the way how to explain the massive use of Οὐλπία/Ulpia as a city-title in the non-official media of the peregrine cities in Thrace, including as pseudo-tribe¹⁶. Unlike these cases are those with Nicopolis ad Istrum and Anchialos where this epithet was used in the local official epigraphic monuments¹⁷.

¹⁰ Gerov 1980, 1980, p. 34, n. 33.

¹¹ Plin., *NH* 4. 42: *Intus Philippi colonia (absunt a Dyrrhachio CCCXXV) Scotussa, Topiros civitas, Mesti amnis ostium, mons Pangaeus.*

¹² See for the examples Dmitriev 2005.

¹³ Galsterer-Kröll 1972, p. 54, n. 65.

¹⁴ On this promotion – see Poulter 1995, p. 10.

¹⁵ Thomasson 2011, 22:010.

¹⁶ On the pseudo-tribes – see Forni 1985.

¹⁷ See the inscriptions cited in *IGBulg.* I², Nos. 369-370; *IGBulg.* II, Nos. 601-604, 606-607, 616-622, 624-632; see also Topalilov 2007, pp. 620-627 – for depriving of the civic status.

The third thesis for the reasons Οὐλπία to appear in the city-title of Τοπεiros belongs to J. P. Adams. According to him the town gained this epithet after favorable attention by the government during the reign of Trajan and land extension, overtaking some of the territory of the neighboring Abdera. In the time of Hadrian Abdera, however, took back these lost lands and consequently appeared two inscriptions dedicated to the emperor erected by ἡ Ἀδριανέων Ἀβδηρειτῶ[v] πόλις¹⁸. This thesis is convincing, but it does not answer the question since the Trajanic favourable attention did not reflect the title of Τοπεiros mentioned in the inscriptions as ἡ Τοπεριτῶν πόλις or Τοπειροῦ¹⁹. The study on the local coinage where Οὐλπία actually is to be found also did not support this theory. The civic coins known so far issued for Τοπεiros²⁰ allow us to suggest that local coinage started in the time of the provincial governor C. Fabius Agrippinus (between AD 138-148) and continued until the time of Julia Domna, Geta and Caracalla. A special study made by E. Schönert-Geiss shows that the coinage ceased to exist with the end of the reign of Geta – AD 212²¹. After a scrutinized study on the civic coinage of Τοπεiros it becomes clear that it was until the coins of Julia Domna, Geta and Caracalla when only the legend ΤΟΠΕΙΡΙΤΩΝ / ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ was used. A certain change may be observed when alongside with ΤΟΠΕΙΡΙΤΩΝ / ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ / ΤΟΠΙΡΙΤΩΝ legend, a new title appeared – ΟΥΛΠΙΑΣ ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ (or ΟΥΛΠΙΑΣ ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ). This change was abrupt and it is found on the coin issues with the image of Julia Domna, Caracalla and Geta along the coin issues with the typical ΤΟΠΕΙΡΙΤΩΝ / ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ. The lack of any coins issued with the image of Septimius Severus implies that the coins under consideration should be dated in the narrow span of time between 211-212, i.e. the death of Septimius Severus (4 February 211) and the death of Geta, which is suggested as the *terminus ante quem* of the Τοπεiros coinage. We may even assume that the coinage actually was restored” after a period of interruption between Lucius Verus and Julia Domna, Caracalla and Geta and it is without any doubt that it was not a matter of lack of space or skill of the engraver that Οὐλπία was missing on the coins before AD 211/212. As one may note on Table 1, ΟΥΛΠΙΑΣ ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ / ΟΥΛΠΙΑΣ ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ appeared on smaller coins too that even gained a bigger legend. All this show that it was something that happened in 211-212 that provoked the use of Οὐλπία in the title of Τοπεiros at this very specific moment, something, that did not happen before.

¹⁸ See Adams 1986, pp. 35-36; for the inscriptions set up by Abdera – see I Aeg. Thrace 2005, E 78; E 79.

¹⁹ See the inscriptions I Aeg. Thrace, E 395; SEG 24, 631.

²⁰ Up to know the most complete catalogue is Върбанов 2004, pp. 33-37, nos. 511-540.

²¹ Schönert-Geiss 1968, p. 252, n. 4.

