

Thracians as “Barbarians”: Greek Stereotypes, Slavery and Constructing of “The Other”

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Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal of Thracians in ancient Greek literature, examining how they were depicted as “barbarians” through the lens of Greek culture and societal norms. It discusses the factors contributing to this characterization, such as language, cultural differences, and lifestyle, alongside the Greeks’ tendency to contrast their own civilization with that of the Thracians, whom they saw as primitive and warlike. The portrayal of Thracians as drunken, brutal, and uncivilized is explored through literary references, while also highlighting the exceptions like certain individuals who were perceived as more refined. The paper further examines the association of Thracians with slavery in Athens. The development of the barbarian stereotype and its impact on the treatment of Thracians, particularly as slaves, is analyzed, with a focus on how the Greeks’ conceptualization of “The Other” shaped their perceptions and societal structures.

Keywords: Thracians, barbarians, slavery, Athens, ancient Greece, social hierarchy.

1. “Barbarism”

Thracian history and culture are not presented by the Thracians themselves, but through the perspective of those whose worldview is foreign, and often opposed, to the Thracian one. These outsiders carry not only their own ethno-cultural backgrounds and inherited mentalities but also their personal ancestral and socio-political positions. These factors shape their evaluative frameworks and creative approaches. Equally important are the characteristics of the literary genre within the tradition of the school to which the written sources belong. Each of these traditions follows its own principles, which leave distinct marks on individual works. This is especially evident in historiography, where writers from Ionia, Doris, and Attica provide conflicting accounts of the same events, actions, and phenomena. In their attempts to make the foreign comprehensible, these authors often resort to deliberate comparisons and necessary assimilation, which leads to a reinterpretation of Thracian reality. Prejudices are abundant, and the true nature of the Thracians is obscured by a focus on the exotic, bizarre, and anecdotal. Descriptions of the indigenous population are frequently exaggerated, shaped into imaginative constructs. The authors are less concerned with the accuracy of the events they describe than with the impact their creations have – aiming to make their depictions seem plausible and in line with the imagined reality of their readers.¹

¹ Popov, 2013: 16-20.

- Thracians were often depicted as warlike, treacherous, and brutal, reinforcing the Greek stereotype of barbarism.
- Thracians constituted a significant portion of Athens’ slaves, contributing to the development of the “barbarian” slave stereotype.
- Despite negative stereotypes, some Thracians were seen as exceptions, displaying qualities admired by Greeks.

The aim is to sharply juxtapose two contrasting worlds: Greek civilization versus Thracian barbarism. The first – brilliant and intellectually elevated; the second – bleakly gray and miserably barren, and the generalizations sought to thicken the gloomy impressions of “barbarism”, to share a general condescension towards people outside the Hellenic or Roman world (*interpretatio graeca/romana*).² In this sense, for both earlier and later historical periods, the Thracians are portrayed with much the same distinctive features. They are savage and treacherous, primitive and warlike, harsh in manners and ruthless with enemies. Euripides (*Alc.* 498) portrays Ares, the fearsome god of war, as the lord of Thrace of the golden *pelte*, that is, the crescent-shaped shield used by peltasts. Herodotus (5.7) notes that Ares, along with Dionysus and Artemis, was one of the few gods worshipped by the Thracians. According to Herodotus (5.6), the Thracians regarded farming as the least honorable occupation, believing that warfare and plunder represented the highest form of life. He further emphasizes their warlike nature by stating that the most prestigious prizes in Thracian athletic contests were given to those who excelled in single combat (5.8). Thucydides’ (7.29-30) account of the Mycalessus massacre depicts the terrifying Thracian brutality. In the 4th century BC, Isocrates (4.115) likened seafaring pirates to peltasts.³ Even during the Roman period, the Thracians retained their reputation for fighting. Vergil (*Aen.* 3.13) refers to Thrace as the land of Mars, while Horace (*Carm.* 2.16.5) describes it as a land consumed by war.⁴

