

## HELLENISTIC THRACE: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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**Keywords:** *Thrace, Hellenism, Cabyle, Odrysiian, Seuthopolis.*

**Abstract:** *The aim of this contribution is to present a synthetic but detailed exposition of the little historical evidence regarding the kingdoms of Hellenistic Thrace. The principal kingdoms attested in Thrace during the Hellenistic period are: the Celtic kingdom with capital at Tylis (Tyle), the Odrysiian residual kingdom around Seuthopolis, the kingdom of Cabyle also probably related to the Odrysiian, the principality of king Sadalas, the principality of Diegyllis. The evidence concerning these kingdoms is very scanty. A special focus will be made on the most important epigraphical sources related to these events: the great Seuthopolis inscription, a fragmentary decree from Apollonia Pontica in which is mentioned Cotys, the Mesembrian decree for Sadalas that is an inscription whose date remains debatable. Also interesting are the relations in this period between Thrace and the most important Hellenistic kingdoms. Military campaigns were made in Thrace by the Seleucid kings, Antiochus II Theos and Antiochus III the Great. Also very intense was the military activity in Thrace of the Ptolemaic king Ptolemy III Evergetes. Later at the end of the third century BC the decline of the Ptolemaic kingdom under Ptolemy IV made possible an intervention policy of the Antigonid king Philip V in the area. Ample space will also be reserved to the analysis of the relations between Thracian kingdoms and the Hellenistic kingdom of Bithynia. Also in this case the evidence is quite small, but are really interesting the figures of Cavarus, king of the Celtic kingdom of Thrace, who acts as a mediator in the war between Prusias I and Byzantium and of Diegyllis, Thracian chieftain who helps Prusias II in the civil war against his son Nicomedes II.*

The historical evidence regarding the kingdoms of Hellenistic Thrace is very scanty and we have only very few epigraphic and literary sources.

In 360 BC with the assassination of Cotys I the Odrysiian Kingdom entered a period of troubles<sup>1</sup>. The kingdom practically disintegrated into three separate

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<sup>1</sup> On the Odrysiian kingdom see ARCHIBALD 1998.

principalities headed by the princes Cersebleptes, Amadocus and Berisades<sup>2</sup>. This division helped the political action of Philip II of Macedon, who in 342 BC effectively took the greater part of the old Odrysian territories. But, despite the Danubian campaigns of Philip and Alexander, the Macedonian control in Thrace was never complete and their power was probably fully established only in the southern part of the region<sup>3</sup>. Yet in the last years of Alexander's reign, Seuthes III, an Odrysian perhaps related with Cersebleptes' branch, stirred the people of Thrace to rebellion and was able to establish an independent principality near Seuthopolis on the Tonzos in the interior of the country<sup>4</sup>. The littoral of the Aegean Sea and the Propontis passed into the hands of Lysimachus<sup>5</sup>. The diadoch fought some battles with Seuthes III and with Dromichaetes, the king of the Geatae probably settled in the fortified city at Sveshtari, but the outcome of these conflicts didn't consist in the annihilation of the kingdoms of the interior and a sort of *status quo* was maintained. In the last years of his reign Lysimachus directed his efforts in the wars against the other successors of Alexander and finally lost his head and his kingdom in the great battle against Seleucus I at Corupedium in 281 BC<sup>6</sup>. Only few months after the battle at Corupedium, Seleucus found his death in the Thracian Chersonese at the hands of Ptolemy Ceraunus, the banished first-born son of Ptolemy Lagos who was then in his entourage.

After the assassination, Ceraunus proceeded to consolidate his gains and established his dominion over Thrace and Macedonia<sup>7</sup>, but his rule was short-lived, because he was slain in the first great battle at the onset of the great Celtic invasion which overran much of the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor in the early seventies of the third century<sup>8</sup>. The collapse of the Kingdom of Lysimachus at Corupedium and the Great Celtic invasion are the real starting point of the history of Hellenistic Thrace. After these events Thrace was very fragmented.

