

Thracian Royalty: The Institution of the King-Priest and Later Accounts of the Importance of Gifts and Their Means of Acquisition

Asen Bondzhev

New Bulgarian University, Department of History, Sofia, BULGARIA

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Abstract

The first part of this study focuses on the institution of the Thracian king-priest – a leader who in addition to the political, also directs religious affairs, as attested since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC not just by written accounts, but by the tripartite vessel from the Valchitran Treasure and the numerous excavated double axes as well. The second part of the research is dedicated to the role of gifts in Thracian aristocratic society. It is so significant that according to Thucydides, it is “impossible to get anything done without a present.” Special attention is therefore given to the personal account of Xenophon, who describes in full detail the method of Seuthes II for acquiring gifts.

Keywords: Thracians, king-priest, double axes, archaeology, eschara, Thracian treasures, royal gifts.

1. The Thracian Institution of the King-Priest

The 12.5 kg Thracian Valchitran Treasure (16th–12th centuries BC, more probably towards the later period) is so far the largest Bronze Age gold treasure found in Europe. It consists of 13 pieces, but one of them has a peculiar and mysterious look and is considered as one of the most certain testimonies for the presence of the institution of the king-priest in Thrace since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC – the tripartite vessel, consisting of three separated gold, tear shaped vessels attached to their tubular electrum (an alloy of gold and silver) handles.¹ This unique vessel may have been placed on a ritual cart, perhaps to mix the *kykeyon* (a sacred drink).²

* This paper is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Dimitar Popov (1950-2015).

¹ Venedikov, 1987; Valeva, 2015. For Thracian treasures in general see Casson, 1977; *Gold der Thraker* 1979; *Gold of the Thracian Horseman* 1987; Marazov, 1998.

² Venedikov, 1987; Eisenberg 1998: 9. For *kykeyon* see Webster, 2000. Discovery of fragments of ergot (fungi containing LSD-like psychedelic alkaloids) in a temple dedicated to the two Eleusinian goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, excavated at the Mas Castellar site (Girona, Spain) provided some possible support for the theory of ergot being used in the *kykeyon*. Ergot fragments were found inside a vase and

- Jordanes directly attests the Getic leader Comosicus being a king-priest.
- According to Thucydides, in Thrace it is “impossible to get anything done without a present.”
- In Thrace more disgrace was being attached to not giving when asked than to asking and being refused.



Figure 1. The Valchitran Treasure, discovered in 1924. The kantharos has a weight of 4.5 kg. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria



Figure 2. The tripartite vessel

We find numerous written accounts for the presence of king-priests in Ancient Thrace as well. It is Homer (*Il.* 10.435) who tells the story of Rhesus' glorious arrival in order to help the besieged Trojans and describes him as king of the Thracians. Although the poetic account lacks the slightest hint of his priestly affiliation, the doubt is later dispelled by Euripides. In the tragedy *Rhesus* (900-972) he states through the words of the Muse, who laments the unfortunate fate of

within the dental calculus of a 25-year-old man (Juan-Stresserras, 2005). Gorman (1979: 200) reminds, that “drugs were only a means of escaping from the body . . . they only allowed the psyche to become aware of its own potentialities.”

her son that “he [Rhesus] shall not descend into earth’s darksome soil,” but will be “restored to life, no longer man but God, even as the prophet of Bacchus did dwell in a grotto ‘neath Pangaeus.” Euripides does not separate priestly abilities from political functions, but unites them in the figure of the ruler.³

Strabo (7.8.35) writes about one of Thrace’s singers – Phamyris: “it was on this shore [Mt. Athos] that Phamyris the Thracian reigned, who was a man of the same pursuits as Orpheus.” Given the fact that Apollonius (1.34) and Conon (45) consider Orpheus a king-priest, Strabo’s information about Phamyris leads to the conclusion of the latter being another ancient Thracian king-priest.⁴

Another example is Eumolpus, despite the complexity of the myth about him (*Homeric Hymn 2 to Demeter* 147, 474).⁵ This Thracian king arrived with his troops to help the Athenians in their war with Eleusis, but he was also the founder of the Eleusinian Mysteries there and founded the Eumolpid family, whose representatives performed the functions of the hierophant – the high priest. A king-priest himself, the Thracian bequeathed the institution to his descendants.

