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THE GREEK TRADITION AND ITS INFLUENCE
IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

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Antti Lampinen

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Recognising Thracians: Tattoos as an Ethnic Marker

Despoina Tsiafaki

1. Introduction

Geographical orientation and the identification of the four cardinal directions – north, east, south, and west – are inherently subjective and contingent upon one’s specific geographical position. When discussing the concept of ‘northernness’ in Greek ethnography and geography, several key considerations emerge. Both terms – ethnography and geography – derive from the Greek word *graphein* (γράφειν = to write), combined with *ethnos* (ἔθνος, pl. ἔθνη = people) and *gaia* (γαῖα = earth), respectively defining their meanings. Geography, alongside an interest in distant places, regions, and maps, became prominent in antiquity.¹ Based on literary sources, it appears that ancient Greeks held distinctive, culturally shared notions about the peoples residing north of the Mediterranean. The Greek perception of northern peoples was shaped by a complex interplay of cultural and climatic factors, which were integrated into their ethnographic and geographic frameworks. In many cases, the geographical information provided by ancient authors was intertwined with ethnographic accounts of the peoples (pl. *ethnē*) inhabiting these regions.² From early texts to later Roman interpretations, the Greeks identified a range of groups as ‘northern,’ often attributing shared characteristics to them despite significant differences.

While the term ‘ethnography’ itself did not come into use until the early nineteenth century, denoting the formal study and description of foreign peoples, their habits, and customs,³ the essence of ethnographic inquiry existed in Greek literature long before. Ancient Greek sources provide some of the earliest recorded observations about other peoples and regions, always filtered through a Greek perspective.⁴ It is crucial to recognise that these early ethnographers and geographers likely inspired and informed other ancient writers, including historians, poets, and tragedians, who further contributed to shaping Greek perceptions of foreign lands and peoples.

The aim of this chapter, however, is not to delve into the technical meanings of ethnography and geography, but to use them as a framework to explore the role of specific attributes such as the attire and, in particular, tattoos among the Thracians as ethnic markers. Geography is employed here to define the regions under examination, which represent the two poles of our exploration: Greece on the one hand and the region of ancient Thrace on the other. As such, the cardinal directions are determined by one’s position in Greece – most notably Athens – relative to the lands to the north. A glance at any map confirms that

¹ Raaflaub & Talbert (eds.) 2010; Podossinov 2014a, 2–3. For ancient geography see Dueck 2012; Bianchetti & al. (eds.) 2016.

² Almagor & Skinner 2013, 1–22; Podossinov 2014a, 2–4.

³ Raaflaub & Talbert 2010; Dench 2010; Skinner 2012; Almagor & Skinner 2013, 2; Harrison 2020, 139–158.

⁴ Herodotus serves as a characteristic example of this. Harrison (ed.) 2002; Dench 2010; Dorati 2011, 273–312; Sears 2013, 313–314; Almagor & Skinner 2013; Vlassopoulos 2013a, 49–66; Harrison 2020, 140–143; Figueira & Soares (eds.) 2020. Within this framework, geography was also utilised to integrate mythical narratives. For instance, Thrace’s proximity to the fringes of the inhabited world made it an apt location for situating myths such as those of the Pygmies and cranes; see Dan 2014a, 47–49.

Thrace is situated directly north of Greece.⁵ In this context, Thrace undeniably lies north of Greece, as supported by Herodotus' account of Xerxes' march through Thrace towards Hellas,⁶ which illustrates the proximity of Thrace to Greek territories.

Thrace, positioned to the north of the core Greek world, was considered the Greeks' immediate northern neighbour. Some scholars even categorise Thrace as part of the 'near North'.⁷ Modern Aegean Thrace corresponds with Northern Greece, reinforcing the ancient geographic association of Thrace with the North. For Athenians and other inhabitants of regions such as the Peloponnese – namely Corinth, Sparta, and Argos – or Boeotia, including Thebes, as well as authors who came from, lived in, or were acquainted with those aforementioned areas, it made perfect sense to view Thrace and the lands beyond as residing in the northern quadrant of their world.

