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Mesut KINACI

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4700-4415>

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The Skamandros in Pseudo-Plutarch's On Rivers: Literary and Material Evidence

Pseudo-Plutarkhos'un Nehirler Üzerine Adlı Eserinde Skamandros: Edebî ve Maddi Kanıtlar

Mesut KINACI*

Abstract: In ancient societies, rivers were perceived not merely as vital resources but also as divine beings embodying the identity, economy, and religion of the communities they sustained. This study examines the Skamandros River in the Troad through a comparative analysis of the relevant section of Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers* (*De fluviis* XIII) and other ancient literary sources, alongside the material evidence relating to the river. Particular attention is given to coins struck at Ilion, Skepsis, and Kyme between the first and third centuries CE, as well as to a votive relief and sculptural depictions. The originality of this study lies in its systematic integration of this relatively neglected literary passage with the available archaeological evidence. The findings demonstrate that Pseudo-Plutarch's account reduces the divine river to a mortal youth and relies on hard-to-verify sources, whereas the material evidence consistently depicts Skamandros as a divine symbol of prosperity and civic identity at Ilion continuously for approximately one and a half centuries. This contrast illustrates how the identity and economic prosperity of a city could be constructed around the cult and imagery of a river god.

Keywords: Skamandros • Ilion • River-god • Coinage • Iconography • Kybele

Öz: Akarsular, antikçağ toplumlarında yalnızca yaşamsal bir kaynak olarak değil, aynı zamanda kent kimliğinin, ekonomik düzenin ve dinsel yapının taşıyıcıları olan tanrısal varlıklar olarak da algılanmıştır. Bu çalışmada, Troas Bölgesi'ndeki Skamandros Nehri, Pseudo-Plutarkhos'un *Nehirler Üzerine* (*De fluviis* XIII) adlı eserindeki ilgili bölüm ve diğer antik yazınsal kaynaklar ışığında değerlendirilmekte; nehre ilişkin maddi kanıtlar ise özellikle Ilion, Skepsis ve Kyme kentlerinde MS I-III. yüzyıllar arasında darp edilmiş sikkeler, bir adak kabartması ve heykeltıraşlık eserleri üzerinden incelenmektedir. Çalışmanın özgünlüğü, literatürde kısıtlı şekilde ele alınmış bu konuyu yalnızca yazılı kaynaklarla sınırlandırmayıp maddi kanıtlarla sistematik biçimde bir arada ele almasında yatmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, Pseudo-Plutarkhos'un anlatısının tanrısal ırmak figürünü ölümlü bir gence indirgediğini ve doğrulanması güç kaynaklara dayandığını; buna karşılık maddi kanıtların Skamandros'u, Ilion kentinin bereketi, kimliği ve dinsel temsiliinin önemli bir unsuru olan tanrısal bir simge olarak yaklaşık bir buçuk yüzyıl boyunca kesintisiz biçimde yansıttığını göstermektedir. Bu karşıtlık, bir kentin kimliğini ve ekonomik refahını bir ırmak tanrısının kültü ve ikonografisi çevresinde nasıl kurguladığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Skamandros • Ilion • Irmak Tanrısı • Sikke • İkonografi • Kybele

* Assoc. Prof., Süleyman Demirel University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Ancient History, Isparta, TÜRKİYE.  0000-0003-4700-4415 | mesutkinaci@sdu.edu.tr.

Among the substances necessary for living beings to sustain their existence, water comes first. For this reason, throughout the ages great importance (and at times sanctity) has been attributed to rivers. In the imagination of ancient peoples fresh water was held sacred, and rivers were frequently personified and conceived in the form of a god. This divine identity was not confined to a religious conception alone: the river became an instrument symbolising the identity, the economy and the defence of the city through which it flowed. The question of how a river-god was represented therefore also provides evidence of how the society to which it belonged defined itself.

