What Was ‘Thracian’ in the Cult of Dionysos in Roman Thrace?*

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Abstract: The cult of Dionysos in Thrace is well attested in literary and epigraphic sources through a long period of time, from the first evidences in the 5th century BC to the Roman times. This long-standing tradition is far from being straightforward: whereas Herodotus’ statement on the Thracian cult of Dionysos (5.7) seems to suggest that it had specific forms and contents, a good deal of Roman imperial evidence may indicate that a considerable portion of the cult had adopted common Greek features. This paper seeks to investigate whether there were specific fields where the Thracian character of this cult still remained during the Roman age.

Key words: Herodotus, oracle, wine, fire, Herakles, mystic associations.

DIONYSOS AND THRACE: FIRST PIECES OF EVIDENCE

The relationship of Dionysos with Thrace has been largely discussed by historians and researchers. Among the first textual pieces of evidence usually commented, noteworthy is the myth of Lycurgus, already attested in the Iliad. According to Homer, Lycurgus chased the nursing mothers of mad Dionysos over the sacred mount of Nysa and terrorized Dionysos himself, who looked for refuge close to Thetis, into the sea. After that, Zeus made Lycurgus blind and he died prematurely because he was hated by all the immortal gods. Although Homer makes no reference to the identity of Lycurgus, we learn from further texts and comments that he was a king of the Thracian Edonians.

The ‘Thracian version’ of the myth is attested for the first time in Sophocles’ Antigone, but it might be already known to Aeschylus, who wrote a lost tetralogy about this episode entitled Lykourgeia. Jeanmarie (Jeanmarie 1970, 64-65; also West 1990, 49-50) suggested that the location of Lycurgus in Thrace could be due to Aeschylus himself, as a result of the intensification of contacts with the Thracian world and the development of Athenian interests in the region of the low Strymon and Pangaion after the Persian Wars. According to the French historian, Aeschylus’ participation in Cimon’s expeditions against the Edonians (476/475) could have provided him with direct or indirect knowledge of some local cults whose ceremonies were similar to those devoted to Dionysos. This fact, together with the gradual spread of the cult of Dionysos in Thrace, may have favoured the invention of the tragic plot. Indeed, in the reconstruction of the Aeschylean tetralogy, both West and more recently Nikolaidou-Arabatzi argued that the ascendancy of the cult of Dionysos in Thrace was fully attained in the third tragedy (Neaivios, Young men), after the god managed to destroy all of his enemies and establish an

Although the presence of a theomachos and his punishment is a story pattern rather usual in Dionysos myth (Gödde 2011, 101-103), the eventual connection of the myth with actual cultic practices and beliefs in Thrace is more difficult to elucidate. Nowadays there is no doubt that Dionysos was an old Greek god who was already worshiped by the Mycenaeans, as confirmed by the LB data (Bernabé 2013, 25, 27). Therefore it seems quite unlikely that its veneration had been imported from Thrace into Greece, as previously argued by many scholars, but rather the opposite. At any rate, once established there, the cult acquired such a vigour and unique characteristics which already captured the interest of ancient authors.

**Herodotus and the Cult of Dionysos among the Thracians**

In a widely known passage, Herodotus (Hdt. 5.7) states that the Thracians only worship three gods: Ares, Artemis and Dionysos. Hermes also received a cult, but it was restricted to the kings, who claimed to be his descendants. The text draws a clear distinction between Hermes, who is venerated as an ancestor among the royalty members, and the divine triad formed by the god of war, Ares, the goddess of hunting, Artemis, and the god of wine, Dionysos, whose cults, in contrast, should be regarded as more popular. A comprehensive analysis of all the available evidence shows that Herodotus is not right, because in Thrace exist many other cults than those mentioned by the historian in this passage. Moreover, none of these four gods has a Thracian name: they are Greek gods, and, as Rabadjiev (2015, 444) points, it is difficult to accept a Hellenization of the Thracian cultic practices at such an early date as the 5th century BC. Therefore, it is more acceptable to think that Herodotus simply translates local divinities into the better-known Greek gods, a very common procedure in his narrative called *interpretatio Graeca*. However, Herodotus gives no useful information on the elements on which he based the association between Greek and Thracian divinities, nor does he explain why these gods had a greater significance. Actually, the only reference to cultic practices regarding the worship of Dionysos among the Thracians which we can find in his work attaches an oracular function to the god that does not correspond at all to the most traditional powers of the Greek Dionysos.

