



A Note on the Archaeology of Cults in Ancient Thrace: The Transition from the Hellenistic to Roman Periods

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to point at a methodological bias that uses Roman or Late Roman evidence for describing earlier periods in the archaeological context of cults in Ancient Thrace. I analyze examples from the recent literature on the Western Black Sea coast, inner, and Aegean regions of Thrace before explaining the bias in question from an epistemological point of view as a consequence of an anachronistic perception of religion. Finally, I propose examples where a clear separation of evidence from the Hellenistic period from evidence from the Roman period allows one to make much better sense of the archaeological data.

Keywords: Historiography, archaeology, cults, Thrace, Hellenistic period, religion

In contrast with previous periods, the Roman period of Ancient Thrace is quite well known due to the availability of numerous written and iconographic sources documenting the cult life of the region. Hence, documents about the Roman period have often been used to describe the Hellenistic and even classical periods. Although this retrospective historical reading might seem anachronistic, it is usually accepted in religious studies because religion is considered to be a stable conservative social structure. The aim of this paper is to question the relevance of this method in the context of the archaeology of cults in Ancient Thrace in the Late Hellenistic period. I will proceed by firstly presenting examples of this retrospective method. I will secondly propose an epistemological critique of that method and thirdly propose another use for the data from this transitional period.

When using specialized publications on Ancient Thrace, references are often encountered that use later evidence as proof for the earlier existence of a specific cult. A very important publication about religion in the ancient Greek cities of the Western Black Sea from the 5th-



1st centuries BC was published recently.¹ It is based mainly on epigraphic material but also includes archaeological data when available. Although the publication does not concern the Roman period, it mentions several cults that appeared only during the Roman period, such as Zeus at Apollonia Pontica,² Dionysus at Bizone,³ Cybele at Bizone,^{4,5} Asklepios⁶ and Isis and Serapis⁷ at Odessos, the Dioscuri at Callatis,⁸ Aphrodite at Tomis,⁹ and the cult of Hercules throughout the region except for Callatis,¹⁰ as well as the Hero Horseman.¹¹

In addition, the publication presents several cults that didn't appear until the 1st century BC (i.e., at the very end of the period), such as Apollo at Anchialos,¹² Dionysus¹³ and Isis and Serapis¹⁴ at Tomis, Demeter at Callatis,¹⁵ Theos Megas,¹⁶ the Great Gods from Samothrace¹⁷ and Isis and Serapis¹⁸ at Dionysopolis, and Aphrodite at Odessos.¹⁹ The publication also occasionally specifies no chronological period, such as for the cults of Zeus at Anchialos²⁰ and Theos Megas at Mesembria.²¹

The late appearance of these cults is acknowledged in the analysis of the sources. However, due to these cults being included in the catalogue together with the other cults rather than in a separate chapter dedicated to the cults of the Roman period, the image of cult life in Thrace during the classical and Hellenistic periods ends up slightly distorted. This distortion gets worse when the list of gods that had been honored up until the Roman conquest also includes all those that only appeared during the Roman period.²² Finally, the author of that publication makes no mention in the conclusion regarding how the deities that are considered

1 D. Chiekova, *Cultes et vie religieuse des cités grecques du Pont Gauche* (Vile-ler siècles avant J.-C.), Bern: Peter Lang, 2008.

2 Ibid., p.161.

3 Ibid., p.108.

4 Ibid., p.83.

5 Ibid., p.133.

6 Ibid., p.237.

7 Ibid., p.257.

8 Ibid., p.153.

9 Ibid., p.220.

10 Ibid., p.229.

11 Cf. Ibid., p.239-248; she says that it appeared in Egypt in the 2nd century BC but didn't arrive in these cities until the 2nd century AD. About the Hero Horseman and his cult, see the contribution of P. Adam-Veleni in the same volume. This cult spread alongside the Macedonian conquest throughout the Hellenistic period up to Late Roman times.

12 Ibid., p.56.

13 Ibid., p.79.

14 Ibid., p.252.

15 Ibid., p.119.

16 Ibid., p.189.

17 Ibid., p.206.

18 Ibid., p.256.

19 Ibid., p.224.

20 Ibid., p.162.

21 Ibid., p.194.

22 Ibid., p.295.

to be of Thracian origin (i.e., Theos Megas, Hero Horseman, Melsas)²³ are attestable only in the late Hellenistic period, if not only even later during the Roman period.

