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11. Thracian thalassocracy and the beginnings of Greek colonisation in Thrace reconsidered

Jan Bouzek

Abstract: Literary tradition on Thracian thalassocracy is confronted with a revision of archaeological finds, notably those uncovered during the last ten years, since a similar paper has been published at Varna (BOUZEK 2005).

Key words: Thracians; thalassocracy; Greek colonisation and penetration of inland Thrace; Black Sea; Balkans and Central Europe.

1. Thracian thalassocracy

Diodorus Siculus in his VIIth book mentions Thracian thalassocracy, rule over the sea, lasting for 79 years between the Bronze and Iron Ages, just after the thalassocracy of the Pelasgians (who were most probably the bulk of the Sea People in Greek oral memory), and prior to the Rhodians. The fragment is only known from the Eusebius chronicle:

..Lidi et Maeones annos 92

Pelasgi annos 85

Thrakii annos 79

Rhodii annos 23

Phrygii 25

Kyprii 33

Phynikii 45,..etc., up to the invasion of Xerxes to Greece.

It was usually believed by most scholars that there must have been something behind the tradition of other earlier thalassocracies, starting with the Cycladic, Cretan and Mycenaean, but the Thracian thalassocracy remained for many a kind of a hapax.

According to Homer Thracians from the area between the Marmara Sea and the Axios River took part in the Trojan War on the side of the Trojans. Homer's description of the Thracian king Rhesus, whose kingdom was on the lower Struma, reflects the richness of the Thracian rulers of his time. Odysseus and Diomedes killed Rhesus before he could intervene in the war, but his arrival at Troy was impressive. Homer describes the way all Greek heroes stared at him in amazement:

“..Here apart be the Thracians, newcomers, the outermost of all,
and among them their king Rhezus, son of Eioneus.
His be verily the fastest horses that I ever saw, and the greatest,
whiter than snow, and in speed like the winds,
and his chariot is cunningly wrought with gold and silver,
and armour of gold brought he with him, huge of size,
a wonder to behold. Such armor is besemeth,
not the mortal men should wear, but immortal gods.”
(Il. X, 436-441, Loeb translation)

Characteristic is what awakened the admiration of the Greeks: much better horses than theirs (cf. also Il. X, 474-5 and X 513-14), and a wealth of gold that exceeded what the Greek princes possessed. A saying was created: "As rich as Rhesus".

