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THE KINGSHIP OF THE SOUTHERN THRACIANS
SUMMARY

Key words: kingship, tribes, Southern Thracians, the Odrysian kingdom, Thracia, king, royal prerogatives.

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INTRODUCTION

The PhD thesis entitled “The Kingship of the Southern Thracians” is meant as a contribution to the expansion of our knowledge of the Southern Thracians. Undoubtedly, this objective cannot be reached without a detailed documentation of the already existing research in the field. Although neglected or insufficiently dealt with in the written sources, the Southern Thracians played an important part in the Antique European history and, it was definitely so because of the kingship.

We start from the premise that the kingship plays an important part in the history of any people. We know that, many times, distant events were recorded according to the reigning period of their sovereigns. With many of the Antique peoples, the welfare or the decline were closely linked to the names of certain sovereigns. We do not know whether the Southern Thracians shared such views about the king but the king played a definitely essential role in the state.

This thesis illustrates the evolution of the Southern Thracians' kingship starting with the Thracian rules mentioned in Homer's poems up to the formation of the Roman province, Thracia. In order to reach my objectives, I divided my thesis into three chapters.

Chapter I is intended as a survey of the main Southern Thracian tribes and their main kings to offer a clear view of the geographic territory under discussion. I have also found it necessary to introduce the so – called “legendary” kings, whose location is uncertain but are mentioned in the written sources as of Thracian origin.

The main chapter of the thesis is Chapter II which analyses the prerogatives of the kingship in the Thracian territory. Undoubtedly, we cannot establish the role of the kingship both in the affirmation and in the decline of the Southern Thracians without a complete analysis of the political actions of the kings that Chapter III deals with.

Literary sources propose different numbers of Thracian tribes. Without enlarging upon this issue, which is not the focus of our study, it must be emphasized that the Thracians bore different names, function of their location. There is no doubt,

however, that, regardless of their name or geographic location, the Southern Thracians had similar characteristics.

It is extremely clear that the Southern Thracians did not live isolated from the other peoples and civilizations and that they were in close contact with both their neighbors and the other civilizations, mutually influencing one another. Under these circumstances, it is only normal that we find similarities between the forms of organization of the Southern Thracians and those of some of their neighbors, similarities which we will highlight based on the comparative – historic method.

The most important of the Southern Thracians are, without a doubt, the Odrysians, who build a kingdom that can be considered a great power in the Balkans. For these reasons, we will make many references to the Odrysian kings who are mentioned in the written sources more frequently than the other Southern Thracians. This is understandable considering their more active involvement in the international relations of the period.

The absence of a monograph about the kingship of the Southern Thracians makes our endeavor all the more difficult but interesting nonetheless. At the same time, a complete study of the Southern Thracian kingship can add to the information

about the Northern Thracians, therefore being a useful contribution to the study of the history of the Romanian territory.

I believe that, in order to establish the role of the Thracians in the Balkans, we must firstly make a rigorous analysis of the sources regarding the Thracians. A mere historic approach would certainly not suffice. We need a close analysis of the information provided by the auxiliary sciences such as archaeology, epigraphy, etc. Only by comparing the information provided by the written sources with the results of the archaeological research and the latest research by the specialists in the field can we have a clear view of the role the Southern Thracians played in the political life of the Balkanic peninsula. Making use of the comparative-historic method, I have looked into the way the Thracian kingship and the Greek, Macedonian and even oriental ones are connected. Starting from certain aspects of the Indo – European kingship, I have tried to establish the features that the Thracians inherited and the ones they took through influences from other peoples.

General Overview of the Sources Regarding the Thracians.

Literary sources

I have given special attention to establishing the importance of the sources regarding the Southern Thracians. Therefore, it has become imperative to carefully analyze the sources and their hierarchy, function of the importance of the information rendered.

The Thracians are mentioned for the first time in Homer's poems. He introduces them as allies of the Trojans but the first definite, and very important information about the Thracians, we get from Herodotus. Undoubtedly, the most important source regarding the Thracians is the work of Thukydidēs. The information provided by Herodotus and Thukydidēs regarding the Thracians is enriched by Xenophon in his works.

We must not overlook the information provided by Diodor from Sicily and Strabon. Tacitus adds to the information provided by the Greek writers, tackling the period in which the Thracians were under Roman occupation..

Epigraphic sources.

The epigraphic sources are of great importance to the study of the Thracian history because they represent a clear proof of the events which took place in certain periods of time.

They also reflect the relations of the Thracians with other states.

