

Everyday Life in Ancient Thrace

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The idea of taking a look at Thracian everyday life has attracted specialists for many decades¹, but the reconstruction of the way of life in ancient Thrace is an extremely difficult task. It is true that the accumulated archaeological material and recent observations on Thracian monuments have added new data to the picture which is taking shape owing to written evidence, but that picture is still not complete. In order to construct a credible idea about Thracian everyday life, it is necessary to know the characteristics of the settlement, of the houses and their furnishings, of the means of livelihood and crafts, of textiles and clothing, of food and nutrition, of religious life and customary practices, whose research has either not started yet, or is not completed. Some of these problems are highlighted in the present study, which was developed primarily on the basis of data from the late 2nd-1st millennium BC.

The data on the Thracian dwelling are scarce, but it can be claimed that it had preserved its appearance almost unchanged throughout the entire period under investigation. Dwellings with one room were most frequent, consisting of a rectangular room with an area of about 10 to about 40 m² (cf., for example, the dwellings dated to the Early Iron Age near the village of Assenovets, Nova Zagora area², the Shoumen fortress³, Pshenichevo and Malka Vereja villages near Stara Zagora⁴, as well as those from the Late Iron Age near the villages of Brestak, Vama region⁵, Vinitsa, Shoumen district⁶ and the Shoumen fortress⁷). The dwelling is usually half-dug into the ground, less frequently built on the ground of wattle-and-daub, the clay being plastered on both sides of the wall mixed with straw. In the centre of almost every dwelling there is a carrying beam which supports the two-eaved roof made of wooden rods and covered with straw. The stones discovered in the ruins of some dwellings are believed to have been placed over the thatched roof to keep the straw in place⁸. Although rarely, sheds have been found in front of the entrance of some dwellings, under which ovens and fireplaces used in better weather have been found. An example of such dwellings can be seen in the settlement from the Shoumen fortress⁹, but the degree of their preservation there does not rule out the possibility that these were houses with two rooms.

The pit-granaries, or the so-called σπόζ, were made around the dwellings. They are mentioned by Anaxandrides, who also referred to an underground storage facility for onions¹⁰. There is no archaeological evidence about specially built granaries, but it cannot be ruled out that wicker baskets with clay plastering,

known from earlier times, were used¹¹. *Pythoi* dug into the ground in groups or individually, close to the dwellings, were used throughout the entire period¹².

The floor of the dwelling is of trampled earth, sometimes plastered with a thin clay layer on top. Each dwelling had one or two hearths, or a hearth and an oven¹³. The hearths were raised about 10 cm above the floor and represented round or hoof-shaped platforms, about 0.80-0.90 m in diameter, plastered with clay¹⁴. Some of the ovens are slightly dug into the ground (e.g., in the Early Iron Age settlement near the village of Golyamo Delchevo, Varna region¹⁵) and there is clear evidence of a destroyed vault.

There are no archaeological examples of the outer appearance of a rich Thracian dwelling from that period, but the exploration of Seuthopolis gives grounds to speak about the urban dwelling in Thrace as well. Houses there followed the architectural plan of the classical and Early Hellenistic Greek house (with *pastasis*, *prostasis* and *peristyle*). They have stone foundations, a superstructure built of wood and sun-dried brick, and a tiled roof. The houses consist of many rooms and are surrounded by an inner court. The rooms have different purposes. All of them are with clay-plastered floors, and in most of them clay cult platforms (*escharae*) have been discovered¹⁶.

According to the archaeologically attested finds and the evidence of the written sources, the furnishing of the Thracian house was sparse. It is not very probable that the floor was covered, but the mats known from earlier periods¹⁷, made from rush or straw, could probably be found in homes from the 1st millennium BC. This is probably what Diodorus implied in his information that the benches for the Thracians at the feast organized by the Getic ruler Dromichaites were covered with straw, while the benches for the guests were covered with mats made by the enemy¹⁸.

In addition to the furs, fabrics made by hemp and wool, as well as felt, were used for mattresses and blankets¹⁹. Indirect evidence for this can be found in the sepulchral sculpture from the Roman period, depicting the deceased individual resting on a pillow and lying on something that resembles a thin mattress²⁰, as well as in the figures depicted in the Kazanluk tomb. There the central male figure in the vaulted burial chamber is seated on a low chair covered with a cushion²¹. A pillow stuffed with wooden shavings was discovered under the head of a male individual buried under a tumulus near Bourgas (2nd century)²².

In all probability, it was customary to sleep on the floor, but a bone applique from a luxurious bed, found in Seuthopolis²³, and appliques considered until now to be parts of a chariot, but subsequently identified as elements of beds²⁴, have given me reasons to believe that beds became an element of the furnishing of the richer Thracian homes towards the second half of the 1st millennium BC. The rea-

sons for such an assumption can be sought in remains from funerary beds discovered in graves from the cited period and from the Roman Age, as well as in the beds depicted on the mentioned Roman sculpture²⁵.

One thing is certain: Thracians used three-legged tables to serve food. This is according to Xenophon's evidence, when he describes the feast in the residence of Seuthes²⁶, such was also the table depicted in the Kazanluk tomb²⁷; three-legged tables are most frequently depicted in votive and sepulchral sculpture from the Roman period²⁸.