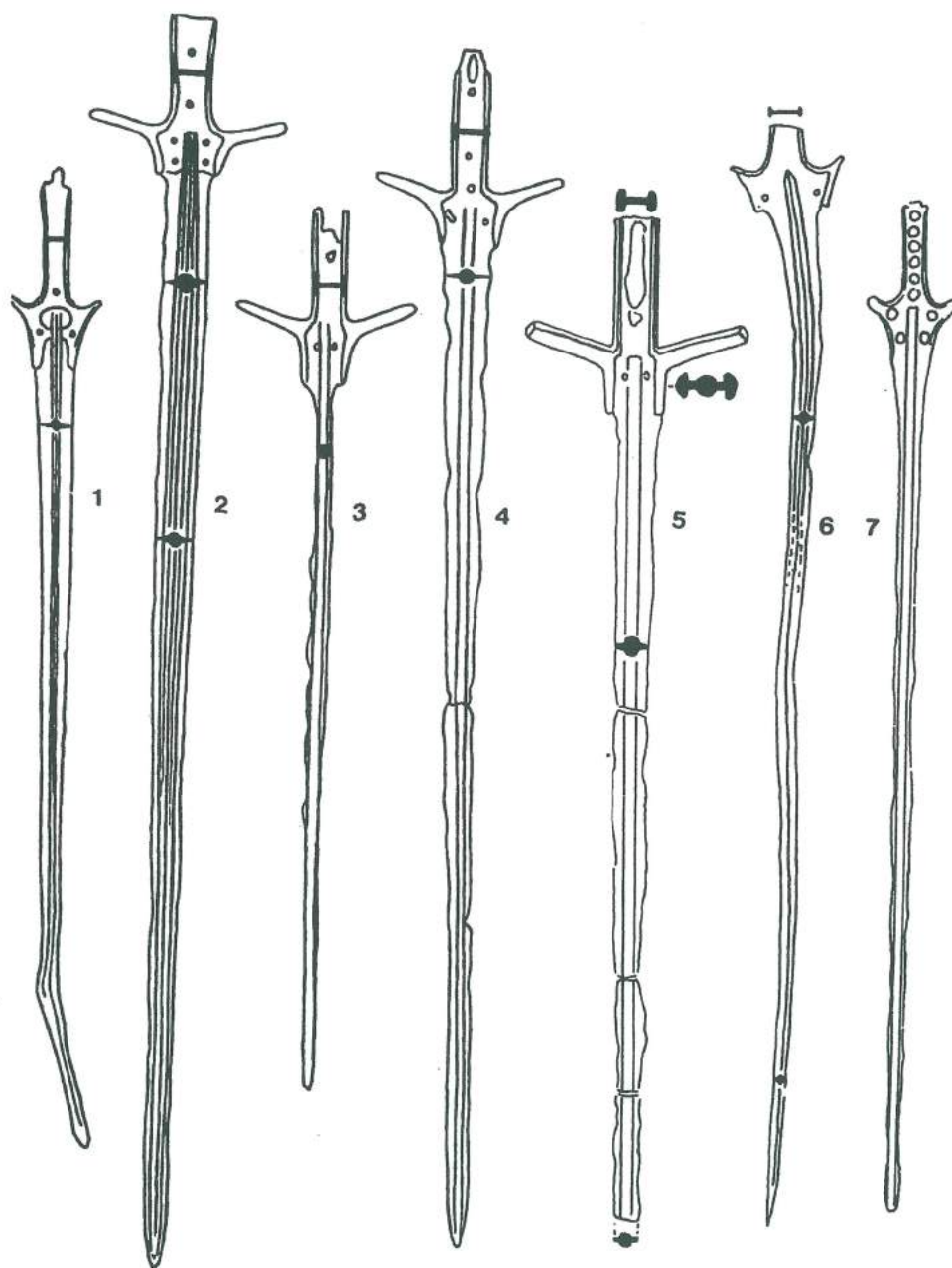


Fig. 11: 1. Mycenaean and related horned swords. 1 Mycenae, 2 Dolno Levski, 3 Doktor Josifovo, 4 Peruštica, 6 Galatin (all Bulgaria), 5 Medgidia (Romania), 7 Tetovo near Skopje (Macedonia).

Greek myths attributed the origins of the Dionysus cult to the Thracians. Through drinking wine and rituals connected to it individuals were freed from their blood relations and able to close new relationships, expressed mainly in the male *Gefolgschaft* and in female *menadism*. It was not only Dionysus with his merry company who came to the Greeks from Thrace, orphism also came from this region. According to legend its founder was the Thracian king Orpheus and Orphism created one of the first bridges between the religious and

philosophical interpretations of the world. In that sense Thrace was a midwife of Greek culture (cf. BOUZEK 2005, 25-42).

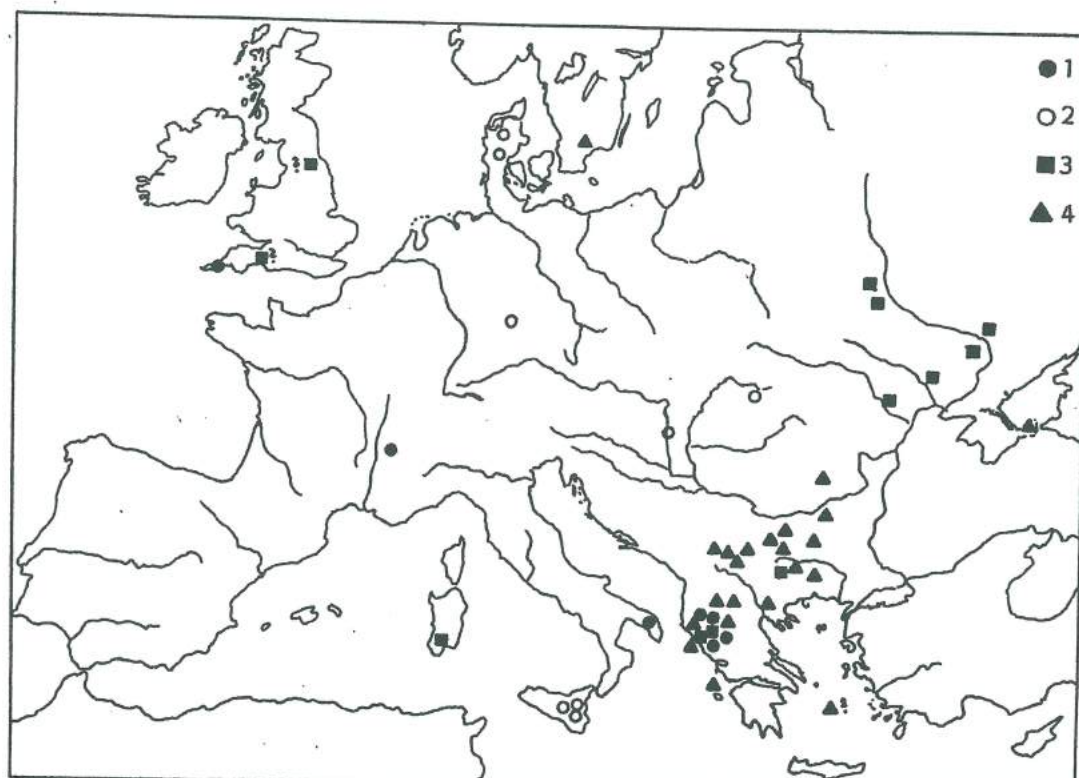


Fig. 11: 2. 1-2 distribution of Mycenaean D-G. swords outside the Aegean and their imitations (1-2), of Mycenaean double axes (3) and of related types (4).

In later periods, Thracians were not particularly advanced seafarers. But the Thracians lived on the North Aegean islands during the Dark Age, on which seafaring was the main way of transport and fishing the main source of nourishing. They were not always in friendly relations with the first Greek settlers there. The Archilochos story on loosing shield (though on the coast of mainland Thrace) may be symptomatic:

“One Saic man is proud of my shield, which
– a nice piece of armour – I left there unwilling.
But I escaped death – and the loss of shield does not matter!
No worse will be the new one, which I will gain later.”