Thus, Herodotus (Hdt. 7.111; Jeanmarie 1978, 431) states that the Thracian people of the Satrae have an oracle of Dionysos in a very high mountain, and that the Bessi, a tribe or a clan of the Satrae, are interpreters of the god, while a priestess utters the oracle, just as in the Delphic oracle. This passage deserves particular attention, because different aspects are worth stressing: Herodotus identifies Dionysos as a prophetic god; he places his sanctuary in an indeterminate and remote space in Thrace; he links it to a Thracian people and a subgroup thereof, and finally he equates the oracular procedure with the one held in Delphi, where a priestess is in charge of giving the prophecy. Indeed, there are many indications that highlight the oracular function of Dionysos as a really outstanding feature of the god among the Thracians, according to the Greek point of view.

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3 For other cults, see the approaches to Thracian religion in Kazarow 1936; Fol / Marazov 1977, 17-36; Archibald 1999; Rabadjiev 2015.

4 To our knowledge, the only place in which it is said that the Greek Dionysos enjoyed some mantic powers can be found in Amphikleia, in Phocis, according to Pausanias (3.33.11). There the priest of the god utters the oracles under divine inspiration.
In a recent study, Iliev has collected all references in Classical literary texts concerning the oracles of Dionysos in Thrace. Among the oldest evidence, dated around the second half of the 5th century BC, are the text of Herodotus, which I have just mentioned, and up to three passages of tragedies by Euripides, an author who most likely contributed to a great extent to shape the popular image of Thrace and the Thracians among Athenians.

In his first tragedy, Alcestis (428), Thracian wooden tablets with the written words of Orpheus are mentioned (Eur. Alc. 968-970). The scholiast relates these oracular tablets with a sanctuary of Dionysos on Mount Haimos. Some years later, in Hecuba (c. 424), the Thracian king Polymestor, who is a perfect model of a betrayer, attributes to the “Thracian prophet Dionysos” the prediction about the metamorphosis of Hecuba into a female dog. Finally, in Bacchae (405) it is stated that Dionysos is a prophet because some kind of prophetic power arises during his celebrations. Evidently Euripides’ passages cannot be considered historical sources, but along with the text of Herodotus they reveal the knowledge of Thracian practices in which the god Dionysos is endowed with the prophetic gift. Tragedy – and also Greek myth – incorporates this element as a distinguishing feature of the Thracian essence of the god and exploits it for poetic purposes.

In Hellenistic and Roman sources, however, the focus of interest points to another direction. In a passage of the Pseudo-Aristotelian work On Marvellous Things Heard ([Arist.] de mirab. ausc. 842a), we read about another “big and fine sanctuary of Dionysos” among the Bisaltians at the site of Crastonia. According to the text, a festival and a sacrificial ritual were held in this oracle, where the god gave prophecies on the productivity of the land: if he augured a fruitful year, a big fire flame appeared which was visible to all visitors; if, conversely, he portended a poor harvest, darkness covered everything. It seems, therefore, that this oracle was somehow specialized in consultations related to land fertility. In this regard, the Pseudo-Apollodorus provides a mythical piece of evidence of interest: according to his thorough account of the myth of Lycurgus, the same, driven mad by the god Dionysos, killed his own son in the belief that he was cutting a vine branch. After that, the land remained barren and the god declared through an oracle that it would bear fruit only if Lycurgus were put to death. And this is exactly what the Edonians did. In both texts, the relationship of Dionysos with the fertility of the land is perfectly stated, so that he can be considered a propitiatory divinity of good harvests, as in the Greek world. The Thracian peculiarity lies in the gift of prophecy through fire and, as we will see, through wine.