We now try to establish a political geography of the country in the early Hellenistic period. After the great invasion of the Gauls, another group of "Celts" arrived in Thrace under the leadership of Comontorius, took and established a royal residence (*basileion*) near Tylis not far from Byzantium (Polyb. 4.46.1–3). The Byzantines consented to pay to the Gauls on each occasion three thousand, five thousand, and sometimes even ten thousand gold pieces to save their territory from being laid waste, and finally they were compelled to consent to pay an

<sup>2</sup> Dem. 23.8. See DELEV 2015a, p. 49–50.

<sup>3</sup> See ARCHIBALD 1998, p. 234–237; DELEV 2015a, p. 51–53.

<sup>4</sup> Curt. 10.1.45. On Seuthes III see BERVE 1926, p. 353, n. 702 and ARCHIBALD 1998, p. 306–308. The identification of Seuthes III with Seuthes *hyparch* of Kersobleptes (Polyaen., *Strat.* 7.32) is possible, but not sure.

<sup>5</sup> On the kingdom of Lysimachus, see LANDUCCI GATTINONI 1992; LUND 1992; FRANCO 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Trog., *Procl.* 17; Just., *Epit.* 17.1.9–2.2; Memnon *FGrHist* 434 F 5.7, 6.1; Paus. 1.10.5; App., *Syr.* 62, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Memnon *FGrHist* 434 F 8.1–3; see HEINEN 1972, p. 61–63; HAMMOND & WALBANK 1988, p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> On the invasion of the Gauls, see MITCHELL 1993; STROBEL 1996; EMILOV 2015, p. 369–371; more recently, the contributions in BEARZOT, LANDUCCI & ZECCHINI 2021.

annual tribute of eighty talents. The modern scholars made multiple efforts to locate Tylis<sup>9</sup>, but the precise collocation of the capital of the Thracian Gauls remains an enigma. Polybius' description of events around Byzantium implies that Tylis was not far away from the polis, but the archaeological data are not supportive of this indication of the literary source. Also, our knowledge of the geographical extension of this Celtic kingdom remains very elusive. It is however sure that the ample historical evidence for the existence of other political entities in the Thracian interior creates a general picture of political division and fragmentation.

An interesting example of this political fragmentation is the case of the city of Cabyle, on the Tonzus River. In the first part of the third century BC the city enjoyed a certain degree of independence. This is proved by the activity of the mint of the city, which struck bronze coins for Spartocus, probably king of a kingdom centered on the city in the first part of the third century BC, who is mentioned also in the great Seuthopolis inscription (IGBulg III.2, n. 1731). In the mint were struck also autonomous silver coins in the name of the city<sup>10</sup>. Later perhaps the city had some degree of subordination to the Gauls of Tylis. Fragments of two inscriptions on marble slabs, containing the letter combination Gala, plausibly restored as *Gala[tai]* ("Galatians"), could indicate a treaty related to the tribute that the polis owed to the Thracian Galatians<sup>11</sup>. Other important Thracian political entities of this period are attested in the three major epigraphical sources for this period: the great Seuthopolis inscription, a fragmentary decree from Apollonia Pontica in which is mentioned king Cotys, the Mesembrian decree for Sadalas<sup>12</sup>.

The great Seuthopolis inscription<sup>13</sup>, datable to ca. 300–280 BC, contains the oath of queen Berenice and her sons to a certain Epimenes. Berenice is the widow of Seuthes III, who, when he was in good health, handed over Epimenes and his possessions to Spartocus, and Spartocus gave assurances to him on these matters. The names of Berenice's sons are Ebryzelmis, Tereus, Satocus and Sadalas and they swear to bring Epimenes out of the temple of the Samothracian Gods<sup>14</sup> and to hand him and his possessions over to Spartocus without doing him any wrong. The oath has to be inscribed on stone steles, and set up at Cabyle in the Phosphorion and in the agora by the altar of Apollo, and at Seuthopolis in the temple of the Great Gods and in the agora by the altar in the temple of Dionysus. The presence of a female regent<sup>15</sup> with four male heirs of minor status shows the

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<sup>9</sup> See EMILOV 2015, p. 71–72.