Herodotus' *Histories* serves as a principal source of information regarding the peoples surrounding the Greek world. In Book 5, Herodotus describes Thrace and its inhabitants in great detail, offering insights into their culture, customs, and habits. Herodotus, along with other ancient sources, contributes significantly to delineating the territorial extent of ancient Thrace, which was much larger than the modern region and encompassed areas now divided among Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. The Aegean Sea formed Thrace's southern border, while its eastern boundary was marked by the Black Sea (*Pontus Euxinus*). According to Herodotus, the northern border was defined by the Istros River (the modern Danube), which also served as the dividing line between Thrace and Scythia.⁸ Consequently, Thrace was located south of Scythia, which occupied the northern frontier of Thracians.

While there is a general consensus among ancient sources regarding Thrace's northern, southern, and eastern borders, the western boundary is less clearly defined due to changes over time.⁹ Initially, in the most ancient period, Thracians inhabited Pieria, from where they gradually migrated eastward. During the Archaic and early Classical periods, the river Strymon marked the western boundary, but by the fourth century BCE, under Philip II of Macedon, the boundary shifted further east to the Nestos River.

Within this geographical framework, the present chapter situates itself, focusing on the Archaic and Classical periods, particularly the fifth century BCE. The primary focus will be on visual arts, specifically the iconography of Athenian vases, which provide valuable depictions of the Thracians, the northern neighbours of the Greeks. While the main emphasis is on the use of tattoos as an ethnic marker among the Thracians, other aspects of their identity – such as attire and physical characteristics – will also be examined to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how the Greeks perceived them. A brief overview of the Thracians and their homeland will help to understand and clarify the traits that made them distinctive in the eyes of the Greeks.

⁵ For Thrace see Casson 1926; THRACE 2000; Theodosiev 2015, 1–11; Valeva & al. (eds.) 2015; Vlachopoulos & Tsiafaki 2017; ARENA <https://arenaen.athenarc.gr/>

⁶ Hdt. 7.105.1. English translation by Godley 1920.

⁷ For the concept of North in antiquity see Käppel 2001; Rausch 2013, *passim*; Avdagic 2018, 59–78; Chiaï 2018, 132–154; Jørgensen & Langum (eds.) 2018, *passim*. For Thrace as 'near North' see Rausch 2013, 14–16, 26–31, 68–75. See also the 'Introduction' to this volume, p. 2, 6, as well as Lampinen in this volume, p. 96.

⁸ Hoddinott 1981, 11–13; Tsiafaki 1998, 19–21; Bouzek & Graninger 2015, 12–21; Braund 2015, 353–354; Graninger 2015, 22–24.

⁹ Bouzek & Graninger 2015, 14; Tsiafaki 2020, 411. For Thracian presence extended southward as far as Boeotia see Buck 1979, 78–81.

2. Presenting the Thracians

The Thracians formed a distinct and multifaceted group in the ancient Greek imagination, frequently appearing in both literary and artistic sources.¹⁰ Their unique position as a northern neighbour to the Greek world allowed for rich cultural interactions, which were both complex and multifaceted. The Greeks encountered the Thracians through trade, colonisation, alliances, and military conflicts, leading to a nuanced understanding of their neighbours. The relationship between Greeks and Thracians can be traced back to the Mycenaean period.¹¹ However, it was intensified notably with the Greek colonisation of the area from the eighth century BCE onward, encompassing clear contacts and interrelations through cultural, social, and economic interconnections. This period – especially during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE – saw the establishment of Greek colonies along the Thracian coast, stretching from the Aegean Sea to the Black Sea.¹² These colonies not only reinforced geographical proximity but also shaped Greek perceptions of Thracians, providing a basis for their depiction as a northern ‘other.’