Indeed, the combination of fire and wine is documented in two other sources in relation to the oracle of Dionysos: Suetonius (Suet. Aug. 94.5) recalls that during his campaign in Thrace (60-50 BC), Gaius Octavius, Augustus’ father received an oracle about his son in a sacred forest of Dionysos while following “barbarian ceremonies”, in which pure wine was poured on an altar, producing a flame more or less high, which was interpreted by the local priests. Some centuries later, Macrobius (Macr. Sat. 1.81.1) states that in a sanctuary of Dionysus: Suetonius (Suet. Aug. 94.5) recalls that during his campaign in Thrace (60-50 BC), Gaius Octavius, Augustus’ father received an oracle about his son in a sacred forest of Dionysos while following “barbarian ceremonies”, in which pure wine was poured on an altar, producing a flame more or less high, which was interpreted by the local priests. Some centuries later, Macrobius (Macr. Sat. 1.81.1) states that in a sanctuary of

5 Iliev 2013. In the next pages I will take his collection as a starting point of my reflections.

6 Eur. Hec. 1267. Commenting on this verse the scholiast adds some interesting information about the location of this oracle, which apparently was a matter of discussion already among ancient authors. Two possibilities are considered: mount Haimos (Stara Planina, the Balkan mountains) and the mountain of Pangaion (near the Lower Struma and Mount Symbolon). On this locations, cf. Iliev 2013, 63; Bouzek / Graninger 2015, 14. Boteva (1997, 293-297) argues that the main Thracian oracle of Dionysos was located on the present Mount of St. Athanasius in the Balkan Mountain (ancient Haimos), where still at that day some rituals were accomplished to celebrate the rising of the sun and the arrival of the spring. However, until now there is no conclusive archaeological evidence regarding the location of this oracle, cf. Rabadjiev 2015, 449.

7 In the Dionysian mysteries, fire was an important element in sacred ceremonies during nocturnal rituals, see Alexandrescu Vianu 2007, 223.
Dionysos among the Ligyreans of Thrace predictions were delivered by prophets after drinking large amounts of pure wine. This statement provides Macrobius with another argument for equating Dionysos with Apollo, since in both oracles liquids (wine and water respectively) are essential elements of mantic procedure8. This statement, although very interesting from a theological approach, cannot be empirically verified, because, as Horster (2011, 71, n. 38) puts it, “there is no attestation of a regularly functioning oracle cult or oracular sanctuary of Dionysos outside literary sources.”

**Epigraphic evidence on the cult of Dionysos**

Yet, we have a good number of inscriptions attesting to the existence of priests of Dionysos in different regions of Thrace. In Seuthopolis, an inscription from the first half of the 3rd century BC, engraved on a statue base, recalls the name of Amaistas, son of Medistas, who dedicated the monument at the end of his service as a priest of Dionysos, in accordance with a common practice in the exercise of Greek magistracies (IGBulg III.2 1732; cf. Dana 2015, 248). More or less at the same time, Apollonios, son of Demophon, dedicated as priest of Dionysos a statue to the god for thanksgiving on behalf of an association of Bakchiastai from Dionysopolis (IGBulg I² 20). In another inscription from the same city, dated in the 2nd century BC, we find a list of priests of Dionysos (IGBulg I² 22, l. 1-2).

In the town of Drama, in Greek Thrace, a set of inscriptions on marble bases confirms the existence of a local cult of Dionysos from the late 4th century BC until Roman times (SEG 48, 791-794). Besides the inscriptions, a bust of the god was also brought to light. According to Skoulariki (2007), “the god is depicted in the age of maturity, dressed in sheepskin and bearing a strip and a wreath of ivy and vine branches on his head. This particular representation of the standing bearded Dionysos, a little shorter than in natural size, alludes to a worship statue of the time of the Antonines (mid-2nd century AD), probably in imitation of a Classical example of the early 5th century BC.”

