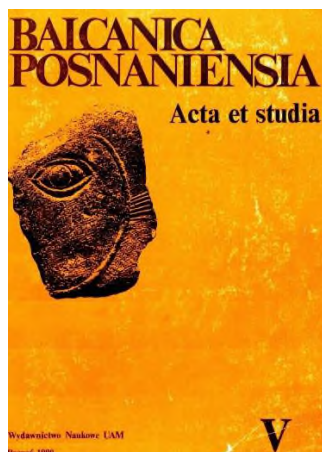




Hoddinott Ralf F., *Did Thracian influences extend into Christianity*, „Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et Studia” 1990, vol. 5, p. 325–330.

<https://doi.org/10.14746/bp.1990.5.24>

<https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/bp/article/view/52703>

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The task was carried out within the framework of the competition “Social Responsibility of Science II – Support for Scientific Libraries”. The project entitled “Digitization of archival editions of scientific journals collected by the Library of the Coll. Historicum of Adam Mickiewicz University”. The project was co-financed from state budget funds granted by the Minister of Science within the framework of the Programme Social Responsibility of Science II. Support for Scientific Libraries (agreement no. BIBL/SP/0092/2024/02 of 05.12.2024). Total value of the project: PLN 247,236.00. Amount of co-financing: PLN 220,836.00.



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Społeczna
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Nauki II

DID THRACIAN INFLUENCES EXTEND INTO CHRISTIANITY?

RALF F. HODDINOTT

ABSTRACT. Hoddinott Ralf F., *Did Thracian influences extend into Christianity?* Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia, V, Poznań 1990, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, pp. 325 - 329. ISBN 83-232-0007-6. ISSN 0239-4278. Text in English.

The author sees a considerable influence of Thracian religion, and especially the cult of Thracian Hero, on Christianity. It was manifested, among other things, in the syncretism of St. George and Heros of Thrace: in the 4th century reliefs of the Thracian deity were considered to be representations of St. George. The sanctuary of Thracian Hero Glava Panega (Bulgaria) which avoided destruction became the site of pilgrimage of sick and maimed people who were searching help from St. George.

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The influences of pre-Christian Greek, Roman and Jewish cultures on early Christianity are so well known that only the degree of their impact is arguable. By contrast, the illiteracy of the Thracians — a numerous people with traditions of such strength and persistence that some of them have lasted into the present century¹, — has meant a total lack of firsthand Thracian written sources. In the case of their religion this has left us with a dangerous dependence of sources which, whether Greek or Roman, are foreign and dealing with a subject which was rarely understood. It is therefore essential for us to recognise that, in our knowledge of Christianity's background, ignorance of a Thracian contribution represents a blind area, perhaps substantial, perhaps insignificant.

We are aware that Thracian religion influenced Greek religion — Orphism, Dionysiac and other mystery cults are instances — and that elements of these affected early Christian thinking. But they came into Christianity much modified by and

¹ M. Arnaudov, *Studii v"rhu b"lgarskite obredi i legendi*, 1, Sofija 1971; R. M. Dawkins, *The modern carnival in Thrace and the cult of Dionysos*, JHS XXVI 1906, 191 ff; K. J. Kakouri, *Dionysiaka*, Thens 1965. Since preparing this paper, I have, through the courtesy of Z. Gočeva, seen her article on the religious ideas of the Thracians and their cultural legacy in *Problemy na kulturnoto nasledstvo*, ed. V. T"pkova-Zaimova and K. I. Iordanov, Sofija 1981, 47 ff.

integrated with the Greek contribution. As such they may still legitimately be claimed as part Thracian, but the question I am posing here is: Were there certain aspects of Thracian religion which directly contributed to the development and spread of early Christianity?

First, to consider briefly the historical background of this mute, monotheistic and, until the introduction of Greek culture, aniconic people. The Thracian Middle and Late Bronze Age, which had been a time of considerable cultural achievement, was succeeded by a long decline in the Early Iron Age. A Persian occupation of Thrace south of Danube — with Bithynia, the only Thracian region directly relevant to this argument — lasted between 513 and about 465 BC. Then came the rise of the Odrysian kings, whose trade with Athens and Greek coastal colonies brought wealth and Greek influences, among them the introduction of anthropomorphic art to ruling Thracian circles. Around the mid-fourth century the Macedonian conquest intensified these influences, but any prospect of a Thracian revival was brought to an end by a third-century Celtic influx. Subsequent anarchy, inter-tribal rivalry and increasing intervention by Rome lasted until the mid first century AD, when all Thrace south of the Danube was absorbed into the Roman empire. A policy of detribalisation and heavy conscription brought further disruption.