The piracy of the Thracians, who lived (and perhaps invaded at the time of the end of the Bronze Age) the North Aegean islands, was apparently feared similarly, as the Illyrian piracy in the Adriatic, which lasted longer; only the very fast Aeginetan ships were going to Adria still in late 6th century B.C., and Illyrians were masters of large parts of the Adriatic until the Hellenistic times (NAVA 2004; MIHOVIĆ 2004).

2. Thracian contacts with the Mycenaean and Protogeometric world

Contacts between the territory of modern Bulgaria and the Mycenaean world prior to the 13th century B.C. are mainly documented by swords, spearheads and double axes. The sword from Galatin is probably a Mycenaean product; others, including the fragmentary weapon from

Drama, are local imitations (Fig. 11.1: 6, 2-4), while the northernmost item found in Medgidia in Romanian Dobrogea (Fig. 11.1: 5) appears to be of Mycenaean origin, too (cf. BOUZEK 2012, 16-17). With some of the swords Mycenaean spearheads with long blade were found; both represent elements of Mycenaean armour, which were unknown in other parts of Europe. The double axes from Bulgaria include mainly North Greek, marginal types (Fig. 11.2: 4), but also genuine Mycenaean shapes of Late Bronze Age date (Fig. 11.2: 3); some of them have been found as far as in the Ukraine (cf. BOUZEK 1985, 44-47; 2012, 17; BUCHHOLZ 1983; BONEV 2004; cf. Fig. 11: 3). Decorative bronze sceptres from that time testify to excellent bronze working technique and are evidence of rulers whose paraphernalia they represented. Some fragments of Mycenaean pottery were found in South-west Bulgaria, at Koprivlen (ALEXANDROV 2005), while those signalled from Drama (LICHARDUS AND FOL eds. 2000) are in fact Ionian Archaic, and the fragment from Tsarevo in the SE corner of Bulgaria (FOSSEY ed. 1997, pl. 2) also suspect.

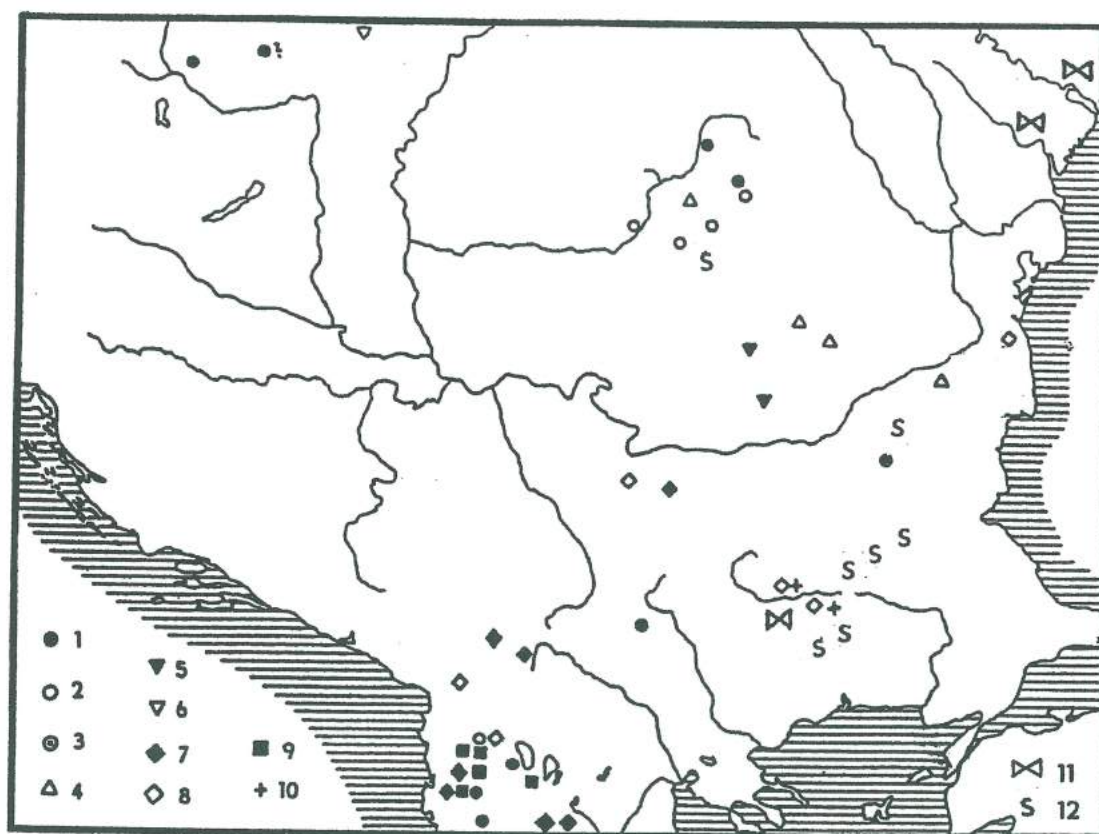


Fig. 11: 3. Mycenaean types of weapons north of the Aegean. 1-3 Karo A and related rapiers, 4 their fragments, 5-6 Persinari and Rosiorii-de-Vede swords, Spišský Štvrtok mould, 7-8 Sandars C swords and imitations, 9 Sandars D-E swords and imitations, 10 Mycenaean spearheads, 11 double axes of Mycenaean type, 12 Thracian sceptres.

