CHRIS WEBBER

THE GODS OF BATTLE

THE THRACIANS AT WAR 1500 BC - AD 150

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In Memoriam: Professor Alexander Fol

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Christopher Webber

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Foreword

Christopher Webber's book is the only one of its kind among the abundant Thracological literature*. It is perfectly and clearly structured, laconic, but thoroughly presents the state of knowledge of the ancient Thracians from the pre-Roman epoch. The kernel of the presentation is the armaments. Such a starting viewpoint is especially productive when it concerns the ancient non-literary societies, because the warfare in its total scope reflects their social-political, economical and religious structures. In the case with the Thracians Mr. Webber's approach is expressively justifiable also from the character of the multiple sources about this people in Southeastern Europe. In the space between the South Carpathians and the Rhodopes at the northern coast of the Aegean Sea and between the two river valleys of Dniester–Dnieper and the two river valleys of Struma–Vardar (ancient Strymon Axios) together with the adjoining to this space northwestern lands of Asia Minor with the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles and the Sea of Marmara is situated 'the most numerous people of the world after the Hindus' (Herodotus, fifth century BC). The Thracians have been observed centuries on end by their neighbours the Hellenes and have been described by them with the languages of the word, the images and the sculpture. These observations have revived the silent archaeological material, and the stories of the historians have put the Thracians in the dynamics of the wars conducted by them or with their participation.

We are acquainted with Mr Webber's work from his web page which presented to the Thracologists from Europe and the USA the pleasant surprise to establish a contact with a colleague from Australia. With the preparation of the book the investigation entered in the favourable events of the last two years of the second Millennium. They passed for us, the Thracologists, under the sign of the preparation of the international congress in succession. The International Congresses of Thracology are held every fourth year (Sofia – 1972, Bucharest – 1976, Vienna – 1980, Rotterdam – 1984, Moscow – 1988, Palma de Mallorca – 1992, Constanza – 1996) with the scientific management of the International Council of Indo-European and Thracian Studies (forty-one scientists from fifteen countries)

* Professor Fol sent me this preface for my first book on Thracian warfare. I was unable to fit it into the other book, but as it remains relevant to this work, it is included here, with the kind permission of Valeria Fol.

which head office is located in Sofia, Institute of Thracology –Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The Eighth Congress was held exactly in Sofia in 2000 with the participation of 153 scientists from Europe and the USA. For many of them Mr Webber's web page was possibly the best occasion for beginning of a discussion.

On behalf of my colleagues I congratulate with joy on the performed work and express the hope that it will continue. The new archaeological discoveries in the countries from Southeastern Europe over which territory are situated the settlements of the big Thracian communities (Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Yugoslavia) are a real present for Mr Webber's investigation.

I suppose that he will accept it.

Sofia, 03.01.2001
Alexander Fol Univ. Prof., DrSc, PhD
Secretary General of the International Council of Indo-European and Thracian Studies /41 scholars from 15 countries

Introduction

Despite being at a major cultural crossroads, the Thracians retained their own customs and language for thousands of years. In prehistoric times their homeland originally stretched from Hungary to the Ukraine and the Black Sea to the Aegean. Although they lived on the periphery of the known and civilized world, they exercised an important influence on the peoples with whom they had contact (principally the ancient Greeks). One of the most important ways they changed the civilized world was through their methods of warfare (they also affected Greek religion and dress). The deadly conflicts with the Greeks helped to propel the Greeks away from citizen soldiers and towards mercenaries, specialists, and professional soldiers. They encouraged the Greeks to develop new tactical doctrines that involved the use of new weapons and equipment, new troop types, and all-arms battle groups. The use of Thracian (and other) mercenaries undermined the security of the democratic states, as it was too easy for a tyrant to gain exclusive control of these men. They came from a foreign land and were not interested in the fate of a *polis* (city-state), only that of their paymaster. It is important to study Thracian warfare, as the story of its development is a significant chapter in the development of the wider (Greek and Roman) world. The Thracians were heavily influenced by the Greeks and Romans but retained their own style of warfare to the end. It is also important to study Thracian warfare because it was shaped by their society and formed a prominent part of daily life for the Thracians.

The Origin of the Thracians

The Thracians were an Indo-European people who occupied the area between Serbia, northern Greece, southern Russia, and northwestern Turkey. Despite their wide geographical distribution they shared the same language and culture, which lasted until the arrival of the Slavs in the sixth to seventh centuries AD.[1] This is known both from literary and archaeological sources. Herodotus says:

> They go by various names in different parts of the country, but they all live in much the same way with the exception of the Getai, the Thrausi, and the people north of Creston.[2]

In their archaeology you see the same style of tombs, metal work, and pottery right across the area. The Thracians who lived near the Danube and further north had

the same cultural motifs, although they may have used different weapons and armour (and clothing to some extent) from other Thracians. The pottery from the classical era is quite distinctive but looks really ugly today. It is called 'monochromatic' because it is a uniform dull grey colour, without decoration. Originally it might have been a glossy black, but the lack of decoration is remarkable given their beautifully-ornamented metal work (toreutics) and the brilliance of pottery from earlier eras. Thracian toreutics and tomb painting show a brilliant synthesis of a unique Thracian style with Persian, Skythian, and Greek motifs. Only a few inscriptions in the Thracian language have been found, all written in the Greek alphabet, and mostly just names. They left us no written records, and their history has to be pieced together from archaeological discoveries and short texts written by their enemies.

The Indo-European languages are divided into the Eastern (Satem) and Western (Centum) groups, roughly divided down a line through central Europe. The Western European languages are all in the Centum group. The Thracian language is classified as part of the Satem group, which links them to Iranians, Slavs and Baltic people (some Baltic people are also said to have a high proportion of red hair). Similarities with the ancient Iranian peoples (e.g. Skythians, Cimmerians, and Sarmatians) are further confirmed by historical and archaeological evidence of early Thracian culture; way of life; crafts, works of art, and burial practices. Bulgarian scholars (Alexander Fol, Ivan Marazov and Elka Penkova, for example) have suggested that the Thracians were part of a wider 'Pelasgian' group of peoples, due to the observed parallels between the Thracian culture and the ancient Minoan, Mycenaean and Phrygian cultures.