These are only some examples of inscriptions attesting to the cult of Dionysos in Thrace, although none of them provide any useful piece of information about the alleged local peculiarities of this god, with no mention of the oracular functions or the singular prediction procedures previously commented. As Archibald (1999, 428) remarks, it seems that there is “an uncomfortable imbalance” between the Greek literary sources and the “nature of ordinary cult behaviour”.

**Dionysos, a reliable god?**

However, we can draw some hints about the essential differences between the Greek and the Thracian god through two inscriptions in which Dionysos appears as guarantor of public oaths:

At the very beginning (l. 3) of the granite stele from Vetren, dated between 359-352 BC9, Dionysos is attested as the guarantor of a list of privileges which are granted to Greek merchants and to the inhabitants of Pliati by an Odrysian ruler – most likely Amadocus (II) (Archibald 1999, 437).

On the other hand, the great Seuthopolis inscription (IGBulg III.2 1731; Elvers 1994; SEG 42, 661) contains an oath of Berenike, wife of Seuthes III, sworn together with her four sons before the dynast

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9 IGBulg V 5557 ter = SEG 43, 486; 47, 1101; 49, 911.
of Kabyle, Spartokos (ca. 300-280 BC). At the end of the inscription, among the usual clauses concerning the act of copying and publishing the agreement, the text mentions up to four copies of the oath and establishes accurately the place where each of them had to be exposed: two copies should be displayed at Seuthopolis, one in the sanctuary for the Great Gods of Samothrace, and one in the agora, in the temple of Dionysos, by the altar; another two had to be set up at Kabyle, one in the temple of (Artemis) Phosphoros, and one in the agora, by the altar of Apollo. Obviously the choice of sacred sites is not fortuitous, since sanctuaries used to act as deposits of treaties and agreements in the Greek world from Archaic times. The reason for this practice was two-fold: on the one hand, sanctuaries were frequented areas, thus facilitating the disclosure of the content to a wide audience; on the other hand, the sanctity of the place offered a greater guarantee of compliance with the agreement. To some extent, the local deity acted as a guarantor, a practice that probably goes back to pre-legal Archaic societies.

It has often been said that the mention of Dionysos in these two political texts is a proof of the importance of the god in the Thracian world. I certainly agree with this statement and I will bring one more argument in this regard. In a recent study on *Epigraphica Dionysiaca*, Guettel Cole (2011, 276-278) highlights the scarce or null reputation of Dionysos as a reliable god among the Greeks, particularly when it was a matter of swearing an oath. Taking as a reference the database of oaths in ancient times made by the team of Alan H. Sommerstein from the University of Nottingham¹⁰, she shows that the examples in which Dionysos is invoked as oath witness are very few in front of other deities considered more 'reliable'. Moreover, almost all the examples belong to fictitious oaths, exclamations or informal swearing in comedies of Aristophanes. Given these data, I think that we can adventure that Dionysos was not only a very important god in the Thracian pantheon, as Herodotus states, but that he was substantially different to the Greek one, insofar as he was considered a divinity with trustworthy powers in treaties and agreements of major political, social and commercial significance.

**The cult of Dionysos in Roman Thrace**

**The oracle of Dionysos and Roman politics**

The worship of Dionysos in Thrace does not decrease in Roman times. It even seems that, at least at the very beginning of the Roman conquest, it embodied a kind of symbol of resistance to the Roman power, as shown in the famous episode of Vologaesus. According to Cass. Dio 51.25.5, M. Licinius Crassus invaded the whole Thrace except the territory of the Odrysaes, which was set apart for two reasons: firstly, because the Odrysaes were devoted to the service of the god Dionysos and, secondly, because they had come to meet him without arms. In addition, he gave them a sanctuary of Dionysos whose control was disputed between the Odrysaes and the Bessi. Crassus’ interference in Thracian internal conflicts caused the subsequent revolt of the Bessi. Indeed, around 15 BC, Vologaesus, a priest of Dionysos from the tribe of the Bessi, who gained some supporters thanks to his numerous predictions, led a revolt and killed the Thracian king Rhaskouporis, son of Kotys. The reputation of his Dionysian powers was so great that Rhoimetalkes, Rhaskouporis’ uncle, ran away without even going into

battle with him (Cass. Dio 54.53.5). Some time later, the governor of Pamphylia, Lucius Piso took part in the affair and stopped the uprising of the Bessi. It appears therefore that the alleged supernatural qualities of Vologaesus did not impress the Romans that much.