Phineus is a Thracian king of Salmydessus, near the Bosphorus, but at the same time he has mantic powers – he is a seer (Apollod. 1.9.21; Ammanius Marcellinus *History* 22.8.14; Sophocles *Antig.* 966-967).

The earliest accounts about Zalmoxis are from Herodotus (4.93-96), but he does not describe him as a ruler. Despite of that most probably he is the ruler of the Getae. He was the Thracian leader in the political struggles with the Hellenic colonists and synthesized all the political activity in response to the campaign of the Persian king Darius I (522-486 BC) against the Scythians in the late 6th century BC. Herodotus talks about a banqueting-hall, “where he received and feasted the chief men of the tribe and instructed them meanwhile that neither he himself nor his guests nor their descendants in succession after them would die” (4.95). This account of a Thracian king-priest initiating the aristocratic elite in a hall resembles the one of Conon (45) about the king-priest Orpheus, who initiates “Thracians and Macedonians . . . in a large building well built for ceremonies.” Plato (*Charm.* 155-158) and Strabo (7.3.5) also talk about Zalmoxis’ king-priest abilities, which further substantiates the institution of the king-priest.⁶

³ Popov, 2014: 216. A. Nock (1926: 184 ff.; Linforth, 1941: 66) does not exclude does not exclude the possibility that Euripides’ verses about Rhesus could be interpreted as referring to Zalmoxis.

Dimitar Popov gives Maron, Euantheus’ son, a priest of Apollo (Homer *Od.* 9.196-211) as another example for a Thracian king-priest with the main argument that the term ἀμφιπόλων (handmaid) is only being used in the cases when servants welcome guests in a royal palace. But Zlatozara Gocheva (2008, Gočeva, 2008) considers Maron to be a Greek and a priest of Apollo, at that time an unknow god to the Thracians. It is very well known that the Thracians of this early age worshipped the sun. This is proven by the many monuments and written records alike (Gočeva, 1978), but has nothing to do with the Asia Minor cult of Apollo, especially in this period. Herodotus (5.7) lists as main Thracian deities Ares, Dionysus and Artemis, as well as Hermes; there is no Apollo among them. If Herodotus knew of Apollo’s veneration among the Thracian population, even if only in Aegean Thrace, he would have mentioned it. Nor does he even give an account of the well-known solar cult, since it has no name and is not known to him from monuments which were more scattered on high mountain places. Indeed, a little later, with the increased Greek colonization, primarily along the Black Sea coast, Greek colonists, especially those from the Asia Minor coast, brought the cult of Apollo, revered as the main patron of the colonists. But by the end of Hellenism, he was mainly worshipped by the Greek population on the Black Sea coast.

⁴ Apollonius (1.34) points that Orpheus was ruler of the Bistones and Conon (*Narrations* 45) – ruler of Macedonians and Odrysians. See Bondzhev, 2024.

⁵ Mihaylov, 1972: 192-193; Yanakieva, 1993; Popov, 2014: 219.

⁶ Popov, 2014: 220-221.

In a much later account Jordanes (*Getica* 73) directly attests the Getic leader being a king-priest:

After the death of Deceneus, they held Comosicus in almost equal honor, because he was not inferior in knowledge. By reason of his wisdom, he was accounted their priest and king, and he judged the people with the greatest uprightness.

2. Archaeological accounts for the institution of the King-Priest

The existence of the institution is also confirmed by the discovery of double axes throughout Bulgarian territory. They were widespread throughout the Mediterranean during the Cretan-Mycenaean era and were considered cult monuments symbolizing power. Their sacred significance can hardly be disputed, since they were passed down through inheritance and could be preserved for generations as relics. This is the emblem of the king, which embodies the political and religious division of power and the union of the two beginnings in syncretic unity.