Trajan's measures in the early years of the second century initiated a return towards economic viability, which continued until the mid third century when Gothic invasions devastated the countryside and destroyed the prosperity of the towns. Gothic invasions continued intermittently until the late fourth century. In the fifth their destructive role was taken over by the Ostrogoths and Huns.

Does this short summary of Thracian decline towards near extinction in the early centuries of the Christian era exclude the possibility of influence during this period?

Not necessarily, I think. Unlike that of Greece and Rome, Thracian religion was monotheistic.² Increasing archaeological evidence supports the existence of solar worship and I suggest this may explain Herodotos' account of Thracians, „thinking there is no other god but their own”, shooting their arrows at the clouds during a thunderstorm to threaten the usurping alien god.³

Herodotos also reports Thracian belief in immortality. „One that dies they bury in the earth, making merry and rejoicing, recounting the many evils from which, being released, he is now in perfect bliss”.⁴ For Christians during the persecutions this could have been one of their own articles of faith.

The Thracian combination of monotheism and belief in a blissful afterlife may well have been important contributory factors in preparing the ground for Christianity, not merely in Thrace and Bithynia, but throughout the empire where Thracian

² Hdt. IV, 94; R. F. Hoddinott, *The Thracians*, London 1981, 169.

³ Hdt. IV, 94.

⁴ Hdt. V, 4, trans. H. F. Cary.

⁵ A. Fol, *Les Thraces dans l'empire romain d'occident*, GSU IFF LVIII 1964, 229 ff and

troops, slaves and gladiators performed their duties.⁵ Like many of the early Christians, these Thracians, whether at home or abroad, belonged preponderantly to the less privileged strata of society.

Before 380, when Theodosius established Christianity as the sole legal religion in the Roman empire, we have no clear picture of its progress among the Thracian population. On the other hand, during the second, third and fourth centuries the popularity of the Thracian Hero reliefs and the numerous sanctuaries in which they were found demonstrate the strength of Thracian religion.⁶ The fury with which these sanctuaries were destroyed by the Christians and the relief tablets of the Hero smashed or defaced is further corroboration and even suggests the Thracian Hero, like Mithras, may have been considered a possible rival.

Hero concepts are features of both Thracian and Greek religion. The title "Hero" appears, in Greek, in dedicatory inscriptions of the Hero-Hunter often enough for us to tend to forget that it was only the Greek and not the Thracian word. As with most aspects of Thracians religion there could be no exact Greek equivalent.

Unlike the Thracian, Greek religion, and for that matter, Roman too, was polytheistic with anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. These were immortal and at a level between them and ordinary men and women came Heroes. In Homer "Hero" is a title customarily given to princes, nobles and occasionally to outstanding commoners. Hesiod reserves it for mortals of semi-divine parentage, who, like the gods, were immortal, but not Olympians. Only gradually did these Heroes, born of god and a mortal, come to be worshipped and considered to exert influence on behalf of the living. Later the Greek concept expanded to permit a more general cult of the dead in which members of a family could regard a deceased relative's spirit as, so to speak, a second-class, "new Hero", who, if suitably propitiated, would perhaps be beneficial or at least not maleficent. But their limited powers of helping living relatives or other followers were in no way comparable with those of the semi-divine heroes and even more so with those who, like Herakles and Asklepios, had been admitted to full divinity. Of the "new Heroes", only emperors were deified.⁷

Without a Thracian literature on which to draw, our knowledge of the Thracian Hero is much more vague, but we can at least see that the concept must have differed from the Greek, for a monotheistic religion could not share its divinity with men.

The earliest Thracian Hero known to us — through Homer — is Thesus, a Thra-

LXI 1967, 3 ff; idem, *The importance of the inscriptions...*, in: *Studien zur Geschichte und Philosophie des Altertums*, Budapest 1968, 377 ff; idem, *La diaspora thrace*, *Rivista storica dell'antichità* 1 - 2, 1971, 3ff; V. Velkov, A. Fol, *Les Thraces en Egypte gréco-romaine*, *Studia Thracica* 4, 1977.