Interestingly, the geographical perception of these colonies varied depending on one’s vantage point. From the perspective of the Greek mainland, these northern territories were seen as the edge of the known world – a frontier that represented both opportunities and threats. Conversely, from the Thracian perspective, these Greek settlements were situated in their southern territories, thus creating a dynamic interplay of perceptions. That is, the same locations were viewed differently depending on whether one was observing from the south, within the context of the Northern Aegean, or from the north, within Thrace itself.

The Greek portrayal of the inhabitants of Thrace, namely the Thracians, both male and female, and consequently the Greek perspective is vividly reflected in various literary and visual sources. Since the Thracians did not have their own writing system and were for the most part a non-literate society, they did not leave behind native historical records from the period of our interest here. Therefore, much of our understanding of the Thracians comes from Greek and later Roman authors.¹³ One of the earliest references to the Thracians appears in Homer’s poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which provide some information on the land and its people offering glimpses as well into Greek interactions with the region of Thrace already back in the Bronze Age.¹⁴ The Homeric poems present a variety of information for those northern neighbours of Greeks, who were allies of the Trojans. In these texts, the Thracians are depicted as fierce warriors known for their horsemanship. The figure of King Rhesus, with his mythological exploits, blurs the line between legend and historical reality. Homer also mentions the Thracian priest of Apollo, Maron, and the famous local wine, *oinos Ismarikos* (οἶνος Ἴσμαρικός), providing insight into Thracian religious practices, goods produced in the Thracian land and economic activities.¹⁵

¹⁰ Hoddinott 1981; Delev 2014; Valeva & al. (eds.) 2015; Spier & al. (ed.) 2024.

¹¹ Triantaphyllos 1991, 283–308; Tsiafaki 2018, 221–223; Tsiafaki 2020, 414–415.

¹² Tiverios 2008; Tsiafaki 2020; Guldager Bilde & al. 2020.

¹³ Theodosiev 2015, 3; Sears 2013, 13.

¹⁴ Tsiafaki 2009, 123–124; Ivantchik 2017; Tsiafaki 2020, 414–415.

¹⁵ Hom. *Od.* 9.39–66, 9.197–212; also Eph. *BNJ* 70 F 38 *ap.* Harpocration s.v. Μαρόνεα. For Thracians in Homer see Tsiafaki 2003, 43–65; Archibald 2024, 11–13.

Homeric presentations highlight the wealth of Thrace, particularly its gold and silver resources, as well as the martial prowess of its inhabitants. The portrayal of Thracian warriors and horses as both beautiful and brave underscores the Greeks' fascination with and respect for their northern neighbours. This portrayal of Thrace as a land of great material wealth and martial strength is further developed by later Greek authors.¹⁶ The warlike nature of the Thracians, epitomised by figures like Rhesus and the violent King Lycurgus, reflects a broader Greek perception of Thrace as both a rich and formidable region.¹⁷

As we transition to the period of our interest here – Archaic and Classical times – the most comprehensive descriptions of the Thracians come from historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, all of whom appear to have had personal interactions with the region or its people. While there is scholarly debate over whether Herodotus himself visited Thrace, it is evident that he was well-informed about the Thracians, many of whom lived in or visited Athens.¹⁸ Apart from the historical points of reference, Herodotus' accounts also provide valuable ethnographic details, including insights into Thracian customs, beliefs, and social structures. Thucydides and Xenophon, both of whom had direct experience with the Thracians through personal military and political engagements¹⁹, contribute further to our understanding of Thracian life.

The Thracians also feature prominently in the Greek poetry of the fifth century BCE, particularly in the works of the well-known Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.²⁰ These tragedians drew upon Thracian myths and legends, contributing to the Greek cultural imagination of Thrace. They dedicated entire dramas to Thracian myths and heroes, while also making scattered references to Thrace in other plays.

