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THE CULT OF BENDIS IN ATHENS AND THRACE

The Thracian goddess Bendis was worshipped in Classical Athens, and her cult became very popular in the 5th and 4th century BC. This article explores the available historiographical and archaeological record of an existing foreign cult within a Greek polis, and compares it to the data from the Thracian inland. As the literary sources limit themselves only to the Greek point of view, a combination of archaeological and epigraphical evidence has to be consulted in the case of Thrace. The aim of this paper is to determine and discuss the uniformity or potential discrepancies in the presentation of Bendis in the place of her origin, as well as in her new context. The mutual relations between Bendis and her Greek counterpart is not to be omitted.

Key words: Bendis, Athens, foreign cults, Attica, Thrace, iconography, nature deity

The goddess Bendis is usually seen as a prototypical Thracian deity that was worshipped in Classical Athens from the 5th century BC onwards. The image presented by Greek authors is the most complete and cohesive representation of any Thracian deity that we have. On the other hand, the sources from the homeland of Bendis are mute or provide slightly confusing information. The fact that we are without any written literary sources from Thrace itself is amplified by discrepancies in the interpretation of archaeological and epigraphical evidence, which lacks uniformity in its study of the complexities of Bendis. This article presents a dichotomous image of Bendis, as perceived in Athens and in Thrace itself, and will attempt to coherently portray and understand the nature of the so called Thracian goddess.

Bendis in Attica

In the first part I will explore the presentation of the cult of Bendis in the Greek world, namely in Athens. The cult of the Thracian Bendis is men-

tioned for the first time in 6th c. BC by Hipponax, where she is compared to Kybele (Kybele, frg. 127). Another occurrence is from Cratinus' play *The Thracian Women* (frg. 85), and Aristophanes' *The Women from Lemnos* (frg. 384); from these we can suppose that Bendis was well known to Athenians already by the second half of the 5th c. BC.¹ One of the most informative accounts we have comes from the philosopher Plato, who mentions an existing cult at the end of the 5th century BC (*Rep.* 327a; 328a). In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of the last night when he went to Peiraeus with his friend Glaucon to pray, and to see the procession held at the Bendideia festival in the port. Incidentally, they met Adeimantus and Polemarchus, who told Socrates of the evening torch-lit horserace and the all-night celebration (*pannychis*) to come. He is then persuaded to stay for the horserace (*Rep.* 354a). When Socrates spoke about the procession, he mentioned his desire to see how the procession was held, as it was the inauguration ceremony of the Bendideia (*Rep.* 327a). According to epigraphical data, we know that the introduction of the cult of Bendis probably took place around 430/29 BC, and was closely connected with the alliance between Athens and the Thracian king Sitalkes that was negotiated few months earlier. Athenians wished to conquer Chalkis and surrounding Thracian lands, eventually getting rid of the Macedonian Perdikkas and Thracians, namely the Odrysian king Sitalkes, who possessed an army of soldiers and riders, well trained for the attack. To win the favour of Sitalkes, Athens consequently granted proxenia to Nymphodoros of Abdera, who was married to the sister of the Odrysian king. Nymphodoros helped to arrange the alliance between Sitalkes and Athens, and as a guarantee to the new relationship, an Athenian citizenship was given to Sadokos, the son of Sitalkes (THUC. 2. 29). It seems plausible that in accordance with this partnership, the cult of Bendis was introduced to Athens to support the recently established connection. The act of introducing a foreign deity and its subsequent incorporation into that state's religion was unprecedented and may have even aroused upheavals within religious groups of that society. The reason for such a major change in Athenian religion was however not religious, but rather political: as mentioned above, the act was an ultimate diplomatic concession in order to win the favour and resources of the Thracian king.² Thrace was known for its strategic position, with Athens having attempted

¹ PACHE (2001: 6) dates *The Thracian Women* to 442 BC, similarly SIMMS (1988: 60–61) adds the occurrence of Attic pottery from 440's with Bendis, identified by inscription on the vase.