Late Bronze Age Thrace was rich country with mighty rulers. The treasure of golden vessels from Valčitrán (distr. Plevén) is one of the best examples of the wealth of Late Bronze Age Thrace. The largest vessel, a two-handled kantharos, has parallels in Križovlin near Odessa and from Bădeni in Romanian Moldova (MIKOV 1958; TAYLOR 1984, 187-202). The Valčitrán hoard appears to be earlier than the gold vessel from Kazičane near Sofia; lids of silver similar to those of the Valčitrán treasure have been found in north-western Bulgaria. The most interesting part of the Valčitrán set is a vessel in shape of a big triple ladle or dipper connected by tubes, so that it is possible to mix together the liquids poured in all there ladles.

This vessel is accompanied by three drinking cups and this triple set shows that it served for ritual sacrifices to a trinity, perhaps identical to that known in later Thracian religion (cf. BOUZEK 1997, 133).

3. The maritime trade and seafaring documents

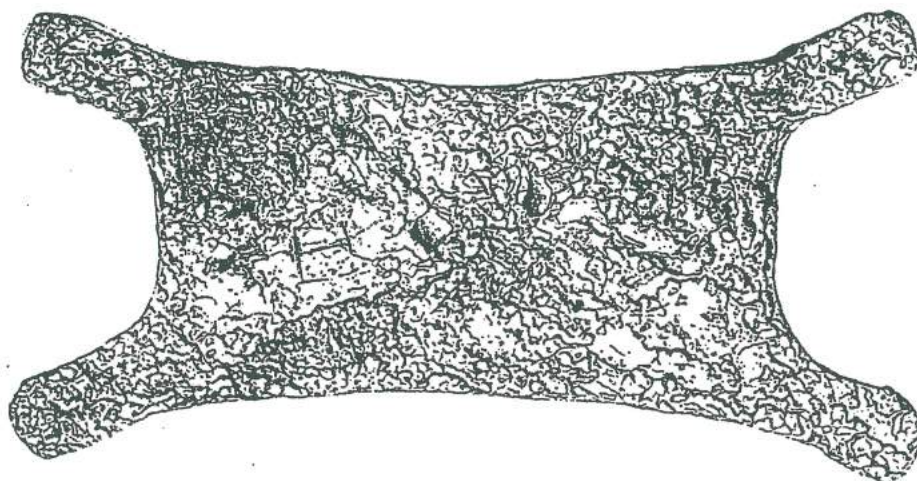


Fig. 11: 4. Copper ingot from Čenovo near Burgas.

The Bulgarian Black Sea coast was involved in maritime trade in the Late Bronze Age, according to finds of ingots of oxtail shape. One bronze ingot was found in Čenovo near Burgas (**Fig. 11: 4**); it weighs 26 kg and is similar to those found e.g. in the wrecks in Yassi Ada and Kaş, at the south-western Turkish coast. Another item of this class, coming from near Cape Kaliakra and weighing 1.5 kg, was composed of 32% of gold, 18% of silver, 43 % of copper and some nickel; it is a unique piece, but its shape is of Mediterranean inspiration; Mycenaean weights were used in most parts of Bronze Age Europe (PARE 1999, 421–514; MICHAILIDOU (ed.) 2001; BOUZEK 2004, 297–309). Three new ingots have been found near Varna; they came from Kirilovo, Bjalata Prst and from Černozem, Lambanskoto kladenče while there is also a parallel fragmentary find from the European coast of the Marmara Sea at İğdebağları in Turkey (c. esp. LICHARDUS ET AL. 2002, 160–176), 160–167f.), several from northern Bulgaria (DONCHEVA 2011, here **Pl. 21** above) and one from near Stuttgart (PRIMAS AND PERNICKA 1998). Some of them have been analysed, and their composition fits well into the usual class of Cypriot ingots. We do not know much about Thracian ships, but some of them were probably like those known from illustrations on Greek Geometric vases, or on the Swedish rock carvings (WACHSMANN 2013, 65–81, cf. **Fig. 11: 6**). Along the Bulgarian coast many stone anchors of pyramidal or square shape have been found, with one, two or three drilled holes at its top (**Fig. 11: 5**). These anchors are characteristic for the Bronze Age seafaring when adverse winds forced boats to anchor immediately wherever they were. Many of these anchors were found underwater in places, which offered no safe anchorage: in dangerous shallow waters and under cliffs. There seem to be two reasons for this situation. One was the necessity to anchor in bad weather wherever it was possible, and to escape by cutting off the anchors when in trouble, but these anchors are also traces of shipwrecks. In the latter case the whole set of anchors of the ship was preserved, as well as other objects from the ship's cargo (Cf. esp. *Thracia Pontica* 5, Sozopol 1994 (eds. CH. ANGELOVA, M. LAZAROV); POROŽANOV 1989; LAZAROV 2004, 19–40). It is a pity that – unlike in the Mediterranean – anchors in Bulgarian coastal waters were discovered without clear context.

Their dating is thus not quite safe, but they must have preceded the Phoenician and Greek Early Iron Age seafaring.

