



Thracian tribes

Summary :

The existence of ancient Thracian tribes is confirmed by ancient Greek and Roman written sources. However, their exact number has not been clarified yet. The connection of the tribes' names with separate locations where they settled remains the most challenging issue. There is also evidence on the political history of the Thracian tribes up to the time of the Roman domination.

Date

Archaic to Roman period

Geographical Location

Thrace

1. Location - Number of tribes

Ancient Thrace, located on the northern fringes of the Greek world, was among the most dynamic regions of the Eastern Mediterranean and played an important role in the history and culture of southeastern Europe during the 1st millennium BC. Since the beginning of the 20th c., a number of scholars from different countries have been continuously studying the region, examining a variety of topics and publishing important works.

Some seminal scholarly publications provide a comprehensive analysis of the ethnonymic situation in ancient Thrace and identify the different tribes known from Greek and Roman historical sources.¹ The exact number of the Thracian tribes will never become known – for example, at the end of the 1st c. BC [Strabo](#)² counted 22 tribes, while in the Imperial Age, [Plinius](#)³ wrote that Thrace was separated into 50 strategiae (which may reflect some ethnic division, besides being Roman administrative units) and [Claudius Ptolemaeus](#)⁴ described 14 Thracian strategiae. Some modern scholars, who study in detail the ancient written sources, consider that the real number of the different Thracian tribes that inhabited the region throughout the 1st millennium BC could be up to 80.

2. The written testimony

One of the major problems in studying the ethnonymic reality in ancient Thrace is to clarify the exact chronological position of the different tribal names located in the separate regions and to clearly explain the quite dynamic ethnonymic situation, as attested in Greek and Roman literary records. Very often it is not possible to explain why in ancient written sources the different tribal names appeared and disappeared in a given region, and why certain tribal names spread far beyond their initial geographical location. Sometimes, this might be simply the result of lack of information or mistakes made by the ancient authors. In other cases, the dynamic ethnonymic situation might reflect some tribal migrations within Thrace. However, in most cases the appearance of any Thracian tribe in the written sources was a result of its political advance and significant military power, which were good reasons for the ancient authors to notice and record a specific tribe, while the disappearance of any tribal name from a particular region is often due to the military weakness when certain tribes fell under the political control of other more powerful tribal communities. The presence of the ethnonyms in Greek and Roman literary sources also depends on the geographical location: thus, the tribes near the North Aegean and West Pontic coasts and the Greek colonies were noticed much earlier by ancient authors than the tribes located deep into the Thracian inland. Simultaneously, ancient writers usually had a relatively complete knowledge of the eastern and southern areas of Thrace, where they described a number of tribes, by contrast to the western and northern Thracian inland, where the tribal names attested in the ancient written sources are not so numerous. It is clear also that the ethnonymic situation, as attested in the Greek and Roman written sources, was not the true ethnic reality and following the records, very often the names of the powerful tribal kingdoms, such as the Odrysians, spread in extensive areas of ancient Thrace and covered the names of most minor tribes who existed at the same time.

3. The tribes' names

Along with the Odrysians, the Getae and the Triballi were among the most powerful ethnic communities who established strong tribal



Thracian tribes

unions and kingdoms, a number of other tribes did also play a political role and were mentioned or relatively well described in the ancient records (in alphabetical order): Agrianes, Apsynthioi, Astai, Bessoï, Bisaltai, Bistonés, Bottiaoi, Brenai, Dakoi, Danthaletai, Dersaioi, Dioi, Dolonkoi, Edonoi, Kainoi, Karpoi, Kebrenoi, Kikones, Korpiloi, Krestonaioi, Krobyzoi, Laiaioi, Maidoi, Melanditai, Mygdones, Nipsaioi, Odomantoi, Paitoi, Saioi, Sapaioi, Satrai, Serdoi, Sithones, Sintoi, Skaioi, Terizoi, Thynoi, Tranipsai, Trausoi, Treres, Tilataioi and others.⁵ Of course, a number of other Thracian tribes are only briefly reported in the ancient literary sources and even their exact location is rather uncertain. In fact, the true ethnic reality in ancient Thrace and the names of all minor tribes will, most probably, never become clear to us.

4. Political history

The political history of the Thracian tribes is thoroughly studied by a number of scholars.⁶ An interesting early example of a joint Thraco-Athenian state community, as attested in the written sources, is related to the political activity of the Athenian aristocrat Miltiades the Elder, who established his rule in the Thracian Chersonesos in c. 560 BC, being **tyrant** of both the Athenian colonists and the Thracian Dolonkoi. Later, this Athenian ruler was succeeded by his relatives Stesagoras and Miltiades the Younger who married Hegesipyle, the daughter of the Thracian king Oloros.

In the late 6th c. BC, the Edonoi established one of the most important early Thracian kingdoms in the lower Strymon valley. Some of the Edonian kings, like Getas and Pittakos, are attested in the literary records and the numismatic material. At the same time, far to the north, in the extensive areas of northeastern Thrace, the Getae formed a powerful tribal union, which was known to the Greek writers already in the end of the 6th c. BC. From the middle of the 4th c. BC down to the end of the Hellenistic period, some of the Getic kings, like Cothelas, Dromichaïtes, Zalmodegicus, Zoltes, Rhemaxos and Burebista, played an important role in the political events related to northeastern Thrace. Another powerful tribal union was established in the northwestern Thracian lands by the Triballi, who had significant military power already in the last quarter of the 5th c. BC. The ancient literary records inform us of two Triballian kings – Chales and Syrmos, who obviously were powerful rulers of the second and third quarters of the 4th c. BC.