Found in many different places, the double axes testify not to the isolated presence of the king-priests in some geographical areas, but to their presence throughout Thrace regardless of the names of the tribes and the extent of their territories. Their widespread adoption and popularity in society is documented not only in the last centuries of the Bronze Age, but also in the Early Iron Age: cult axes with an artistically crafted heel date back to the 10th–8th centuries BC; axe amulets date to the 8th–7th c. BC and as late as the 6th c. BC, when their development finally ceased.⁷

Another example from archaeology are the excavations of the best studied Thracian city – Seuthopolis.⁸ In the palace of the Thracian king Seuthes III (ca. last quarter of the 4th century BC) were found two clay platforms, but they are not ordinary hearths, but cult altars – *escharoi*,⁹ which have parallels and a probable origin in the Mediterranean of the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC: e.g. in the sanctuary of the palace at Phaistos on Crete, in the altars of Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos and mainland Greece from the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.¹⁰ In these sites, the monumental and ornate *escharoi* played an important role in the cult ceremonies performed by the dynasts. The meaning and functional purpose of the sacred hearth in the throne room at Seuthopolis is equivalent to them, although it dates from the 3rd century BC. They thus prove to be a good testimony to the vitality of the king-priest institution from the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC to the era of early Hellenism, when Seuthopolis existed.

The nature of the local leader who directs political and religious affairs is confirmed by the second *eschara* in the palace. It is located in the sanctuary of the great Samothracian deities. The multifunctionality of the home indicates that the king's palace was both a monumental building with many living quarters and a large reception hall that housed a temple. This is well attested by the inscription found in the same room.¹¹ Regardless of the presence of altars in every

⁷ The earliest axe is dated 12th–10th centuries BC, found in Karlukovo (Lovetch). After that follow: end of the 10th – beginning of the 8th c. BC – Stara Zagora; 8th c. BC – Teteven; second half of the 8th c. – beginning of 7th c. BC – Chomakovci (Vratsa); 7th c. BC – Kamenno pole (Vratsa); second half of 7th c. BC – Rila Monastery; 6th c. BC – Gorna Lyubota (Bosilegrad) (Kitov, 1979; Popov, 2014: 228; see also Venedikov, 1973: 26-33).

⁸ Dimitrov, 1961; Danov, 1962; Dimitrov & Čičikova, 1978; Dimitrov et al., 1984; Velkov, 1991: 7-11; Manov, 1998; Archibald, 1999; Tacheva, 2000; Popov, 2002: 122-134; Rabadzhiev, 2002: 10-54; Lehmann, 2016; Chichikova & Dimitrov, 2016.

⁹ For *eschara* (plural: *escharoi*) see Ekroth, 2002: 25-27.

¹⁰ Nilsson, 1955: 267-270, fig. 4.1.

¹¹ Dimitrov, 1957: 185.

home, the sacred hearths here are associated with the city's most important official cult, whose high priest in the mystical sacraments is the king.¹²

3. The importance of royal gifts

According to Thucydides (2.97), during the reign of Seuthes I (424-405 BC) the tribute from all Thracian districts and the Hellenic cities amounted to about 400 talents (one talent equals c. 26 kg) in gold and silver (equaling 2 400 000 drachmas). There were also presents in gold and silver to a no less amount. Probably that is why Diodorus (12.50.2) sums it up to “more than a thousand talents”.¹³

But even this evidence of the wealth of the Thracian kings at the height of their power pales in comparison with the findings of the archaeological excavations. They create the milieu that surrounded the elite, illustrate their everyday accessories, and add to the protocol-ceremonial list of objects that are missing from the written sources. The best example is the world-famous 6,2 kg golden Panagyrishte Treasure (310-290 BC), whose metal weight alone would have been enough to pay an army of 762 soldiers for a year.¹⁴



Figure 3. The Panagyrishte Treasure, discovered in 1949. The amphora has a weight of 1.6 kg. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria. Photo: Nikolay Genov.