Another research on the region between the valleys of the Strymon and Nestos rivers from the 7th-4th centuries BC²⁴ is also noticed to mention several cults as if they had existed during the study's examined chronological period. Only an additional research of the present-ed sources leads to the realization that the cults in question only date from later times (i.e., the cults of the sanctuary at Skalichkite in the village of Levunovo,²⁵ as well as the one on a peak in the village of Slivnitsa).²⁶ These cults have been attested to only through decontextualized findings dating to the Roman period, namely the votive slabs depicting Artemis as first collected by D. Detschew.²⁷ At Pautalia, Asklepios' cult is assumed to have started in the 4th century BC, although a search through the sources at my disposal reveals that nothing to have been found on the site dating earlier than the Roman period. This is also the case with Hercules' cult at Rasnik²⁸ and Asklepios' cult at Daskalovo.²⁹

Our third and last case concerns inner Thrace, and is rather about considering religion as a stable, conservative social structure, with or without archaeological sources. In the chapter titled "Religion" in the publication *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*, K. Rabadjiev initially delineates three main periods under the heading "Pantheon and Priests", further subdividing the second period. The first great period is the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age; the second is the 5th-1st centuries BC, with a pre- and post-341 BC distinction; the third period is from 1st century BC until Christian times. One can recognize the traditional periodization in these periods, with the first being the Protohistoric period, the second uniting the classical Greek and Hellenistic times, and the third corresponding to the Roman era. One can also notice how each period is related to a predominant kind of source: archaeological for the Protohistoric period, literary for the classical and epigraphic for the Hellenistic periods, and finally all three sources for the last period.³⁰

Rabadjiev's second heading, "Ritual Space and Practice," involves the chronological hiatus between Hellenistic and Roman periods,³¹ while the third heading on afterlife beliefs is a little less specific about the distinction; "In aristocratic Thrace, ideas about the psychosomatic immortality of the elite could be traced to the origin of the state at the end of sixth century

23 Ibid., p.291.

24 A. G. Zannis, *Le pays entre le Strymon et le Nestos: géographie et histoire (7.- 4. siècle avant J.-C.)*. Athènes-Paris: Fondation Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, no. 71, 2014.

25 Ibid., p.114 n. 295.

26 Ibid., p.115 n. 304.

27 D. Detschew, "Der Artemiskult im Gebiet des mittleren Strymon." *IAI*, 19 (1955), p. 95.

28 Zannis, p.101.

29 Ibid., p.102.

30 K. Rabadjiev, "Religion." In: Valeva, J. et alii (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*. John Wiley & Sons Inc: Hoboken, 2015, p. 444-448.

31 Rabadjiev, p.450.

and continued until the Roman conquest.³² Thus, the distinction here instead occurs between the pre-Roman and Roman periods. Rabadjiev continues with a description of the belief in the psychosomatic immortality attributed to the Thracian elite. This part of the chapter consists in an interpretation of the metaphysical signification of the chamber tombs found in Thrace, without any analysis of the archaeological data:

The Thracian elite was promised a post-mortem bliss, similar to their way of life, and psychosomatic immortality in places located on the periphery of the inhabited world - (oikoumene), but not beyond, transferred there by the god. [Thus, they were not dependent on the living, as the pale shadows of ordinary Greeks in the kingdom of Hades were, which may explain the proximity of the Greek polis to its necropoleis]. The challenge is to identify reflections of these ideas about anthropodaimones in Thracian burials.³³

Anthropodaimones is a reference to a word coined for a theater play.³⁴ Rabadjiev searches its materiality here through the funerary monuments of Thrace instead of analyzing these in connection to their closest architectural parallel, the Macedonian chamber tombs. Thus, the understanding of the sources is yet again being distorted, with the interpretation of the whole archaeological evidence of the pre-Roman funerary monuments being submitted to the meaning of a literary *hapax*.

Both the method and the reasoning find close parallels in the work of Alexander Fol. While Fol had ascertained the Thracian religious system to have been united by a Thracian Orphism, Rabadjiev used the same methodology but instead replaced Thracian Orphism with a kind of hero cult.³⁵ Even though Rabadjiev does not quote Fol, he had largely been inspired by him, the former having indeed conceptualized the “Thracian aristocratic doctrine of Orphism” about the “Orphic priest-king [...] son of the Sun.”³⁶ The link between my three examples and the way they generalize are revealed through the references they use. Indeed, Chiekova takes over Fol’s theory of the Thracian Dionysus, stipulating the Greek Dionysus to have “inherited religious ideas coming from Thrace and Asia minor,”³⁷ whereas Chiekova did not confirm this in her own study.

