

THE IDENTITY OF THE TRIBALLIAN GREAT GODDESS

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Thracian art has preserved for us the image of the female deity of the Thracians. Written sources also mention a number of goddesses, usually by the names of their Greek counterparts: Artemis, Hecate, Hera and Aphrodite. The cults of two Thracian goddesses, Cotytto (Cotys) and Bendis, are relatively well known. It is difficult, however, to fit this fragmentary information into a coherent system and this entails one of the principal problems of Thracian mythology: are we dealing with the numerous hypostases of one Goddess or with different goddesses with fixed functional range, invariable attributes, plastic images and acolytes. I ought to thank Professor Jan Best for having clearly defined the question and put it forward as one of the principal subjects of discussion at this round table.

First of all, I would like to dwell on some general conceptual points. *Firstly*, what classification principle should we use to distinguish between the hypostasis of the Goddess and the individual goddess—local, ethno-cultural, temporal, functional or nominal? None of these gives us sufficient grounds to give preference to the individualized deity over the hypostasis. *Secondly*, from the viewpoint of the history of religion the evolution of the goddess proceeds from a state of polyfunctional unity of her image towards the personification of separate functions. Consequently, we should establish the stage that Thracian mythology had reached in the 5th-4th century BC. But in this connection the question that immediately comes to mind is that we may have been misled by the Greek plastic model according to which the divine image is represented with strictly personalized functions, attributes and behaviour. Most Thracian goddesses are known by their Greek names and this tempts us to draw analogies, but this implies that the Greeks and the Thracians had an equally developed mythological consciousness which is a historical error since in the 4th century BC the two neighbouring peoples lived in different eras. *Thirdly*, we must find the correlation factor which would enable us to avoid the mistakes of "reverse translation", that is, the Thracian interpretation of Greek

deities in written sources and pictorial texts. From a semiotic point of view this question may be put in the following manner: does a sign borrowed from one culture preserve its meaning in the adoptive culture?

The Thracian goddesses. Let us start with the analysis of the Thracian goddesses we know from written sources and compare them to the information derived from local iconography. Herodotus mentions only one female deity in the pantheon of the Thracians: along with Dionysus and Ares he names Artemis. The virgin huntress is portrayed on one rhyton of the Panagyurishtë treasure, on jug 157 from Rogozen and between the horsemen on jug 159 of the same treasure. Elsewhere he speaks of Artemis Basilea (Queen) who was worshipped by Paionean and Thracian women.

And yet the only goddesses known by their Thracian names are Cotytto and Bendis. In antique written sources they get sometimes identified with each other, at least so far as their rituals and feasts are concerned. It would be interesting to see how the Greek authors interpret Bendis whom they were familiar with from her cult at Piraeus. The very fact that her temple was located on Munychia associates her with Artemis Brauronia. On the other hand, in written texts she is identified with Cybele, Britomartis and Artemis. An inscription originating from the Aegean Islands mentions the "Thracian Aphrodite" who can be compared to Bendis. This assumption is confirmed by Conon who writes that Pallene is the daughter of Sithon by the nymph Mendeis (i.e. Bendis), and that Aphrodite saved the princess from her father's wrath. The feast of Bendis in Athens, described by Plato, shows her close association with horses, that is, it involves a hippomorphic aspect. For another thing, ephēbi took part in the festival (evidenced by the relief in the British Museum), therefore the goddess patronized the initiation of youths. In Bithynia Bendis was described as a huge woman who spins and pastures pigs which is indicative of a married status. On the coins of the Bithynian king Nicomedes III she appears armed, which identifies her with Athene. It should not be forgotten that in Chalcidice Athene was called Pallenia, which is associated with the appellation of a youth during the period of his warrior's initiation—*pallas*—as well as with the name of Pallene. It is also possible that the identity of Britomartis and Pallene should stem from their common attribute, the net. The Cretan goddess was caught in a fishing net (or invented a hunting net), the reliefs on the rocks near Philippi show the goddess of southern Thrace as a huntress with a net in hand. The net is an attribute of the "wild (black) hunt", practised by young men during their period of transition. Evidently, the fact that

Bendis uses this kind of weapon shows once again that she was the patron of initiation.

Even this cursory analysis reveals the wide range of functions performed by the Thracian Bendis which makes it hard to identify her with the image of one single Greek deity. What is more, she displays features which are downright contradictory and incompatible with unambiguous characterization. That is why I am inclined to regard her as a deity of the type of the primeval Great Goddess. Small wonder that in Lemnos she was known as Megale Thea.

