

# The History of Ancient Thrace, a Field for Methodological Experimentation, Historiographical Deconstruction and Epistemological Reflection

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the possible benefits of challenging the traditional protohistorical approach to Ancient Thrace. The analysis of Greek myths featuring the Thracians, notwithstanding modern prejudice, illustrates the strong integration of the Ancient Thracians in Greek representations and history, underlining the stakes of including the Thracians into the grand historical narrative. The paper also briefly presents the methodologies that make Ancient Thrace a stimulating and potentially groundbreaking subject for historical study.*

**Key words:** Protohistory, Mythography, Athens, Alliances, Precious metal objects, Coins

**Ключови думи:** протоистория, митография, Атина, съюзи, предмети от благородни метали, монети



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As with the Celts, the Dacians, the Illyrians, the Germans and many others ancient peoples, over the long term the Thracians have been relegated to 'protohistory', a field of studies documented by material sources and external texts only. This academic consideration has resulted in their exclusion from a grand historical narrative dominated by literate societies, first Greek and then Roman, with major consequences regarding both the organisation of research and our understanding of these societies. I have tried elsewhere to demonstrate that the Thracian studies may help in undertaking major epistemological and historiographical challenges, especially through wide-scale and comparative analysis of an archaeology of war exchanges<sup>1</sup>. In all the so-called protohistorical studies, the lack of written narratives as well as the specificities of the material sources indeed require a multi-disciplinary approach with efficient methodologies. And yet, ancient Thracians are much better documented than many other societies without written literacy: Thracian studies may therefore appear as a field of choice for strong methodological inves-

<sup>1</sup> Rufin Solas 2022.

tigations and a key topic for anthropological as well as comparative archaeological approaches. Protohistorical studies, all over Europe, not to say all over the world, is indeed shaped by a strong national paradigm. There is also a major gap in European protohistory research, as we can observe an east-west organisation for comparative research, inherited from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This has contributed to the marginalization and even the exclusion of the so-called protohistorical societies in the classical historical narrative, where many prejudices are pursued. Reopening here these questions, I will firstly focus on the Greek myths, through ancient sources and recent commentaries, as they illustrate the strong integration of the Ancient Thracians in Greek representations and history. Challenging the prejudice developed in modern historiography, the analysis underlines the stakes of including the Thracians into the grand historical narrative. Finally, I will briefly discuss the methodologies that make ancient Thrace a stimulating and potentially groundbreaking subject for historical study.

## 1. THE THRACIANS, THE GREEK MYTHS AND THE GRAND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Ancient Thracians have played an important role in the Greek imagination. Present in the earliest literary works (Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus), they are well represented in tragedy and, more generally, in Greek myths. While mythological narratives provide material for research into literature and cultural anthropology, history is especially relevant when studying mythography, in other words, the process, set in time and space, comprising creation, circulation and modification of the myths, which often served political interests. It is a difficult undertaking, but we sometimes come up with interesting results, especially when it comes to Athens in the fifth century BC.

Regarding tragedy, we may mention the lost play of Aeschylus the title of which is the name of a Thracian people, the Edonians, also mentioned in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Sophocles also wrote about Lycurgus. This mythical Thracian

king was then associated with the Edonians who were settled in the region of Amphipolis. It was at this time, when the Athenians were increasing their ventures in Thrace, and precisely in this rich mining region between the Strymon and the Nestos rivers, that the presence of the Thracians was developing in the myths written down in the city. Another tragedy featuring a mythical Thracian king, Rhesos, the famous Thracian protagonist in the *Iliad*, had been the subject of controversy in terms of both its attribution to Euripides and its dating. The play is now considered to be a product of the fourth century BC. There are, however, decisive arguments in favour of a fifth-century date and consequently for an attribution to Euripides. Some of these objections were raised a long time ago by Goossens, in an article published in 1932<sup>2</sup>. In this tragedy indeed, we find the same pattern of the late Thracian ally, present in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*; only it is treated differently by Euripides, who transposes into the Trojan cycle the same actuality: the *symmachia* with the Odrysian Sitalkes. These literary references seem to reflect the doubts that Athenians had about their Thracian alliance at this time of war, suggesting that the Rhesos was precisely set in 425 or 424, in any event shortly before the loss of Amphipolis and at a date almost contemporary with Aristophanes' first performance of the *Acharnians* in 425.

In the same context of the Peloponnesian War, and more specifically of the alliance with the Odrysian Sitalkes from 431 onwards, Thucydides' account provides a mythological evocation that brings the Thracians even closer to the Athenians: the historian takes care to specify that the Thracian Teres, father of the Odrysian king Sitalkes, was not to be confused with the Thracian Tereus (*Thuc.* 2. 29. 3). The latter is not only located in Phocis, the myth settling Thracians close to Athens (and to Delphi, the centre of the Greek world), but he is also presented as an ally of King Pandion of Athens, whose daughter he had married. Thucydides explains the marriage between Pandion and Tereus by the proximity of the two countries, as the two princes were able to help each other.