Incidentally, models of tables and chairs were known even from the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age, but it seems that chairs gained a lasting presence in everyday life around the second half of the 1st millennium BC. A low stool appearing in front of a three-legged table in the painted decoration of the Kazanluk tomb demonstrates the proportions of the furniture of that type²⁹; again there, it is possible to see also a high-backed chair. Places for sitting are mentioned by Diodorus and Xenophon³⁰.

The metal casing, locks and other remains of wooden caskets of different sizes, in which jewellery and toilet attributes were kept, together with vessels and other objects discovered in some sites, presuppose the use of other wooden objects as well in everyday life: shelves, chests, etc.³¹ A find from Chatalka near Stara Zagora (2nd century)³² suggests that one cannot rule out the use of wicker or rush baskets for fruit, linen, etc.; pictures of baskets can be seen on monuments dated to the Roman period as well³³.

Light probably flowed into the house through the apertures (windows) left in the walls, which also allowed the smoke from the fire kept in the hearths to escape. Towards the second half of the 1st millennium BC, the houses of the more affluent Thracians and of the urban dwellers began to be illuminated with objects imported from Hellas: clay lamps³⁴ and even candelabra³⁵ - becoming even more frequently used during the Roman period³⁶. Objects associated with the kindling and maintaining of fire are almost lacking. One exception in this respect is the iron tripod found in the Koukova Mogila tumulus (5th century BC) near the village of Duvanlii, Plovdiv region³⁷.

When the food was prepared, it seems that the vessels were placed directly into the fireplace. Incidentally, the vessels used by the Thracians were made predominantly of clay, wood and metal, less frequently of skin, horn or other materials. Clay and wooden vessels were most extensively used in everyday life, which is supported by the evidence in the sources that the Thracians drank out of wooden cups³⁸ and used wooden vessels for wine-making³⁹. It cannot be ruled out that spoons were also made of wood, because their bone or clay models have been found in settlements dated to the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age⁴⁰. Wineskins were

made of leather. Homer narrates about a goatskin filled with wine, when he tells how Odysseus went to the land of the Kikones⁴¹. A wineskin is also depicted on one of the votive tablets from the village of Madara near Shoumen⁴². Milk was probably also transported in such leather vessels and cheese was made there as well. It is assumed that the microorganisms responsible for turning the milk into yoghurt appeared precisely in the specific medium of the skin⁴³. As regards the metal vessels, they were the property of rich Thracian families and were probably applied more extensively in rituals than in everyday life.

Depending on their purpose, vessels are divided into several groups: for preservation and transporting of products, for preparation and serving of food, for drinking and for liquids. It is interesting to note that the vessels from the last group demonstrated a great diversity of form. This great importance attached to the cup in everyday life may be evidence of the exceptional role played by inebriating beverages in Thracian culture⁴⁴. Therefore, it is not accidental that all sets of gold or silver vessels were used exclusively for drinking. As regards the tableware and vessels, most of which were deep and with a mouth rim to prevent spilling, they seem to have been designed for liquid and porridge-like foods, which could have been the principal type of food during the period under review.

Vegetarian dishes prevailed in the Thracian cuisine in those days. Bread featured very prominently in the menu, being made of sifted flour or of flour mixed with the bran or with barley. The definition of "millet-eating people" given to the Thracians around Salmydessos⁴⁵ suggests that in some places millet was important if not essential for the feeding of the population. Unleavened bread and bread made with yeast were known⁴⁶. Pictures of bread can be seen in the Kazanluk tomb and on sculpture from the Roman period⁴⁷; clay models of bread have been found in the excavations in Seuthopolis⁴⁸.

Bread was substituted or complemented by porridge made of coarsely ground barley or wheat, to which water, milk, cheese and fats were added before cooking⁴⁹. The Thracians also consumed raw onions, garlic, broad-beans soup or mash⁵⁰, fresh or dried peas, lentil and sometimes vetch⁵¹. In spring and summer the diet was diversified with fresh vegetables (e.g., dock, sorrel, cabbage, etc.), mushrooms and fruit (grapes, apples, cornel-cherries, plums, mulberries, etc.)⁵². Meat was consumed rarely, mainly in the autumn and winter, when it could be stored for a longer time. Meat was mainly boiled and roasted (cf., for instance, the skewers for roasting meat, found in the villages of Vinitsa near Shoumen and Vetren near Pazardjik⁵³, as well as the evidence in Xenophon about the meat grilled on skewers during the feast offered by Seuthes⁵⁴).

Milk and dairy products were of extreme importance in the Thracian cuisine at that time. The Thracians used cheese⁵⁵, butter⁵⁶ and yoghurt⁵⁷. One cannot fail

to notice also the consumption of wine and of the beverages prepared from barley (βρῦτον) and millet (παραβίη)⁵⁸.

There are grounds to assume that the Thracians practice a twice daily feeding pattern: with a late breakfast and a second meal in the late afternoon. Indirect evidence about such feeding pattern is contained in texts of Herodotus and Xenophon⁵⁹.

This brief survey on the dwelling, its furnishing and on the food in Thrace does not exhaust by far the range of issues connected with Thracian everyday life. Nevertheless, it can serve as the beginning of a palaeo-ethnological investigation of Thracian antiquity.

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NOTES

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