The example of Bendis, the best known Thracian goddess, can prompt us the model of the reconstruction of the Thracians' female deity. She was known to the Edones (southwestern Thrace), but also to the Bithynians (the Thracian diaspora to northwestern Asia Minor). Consequently, her cult was observed throughout Aegean Thrace across local, political and ethno-cultural boundaries. Probably she was worshipped under different names corresponding to her different aspects. However, we cannot pin down with any certainty those separate aspects of her cult to a stable image existing within given local, political, tribal or temporal structures. On the contrary, in southwestern Thrace or Bithynia it even combines different qualities. Moreover, even the name of the goddess is no more than an epithet or epiclesis, and has one of the clearest etymologies in Thracian theonymy: it is derived from an Indo-European root **bhendh-*, i.e. "bind". It is assumed that her name reflects her function of binding people by matrimonial ties. But the "binding deities" of the Indo-Europeans are usually warrior gods, and as we saw, Bendis indeed has some warlike features. Her role of a spinner may be linked to this function, considering that Athene is also a weaver and a warrior at the same time. Evidently, even Bendis is not a deity personifying certain qualities or a single function. It has remained on the evolutionary stage of a Cybele-type Great Goddess (and, incidentally, exactly like her, she is being depicted on rock faces, and in a later folkloric era the stone has become her aniconic symbol). Possibly the hearths dedicated to the goddess used to burn on the mountain tops of Chalcidice and their ash was never scattered. Therefore, she also impersonates the functions of Hestia. In my opinion precisely this kind of omnipotent female deity, which emerged in the Mediterranean region during the early neolithic period and was transformed by the Indo-Europeans into a transfunctional goddess, is characteristic of Thrace in historical times and survived even during the period of Roman domination. This accounts for the ease with which the local deities assume Greek or Latin names or are represented by means of borrowed iconographic schemes. I suppose

that what Herodotus writes about the Pelasgians' having no names for their gods should be also largely true of the Thracians. Other authors mention a Thracian tribe that had no gods, that is, obviously did not name them. This is why I prefer to speak of a Goddess rather than goddesses of the Thracians.

Ways of individualizing the goddess. Thus far I tried to reconstruct the model of the Thracian Great Goddess from the existing written evidence, but our main source of information about her is Thracian iconography, the pictorial texts preserved in Thracian art. First of all I must say that Thracian iconography, unlike the Hellenic, Egyptian or Medieval ones, is not so rigid. In Thracian art we rarely find repetitions of the same scene. This means that Thracian art did not proceed from a formalized theological basis, but rather developed according to the folklore principle: involving many clichés and formulas, but enjoying relative freedom in the interpretation of signs. From a semiotic point of view this means that the sign changes its meaning depending on the context, and conversely, the same message can be conveyed by means of different signs and different pictorial texts.

Regrettably, no local image of the goddess bears any inscription; such bilinguals are sometimes found on Greek objects intended for the barbarian market (e.g. the rhytons from Panagyurishtë, or the Rogozen phiale featuring Auge and Heracles). Therefore we shall never know the name or the epithet of the deity whose image we possess. The level which we can safely reach in the process of reconstruction without stretching the rules of interpretation is the degree of functional individualization of the image. The Thracian craftsmen individualized the goddess in several ways.

1. *The attributes.* The code of the attributes was one of the principal pictorial idioms of the barbarian craftsman. By putting some object in the hands of the deity he makes it much more easier for the viewer to interpret the image. This is because in primitive cultures every object along with its purely utilitarian purpose had a definite symbolic role. Naturally, these meanings are revealed much more concretely in a broader context involving a larger number of codes. Unfortunately, in Thracian art such pictorial texts are rare and this makes reconstructions more difficult.

Let us now consider some examples. In Thracian art we often see a combination of a woman (sometimes represented by her head according to the *pars pro toto* principle) and a plant (in the form of a palmette, a lotus leaf or a rosette)—phiale 99 and 100 from Rogozen, the chalice from Loukovit, the pectorals from Mezek and Vurbitsa, the acroteria from Strelcha, the pediment from Sveshtari. Usually the idea of the

connection between the female principle and vegetation is represented by the alternation of a female head and a vegetal motif stylized to the level of an ornament. Sometimes, however, as in the caryatids in the Sveshtari tomb, the female figure is itself “vegetalized”: the dress has been transformed into acanthus leaves curling up like the cups of a lotus bloom. Clearly in all those cases the general idea is fruit-bearing, the constant rebirth of life which the Goddess signifies.