Aeschylus wrote a trilogy entitled *Lycurgeia* (466–459 BCE), which focused on Thracian themes and included the tragedies *Edonoi*, *Bassarai*, and *Neaniskoi*, alongside the satyr play *Lycurgus*.²¹ The timing of *Lycurgeia* coincides with Athenian military actions in Thrace. Aeschylus also dealt with the myth of Phineus in his tragedy *Phineus*, part of a trilogy performed in 472 BCE, and with the myth of Tereus in his play *Agamemnon* and in *Suppliants*.²²

Sophocles featured Thracian myths in his plays, including *Thamyris*, a lost work about the eponymous musician's contest with the Muses, in which the poet took the lead role.²³ His play *Tereus*, likely written before 431 BCE, is the first known source to name Tereus as a Thracian and introduces the characters Procne and Philomela. Sophocles dedicated at least two tragedies to *Phineus*, focusing on the myth of his blinding and punishment, and likely introduced new elements to these stories, such as the family crimes that led to Phineus' punishment.²⁴

¹⁶ Tsiafaki 1998, 21–29, 247–264; Sears 2013, 52–89, 142–149, 179–180; Tsiafaki 2016a, 261–262; *ead.* 2020, 411–420.

¹⁷ Tsiafaki 2003, 43–66. Cf. Lissarague 2002, 101–124.

¹⁸ Osborne & Byrne 1996, 106–110; Xydopoulos 2007, 693–697; Vlassopoulos 2013a, *passim*; Sears 2013, 13–14, 31, 140–173, 308–314; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 58–60; Vlassopoulos 2023, 70–78.

¹⁹ Sears 2013, *passim*.

²⁰ Hall 1989, *passim*; Tsiafaki 1998, *passim*; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 56–58.

²¹ Hall 1989, *passim*; Bednarek 2021, 28–120.

²² Hall 1989, *passim*; Tsiafaki 2016b, 729 with earlier bibliography.

²³ Hall 1989, *passim*; Fitzpatrick 2001; Markantonatos (ed.) 2012, *passim*; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 57–58.

²⁴ Tsiafaki 2016b, 729–730.

Euripides also gave significant attention to Thracian themes.²⁵ Aristophanes mentions in *Thesmophoriazousae* that Euripides had a Thracian slave, possibly a source of inspiration. His play *Alceste* includes the earliest reference to Orpheus descending to the underworld to retrieve his wife. In the lost tragedy *Erechtheus*, Euripides discusses the Thracian hero Eumolpus and his alliance with Eleusis against Athens. He also references Diomedes, the Thracian son of Ares, in *Herakles Mainomenos*.²⁶ Regardless of whether it is a work of Euripides or not, the drama *Rhesus* tells the story of its titular Thracian king, focusing on his exploits while also featuring references to the Thracian musician Thamyris and the king Tereus.²⁷

However, Greek poetry's interest in Thracian themes began earlier than that of the three renowned tragedians. The lyric poet Simonides (556–468 BCE) composed a poem detailing the abduction of Oreithyia, the daughter of the Athenian king Erechtheus, by Boreas, the North Wind.²⁸

Based on Greek mythology, poetry but also in historical information as well as reality, the first easily recognised Northern attribute given to Thracians by Greeks is the North Wind. The figure of Boreas, the personification of the North Wind, is a notable example and becomes emblematic of northernness in Greek culture. Boreas, associated with the harsh and cold aspects of nature, was intimately connected to Thrace, which the Greeks viewed as a cold and formidable land placed geographically in the north. *Boreas* (Βορέας, Βορράς or Βοριάς) was the name given by the ancient Greeks to the cold untamed North Wind, for whom it would be appropriate to have Thrace as his home, since it was considered to be a cold northern land from the Greek point of view.²⁹ This association with Boreas is first mentioned by Homer and elaborated upon by later authors such as Pindar, Hesiod, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Mundo*. Hesiod also knows Thrace as home of Boreas, from where he blows upon the wide sea.³⁰ He considers Boreas so strong and cold that he makes animals shudder and put their tails between their legs, even those who are covered by fur.³¹ In *Theogony* Hesiod considers Boreas as son of Eos and Astraios, while others mention as his father the Thracian River Strymon.³² Ibycus speaks about the Thracian Boreas and Pindar relates that Boreas was the thundery 'king of winds', bringing gloom, cold and snow. According to the Pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* the winds blowing from the north towards Greece were called Βορέαι οι ἀπὸ ἄρκτου.³³ Boreas' role in bringing cold, storms, and snow from his Thracian homeland reinforced the connection between Thrace and the untamed forces of nature.