<sup>10</sup> For these coins of Spartokos see PETER 1997, p. 203–214. On the coins of Thrace, see PETER 1997 and PAUNOV 2015.

<sup>11</sup> See DELEV 2003, p. 107–108, and EMILOV 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Generally on the Thracian inscriptions of the Hellenistic age see DANA 2015, p. 245–253.

<sup>13</sup> IGBulg III.2 1731; LUND 1992, p. 29–35; ELVERS 1994; CALDER 1996; DANA 2015, p. 248; GRANINGER 2018.

<sup>14</sup> On the concept of *asylia* in this inscription, see CHANIOTIS 1996, p. 71, n. 23.

<sup>15</sup> The Macedonian name Berenike suggests that she could be a daughter either of Antigonos or Lysimachus. See LUND 1993, p. 30–31. BURSTEIN 1986, p. 24, n. 33, links her to Lysimachus.

relative weakness of the position of Seuthopolis after the death of Seuthes III, in contrast with the apparent stability of the kingdom of Spartocus at Cabyle. Very difficult is to reconstruct the role of Epimenes, who in the inscription appears as a man once at the service of Seuthes III and now in a sort of bond-service with Spartocus, the dynast at Cabyle. Particularly obscure appears his role as a supplicant in the temple of the Samothracian gods at Seuthopolis. Mihailov proposed the context of a conspiracy, perhaps by Lysimachus, to assassinate Seuthes<sup>16</sup>, but, as Lund wrote, “seems unlikely that Epimenes, if guilty of attempting so grave a crime, would be allowed to escape with his life”<sup>17</sup>. The reference to some wrong made by Epimenes may be related to some crime of private nature done by him in Seuthopolis, for which he wants to be judged by Spartocus in Cabyle. However for the lack of further elements the precise context of the great inscription remains obscure. The dynasty at Seuthopolis appears in decline at the time of the inscription, but it is not sure if the destruction of the city was related to the Celtic invasion or Seuthopolis continued to be the center of an independent Thracian kingdom also in the second quarter of the third century<sup>18</sup>. The domain of Spartocus in Cabyle appears more stable in the inscription, but the epigraphical and numismatic evidence mentioned above shows that also Cabyle lost great part of his independence to the Gauls of Tylis in the second part of the third century<sup>19</sup>.

A Thracian dynast of the name of Cotys is attested, together with his son Rhescuporis, in a fragmentary decree of Apollonia Pontica, found in Burgas and dated to the middle of the third century<sup>20</sup>. This king Cotys of this inscription is generally associated with a rare bronze coin bearing the names of Cotys and Rhescuporis both accompanied by the royal title. More difficult is the identification of the king Cotys of the inscription and of the coin with the “Cotys, the son of Rhaizdus, king of the Thracians” (Κότυς Ραίζδου Θραϊκῶν βασιλεύς) known from a Delphic proxeny decree that is dated to ca. 270–260 BC.<sup>21</sup> As Delev noted<sup>22</sup>, the identification is surely not certain, but doesn’t seem impossible, as was suggested by Mihailov<sup>23</sup>. The inscription attested the presence in the area near Apollonia and Burgas of an independent Thracian principality lead by Cotys and Rhescuporis. Unfortunately, the fragmentary state of the inscription doesn’t consent to know more about this political entity of Hellenistic Thrace.