The goddess often holds a phiale or another vessel in her hands (the rhyton from Poroina, jug 157 from Rogozen, an appliqué from Letnitsa, the rings from Rozovets and Brezovo). At least in some cases the vase is identified with the goddess (this is supported by numerous parallels from various Indo-European mythological traditions). She uses it to pour out fertile moisture; it holds the drink of immortality. In a different context the chalice which is being handed to the hero encodes his communion with the goddess, and the whole scene acquires the meaning of an investiture (e.g. the rings or greave No.1 from Agighiol).

Sometimes the plant and the chalice are mutually complementary attributes in the characterization of the goddess (the Rogozen jug and the Letnitsa appliqué). Probably they encode the connection between divine moisture and fruit-bearing. In many rituals the “sprinkling with a twig” plays a central role and is done “for health” and “for fertility”. It is semantically equivalent to another ritual action—“flagellation”. I believe that this is precisely what we see in the Letnitsa appliqué in a hierogamy scene: the goddess strikes the newlyweds with a twig which she dips in the vase she is holding and in this way ensures the generative power of marriage. Obviously, in a broader pictorial context attributes acquire a mere concrete significance.

The bow and the arrows were added to the attributes of the Thracian goddess with the images on two Rogozen jugs (155 and 157). They undoubtedly characterize the goddess as a “huntress”, that is, a deity of the type of the Greek Artemis.

The wings which the goddess has on Rogozen jug 158 are a pretty archaic attribute. In Greek 4th-century art they were preserved only in Iris and Nike, while the Thracian goddess clearly belongs to a different classification type. The wing depicted on the greave from Vratsa can be regarded as another indication that the goddess was a winged one. It may be reminded that the two chariots in which the goddesses of Rogozen jug 157 are riding also have wings. Two other Rogozen jugs (160 and 161) and a jug from the Loukovit treasure which is identical with them also feature wings flanking an inverted palmette. Two classical attributes of the goddess have been combined and though the anthropomorphic epiphany is missing, we may assume that this is one

of her hypostases.

2. *The clothing.* The anthropological approach to the analysis of Thracian images that I have chosen to apply, calls for a careful study of the character and the details of clothing because in traditional societies costume holds great information value: it is an independent code providing a visual expression of the person's social status.

The female figures in the Rogozen images are distinguished by the different way they are dressed. This is clearly seen in jug 157. The goddess with the twig and the phiale wears a long chiton, while the goddess in the other chariot is dressed in a short tunic. The garments of the goddess riding a lioness (jug 155) and of the winged goddess on jug 158 are long, while the Amazons on jug 154 are dressed in short tunics. These differences can be hardly explained by the personal preferences of the craftsman. It is more likely that their purpose was to specify the image of the goddess and indicate her status within the structure of the pantheon. The long dress is characteristic of a married woman while the short tunic usually signifies virginal status. This guess is supported by the analysis of the other attributes: phiale and twig, and bow and arrow.

3. *The hairstyle.* Like the dress, in traditional societies the hairstyle is loaded with semiotic meaning. It also has information value as a signifier of social status.

The unmarried girl is characterized by short (or drawn-back) hair, a hairdo worn by the Amazons and the huntress goddess. The status of the married woman is designated by the long shoulder-length hair. If we compare the sets of attributes characteristic of each social status, we shall see that they neatly fit into a strict and coherent system. That is why I believe that the Thracian craftsman has used the habitual information language of attributes, hairstyles and clothing peculiar to his society in order to create a concrete image of each of the hypostases of the Goddess.

4. *Acolytes.* Every deity is accompanied by the members of its *thiasos*. In this respect the most typical example is Dionysus but the analysis of the train also has a particular significance for identifying the Thracian goddess.

In the case of jug 157 each of the goddesses is accompanied by a female charioteer. The need for helpers, which in the cult was satisfied by the priestesses, in the pictorial text of the myth required the depiction of various additional personages, who performed auxiliary functions. The two women with short hair and no apparent breasts (i.e. having the status of young girls) who flank the two seated goddesses on the Poroina rhyton, belong to this functional category.