The most popular story of Boreas in Antiquity appears to be his marriage to the Athenian princess Oreithyia,³⁴ a myth that further deepened the connection between

²⁵ Hall 1989, *passim*; Markantonatos 2013, *passim*; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 58; McClure (ed.) 2016.

²⁶ Ar. *Thesm.* 280; Eur. *Alc.* 357–364, *Erecht.* F 370 (*PSorbonn.* 2328) l. 100, *HF* 380–385.

²⁷ Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 58. On the matter of whether *Rhesus* is a work of Euripides, see McClure (ed.) 2016, *passim* with references to earlier bibliography.

²⁸ Acosta-Hughes 2010, 171–213; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 56–57.

²⁹ Rausch 2013, 11–13.

³⁰ Hom. *Il.* 9.5, 23.230; Hes. *Op.* 503–547.

³¹ See Bridgman 2005, 29.

³² Hes. *Theog.* 378; *Schol. in Ap. Rhod.* 1.211–212.

³³ Ibyc. F 286.9 (P-D) *ap.* Ath. 13.601b; Pind. *Pyth.* 4.181; Arist. [*Mund.*] 394b 20.

³⁴ Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979; Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1986, 133–142; Tsiafaki 1998, 135–137; *ead.* 2000, 383–386; Zarkadas 2022, 357–377; Tsiafaki 2024, 53–54.

Thrace and the North. The latter was the daughter of the Athenian king Erechtheus and his wife Praxithea. Homer knows Oreithyia as Nereid, and her name (translated as ‘storming in the mountains’) suggests she is a ‘bride of the wind’.³⁵ According to the myth, the Thracian wind asked Erechtheus for Oreithyia as his bride, and when the Athenian king refused to give his daughter to Boreas, he abducted her and took her to his homeland, Thrace. There, they had two sons (Zetes and Kalais) known as the Boreads, and two daughters, Cleopatra and Chione. Boreads’ name reveals they were also the northern storms.³⁶ Their sister Cleopatra got married to the Thracian king Phineus.³⁷ The name of the second sister, Chione (Greek χιών, ‘snow’), is fitting for a daughter of the North Wind. The connection of Boreas with Thrace is further strengthened by Herodotus who relates that the Thracian wind helped twice to save Athens from the onslaught of the Persians.³⁸ This myth symbolises the union between Athens and the fierce northern realm of Thrace.

In the course of the fifth century BCE, the adventure of the Athenian Oreithyia and the Thracian Boreas gained in popularity in Greek literature and visual arts.³⁹ The abduction was dramatised in Aeschylus’ lost drama (satyr play or tragedy) *Oreithyia*, while it was retold in one of the lost plays of Sophocles as well as in Choerilus’ late-fifth century BCE epic poem *Persika*. Likewise, the fifth-century BCE mythographer Pherecydes addressed the story, and in the next century Plato describes Oreithyia’s kidnapping by Boreas.⁴⁰ Moreover, the abduction of Oreithyia became a popular theme in visual arts, with over 70 Attic red-figure vases depicting the scene. Notably, the earliest is dated around the period of the Persian Wars and after the victory at the sea-battle in Artemisium. That was also the time of the foundation of Boreas’ cult in Athens. Sculpture, monumental and minor arts incorporated the subject into their repertoire, particularly in the fifth century BCE and less in the fourth, while Boreas himself continues to appear until the Roman times.⁴¹

Of interest is that the ferocity of the cold Thracian North Wind is demonstrated mostly on the earlier representations of Boreas on the Attic vases.⁴² These artworks often show Boreas as a wild, wind-blown figure, contrasting sharply with the idealised forms of Athenian maidens. Boreas’ rugged appearance and muscular, forceful gestures emphasise the Greek perception of the Thracians as barbaric and untamed. This perception is further reinforced by Athenian vase paintings, with characteristic examples such as two identical trade amphorae depicting the rape of Oreithyia by Boreas.⁴³ One of them is now lost,

³⁵ Hom. *Il.* 18.48.