From before the Trojan War until the Roman conquest they were a tribal Homeric society, with many similarities to that of Mycenae. Thracians were still burying their kings in beehive tombs in the third century. As Alexander Fol puts it:

> if we compare Thrace of all the classical period with Mycenaean Greece, we shall find many affinities. During Pericles' time Thracians were still hearing the clash of swords as the ancient heroes fought. Archaism was an inherent feature of Thracian religious feeling. This also meant that it had preserved the intensity of passion which characterised the Mycenaean age.[3]

This allows the cautious use of Homeric descriptions of Thracians along with more reliable texts from later authors.

The Balkans was the site of major Neolithic cultures, including the Vinča, Varna, Karanovo, and Hamangia cultures. The Neolithic ancestors of the Thracians migrated to south-eastern Europe in the seventh millennium BC.[4] Between the sixth and the third millennia BC they were part of the Vinča culture, which could be found stretching around the course of the Danube in Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro and the Republic of Macedonia, although traces of it can be found all around the Balkans, parts of Central Europe and Asia Minor. In the area

of what is now north-eastern Bulgaria and the Danube Delta could be found the Hamangia culture, from the middle of the sixth millennium BC. At this time there were contacts between Thrace and Asia Minor, Greece, and elsewhere on the Balkan Peninsula. Contemporary weapons – spears, axes, hand axes, and primitive knives – were made of wood and stone bound together with glue and sinew or other non-ferrous materials.

By the end of the fifth millennium BC they were mining and smelting copper, and had a prosperous and stable society. The pottery of this time differed starkly from later periods, being vibrantly decorated and coloured. The copper was at first just hammered nuggets that were made into items such as earrings for idols, but it was then made into weapons and tools as the technology of smelting and casting advanced. As copper is a soft metal and was so expensive to produce (almost as expensive as gold), it never entirely replaced stone as a material for tools and weapons, so its use was often for prestige purposes. Copper weapons would have remained mainly in the hands of priest/chieftains, while the rest of the tribesmen were armed with hand axes and stone-tipped or fire-hardened wooden spears. The Copper Age (Chalcolithic) began in Thrace earlier than in the Aegean, and likely had an independent start.

The fifth to fourth millennia BC represent the transition between the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. There is evidence in the Danube delta and other locations of a flourishing Chalcolithic proto-civilization, Europe's earliest.[5] They were the first to work gold and therefore the first metalworkers. There was a spectacular flowering of the Chalcolithic culture around 3000 BC, with the world's oldest goldwork being found in a necropolis near Varna. Copper axes were now being made. The copper axe was a symbol of authority, and a ceremonial sceptre shaped like an axe has been found at Varna. At Varna, some of the graves were purely symbolic cenotaphs – no body was actually buried there. Such graves were dug for men who had achieved something noteworthy for their native region or tribe, possibly having fallen on some distant battlefield. In the graves lay clay masks where the dead hero's head would have been, on which the eyes, mouth and teeth were indicated by gold plaques. The 'head' was further decorated with a gold diadem and gold earrings, and at the place where the neck would have been were little gold amulets. In other respects the cenotaphs were adorned in the same fashion as the graves containing burials. In any case, it would seem that the role of gold in assuring the eternal life of the deceased priest-king was established at this time, and this tradition continued in Thracian graves for thousands of years, well into the Roman era.

It is thought that a Proto-Thracian people developed from a mixture of indigenous peoples and Indo-Europeans from the time of Proto-Indo-European expansion in the early Bronze Age. Thracian tombs can be found dating back to 3000 BC, when proto-Thracian culture began to form. The third to early second millennium BC (the early and middle Bronze Ages) marked a very turbulent time in Thrace. There was evidently a major disruption to society, and the pottery became plain and utilitarian. Around this time (between 3000 and 1200 BC) a man using a

bow and arrow was painted in a primitive hunting scene on the wall of the 3km-long Magura Cave in Vidin, north-western Bulgaria (18km from Belogradchik). He is next to what appear to be poorly-painted two-legged, long-necked animals that might be ostriches, deer, or men dressed as animals (in the kuker tradition).

About 1600 BC the Achaean Greeks invaded the Balkans, creating kingdoms of Mycenae, Argos, and Tiryns. Then around 1500 BC (definitely before 1300 BC), the indigenous peoples of Thrace were conquered by an Indo-European, horse-riding people. These were Homer's hard-riding, magnificently equipped warrior Thracians, who had migrated to south-eastern Europe after the Greeks. Their taste for war, silver, gold, and fine horses stayed with them throughout ancient history. They spoke an Indo-European language, akin to Latin and Greek, that is nowadays closer to the Baltic and Persian languages.[6]

Thrace, the Balkans and the entire eastern Mediterranean were again overrun by waves of tribes between the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BC. The strife and terror of the time has left us just a few splendid artefacts. During the second half of the second millennium BC the Vulchitrun treasure (consisting of thirteen golden ritual drinking vessels weighing a total of 12.425kg) and several other hoards of treasure were hidden on the broad plains on either side of the lower Danube, between the Carpathians and the Balkan mountains. This was the time of the earliest rock tombs in Thrace; the legendary Thracian priest-kings Orpheus, Rhesos, Lycurgus, Tereus, and Zalmoxis; and 'Mycenaean Thrace'. There is evidence for a strong and wealthy north Thracian power, contemporary with Mycenae, reaching west across the Hungarian plain and east beyond the Dnieper.

