

TRADITION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE FUNERAL RITES DURING THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE: THE CASE OF THRACE

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Abstract. *The tradition of funeral customs in Thrace, which in the Roman times preserves that of previous generations of Thracian aristocracy is not an isolated phenomenon; it has parallels in other parts of the Roman empire, e-g in some parts of Gallia, in Galatian in Asia Minor, in peripheral areas of Syria etc. The paper should investigate the traces of these funeral traditions in archaeological material and the corpus of inscriptions and try to contribute to clear some less known aspects of this particular phenomenon.*

Historical, cultural and ethnic identities were formed by the individuals who felt themselves part of them and even nowadays the individual people depend on intentional dimensions of human self-definition. Modern nations are basically different from the ancient ethnic groups, which were more dependent on their leaders, on family relations, on the systems of clients etc., but also old nations were expressions of intentional self-classification of their members and their neighbours who contributed to the self-definition of the former. The ethnic entity was a communicative expression of particularity (specificity) of individual groups, as self-representation of the group as different from its neighbours. Ethnic identity had its roots in the language, in the oral tradition, in the religion, rituals and in common symbolic codes of the particular nation (cf. Assmann 1999; Assmann– Friesse, eds.1998). The more general identity (and its classification in Classical Antiquity) was mainly based on the language and on particular religious approaches to the reality, but these general units only had limited value. They indicated only very general feeling of belonging to a specific cultural sphere. Such large unifying factors were the Greek identity of the Hellenized Eastern Mediterranean, and the Latinized identity of the western provinces of the Roman Empire. Even less so this general identity was felt by the Celtic speaking populations from Spain to Anatolia, or by the Thracians with the Geti and Dacians, who all spoke similar language. The more specific identity was based on the tribal groups with (real or fictive) common ancestry or on local common background. The first was especially important unifying phenomenon for nomadic, seminomadic and other peoples without urban culture), while the story of the foundation of a city or a tribal sanctuary which was more stressed by the peoples with urban civilisation or with those approaching this stage, like the ethnoi in Greece or the more advanced Thracian tribes.

Particular language and particular religious traditions were decisive factors for the preservation of ethnic identity in an alien milieu and in the melting pot, as was for non-Latin and Non-Greek ethnic identities the civilisation of the Roman Empire (Mitchell - Greatrex, eds, 2000). Ancient literary sources, such as a speech by Chimerios – a rhetor, who lived from 300 to 380 AD – gives us interesting evidence on the Thracian element in 4th century diocese of Thrace. The speech, entitled *Epithalamios eis Seberon*, was written by the rhetor for the wedding of one of his students – Severos. The bride was a Thracian noble woman originating from Philippopolis. Chimerios, glorifying the genealogy of the bride, highlights her royal Thracian origin. According to the cited author her origin in its outermost roots reaches to the local Thracian rulers and her relatives up to Chimerios' times (4th c. AD) have leading posts in the society and administration of the urban life of Thrace (Himer. Or., IX, 13, p. 83, 150 – 157) (Velkov 1958, 737).

The source quoted shows us how the bride, a noble Thracian woman, citizen of Philippopolis in the 4th c. AD, takes pride in her origin and demonstrates consciousness of her Thracian identity.

In the Roman army, the first two centuries of the Roman Empire bring enough evidence on military units composed from ethnic groups, but later their numbers diminish and change step after step into another categories, composed of barbarian neighbours of the Empire – foederati and other allies with alien identities

(Pohl– Reimitz, eds. 1998). This situation apparently reflects the loose of ethnic identity in most part of the Roman Empire, as reflected in other testimonies as well; while later the alien elements penetrating the Roman territory kept on their particular identities more rigidly. We can find data about many Thracians, citizens of the Eastern Balkan lands, who are the addressees in the issued decrees edited by emperor Diocletian during his journey in Moesia and Thrace and in other legislative sources, e.g. Ziparus from Durostorum (294 AD), Aurelia Zania Antipatra from Philippopolis (293 AD), Doles from Heracleia (294), Bithus (294), Auluzanus (293), Mucatralis (293), Diza (293), Dizo miles (290), Flavius Rumitalus (293 – 304) from unattested? Unamed cities.