However, leaving aside the consideration of the superstitious nature of the Thracians, these passages confirm the political significance of the cult of Dionysos and suggest a prominent role of some shrines and priests in local history. It is even possible that the oracle of Dionysos, through the rising of the flame, provided some kind of legitimization of power for the local rulers, which would perhaps explain the aforementioned consultation by Augustus’ father (Fol / Marazov 1977, 57-58).

Ancient and new paths in Roman Age

After the Roman conquest, the use of images and written dedications to the gods began in Thrace (Rabadjiev 2015, 450). The spread of this new practice explains the significant increase of inscriptions related to the cult of Dionysos. I will end my paper by commenting on some of them.

In an inscription of Maroneia found in the sanctuary of the Great Gods in Samothrace and dating to the reign of Claudius (AD 41/42 or 46), a copy of a decree sealed with a seal depicting the head of Dionysos is mentioned (SEG 53, 659, A, l. 37-38). This is not surprising, since Dionysos was the main god of the city (Clinton 2003, 395), whose portrait can be found on some local coins (Hansen / Nielsen 2004, 879-880), but this text adds another proof on the reliability of the god in this area. Indeed, the act of sealing a document contributes to guaranteeing its authenticity and at the same time ensuring that it has not been opened before reaching its final destination. In this case, however, through the prosopon of Dionysos the seal also involves a political function, to the extent that it identifies the issuing authority – Maroneia –, and a sacral significance, since it puts the agreement under the guidance of the god.

The organization of mystic associations is mostly regarded as the main characteristic feature of the cult of Dionysos in Thrace during Roman times (Jeanmarie 1978, 431-433). In this regard, we can add to the Bakchiastai of Dionysopolis, whom I have already referred to, the mystai of Dionysos Kallon from Byzantium, attested in six inscriptions dated from the mid-1st century to the first quarter of the 2nd century AD. These were members of a thiasos probably linked to a restricted family group, as suggested by the prosopographical study of the honorees (Dana 2011, 83-85). In the same city there was another thiasos of Dionysos Parabolos. Of great interest is also the mid-3rd century catalogue of a thiasos of Cillae (Cherna Gora), in the region of Philippopolis, which records the names of the members of this Bacchic association together with their offices inside the religious collegium (IGBulg III.1 1517). All these inscriptions show a general diffusion and substantial development of the organization of the cult of Dionysos in Thrace, although it seems that this is not an exclusive feature of this area, but a general trend throughout the Roman Empire (Foucher 1981).

Greater local nuance is visible in the new cultic associations of deities that we find in some Thracian inscriptions from this period. For example, in an inscription from Pautalia, whose date is unfortunately

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11 On this revolt, see Velkov 1981, 475; Lozanov 2015, 78.
12 The prosopon of Dionysos was worshiped in different locations of the Greek world: Naxos (Ath. 3.14), Methymna (Paus. 10.19.3), Corinth (Paus. 2.2.6-7), etc., cf. González Merino 2009, 135-138.
13 IK Byzantion 30 (AD 85-96) = SEG 18, 281, l. 3.
14 IK Byzantion 37 (AD 117-137) = SEG 28, 562; 50, 665, l. 2.
15 On the names of the Dionysiac mystery associations’ functionaries attested in Bulgarian lands, see Slavova 2002, 141-143.
uncertain, Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Herakles, Dionysos and Aphrodite are worshiped together (IGBulg IV 2230). More frequently attested is the association of Zeus and Dionysos, who receive an altar in the region of Bizye during the reign of Caracalla, ca. AD 211-217, and are worshiped together in two other cases16. Last but not least, Dionysos and Herakles appear together in two inscriptions with reliefs: one from Philippopolis (IGBulg III.1 1055) and the other one from Nicopolis ad Istrum (IGBulg II 697).