Thracians are clearly called barbarians by Thucydides (2.97; 4.109; 7.29).⁵ He, probably influenced by his partial Thracian descent,⁶ interprets the barbarism of the Thracians in a different way. After his failure as a general to protect Amphipolis and the subsequent exile from Athens, Thucydides retired to his own estates in Thrace, where he devoted his entire time to research and history writing. He argues (1.6.6) that the barbarians of his own day live as the Greeks themselves once had. Thus, according to Matthew Sears, the Thracian barbarians should not be

² Translation into Bulgarian of sources regarding Thracians began at the very beginning of the 20th century: Gavril Katsarov and later Dimitar P. Dimitrov; followed by Christo Danov, Velizar Velkov, Georgi Mihailov, Ivan Venedikov (i.e. see Danov, 1944; Katsarov et al. 1949); translations were finally expanded by the founder of the Institute of Thracology – Alexander Fol (Fol 1975; 1976; 1979; 1980a; 1980b). And although the translated sources were sometimes (mainly in the 1970s–1980s) used in a more subjective manner, their subsequent study immensely contributed to the advance of scientific knowledge on ancient Thrace and the Thracians.

³ For Thracian peltasts, see Bondzhev (forthcoming).

⁴ Sears, 2013: 145-146.

⁵ Cartledge, 2002: 68-69.

⁶ The name of Thucydides’ father, Olorus (Marcel. *Thuc.* 2; cf. *Thuc.* 4.104.4; *Plut. Life of Cimon* 4.1), the name of his mother, Hegesipyle, his rights to exploit gold mines in Thrace, and the influence he enjoyed within the Thracian boundaries, reveal Thucydides’ Thracian connection and suggest that Thucydides’ family’s ties to Thrace went back to his great-great grandfather, the Thracian king Olorus (Porozhanov, 2009: 132; 2021: 177; Theodossiev, 2015: 4).

considered fundamentally different from the Greeks, but are simply at an earlier stage of societal and cultural evolution.⁷

There were several factors contributing to the labeling of the Thracian as a *βάρβαρος*: language, cultural differences, and lifestyle. The Thracian language was unrelated to Greek and was perceived by the Greeks as incomprehensible, often described as a “barbarous” tongue. While the Greeks considered their *poleis* to be a highly developed form of government based on the principles of democracy, Thracian society was more tribal, with a focus on chieftain-led groups and decentralized authority. But some customs, particularly some wine related and feasting practices, were considered by the Greeks to be rough or barbaric.

2. Wine and feasting practices

The records of Thracian affinity for wine are numerous. In fact Thracians, as other “barbarians”, were purported to be drunkards. Aristophanes (*Ach.* 141) ridicules the Athenian envoys to Sitalces by suggesting that they were held up so long in Thrace by continuous drinking parties. In a private legal speech of Demosthenes (54.39), a group of rowdy, drunken, and utterly sacrilegious Athenian youths is described. This group dubbed itself the Triballi after the famously uncouth and violent Thracian tribe.⁸ Macrobius (*Sat.* 1.18.1) attests, that Thracian “soothsayers drink large draughts of wine before delivering their prophecies”. Xenophon (*Hell.* 3.2.5) writes that when some Odrysians have found the dead bodies of their brothers in arms, they “drank a great deal of wine in their honor”. Aelian (*Hist.* 3.15) considers all Thracians to be “great drinkers”, while Athenaeus (10.60) concludes that “all the Thracians are addicted to drinking”. However, exceptions, such as Cotys, stand out: “in character he was not at all like a Thracian; for he was sober, and one noticed in him a certain gentleness and depth of sentiment distinctive of a gentleman” (Polybius, 27.12).⁹

According to the Greeks (Plato *Laws* 637e; much later Athenaeus 10.39), unlike them, the Thracians drank wine pure, not mixed with water. They considered this a barbaric custom, not realizing that Thracian wine was lighter than the thick Greek wines, although they themselves, like the Romans, drank unmixed wine on occasion. The Thracians liked to empty their cups at one draught, considered indecent in Greek society: “For he too hated to drink unmixed wine with his mouth wide open in large Thracian gulps, but enjoyed the small cup” (Callimachus, Fr. 178.12; also Athenaeus, 10.60).