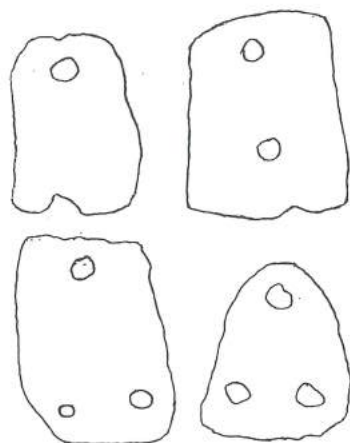


Fig. 11: 5. Stone anchors at Sozopol.

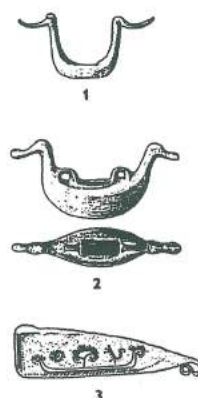


Fig. 11: 6. 'Vogelbarke' from Hungary and Denmark.

4. Thracians and Sea Peoples, migrations to and from Thrace

According to Greek tradition the Trojan War came at the end of the 13th century B.C. Those who returned from it were among the last heroes of the mythical period, which ended shortly afterwards with the beginning of the new Age of Iron. In Thrace the Bronze Age lasted longer; but even there it did not survive too long after the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces. Around 1200 B.C. the powerful Hittite empire ceased to exist in Asia Minor, the so called "Sea Peoples" conquered Cyprus, destroyed Syrian towns – among the best known of those destroyed was Ugarit and – around 1190 B.C. Their victorious campaign was only stopped on the Egyptian frontier by the armies of Ramses III. More sophisticated state structures mostly disappeared, only the more distant of them survived, especially Assyria and Egypt, and the Dark Age began. Although – thanks to intensive research during the last decades – the next centuries are now better known and the Dark Age becomes lighter to our knowledge, the state of affairs became more primitive than in the preceding Late Bronze Age and in the following civilization of Archaic Greece. The LBA symbolic representations known from Thrace are similar to those from Scandinavia and Central Europe (cf. Figs. 11: 6-7).



Fig. 11: 7. Stone stele from Razlog and detail of the engraving.

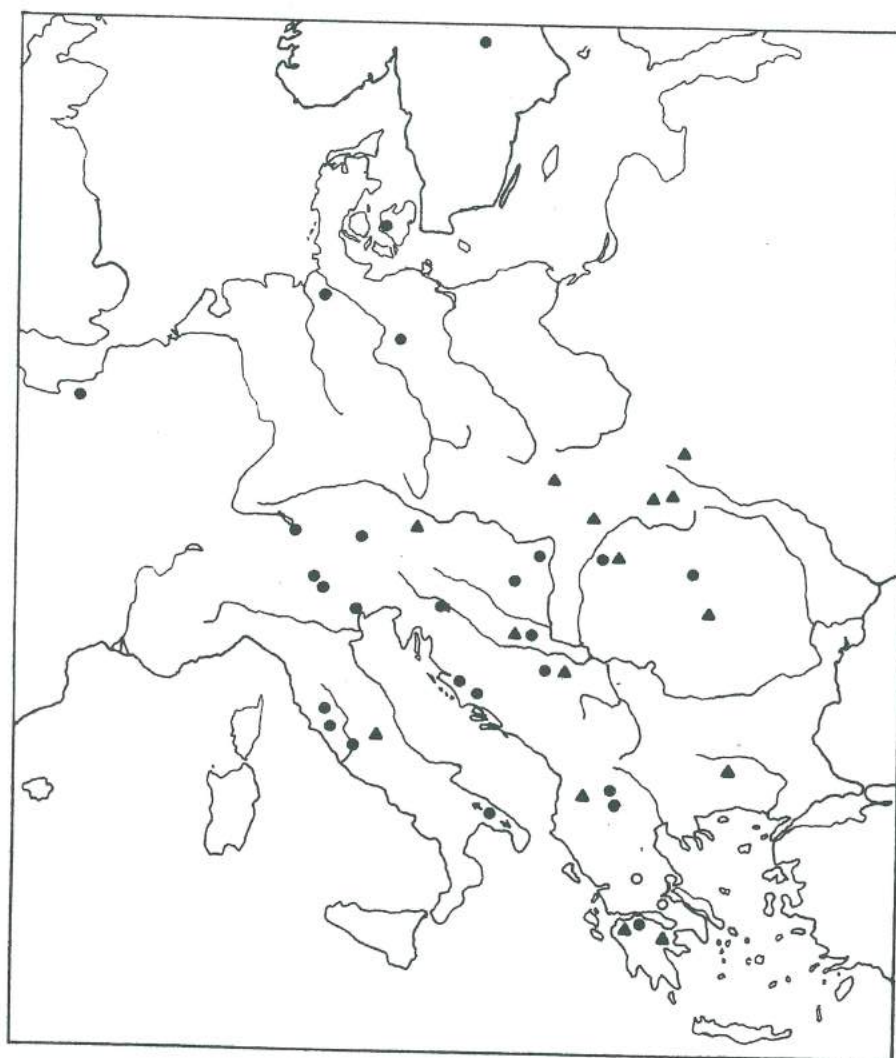


Fig. 11: 8. Distribution of Sprockhoff IIb swords. Circles type Stätzling, triangles type Ennsdorf – Vyšný Sliach.