<sup>2</sup>Goossens 1932.

As well as popularising the idea of an ancient geographical proximity between Thracians and Athenians, the myth consequently provided an illustrious precedent for military collaboration between these partners. The adventures of Tereus and Procne, the daughter of Pandion, were already well known to the Athenians at the time, as evidenced by representations of the myth on Attic ceramics before this date and Sophocles' tragedy *Tereus*. This explains why Thucydides thought it useful to make a clear distinction between Teres and Tereus. However, Thucydides' text shifts the focus from the events of his own time to those of the myth: on the subject of Pandion, the mythical king of Athens, he states that "a journey lasting several days separated him from the Odrysians". While stressing immediately afterwards that the power of the Odrysian kings dated back no further than the time of the father of their ally Sitalkes, Thucydides indeed settles the Odrysians, allies of Athens during the Peloponnesian War, in the world of heroes. We do not know whether the story of the alliance between Pandion and Tereus was produced in Athens in 431, the year of the alliance with Sitalkes, or whether it was created at an earlier date and re-exploited then. In any case, it is close to the official introduction of the Thracian goddess Bendis into the Athenian civic cults in 429.

The image of a distant past in which the Thracians were located in central Greece has long since faded, associated as it was in Greek literature with Phocis (Daulis and Parnassus) and Boeotia (Thebes, which they occupied temporarily, and Helicon). Several stories of migrations also show how myths have reinforced this integration of the Thracians into the Greek imagination, by building up either a geographical proximity or a kinship and, in all cases, a shared history. Herodotus recounts the migrations of the Thracian Minyans, descendants of the Argonauts, who dominated Lemnos, from where they were driven out by the arrival of the Tyrrhenians, before arriving in Laconia, homeland of Castor and Pollux, where they were well received. Things went badly, and these Thracians took refuge first in the Tegetus, then

dispersed, some of them founding cities in the Peloponnese (which Herodotus says were later destroyed by the Eleans) while others accompanied the hero Theras in founding Thera (*Hdt* 4.145-148). The Greek myths, whether based on real migrations or not, have finally given the Thracians a prominent place in Mediterranean geography. It is also worthy of note here that all these narratives, set in the time of the heroes, are linked to military operations.

## 2. A "THRACIAN PRETENCE"?

In a fragment preserved in Strabo, Ephorus recounts a mythical pretence, or trickery, attributed to the Thracians, at the expense of the Boeotians (*Strabo* 9.2.5). This pretence consisted of attacking at "night" during a truce agreed for a certain number of "days". According to Ephorus, this episode would shed light on an adverbial locution, "true Thracian subtlety!" (Θρακία παρέρχεται). Although the fact illustrates a deception, it demonstrates not only the Thracians' *metis*, but also the fact that these adversaries were part of a common framework, defined not only by norms but also by dialogue. The Thracians indeed, did not commit perjury.

In fact, this "Thracian trickery", which is valid from a legal point of view, most probably refers to a case that must have been hotly debated in Athens. Before examining this Athenian case, it is worth noting how this myth of a Thracian pretence has been received right up to the present day. In a study published in 2014, Bayliss, referring to a series of historical accounts implementing a similar ruse, considers that the "Thracian pretence" had become in the fourth century "a 'floating anecdote' which could attach itself to anyone"<sup>3</sup>. In the fourth century, Ephorus is our most ancient source. Nevertheless, this mythological account should be read in conjunction with Thucydides' account of the Thracians in central Greece for the first time. We therefore have good reason to believe that the fifth century in Athens was the context in which these stories were created and put into circulation. However, in 437, the date of the second attempt (this time successful) to found Amphipolis, according to Polyaeus,

<sup>3</sup> Bayliss 2014 : 261.

it was an Athenian, Hagnon, who tricked the Thracians into trusting him (*Polyaen.* 6. 53). He circumvented the three *days* truce by fortifying the site of Amphipolis by *night*. As Thucydides knows the story, it is safe to assume that the matter was discussed in Athens because of the seriousness of the perjury, which jeopardised the city's relationship with the gods. So, if there is indeed, as Bayliss suggests, a literary topos around this form of shirking a commitment, we should rather recognise it as an Athenian precedent and a quite interesting phenomenon of re-attribution, through myth, to the Thracians, whom the myth located in the heart of Greece. The fact that the Thracians did not respect their oaths cannot indeed be taken as a historical given, as several historians do, such as Torrance, who seeks to explain Zenobios' late commentary, quoting Menander of Ephesus (*FGrH* 783), by some Thracian specific features<sup>4</sup>.