The three examples might seem very different, but they are the result of a similar approach to considering religion as a stable conservative institution. Indeed, these three cases apply the data from a specific period as evidence for later and earlier periods, with the implicit presumption that the historical context did not change significantly and/or that religious matters are usually long standing. For archaeologists to link a phenomenon to its chronological and

32 Ibid., p.451.

33 Ibid., p.452.

34 Eur. *Rhes*. 971. I’ve discussed this play in my PhD (in press), M. Bastide, *Les lieux de culte en Thrace du VIII^e au III^e s. avant J.-C.*, BEFAR.

35 Ibid., p.451-454.

36 A. Fol, *Thracian Culture: Told and Untold*. Sofia: ТАИГПА ТаиНарПа, 2010, p. 110-111.

37 Chiekova, p.113.

geographical context appears contradictory, as the retrospective readings are thought to derive from a misleading use of the paradigm of the history of religion in archaeological research.

Firstly, one must question the very concept of Thracian religion that appears in some of the examples, because it implies not only the existence of a religious system but also of a Thracian identity. Little is known about the very existence of a Thracian ethnicity: the Thracians might have shared a material culture at some point, but according to the recent onomastic study by D. Dana,³⁸ they spoke several dialects from four different groups, and their political structures were either transient (kingdoms) or barely known (tribes).

Secondly, one could also more generally question the use of the concept of religion in history and archaeology. The historian of religion J. Z. Smith showed this concept to be “exclusively a product of scientific imagination.”³⁹ What Smith means is that no religion can be found as a complete well-built system in the pre-modern world. The concept of religion is rather an analytic tool used to understand a series of cultural phenomena. Similar to Smith, some researchers consider the concept of religion to be an efficient tool when applied to the study of past cultures, while others think of it as only a lure. As Hawthorne wrote:

*either “religion” is used in so many different ways that it “picks out nothing distinctive and clarifies nothing” [sic] or the term is really referring to involvement of superhuman entities in some way, and this is theology, not religious studies.*⁴⁰

Confronted with this dead-end, one tendency is to consider that religion encompasses whatever is beyond theoretical and empirical analysis. Thus, a lot of papers consider “all that is not understood or clearly non-functional [to be] ritual or cultic.”⁴¹ So, rather than considering the existence of any Thracian religion, I think it more efficient to focus on cult practice. I rest on Durkheim’s definition of sacredness⁴² as “set apart” and opposed to profanity, as K. Hawthorne explained, “Every society ascribes greater value to certain things or sets them apart for a particular usage, and concomitantly, regards other things in relation to them as less, or excluded from the former in some sense.”⁴³

Otherwise, one could consider as sacred anything that appears to belong to the first category (i.e., that of “things set apart”) and accord it a greater value while considering as

38 The study of D. Dana is based on 1,500 names and distinguishes by region (roughly, Dacia, main Thrace, Western Thrace, and Bithynia) which he stated show an obvious “dialect diversity” and rather reflects the “coexistence of kin languages” (“coexistence de langues (étroitement) apparentées”), *OnomThrac*, p.LXV, and p.LXVI, fig. 1.

39 J. Z. Smith, *Magie de la comparaison : et autres études d’histoire des religions*, Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014, p.23.

40 K. Hawthorne, “Balkan Pit Sanctuaries - Retheorizing the archaeology of Religion.” PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2009, p.175.

41 P. Pakkanen, “Deposing Cult - Considerations on What Makes a Cult Deposit” in Pakkanen, P., Bocher, S. (ed.), *Cult material from archaeological deposits to interpretation of early Greek religion*. Helsinki: Suomen Ateenan-Instituutin Säätiö, 2015, p. 30.