From the time of the first Odrysian kings, the most flourishing period of the kingdom, we have inscriptions, but the following periods are better represented.

The most important inscriptions regarding the Thracian territory are contained by *Inscriptiones Graecae, Bulgaria repertae*, ed. Giorgi Mihailov, 5 vol, Sofia, 1958 – 1970.

Archaeological sources

The archaeological research regarding the Thracian culture has flourished, especially after World War II. Following the archaeological excavations, a great number of Thracian graves and sanctuaries were discovered. Among the most important are those at Mezek, Kazanlak, Svestari, Seuthopolis, etc. The royal tombs investigated and their rich inventory in particular allows us to establish features of the Thracian culture.

Numismatic sources

The minting of coins represents a prerogative of the ruler and the analysis of coins offers valuable information about both the kings that make them and the economic situation of the kingdom. During Sitalkes, the Odrysian

kingdom started to mint coins which circulated simultaneously with the coins of many Greek cities.

The Beginnings of Tracology. The interest in the research of Thracian history

The interest in the study of Thracian history is manifest even from the 18th century when M. Cary writes a book about the Thracian kings from the perspective of the coins they minted.

Almost 140 years later, the Viennese linguist, W. Tomaschek, formulates the first hypothesis regarding the Thracians' origin, language and religion. Today, Tomaschek is considered the founder of modern Tracology. Today, we have at our disposal works by renowned historians such as G.I. Kazarow, I. Todorov, Sofia H. Archibald, while the historiography dedicated to Hellada and Macedonia for which R. M. Errington is a representative helps us glimpse into the nature of the relations between the Greeks, the Macedonians and the Thracians.

The frequent organization of international congresses of Tracology makes it possible for us to be in permanent contact with progress achieved in the study of Thracian history. The

first congress was organized in 1972 at Sophia and since then they have been organized every four years.

CHAPTER I

KINGS AND KINGDOMS IN THRACIAN HISTORY

The first information about the early state of the Thracians is found in Homer's poems. Homer introduces in Iliad the Thracians who came in the aid of the Trojans.

In the Iliad, Thracia is presented as a very rich country from where the most courageous Thracians came.

Without a doubt, the most interesting of the Thracian rulers, ally of the Trojans, is king Rhesos. His personality continues to be controversial and there are many uncertainties about his participation in the Trojan war, the territory he ruled over and even his mere existence.

The Thracians are a generic name for a great number of Indo – European tribes who spread around the Black Sea, into the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor in the III – II millennium B.C. The name *Thrakos* or *Thrakios* was attributed by the Hellenic writers to the peoples from this part of the world, considered barbaric. This term, which became an ethnic-national name extended to the tribes between the Aegean Sea

and the Danube, is not considered of Thracian origin but of Greek origin, with uncertain etymology. It was spread and generalized by the Greeks¹ because, as it is known, the Thracians were characterized by lack of unity and would not have attributed a name to themselves.

In order to offer a clear view of the inhabitants of the Thracian territory, we tried to present the main Thracian tribes as they appear in the antique written sources concluding that, the most important Thracian population is that of the Odrysians, the only ones who managed to form a powerful and well-organized state.

CHAPTER II

THE PREROGATIVES OF THE THRACIAN KINGS

II.1. THE INDO-EUROPEAN HERITAGE

The Indo–European society had a patriarchal nature and the king was a great priest and a military leader.

Emile Benveniste claims that originally the king had the attribution of delineating the territory of a kingdom, being

¹ I. I. Russu, *Limba traco-dacilor*, Bucure ti, 1967, 20.

entitled to decide what is right and what is wrong². In this way emerges the idea that the king, although the chief of the tribe, was not only the holder of the political power but also a sacred figure. He is a mediator between the Earth and the world of the gods and the keeper of the general welfare. As the connection between the people and the gods, the king is also a great priest doing rituals and sacrifices.

We wonder how many of these aspects are inherited by the Thracian kingship. We will see that the kingship in the Thracian territory in general and that in the Southern Thracian territory in particular inherited many of these aspects specific to the Indo-European kingship, even if, it naturally underwent changes brought about by different internal and external influences.

II.2. THE RELIGIOUS PREROGATIVES

II.2.1 GODS, KINGS AND PRIESTS IN THE SOUTHERN THRACIAN TERRITORY

The fusion between the political and the religious powers with the Thracians is illustrated by many Antique

² É. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des Institutions indo-européennes*, 2. *Pouvoir droit, religion*, Paris, 1874, 15.

authors. The oldest information on the subject comes from Homer. Herodotus' information regarding the divine origins of the Thracian kings is also worth taking into account. He speaks of the Thracian kings who claim they are born from a divinity whom the historian from Halicarnas identifies with Hermes. The archaeological discoveries from Seuthopolis are another proof in the direction of accepting the king as great priest.