An argument for the preserved consciousness of a Thracian identity are the attestations of persons with leading posts in the temporal power, in the clergy and in the army with Bessic origin in the historical, hagiographical works in the period between IV and VI centuries AD as well as in the epigraphic monuments. A list of soldiers and military functionaries from Salsovia gives us interesting information about the ethnic structure in 4th century Scythia Minor. The list contains 33 names of soldiers (circitores, castricani, equites, bisexarii, exarchi) which, according to their ethnic origin, can be divided in the following groups: 22 Latin, 2 Greek, 5 Semithic, 1 Dacian (Popescu 1976, no. 272).

Traditions of indigenous funeral customs and beliefs in proper way to proceed to afterlife in Thrace and in other Roman provinces with strong indigenous traditions represent a phenomenon showing the importance of local and family traditions for keeping the ethno-cultural identity notably in Thrace, Galatia, Egypt, Syria and Gaul. There was a big difference in this respect between provinces, where the old social structure was completely destroyed (like in Dacia, Moesia, Germania, North Africa), and those, where the Romans took over the power in less warfare way. In the latter, the Romanization (respective Graecization) did not replace completely the local languages. The rather peaceful annexion had to respect to some extent the local social structures and traditions. The local population in them was in better position. It could continue more closely in their particular way of life and to some extent conserve the traditional structures of their pre-Roman social systems and stratification.

The tradition of funeral customs in Thrace, which in the Roman times preserved the burials under tumuli in cemeteries with continuity of burials from Hellenistic (and even earlier) period. is a testimony that the Thracian religious identity of previous generations of Thracian aristocracy was not lost in the Imperial period. Though very characteristic for Thrace, the continuity of burial customs on long-living cemeteries there is not an isolated phenomenon. It has parallels in other parts of the Roman Empire, e.g. in the provinces of Gallia, in Galatia in Asia Minor, in Syria etc. Famous ancestors were important for the upper class social structure in Rome itself; many senatorial and other families until the end of Classical antiquity represented themselves by famous ancestry. The provincials copied the system of Rome itself, while stressing their particular aristocratic origin in the frame of their province, like in Galatia (Strobel 1998).

The good ancestry counted in the social life of the Roman provincial society in all areas, in which the old pre-Imperial structure to some extent persisted and was inaugurated into the new situation. Besides this - even in the frame of the Roman Empire in general - religious particularities were part of tradition which was allowed as an enrichment of the Roman official pantheon (besides the official cult of Roma and the emperors) and was also kept by those who anxiously tried to keep at least part of the old dignity and power, the traditional identity.

The cults integrated into the pantheon of polytheistic Roman empire were not only tolerated, but considered by many – even in the official politics of the state – useful means to enhance the importance of Roman Empire by getting support for Rome also from divinities of all countries conquered; the conquered gods had to support Rome, its universal power in the ancient world. So e.g. the structure of the koinon Galaton, with three ethnoi: von Ankyra (Tektosagoi) of Pessinus (Tolstobogii) and Tavium (Trocmi) is well known from the inscriptions of the priests of Roma and Augustus at Ankyra. In this province the Galatian aristocracy kept much of their political positions – as tetrarchoi and priester also the three Galatian ethnoi kept their identities until the 3rd century A.D. The cult of Zeus Bussurigos (Zeus withroyal mouth) received dedications from all ethnoi. His tempels, apparently connected with the cult of Kybele, as Aurelius Sentamus from Dalapopze in this place founded in 218 AD, other dedications date from mid 3rd century. Zeus Bussumaros was known also in the province Dacia Superior. Much of the Galatian religion was also

taken over from the previous Anatolian population, as Kybele – Kubaba with her main sanctuary at Pessinus. Celtic names were common in Galatia until the 4th century AD. Tombstones from the 3rd century mentioning Celtic names are rather common in Galatia. Also the tombs of the Galatian aristocracy with tumuli continued here long into the Roman Empire (Strobel 2006). (Celtic names attested in the region of Montana, Bulgaria – see the article of A. Fetotov in Orpheus, 2007?)

In Pannonia several Celtic ethnai kept their identity also until the 3rd century AD: in some vici Celtic pottery was produced in the traditional way until the 2nd century A.D. About Boi, Eravisci and other Celtic civitates we are informed from funeral and dedicatory inscriptions and from scenes and symbols on their funeral stelae. Women usually wear the traditional costumes, while men are dressed in Roman fashion. Representations of heads remind one of earlier Celtic masks, astral symbols are common, boar hunts and attributes of Essus and Cerunnos known from some stelae. Torques is also represented, as well and funeral wagons, the last mentioned are most common in the territory of the Eravisci (Petres 1975, 1990).