² PARKE (1977: 149), PARKER (1997: 174–175), GARLAND (1992: 112–114) speaks about the abundance of Thracian timber, the importance of strategic position and the well trained army that Athenians needed for the planned attack of Macedonia.

several times to gain control over the Thracian lands from as early as the 6th c. BC and the alliance with Sitalkes was one of these efforts.³

The date *ante quem* of the introduction of Bendis is determined by an existing inscription IG I³ 383 from 429/8 BC (the accounts of the treasury of “*The Other Gods*”; l. 143)⁴ where the treasury of Bendis is mentioned, suggesting the cult had already been established by this date. In 404 BC we have the recorded existence of a Bendis sanctuary in Piraeus (XEN. *Hell.* 2. 4. 11), located in the eastern part of the port, next to the temple of Artemis Mounychia.⁵ We know from other epigraphical sources that Thracians were given a plot of land (IG II² 1283)⁶ to build the temple of their gods within the area of Athens, as was imposed by the Dodona oracle (line 6). The organization of this event was in charge of two religious groups (*orgeones*)⁷ that also had the power to issue related inscriptions (e. g. IG II² 1283): one of them consisted of Athenians and one of Thracians, probably metics. Thracians were allowed to worship Bendis the way they were accustomed to in their homeland (line 25) and according to the laws of Athens. The festival was celebrated on Thargelion 19–20, with the main event being the day procession (*pompe*) starting from the Prytaneion (line 15–16), and finishing at the sanctuary in the port. The evening torch-race and the all-night celebration was followed by a sacrifice at the existing sanctuary. The IG II² 1283 inscription also confirms the incorporation of the festival into the Athenian state’s religious system; several provisions were officially made to finance the celebration (lines 35–37). The date of this act was probably

³ For Athenian interest in Thrace see OLIVA (2007).

⁴ The introduction is mostly agreed to happen in 430/29 BC, but there is on going discussion about the introduction date of Bendideia festival, that according to available sources happened in 413/2 BC (based on the text of IG I³ 136). But the most plausible is that in 413 BC was Bendis officially incorporated into Athenian state’s religion, as a reward for the service and support of the Thracian troops in the Sicilian expedition (THUC. 7. 27.1) and to maintain a friendly connection between Athens and the Thracians. For references, see ARCHIBALD (1998: 97, n. 16); PLANEAUX (2000: 182–183), SIMMS (1988: 61–66).

⁵ XEN. *Hell.* 2. 4. 11: “*And the men from the city, when they came to the market-place of Hippodamus, first formed themselves in line of battle, so that they filled the road which leads to the temple of Artemis of Munichia and the sanctuary of Bendis.*” (Translation BROWNSON (1969). PEČÍRKA (1966: 126) mentions a discovery of 3 fragments of an inscription SEG X 64 (IG I³ 136) on the south-western slope of the Mounychia hill, where the sanctuary was probably located, but still undiscovered due to the modern occupation of the area.

⁶ IG II² 1283 is usually dated to the first half of the 3rd c. BC, PLANEAUX (2000: 168). PEČÍRKA (1966: 122–130).

⁷ PLANEAUX (2000: 186).

later than the introduction of the cult itself, and one plausible date may be 413 BC, as discussed above.

The sanctuary in Piraeus was not the only one of Bendis' cults in Attica. A smaller private sanctuary was possibly located in Laurium, and appears to have been used at the end of the 4th c. BC. Several votive statues and an inscription on a statue base (SEG 39, 210 from 300 BC) were found in the silver mines, where members of the Thracian community were working.⁸ Another existing cult was confirmed by inscriptions on the island of Salamis (IG II² 1317b; SEG 2, 9; 2,10; 44,60 from the mid - 4th c. BC)⁹, in the form of decrees published by the organizing body (*thiasos*), consisting of non-citizens, who were otherwise people of unknown origins and affiliations.¹⁰

Iconography of Attic Bendis and her association with Artemis

A few *ex-voto* statues depicting Bendis were found in the sanctuaries mentioned above.¹¹ She was also portrayed on Attic vessels together with other deities, such as on a cup from the 430's, or on a skyphos from the end of the 5th c. BC.¹² On the depictions found in Attica, Bendis is portrayed wearing a short chiton with belt and a coat (*zeira*), a fox skin cap (*alopekis*), and boots. She is often holding two spears or other weapons, and is depicted ready for hunting. The depiction of the double spear is especially important, as Bendis is in the literary sources addressed as *dilonkhos* ("with double spear", Cratinus frg. 85). Sometimes she can hold a *patera* in her hands, or some other vessel to catch the blood of sacrificed bulls. Due to these characteristics, she has frequently been identified with the Greek goddess of the hunt - Artemis.¹³ On several occasions she is associated with the healing hero Deloptes, who has been found standing next to her on the

⁸ FORSDYKE (2012: 187, n. 126) suggests that the inscription dedicated to Bendis by Daos, a winner of the torch race in the late 4th and early 3rd century BC, points to his slave origin, but there is no other evidence of his social status than a missing affiliation and patronymics of the name.