Xenophon (*Anab.* 7.3.21-33) describes in detail one of the feasts of Seuthes II (400 BC).¹⁰ Several times nobles drained entire horns of wine as they drank to Seuthes and the king himself emptied a horn with Xenophon. After drinking at the feast, Seuthes let out a war cry and performed a dance emulating combat in order to show his own martial prowess. As if this feat of

⁷ Sears, 2013: 148; 2015: 315. For the cultural appeal of Thrace for the Athenian elite see Sears, 2013: 174-179.

⁸ Sears, 2013: 147.

⁹ Mihailov, 1972: 246-247. Cotys is reviled by Demosthenes (23.114) as directing a drunken rage against his foes, Athens included.

¹⁰ According to Sears (2013: 15-16), Xenophon is a well-informed source, but he had clear biases from which his history seems to suffer at certain points (see Cawkwell & Warner, 1978: 7-46; Zhekov, 2021: 90-91). His portrayal of the Thracians, especially Seuthes, appears in many places to be a hostile one, probably because Seuthes failed to deliver the promised rewards to Xenophon and his troops. What Xenophon tells about Seuthes’ court, however, is in line with other sources concerning the Thracian nobility, including material remains.

dexterity was not enough, at the end of the festivities Seuthes sprang up, showing no sign whatsoever of being drunk in spite of the large quantities of drink he had consumed.¹¹

Xenophon (*Anab.* 6.1.5-6) also describes another feast:

After they had made libations and sung the paeon, two Thracians rose up first and began a dance in full armour to the music of a flute, leaping high and lightly and using their sabres; finally, one struck the other, as everybody thought, and the second man fell, in a rather skillful way. And the Paphlagonians set up a cry. Then the first man despoiled the other of his arms and marched out singing the Sitalces, while other Thracians carried off the fallen dancer, as though he were dead; in fact, he had not been hurt at all.

What is here Xenophon actually describing is the Thracian dance *colabrisimus*. It has been mentioned by Athenaeus (14.27) – a dance which expressed firmness and swiftness, as did the Greek dance *cordax* and *sicinnis*.¹²

And while these accounts attest for an innocent feasting practices, there are accounts of uncivilized ones:

. . . some Thracians make a sport of hanging at their drinking-bouts; they attach a noose at a certain height, directly under which they place a stone which may be easily rolled by any who step upon it. They then draw lots, and the one who receives the lot mounts the stone, holding a pruning-knife, and places his neck in the noose; another comes by and pushes the stone; and while it is rolling from under him, the man hanging there, if he does not quickly cut himself loose with the knife before it is too late, is dead, and the others laugh, holding the poor devil's death a great joke. (Athenaeus 4.42)

. . . the Odrysaes are noted for their savage cruelty beyond all others, being so habituated to the shedding of human blood that when there were no enemies at hand, at their feasts, after a satiety of food and drink they plunged the sword into the bodies of their own countrymen, as if they were those of foreigners. (Ammianus Marcellinus 27.4.9)

3. Thracians as “The Others”, Barbarians and Slaves

The earliest Greek literature shows little to no evidence of negative stereotyping of barbarians. Homer only uses the word *barbaros* in a descriptive way (such as for the *barbarophonoi* Carians).¹³ There is no clear indication of any process of “othering” in the 7th and 6th centuries BC.¹⁴ It is later when the Greeks developed a dualistic mindset, according to which all of humanity was split into two distinct and opposing categories: Hellenes (Greeks) and *barbaroi* (non-Greeks). The *barbaroi* were not merely non-Greek but were seen as fundamentally different from the Greeks, unable to ever become like them – they were the ultimate representation of “The

¹¹ Sears, 2013: 211.

¹² Athenaeus adds that during a dance of a similar kind, Philip II's brother – Alexander, was killed. For *colabrisimus* see Lawler & Kober, 1945.

¹³ For *barbarophonoi* see Almagor, 2000; Isaac, 2017: 197-198.