Even more often are the traditional female dress representation on the funeral stelae in Noricum (Garbsch 1965), a province in which much tradition from the preceding kingdom. Noricum had rather smooth transition from the Roman protectorate to province at the time of Augustus. As in other parts of the conglomerate of the Roman Empire, women were usually more traditional in their wear, while men, who had to be more in the public and negotiate with the Roman administrative, and adopted the Roman dress fashion more quickly.

Similar traditional elements can be traced in French Gaul, in Iberia and in other Roman provinces as well (cf. Pearce-Millet-Struck, eds. 2000). In the East, notably Syria shows much local tradition in burial customs; the most apparent examples being Palmyrean funeral monuments and those in the Hauran region of the province Arabia (Colledge 1976; Parlasca 1982). But even more apparent is the keeping of the local tradition of cult and funeral representations in Egypt, whose traditional religion disappeared only with the spread of Christianity during the Late Roman times. The rich corpus of Anatolian funeral stelae, of which those from Galatia have been mentioned above, also preserved much from the earlier tradition in Anatolia, though being more Hellenized already in the Hellenistic times.

In Thrace, the Thracian Hero-Rider is the most apparent example of the religious tradition outliving the pre-Roman period, being followed by the tumulus graves, of which more are known from the Roman times than from the previous Classical and Hellenistic periods, as shown in many individual cemeteries (e.g. Kančeva-Ruseva, Velkov, Veselin 1996) and discussed in the series of colloquia on funeral archaeology, of which this colloquium is the Vth. Interesting is also the survival of the Thracian language until the end of Classical Antiquity, best documented by the existence of the Biblia Bessica (cf. Bouzek 2005, 138-144, with bibl.; Oppermann 2006).

As our globalised world has many traits common with the development under the Roman Empire, again we may use history as *magistrum vitae*: how was the resistance of national languages and cultural traditions, identities, in the Roman Empire. How deep were the roots of these traditions? Against the nationalistic development, which was especially strong in the 19th century and continued still in the past century, and which still some minor ethnic groups continue to develop as latecomers in the Balkans and elsewhere, the globalizing trend appears to be much stronger. If the next generation would consider the European mosaic of nation's worth of being kept, it is not without interest to know how their early predecessors kept their traditions in the melting pot of the Roman Empire.

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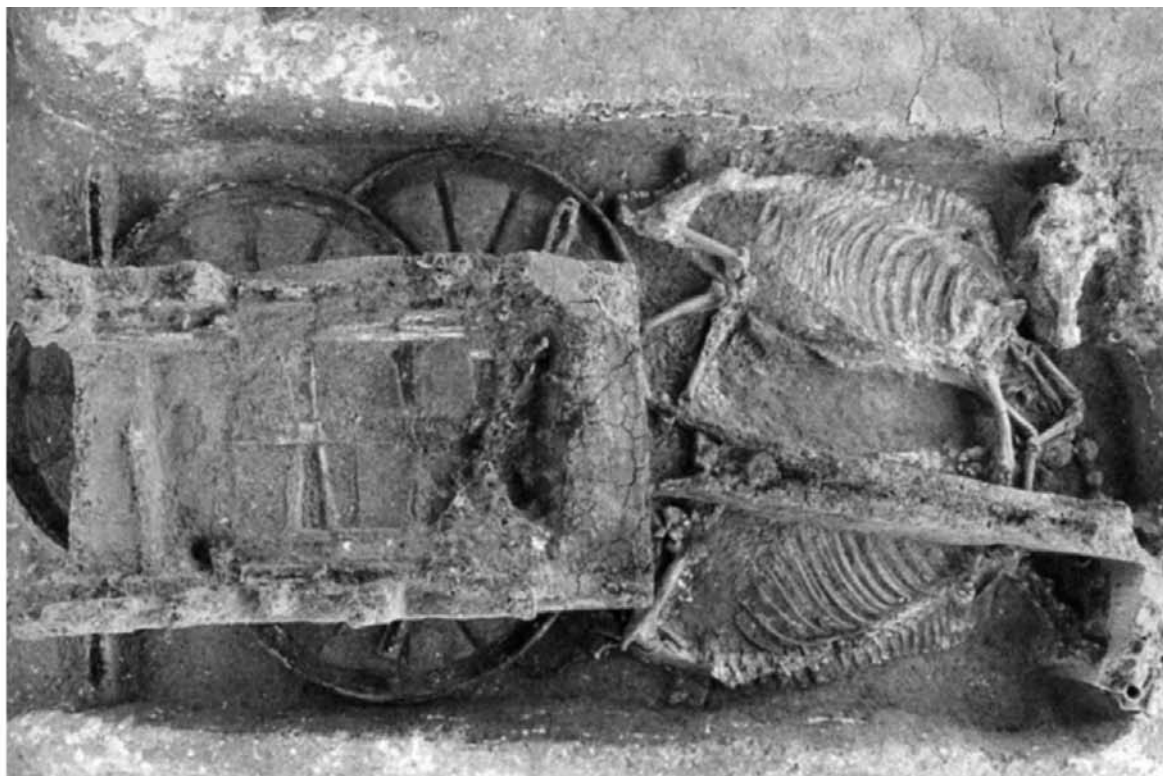