The work of Pseudo-Plutarch that provides information about rivers, mountains, plants and stones near them is known in short as *On Rivers (de fluv.)*. The work has been preserved in its entirety in two manuscripts: the *Palatinus Heidelbergensis gr. 398* (P), dated to the IX century and held in the Library of Heidelberg University, and the manuscript *Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Supplément grec 443A* (B), which derives from it¹. Although the second manuscript derives from P, it carries the corrections of a learned copyist and offers readings that coincide with the independent conjectures of modern philologists, and it is therefore important for the constitution of the text². Because the author's name was Plutarch, the work was at first attributed to the famous biographer; however, since in its choice of words, its level of knowledge and the reliability of the sources it cites it does not resemble the writings of that author, it has been argued that the work belongs to another, otherwise unknown writer named Plutarch. When the references in the work (which deals with twenty-five rivers extending from India to Galia) are traced, almost all of them prove to be fabricated; it is thought that this may stem from the author's wish to make his work appear more scholarly³. Nevertheless, it would not be correct to regard all the accounts as wholly invented, and for this reason they need to be corroborated by other sources.

This study takes up the section of the work devoted to the Skamandros River in the Troad (*de fluv.* XIII). The author's accounts are compared not only with the statements of other ancient writers but also with the material evidence bearing on the river's divine identity (chiefly the coins of Ilion, Skepsis and Kyme, a votive relief and sculptural Works) so that a holistic assessment is aimed at the intersection of philology, numismatics and the history of religion.

The Name and Location of the Skamandros

In antiquity, names were generally given to rivers by drawing inspiration from mythological events, a practice regarded as an instance of the aetiological (origin) myth, which explains in figurative form how a name came into being. Pseudo-Plutarch (*de fluv.* XIII. 1) states that before receiving this name the Skamandros was called Ksanthos. According to the author, Skamandros, the son of Korybas and Demodike, suddenly witnessed the mysteries of Rhea while they were being celebrated, went mad, threw himself into the river Ksanthos, and the river was thereafter called by his name.

The information that the river was known by two names goes back to the earliest accounts of the ancient tradition. Homer (*Il.* XX. 73-74) reports that the gods called the

¹ Kinacı 2020, 124; Poidomani 2016, 57-59.

² Poidomani 2016, 63-70. For the current critical editions used here see Calderón Dorda et al. 2003; Delattre 2011.

³ Cameron 2004, 28.

river Ksanthos and men called it Skamandros. What is in question here, however, is not a successive change of name but two designations valid at the same time, one divine and the other mortal. In Homer the Skamandros is not a mortal youth who throws himself into the water but a divine river that, in the twenty-first book of the *Iliad* (XXI. 211-382), raises its waters against Achilles. In Pseudo-Plutarch's account, by contrast, this simultaneous duality is turned into a one-directional, chronological renaming, and the divine river is reduced to a mortal youth. This construction is not so much a choice peculiar to the author as the signature pattern of the work: of the twenty-five rivers described, twenty-two take their name from a person who drowns in them⁴. The part of the book concerning the Skamandros is likewise an application of this invariable scheme to the Troad. In the common tradition the Skamandros is a river-god and, through the nymph Idaia, is reckoned the father of Teucer, the ancestor of the Trojan royal line. His daughter Callirrhoe married Tros, the founder of Troy; another daughter, Strymo, became the mother of king Priam; and the Trojan nymphs too were held to be his daughters⁵. The Skamandros is thus positioned as the divine river at the origin of the Trojan dynasty. The descent the author gives, on the other hand "*son of Korybas and Demodike*" appears in no other source; that the name "Korybas" evokes the Korybantes, the ecstatic retinue of the mother of the Gods, and that the event triggering the change of name is the "mysteries of Rhea", emphasises in the very first sentence the Mother-Goddess narrative that pervades the whole section. The motif of the hero going mad on account of the Mother of the Gods recurs in the Maiandros section of the work as well (*de fluv.* IX) and is consistent with the cult of Kybele in antiquity⁶. This narrative is not peculiar to the section but is a structural thread of the work: the theme of the Mother of the Gods is repeated in the Maiandros (*de fluv.* IX), Marsyas (*de fluv.* X) and Sagaris (*de fluv.* XII) sections as well; indeed Campbell too has independently identified this repetition⁷.