In Thrace the gradual transition to the Iron Age began in the thirteenth century BC. There were mines in Bulgaria where good iron ore with few impurities could be found, but the transition to iron weapons occurred at the same slow pace as elsewhere, continuing to the end of the sixth century BC. Nevertheless there were profound changes.

In the twelfth century, northern invaders, the Dorians, settled in Greece, destroying Mycenae in 1100 BC, and plunged the Balkan Peninsula into the Greek Dark Ages (1200–800 BC). Writing vanished, monumental architecture disappeared, and population declined to less than a fifth of its previous Mycenaean high. Some of these immigrant peoples, passing from Europe through Thrace into Asia in great waves, settled in Asia Minor, especially in Bithynia and the Troad, with the Brygi becoming ancestors of the Phrygians.[7] Although the Phrygians lost much of their Thracian roots, the Bithynians retained their Thracian culture.[8] Bevan says they were

> Thracian immigrants from the opposite shore, and shared the same characteristics as their European cousins, savage hardihood, wild abandonment to the frenzy of religion and war. The terror of them kept the Greeks from making any settlement along their coast, from Calchedon to Heraclea, and woe betide the mariner driven to land there![9]

From the archaeological evidence, it is known that only a small proportion of the Thracian population took part in these migrations and they did not cause much change in the ethnic structure of Thrace. It is nevertheless all the more understandable why these people allied with Troy in the Trojan War.

From a Thracian perspective the Trojan War was a combined struggle to confound Mycenaean attempts to gain control of the Propontis and free access to the Black Sea. The defeat of Troy (*c.*1190) did not stop Thrace from becoming a significant maritime power in the Aegean for the final century of the millennium. From 1100–1000 BC Troy VIIb was a Thracian settlement.[10]

The migrations caused other Thracians to flee the plains and take refuge in the Rhodope mountains (the regions of Sakar and Strandja), and in the eastern sections of the Balkan Range. It was there, between the twelfth and sixth centuries BC, that imposing megalithic tombs then appeared, suggesting that south-eastern Thrace was the centre of an advanced civilization. These dolmens were tombs made of large unworked slabs of stone. There were also burial chambers hewn directly into steep rock faces. The dolmens and rock-face tombs were always constructed in mountainous areas and were probably related to the Thracian practice of sun worship.[11]

Thracian tribes inhabited Central Macedonia until the founding of the kingdom of Macedonia by the Temenids (early seventh century BC), at which time they were forced to move eastwards.[12] In the end, the Thracian tribes were restricted mainly to the north-eastern area of the Balkans.

From the seventh century many Greek colonies were founded on Thracian shores, leading to intense conflict and mutual influence between the Greeks and Thracians throughout the historical period. Thousands of Greek lives were lost. Between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, the Athenians lost nine expeditions while trying to colonize the Strymon valley area alone.[13] This included an expedition inland from Amphipolis, which was cut to pieces by a combined army of Thracians.[14] Nevertheless, by 600 BC a line of Greek cities from the north-eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea had been firmly established, and an active trade developed between them and the 'barbarians' in the hinterland.[15] The historian Thucydides lived in that area and was the Athenian general responsible for Thrace (until he failed to capture Amphipolis).[16] Other famous Athenians with Thracian connections include Themistocles, who may have had a Thracian mother, and Miltiades, who married Hegesipyle, daughter of the Thracian king Olorus.[17]

The Thracians were ruled by independent chieftains until the fifth century, when the first Thracian kingdoms were formed. The greatest of these, the kingdom of the Odrysians, was created about 460 BC. At its height, ruled by Sitalkes, it covered the area from the Strymon River to the Black Sea and from the Aegean to the Danube. This Thracian empire produced nearly as much tribute as the Athenian empire. The Odrysian kings were subjugated in 342 BC by the Macedonians. The dynasty continued, though; Seuthes III fought to keep out Lysimachus and went on to build his own capital, Seuthopolis; Dromichaetes, king of the Getai, also fought the Macedonians and even captured Lysimachus.

The Gods of Battle

Herodotus says that Thracians honoured warriors very highly, and despised all other occupations.[18] Thracian warriors were ferocious opponents who were in high demand as mercenaries. They are often described as 'warlike' or the 'the most warlike nation.' For instance, Justin says:

> After the death of Alexander, when the provinces were divided among his successors, the most warlike nations [primarily the Thracians] were assigned to Lysimachus as the bravest of them all; so far, by general consent, had he the pre-eminence over the rest in military merit.[19]

War was endemic in the region, and the Thracians claimed descent from Thrax, son of the war god, Ares. Euripides said that the Thracians had 'hearts of Ares'[20] and the soldier poet Archilochos, referring to the Thracian tribe of the Abantes, said they were 'the gods of battle.'[21] He lived on Thasos about 650 BC and fought the Thracian tribe of the Saians there. He was not ashamed to admit having once fled from the field, leaving his shield behind as booty to a Thracian warrior. The god of battle was also said to rule the Thracian coast.[22] Ares himself was said to be Thracian, and was one of the gods the Thracians worshiped. Euripides says of Rhesos (who has come to aid Troy):

> A god, O Troy, a god, a very Ares, Strymon's colt and the tuneful Muse's, has come to breathe courage into you.[23]

The Thracian Hero, an equestrian who appears again and again in Thracian iconography, was also popular and highly venerated. The nature of the cult is not fully understood, but its mythology equated to something like St George and the Dragon and was a warrior cult. Valerius Flaccus says:

> Ought we to have made no prayers, sought no agreement with the king, but plunged all into battle's doubtful issue? So act the Thracians.[24]

Mercenary Thracians were often used for executions or massacres, because of their savagery.[25]

The other main gods the Thracians worshipped were Dionysios and Artemis (or the mother goddess Bendis). They were an extravagant, drunken, high-spirited people who loved singing war songs and dancing. Orpheus, a great musician, was Thracian. His singing and playing were said to be so beautiful that animals and even trees and rocks moved about him in dance. The Orphic religion was popular, and the Thracians believed in life after death, one of the reasons their warriors were so fearless. The Thracian bard Thamyris was so good at singing that he thought he could out-sing the Muses but was blinded for his presumption. The Thracian battle hymn seems to have been quite impressive, as Strabo says the Greeks had a special name for it, calling it the *titanismos*, in imitation of the cry to the Titans.[26]