Generally, Thrace was touched by Late Bronze Age migrations less than other countries (cf. Fig. 11: 8). Its cultural continuity was more disrupted only in some parts of its territory, although the influence from the western Balkans was decisive for further development of jewellery, dress fasteners and armour, especially in the western part of Thrace, and – besides influences from the Pontic and Caucasus areas – it became the main background of the Thracian bronzework in the Early Iron Age (cf. BOUZEK 2005, 38-41). It might be under pressure of arrival of other groups from the north to Thrace that other migrations from the Balkans to Asia Minor occurred. Tradition recorded by later Greek authors (mainly by Herodotus, 7, 73 and 8, 138, and Strabo 7, 4, 2 and 14, 5, 29) testifies that the Phrygians moved to Asia Minor from the area of the Vardar (Axios) valley; their remnants stayed in western Macedonia until historic times and were called the Brygi. The Phrygians created a powerful kingdom in Asia Minor with its centre in Gordion; their kingdom was destroyed by the The earliest pottery known from the excavations at Gordion shows many traits comparable to the Early Iron Age pottery style of the southern Balkans (cf. BOUZEK 1985, 241-244; 1997, 24-33; Dal Palazzo alla città, Atti convegno Roma, 1988, publ. 1991; ORAN (ed.). 2000; PETROVA 1996). Also the Armenians were, according to Herodotus, descendants of the Phrygians. The Mysians living in north-western Asia Minor came there according to ancient authors from the present north-western Bulgaria (HEROD. 7. 75. 2).

Those of the Mysians, who stayed in their homeland on the Danube, were called Moesians and later gave their name to the Roman province of Moesia (in late sources also sometimes called Mysia). Just a brief look at the map shows us that both historically proved movements can be linked with the two archaeologically documented movements of other groups from the eastern part of central Europe; the latter may perhaps have been responsible for the pressure which caused the Mysians, Bithynians and Phrygians move to Anatolia. Further movement from Thrace into Asia Minor can be traced in the similarity of the Trojan pottery after the fall of Troy VI with the pottery style known in eastern Bulgaria and Rumania (Babadag, Sava-Conevo, Malkoto Kale; DOMARADZKI ET AL. 1991; TONČEVA 1980; LÁSZLÓ 1994). It concerns first of all the so-called Trojan Knobbed Ware (Fig. 11: 5). Some parallels with Trojan pottery of the 12th–10th centuries B.C. can also be found in more western parts of Thrace (BOUZEK 1985, 79-82; 1994, 218-220), while Aeolian (Trojan) Grey Ware is also known from Bulgaria (LICHARDUS ET AL. 2002, 140-159; NIKOV 2012). The legend on Thracian thalassocracy may suggest that also some Thracians participated in the movements of the Sea Peoples.



Fig. 11: 9. 1 bimetallic daggers, 2 north Caucasian horse-bits, 3 sceptres, 4, Cimerian finds from Anatolia, 5 Thracian bronzes, 6 other Cimmerian graves. K – Kuhan and Koban cultures, MB – area of the earliest Macedonian bronzes, TC Central Transcaucasian group.

The close parallels between Greek and Caucasian bow fibulae and Caucasian bronze objects from Samos show that contacts across the Black Sea existed in the 9th–8th centuries B.C., though no safe Greek pottery imports of this early date are known from the Black Sea area as yet (BOUZEK 1990, 15-17).