As regards location, Pseudo-Plutarch (*de fluv.* XIII. 1) is content merely to state that the Skamandros is a river of the Troad, giving no information about its source, its course or its mouth. Yet the geography of the river is described in detail in other sources. The spring-rich character of Mount Ida, from which the Skamandros takes its source, was emphasised by Homer (*Il.* VIII. 47); Strabo (XIII. 1. 5; 43) gives a detailed account of the foothills of Ida and of the river's sources. The river's two springs, one hot and one cold, attracted attention in antiquity (*Il.* XXII. 147-152), while the custom of Troad brides bathing in the Skamandros before marriage (Aes. *epist.* X) attests the river's position as a local cult associated with fertility and marriage. Modern research localises the Skamandros to the present-day Karamenderes⁸. The author's contenting himself, in the face of this rich geographical and ritual tradition, with the mere phrase "a river of the Troad" reveals the superficiality of the geographical knowledge in his work.

⁴ Racine 2020, 220; Campbell 2024, 713-714.

⁵ Apol. III. 12. 1; III. 139; Dion. Hal. *ant.* I. 62; Q. Smyrn. XI. 245; see also, Körpe 2019, 351. For the Skamandros reckoned the son of Okeanos and Tethys see Hes. *theog.* 345; for him reckoned the father of Teucer see Diod. IV. 75; cf. Campbell 2024, 728.

⁶ Roller 2004, 159; Kınacı 2020, 125-128.

⁷ Campbell 2024, 712, 727-728.

⁸ Altınoluk 2005, 198.

The Plant, Mountain and Stone Around the River

Pseudo-Plutarch (*de fluv.* XIII. 2) states that a plant called *sistros* grows in the river. According to the author, this plant, which resembles the chickpea, takes its name from the sound made by the seeds rattling inside the pod when it ripens; and whoever possesses it fears neither a phantom (*phantasma*) nor a visible god. The author bases this information on the second book of Demostratos's work *On Rivers*. Deriving the name of a plant from a sound is a method to which the author frequently has recourse: in the Marsyas section, too, he mentions a plant called *aulos* that is said to produce a musical melody in the wind (*de fluv.* X. 3)⁹. That the word *sistros* corresponds to the sacred rattle (*sistrum*) used in the ecstatic worship of the Mother of the Gods accords with the Mother-Goddess-centred construction of the section. Indeed the plant-name, which appears in the manuscripts in the form σίστρος, was emended in later editions to σεῖστρος, by connecting it with the word σεῖστρον denoting the rattle¹⁰.

The property attributed to the plant - "not fearing a phantom or a visible god" - clearly rests on the logic of an amulet (*phylaktérion*) and has a widespread counterpart in ancient medico-magical literature. Pliny the Elder (*nat.* XXV. 29) speaks of the protective power of the peony (*paeonia*) gathered at night; Dioscorides (III. 140) records that the root of the same plant was hung as an amulet against night-terrors (*ephialtes*) and epileptic seizures in children. Similarly, Pliny (*nat.* XXIV. 160; XXX. 6) reports that the Magi used the plant *aglaophotis*, which glows at night, to summon the gods. These parallels show that the property attributed to the *sistros* is not an arbitrary invention of the author but belongs to a known category of the conception of plants that ward off supernatural manifestations. The Demostratos adduced as a witness, on the other hand, is also cited in the Maiandros section (*de fluv.* IX. 2).

After the plant, the author (*de fluv.* XIII. 3) states that near the river lies Mount Ida, formerly called Gargaros, on whose summit stood the altars of Zeus and of the Mother of the Gods. The main theme of this account strongly coincides with the ancient tradition, for Homer names Gargaros as the highest peak of Ida (*Il.* XIV. 292) and states that this peak housed a precinct and altar belonging to Zeus (*Il.* VIII. 48). The author's information thus proves to coincide directly with the Homeric accounts. This old name of the mountain appears in corrupted form in the manuscripts as τάρταρον, the correct form Γάργαρον (Gargaros) being obtained only through emendation in later editions;¹¹ Campbell too has adopted the same correction (*Gargaros pro Tartaros*)¹². As for the identification of Ida with the Mother of the Gods, it appears that the goddess was known in the region as Meter Idaia, and that the Idaean Dactyls associated with her were connected with metalworking and ecstatic worship¹³. By contrast, the connection of the mountain's name with the nymph/kanephoros/ basket-bearer Idaia and Aigesthos does not occur in other sources. On this point it appears that the author has added his own aetiological construction onto a genuine cult geography. In this section the phrase in which Ida is called a "basket-bearing" (*kanephoros*) girl is corrupt in the manuscript; some scholars adopt here the emendation *kanēphorou korēs* and have also proposed

⁹ Kinacı 2021, 4.

