

The Thracians

Lionel Casson

Chairman

Department of Classics

New York University

When Hector led the army of Troy against the Greek invaders, he had allies from far and near fighting at his side. There was even a king from distant Thrace who arrived, as a character in the *Iliad* reported, with

the biggest and handsomest horses I ever saw,
whiter than snow and swifter than the winds,
and a chariot finely wrought with silver and gold.

The arms that he brought were also of gold. A taste for war, for silver and gold, and for fine horses—Homer neatly caught the characteristics that were the hallmark of Thracian aristocrats throughout ancient history.

The earliest traces of man in Thrace—roughly speaking what is today part of northeastern Greece and south-eastern Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and European Turkey—go back to Paleolithic times, forty thousand years ago. By about 6000 B.C. its fields were being tilled by a settled agricultural population; Thrace had entered the Neolithic Age. Two thousand years later some of the inhabitants discovered the riches under the soil, abundant deposits of minerals, and turned to mining and metalwork. In central Bulgaria archaeologists have come upon shafts sunk deep into the earth to extract copper ore and have excavated numerous copper tools, weapons, and ornaments, all dating from this remote period. By 3000 B.C. Thrace's precocious smiths were working in gold—probably panned from rivers rather than mined—and were fashioning the rings, bracelets, plaques, and other adornments that were among the earliest gold objects to come out of Europe.

Sometime around 1500 B.C. there swept in upon this land the Thracians Homer wrote about, the hard-riding, opulently equipped warriors. They spoke an Indo-European language—one akin to Latin and Greek and most of the other languages that now prevail in Europe—so they must have been part of the vast movement that brought speakers of Indo-European from their homeland, wherever it was, into southern Europe and Asia Minor. The new arrivals established themselves as a

ruling aristocracy and indulged fully in that fondness for gold which Homer observed. Some fifty years ago the owner of a farm at Vulchitrun in northern Bulgaria, while turning the soil, stumbled upon a hoard that must have belonged to one of these Thracian chieftains, a collection of solid-gold bowls, cups, lids, and a strange three-part vessel, with an aggregate weight of more than twenty-seven pounds; one bowl alone weighs nearly nine.

The Thracians, both the nobles and the peasants, were caught up in the churning of peoples that took place between 1200 and 1000 B.C. as the curtain came down on the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean. When the Iron Age opened, there was a new cast of characters, including the Greeks of Classical times and later, those whom we know so well from their renowned intellectual and artistic achievements. Thanks to these Greeks, the Thracians finally stepped out of the dim shadows of prehistory and into the light of recorded history.

About 700 B.C. Greek emigrants began planting colonies along the strip of Thrace that borders the northern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The first years were hard: the Thracians were tough fighters, and much blood was spilled before they gave up their rights of possession and grudgingly retreated into the mountains and valleys that lay behind the coastal plain. But by 600 B.C. a line of Greek cities had been firmly established, and an active trade developed between them and the "barbarians" in the hinterland. By "barbarian" Greeks usually meant anyone who did not speak Greek, but in the case of the Thracians, they meant it the way we do today. For the Thracians, instead of living in cities as all Greeks thought civilized peoples should, clung to their age-old tribal organization, clustering in hamlets that were mere collections of huts and existing on meager farming augmented by herding, hunting, and brigandage.

Around 450 B.C. that tireless and observant traveler Herodotus found himself in Thrace. Herodotus has been called the Father of History; he might equally aptly be dubbed the Father of Anthropology: his chapters on the

Opposite: Thracian soldier and a woman holding a *harpe* (sickle), detail of an Attic red-figured bell krater by the Painter of London E 497. About 440 B.C. Metropolitan Museum, Fletcher Fund, 24.97.30



Thracians and their neighbors are a milestone in Western literature, the first eyewitness account of primitive peoples living beyond the pale of civilization. He reported, among other matters, the Thracians' belief in immortality and their curious sexual and marital customs. Men had not one but several wives, and the wives, upon the death of their jointly held husband, competed as to who had been his favorite; the winner gained the privilege of being killed and placed at the side of the corpse in the grave, which was in a tomb covered by a prominent mound. We may believe what he says, for archaeological excavation has confirmed his words. All over Thrace have been found the burial mounds he mentions, tumuli containing chambers that were carefully built, lavishly decorated, and filled with precious objects to serve the deceased in the next life. A recently discovered tomb at Vrasta revealed that more than one favorite might accompany her lord to the hereafter: in the inner chamber archaeologists found the bodies of a young couple, the woman with a knife through her breast, and, in an outer, a second woman transfixed by a spear.

Paintings on Greek vases, such as one on the fifth-century B.C. bell krater on page 2, confirm Herodotus's description of the dress and armor of a Thracian soldier: "They wear fox-skin caps on their heads, tunics next to the body, and over this long cloaks of many colors. Legs and feet are in fawn-skin boots. They carry javelins, light shields, and short daggers."