⁹ KLOPPENBORG – ASCOUGH (2011: 114–121).

¹⁰ SIMMS (1988: 70).

¹¹ BESCHI (1990:34–35).

¹² LIMC III, 1 s.v. Bendis: no. 1 cup from Verona, Mus. Teatro Romano 52, ARV2 1023, 147, Phiale painter; no. 2 skyphos from Tübingen S/10 1347 with an inscription identifying Bendis and Themis.

¹³ TSIAFAKIS (2000: 387).

reliefs (such as the relief from Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, IN 462, 329/8 BC where Bendis is honouring two temple stewards for their piety). Another important relief from the British Museum, London (BM 2155, 400–375 BC) shows a procession of naked athletes (probably victors of the torch race) at the Bendideia festival and Bendis is depicted as Artemis with all her huntress attributes.

The striking resemblance between Bendis and Artemis had already been acknowledged in Antiquity, but to uncover the nature of this relationship, it is essential now to compare Bendis with Artemis Mounychia, especially since their sanctuaries in Piraeus stood next to each other, likely not incidentally. In the Classical literature and in later traditions, Artemis was portrayed as a huntress; a savage and wild deity of nature, and a virgin maiden. Artemis Mounychia, however, differed from this Classical image. The characteristics of this particular Artemis were in fact more similar to the cult of the moon goddess: Hekate. In Classical tradition, the holy day of Artemis was on the 6th day of the month, but the Mounychia festival was instead held on the 16th day of Mounychion, under the full moon, an element of the cult of Hekate. During the Mounychia procession, round cakes with little torches were offered to the goddess¹⁴, corresponding directly to the torch races of the neighbouring cult of Bendis. Another fact pointing toward the pre-Classic beliefs, is that the Artemis Mounychia sanctuary had always been linked to the cult of Brauronian Artemis, where young Athenian unmarried girls served as she-bears. The bear is said to be one of the very old relics of Artemisian cult, having originated in the Neolithic period, that is more connected with the nature, wild life, protection of life and healing powers. The girls in Mounychia also similarly served as they did in Brauron, and this characteristic is what suggests to us the far older origins of this type of cult practice in Peiraeus, potentially preceding the Persian Wars.

It is within the context of this nearby cult of Artemis Mounychia that we may begin to compare and secondarily reconstruct the characteristics which the cult of Bendis may have had in Athens. From studying these sources, it appears that Artemis Mounychia was hence a deity of protection, one connecting women with the moon cycle, and one which represents marriage, fertility and the protection of human life and nature. The physical proximity of the Bendis temple to that of Artemis Mounychia, and the similarity of festival activities (such as the torch use in relation to the moon cycle) suggests a closeness in the orientation of these cults, one which is an essential consideration for any exploration of the cult of Bendis in a foreign context.

¹⁴ SIMON (1983: 81–88).

Bendis, with her three sanctuaries and celebrations every year, became one of the most popular foreign deities in Attica in the Classical period. Her introduction appears to have been connected to foreign affairs and diplomacy in the Mediterranean, rather than an Athenian willingness to accept the little-known Thracian deity into their state religious system. Her cult was very popular as demonstrated by the Bendideia celebration in Peiraeus, a festival described by Plato. The last reference to her cult comes from the 3rd c. BC, after which Bendis' cult seems to have disappeared for unknown reasons. We are very well informed about the organization of the Bendideia festival from various Greek sources, but the nature of the cult and its relation to Artemis remains a puzzle that may never be answered completely. From the indirect and direct evidence it appears that Bendis was often associated with Artemis because of similarities in their characteristics. In the periods preceding the Classical period, Artemis is known not only as a huntress and a bloodthirsty maiden, but also as a goddess of nature and the protection of such. She was originally an earth goddess associated with wild life and human birth, as is presented in the cult of Artemis Mounychia. Under the influence of contextual circumstances, her image was adapted into one of a savage huntress, with human sacrifice playing a role in the cult, despite the different nature of the original cult. Consequently, based on the evidence and similarities between the cult of Artemis Mounychia and Bendis, we may begin to interpret the Bendis perceived by Athenians as a protecting deity, one closely related to nature and the life cycles of women.