¹⁰ Poidomani 2016, 74.

¹¹ Poidomani 2016, 74.

¹² Campbell 2024, 728 fn. 58.

¹³ Strab. X. 3. 7; 22; see also, Şahin 2012, 213.

reading *aphanous* ("vanished from sight") instead of *aphronos* ("lost her wits")¹⁴.

Finally, the author (*de fluv.* XIII. 4) speaks of a stone called *kryphios* ("hidden") on Mount Ida, which appears only while the mysteries of the gods are being celebrated, and bases this on the second book of the work *On Stones* (*Peri Lithon*) by Herakleitos of Sikyon. The name of the stone appears in manuscript P in the form Κρύφιος; in manuscript B it was written, in keeping with the region's Mother-Goddess associations, as φρύγιος (phrygian) and subsequently corrected. The stone's property of being "visible only during the mysteries" likewise rests on emending the manuscripts' reading μόνος to μόνους¹⁵. The notion of a stone that is "visible" only during ritual is a pattern that recurs in Pseudo-Plutarch's stone-accounts: in the Maiandros section he speaks of the *sophron* stone that drives a person mad, and in the Marsyas section of the *makhaira* stone that drives mad whoever finds it during the rites of Kybele at Berekynthos, the almost identical accounts of these stones being found in the text attributed to Aristotle, the *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus*¹⁶. The work of Herakleitos of Sikyon on which the account is based, on the other hand, is met with in no other source. This indicates that the special source adduced for the account in question is very probably fabricated.

The Divine Identity of the Skamandros and its Interpretation

Pseudo-Plutarch's account, which reduces the divine river to a mortal youth, produces a striking difference when compared with the river's divine identity in antiquity. This identity is documented even in the earliest literary sources: in the *Iliad* it is reported that the Skamandros had a priest (*Il.* V. 77-78) and that the Trojans sacrificed live horses and bulls to the river (*Il.* XXI. 131-132). The river's identification with the identity of the Troad reached such a degree that Hector gave his son the name Skamandrios after the river's name; among the people the child was called Astyanaks, "protector of the city" (*Il.* VI. 402-403). Ironically, at the fall of Troy this child was killed by being thrown from the walls (*Eur. Tr.* 719-725, 1133-1135; *Sen. Tr.* 1068-1119; *Apol. epit.* V. 23). Although no surviving ancient source specifies where his body fell, some commentators have suggested that he was cast into the Skamandros; on this reading, with the fall of the "Skamandrios" Astyanaks into the river, the last member of the dynasty would also have perished¹⁷.

This divine identity is also confirmed by the river's material remains. The Skamandros was depicted on the Roman-period coins of Skepsis and Kyme, and above all of Ilion, throughout roughly a century and a half from the reign of Nero to that of Geta (ca. 54-212 CE), in the type of the reclining river-god leaning his back on an overturned amphora from which water flows, and frequently together with the name of the city (ΣΚΑΜΑΝΔΡΟΣ ΙΛΙΕΩΝ)¹⁸. The distinctive element that sets the Skamandros apart from other river-gods is the long-stalked aquatic plant he holds, which is thought to be a species unique to the Skamandros and still grows today along the banks of the Karamenderes River¹⁹. This forms a striking parallel with the work's mention of a plant

¹⁴ Campbell 2024, 729 fn. 59.

¹⁵ Poidomani 2016, 61, 75.

¹⁶ Aristot. *mir. ausc.* 162; 167; 173; Kınacı 2020, 130-132; 2021, 5.

¹⁷ Körpe 2019, 354.