¹² Popov, 2014: 232-233.

¹³ Using the existing Athenian tribute lists from 454/453 to 404/403 BC (Meritt, 1939-1953) (or rather the absence of evidence in the registers on taxes paid by *poleis* located along the Thracian coasts), Kalin Porozhanov (2021: 179-279) calculated the eventual tribute paid (voluntarily or through coercion) by the Greek *poleis* and *emporía* (trading posts) of the Thracian Sea and the Sea of Marmara to the Thracian kings (on which their existence depended much more than Athens) as follows: Teres I (first half of 5th c. BC) – 9-13 talents and 2000 drachmas; Sparacodus (448-444 BC) – 17 talents and 1000 drachmas (eventually, but less likely, 10 more talents from Perinthus); Sitalces (444-424 BC) – 77-78 talents; Amadocus I (Medocus I) (405-386 BC) – no data, but presumably 400 talents from his whole kingdom (just as Seuthes I), half of which from the *poleis* and *emporía*, the other half from the subjugated Thracian ethnical groups; Hebryzelmis (386-383 BC) – the same; Cotys I (384/3-360 BC) – no data, but most probably over 1000 talents from his whole kingdom, including the Thracians (cf. Demosth. 23.110 – Cotys' son Cersobleptes (360-341 BC) received as tribute 30 talents from Chersonese and 200 talents from the ports, but his kingdom was only 1/3 to 1/2 of the size of Cotys' kingdom).

¹⁴ Venedikov, 1970: 11. For the Panagyrishte Treasere see Tsontchev, 1955; Venedikov, 1961; von Bothmer, 1962; Kontoleon, 1962; Corbett, 1964; Strong, 1966: 97, 102; Griffith, 1974; Hoddinott, 1975: 85, 89; Moorey, 1976; Marazov, 1977; Venediko, 1977: 39; von Bothmer, 1977; Vickers, 1989: 33-37; Rotroff, 1998; Marazov, 1998: 145-148; Archibald, 1998: 271, 328; Chary, 2011: 1, 145; Ovadia, 2014; Valeva, 2015; Holt, 2016: 47.

The fact that many of the Thracian treasures were not found in graves or tombs, but were buried directly in the ground, means that they were not intended to serve for the next life of the deceased, but were most likely hidden as a result of sudden attacks.

The Thracians were known for their lavish clothing, the luxury of their weaponry and the precious tableware. Such decoration and ostentation are typical of the Scythians, Persians, and Eastern people in general – according to Herodotus (4.104), “the Agathyrsians are the most luxurious of men and wear gold ornaments for the most part”. These habits aroused the ridicule and derision of the Hellenes, who often mocked the adorned “barbarians”. Precious objects abound especially during feasts and feasts. According to Diodorus (21.12), Dromichaetes’ noble guests drink from gold and silver goblets and eat at a silver table. Just as the Paeonian kings make drinking-cups out of enormous horns and cover over the brims with silver or with gold (Athenaeus 11.51), so does the Dacian king Decebalus also drink from a gold-plated horn (*Greek Anthology* 6.332).¹⁵

The beauty and virtuosity of the workmanship, the rich decoration and the high price make the exquisite objects accessible only to the aristocracy. We find the Thracian word for these people in Hesychius (s.v. Zibutides) – *zibutides*, meaning “shining”, “radiant” people, in order to emphasize their high place in the hierarchy, obtained not without the help of ostentation of clothes, armaments, jewels, or, more simply put, through the possession of wealth and treasures.¹⁶

The reality is that wealth and treasure are most often acquired not through economic means, but through war and plunder. Plunder became an important means of establishing the authority of the dynasts and their entourage. Hence, the sharp reluctance of the Thracian aristocracy to toil, attested not just by Herodotus (5.6) – “not to work is counted most honourable, and to be a worker of the soil is above all things dishonourable: to live on war and plunder is the most honourable thing”, but by Plutarch (*Sayings* [*Apophth.*] 174d) as well: “Teres, the father of Sitalces, said, when he was out of the army and had nothing to do, he thought there was no difference between him and his grooms”.