Consequently, we can safely say that the Thracian kings who defend their divine origin are also great priests of the gods who assigned them the task of leading and, at the same time, protecting his subjects. We can say that, in the Thracian world there was a certain period of time when king identified himself with the gods and the great priest and the king usually was all three. He could be both the great priest of the supreme divinity and son of a god. This statement is definitely proven for the archaic period but we don't have sufficient information to support the idea of the king-god for the following periods.

II.2.2. SYMBOLS OF THE THRACIAN KINGSHIP

The royal tombs from the Thracian territory that were investigated by the archaeologists make it possible for us to identify the symbols of the Thracian kingship.

One of the proofs supporting the quality of great priest that the Thracian kings had is the presence of a great number of rhytons found in the royal tombs investigated. Another symbol of the social status can be the horse. In many cases, the Thracian warrior is joined in his grave by his horse. There have been found rings, tiaras and scepters in many royal tombs, all of these being other symbols of the kingship.

II.2.3. THE ROYAL BURIAL ART

During the archaeological diggings in the Thracian territory, there have been discovered a great number of Thracian tombs and sanctuaries. Among the most important we mention the ones at Mezek, Kazanlak, Svestari, Seuthopolis, etc.

In the 4th century B.C. the round grave with a dome was very popular. The most famous grave of this type is the one we find at Mal Tape near Mezek probably dating around the middle of the 4th century B.C.³ The tomb from Strelcea is also extremely interesting. The skeletons of three horses were discovered in this tomb, two of which were harnessed at a four

³ M. Oppermann, *Tracii, între Arcul Carpatic și Marea Egee*, trad. Ondine Cristina Dăscăliș, București, 1988, 106.

– wheel chariot⁴. Others burial monuments famous for their mural paintings are those of Kazanlak and Svestari.

II.3. THE MILITARY PREROGATIVES

II.3.1. THE ROLE OF THE KING IN THE ORGANISATION OF THE ARMY

The Thracian king was the leader of the army. First a temporary duty, it then became a permanent one. Leading the army meant the king's participation in the military campaigns in which the state was involved, the endowing of the army and the securing of the number of soldiers necessary to keep the kingdom among the great powers in the Balkans.

The Odrysian kings will start resorting more and more to the foreign mercenaries in order to better train the army. The battles were fought with simple weapons such as the spear, the arrow, the dagger or the axe.

Through their large numbers, the bravery they proved in the battles they participated in and because of their efficient leaders, the Thracians were, until the emergence of the Romans in the area, an undisputable military force.

II.3.2. THE THRACIAN DEFENCE SYSTEM

⁴ *Ibidem*, 108.

The Thracian kings build cities with strong defense walls which function as real fortresses. The best example is probably the city of Seuthopolis built by Seuthes the Third. The city was build after the Greek urban and architectural design which proves the superior civilization the Thracians reached in the 4th century.

The Thracian defense system was based on fortifying the main settlements as well as on the natural fortresses in the mountains which were used wisely. The Thracian fortresses are built at high altitudes and the essential condition when choosing the place to build a fortress was the presence of a water source.

II. 4. THE ADMINISTRATIVE PREROGATIVES

The Thracian king controlled the administration. Perhaps the Thracian kings used to have some sort of evidence which recorded the activities of the kingdom but, unfortunately, these recordings did not reach us.

The king decided the tribute that his subjects had to pay, minted coins, and built access routes necessary for the commercial activities. During the reign of Sitalkes, Thracia began to mint its own coins, which circulated simultaneously with the largely – spread coins of many Greek cities. On the

other hand, the Odrysian royal coins minted by the Greek colonies on the Southern shore of Thracia were probably part of the tributary duties that these cities had for the Thracian kings.

II.5. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE SUCCESSION TO THE THRONE IN THE THRACIAN TERRITORY

Any study on the Odrysian kingship highlights the fact that, in many cases the king is followed to the throne not by his son but by a brother or a nephew. This issue raises some questions about the manner of the succession to the throne in the Thracian territory.

It appears that the Thracians kept the agnates system of succession to the throne from the Indo – Europeans. A complete analysis of the system of succession to the throne in the Thracian world is provided by R. Vulpe⁵.