These new cultic partnerships pose numerous questions about the beliefs and religious practices of these cities in imperial times. Considering Herakles and Dionysos, both were sons of Zeus and, despite their semi-divine origin, they reached the status of gods in the Greek pantheon. The two were considered traveling gods who brought civilization, and both were closely related to wine: Dionysos as god of the wine, and Herakles as a heavy drinker17. This relation is also attested in some myths of the legendary past of Greece in which they faced uncivilized peoples like the Amazons18 and the Centaurs19. Together they became the founding gods of Nikaia, in Bithynia (Robert 1977, 8-12; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 150), and the Dii Patrii of Leptis Magna and the Severan house (Foucher 1981, 700; Di Segni 1997, 154). While these traditions were mostly developed in Roman times, we cannot rule out that the Thracian cult shared by the two sons of Zeus dated back to an earlier time, especially if we consider that their cult was of great significance in Thasos (Oppermann 2012, 345), as proved by the fact that they were depicted on both sides of local coins already in the beginning of the 4th century BC (Kraay 1976, 150).

**Some Final Remarks**

To sum up, there is a gap between the information about the Thracian cult of Dionysos which depends on the written sources which we take into account (literary or epigraphic). The earliest pieces of evidence regarding the Classical period are literary passages (mainly by Herodotus and Euripides) which highlight the oracular function of Dionysos as the main feature of the god among the Thracians. Connected to this function, we read about some oracles and we learn about some practices which are equated with those held in Delphi. In this regard, we can trace a path of assimilation between the Thracian Dionysos and Apollo, which is still alive in some theological reflections on the god in later times, for example in the work of Macrobius.

The literary sources of the Hellenistic period incorporate details in the description of the oracle of Dionysos; in particular, they mention the use of fire and wine in mantic sessions and the prominent role of priests, who may even ingest wine in large quantities in order to deliver the oracle. Unfortunately, no epigraphic source confirms these data, but they underline a substantially distinctive feature of the Thracian Dionysos: this god, unlike his Greek counterpart, is a reliable god; a god to which one can swear and on whose altar treaties and oaths can be safely deposited.

The political importance of the cult of Dionysos can be inferred from the involvement of priests and even of the sanctuaries of Dionysos in inter-tribal conflicts and, subsequently, in the confrontation with the Roman power. From this moment on, inscriptions overcome the literary evidence and provide data of great interest to elucidate not only the

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16 IGBulg V 5659, Malko Turnovo, territory of Bizye, AD 211-217 (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Julia Domna) = SEG 28, 560 = AE 1999, 1368. This association of father and son is attested in two other inscriptions from Malko Turnovo of uncertain dating: IGBulg III.2 1864 and 1865.

17 On drinking competitions between Dionysos and Herakles depicted on vases and mosaics, see Foucher 2000.

18 According to Pausanias (7.2.4), on two occasions the Amazons requested refuge as suppliants in the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesos when they fled Herakles and, some time earlier, Dionysos. This episode is represented in a decorative frieze of the “Temple of Hadrian” of the 4th century AD, cf. Linant de Bellefonds 2002, 65-67.

spread of the cult, but also its internal organization. In this regard, inscriptions of both priests – always men – and cultic associations – including also women – deserve to be highlighted. In all cases, the mystery character of the cult is clear. Finally, in this period we see how Dionysos is worshiped together with other deities, thus enriching his already large entourage with a new cultic framework of complex relationships.

Nevertheless, beyond the external forms, which seem more characteristic of the new cultural horizon of the Roman Empire, consciousness of a long cultic tradition in which Dionysos had always occupied a prominent place probably survived.

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