Xenophon personally witnessed and described in full detail another method for acquiring gifts – that of Seuthes II (401/400–387/386 BC), by inviting to dinner the generals and captains of the Hellenic mercenaries who came to him at the very end of the 5th century BC:

When they had reached his doors and were about to go in to dinner, there stood a certain Heracleides, of Maroneia; this fellow came up to each single one of the guests who, as he imagined, were able to make a present to Seuthes . . . it was customary when Seuthes invited people to dinner, for those who were thus invited to give him presents...

When the drinking was well under way, there came in a Thracian with a white horse, and taking a full horn he said: “I drink your health, Seuthes, and present to you this horse; on his back pursuing you shall catch whomever you choose, and retreating you shall not fear the enemy.” Another brought in a boy and presented him in the same way, with a health to Seuthes, while another presented clothes for his wife. Timasion also drank his health and presented to him a silver bowl and a carpet worth ten minas . . . Then Xenophon . . . arose courageously after taking the horn and said: “And I, Seuthes, give you myself and these my comrades to be your faithful friends.” (*Anabasis* 7.3.15–7.3.30)

This genuine description attests for the popularity of gift-giving among the Thracians and is confirmed by Thucydides (2.97), according to whom: it is “impossible to get anything done without a present”. In addition to the yearly tribute of 400 talents “there were also presents in gold

¹⁵ See also Blumenstengel, 1964.

¹⁶ Detschew, 1976: 187; Velkova, 1986; Popov, 2014: 283.

and silver to a no less amount, besides stuff, plain and embroidered, and other articles, made not only for the king, but also for the Odrysian lords and nobles” and “more disgrace being attached to not giving when asked than to asking and being refused.”¹⁷ In fact, it is not only through the means of military power and religion that the Odrysian kings established and maintained political power, but also through gifts.¹⁸ The royal gift exchange, a practice originally adopted from the Persian court,¹⁹ was especially important for legitimation.²⁰

Thucydides also states that among Thracians there was “a custom opposite to that prevailing in the Persian kingdom, namely, of taking rather than giving” (2.97.4). But that is quite opposite to Xenophon’s account (*Anab.* 7.3.20): Heracleides convinces the latter to honor Seuthes II – “I am quite sure that the greater the gifts you bestow upon this man, the greater the favours that you will receive at his hands.” According to Plutarch (*Sayings* 174d), the Odrysian king Cotys, “when one gave him a leopard, gave him a lion for it:” obviously the case represents a fairly equal dynastic exchange; yet the advantage is on the side of Cotys, because the lion is the king of the beasts. Apparently, in relations between equals, the most important thing is that if the receiver does not respond equally, he remains under the dependence of the giver.

4. Conclusion

The first written accounts of the Thracian king-priests refer mainly to the period of the 13th–12th centuries BC, when the interactions of Thracians and Achaeans were most active – at the time of the Trojan War.²¹ But the institution of the king-priest was present much later – during the contacts of the Greek colonists with the Thracian coastline in the 8th–6th centuries BC and as late as the 1st century BC among the Getae. It would be correct to state that since for most of human history the desire for the material has always been stronger than the pursuit of the spiritual, so the pursuit of political affairs has always been greater than that for religious ones, and hence the blatant aspiration for luxury, treasures and gifts, as a symbol of political and hierarchical power, especially among the Odrysians. But on the other hand, it is the preserved treasures that arouse our admiration and curiosity about some ancient cultures and challenge us to explore their spiritual beliefs as well.

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¹⁷ See Zournatzi, 2000: 692.

¹⁸ Greenwalt, 2015: 337.

¹⁹ Brosius, 2011: 145.

²⁰ Sobotkova, 2013: 135.

²¹ Popov, 1981.

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