¹⁴ In fact, during that period, Near-Eastern mythology and philosophy were absorbed into the mainstream of Greek religion and culture (see Burkert, 1992). If the archaic period was characterized by exchange and Near Eastern influence on Greek culture, the classical period is characterized by confrontation and polarity (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 8).

Other”.¹⁵ By the time Aeschylus’ *Persians* was performed for the first time at the Athenian Great Dionysia festival in 472 BC, the process of “othering” and the creation of a uniform barbarian stereotype were already well established in Greece.¹⁶ And although the turning point was the defeat of the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–479 BC, after which the Athenians based their anti-Persian empire,¹⁷ Vincent Rosivach does not believe that the Athenians waited until the 5th century BC to begin “inventing” the *barbaros*. He asserts that “if the Athenians were already enslaving *barbaroi* before the Persian wars and before the advent of democracy, it is reasonable to assume that they had also begun to construct an ideological *barbaros* which depended neither on their experience in the wars nor on the ideology of democracy, but was rather shaped in its earliest stages, more simply, by the Athenians’ experience with the enslaved *barbaroi* in their midst” and that “Athenians began to enslave Thracians in the second half of the 6th century BC”.¹⁸

In the 1980s early Greek society was considered to be a “society with slaves”, where slaves were few and slavery played a limited economic role;¹⁹ after Solon’s reform in 594/3 BC only people who could not speak the Attic dialect could be enslaved, which forced the Athenian elite to mass importation of slaves, leading to the emergence of “slave societies”, where slavery constituted a dominant economic, social, and political institution and slaves comprised a substantial proportion of the population. But research in the 2010s has showed,²⁰ that Greek elites depended overwhelmingly on slave labor already in the Homeric world (800–700 BC), meaning that early Greek communities were already slave societies.²¹

In the 6th century BC, Greece required a significant influx of labor to support its expanding economy. But it was not only industries such as mining, viticulture, milling, smelting, and weaving that demanded substantial manpower; essential everyday household activities, like cutting wood, drawing water and making bread also required an enormous quantity of labor. And it was going to be supplied through slavery. Trade was the primary source of barbarian slaves in most parts of the Greek world, significantly expanding the reach of slave-trading areas across the ancient world, extending to the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.²² The wars that accompanied the rise of large states and empires, such as the Odrysian kingdom or the Royal Scythian kingdom in the Black Sea, created major opportunities for capturing slaves. The same was true during the crises or collapses of such states. Greek colonies in the Western Mediterranean, Thrace, and the Black Sea, along with their commercial networks, provided a convenient and profitable outlet for the thousands of slaves generated by these conflicts. For example, a single day of campaigning by Seuthes around 400 BC, who sought to expand his power,

¹⁵ For research focusing on the relationship between ancient Greeks and “The Other” – that is, non-Greek cultures – see E. Hall, 1989; J. Hall, 1997; 2002; Cohen, 2000; Malkin, 2001; Harrison, 2002; Finkelberg, 2005; Vlassopoulos, 2013.

¹⁶ Cartledge 2022: 53–54. According to S. Saïd (2002: 62), there are 101 examples of *βάρβαρος* in the 18 extant tragedies of Euripides (to which must be added 7 examples in the fragments) as well as one example of *βαρβαρόω* and one of *μειξοβάρβαρος*, or a total of 110 attestations against 14 of *βάρβαρος* (plus 4 of *κάρβαρος*) in the seven preserved tragedies of Aeschylus and 6 examples of *βάρβαρος* (and one of *βαρβαρόω*) in the seven preserved tragedies of Sophocles.

¹⁷ Hall, 1989: 16–17.

¹⁸ Rosivach, 1999: 154, 157.

¹⁹ Finley, 1980.

²⁰ Harris, 2012; Lewis, 2018: 107–124; Vlassopoulos, 2021.

²¹ Vlassopoulos, 2023: 68.