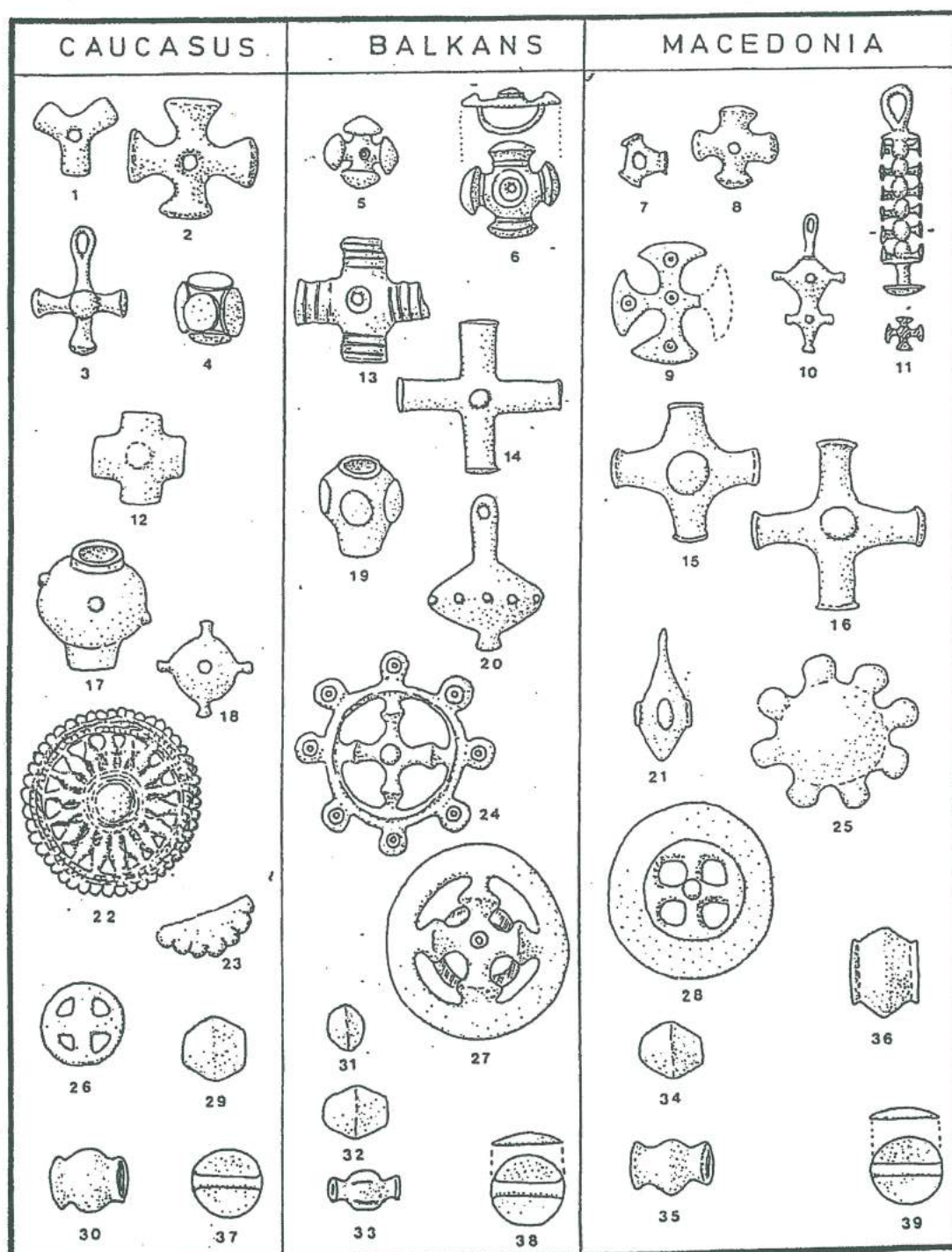


Fig. 11: 10. Parallels between bronze pendants and beads: the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the earliest Macedonian bronzes.

5. The silent trade of Herodotus

However, the precolonial trade had rather other reasons than bringing pottery, which is certainly more important for archaeologists than it was for early travellers; similar situation is with the earliest trading stations of the Phoenicians in the Western Mediterranean.

Herodotus has nice story on the trade phases from silent trade to agents and emporia;

this was everywhere and probably also in the Black Sea. The metals were much more important for early trade than clay vessels and their importance should not be overestimated. More important for the discussion are the finds of 8th century Caucasian bronzes in Samos Heraeum and the fact that the first Caucasian fibulae much resemble the Greek Island types of Blinkenberg. Metals made the world to get around, and these substances were much in demand both for the Phoenicians and Greeks.

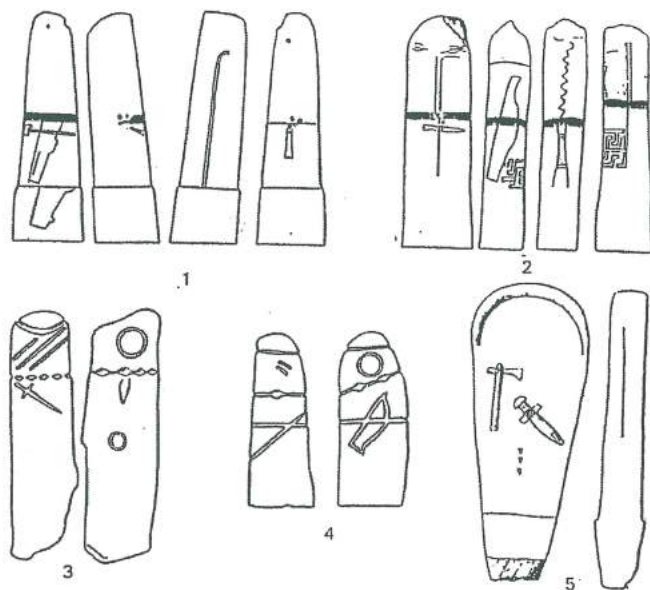


Fig. 11: 11. Cimmerian stone stelae. 1 Olbia, 2 Belogradec, Bulgaria, 3 Sosnovka, Tuva, 4 Gamarevo near Orenburg, 5 Novo Mordovo, central Volga area.