Tacitus says it was a Thracian national custom to 'gambol' with songs and dances in front of their ramparts.[27] Xenophon describes similar scenes at a dinner with Seuthes:

> After this there came in musicians blowing upon horns such as they use in giving signals, and playing upon trumpets of raw ox-hide not only measured notes, but music like that of a harp. And Seuthes himself got up, raised a war-cry, and sprang aside very nimbly, as though avoiding a missile.[28]

They celebrated in a similar way after winning a battle. Livy says:

> After the victors returned to the camp, all indeed rejoiced, but above the others the swaggering joy of the Thracians was conspicuous; for they returned bearing with songs the heads of their enemies impaled on spears.[29]

Pausanias says that drunken Thracian women killed Orpheus, 'and hereafter the custom of their men has been to march to battle drunk.'[30] This custom is confirmed by Polyaenus, who says:

> After plundering Thrace, Clearchus... encamped near the mountains of Thrace. When the Thracians gathered, he knew that, drunk and rushing from the mountains, they would attack at night.[31]

Plutarch says:

> the women of this country [Macedonia] having always been extremely addicted to the enthusiastic Orphic rites, and the wild worship of Bacchus … imitated in many things the practices of the Edonian and Thracian women about Mount Haemus, from whom the word *threskeuein* seems to have been derived, as a special form of superfluous and over-curious forms of adoration; and that Olympias, zealously affecting these fanatical and enthusiastic inspirations, to perform them with more barbaric dread, was wont in the dances proper to have great serpents around her.[32]

They were infamous for their love of plunder. Alexander encouraged his Thracian mercenaries before the Battle of Issus by saying that all the purple and gold the Persians were wearing was simply plunder ready to be taken.[33] Perhaps the prospect of getting to the spoils explains why Thucydides says:

> For the Thracian race, like all the most bloodthirsty barbarians, are always particularly bloodthirsty when everything is going their own way.[34]

There are also several recorded instances where mercenary Thracians switch sides if offered a bribe, or because they preferred to fight for the other side.[35]

Ancient writers were hard put to it to decide which of the Thracian tribes was the most valiant – the plains tribes: Getai, Moesi, and Odrysai; or mountain tribes: Thyni, Odomanti, Dii, Bessi, Bisaltai, and Satrai. Other Thracian tribes included the Triballi and, probably, the Paeonians, though the latter are usually referred to separately from the Thracians. Herodotus described the Thracians as the most numerous people of all, after the Indians.[36] He said that they would be the most powerful of all nations if they didn't enjoy fighting each other so much. There may have been a million Thracians, divided among as many as forty tribes.[37] They lived almost entirely in villages, but used fortified refuges when necessary.[38] They were employed as mercenaries by all the great Mediterranean civilizations. Thrace had the potential to field huge numbers of troops, and the Greeks and Romans lived in fear of a dark Thracian cloud descending from the north, devastating civilization in the Balkans.

> The Macedonian kings now seem to threaten the liberty of Greece; but if that kingdom and people were removed, the Thracians, Illyrians, and after them the Gauls, savage and untamed peoples, would pour into Macedonia, and into Greece. By demolishing all the nearer powers, he said, we should offer access to ourselves by larger and more menacing races.[39]

The reputation of the Thracians caused their more civilized neighbours to emulate them. Young Athenian cavalrymen wore the fox skin hat, the short, bright, decorated cloak, and the turnover boots of Thracian horsemen. At first sight some of these Athenians might be taken for Thracians.

> But the vases of the *dokimasia* and even the sculptures of the Parthenon show that it was Athenian citizens who were affecting the costume of the north. Presumably they did so because the clothes suggested the skill, courage and fierceness of these foreigners.[40]

After surviving invasions by the Persians, Greeks, Macedonians, and Celts, the northern/Danubian Thracians of Moesia become part of a Roman province in AD 6, and the others were finally conquered by Rome in AD 46 when the southern part of Thrace became the province of Thracia. Their cousins the Dacians continued to fight the Romans vigorously but lost their independence when Dacia became a province in AD 106. The most famous Thracians were Orpheus and Spartacus.

The Sources

The sources for Thracian military history are mixed. The Thracians themselves produced no written records, and only three inscriptions in the Thracian language are known. For a connected narrative that puts events in a sequence, we depend on the Greek and Roman historians. Even this is fragmentary and must be carefully pieced together. The study of the Thracians is like a huge detective story, with tiny clues being found in the most unlikely places. Finding these texts can be very difficult and time consuming. To make this easier for readers, the entire collection of relevant ancient texts has been placed on this book's companion web site. Also, in this book the texts are often quoted in full rather than just giving the reference, as would normally be the case.

The ancient texts are full of cultural bias, and we have to remember this whenever we use them. The Greeks and Roman writers thought of the Thracians as barbarians. The word 'barbarian' literally meant anybody who didn't speak Greek. It also meant they did not think of the Thracians as noble savages, but filthy 'butter-eating' savages. They thought they were brave, but excessive, with what we would now call a marvellous zest for life. They said the Thracians wore colourful clothes, drank too much, were terrific musicians and singers, great warriors, and loved to dance. Their gods were those of the strong north wind (Boreas), wine and excess (Dionysios), war (Ares and the Thracian Hero), the sun, a mother goddess (Bendis) and the afterlife (Zalmoxis/Orpheus). They had orgiastic religious rites. They were illiterate and did not live in towns and cities. In short, they represented the power of chaos in contrast to what the historians saw as their superior ordered civilized life, which they constantly threatened to overthrow.

