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Philology and Cultural Identity: the Balkans as a Common Cultural Area in Antiquity

Opening Lecture

On July 15th, Reuters announced that a new fourth-century Thracian golden mask and a golden ring were unearthed in the vicinity of Topolchane near Sliven, south Bulgaria (**Slide 1**). By a good fortune, the ring bears an inscription, which –according to the founders – reads “The Savior of Asia.” Who is this savior? To people who are familiar with the Balkan history in the Hellenistic period it was a little queer to learn about such an identification because the very term of Asia appears centuries later, when the Romans administrated the province of Asia. Actually, bearing in mind that this ring was used as a seal and that the inscription was curved retrogradely, we can identify the name of its bearer by reading it counter-clockwise: Σηϋσα Τηρητοϋ (=Σευθα Τηρητοϋ), i.e. the ring belongs to a Thracian aristocrat named Seuthas, son of Teres.

The incorrect reading, proposed by some archaeologists and historians, is only another indication as to how much the classical philology in Bulgaria has withdrawn from its natural duties and traditions in both investigating all written evidence of antiquity and drawing parallels between literature, epigraphics, and artifacts. Being in the ivory tower of the “High Classics” and filled with awe of the ancient literature, teachers of Classics often prevent the students from a real and deep penetration in the secrets of the past.

This situation, at least in Bulgaria, would not be so hazardous if Classics was but some kind of *Glassperlenspiel*. On the contrary, the vocation of Classics is not only to build up connoisseurs of *Ablativus absolutus* or Plinius’ letters *per se*, but also to build a bridge across centuries and cultures. Its mission is to shape broad-minded humanitarians of keen taste both for understanding social, cultural, and even economic features and for propagating

the high standards of ancient Greco-Roman civilization as a base and impetus to the contemporary culture.

This statement gains much more value when speaking of the Balkans. It is not a coincidence that the twenty-century historiography of Europe is used to applying the term “Balkanisation” for political situations of total disagreement and conflicts. It was the nationalism and nationalistic ideologies arisen after the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire here that created a good milieu for shooting up of perilous stereotypes and propaganda often based on ignorance and prejudice. The problems of minorities, nationalities, and languages of this region have affected all the decades of the last century. Moreover, the radical nationalism against the Turkish minority has found its grounds even in contemporary Bulgaria and therefore has influenced our own lives. In this alarming situation, I cannot but have the deep feeling of the humanitarian education’s defeat. Therefore, I find it responsibility of the Classicists to highlight rather the togetherness than the diversity of our cultures on the Balkans. Although remote in time, the notion of common ancient legacy and history of that area could be, in my opinion, a life-saving remedy.

Hence, in this presentation about the Balkans as a common cultural area in antiquity, I have chosen the example of ancient Thracians and Greeks. However, in contrast to the official propaganda of the last three decades, which looks for patriotic pride in the glory of ancient Thracians, considered one of the three constituent elements of the Bulgarian people, I would rather show you how they shared the same culture with their Greek neighbours.

First, I will draw your attention to the Greek colonies on the Black Sea coast (**Slide 2**), some of which we visited last summer, namely Varna (the ancient Odessos), Nessebar (the ancient Megarian Mesambria) and Sozopol (the ancient Milesian Apollonia). As for Dionysopolis (present day Balchik), whose founders we are not familiar with, its residents were “μυγάδες Έλληνες” (mixed

Hellenes), according to the anonymous author of *Periplus Ponti Euxini* (**Slide 3**). His statement is an eloquent testimony to the mixed population not only of this, but also of the other colonies situated in a barbaric environment. We can infer that there were intensive commercial contacts and mixed marriages between the Greek colonists and the native Thracians from the beginning of the Greek penetration here. Colonists were always attracted by peninsulas that provided excellent conditions for trade and defence, often with a river flowing down into the sea nearby. However, Thracians had occupied these small pieces of land long before the arrival of the Greeks, and archaeological excavations have already revealed the remnants of their dwellings as well as fragments of their household objects dating back to the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BC. Although the Greeks preserved some of the names of the Thracian settlements such as Odessos and Mesambria, they maintained the pure Greek character of their everyday life and polis organization.

