

Surion-Vani Patron Goddess: *Ανασσα Σουρι*

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Abstract: The article discusses one of the arti-facts of Vani Nakalakari-an inscription found on the gate-wall of the town, which presents an interesting material about the general ideology of society in ancient Colchhis.

Key Words: *Vani, Surion, Aphrodite, goddess, Anasa, Colchis*

The ancient city Vani was known as the city of "Surion" "*Ανασσα Σουρι*" in ancient times [5, p. 223; 9, pp. 124-128]. A number of significant artifacts have been discovered about the city, among which the highest interest is evoked by a vertically scratched inscription on the gate wall of Vani city which reads as follows: "*Ἀῤῥομαῖῳ Ἀναῤῥᾶ*" „I pray thee my Lord – the Goddess" [6, p. 52]. From the paleographical point of view, the inscription dates from the IV-III cc. BC and is considered to be the oldest of the ancient Greek lapidary inscriptions [4, p. 148]. The inscription is worth noting for a number of reasons. For instance, not only does it provide an insight into the religious beliefs of the citizens of the city Vani - Surion, but, also, about the general ideology of society in ancient Colchhis.

According to explorers, the Goddess must have been the patroness of Surion-Vani [7, pp. 199-200], which seems quite reasonable. However, it has not yet been established exactly which Goddess the Surion *Ανασσα* is associated with in essence. In this regard, some answers can be obtained from anonymous coins depicting the images of Lotus dated to the 1st century BC discovered in Vani [2, pp. 32-33].

We believe that the topography of these coins is associated with the "Goddess" of the earth hidden behind the epiclesis" –

"*Ανασσα*" "The Lord". At the same time, the obverse type indicates the cult of Isis. According to the explorers' interpretation, these attributes are typical of the local goddess traditionally worshipped by the Colchis [8, p. 124]. Besides, syncretism of cults was popular in the period of time when Colchis was the part of the Kingdom of Pontus and Isis was identified with Aphrodite, while in Lesser Asia and the Mediterranean, Aphrodite was worshipped in the same way as the Lord [1, pp. 24-25]. It is also worth noting that in the Kingdom of Pontus Aphrodite was worshipped as Iranian Anahita and Makibella or was identified with the cult of Great Mother. Thus, semantically, she was closer to Egyptian Isida [10, pp. 157-180]. In the Hellenistic epoch attributes of gods of fertility reveal closeness with the cults of Isida and Osiris [3, p. 25].

Considering the fact that the temple dedicated to Aphrodite was erected in Vani and one of the hypostasis of Zeus Philios was considered to be Pylos, whose female mate was Demeter, as well as the rest of Eleusinian goddesses [11, pp. 471-475], we can consider Surion-Vani patron Goddess as the symbol of the Goddess of Nature.

It is not impossible that the Colchian form of the Vani patron Goddess's name was Suria. It is also possible that the city was named after her, similarly as Athens was named after Athena, or the name of Phasis came from the Phasian goddess. As for the etymology of the old name of Vani – "Surion", we believe that it, like Phasis, it must be connected with water. The root of "Surion" – "Sur", similar to alternatives of "Phas" in Kartvelian languages such as *Su*, *Sumua*, *Pse*, *Psuma*, *Suamt*, *Mosmuroba*, *Suru* – conveys the meaning of "water" and its related concepts. If this is true, then "Anassa Suri", similarly to Aphrodite, might have been the Goddess of one of the essential elements of nature – the water, or the river Goddess.

It should also be noted that in the entrance to Surion – Vani city, like in Phasis, there was erected a statue of patroness Goddess – Surion-Vani (Arr., PPE, 9) [6, pp. 61-62]. Such topography was characteristic of only the Colchian pantheon and thus was uncommon in the Greek world. However, Hellenistic and Colchian

sacral construction traditions and a religious process of syncretisation are quite explicit.

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