³⁶ Pind. *Pyth.* 4.181; cf. Herod. Pont. *BNJ* 31 F 46 *ap. Schol. in Ap. Rhod.* 1.211.

³⁷ For Phineus see Tsiafaki 2016b, 726–740 with earlier bibliography.

³⁸ Hdt. 6.44, 7.189.

³⁹ Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979; *ead.* 1986, 133–142; Tsiafaki 1998, 137–164; Zarkadas 2022, 357–377.

⁴⁰ Pherec. *BNJ* 3 F 145 *ap. Schol. L ad Ap. Rhod.* 1.211c; Pl. *Phdr.* 229c–230a.

⁴¹ For a detailed catalogue of Boreas’ representations see Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1986, 133–142.

⁴² Tsiafaki 1998, 137–164; *ead.* 2016a, 277; *ead.* 2024, 53.

⁴³ Attic red-figure trade amphorae by the Oreithyia Painter, 480–470 BCE. The first once in Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg F2165, now lost; BAPD 206421. [https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={0624CA67-0C09-4CF5-AFD3-F293DFB4DCED}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20%20\[Vase%20Number\]%20206421](https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={0624CA67-0C09-4CF5-AFD3-F293DFB4DCED}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20%20[Vase%20Number]%20206421). The other in Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek 2345; BAPD 206422. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boreas_Oreithyia_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen_2345.jpg; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Munich+2345&object=Vase>; <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/>

but just looking at the preserved vase in Munich is enough to understand the wildness of Boreas and how he was perceived in the vocabulary of the Athenian vase-painting (Fig. 3.1). Boreas has locked Oreithyia tightly in his arms so that their heads are juxtaposed: Boreas' coarse profile with a hooked nose and his wildly dishevelled hair and beard contrast starkly with the kempt hair and ideal Greek profile of the maiden Oreithyia. Her friend Herse, the daughter of the Athenian king Kekrops, tries to help without success. The other Kekropides (daughters of Kekrops), Pandrosos and Aglauros, rush off to report the rape to Kekrops and Erechtheus. These idealised female figures add a formal character to the scene and enhance the contrast between the Athenian maiden and the northern Thracian wind. This depiction, which presents Boreas with a savage appearance, in stark contrast to the serene portrayal of Oreithyia, encapsulates the Greek view of the Thracians as northern barbarians whose ferocity and martial prowess were both admired and feared.

The ferocious and warlike traits that the Greeks associated with their northern neighbours are evident in Athenian vase paintings depicting Boreas, dating from before the mid-fifth century BCE. However, this imagery extends beyond the well-known scene of Boreas abducting Oreithyia. Similar motifs can also be found in other Thracian myths, such as the murder of Orpheus, as will be explored further in the discussion of Thracian tattoos.

Another perspective on the association of Thrace with the northern and colder regions can be seen in the detailed descriptions of their warm attire, as provided by Herodotus.⁴⁴ The Thracians are depicted as dressed in garments suited to a harsh, cold climate, highlighting their perceived northern identity (Fig. 3.2). One of the key elements of their clothing was the *alopekis* (ἀλωπεκίς), a cap made from animal pelt, typically from a fox, as suggested by its name.⁴⁵ Black and red-figure vases often depict this cap with the animal's tail still attached, emphasising its natural origin and practicality for cold weather.⁴⁶ Another significant garment was the *zeira* (ζείρα), a thick woollen mantle known for its warmth and durability. This cloak was often elaborately embroidered with geometric patterns in contrasting colours, reflecting both the skill of Thracian weavers and the cultural significance of their attire. The decorative elements may have served both aesthetic and symbolic purposes, possibly indicating status or tribal affiliation. In addition to these garments, the Thracians wore *embades* (ἐμβάδες), boots made from fawn-skin, which featured down-folded, overlapping tops. These sturdy boots, ideal for rough terrain and cold weather, further emphasise their adaptation to northern climates.