It is clear that not only Greek colonists came into contact with Thracian tribes and their kings dwelling around them, but also that Thracians themselves settled together with them in the colonies.

The stones, however, are not very loquacious until the end of the Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, they imply well-running political and economic relationships based on mutual agreements such as the contract of the Mesambrians with the Thracian King Sadala or that of the Apollonians with the Thracian Prince Rhaiskouporis, son of the King Kotys. Both decrees date to the third century BC. The first one (M 307, 3^a) informs us about the managing of the shipwrecks on the Thracian coast (**Slide 4**), the second one (**Slide 5**) - about Rhaiskouporis' hostage as a guarantee of the peace between the local Thracians and the colonists from Apollonia (A, 389, 3^a).

Our most valuable epigraphic witnesses about the Thracian-Greek symbiosis, however, come from the last two centuries of the Hellenistic epoch. This is the time period, when, for instance, a Thracian sanctuary of Heros Karabasmos, worshipped also as Apollo Karabasmos, functioned in Odessos (O, 78 bis, ter, 79, 79 bis, 79, 2-1^a) (**Slide 6**).

From a linguistic point of view, most persuasive proofs of that cultural infiltration are offered by the onomastics. We possess one remarkable fifth-century sepulchral stele from Apollonia, which memorised three deceased persons - Παιβινη, Αὐγή, and Ἑρμαῖος (A, 430, 5-4^a) (**Slide 7**). The first of them bears a popular Thracian name and is a witness of the Thracian penetration into the colonies at least three generations after their foundation.

No less eloquent is a typical Mesambrian anthroponym Μελσέων, a derivation from the name of Melsas, the legendary Thracian founder of the polis. Two bearers of this name have been attested so far on stone: Μελσέων Ἡροδώρου, honoured by a decree from the third century (M, 308 sexies, 3^a) (**Slide 8**), and, most probably, his son, Πολύξενος Μελσέωνος, attested, by a good fortune, in three magnificent official documents of Mesambria and Dionysopolis. The first one is one of the famous stratagoi reliefs (**Slide 9 + Picture**); the last two have been found in Dionysopolis and are still not published. They demonstrate the high social status of this family and its special merits to the Greek poleis on the coast. The fact that such prominent and wealthy Greeks chose a name connected with the native Thracian traditions points to the vivid local ideology and feelings of pride of glorious ancestors. You can see now on the screen not only the name, but also the image of Melseon's son, Polyxenos.

Now, I would like to move to the South of the Balkans, on the Aegean coast, opposite to the island of Thasos, and introduce to you an ancient Thracian tribe named Edoni (**Slide 10**). They dwelt mostly between the Nestus and the Strymon rivers in southern Thrace, near the mountain of Paggaion (Kushnica or Parnardag), but also once dwelt west of the Strymon at least as far as the Axios.

I have chosen them because they are famous with the silver coins of their King Getas dating back to the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century BC (**Slide 11, 12**). These silver octadrachmes of a weight of 27-29 grams are the first European coins with legends containing the title “King” (βασιλεύς) and its name. The beginning of Getas’ reign should precede the Persian invasion in the Aegean Thrace, namely Darius’ and Xerxes’ expeditions in 513 and 480 respectively. According to the ancient historiographers, mainly Herodotus, there were a number of Edonian towns, including Drabescus and Myrcinus, which remained under the control of the Persians even after their defeat. Thucydides mentioned the importance of these lands for Lacedaemonian and Athenian military plans during the Peloponnesian War. He added that their last King Pittakos was murdered in 424, this being the last witness of the Edonian occurrence in the history.