Any Thracians who could afford it, Herodotus reported, had nothing but contempt for the life of a farmer and considered fighting, above all brigandage, as the only proper way to earn a living. This attitude soon brought them out of their mountain fastnesses and into contact with the Greek world, for here, they discovered, there was plenty of opportunity for employing their warlike talents. Greek armies depended almost exclusively on the heavy-armed infantryman, the famed hoplite; they were chronically short of cavalry, and had no light-armed troops at all. Thracians were born horsemen and, so far as foot soldiers were concerned, they had only light-armed men, dressed, as Herodotus described, with nothing but a light shield as defensive armor. The shield was crescent-shaped and made of wicker covered with hide; it was called a pelta, and the men who carried it, like the soldier illustrated at the right, were peltasts. Completely mobile, they made ideal guerrillas—and, through bitter experience, the Greeks discovered that the only way to protect their solid, slow-moving lines of hoplites from the hit-and-run peltasts was to fight fire with fire and have some of these agile troops on their own side. Thracian peltasts and cavalrymen began hiring

out as mercenaries to Greek commanders as early as the sixth century B.C. Within a hundred years there were contingents of them in most Greek armies, and they became so common a sight in Greek cities that Aristophanes could crack jokes about them: in his *Lysistrata* one of the characters tells how she saw a Thracian buck swagger into the marketplace

and, brandishing pelta and javelin, make
some fruit vendor so afraid
she runs for her life—and lets him take
her total stock in trade.

Thracian slaves were an equally familiar sight. Herodotus mentioned the Thracians' habit of selling their children into slavery abroad. In addition, any males taken as prisoners of war generally ended up on the auction block. Consequently, considerable numbers of Thracian men and women were to be seen in the service of Greek households, where, being tall and gray-eyed and either fair-haired or red-haired, they must have stood out among their shorter, dark-complexioned owners. The plays of Aristophanes and Menander and other writers of Greek comedy often have slaves named Thratta or Geta in the cast of characters; Thratta is simply Greek for "Thracian girl" and the Getai were one of the most important Thracian tribes. In a comedy by Menander, a slave named Geta delivers a bit of ethnic humor: he holds forth on how much better off his countrymen are than the ordinary run of males who must make do with only one wife; Thracians, he declares, can't get along with less than "ten, eleven, twelve, even more. Why, back home, any poor devil who has only four or five doesn't even count as married."

Toward the end of the fifth century B.C. Thrace began making an impact on the Greek world in more significant ways than supplying it with mercenaries and slaves. The tribes were continually squabbling and gradually the heads of the stronger, conquering their weaker neighbors, promoted themselves from chieftains to kings. Eventually, around 420 B.C., a king named Sitalkes managed to subjugate the whole country, not excepting the Greek cities along the coast, which put him in a position to play a hand in international politics. His moves affected even Athens: though the mightiest among the Greek city-states, she wooed him assiduously, going so far as to grant this barbarian's son honorary Athenian citizenship. Sitalkes's successor managed to do just as well, building up the total revenues—tribute levied on the tribes and Greek cities he controlled plus "presents" they were constantly being invited to give him—to a grand total of 800 talents, a considerably greater sum than Athens collected from all her subjects



Thracian peltast, detail of an Attic red-figured kylix in the manner of Onesimos. About 480 B.C. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Bequest of David M. Robinson, 1959.219

during Pericles's heyday, equivalent in purchasing power to perhaps \$24,000,000 or more. These parvenu rulers grew so wealthy that they were able to turn the tables and hire contingents of Greek mercenaries to fight for them. Indeed, we get our next firsthand glimpse of the Thracians from the leader of one such group, the soldier-writer Xenophon. In 400 B.C. he arrived in Thrace with the bulk of the 10,000 Greeks he had led to safety across Asia Minor's rugged terrain and through its hostile tribes. An ambitious king named Seuthes hired practically all of them, figuring—rightly, as it turned out—that, with his local cavalry and peltasts stiffened by this hardbitten collection of hoplites, he would have no trouble defeating all rivals.

By this time Thrace was showing clear signs of the centuries of contact with Greeks. Archaeological excavation of Thracian tombs reveals that, from the fifth century B.C. on, the objects buried with the dead included many either imported from Greece or made by resident Greek craftsmen, while those made by native craftsmen often mingled Greek and local elements. In fact, Hellenization had gone so far that, as we can see from Xenophon's account, many a Thracian spoke some Greek. At court banquets, at least one of the wine servers was able to take orders directly from the Greek guests. Seuthes himself, though he used interpreters, could follow most of a Greek conversation. The language even penetrated deep into the hinterland: once, when Xenophon and his men were passing the night in the huts of a mountain

village, they were surrounded by a hostile local force who knew enough Greek to shout, "Xenophon, come on out and die like a man!"