Goddesses are very often accompanied by their sacred animals, even

when they are not of the Potnia Theron type. The goddess riding a lioness from Rogozen jug 155 is a characteristic example. The nearest analogy found in the same region is the bronze figurine from Naieni (Romania) where the goddess riding a lion is flanked by two acolytes. The act of breaking in an animal has a definite meaning both in the myth and the ritual: it translates the idea of subordination. After the goddess has subdued the royal beast, she has herself attained the rank of Basilea (Queen). This is why I believe that in this Rogozen image we have a deity of the Artemis Basilea type mentioned by Herodotus. The goddess holding dogs (or wolves) (jug 158) is a good example of the iconography of Potnia Theron. If we insist to give her a name, we could use the written information about the "dog-eating" Thracian goddess Hecate, whose epithet Zerinthia is evidently etymologically cognate with "Zverska" (Bulgarian for "bestial").

5. *Zoomorphic code.* The animals accompanying a deity usually reflect the evolutionary accretion of images which the deity assumed and shed during the successive stages of its development. One may guess that the goddess riding a lioness had at one point appeared herself in that animal form.

In Thracian art there are some examples of hybrid "fantastic" creatures. The most interesting among them is depicted on the greaves: a woman's head crowned by an ivy wreath, adorned by torques, earrings and a tattoo, but with arms and legs in the form of snakes. I guess that this is a deity of the type of the Scythian snake-legged goddess described by Herodotus. Snake-legs are classifiers of chthonism and for that reason get easily transformed into signs of autochthonism. It appears that in antiquity it was the snake that encoded the principle of autochthony. Let us recall the account given by Herodotus of the augury of ill-omen that Croesus received when the horses in his land ate up the snakes and that was interpreted by the diviners as a sign that his kingdom was threatened by imminent invasion. Autochthony is an important theme in Indo-European royal ideology since autochthonic origin served to legitimize the dynasty. This is why the Scythian kings originated from the snake-legged goddess Hestia-Tabiti; likewise, Zalmoxis, the mythical first king of the Getae, received "the laws" from the "common Hestia". I suggest that we should see the Thracian snake-legged goddess also as Hestia: the goddess of the hearth which gives birth to legitimate children, which is a guarantee of legitimate filiation, and legitimate succession, a centre of the royal lands and of society. Precisely because of her focal position, this goddess is static, she does not leave the home, and is rooted through her snake-legs in her plot of land. It is worth mentioning that the snake also figures in the decora-

tions of some hearths in the palace of the Odrysian capital Seuthopolis. As though the Minoan and the early Hellenistic eras were not two thousand years apart.

6. *Behaviour*. One of the most important methods of individualizing the divine figure is the description of its behaviour in which it is possible to identify the social norms, prescribing a definite type of behaviour corresponding to the person's particular social status. Regrettably, in this respect our written sources are pretty meagre and we can judge what the mythical behaviour of the Thracian goddess was mainly by the images of Thracian art.

One of the specific features of Thracian iconography is that unlike Greek artists, the Thracian craftsmen did not create extended narrative texts. The Thracian pictorial text is usually based on the principle of accumulation: various characters are being juxtaposed but the general meaning of the action is not made clear. This makes the deciphering of those texts much more difficult.

Let me take just one example—the images on Rogozen jug 158 seen as a coherent semantic system—and try to analyse it. What we see here are two decorative strips placed one above the other, featuring different but semantically equivalent actions. In my opinion, the upper frieze is a rendering of the mytho-ritual theme of “bride abduction”. The centaurs are attacking the virgin-goddess (as the iconography of Potnia Theron indicates, she is the patron of wild nature and should therefore have a virginal status). On a mythical level the centaurs encode young men during their initiation period when they are asocial and “wild”. Their action is clearly sacrilegious, it is intended to deprive society of its structural cultural norms: the institution of marriage is replaced by violence. This kind of action is characteristic of the critical periods of cyclic time when the forces of chaos temporarily prevail over the forces of culture. Such moments are dangerous for the future of the cosmos. The lower decorative strip features a different scene: a bull is being attacked by lions. While in the upper frieze the female principle is represented by the goddess, and the male one by the centaurs, in the lower one, the female principle is encoded by the animals accompanying the goddess, and the male one, by the bull. The roles of victims and attackers have been reversed. Obviously, the craftsman tries to convey the idea that the fate of the cosmos depends on the outcome of the two parallel contests. The bull has already kneeled before the lions; what is more, he has bowed his head exactly like the sacrificial victim in the Greek taurobolium and only has to nod in order to signal that he is willing to submit to the knife. The male (in this case, the profane) principle will be vanquished, the female (the sacral) will come out

victorious; the divine order will be preserved. The goddess will remain a virgin (in order to guarantee the purity of the genealogical line). One of the common Greek metaphorical epithets applied to a maiden is *atauros*, which literally means "without a bull". And this is precisely the status that the goddess of the Rogozen jug will retain.