Their presence in the Greek and Roman literature, however, did not cease. Being in a contact zone of mutual cultural influence, they became a popular and favourite topos for the ancient poets when describing orgiastic Dionysian feasts, Orpheus, and Trojan mythological cycle. (**Slide 13**) Aeschylus’ tragedy “Ἡδῶνοι” presented Kotyto’s mysteries accompanied with yelling, tympani, and songs. We know about Lycurgus that he was βασιλεύς Ἡδῶνων (Soph. Ant.955), that the maenads were often called Ἡδωνίδες, and their coloured cloaks βασσάραι were defined as Ἡδωνὰ ἱμάτια. In the Roman poetry, Edōni, ōrum, m used to be the inebriated worshippers of Bacchus as we

can infer from a simile in the seventh *carmen* of Horace's second book (Hor.C.2,7, 25-27): (**Slide 14**) (Systēma Alcaicum). Horace welcomed an old friend of his military service by saying:

“Welcome home at last, dear old companion of my tent and table, **Pompeius!** Together we made the campaign of **Philippi**, when I lost my shield. Then Mercury snatched me away in a Homeric cloud, while the withdrawing wave swept thee back again to war. Come then and share the cask I have kept for thee!” And in the end of this invitation to celebrating, Horace says:

Oblivioso/ leuia Massico
ciboria exple,/ funde capacibus
unguenta de conchis./ Quis udo
deproperare/ apio coronas

curatve myrto?/ Quem Venus arbitrum
dicet bibendi?/ Non ego sanius
bacchabor Edonis:/ recepto
dulce mihi /furere est amico.

(Slide 15 English translation)

Lethe's true draught is Massic wine;
Fill high the goblet; pour out free
Rich streams of unguent. Who will twine
The hasty wreath from myrtle-tree

Or parsley? Whom will Venus seat
Chairman of cups? Are Bacchants sane?
Then I'll be sober. O, 'tis sweet
To fool, when friends come home again!

My translation: “I will not be saner in my rave than the Edoni”, which is another name of Bacchae. Therefore, the female noun Edōnis, idos, f means just a maenad. So, the muzzy Propertius, when coming back home at dawn after a heavy drinking, compares his sweet dreaming lover with an Edonian girl that has fallen on the grass near the river of Apidanus after ceaseless dances (Prop.I,3, 5): **(Slide 16)**

nec minus assiduis Edonis fessa choreis
qualis in herboso concidit Apidano.

If I indulged in this journey through the ancient literary texts mentioning the Edoni, it was to prove the vigorousness of this Edonian *locus communis* in the Greco-Roman literature and culture. Its fixedness and persistency imply the deep roots of the cultural and economic interacting of Thracians, Greeks, and Romans in this area of the Balkans in antiquity.

This cultural and economic commonwealth was reflected quite naturally by the common coinage of the Thracians, including other tribes in the vicinity of the Edoni, and the Greeks in this geographical area. When I said “common”, I mean the shared common motifs on the face and the averse of their coins, which can be explained by both the common cultural background and by the common mints. Therefore, the motif “a Centaur or a Satyr holds a maenad” is typical for the coinage both of the local Thracians and the Greeks from the opposite Thasos **(Slide 17, 18, 19)**. The motif “a warrior standing near a horse” is common for the Thracian coinage and that of the first Macedonian King Alexander the Philelin (498-454) **(Slide 20, 21)**. Moreover, the Thracian coins have the figure of a naked man with a hat named causia, who is driving two oxen **(Slide 22, 23, 24)**. It will be not an exaggeration to identify here an

illustration of the popular Greek myth of Hermes stealing the fifty white oxen of Apollo, which was the idea of the French scholar Perdrizet.

To sum up, we have Greek motifs on the Thracian coins, which, on their part, have become a model for the Greek Thasian and Macedonian coinage. On the other hand, we have a vivid Edonian presence in the ancient literature, which illustrates their popularity as a literary cliché. Both facts ascertain to the idea of a cultural and economic community of Thracians, Greeks, and Macedonians on the Aegean coast of Thrace in antiquity.

My only dream is to transfer it to the present day Balkans.