Bendis in Thrace

As previously mentioned, it is necessary to recognise the Atheno-centric nature of historical texts which describe the cult of Bendis. No Thracian literary sources survive to the present day, and therefore the only historical perspective on this Thracian matter is the Greek one. Herodotus speaks briefly about Thracians in the beginning of his fifth book (5.3– 5.10), where he describes Thracian religion in merely two sentences. He argues that the Thracians did not believe in any gods but Dionysus, Ares and Artemis, except for the nobles who also did worship their ancestor Hermes.¹⁵ Bendis is mentioned not even once, but scholars almost uniformly argue that Herodotus was in this passage in fact describing Bendis, with which Artemis was often identified.¹⁶ The possible reason why Herodotus chose to descri-

¹⁵ PACHE (2001: 5).

¹⁶ In the Greek literary texts Bendis never stands alone and is always compared to Ar-

be the goddess as Artemis instead of Bendis was due to his largely Greek audience; it would have been easier for them to envisage a representation of Artemis rather than a unknown Thracian goddess.¹⁷

The physical evidence for existence of the cult of Bendis *per se* is not attested anywhere in Thrace. Titus Livius mentions an existing temple of Bendis (Liv. 38.41.1), but he informs us only about the existence of a cult during Roman times. Until the temple is archaeologically proven, we know only its approximate position near the river Hebrus (Maritsa) in the vicinity of Cypsela. No other cult places or sanctuaries within Thrace that belong specifically to Bendis are known as of yet. Temples belonging to Hellenized deities, identified with Bendis are discussed later in the article.

The surviving epigraphical documents from Inland Thrace do not confirm the existence of Bendis' cult either. No dedication to the goddess Bendis has been revealed in Thrace itself and the only evidence is found in a few examples of the personal name Bendis, but they never address her in the religious context specifically belonging to Bendis (e.g. as a dedication).¹⁸ In the Aegean region derived personal names were used: such names include Bendidoros, Bendidora, Bendiphanes, Bendizeta, Debabenzis and many others. Geographically, the occurrence of those names is limited to the areas adjacent to Attica and Thrace, such as Euboea, Macedonia, Thasos, Ainos, Maronea, Byzantion and northern parts of Asia Minor. These epigraphical monuments are usually dated to Hellenistic and later periods, so it does not

temis or other oriental gods, probably because she was otherwise unknown to the audience. Hesych. Κυβήθη: καὶ Διὸς κούρη Κυβήθη καὶ Θρηϊκὴ Βενδῖς. ἄλλοι δὲ Ἄρτεμιν; Scholia in Platonem, Resp. 327a, bis: ἃ δὴ τοῖς Βενδιδίοις καλουμένοις εἶπετο. τούτων δὲ καὶ Θράκες ἐκοινώνουν, ἐπεὶ καὶ Βένδῖς παρ' αὐτοῖς ἢ Ἄρτεμις καλεῖται, καὶ αὕτη τιμωμένη (10) κοινῇ παρ' ἀμφοῖν. Timaeus Sophista Gramm., Lexicon Platonicum (*e cod. Coislin.* 345): (980b.) Βένδῖς. ἢ Ἄρτεμις, Θρακία φωνῆ· καὶ Βενδίδεια, Ἀρτέμιδος ἑορτὴ παρὰ Θραζῖν.

¹⁷ For the discussion see ΡΟΡΟΥ (1976: 290–291).

¹⁸ Bendis as a personal name is attested 5 times: 1) IG Bulg III, 2 1801 from village Duganovo with personal name Flavia Bendis, 2) IG Bulg III, 2 1828 found near village Kamilski Dol, where is mentioned Bendis, daughter of Apollodoros. 3) IG Bulg III, 1 1347 where the name is spelled as Oendis, that could be restored as Bendis, daughter of Drogedous (?) from the sanctuary of Nymphs in Bourdapa. All three inscriptions are probably from Roman times. The first two inscriptions bear relief with the Thracian rider, the third one is carved under the relief of three Nymphs. The last two inscriptions come from Maronea and both are epitaphs of person called Bendis: 4) I Aeg 268 belongs to Bendis, daughter of Metrophanes, dated to 2nd/1st c. BC; 5) I Aeg 279 belongs to Bendis, wife of Dioukilas from 2nd c. AD. Inscriptions from Maronea have no relief. From the Northern Aegean region is Bendis also attested 6 times on Thasos, for details see MASSON (1988: 9).

say anything about the existence of the cult in the Classical period.¹⁹ As the name was reflected only in onomastics, it can signify the possible existence of cult of Bendis, but with no surviving direct evidence in epigraphy or archaeology. The only epigraphical evidence revealing possible existence of Bendis cult comes from Samothrace, the island often associated with the Thracian settlers from the mainland. Recently published graffiti shows a possible reconstruction of a dedication to Bendis, which according to the editor shows the existence of Bendis sanctuary on Samothrace²⁰. As the name Bendis is only reconstructed by the editor, and as it is the only occurrence on the whole island, the existence of the sanctuary has to be proven by further research and it cannot be taken as a fact yet.