42 E. Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Paris, 1912. [2007], p.83-87.

43 Hawthorne, p.132.

profane whatever is perceived as of a lesser value. Both categories (i.e., that of the sacred and that of the profane) are exclusive categories. One can propose a definition of cult as the process of caring that creates, maintains, and promotes the sacred. In other words, any practice that aims to reinforce the greater value of the things stated as sacred would be considered to be cultish. The great advantage of this definition, which does not imply the existence of a global religious system, is that it is closely aligned with what can be observed archaeologically. Hence, the building of a monumental temple, a colossal statue, or a temenos can be understood as way of setting apart something sacred.⁴⁴

I will show in the final section what can be gained in archaeology and history from the use of the archaeological paradigm. The definition of the object of my study, namely cults as “any practice which aims at reinforcing the greater value of the things set apart as sacred,” highlights its dependency on a given economic and political situation. Robert Parker strongly asserted in the chapter on religion in the Introduction of Hansen and Nielsen’s *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*:

On the assumption that religious beliefs and rituals are old and prone to persist unchanged for many centuries, the information in late sources about sanctuaries and divinities is not infrequently used as evidence for polis religion of the Archaic and Classical periods. Yet, the evidence we possess shows that religious beliefs and practises changed as rapidly, sometimes even more rapidly, than social and political institutions.⁴⁵ Old cults were transformed, sometimes beyond recognition, and new cults were introduced. Therefore the use of Hellenistic and Roman sources to describe polis religion of the Archaic and Classical periods must be avoided unless the source is retrospective or can be associated with other sources which explicitly concern the period before 323.⁴⁶

If one considers the cults in Thrace, where Thrace is an area conventionally delimited by the Strymon valley to the West; by the Aegean, Marmara, and Black Seas to the South and East; and the Balkan range to the North, that some changes occurred in this wide area between the Hellenistic and the Roman period should come as no surprise. Placing the Hellenistic period between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and the founding of the Roman province of Thrace by Claudius in 45 AD⁴⁷ leaves almost 370 years of intense military campaigns. Several Hellenistic kingdoms and Rome later repeatedly tried to dominate

44 Although I disagree on the use of “religion”, the archaeological identification of cults stands to be enriched by the use recently proposed by M. Haysom, “Entangled Religion, Ritual and Social Practice: The Case of Karphi” in Lemos, I. S., Tsingarida, A. (ed.), *Beyond the polis: rituals, rites and cults in early and archaic Greece (12th-6th centuries BC)*. Brussels: CreA-Patrimoine, 2019, p. 53-64. Haysom proposed three criteria (i.e., oddity, consistency, delineation) to distinguish between everyday and religious archaeological remains.

45 J. N. Bremmer, *Greek religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 84-100.

46 R. Parker, “The Polis as a Religious Organisation” in Hansen, M. H., Nielsen, T. H. (ed.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 133.

47 R. Ivanov – G. von Bülow, “Thracia: eine römische Provinz auf der Balkanhalbinsel”, *Mayence, Zaberns Bildbände zur Archäologie*, 9 (2008), p.15.

Aegean Thrace, more or less compromising with numerous local tribes and kingdoms. To this quite permanent background must be added the Celtic invasion of the early 270s BC and the possible existence for a few years of a Celtic kingdom established somewhere around Byzantium.⁴⁸ This is also in combination with the influence of Antigonos Gonatas, Antiochus I Soter, and his successor Antiochus Theos, as well as the Ptolemies Philadelphus II and Euergetes III (who ruled South-Eastern Thrace from 246 to 221 BC), some independent Greek cities, and several Thracian tribes and kingdoms (e.g. those around Seuthopolis, Kabyle, and Mesembria). By the end of the century, the Celtic kingdom is known to have collapsed and Thrace to have been conquered by Philip V. According to Delev, "The large-scale aggressive operations of Philip in the last years of the third century changed completely the situation in Southern Thrace and the whole Aegean area."⁴⁹

The Romans enter the picture in opposition to the growing power of Philip V and would gain influence over the region from 167 BC onward, with a period of intense conquests between 114 BC and 97 AD. In the 80s BC, they were challenged by a new enemy, Mithridates Eupator, whose attention on the region the Thracians had managed to attract. After a Roman victory as the outcome of the Third Mithridatic War in 73 BC, Roman coins started to become widespread in Thrace. The Roman province of Moesia in the Danube valley is considered to have been founded by Gaius Poppaeus Sabunius in 12 AD, but in Southern Thrace, the last Odrysian king, Rhoemetaces III, was only killed as late as 45 AD.⁵⁰

To postulate that any cult established during the Classical period and thus coinciding with the apogee of Thracian power in the region would have lived throughout the turmoil of the Hellenistic and the Roman periods can seem quite illusory. This is firstly because the Hellenistic period was like anywhere else marked by a period of numerous changes in cult practice, but also because the military and political history of the region influenced everyday life and, thus, had the ability to redefine the main things that were to be set apart and considered sacred by anyone in this region. This can be true in any society but is even more so in a time and place where several new gods are known to have appeared (i.e., Isis and Serapis, Mithra, Sabazios), and where a royal cult and domestic hero cults are spreading.⁵¹

For example, a clear difference exists between associating the appearance of the cult of the Hero Horseman with the Classical, the Early Hellenistic, the Late Hellenistic, or the Roman period, given that the possible influences and meanings of this cult would be different during each of these periods. The same can be said about Hercules' cult, which already had had a long history in the Greek world when it started spreading in Thrace.