The description though is consistent through hundreds of years and many different authors of different nationalities. It is likely therefore that the sources can be relied upon as long as we are aware of the bias inherent in all accounts. Other types of bias are also evident, for instance in the numbers of troops present at battles, and in the way combatants are described favourably, unfavourably, or (all too often) not at all. Some authors added an overly pro-Greek or pro-Roman bias that makes it even more difficult to discover the truth.

The only source available prior to the sixth century is Homer's *Iliad*. His work (and that of the even more remote Virgil), which only mention the Thracians briefly, is mainly literary; however it may be based on fact and contains many accurate descriptions. It is certainly a fabulous confabulation of Bronze Age and classical warfare styles. The paucity of source material (a common problem with

Thracian studies) means we have to use it even though we know it to be, to some extent, unreliable.

Ancient writers were often more concerned with literary style than literal truth. What often passes as history turns out to be dramatic representations of what the historian thought may have occurred. Also, ancient historians were concerned with rhetoric, and expected their work to be recited rather than read. This is why there are so many great (but fictitious) speeches. Names, dates, and details of battles were frequently inaccurate, invented, or sometimes omitted in the interests of telling a good story. Not the least of the problems this creates is that of troop numbers. The size of military forces is often concealed or changed to make a victory more astounding, or a defeat less galling. Translations can also cause problems, for example the Greek words for many, a thousand etc. are so similar – but it's not very useful to us to say there were 'myriads of them'. With this in mind, I try to qualify the figures where possible. This is difficult, as in many instances there is no corroborating evidence. In those cases, I have given the troop figures as mentioned in the ancient texts without comment, as I expect the reader will have his or her own opinion as to the accuracy (or ridiculousness) of the figures.

The first of the historians is Herodotus (484–425 BC), who described the Thracians as part of the background to his main story, the fifth-century Greek and Persian wars. Herodotus must be read with caution, because he wrote down hearsay evidence without checking it. He also had no military experience and wrote years after the events described. He is nevertheless regarded as the 'Father of History'. Some of his stories about the Thracians have been confirmed by archaeology. For instance, he says that if a man died, his wife was killed on the grave and buried with him, and there have been several such tragic discoveries made in Bulgaria of women buried in mounds with a man, often with magnificent golden jewellery, but with a knife in her chest.

The second main source is Thucydides (460–395 BC), who lived in Thrace and commanded Athenian troops in the area. Thucydides was much more rigorous with his collection of material, going to great lengths to verify it. Xenophon (431–352 BC) is the third important source. He fought alongside Thracian mercenaries, against Bithynian Thracians, and for a Thracian king. His *Anabasis* contains many eyewitness accounts both of combined operations between Greek mercenaries and Thracian troops, and battles with Thracians. The *Hellenica* also includes many passages describing peltast actions. Other Greek writers include Diodorus the Sicilian, a first century BC compiler whose universal history drew on various sources, some more reputable than others. Diodorus is sometimes the only source for the history of Thrace during Hellenistic times. Arrian (*c.*AD 87–145) wrote hundreds of years after the events, but he served as a cavalry officer in the Roman army, seeing action in Dacia. He later commanded two legions and may have participated in Trajan's campaign against the Parthians.[41] His history of Alexander is regarded as the most reliable because it is based on eyewitness accounts. He gives us some important passages about Thrace during the rise of Alexander, and Thracian troops in Alexander's service. He also wrote a military

manual, the *Ars Tactica*, which describes the Macedonian army and, in doing so, gives the origin of the Thracian cavalry wedge formation.[42]

The Thracians are also mentioned by Plutarch, Curtius, Tacitus, Livy, Appian, Dio Cassius, Sallust, and Polybius. Plutarch (AD 46–120) was not concerned with writing history but with teaching morality, by exploring the influence of character – good or bad – on the lives of famous men. He had no military training but travelled widely, and was familiar with many of the locations about which he wrote. He gives us many incidents that are not provided by other authors, including the activities of the Thracians at the Battle of Pydna. Tacitus (AD 56–117) gives us an account of a Roman attack on a Thracian hill fort, and the actions of Thracians in Roman service. He was a legion commander but apparently did not see action and wrote some time after the events. Unfortunately a volume of his work that related much more about the history of Thrace has been lost. Livy (59 BC–AD 17) tells us what the Thracians did at the Battle of Magnesia and its aftermath, including a Thracian ambush of a Roman baggage train and a rather fanciful Roman victory over a Thracian army. Livy is usually regarded as a reliable source, although he had no military experience and in many cases he simply retells Polybius' account of the Second Punic War in a different, perhaps more dramatic fashion.[43]

Dio Cassius (AD 150–235) wrote many years after the events and had no military experience. His work is faulty because it relies on unchecked sources and is mostly just a rewriting of Livy's history. He provides just a few brief passages about the Thracians in the Roman era.

Polybius (*c*.200–118 BC) fought in the Achaean War and commanded Greek troops before being taken as a hostage to Rome. He visited many of the battlefields about which he wrote, and interviewed the major commanders. His account is generally regarded as being very reliable as he checked his sources and used eyewitness accounts. He provides many descriptions of Thracians in Macedonian service, Thracians who attacked Macedonia, and other important passages about ancient military techniques.

Sallust (*c*.86–35 BC) was an experienced soldier who saw combat in the civil war in Illyricum, Campania, and North Africa. His *Jugurthine War* provides a few accounts of Thracians in Roman service, but is generally untrustworthy as to numbers, dates, distances and size of forces.[44] Appian (*c*.95–*c*.165) wrote many years after the events he described, and had no military experience. His *Roman History* briefly includes the actions of Thracians during the Roman civil wars. Quintus Curtius Rufus was a Roman historian who is thought to have written his works during the reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54). His biography of Alexander the Great is not highly regarded, as it reveals an ignorance of geography, chronology and technical military knowledge, focusing instead on character. Nevertheless, it includes text that is not in Arrian's history, including some important events involving the Thracians.