Carried away by their own prejudices, modern historians continue to propagate clichés that support the idea of the intrinsic instability of Greco-Thracian alliances, such as the "Thracian pretence". This theme, which can be traced back to Athenian origins, must be assigned to the propaganda register, mythography having succeeded in whitewashing (to the present day) the city for what the Athenians themselves had done to Thracians. This only example shows that relegating the Thracians to protohistory is a dead end. Assuming a linear evolution towards the state and literature and sustaining the myth of civilisations distinct from a barbaric world prevents analysis of the Thracians as rational actors in Ancient history. Indeed, describing the Thracians as 'barbarians' has led commentators to presuppose their systematic hostility toward other societies, especially Greek, and to question the possibility of *philia* (friendship or alliance) between Greeks and Thracians. The same doubts have been expressed about the *xenia*, the traditional hospitality based on gift giving, which refers to all the social practices that made *philia* possible. However, the Greeks themselves were not the most reliable allies. Moreover, these assumptions are contradicted

by classical sources, which document numerous agreements between Greeks and Thracians, especially from the fifth to the second century BC. The intensity of these collaborations, which were a two-way street since Greeks also served the Thracians, means that these partners need to be integrated into a more open ancient history, less focused on Greek cities and kingdoms alone. In this perspective, a pragmatic interpretation of the failures of alliances between the Greeks and the Thracians is undoubtedly to be preferred, without systematizing prejudices or misunderstanding.

### 3. METHODOLOGIES

Material data also enlighten these relations. Among the very large number of precious metal objects dating from the 5th to 2nd centuries BC that have been discovered in Thrace, pieces of gold and silver objects constitute a rich documentary source lending itself to typological, stylistic, iconographic, epigraphic and metrological studies. In a corpus that has grown steadily over the last decades, some discoveries are particularly significant of the uses that Thracian societies may have made of these pieces of silverware, especially in 2004 the two silver vases, bearing inscriptions giving their weight in Alexander's tetradrachms, discovered in the tomb of the tumulus known as Golyama kosmatka. It has also been established that at least some of the gold and silver vases discovered in Thrace were buried long after and far away from their place of manufacture, which bears witness to their circulation. As well as being objects of hoarding, precious metal vases were indeed also used in payment or gift-giving practices : they were therefore "monetary" or "almost monetary" instruments. The map of these precious metal vase hoards, buried in the ground outside any architectural context, does not show the same geographical distribution as the map of silver or gold vases found in funerary contexts: gold and silver vases hoards found outside funerary contexts complement and confirm the information provided by monetary circulation<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Torrance 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Rufin Solas 2013.

Although it is impossible to shed light on all the mechanisms involved, these numerous material sources lend themselves to analyzing hoarding practices. Thrace also offers a good number of inscriptions on precious metal objects, including coins, making it an interesting place to study monetary legends, which in Thrace have a number of original features. Many studies have been conducted both on goldsmith's pieces and coins, demonstrating that an already known documentation may be reviewed again and, with the use of new methodologies, provide new data or information. More generally, Thrace, with its highly interesting monetary material, invites us to question a number of presuppositions about coinage, inherited not only from the Greeks, particularly Aristotle, but also from our modern view of coinage. From the very first appearance of Thracian coinage, under Persian domination, coins came with surprising characteristic. Not only were the monetary images shared between distinct issuing powers, but these powers did not always seek to identify themselves on the coins<sup>6</sup>. The phenomenon is not restricted to the so-called "Thracio-Macedonian" coins, minted to pay tribute to the Persians, but is also found in coins with silenias and nymphs in the 5th c BC. The attribution of these coins to Thasos, although some-

times disputed, is not in doubt. However, a study of the corners reveals certain oddities that were observed to the same extent by Alexandros Tsamanlis in his study of Thracio-Macedonian coins from the Persian period, especially important or very important difference in weight between coins struck with the same die. This phenomenon, which needs to be confirmed by a more detailed study of coin dies, may challenge the interpretation of coinage as an expression of sovereign power.

Given its exceptional documentation in the form of written documents, coins, gold and silver objects, ceramics and other architectural remains, as well as an abundance of external literature, it is to be hoped that Thrace will establish itself as a leading field of experimentation in the study of ancient societies without written literacy. Comparative archaeology is particularly worthwhile in relation to the Celtic and Illyrian worlds, because these societies, known by the same type of documentation, had the same partners in war and trade as the Thracians. Finally, by challenging the research methods used in Greek and Roman studies, which cannot be applied without adaptation to Thracian epigraphy or numismatics, Thracian studies may not only help the designing of new methodological tools but also shed new light on the ancient societies.

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<sup>6</sup> Picard 2000.



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## Историята на Древна Тракия – поле за методологически експерименти, историографска деконструкция и епистемологична рефлексия

Алиенор Руфин Солас

Статията оспорва традиционния протоисторически подход към Древна Тракия. Анализът на гръцките митове, представящи траките, независимо от съвременните предразсъдъци, илюстрира интеграцията на древните траки в гръцката образност и история. Особено развит е примерът с „тракийската претенция“. Той илюстрира задънената улица на разглеждането на траките като варвари в един грандиозен исторически разказ, доминиран от техните гръцки цивилизовани съседи. Статията обсъжда накратко и някои нови методологии, на кръстопътя на историята, нумизматиката и сравнителната археология, които правят древна Тракия стимулиращ и потенциално новаторски обект за историческо изследване.

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