¹⁸ Altınoluk 2005, 199-202; Tekin et al. 2009.

¹⁹ Körpe 2019, 357.

peculiar to the river (*sistros*). A marble statue from Ilion, now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, holding a cornucopia in its right hand (130-150 CE), together with the miniatures of the *Ilias Ambrosiana*, reflects the same divine conception²⁰. The cornucopia recurring in this evidence emphasises the abundance the river brought, while the legend giving the city's name emphasises the river's place in civic identity.

The material traces of the Skamandros cult are not limited to coins either. A votive relief found in 1966 in the Karamenderes valley, at the point where the river joins the Akçın stream, and dated to the II century CE (Çanakkale Archaeological Museum, inv. 2330), depicts the river-god Skamandros reclining on a *kline* and an offering being made to him; its Latin inscription records that a vow was fulfilled to the god (*Scamandro votum solvit*). This relief is thought to come from a sanctuary dedicated to the Skamandros on the riverbank²¹. To this should be added a festival peculiar to the region in which Troad brides entered the river before marriage and bathed, saying "Take my virginity, O Skamandros" (Λάβε μου, Σκάμανδρε, τὴν παρθενίαν) (Aes. *epist.* X);²² this ritual gives concrete form to the river's cultic position associated with fertility and marriage.

A marked contrast thus arises between this divine and public Skamandros, to which the material evidence jointly bears witness, and the mortal and schematic Skamandros constructed by Pseudo-Plutarch. While the coins, statues and Homeric cult data present the river as a fully divine, abundance-bringing being identified with the identity of the city, Pseudo-Plutarch's text reduces the same river to a youth who goes mad and leaps into the water, places it within a framework of the Mother of the Gods and madness, and bases it on unverifiable sources. This opposition shows that Pseudo-Plutarch's aim was not to convey the river's real cultic identity but to apply the invariable name-change scheme of his work to the Skamandros; the material evidence here proves that this text, taken on its own, can be misleading.

Conclusion

When Pseudo-Plutarch's accounts concerning the Skamandros are compared with the statements of other ancient writers and with the river's material remains, it emerges that a part of the information he gives can be corroborated. The river's being known by two names, Ksanthos and Skamandros, rests on the Homeric accounts; the altar of Zeus on the summit of the neighbouring Mount Ida (Gargaros) and its identification with the Mother of the Gods are well known; and the protective property attributed to the *sistros* on its bank accords with the ancient plant-amulet tradition. By contrast, the descent of the Skamandros as "son of Korybas and Demodike", the transformation of the simultaneous double name into a successive change of name, and above all the sources adduced (Demostratos and Herakleitos of Sikyon) cannot be corroborated. It is therefore probable that these sources were produced in order to make the work appear more scholarly.

The most conspicuous result that this study brings out is the divergence between the literary and the material evidence. The coins of Ilion, Skepsis and Kyme, the votive relief at the Karamenderes and the sculptural works from Ilion independently document the

²⁰ Körpe 2019, 355-357.

²¹ Taşlıkılıoğlu 1971; Körpe 2019, 356-357.

²² Körpe 2019, 354.

Skamandros, throughout the I-III centuries CE, as a divine, abundance-bringing being identified with the identity of the city. This corpus shows concretely how Ilion constructed its civic identity, economy and religion around its river-god. The convergence of the section's four fundamental elements (the change of name, the *sistros*, Mount Ida, the *kryphios*) within a single Mother-Goddess framework, moreover, is of a piece with the construction observed in the author's other sections, such as the Maiandros and Marsyas. The contribution of the study lies precisely in this confrontation: by bringing the philological analysis of *de fluv.* XIII into systematic dialogue with the numismatic, epigraphic and sculptural evidence, it not only tests the reliability of a single chapter but also offers a method that may be extended to the other river-chapters of this little-studied work.

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* Abbreviations of epigraphical editions and reference works follow the "Liste des abréviations des éditions et ouvrages de référence pour l'épigraphie grecque alphabétique (GrEpiAbbr – Version 03, Septembre 2024)" developed by the Association Internationale d'Épigraphie Grecque et Latine.