Fig. 1. Tumulus of Mikri Doxipara Zoni, Wagon C (after Triantaphyllos, Terzopoulou 2006).



Fig. 2. Tumulus of Mikri Doxipara Zoni, Wagon B (after Triantaphyllos, Terzopoulou 2006)



Fig. 3. Horse burial in the tumulus of Ladi (after Triantaphyllos Terzopoulou 2006).

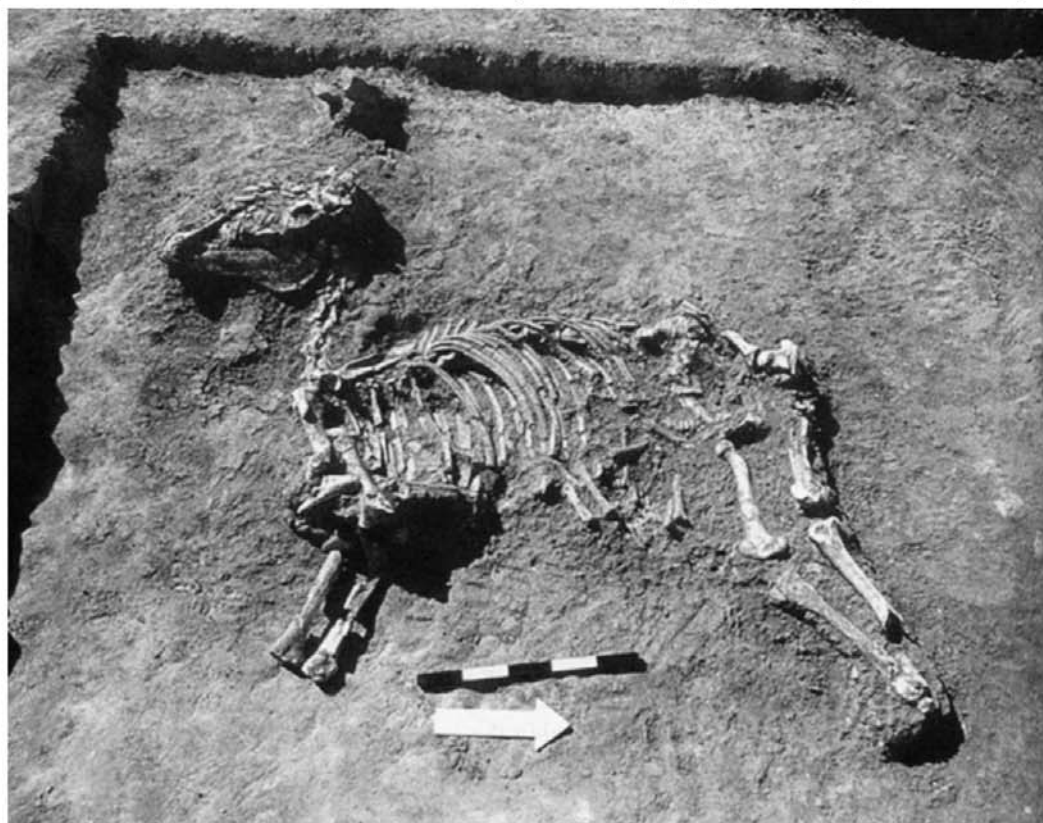


Fig. 4. Horse burial in the tumulus of Rigion (after Triantaphyllos Terzopoulou 2006).