More informative is the Mesembrian decree for Sadalas. The inscription contains a decree which confers honours to a certain Sadalas and his descendants<sup>24</sup>. The honors mentioned are citizenship, the status of *proxenos*, privileged

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<sup>16</sup> IGBulg III.2, p. 147–148. OGNENOVA-MARINOVA 1980, p. 47–48 argues that *epimenes* is not a personal name, but represents a function assumed by Spartocus and *ta hyparchonta* denotes not property, but power or authority.

<sup>17</sup> LUND 1992, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> DELEV 2003, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> EMILOV 2005.

<sup>20</sup> IGBulg I<sup>2</sup> 389.

<sup>21</sup> Syll.<sup>3</sup> n. 438 = FD III 4 n. 414.

<sup>22</sup> DELEV 2003, p. 111

<sup>23</sup> MIHAILOV 1961, p. 40–41.

<sup>24</sup> IGBulg I<sup>2</sup> 307 = ISE II 123. On the inscription of Sadalas see VENEDIKOV 1980, p. 7–12; ISAAC 1986, p. 252–253; MAINARDI 2011; BRAUND & HALL 2014, p. 388–389.

seating at the games that the city holds, and the right to sail into and out of the city inviolably. In the text are also mentioned the ancestors of Sadalas: Mopsyestis, Taroutinos, Medistas and Cotys. In the second and fragmentary part of the inscription is preserved a little part of an agreement between Sadalas and the Mesambrians, which contains some measures of preservation for those of the Mesambrians, who are cast out of their ships into the territory of Sadalas. Sadalas appears as the head of one of the Thracian principalities contemporary to the Celtic kingdom of Tylis and is inserted in a long dynasty that is mentioned in the decree. The date of this inscription remains debatable between the end of the fourth century BC and the second half of the third century BC.<sup>25</sup> As noted by Robu<sup>26</sup>, paleographical criteria make more likely for the inscription a dating to the first half or the third century BC. The fact that the treaty discusses the return of wrecked shiploads, and the city decrees for him the right “to sail in and out”, seems to imply that his domain should have been a coastal one, perhaps in the region north of Mesambria, because in this direction there were more economical interests for the *polis*. An interesting hypothesis was put forward by Robu<sup>27</sup>, who linked this decree of Mesambria with an inscription found at Callatis (ISM III 7), where, at the lines 9–12, in a fragmentary context are mentioned a king and a war. Vinogradov<sup>28</sup> proposed that the king is Antigonus Gonatas and the war is between Callatis and Istros, with the reading τὸν ποτ’ Ἰστ[ρία][νοῦς at ll. 11–12. Robu instead proposed to read a mention of Sadalas and not of Istros. With this reading he linked these inscriptions with the expedition of Antiochus II in Thrace, which is attested by a passage of Polyaeus and by a Mesambrian fragmentary decree found at Apollonia that concerns honors probably for a general of Antiochus<sup>29</sup>. So for Robu the king in the Callatis inscription is Antiochus II and his campaign is directed also against Sadalas. Unfortunately, the lack of a more precise historical evidence doesn’t make possible to confirm this hypothesis.

After the expedition of Antiochus II, the internal troubles of the Seleucid Empire in the reign of Seleucus II Callinicos permitted the successor of Philadelphus, Ptolemy III Euergetes (246–221 BC), to start a campaign in Europe. The whole Aegean littoral of Thrace from Abdera through Maroneia and Aenus to Lysimachia and the Thracian Chersonese was in this period under the control of the king of Egypt and his very strong navy (Polyb. 5.34.7–8)<sup>30</sup>. A decree of Samothrace from this period cites a certain Hippomedon, Lacedaemonian and “strategos placed by king Ptolemy over the Hellespont and the Thracian littoral”<sup>31</sup>. The last king of the kingdom of Tylis was Cavarus, who had yet great prestige because he was called as a mediator in the conflict between Prousius I, king of Bithynia and Byzantium<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Bibliography in ROBU 2014, p. 23, n. 18.

<sup>26</sup> ROBU 2014, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> ROBU 2014, p. 23–25.