Iconography of Thracian Bendis

The fact that the cult of Bendis is not represented in a written culture does not mean that the material culture could not bring more light to the presence of Bendis in Thrace. Unfortunately, the iconography that is securely known to belong to the cult of Bendis comes only from Attica, not from the Thracian hinterland. But on the other hand, we have several epigraphical monuments from Thrace itself bearing a female deity relief, usually identified as Artemis, *Artemis basileia* and sometimes as Bendis the Great Mother. None of these inscriptions however, mentions Bendis specifically, and the only evidence of her are resemblances in the depictions, namely based on the Attic iconography.

Based on the study of these reliefs, we can discern two iconographic categories. The first one is the Hellenized Artemis – Bendis. This depiction comes from the post-Hellenistic periods and is always connected with the Greek goddess of hunt, Artemis. The reliefs of Artemis – Bendis appear on votive tablets from southwest Bulgaria, the valleys of Struma, Vardar and Mesta rivers, the western Rhodopes and the vicinity of Philippopolis, dated mostly to the 2nd and 3rd c. AD. The goddess is iconographically similar to reliefs of Artemis known from the Greek world: she is depicted in a short dress, high boots and fur cap, and is often holding a spear or bow, accompanied by dogs or deer. The content of the inscriptions characterize her as a deity protecting children, *kourotrophos*, and the monuments are often found together with the Thracian rider dedications.²¹

¹⁹ MASSON (1988: 6–12), BRIXHE (2006: 139).

²⁰ BRIXHE (2006: 139–140).

²¹ ДЕЧЕВ (1955: 95–109), DEOUDI (2010: 73–80, 100).

The second iconographic type is the representation of Bendis – Great Mother. This depiction could be traced to pre-Greek periods, but the tradition is surviving into Roman times as well.²² Since we have no written and epigraphical evidence this deity remains anonymous, but showing iconographic similarities to other known deities such as the Great Mother, *Potnia theon*, Mother Nature and Phrygian Kybele.²³ This goddess is closely connected to the cult of fertility, marriage and the delivering of children, as well as the protection of animals, vegetation and nature in general. These characteristics are similar to the ones of Artemis of the archaic period and of *Artemis basileia*, described by Herodotus as the cult of fertility being practised by Thracian and Paeonian maids (HDT. 4.33.5). As for the iconographic type, female deity is occasionally shown with attributes of fertility-related cults, such as pine cones and corn ears.²⁴

Under the oriental influence, Bendis was often also identified with deities of the night – Cottyto, Cybele, and Hekate. These deities were often associated with the life cycle and fertility of women and were famous for orgiastic night dances and celebrations. These goddesses are also known for their connection to dark magic and the underworld. On the island of Lemnos the worshippers of the Great Goddess of Lemnos (Aristophanes *Women of Lemnos*, frg. 368) practiced a dark magic, accompanied by human sacrifice. The connection between the Great Goddess of Lemnos and Bendis is traditionally accepted and documented by a depiction of huntress on a pottery shard from Lemnos from the archaic period.²⁵

As seen in the example of Great Goddess, sanctuaries are often ascribed to other female deities on the basis of similar characteristics and the dynamic nature of the cult of Bendis in Thrace. These sites are situated on the fringes of Thrace, in areas cohabitated by peoples of both Greek and Thracian ethnicity. In Oisyme and Neapolis in the 6th c. BC, a small sanctuary is dedicated to Parthenos, usually identified with Athena or Artemis.²⁶ The situation is similar in the case of Artemis Phosphoros at Odessos, documented by a dedication to Phosphoros on inscription IG Bulg I² 88, 2 from 2nd-1st c. BC. The presence of Phosphoros is also attested in Byzantion, where Bendis is usually identified either with Artemis or Hekate. On the other hand in Abdera, is Bendis associated with Hekate only.²⁷ The reason

²² POPOV (1976: 292); GOCHEVA (2003: 171).