I shall also venture a hypothesis about the ritual context in which the jug was used. The treasure includes a pair of phialae decorated with female heads alternating with a vegetal motif. The semantics of this decoration refer us to the mythological range of the goddess. Another pair of phialae are decorated with a frieze of bulls' heads alternating with acorns. This motif may be connected with the male principle which had been associated with the bull since neolithic times. Consequently, in these four phialae we meet with the protagonists from the Rogozen jug. Probably during certain feasts (for instance, New Year) the ritual set was used for affusions and at ritual feasts either with the participation of ritual personages enacting a sacral mimical drama or of the priests and priestesses of the goddess.

The anthropological approach. The description of ancient mytho-ritual systems by the methods of cultural anthropology enables us to achieve more authentic reconstructions. Applied to Greek religion by L. Gernet and A. Jeanmaire during the 1930s, this approach produced brilliant results in the works of the French "analysts" led by J.-P. Vernant. The Soviet mythological school has also been developing the methodology of cultural anthropology applying it to the reconstruction of fragmentary mytho-ritual texts. During the past fifteen years I have also been trying to examine Thracian religious reality as an ethnographical subject to whose reconstruction retrospective methods can also be applied. The comparison of Thracian myths and rituals with the folklore system of the Balkan peoples is not intended primarily to identify surviving relicts, but rather to demonstrate the persistence of the mechanisms of myth-formation which in similar social circumstances generate similar images and situations. This has enabled me, for example, to reconstruct the myth of the traditional Amazon and my hypothesis was confirmed by the frieze on Rogozen jug 154. I believe that the anthropological method gives us a sound basis because, regardless of its concrete variants, the invariant structure of myth and ritual and the mechanism of its regeneration always obtains.

The iconography of the Thracian goddess incarnates the two principal statuses of women in archaic ideology: those of the married woman and of the virgin. In the case of jug 157 these hypostases are probably represented as mother and daughter (of a Leto-Artemis or Demeter-Kore type). Jug 155, however, shows the two statuses inte-

grated into one dual image. The goddess riding a lion holds a bow and arrow (signs of her virginal status), but is dressed in a long chiton, has shoulder-length hair and her breasts are plastically emphasized (signs designating a married woman). This lack of differentiation reflects her situation at the time of marriage, conveyed by means of a zoomorphic code: a lion attacking a hind. These two animals are well known epic metaphors of hero and maiden. The struggle between them encodes the wedding contest which both the myth and the ritual involve. It is precisely the indeterminate status of the bride at the time of her wedding that has justified the mixing of status attributes in the image of the goddess from the Rogozen jug.

Conclusions. The analyses made so far show how I intend to answer the question: "Goddesses or a goddess?"

1. Regardless of the written sources which mention a number of goddesses, Thracian mythology largely preserved the syncretic unified image of a Great Goddess, characteristic of the Anatolian and West-Mediterranean region. The different names and iconographic variants conceal different hypostases and epiphanies of this Goddess. Therefore, through the attributes and the behaviour of the goddess, Thracian iconography elaborates various situations and functional (but not local or temporal) aspects of her image.

2. Since we have no written information about Triballian mythology, it would be extremely difficult to identify the female deities portrayed by their artists. That is why I prefer to refrain from giving them names familiar from other cultural regions (such as Artemis, Cybele or Bendis).

3. The situation concerning the identity of the Thracian goddess bears in my opinion a certain typological resemblance with the situation of the female deities of the Hittites where the large number of "Sun Goddesses" get differentiated only by the places where they are worshipped.

4. The lack of differentiation in the Thracian goddess corresponds to the rather indeterminate functional essence of her male counterpart—the hero. In Thracian iconography he was represented as Heracles, Theseus or Bellerophon, but in Roman times he was designated simply as Heros (hero) and the inscriptions on votive reliefs ascribe to him diverse functions ranging from healer of bites of rabid dogs to defender of city gates. Like the Thracian hero who receives various Graeco-Roman names (Apollo, Ares, Asclepius, Dionysus) or various local epithets, the goddess was represented in Roman-time iconography under the names of Graeco-Roman deities (such as Hera, the three nymphs, and Diana). This kind of syncretism is possible only if the

goddess was herself amorphous in the minds of the Thracians and the personification of one of her aspects did not impair her primeval integrity.

Therefore, after all, A GODDESS.