This principle of succession was present in a very old era with all the Indo – European peoples and it was clearly with the Celts, the Dacians and Macedonians alike⁶.

⁵ R. Vulpe, *Studia Thracologica.*, 16-32.

⁶ *Ibidem*

It appears that the agnatic succession was an undisputable norm in the Thracian tradition which lasted until the close contact with the Greek world brought about a change in mentality.

II.6. THE ROLE OF THE ‘GIFT’ IN KEEPING THE KING’S AUTHORITY

Marcel Mauss believes that “the gift” is a “complete social phenomenon”⁷ with economic, social, political, judicial, familial and even religious implications. From his point of view, this phenomenon is based on two essential coordinates: *the obligation to give* and *the obligation to receive*⁸, because although these present exchanges appear to be voluntary and free, they are, in fact, purely compulsory and conditioned.

Through such exchange, a social hierarchy is established and the purpose is that of gaining prestige rather than goods. The presence of the “institution of the gift”⁹ in the Thracian society is highlighted by Tukydidēs and Xenofon. Analyzing the writings of these two historians we can assume

⁷ Mauss, Marcel, *Eseu despre dar*, trad. Silvia Lupescu, Ia i, 1993, 41.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ C. Astalo, *Repere privind funcționarea „instituției darului” la societățile barbare ale epocii fierului*, în Satu Mare – Studii și Comunicări, seria Arheologie, 17-21 (2000), 49.

that the gift is the basic mechanism of the organization of the archaic societies in general and of the Thracian society in particular. It functions as a way of establishing the social hierarchy, of strengthening the king's power, forming allegiances, settling rivalries, etc. This mechanism based on the exchange of gift exercised in an endless struggle for power as Tukydidies points out with the Odrysians who “practiced this custom in order to gain power because no one can gain power without offering gifts¹⁰. “

CHAPTER III
THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY ROLE OF
THE SOUTHERN THRACIAN KINGS IN THE
BALKANS

III.1. THE RELATIONS OF THE THRACIANS
WITH THE GREEK WORLD UP TO THE EMERGENCE OF
THE ODRYSIAN KINGDOM

¹⁰ Thukydidies, 2. 97.

Before the Persians wars, in the Thracian territory there were several tribal organizations which could not be termed “state” in the proper sense of the word. The first real Thracian state is the one of the Odrysian Thracians, founded by Teres in the first half of the 5th century B.C.

The outburst of the Persian wars completely changes the situation in the Thracian territory. Thracia is conquered and becomes Persian conquest. Undoubtedly, the Persian control over this strategic territory seriously affected the Greeks and especially the Athenians due to the economic interest they had in this region which was extremely rich in resources of great importance: cereal, gold, silver.

The political and military events taking place in Europe in this period stimulated and strengthened the tribes from the South–East of Thracia who, in certain situations, were hostile towards both the Persians and the Athenians. This makes us conclude that the Thracians acted according to whatever interests they had clearly rejecting any conquering tendencies of the Greeks and Persians.

III.2 THE RELATIONS OF THE ODRYSIAN KINGDOM WITH THE SCYTHIANS

The tribal confederation ruled by the Odrysians consolidated even from the Persian domination, eventually leading to an early state.

The greatest danger the Odrysian king faced was the Scythians. The diplomatic qualities of king Sitalkes and his politics helped avoid some major conflicts between the Odrysians and their powerful neighbors.

III.3. THE RELATIONS OF THE ODRYSIAN KINGDOM WITH THE GREEKS

The information we have on the Odrysian kingdom before Philip II are short references to the Athenian politics in the Thracian territory.

Taking into account these references we can conclude that the formation and the territorial expansion of the Odrysian kingdom did not appear to upset Athens and despite the measures Pericles took in the Thracian Chersones, the relations between Athens and the Odrysian kingdom were generally peaceful. It can be inferred that Athens regarded the Thracian state as a “buffer state” in the event of a foreign invasion.

During the Peloponnesian war, the Odrysians were regarded as powerful enough to be wanted as allies by both the Athenians and the Spartans. However, we must mention that the odrysians

guided their relations with the Greeks function of their own interests in the Chersones.

III.4. THE RELATIONS OF THE SOUTHERN THRACIANS WITH MACEDONIA

Between 342 – 339 B.C. Philip II conquers the Odrysian kingdom. Philip's actions in the Thracian territory led to the obliteration of the Odrysians kingdoms, but Philip took no measure in order to change the social structure of the kingdom. He was happy only to exploit the resources of the region and to keep several garrisons in order to keep the order. Shortly after the conquest of Thracia, for this area we find references for royal clerks with the name *strategos*.