²² For the Black Sea routes, see Fischer, 2016; Parmenter, 2020.

resulted in a thousand captives who were swiftly sold in the nearby Greek colony of Perinthos (Xen. *Anab.* 7.3.48).²³

Barbarian slaves from the Black Sea or Thrace could be sold in the Athenian port within just a few days of being captured. The short maritime distances meant that there was no need for specialized slave ships or specific slave routes; slaves were transported along the same paths as other goods. As a result, the price of slaves in classical Athens seems to be significantly lower than in other ancient societies for which we have sufficient data (such as Rome and Mesopotamia). On average, Athenian slaves cost about the same as the annual wages of a skilled craftsman. Given these low prices, it is unsurprising that most slaves in places like Athens appear to have been first-generation non-Greeks. Thus, wealthy Athenians typically owned around 10 slaves. There are notable exceptions, such as the politician and general Nicias, who owned a thousand slaves that he rented out to mine operators (Xen. *Ways and Means* 4.4),²⁴ and there are also examples of workshop owners who employed 30, 50, or even 60 slaves.²⁵

When the Greeks referred to barbarians, they typically did not consider them as a varied group of people with distinct national traits who simply weren't Greek. Instead, they viewed them as a unified group, all sharing a common nature, despite their obvious diversity. The Athenian desire to make chattel slaves of barbarians is easily explained – psychologically it is much easier to treat someone as property, if that someone is denied personhood, by being seen *a priori* as “The Other”, as a barbarian. One of the most obvious differences for the Greeks between themselves and the barbarians was language: the Greeks spoke Greek, while the barbarians did not. As large numbers of barbarians became slaves to Athenian masters, the relationship between Greeks and non-Greeks evolved. It was no longer just a matter of speaking different languages, but of barbarians either not speaking Greek or not speaking any real language at all. For example, Sophocles (*Trach.* 1060) has Heracles divide the world into Greece and “language-less land”; Aristophanes (*Birds* 199-200) contrasts the term *βάρβαρος* with speech; and Aeschylus (*Ag.* 1050), Herodotus (2.57), and Aristophanes (*Frogs* 679-682) all compare the speech of barbarians to the sound of twittering birds. What might have once been seen as a simple language difference now became a marker reinforcing the belief that barbarians were inferior to Greeks.²⁶

Aristotle's concept of slaves-by-nature referred to barbarians, and from a typical Athenian perspective, all barbarians were, at least potentially, slaves. Thracian barbarians, for example, could be viewed as culturally “primitive”, especially in comparison to the Athenians. This perception of “primitiveness” likely played a role in the belief that these barbarians, and barbarians in general, were mentally inferior.²⁷ So through Aristotle we get access in not very rarefied form to the thinking or rather prejudice of “ordinary” Greeks.²⁸ The barbarians were portrayed as impudent, rash and unsophisticated, relying on the “outdated machismo” of their monarchs that was no match for the “covert and cunning activities of the Greeks”.²⁹ In his *Symposium* (2.4), Xenophon has Socrates mention that free men who exercise in the gymnasium have a distinctive scent. Aristocratic views are further reflected in the visual representations of

²³ Vlassopoulos, 2023: 72.

²⁴ According to Harris (2012: 359), this figure should not be accepted uncritically. In this passage Xenophon is deploring the relative poverty of 4th-century BC Athens and comparing it unfavorably with the Golden Age of the 5th century BC. To make the contrast effective, Xenophon is inflating the number of slaves held by these prominent Athenians during this earlier period of prosperity.

²⁵ Vlassopoulos, 2023: 73-74.

²⁶ Rosivach, 1999: 142, 153.

²⁷ Rosivach, 1999: 152. For examples of mentally inferior barbarians/slaves, see Rosivach, 1999: 148-149.

²⁸ Cartledge, 2002: 56.

²⁹ Hall, 1989: 122-123.

slaves and free people, where slaves are often portrayed by vase painters and on *stelai* as notably smaller, unattractive, or tattooed.³⁰ The archetypal ugly slave was Aesop, traditionally a Thracian or Phrygian,³¹ and imagined as pot-bellied, weasel-armed, hunchbacked, a squalid, squinting, swarthy midget with crooked legs;³² a walking disaster, deaf and what is worse, dumb (*Life of Aesop*, G and W 1).