Table 1. Ulpia in the city-title of Toperos based on the civic coinage

Emperor and provincial governor	26 mm	23/24 mm	18/19 mm	unknown
Antoninus Pius				
C. Fabius Agrippinus	ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ			
Iulius Commodos				ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ
Iulius Cordolus				ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ
no name				ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ
				ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ
Marcus Aurelius				
C. Fabius Agrippinus		ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ		
Iulius Commodos		ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ		
no name			ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ	
Lucius Verus				
no name			ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ	
Iulia Domna				
no name				ΟΥΛΠΙΑC
				ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ
				ΟΥΛΠΙΑC
				ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ
Caracalla				
no name		ΟΥΛΠΙΑC		ΟΥΛΠΙΑC
		ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ	ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ	ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ
Geta				
no name		ΟΥΛΠΙΑC		ΟΥΛΠΙΑC
		ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ	ΤΟΠΕΙΡΕΙΤΩΝ	ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ

Before going further, a note is needed on the specifics of the civic coinage in Thrace. We know that after the reign of Commodus (180-192) the local authorities and aristocracy began to use the local civic coins mainly for political propaganda. On them they declared their political attitudes, ambitions and desires²². The coins might show the nobles' benefits and it is noteworthy to mention, that this propaganda could be partially-truthful. So, the coins should not be regarded as a primary historical source, but as a part of the propaganda machine of the local elite, and therefore their

²² Harl 1987, pp. 31-32; see also Hartmann, Macdonald 1969, p. 30.

historical value is obscure. The cases known show that some time despite declaring privileges on the coins, they never happened and despite the propaganda, this policy was not successful all the time²³. From the reign of Commodus the new epithet is not connected with concrete privileges, especially in the East²⁴. So, the question that arises is what happened in Topeiros at 211-212 which even provoked the issuing of new coins after a period of lack with Οὐλπία in the city-title?

The limited circulation of the Topeiros coins indicates that these coins were not struck to fulfill the full requirements of the local market, but most likely had representative function. Thus, they could be used as propaganda by the local notables and magistrates and the appearing of a new city-title with Οὐλπία might had been connected with a particular event that caused their issuing. I believe the answer may be provided by the coins issued for Byzantium, Perinthus, and Nicopolis ad Nestum in 211²⁵ that imply the emperor's presence in the region and especially in these cities that were located alongside the Via Egnatia. It is highly probable that Caracalla and Julia Domna visited also Topeiros that was located between Nicopolis ad Nestum and Perinthus and accordingly coins were issued to commemorate the imperial visit.

In 1964 an honorable inscription of the emperor Maximinus Thrax (235-238) was erected by the local authorities of Topeiros (ἡ Τοπειριτῶν πόλις). The inscription was found near the modern Greek village of Aetopholos, eastwards of Topeiros²⁶. As noted correctly by Gerov this inscription proves a vast territory expansion eastward by Topeiros which reached the territory of Traianopolis²⁷. Another inscription from Maroneia²⁸ also implies this suggestion²⁹. To obtain such a vast territorial expansion, however, a truncation of the territory of Abdera should have been made again³⁰. As the inscription set up for Maximinus provides only the *terminus ante quem* of this territorial expansion it remains unclear *when* this happened and *why*? And here comes the case with ΟΥΛΠΙΑΚ ΤΟΠΙΡΟΥ / ΟΥΛΠΙΑΚ ΤΟΠΕΙΡΟΥ on the coins issued for Topeiros on the occasion of the emperors' visit in 211-212 AD. The specifics of the epithet in the city-title at that time suggest the use of the civic coinage as the most powerful propaganda machine, and the land attribution during the reign of Trajan makes me believe, that the epithet Οὐλπία was manifested on the local coins as propaganda and as

²³ See the examples cited in Magie 1950, pp. 636-637.

²⁴ On the epithet in the city-title – see Galsterer-Kröll 1972, pp. 80-81.

²⁵ Boteva 1997, p. 243.

²⁶ See I Aeg. Thrace, E 395; SEG 24, 631.

²⁷ Gerov 1980, p. 34, n. 33B.

²⁸ SEG 35, 824, 1.

²⁹ This possible territorial dispute is not in the list, provided by Burton 2000, pp. 206-208.

³⁰ A possible reference for that might be also the inscription I Aeg. Thrace, E 489 where ΤΟΠΕΙ [---] is developed as Τοπέιρου – see I Aeg. Thrace, 599.

a way the local elite “to recall” the visiting emperor about the benefactions they received some 100 years earlier under Trajan. Since Trajan was especially honoured under the Severans, it should not be surprising that the local authorities acted this way. If so, the use of the Trajan *nomen gentilicium* in the title of the peregrine cities in Thrace, especially in these cases, where it is found only on coins, should not be regarded as an explicit argument for obtaining civic status by Trajan and it requires a more detailed study. The inscription with the name of Maximinus Thrax (235-238) shows that the local elite’s action was successful and in fact the land of Topeiros was extended much more than in the time of Trajan.

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Summary

This paper explores the reasons why ἡ Τοπειριτῶν πόλις obtained the Trajanic *nomen gentilicium* Οὐλπία in its title. The question arises since it appears on the municipal coin series minted for Topeiros at a particular moment in time, specifically in 212 AD. This coincides with an imperial visit which Caracalla and his mother Julia Domna paid in the city.

The author argues that by using such propaganda gimmick, the local authority sought to attract the emperor’s attention to the privileges and most probably territorial extension granted by Trajan but later delayed by Hadrian. The lands in question had originally belonged to the neighboring city of Abdera. It appears that the town leaders of Topeiros succeeded, since an inscription dated to the reign of Maximinus Thrax (235-238) shows a vast extension of the municipality’s landhold eastwards.

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