



Leuke/Achilleios Nisos

Summary :

Leuke/Achilleios Nisos (modern island Zmeinyj in Ukraine) is situated in the Black Sea area ca. 45 km from the mouth of the Danubian branch Sulina. From the 7th century, Leuke was considered as an island closely linked with Achilles. With its famous temple of Achilles, it was one of the most honoured places connected with the cult of the hero.

Other Names

Makaron; Filoxia; Fidonisi; Yılan Adası; Şerpilor

Geographical Location

Ukraine

Historical Region

Scythia

1. History and geography

During its history, island Zmeinyj (i.e. island of Serpents) had many names: Leuke (i.e. 'White') in Ancient Greek, or island of Achilles, or island of the Blessed (Makaron); in Italian Filoxia; in Modern Greek Fidonisi; in Turkish Yılan Adası; in Romanian Şerpilor. It is unique among the Black Sea islands, due to the fact that it emerged as a result of the tectonic raising of the seabed. The island is a bare rock of whitish color (hence it was called Leuke-'White'), and there is no permanent population; a lighthouse is the only structure on the island. The circumference of the island amounts nowadays to ca. 2 km.

The island was known in antiquity due to [the cult of Achilles](#). According to the legend, Achilles after his death was carried off from the funeral pyre in [Troy](#) by his mother Thetis and brought to this island.¹ The Greek poet [Alcaeus](#) connects Achilles directly with Scythia and calls him "lord of Pontus".² The northern of the Black Sea was explored during the time of the [Greek colonisation of the Black Sea](#), and the island Leuke lay on the way to this extreme end of the world; that is why the island could be interpreted as an island of Blessed, where Achilles was considered their ruler. At first, the island belonged to the Olbian polis, which controlled and took care of the sanctuary of Achilles – main patron and protector of [Olbia](#). However, from the end of the 1st c. A.D. control of Leuke passed to the Greek cities of the Roman province of Moesia Inferior.

2. Ancient sources

The most detailed description of Achilles' island is attributed to the politician and writer Flavius Arrian who in his "Periplus Ponti Euxini" (middle of the 2nd c. A.D.) gives abundant information concerning the shores of the Black Sea.³ Arrian determines the location of the island opposite the Pylon mouth of the Istros, and records a legend that Thetis founded the island for her son to dwell there. He also notes that the island is devoid of humans and that there is a temple of Achilles on it with a wooden cult statue of ancient workmanship⁴ and an oracle. In the temple there are many votive offerings – bowls and rings and precious stones, as well as Greek and Latin inscriptions praising Achilles. Along with him, some of the inscriptions also honour Patroclus.⁵ On the island there are a few goats, dedicated to Achilles, and many birds.⁶ According to Arrian, Achilles appears in the dreams of the sailors to indicate to them the best place on the island for mooring. In this testimony Arrian refers to the testimonies of those who have either landed there or heard it from others. Philostratus⁷ says that the sailors may enter the island, but not build anything or even spend the night, because they believe that Achilles and Helen⁸ feast there every night and sing of their mutual love, [Homer](#) and his poems about Troy.

Thus, Achilles appears on Leuke not only as the god of the dead, but also as a healer, a patron of sailors, a protector of the polis and its frontiers, and as an oracle. All these qualities are confirmed by the literary sources and local inscriptions.



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3. Excavations

Archaeological investigations on Leuke began at the end of the 18th– beginning of the 19th c. Most important was the inspection of the remains of a building which were interpreted as the ruins of the temple of Achilles. This inspection was carried out in 1823 by the lieutenant commander of the Russian navy N.D. Kritskij on behalf of St. Petersburg's Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately a lighthouse was built on the island in 1837, and the masonry of the presupposed Achilles' temple were used for its construction. Since then several archaeologists investigated the territory of the island (N.N. Murzakevich in 1841, N.V. Pjatyshcheva in 1964, S.A. Bulatovich in 1968). The Odessa Archaeological Museum (Ukraine) has been conducting systematic excavations on Leuke since 1988, under the supervision of S.B. Ohotnikov and A.S. Ostroverhov. The underwater part of the island shore, investigated by the archaeologists in the past few years, brought to light many imported finds.

As a result, we have now some remains of the marble walls of the Achilles' temple, some inscriptions on the stones, many graffiti and votive offerings to Achilles, many coins from all ends of the ancient world, jewellery offered to Achilles, anchors and numerous pottery sherds. Archaeologists suppose that the temple followed the **Ionic order**. According to the plan and the description of Kritskij, the temple measured 29,87 x 29,87 m and was oriented to the east. Part of its architectural decoration was made of Parian marble while another part consisted of architectural terracottas. Two inscribed stone pedestals were also found. The earliest pottery finds belong to the end of the 7th – beginning of the 6th c. B.C. Coarseware is almost lacking. The prevalent pottery finds are of a festive character, painted and originate from various centres of ceramic production. A great quantity of coins from all parts of the then known world, dating to different historical periods beginning from the 5th c. B.C., constitutes another important witness of the popularity of the cult of Achilles on Leuke island.

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1. Arctinos *Aithiopsis* bei Procl. *Chron.* 198-200.
 2. Alc. Fr. 14.
 3. Arr. *Peripl.* 21-23.
 4. Cf. about the temple of Achilles and his statue Paus. 3.19. 11.
 5. According to Paus. 3. 19. 12-13, Leonymos, a wounded Crotonian, was healed on the island of Leuke. He told that he saw Achilles and both Ajaxes there accompanied by Patroclus, Antilochus and Helen, who allegedly lived there with Achilles.
 6. On the abundance of birds on Leuke see Ps.-Scymn. frg. 7a-b, Philostratus. *Her.*
 7. Phil., *Her.* 19. 20.
 8. Philostratus mentions the statues of Achilles and Helen in the temple (*Her.* 19. 16).
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Glossary :

	ionic order, the An architectural order devised in Ionia and developed in Asia Minor and the Greek islands in the 6th century BC. Its columns have elaborately moulded bases, fluted shafts (with fillets, ending in fillets), and volute capitals. The entablature consists of an three-fasciae architrave, a continuous frieze, usually richly decorated with reliefs, and a cornice. The Ionic order was more elaborate in dimensions, comparing with the Doric.
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Sources

Arrian *Periplus Ponti Euxini* 21-23.

Pausanias 3.19. 11.

Plinius *Natural History* 10. 78.

Philostratus *Heroicus* 19. 20.