48 Ibid., p.8.

49 P. Delev, "From Koroupedion to the Beginning of the Third Mithridatic War (281-73 BCE)" in J. Valeva et alii (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*, John Wiley & Sons Inc: Hoboken, 2015, p. 64.

50 Ivanov- Bülow, p.15.

51 M. T. La Dinahet, *La religion des cités grecques: VIIIe-1er siècle avant J-C*, Paris: ELLIPSES, 2005, p.178.

In the mixed Greek and local sanctuary of Zone, the temple of Apollo, whose cult had started in the late archaic period, was at its highest fame in the beginning of the 4th century BC before starting to be abandoned in the 3rd century BC.⁵² Should this be linked to the end of the relative balance kept in the region during Lysimachus' rule or to the Celtic invasion? Difficulty is had in assigning with certainty this transition to a single precise military event. In Zone, the end of the cult must be explained in the broader context of the abandonment of the city.

In Vulchev's study on extra-urban sanctuaries in the Roman Province of Thrace, he published an even more diverse situation. Indeed, his only example of archaeological site with certain continuous cult practices from the late Hellenistic to the Roman period (i.e., the site of Krepost in the Dimitrovgrad municipality of the Haskovo region) demonstrates a complex succession of practices.⁵³ During the first phase, from the 4th-3rd centuries BC, it had been characterized by about 80 so-called ritual pits. Then, during the second half of the 1st century BC, several of these pits were covered by a tumulus built over one grave and surrounded by a ditch filled with offerings. Later during the Roman period, a cult to the Hero Horseman is attested to by the ritual pits and several votive slabs depicting the Horseman. This example could give ground to a funerary interpretation of the Horseman cult, as Maria Alexandrescu-Vianu had already suggested in 1980.⁵⁴

On the peak-site of Babyak,⁵⁵ a regular occupation by a local population had occurred as early as the 8th century BC, but votive slabs attesting to a cult practice devoted to Zeus and Hera didn't occur until during the Roman period. Both the use of the votive slab as a gift and the recognition of Zeus and Hera as gods are characteristics of cult practices of the Roman period in Thrace and should not be confused with the previous use of the place as a settlement.⁵⁶

In conclusion, I would like to underline the fact that information from the Roman period in Thrace is often misleading when used to provide information about cult practices from the archaic, classical, or Hellenistic periods. Firstly, this is because such a practice assumes a permanency in the empirical data that is inconsistent with the information provided by archaeological research. Secondly, this practice is grounded on an idea of religion that corresponds to what religion is considered nowadays in most parts of the world. However, as I have argued in this paper, this modern idea of religion should not be confused with ancient conceptions of religion. Finally, I have shown that, when one avoids this misleading, retrospective reading, a more complex stratified understanding of the ancient world can emerge.

52 Tsatsopoulou-Kaloudi, et al. *Αρχαία Ζώνη I - Το Ιερό του Απόλλωνα. Αρχαία Ζώνη*, vol. 1, Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού και Αθλητισμού, Εφορεία Αρχαιοτήτων Έβρου, 2015, p.133.

53 I. Vulchev, *Извънградските Светилища в Римската Провинция Тракия* [Extraurban Sanctuaries in the Roman Province of Thrace]. Sofia.: УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 2015, p.325-327.

54 M. Alexandrescu-Vianu, "Remarques sur l'héroïsation thrace", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* (DHA), 6 (1980), p.101-111.

55 M. Tonkova, "Jewellery representations on the jugs-rhytons with women's heads from the Panagyurishte treasure" in T. Stoyanov, M. Tonkova, Ch. Preshlenov, Ch. Popov (Ed.). *Heros Hephaistos. Studia in honorem Liubae Ognenova-Marinova*, Tarnovo: Фабер, 2005, p.262-275.

56 Cf. I. Vulchev in the same volume.

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