Knowledge of the military organization of Greek and Hellenistic armies has come down to us through a series of manuals on tactics, of which three have survived, by Asklepiodotos, Aelian, and Arrian. It is thought that all three works are

derived from one source, a lost manual by Posidonius.[45] The fourth-century-BC mercenary captain Aeneas Tacticus wrote several books on Greek military matters, but the only surviving one is *How to Survive Under Siege*.[46] None of these except Arrian wrote anything directly about the Thracians that has survived, but their works provide useful background knowledge.

As Thracian texts are so rare, we also have to rely on literary works. Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* was a Greek epic poem written in the third century BC. It tells the myth of Jason and the Argonauts. Jason sailed past Thrace and his crew of heroes included one Thracian – Orpheus. An early part of the story tells how the men of Lemnos defeated the nearby mainland Thracians in combat, brought back Thracian concubines, and lost interest in their own wives. Gaius Valerius Flaccus wrote his (Latin) *Argonautica*, based on Apollonius' work and Virgil's *Aeneid*, during the time of Vespasian, and died around AD 90. His version includes some insights into the good and bad sides of the Thracian character, as well as information about the *rhomphaia*.

Ovid (43 BC–AD 17) was a Roman poet who was exiled to live on the Black Sea coast of Thrace at Tomis (the modern Romanian city of Constanza), in Getic territory. He thought he was beyond the ends of the Earth and moaned a lot about his predicament (e.g. in *Letters from the Black Sea*), but since he moaned in writing his complaints give us a lot of useful information about the Getai. His *Metamorphoses* also include the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. He wrote poems in the Getic language while at Tomis, and died there after living in Thrace for ten years.

Later compilers of history and writers of ancient literature (e.g. Polyaenus, Justin, and Aulus Gellius) also mention the Thracians, although these are often not very reliable. Polyaenus, for instance, was more interested in impressing his emperor than ensuring that each stratagem he wrote down was correctly attributed. To him, historical accuracy wasn't necessary to teach a tactical or strategic lesson. For instance, the story of Kersebleptes' corn seems to have come from a rhetorical exercise.[47] He was born around AD 110, so was writing up to 500 years after the event, giving further reason to treat his words with caution. All the same, many of his 871 stratagems are the only remaining record of some incidents involving the Thracians, so his work is quite significant.Archaeology has thus an important role in portraying the Thracians. There is a limited amount of epigraphic evidence – Greek inscriptions referring to Thrace have been found in Thrace and Athens. Thracian arms and armour have been found at many sites.

For the dress and armament of Thracian soldiers, there are a variety of artistic sources. It is here that we do have some splendid information of Thracian origin. The walls and ceilings of a few Thracian tombs depict Hellenistic Thracians at court, and there are a few tombstones of Thracian mercenaries which show them in reliefs. Thracians were also depicted in their own magnificent artworks, many of which are still being discovered today – gold and silver jewellery, sacred objects, and drinking vessels. They are depicted in Greek vase-paintings, and these must have been reasonably accurate, as some have been found in Thrace. There are also some Greek sculptures that show Greeks in Thracian dress (e.g. on the Parthenon frieze).

The picture provided by archaeology is incomplete. The chronology of Thracian kings is mostly obtained from coins, and there are several different versions of the Thracian royal histories. It is often hard to determine the relationships between Thracian kings (and the line of succession) as all that may be known about them is a name on a coin, how many have been found, and their location(s).

Greek vases only show Thracians of the sixth to fourth centuries, and even then do not show the Thracian nobility. The depictions of Thracians by their own artists, the Greeks, and by the Persians are all quite different; the Persian bas-reliefs being particularly hard to reconcile. After the third century, most archaeological evidence is found in unpainted Thracian tombs or in Dacia. The non-Dacian evidence depicting Thracians consists of the Pydna monument at Delphi, the Abdera tombstone, and some Bithynian tombstones in Turkey and Palestine. There are also numerous carvings of the Thracian hero. The picture provided by archaeology is limited by the resources available in countries that are not rich; so that tomb robbing is rife (there are thousands of unexcavated burial mounds in Bulgaria). Many artefacts have been cited that are of unknown origin. Also they do not get written up in archaeological journals even after sitting in museum display cases for ten years.[48] Excavations of Thracian tombs are frequently not carried out due to lack of funds, or are reliant on foreign sponsorship. Many tombs that are excavated have to be closed immediately as there are no funds available for conservation or protection.

Many scholars get very upset when they see a mixture of Greek and Latin spellings in an ancient history book. In this case, the variety of source material and length of time covered makes it difficult to maintain a single Greek or Latin spelling scheme. Names in particular can get mangled after being translated from Thracian to Greek to Latin to Bulgarian (or Romanian) to English, or worse. There are so many ways to spell Thracian names such as 'Seuthes'/'Sevt', 'Amodokos'/'Medokos' and 'Hebryzelmis'/'Ebryzelmis' etc. that you are sometimes not sure if the same or a different person is being referred to. I have tried to use the Greek spellings or the most well known spelling but may not have changed the spelling if the orginal source was in Latin or is not known.

It is also necessary to say something about bias in the secondary sources. Much of what has been written about the Thracians was written during the Cold War, and was affected both by East/West tensions and Balkan nationalism. This often prevented knowledge about the Thracians from Bulgaria and Romania from reaching the west. In Greece, the emphasis on classical studies allied with the traditional animosity between Greece and its northern and eastern neighbours may have encouraged a reluctance to investigate their mutual non-Greek past. In Bulgaria, there was some attempt to hide the non-Slavic past – some discoveries were actually hidden in vaults after being dug up.[49] There were also competing views about the Thracians that might be said to be specifically Bulgarian and Romanian (though the Romanians seem to be the only people to say this). Bulgarian scholars tend to say that the Dacians were descended from the Thracians whereas the Romanians say they were not.