But Xenophon's account shows equally clearly that Greek influence was only superficial, that the Thracians were still very much their old primitive selves. At court banquets Seuthes served his guests by tossing—literally tossing—chunks of bread and meat at them. Wine was drunk from horns, and the custom was, after draining a hornful, to splash the last drops over oneself. Music was supplied by army trumpets and by what Xenophon describes as "trumpets of raw oxhide," which may have been bagpipes. When the music started during a court occasion, Seuthes leaped up and went into a solo war dance. Another war dance was a pas de deux in which the performers mimed a duel with sabers, and often did it with such verisimilitude that, when one fell at the end, audiences thought he really was dead. A form of entertainment that actually did at times end in death was a sort of Thracian equivalent of Russian roulette. A man clutching a Thracian short sword would stand on a stone and put his head in a hangman's noose. Someone would kick the stone away, and the trick was to slash the cord before it was too late. Those not fast enough drew a big laugh from the crowd for their unfortunate lack of skill.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his spectacular conquests introduced changes that marked a new age for the Aegean and Near East. The Greek city-states such as Athens and Sparta, who for so long had directed the flow of history, lost their power and became subject to the whims of Alexander's successors ruling as absolute monarchs over large empires. Inevitably the Greek part of Thrace along the shore was affected—but not the interior: there the tribal leaders maintained their independence and, with it, the freedom to carry on their interminable fighting with each other. In the second century B.C. a new and mighty power, Rome, made its weight felt in the area. For a long while the Romans were content to do as the Greeks had, confine their attention to the coastal strip and let the rest of the country go its own way. All they required from the various Thracian chieftains was the right to recruit cavalymen and peltasts to serve with the Roman armies and the opportunity to acquire slaves. Rugged young Thracian males were especially in demand since the Romans had discovered that they made first-rate gladiators. During the great days of the Roman Empire, no program of gladiatorial combats was complete without a duel in which a *Thrax* took part. The one gladiator most of us know by name, Spartacus, was a Thracian.

Then, shortly before the middle of the first century A.D., the tribal squabbling created such unrest that the



The "Thracian Horseman" (see color plate 17)

Opposite: Horseman attacking a lion. Silver, partly gilt, 7.5 cm. (2 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.); weight 38 gr. End of the 4th century, Loukovit. Archaeological Museum, Sofia, Inv. No. 8213

Roman emperors decided they had to do something about it, and began marching the legions into the hinterland. And so, civilization finally came to this region as army bases and administrative centers began to rise and a network of roads connecting them began to be laid out. Like Gaul in the wake of Caesar's conquest, Thrace was becoming tamed.

The extensive Roman ruins visible today show how pervasive the process was. At Oescus on the northern boundary of Bulgaria, where a legion was stationed, there are the remains of a fort, two aqueducts, and a bath. At Nicopolis, not far from Veliko Turnovo in north central Bulgaria, are the remains of a theater, colonnade, forum, council house, and paved streets. Serdica, today Sofia, site of a Thracian village which was selected as an administrative center, was garnished with a governor's palace, fort, baths, and temples.

The Romans carried out their program with characteristic organization and thoroughness. Yet, despite this, something of old Thrace tenaciously managed to linger on, especially in the remoter sections. Language is a case in point. In the plains and along the valleys where urbanization had progressed relentlessly, the Thracian language was scarcely heard any longer, having given way to Greek. But up in the mountains it was still spoken and continued to be, right up to the sixth century A.D.

when the Slavs arrived en masse and took over the land.

In religion, too, some Thracians clung to traditional ways. In the new Roman settlements there sprang up temples and chapels for the worship of the Roman emperors, of Serapis, Mithras, and the multifarious other deities to whom Rome's subjects addressed their prayers. But in the back country the ancient gods and forms of worship held their own. Old-fashioned landowners still had themselves buried in the time-honored way, laid to rest in their tombs with a funerary chariot and surrounded by grave goods, and, as marker over it all, a prominent mound. Peasants still made obeisance to the gods of their ancestors, particularly one we call the "Thracian Horseman," since he is invariably represented on horseback charging with a spear at some wild animal. When Christianity finally reached these backwaters, the locals simply shifted their allegiance to Saint George.

Like so many of the lands around the Mediterranean, Thrace was, so to speak, an archaeological ledger. The earliest entries are the dim traces of Paleolithic man. Then come the entries of the Neolithic population, the humble stone tools of the farmers and the fine copper and gold objects of the precocious smiths, and then, the tombs of Thrace's opulent horse-loving aristocracy. The latest entries—at least of ancient date—are the bricks and mortar of the structures of the Romans.