ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Branchidae

Summary :

Branchidai is a toponym in the territory of Miletus, equivalent to Didyma. However, it is often interpreted as the name of a family of priests from Didyma, of which each member had a seated statue along the Sacred Way leading to the entry of the sanctuary of Didyma.

1. Geography

Branchidai is a toponym in the territory of Miletus, equivalent to Didyma. This name has long been misunderstood; it is often interpreted as the name of a family of priests from Didyma, of which each member had a seated statue along the Sacred Way leading to the entry of the sanctuary of Didyma. This interpretation is the result of a series of misconceptions.

2. Ancient Interpretations

The word Branchidai occurs in Herodotus as a toponym.[1] Contrary to modern usage, in antiquity the term was used more frequently than Didyma to designate the location of the suburban sanctuary of Apollo in the territory of Miletus.[2] For example, according to Herodotus, the King of Lydia, Croesus (560-546 B.C.) sent as many offerings to Apollo in Branchidai as to Apollo in Delphi,[3] and Hecataeus proposed to use these benefactions during the Ionian Revolt.[4]
Moreover, the word Branchidai appears in a few other ancient authors, many of them from Christian times. In the Imperial period, the sanctuaries of Apollo in Asia Minor were very famous, and people came to consult the oracle from far away. Second only to Apollo of Claros, the Milesian god of Didyma- Branchidai is well attested in literary texts and inscriptions. Eusebius of Caesarea mentions Apollo of Branchidai.[5] Iamblichus and Porphyrius write about the priest of Claros as well as the prophetesses of Branchidai.[6] Porphyrius also quotes some oracles by Branchidean Apollo.[7] Lucian and Origen list the sanctuary at Claros next to the one at Branchidai.[8] Even Pausanias Periegetes refers to Branchidai as a toponym, i.e. the location of a famous oracle for which the sculptor Canachos casted a statue of Apollo in bronze.[9]
From the Archaic period to Late Antiquity, Branchidai was thus well known as the place of one of the most famous sanctuaries of Apollo. However, an alternative story in antiquity suggests a totally different meaning for the term Branchidai. According to Strabo, quoting Callisthenes, Branchidai were real people.[10] When Xerxes (486 - 465 B.C.) burned the sanctuary of Didyma, they betrayed the Milesians and gave the treasuries of Apollo to the Persians. Subsequently, they fled and took refuge in Sogdiana. When Alexander the Great came to Persia one and a half century later, disgusted by their sacrilege and betrayal, he destroyed the city in which Xerxes once installed them. Between these two events, in this time of shame, the oracle in Didyma did not issue any prophecy.

3. Modern Interpretations

This story provoked various reactions amidst the modern historians, from total adhesion to complete rejection. On the one hand, some consider that the Branchidai were a family of priests who administrated the Apollo sanctuary autonomously from the city of Miletus. Their attitude favourable towards Persia was considered as a betrayal to the Greek cause.[11] On the other hand, Ehrhardt contested point by point this interpretation and put in doubt even the date alleged by Strabo and Pausanias for the destruction of Miletus by Xerxes (479 B.C.).[12] According to Herodotus,[13] Miletus was destroyed by Dareius (522-486 B.C.) in 494 B.C. Should we suppose two different attacks against the city and its sanctuaries or dismiss one of these? The silence of Herodotus on the Branchidai betrayal, the making of this tale for the story of Alexander the Great and the simultaneous apparition of the mythical figure of Branchos in the poetry of Callimachos are strong arguments against the existence of real people named Branchidai. We may think of a story imagined by historians of Miletus at the beginning of the Hellenistic period: they would have tried to please Alexander or his successors and to gain royal favours for the city. This is now the opinion of Niemeier, the archaeologist responsible for excavations at Miletus.[14]

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A final point needs to be discussed: the identity of the Archaic seated statues found along the Sacred Way leading to the sanctuary of Branchidai-Didyma (they are now conserved in the British Museum). Art historians often interpreted them as representations of those Branchidai known as historical people, and Mobius even recognized in one of them the portrait of the highest priest, the prophet of the sanctuary.[15] On the contrary, Tuchelt has long been arguing against this identification.[16] First, in Archaic times, there was in the Greek world no row of statues similar to the processional way leading to Egyptian sanctuaries. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the so-called Branchidai were not discovered in their original setting. Initially, most of them were offerings consecrated inside the sacred precinct; they were probably extracted from the ruins of the sanctuary at the time of the removal of activity of the oracle and placed along the Sacred Way in the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Second, the word Branchidai was initially used to designate those seated statues with a topographical meaning[17] and it is only in the more recent archaeological literature that it became understood in a social context.

Finally, German archaeologists discovered a new precinct along the Sacred Way at the middle way between Miletus and Didyma.[18] There, they found another set of seated statues, which were aristocratic offerings but quite certainly not representations of priests from Didyma.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, let us say that all sacerdotal connotations associated to the term Branchidai are misguiding allegations that disturb the clear topographical meaning of the ancient term, except for the fictitious story once narrated by Callisthenes.

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1. Hdt. 1.46, 1.92, 1.157-159, 5.36.

2. Ehrhardt, N., "Didyma und Milet in archaischer Zeit", *Chiron* 28 (1998) pp. 11-20.

3. Hdt. 1.92.

4. Hdt. 5.36.

5. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praep. Evang*. 5.6.1.

6. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3, 11. Porphyrius, *Epistula ad Anebonem* 2, 2d.

7. Porphyrius, *De philosophia ex oraculis* 128.

8. Lucian, *Alexander* 8, 29. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.3.

9. Paus. 1.16.3, 8.46.3.

10. Strabo 11.11.4, 14.1.5, 17.1.43. Callisthenes *FGrHist* 124 F 14.

11. Parke, H.W., "The Massacre of the Branchidai", *JHS* 105 (1985) pp. 59-68. Tuchelt, Kl., "Die Perserzerstörung von Branchidai-Didyma und ihre Folgen archäologisch betrachtet", *AA* (1988) pp. 427-438.

12. Ehrhardt, N., "Didyma und Milet in archaischer Zeit", *Chiron* 28 (1998) pp. 11-20. Paus. 8.46.3.

13. Hdt. 6.19.

14. Niemeier, W.-D., "Die Zierde Ioniens", *AA* (1999) p. 398.

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15. Möbius, H., "Archaische Sitzstatue aus Didyma", *AntPlast* 2 (1963) pp. 23-29. See also: Hockmann, U., "Die Sitzstatue des Propheten aus Didyma", *IstMitt* 46 (1996) pp. 93-102.

16. Tuchelt, Kl., *Die archaischen Skulpturen von Didyma*, (IstMitt Beiheft 27, Berlin, 1970) pp. 215-219.

17. See Newton, Ch.T., *A History of Discoveries at Halicarnassus, Cnidus and Branchidae* (London 1863).

18. Tuchelt, Kl., Schneider, P., Schattner, T.G., *Ein Kultbezirk an der Heiligen Strasse von Milet nach Didyma (Didyma III 1)* (Mainz, 1996).

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