Ideology was also important in the former communist countries such as East Germany, Bulgaria and Romania. History had to be written in accordance with Communist precepts. These provided some useful insights but this is something which one must be on guard against. For instance, the Satrap of Skudra is described as a feudal state, which might fit Communist theory but is incorrect. Similarly, the introduction of iron working between the tenth and seventh centuries is described as increasing social differentiation and being the prerequisite for the development of private property.[50] It unfortunately means that books that ask questions like 'Who were the Thracians?' 'How did they live?' 'What did they look like?' tend to be rather rare, – instead there is a large amount of work done on Thracian religion and mythology. This sort of thinking has been hard for some to let go of – a recently published (otherwise beautiful and very impressive) book has this as a caption for a picture: 'The participation of dogs in the hunting stresses their relation with the warrior ideology.'[51] The large amount of gold and silver artefacts found in Thracian tombs has also affected Thracian research, which has concentrated on the interpretation of these objects to the exclusion of other subjects.

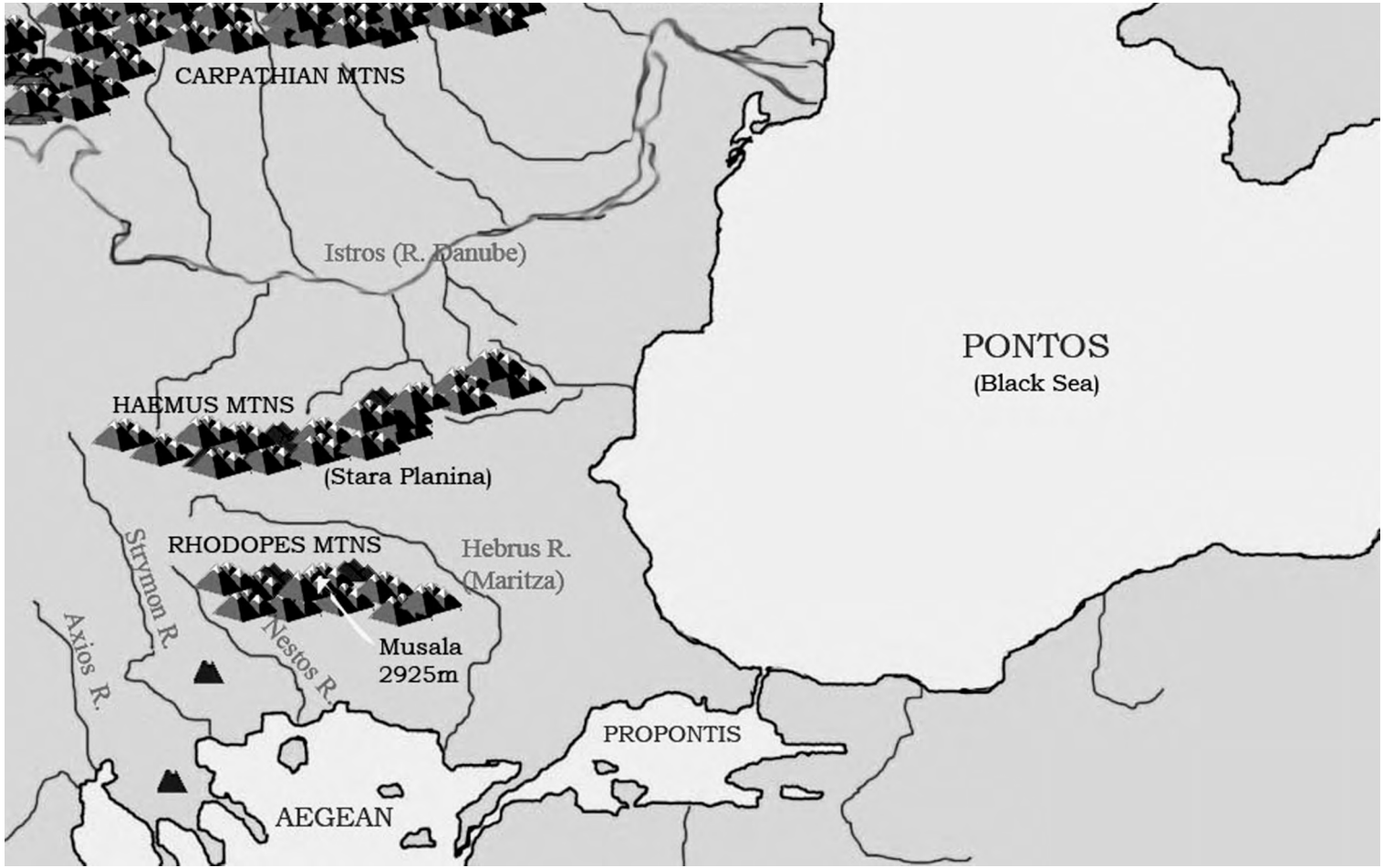
In the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, some great strides have been made in the study of Thracology, and remarkable discoveries are now almost routinely made every year. Exhibitions of Thracian artefacts are constantly on tour around the world, and there have been some wonderful new books written by the old generation of archaeologists. It is to be hoped that the participation of the Thracian nations in the European Community will help to remove some of the barriers to the study of Thracology – a hopeful sign is that the last Thracology conference was held in Athens, and the next in Istanbul. There are now Institutes of Thracology in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Germany, and several other countries.

The lack of source material means that until further evidence becomes available, the reader should be aware that much that is written here can be disputed, and is often based on flimsy evidence, supposition and/or extrapolation. Where this is the case it is clearly indicated, and it is to be hoped that this will prompt further research in this area.

For a more thorough discussion of the problems of using ancient texts to write about ancient warfare, I recommend reading John Drogo Montague, *Greek and Roman Warfare*, Greenhill Books, London, pp. 21–4 and pp. 3–15 of Philip Sabin, *Lost Battles*, Hambledon Continuum, London 2007.