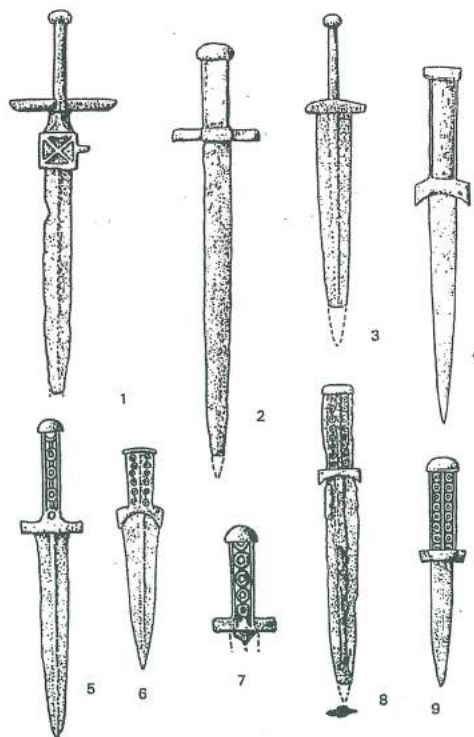


Figure 11: 12. Cimmerian bimetallc swords. 1 Leibnitz, Austria, 2 Kiev area, 3 Klein-Neundorf, Saxony, 4 Vysokaja mogila near Chişinau, 5 Gamów, Silesia, 6 Abadzechskaja, 7 Koutouč near Štramberk, Moravia, 8 Achmolovskij mogilnik, Upper Mari, 9 Tatarskoe Burnašev near Kujbyšev.

For all these reasons, there is at least very probable that there existed in the Black Sea, as did in the Mediterranean, a precolonisation phase of Greek trade, in which ships travelled across the Bosphorus northwards, and made use of trade possibilities at least with metals, the *nervus rerum* of all ancient civilisations. The pre-colonial phase apparently existed in the Black Sea prior to the second quarter of the 7th century and it prepared the know-how for the sudden outburst of Greek interest in the Black Sea and also of the Scythian and other peoples of the region willingness to accept Greek wares and tradesmen. A symbiosis evolved, useful for all participants of the history to which the congress is devoted. It created a community in which all participants preserved their identity for centuries, but they also were participants of the same network, of a broader community for the benefit of all, similarly as we do in our days.

6. Greek colonisation in the Northern Aegean and in the Black Sea

The colonisation of the Chalcidice started with Protogeometric (Torone, Mende), but became more intense in 8th to 7th century (BOUZEK 2005; TIVEROS 2008, 1-52) and the Sub-Protogeometric pottery arrived into the southern fringes of nowadays Bulgaria and Republic of Macedonia (BOŽKOVA 2005, 2013).

According to historical tradition Greek colonization of the Thracian Black Sea coast started after the attacks of Cimmerians and Scythians ended, i.e. around 660 B.C., but few Greek cities in the area have yielded pottery earlier than 600 B.C. (BOARDMAN 1980, 239-250; TSEKHLADZE 1998, 9-68; BOUZEK 2013). The first Milesian colony on the Black Sea Thracian shore was Histria (also Istria, Istros or Istropolis). According to Pindaros Istros was in the area where Apollo lived in winter, so even the Apolline myth shows Thracian links. The earliest pottery from Histria dates from the end of the second quarter of the 7th century B.C. Some exceptions may, however, date from the end of the 8th century B.C.; here belong perhaps fragments of Black-on-Red vases from Cyprus, some fragments of Aeolian amphorae and one Geometric sherd, but the provenance of the latter has been questioned (cf. again ALEXANDRESCU 2000), and new excavations revealed nothing that early. The earliest pottery from Istria widely known is of Milesian Middle Wild Goat style I, as clay analyses have confirmed. Similarly early finds yielded Orgame near to Histria; the earliest also date from mid 7th century B.C. Middle White Goat I fragments, fragments of bird bowls, a Valet-Villard A2 Samian cup and an early Chiot transport amphora came from one of the earliest graves of the cemetery, perhaps of the *ktistes* of the town (MANUCU AND ADAMSTEANU 2001). Apollonia Pontica yielded first pottery from the third quarter of the 7th century, while Odessos only from mid 6th century B.C. (for Apollonia cf. NEDEV AND PANAYOTOVA 95-156 and for Odessos MINČEV, 209-287, both in GRAMMENOS AND PETROPULOS, eds. 2003). As shown again before shortly by G. TSEKHLADZE in *Pontica* 2007, Middle White Goat I sherds and the early Bird Bowls of the same date – mid 7th century are known not only from the Greek colonies, but also from Scythian graves and settlements partly far away from the sea, what suggests that the links with the Scythians were established in some way slightly earlier than the results show. Visually, there are few problems, but the new generation preaching clay analyses similarly as our doctors prefer to make tests to visual observation of the patients, may still bring more details, but generally the discussion on what was five or ten years earlier according to one more fragment appears similarly little fruitful as was the old one on relation between Syracuse and Megara Hyblaea foundations by Valet and Villard in the fifties of the last century.

Also the shift from Assyrian-influenced to Ionizing phase of Scythian art belongs to the third quarter of the 7th century, and in the last quarter of the century it clearly dominated the art of the Scythians. These dates leave enough time for a period of Thracian seafaring

dominance in the Black Sea prior to founding Greek colonies.

7. Conclusions

It can be concluded that the legend on Thracian thalassocracy fits well into the period preceding the Greek colonisation of the Black Sea, when Greek seafaring was not yet very successful and of limited scale only. The Trojan Grey ware is known from many sites in the Eastern Mediterranean, and some Thracians may well have participated even in the campaigns of the Sea Peoples, together with the Pelasgoi, who left other myths in Greek tradition. It seems that there are enough archaeological sources suggesting that the traditional story of Thracian thalassocracy was not a pure invention. There may well have been a real core behind the legend, which also resembles parallel stories describing Illyrian thalassocracy in the Adriatic Sea, though the latter lasted longer and was apparently on a more sophisticated level.

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