<sup>28</sup> Vinogradov *apud* Avram, ISM III, p. 242.

<sup>29</sup> Polyaeus. 4.16; IGBulg I<sup>2</sup>, 388.

<sup>30</sup> DELEV 2003, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> IG XII, 8 156.

<sup>32</sup> Polyb. 4.52.1–2. See VITUCCI 1953, p. 37–40; HABICHT 1957, coll. 1088; HANNESSTAD 1996, p. 79–80.

After Cavarus, however, the kingdom of Tylis collapsed for reasons that we largely don't know. Polybius mentions briefly that "the kingdom of the Celts and their whole tribe were eradicated by the Thracians" (Polyb. 4.46). But which Thracians? A single principality or a coalition? We simply don't know. The collapse of the kingdom of Tylis and the weakening of Egypt's maritime supremacy opened new spaces in the area of Thrace and Philip V, after signing the peace with the Romans in Phoenice in 205 BC, started a major campaign in the area that affected Cabyle and the country of the Astii, Adrane, the tribe of the Digerri, and the quite obscure "plain of Ares" (Polyb. 13.10).

Later in 200 BC Philip V again launched a major campaign in Southern Thrace with considerable land and sea forces. According to Livy<sup>33</sup>, he successfully attacked Maronea with his ships, two thousand light infantry, and two hundred cavalry. He took also many other cities and fortresses in southern Thrace and in the Chersonese<sup>34</sup>. After the second Macedonian war and the weakening of Philip's power, Thrace was invaded by Antiochus III, who maintained his hegemony on the territory until his war with Rome. A few years after this war, in 181 BC, Philip undertook another campaign in the Thracian interior and made an alliance with the Bastarnae, a Celtic or Germanic warrior tribe established on the Lower Danube.

In this period there was yet a residual kingdom of the Odrysians, at the time of Philip V king of this state was probably Seuthes IV, but the historical sources have not preserved any details about his reign<sup>35</sup>. His son was that Cotys, who helped Perseus in the Third Macedonian war and seems to have participated to the battle of Pydna<sup>36</sup>. Cotys then sent a delegation to Rome and received a Roman pardon and the release of Bithys, his son, who was hostage firstly of Perseus and then of the Romans<sup>37</sup>. The Odrysians became hence strong Roman allies and supporters in the area.

During the rebellion of Andriscus, the rebel gained the support of two local Thracian dynasts, Teres and Barsabas, of which we know practically nothing other than the names<sup>38</sup>. We have more information about another dynast, Diegyllis, king of Caeni, who tried to help Prusias II in his unfortunate civil war against his son Nicomedes<sup>39</sup>. He also captured and razed Lisymachia, but after that he was defeated by the army of the king Attalus<sup>40</sup>. He probably perished in a coup; his son Zibelmios tried to have his revenge on his own subjects, until in the end these killed him<sup>41</sup>.

With the establishment of the Roman province of Macedonia in 148 BC, the history of Hellenistic Thrace came to an end. In conclusion the early Hellenistic age was surely a period of political fragmentation in Thrace, but, nevertheless, the

<sup>33</sup> Liv. 33.30.3 .

<sup>34</sup> DELEV 2003, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> DELEV 2003, p. 117–118.

<sup>36</sup> Liv. 44.42.2.

<sup>37</sup> DELEV 2015b, p. 67–68.

<sup>38</sup> Diod. 32 fr. 15.

<sup>39</sup> App., *Mithr.* 5–6 on the coup see now PAGANONI 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Strab. 13.4.2; Trog., *Prol.* 36. See LOUKOPOLOU 1987, p. 67–71.

<sup>41</sup> Diod. 33 fr. 14–15; 34 fr. 12; see ZIEGLER 1972.

Thacian kingdoms showed a great political vitality, which manifested itself in the destruction of the once mighty Celtic kingdom at Tylis and in an active political interaction with Bithynians, Macedonians and Romans.

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