Note on Terminology

The same weapons have many different names, which can be confusing. In this book 'lance' means a long spear used for shock action by cavalry. 'Mail' means armour made of small metal circles knitted and riveted together (only called 'chain mail' by Victorian historians). 'Targeteers' are called 'peltasts'. 'Long spear' means a spear 3m long or longer, used one-handed for hand-to-hand combat. 'Pike' means a spear at least 5m long, held in two hands. '*Sarissa*' means the same as 'pike'. 'Cavalry *sarissa*' means the same as '*xyston*' – a balanced, tapering lance. '*Kamax*' means an earlier form of cavalry lance that does not have tapering ends. 'Javelin' means any spear primarily thrown from a distance to hit its target.



Map 1. The major mountains ranges and rivers of Thrace.

Map 2. The towns and tribes of Thrace.

Chapter 1

Historical Outline: A Brief History of the Struggle for Thrace

Classical Era

The Sixth Century BC

The written history of the Thracians begins with Herodotus, as a sideshow to the Greek and Persian wars that occasionally moved to centre stage. In the first decade of the sixth century, the Persians invaded Thrace and made it part of Skudra, a border area that never quite pacified enough to make the status of satrapy. This lasted from about 512 to 476 BC.[1] The area was ruled from Sestos.[2] Thracians were forced to join the invasions of Skythia and Greece.[3] Skudrians were well known in the Achaemenid Empire, and hundreds of them were in the service of the Great King in Parsa. They appear to have been the largest ethnic group mentioned in the Persepolis Fortification tablets (509–494 BC). They are not mentioned in the later Persepolis Treasury Tablets (492–458 BC), which perhaps reflects the smaller number of those tablets, or the breaking away of large parts of European Thrace from the Persian Empire after 479 BC.

Around 560 BC, the Athenians made their first foray into Thrace, with Miltiades visiting the Thracian Chersonese. Miltiades acquired a personal fief in the Chersonese, in alliance with some Dolonci, who had asked the oracle at Delphi whom they should invite to help them in their war against the Apsinthians, which was going badly for them. The oracle answered that they should take the first person to invite them into his home, who turned out to be Miltiades. Miltiades was the first to build a wall (7.24km long) across the peninsula, from Kardia to Pactye, to protect his followers from invasion by the Apsinthii from the north. He ruled as a prince over a mixture of Thracians and Athenian followers. It has been suggested that the real story was that the Thracians invited the Athenians to build a colony there, and that it was Miltiades who consulted the oracle.[4] After his death, another Miltiades came from Athens and took control of the region through a ruse that enabled him to kill all the local leaders. He kept a body of 500 mercenaries and married Hegesipyle, the daughter of the Thracian king Olorus. After only two years, he had to leave, as the Skythians advanced as far as the Chersonese after throwing out Darius. He fled before they arrived. The Dolonci invited him back when the Skythians left, however.[5]

There were six phases of Persian conquest and reconquest between 513 and 492 BC. All except the last one failed. The Persians often had to reconquer coastal

cities, territories, islands, and fortresses. The first phase involved Darius' invasion of Skythia via the upper Hebros valley, in 513 BC. This involved the subjugation of the Thracian Chersonese, Byzantium, and Chalcedon. Herodotus was not correct to say that all Thrace was under the Persian sway at this time, as only parts of the Black Sea coast and the Hebros valley had been conquered. An important royal fort was also established at Doriskos at the mouth of the Hebros River.[6]

The second phase involved the conquest by Megabazos of all the remaining states in the Hellespontine regions that did not yet bow to the Great King. In Thrace, this left the Persians in control of the lower Hebros and Doriskos. Megabazos then turned west, conquering all the cities and towns along the Aegean coast up to the Strymon River.[7] From the latter area, he then removed most of the Paeonians and transported them first to Sardis, and then to Phrygia.[8] Despite the difficulties involved, some of these were later able to escape back to western Thrace.[9] If others moved further east, this would account for the large numbers of Skudrians in the Persian tablets.[10]

Meanwhile it seems that the Hellespont had once more slipped out of the Persians' hands, for while Megabazos was escorting the Paeonians east, his replacement, Otanes, was reconquering Byzantium, Chalcedon, Antandros and Lamponeia in the Troad. He also reconquered Lemnos and Imbros. The fifth campaign was brought about by the conclusion of the Ionian revolt, in the early spring of 493 BC. The Persians sailed up the Hellespont, and again laid claim to all the cities of the Thracian Chersonese, except Kardia, and the Propontis.[11] The last included several Thracian walled forts (the *teichea*). Balcer suggests that the ability of many Byzantines to escape the fourth conquest of their city by moving to Mesembria on the Thracian Pontic coast implies that Darius' conquest of the Thracian Pontic shore was only ephemeral.[12]

The final phase of conquest was the most successful, with Mardonius marching from Sestos to the Strymon with a huge army.[13] Greek towns were reconquered and Persian garrisons established. Thasos was also taken. The fortress of Eion was established, some time before 492 BC, and a bridge built across the Strymon. In 492 BC, while they were encamped in Macedonia, the Brygi attacked them by night, and slew many of them, wounding Mardonius himself. Herodotus states that it was the heavy toll exacted by the Brygi that caused Mardonius to retreat.[14] Thrace was then securely in Persian hands until Mardonius' death at Plataea in 479 BC. During this time, Thrace was ruled from Sestos, Eion, and Doriskos, all coastal locations, which indicates that little of Thrace north of the Rhodope mountains was controlled directly by the Persians.[15] Mardonius had intended to march to Greece, but lost the Persian fleet while it was rounding Mt Athos. After conquering Macedonia he therefore returned to Sestos.

The Fifth Century BC

Herodotus says 300,000 Macedonians and Thracians were in Xerxes' army.[16] A king of the Bisaltai tore out the eyes of his six sons because they were so eager to fight they joined Xerxes' army, even though their father had fled from Xerxes