Alexander's death and the conflicts between his generals gave the Thracians the opportunity to try and regain their independence. The Thracian possessions of the Macedonian kingdom were given to Lysimachos, who had served as general in Alexander the Great's personal guard. In order to impose his authority in the area, Lysimachos has to risk a confrontation with the forces of Seuthes III who, despite the Macedonian domination, turns out to be an extremely powerful adversary.

III.5. THE RELATIONS OF THE SOUTHERN THRACIANS WITH THE CELTS

The cessation of the Macedonian rule over the Danube and the Thracians did not entail that the Thracians regained their dominant position because there was a new danger at the Danube. The Celtic tribes had entered the Balkan territory.

The kingdom of Tylis is formed around 277 B.C. in south – Eastern Thracia. Its population expanded South of Haemus and North up to the Danube. The Celtic domination was forced over the entire Balkan Peninsula imposing a tribute on the inhabitants of this area.

Even under the circumstances of the Celtic pressure, the Odrysian kingdom, with its territory greatly reduced, will continue to exist. Without a doubt, the Celts were an obstacle in the way of the Odrysian kings who attempted to restore the power they once had but the Odrysian royal house, who had withstood the more powerful Macedonian domination, manages to keep its force in the state. Moreover, the Greek colonies from Potus Euxius will be under its protection for a long time. The migration of some Celts in Asia Minor and the pressure the Thracians exerted eventually led to the disappearance of the Celtic kingdom from Thracia. The Celtic kingdom will withstand in the Danube territory until around 193 B.C. when it will be destroyed by the Thracians.

III.6. THE RELATIONS OF THE SOUTHERN THRACIANS WITH ROME

After Macedonia and Greece became Roman provinces in 148 B.C. and 146 B.C. respectively, the South of the Balkan Peninsula was turned into a powerful base, from where they could start offensive operations against the free Thracian territories. Even from 167 B.C., the cities on the shore west of Maritza were under Roman domination, because this territory was under the administration of Macedonia. When, in 133 B.C., the kingdom of Pergam was taken over by the Roman based on succession, the entire South–Thracian seaside was taken by the Romans.

After the imposing of the Principality, there are no other mentions of Southern Thracian kings but the Odrysian ones who were the only ones to whom Augustus recognized the Thracian kingship after he made them vassals of Rome. This measure was probably necessary because in the first century there were no Roman legions along the Lower Danube and the Danube frontier of the kingdom had to be defended by the Thracian vassals. Therefore, in the second half of Augustus' reign, king Rhoemetalkes I ruled over all Thracia as a client

king to Rome¹¹. The stance of the Thracian aristocracy was characterized by unconditional loyalty to Rome and obvious inclinations towards the Roman customs. This brought about conflicts with the compatriots who were determined to fight for national independence. The great Thracian insurrection of 13-11 B.C. was firstly intended against Rhoemetalkes and his brother and co-regent Kotys who loses his life on this occasion.

For a while the Odrysian kingdom successfully did the task defending the Roman Danube frontier but, on the basis of a dire crisis within the Odryasian dynastic family and considering the ever greater barbaric danger, Rome will impose direct control over the Thracians by forming the province Thracia during Emperor Claudius.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Alongside the Greeks and the Macedonians, the Southern Thracians dominated the Balkan – European territory until the period of maximum expansion of the Roman Empire. The dominant role in the affirmation of the Thracians is Antiquity is held, without question, by the kingship. The

¹¹ Tacitus, 2. 64.

Odrysian rulers, although called kings of the Thracians, never exerted absolute power over the entire area east of the Balkans because they did not succeed in subduing all the Thracian tribes. However, the Odrysian kingdom became a great power partly due to the ability of some kings to impose themselves to their subjects and to act intelligently and diplomatically both internally and externally. The kings' inability to maintain the unity of the kingdom, the frequent conflicts among the heirs to the throne as well as the emergence of new powers in the area, firstly Phillip's and Alexander's Macedonia and then Rome, led to the gradual decline of the kingdom which is eventually turned into a Roman province. Without question, the Thracian king held almost absolute power over his subjects and as such he could order arrests, death penalties or the confiscation of fortunes but there is no evidence of an authoritarian rule as is the case in the Oriental area. It resembles more the Macedonian rule.

The king decided the quantum of the tribute to be paid by his subjects, minted coins, built routes of access necessary for the commercial activities; he was the supreme leader of the army and a great priest.

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