Thracians constituted a significant portion, possibly even the majority, of both public and private slaves in Athens. Among the 28 slaves listed in the Attic *Stelai* as seized from the *hermokopidai* in the late 5th century BC, nine were Thracian, making them the largest ethnic group represented.³³ Thracian maids and nurses were especially prevalent, and the portrayal of maids with tattoos on Athenian vases reflected the fact that tattooing was a common practice among the Thracians. Many actual Thracian maids would have had such tattoos,³⁴ regarded as a sign of barbarism by the Athenians, since in Antiquity tattoos were used to mark slaves and war captives. At the end of the 4th century BC, presumably to serve the large population of Thracian slaves working in the mines, private shrines of Bendis were set up in Laurion.³⁵

Thracian slaves went to Greek *apoikiai*, but slaves moved in the opposite direction as well. The 5th-century BC historian Charon of Lampsacus recounts an intriguing tale about Naris, a Bisaltian Thracian, sold as a slave in the Greek *apoikia* of Cardia in the Thracian Chersonese. He became a barber and overheard the Cardians in his shop discussing an oracle predicting that the Bisaltians would one day attack them. Naris also learned that the Cardians had trained their horses to dance to flute music for entertainment during their symposia. Eventually, Naris escaped to the Bisaltians, became their leader, and purchased a slave flute-player girl from Cardia. She taught the Bisaltians how to play the flute, and they used the music to confuse the Cardian cavalry, leading to their victory.³⁶

4. Conclusion

The depiction of Thracians as barbarians in Greek literature is deeply rooted in the cultural and ideological divide between the Greek and non-Greek worlds. The Greeks' portrayal of the Thracians, often as savage, brutal, and uncivilized, highlights the broader tendency to classify those outside their civilization as inferior. This dualistic worldview, which categorized humanity into Hellenes and barbarians, shaped the Greeks' perceptions of neighboring cultures, including the Thracians. The Thracians' language, customs, and tribal social structure marked them as distinct from Greek society, contributing to their status as "The Other" in Greek thought. One of the most significant aspects of the Greek portrayal of Thracians is their association with slavery. Thracians made up a substantial portion of the enslaved population in Athens, where they were seen as a prime source of labor. This association between Thracians and slavery reinforced the

³⁰ Millett, 2007: 196.

³¹ For all sources on Aesop, see Parmenter, 2020: 84-85. See also Lissarrague, 2000.

³² Paul Millett uses the description of Keith Hopkins (1991: 13).

³³ Pritchett & Pippin, 1956: 278. Sears, 2013: 150, 155.

³⁴ Tsiafakis, 2000: 372-376; 2015: 96-102; 2016: 267-268.

³⁵ Garland, 1992: 112. The introduction of the cult of Bendis probably took place around 430/429 BC, and was closely connected with the alliance between Athens and Sitalces that was negotiated a few months earlier, as war between Athens and Sparta loomed on the horizon; it is also possible that the Athenians wished to ensure the loyalty of those many Thracian metics already living in Athens in order to protect against any possible unrest in the city and also to make use of the foreigners on campaign (Sears 2013: 153). For Bendis in Attica, see also Simms 1988; Planeaux, 2000; Janouchova, 2013.

³⁶ *FGrH* 262 F1. Vlassopoulos, 2013: 124-125.

Greek belief in the inherent superiority of their own culture and the justification for the subjugation of non-Greeks.

In much of Greek, particularly Athenian, discourse, Thrace was despised, ridiculed, and even feared as a primitive and backward society of fierce warriors. Their aggression was paired with greed, treachery, and drunkenness. Despite the widespread stereotype of Thracians as savages in Greek literature, the worship of their goddess Bendis was adopted and publicly funded in Athens.³⁷ While Thracian characters often represented negative behavior that Athenians sought to distance themselves from, Thracians were not inherently enemies of the Greeks, and certainly not of Athens specifically; they simply belonged to the category of “The Others”.³⁸

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³⁷ In the 4th century BC the sacrifices to Bendis involved the third largest expenditure for buying animals, after the festivals of the City Dionysia and the Olympic Games (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 144).

³⁸ Tsiafakis, 2000: 388.

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