²³ FOL – MARAZOV (1977: 21–24).

²⁴ ОГНЕХОБА (1959: 81–96).

²⁵ FARNELL (1896: 474).

²⁶ ISAAC (1986: 9–11, 68–69).

²⁷ ISAAC (1986: 107, 235, 257, 289).

for their association with Bendis is that the cults of Phosphoros and Hekate were accompanied by torch-lit night celebrations, similarly as in the case of Bendis in Athens. Additionally, the name Phosphoros means ‘*light-bringer*’ or ‘*torch-bearer*’ and is assigned to Artemis, Hekate and Eos. In the Inland Thrace the cult of Phosphoros was documented in Kabyle, one of the royal Hellenistic cities of the 3rd c. BC by an inscription SEG 42: 661 dated to 300–280 BC. Unfortunately, the location of the sanctuary of Phosphoros still remains unknown up to present, but the iconographical typology is well known from the coinage minted in Kabyle. The female deity does appear to hold a patera and burning torches that became one of the symbols of the city in antiquity. The coins minted by the rulers of Kabyle adapt this iconography, and while the cult of Phosphoros is usually identified with Artemis, some of the attributes could also belong to the cult of Bendis, in particular the double length torch which resembles a spear, the short chiton, and the patera in her hands.²⁸

Conclusion

The character and the development of the cult of Bendis in Attica is well documented by literary as well as archaeological sources. They present Bendis as the Thracian counterpart of Artemis, the deity of wild nature and the protector of life. Their iconography is also similar. The iconography of Bendis is likely derived from the one of Artemis, but has with several specifics, such as the Phrygian attire and the double spear. The cult of Bendis became very popular in Attica in the 4th and 3rd c. BC and spread to nearby regions. The annual festival of Bendideia became a part of the official religion in the 5th century Athens. The character of the celebration suggests its close connection to the Artemis Mounychia, located near the famous sanctuary of Bendis in Peiraeus. Our understanding of Bendis in Athens is as complete as any other Greek deity of the Classical period, with many representations in Greek literature and material evidence as well. This suggests the cult was commonly accepted by local population, despite its foreign origin.

On the other hand the situation in Thrace appears to be more complicated. Bendis was known in the Greek world as a Thracian deity. One would assume that the land of her origin would also produce numerous records about the cult and the goddess herself. However, we have no direct evidence of the presence of Bendis in the interior of Thrace. The only existing information

²⁸ Драганов – Попов (1982: 18–31).

comes from the fringes of Thrace, and from later, Hellenistic and Roman, contexts. The archaeological and epigraphical evidence often presents an incomplete image of the female deity. In some contexts, this deity has mixed features and has been also identified as Artemis, Hekate, the Great Goddess, Phosphoros and many others. The closest iconographic counterpart to Bendis is the Greek goddess Artemis. Majority of iconographic evidence, however, comes only from the Roman period, the time of strong religious and iconographic syncretism. All in all, our understanding of the cult and image of Bendis in Thrace is problematic, because it is based on evidence that is both spatially and temporally distant from the presumed original setting of the cult. We know that Bendis was worshipped in Athens, but there is no direct evidence that the cult of Bendis actually existed in the 5th c. BC Thrace.

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Abbreviations:

IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*

IG Bulg = *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae*

LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*

SEG = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*

RESUMÉ

Kult thrácké bohyně Bendis se stal velice populární v 5. a 4. st. př. n. l. v oblasti Attiky, kde se nám dochovaly důkazy o existenci svatyní v Peiraeiu, na Salamíně a v Laureiu. Kultu se účastnili jak Thrákové žijící v Attice, tak i samotní Athéňané, a slavnost Bendideíi se stala na konci 5. st. př. n. l. součástí státního náboženství Athén. Bendis Řekové vnímali jako thráckou verzi Artemidy, která si ponechala své specifické atributy. Oproti tomu v Thrákii samotné se přímé důkazy o existenci kultu bohyně jménem Bendis nedochovaly, Bendis se zde vyskytuje pouze jako osobní jméno bez přímého spojení s thráckou bohyní. Archeologické nálezy ale poukazují na existenci anonymní bohyně, ochránčyně přírody, která bývá často chápána jako Velká Matka, či Matka příroda a v řeckém kontextu je nezřídka ztotožňována s Artemis, Fosforos a Hekaté a to pouze na základě Attických paralel a podobných ikonografických atributů.

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