⁶ W. Szubert, *On the sanctuaries of Lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, *Archeologia* XXVIII 1977, 48 ff.

⁷ E. Lucius, *Les origines du culte des saints dans l'église chrétienne*, Paris 1908, 28 ff.

cian king, ally of the Trojans and famous for his prowess, his gleaming armour, in Greek eyes "fit only for the immortal gods", and his magnificent white horses. He was killed fighting against the Greeks. A thousand years later, in the first half of the third century AD, Philostratus tells us that Rhesus is said to inhabit Rhodope where he breeds horses, marches in armour and hunts wild beasts and, moreover, that he is reputed to ward off plague from his boundaries.⁸

It is open to question whether in Thracian religion there was a single great Hero-ancestor empowered to protect and succour his people and that Rhesus and other Thracian heroes appeared as his manifestations, or whether a more limited heroic status was achieved by any Thracian who had performed sufficiently valorously and meritoriously during his lifetime. The uniform iconography of the Hunter reliefs may be cited in favour of the former. On the other hand, the latter concept appears to have been present, although it may have arrived relatively late as a result of Greek influence.

Certainly the iconography of the Hunter reliefs — a mounted horseman attacking a boar which emerges from behind a tree around which a welcoming serpent is coiled — is Greek and may have had its origin in Greco-Persian stelai of c.400 BC from the largely Thracian region of Cyzicus.⁹ But redolent with alien symbolism as this is, its adoption by the hitherto aniconic Thracian religion shows that for Thracian it somehow symbolised their Hero concept.

I must emphasize that I am referring only to the Hunter reliefs; those depicting a rider approaching an altar and/or woman probably, I think, reflect a stronger Greek or Roman rather than Thracian tradition. Accompanying inscriptions syncretizing the Hero-hunter with a Greek god such as Asklepios or Apollo, also reflect Greek influence, but only a superficial one, for in Thracian religion healing, prevention of ills, protection against enemies were all inherent attributes of their Hero.

When Christianity, accepting and adapting certain deeply rooted pagan customs, converted the concept of the Hero into that of the saint, the semi-divine Greco-Roman personifications represented the old order too fiercely to be safe. More acceptable, and already attuned to monotheism, was an alternative concept, the legacy of a fast disappearing people whose religion in consequence was no longer consciously the menace it had been when Christianity was struggling for supremacy.

Thus St. George, glorified as the most invincible of all Christian warriors, developed as the "great martyr" of Christendom in the early centuries of official Christianity, centuries when the need for Christian militancy was becoming paramount. His triumph over paganism was symbolised when the great rotunda in Thessalonica intended by Galerius, the fierce persecutor of Christianity, as his mausoleum, became instead the church of St. George, although we do not know with any certainty how early it was so dedicated. Gradually, even aspects of the Thracian Hero's iconography

⁸ Philostratus, *Heroica* 691.

⁹ Hoddinott, *o.c.*, 128 f.

became attached to the martyr saint, although the tree and serpent, having unacceptable connotations, had to be omitted. The syncretism of the Hero and Saint was such that even up to the early years of this century when Thracian Hero reliefs were discovered they were often taken for icons of St. George. Glava Panega in Bulgaria, a Hero sanctuary that had escaped Christian persecution, was a place of pilgrimage for the sick and maimed on St. George's day, just as it had been in the early centuries of the Christian era and probably before.¹⁰ In Bulgaria and Greece Thracian Hero tablets are to be found built into the walls of churches and were treated as icons of St. George in private houses.¹¹ One was built into the wall by the main gateway of the mediaeval citadel at Ainos in Turkish Thrace¹², a symbol of the protection given by the Hero of Christianity.

¹⁰ N. Vulić, *Tracki konik...*, Spomenik 1941 - 1942, 281 ff.

¹¹ Hoddinott, o.c., 168, with refs.

¹² S. Casson, *Macedonia, Thrace and Illyria*, Oxford 1926; A. Erzen, 1971 *Aili Enez (Ainos) Arastirmalari*, Türk Arkeoloji Dergisi 20, 2, 1973, 29 ff.