5. The Odrysian Kingdom

Undoubtedly, the most significant supra-tribal state in Thrace was the Odrysian Kingdom. The Odrysians inhabited southeastern Thrace and are historically attested in the late 6th c. BC at the earliest. Their first king known to ancient authors was Teres who reigned during the first half of the 5th c. BC. Teres was succeeded by Sparadokos (c. 448 – 440 BC), Sitalkes (c. 440 – 424 BC), Seuthes I (c. 424 – 408 BC), Medokos (c. 407 – 386 BC) – also known as Amadokos I, and Hebryzelmis (c. 386 – 383 BC). One of the most powerful Odrysian kings was Kotys I (383 – 359 BC) who imposed his political control upon extensive territories of ancient Thrace and maintained diplomatic relations with the local Triballian and Getic rulers to the north. After the murder of Kotys I, the Odrysian Kingdom was divided into three parts, respectively ruled by Kersebleptes (359 – 341 BC), Amadokos II (359 – 351 BC) and Teres II (351 – 341 BC), and by Berisades (359 – 356 BC) and Ketrporis (356 – 351 BC). In 341 BC, the Macedonian king Philip II conquered the Odrysian Kingdom and soon after, [Alexander the Great](#) took possession of almost the entire Thracian territory. At the time of the Diadochi, [Lysimachus](#) continued the Macedonian control upon a significant part of the Thracian territory and declared himself 'King of Thrace', while in the last decades of the 4th c. BC the powerful Odrysian king Seuthes III (c. 330 – 300 BC) emerged politically. From the beginning of the 3rd c. BC onwards, the Odrysian Kingdom fell into decline and was divided into separate parts, while a number of different Thracian kings who ruled during the Hellenistic period are attested in the literary sources and the epigraphic records. After 42 BC, [Rhescuporis I](#) established the Sapaian dynasty with the capital Bizye in southeastern Thrace and later he was succeeded by Roimetalkas I (11 BC – 12 AD), Reskouporis II (12 – 19 AD) and Kotys (12 – 19 AD), Roimetalkas II (19 – 36 AD) and Roimetalkas III (37 – 45 AD) who was the last Thracian king. In 45 AD, the Roman Emperor [Claudius](#) annexed the Thracian kingdom.

1. Danov, Ch., *Altthrakien* (Berlin – New York 1976); Fol, A., *Politicheska istoriya na trakite* (Sofia 1972); Fol, A., *Trakiya i Balkanite prez rannoelinisticheskata epoha* (Sofia 1975); Fol, A., *Istoriya na bulgarskite zemi v drevnostta do kraya na III v.pr.Hr.* (Sofia 1997); Fol, A. – Spiridonov, T.,



Thracian tribes

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2. Str. 7.48.

3. Plin. NH 4.11.40.

4. Cl. Ptol. III 3.11.6.

5. Cf. Detschew, D., *Die thrakischen Sprachreste*² (Wien 1976).

6. Katsarov, G., *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte der Thraker* (Sarajevo 1916); Katsarov, G., "Thrace", in *CAH* 8 (Cambridge 1930) p. 534-60, 781-3; Casson, S., *Macedonia, Thrace and Illyria. Their Relations to Greece from the Earliest Times down to the Time of Philip, Son of Amyntas* (Oxford 1926); Todorov, Y., "Trakiiskite tsare", *Godishnik na Sofiiskiya Universitet. Istoriko-Filologicheski Fakultet* 29:7 (1933) p. 1-80; Danov, Ch., *op. cit.*; Mihailov, G., *Trakite* (Sofia 1972); Fol, A., *op. cit.* (Sofia 1972); Fol, A., *op. cit.* (Sofia 1975); Fol, A., *op. cit.* (Sofia 1997); Papazoglu, F., *op. cit.* (Amsterdam 1978); Hoddinott, R.F., *The Thracians* (London 1981); Oppermann, M., *Thraker zwischen Karpatenbogen und Ägäis* (Leipzig – Jena – Berlin 1984); Gattinoni, F.L., *Lisimaco di Tracia. Un sovrano nella prospettiva del primo ellenismo* (Milano 1992); Lund, H.S., *Lysimachus. A Study in Early Hellenistic Kingship* (London – New York 1992); Yordanov, K., *Politicheskite otnosheniya mezhdu Makedoniya i trakiiskite darzhavi (359 – 281 g.pr.Hr.)* (*Studia Thracica* 7, Sofia 1998); Yordanov, K. et al., *op. cit.*; Tacheva, M., *op. cit.*; Loukopoulou, L., *Contribution à l'histoire de la Thrace propontique durant la periode archaïque (Meletemata* 9, Athènes 1989); Stronk, J., *op. cit.*; Archibald, Z.H., *op. cit.*; Popov, D., *op. cit.*; Boteva-Boyanova, D., *op. cit.*; Theodossiev, N., *op. cit.*; Boshnakov, K., *op. cit.*; Delev, P., *Lizimah* (Sofia 2004).

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Thracian tribes

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Glossary :

	tyrant, the
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The initial meaning of the term was the leading archon of a noble origin. Later on he was the usurper of rightful power and the one who was ruling in an absolute way, aiming ostensibly to the welfare of his people.

Sources

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Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 4.11.40

Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Geographia*, III 3.11.6