Beyond their distinctive warm clothing, the Thracians were also known for their unique weaponry. Herodotus notes the use of the *pelte* (πέλτη), a small, lightweight crescent-shaped shield.⁴⁷ This versatile shield became emblematic of Thracian warriors, particularly their peltasts, who were highly mobile light infantry. Thucydides frequently refers to Thracian peltasts during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), emphasising their importance in Greek military campaigns.⁴⁸ These peltasts were valued for their agility

ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={9864C76D-6AED-41FB-8A2F-F6D82B0CEB19}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20%20[Vase%20Number]%20206422

⁴⁴ Hdt. 7.75.

⁴⁵ It should be mentioned that the Greek word for fox is *alopez* (ἀλώπηξ).

⁴⁶ Best 1969, 144–145; Raeck 1981, 67–105; Zimmermann 1980a, 429–446; Sparkes 1997, 139–142; Tsiafaki 1998, 31–40; *ead.* 2021, 249–255.

⁴⁷ Best 1969.

⁴⁸ Thuc. 2.29.5, 4.129.2, 5.6.4, 7.27.1.

and their skill in skirmish tactics, making them a crucial element of Thracian warfare and further cementing the Thracian image as hardy, resilient people of the northern frontiers. This combination of clothing and weaponry paints a vivid picture of the Thracians as inhabitants of a rugged, cold environment, and it contributes to their broader depiction in Greek ethnography as a quintessential northern people.

Furthermore, Xenophanes of Colophon provides valuable insight into the physical characteristics of the Thracians, describing them as having red hair and blue eyes.⁴⁹ This description not only aligns with Greek perceptions of northern peoples as fair-skinned and distinct in appearance but also reflects the broader ethnographic tradition of distinguishing different ethnic groups by their physical traits. Xenophanes' account is visually confirmed by Athenian vase paintings from the fifth century BCE, where Thracians are often depicted with red hair (Fig. 3.3).⁵⁰

The vase painters employed dilute glaze techniques to represent this reddish hue, setting these figures apart from the typically darker-haired Greeks. This artistic choice likely served to reinforce the Thracians' perceived exoticism and their identification with the cold northern regions, where red or fair hair was thought to be more common. In addition to their striking hair colour, some Thracians on these vases are shown with pointed beards, a stylistic feature that further differentiates them from Athenian bearded men.⁵¹ This pointed beard may have been a deliberate marker of their foreignness, signalling their status as non-Greek or 'barbarian.' Such representations in Greek art highlight not only physical differences but also the broader cultural distinctions that separated Thracians from Athenians and other Greeks.

These literary and visual depictions of Thracians as red-haired and blue-eyed serve to underscore their position within the Greek imagination as a people of the North, whose appearance was linked to their geographic origin.⁵² The emphasis on these traits can be seen as part of a wider Greek ethnographic tendency to categorise non-Greek peoples based on climate and geography, associating fair hair and lighter features with colder, more northern regions. This approach contributed to shaping the Greek worldview, where physical attributes were seen as indicators of broader cultural and environmental influences.

Although the various depictions of Thracians by Greek sources – such as their clothing, physical features, and weaponry – provide valuable insight into how the Greeks perceived their northern neighbours, one of the most prominent and enduring attributes associated with Thracians was their practice of tattooing. Greek authors, particularly Herodotus, placed significant emphasis on this custom, which became one of the defining characteristics of Thracians in the Greek imagination.

Herodotus specifically notes the cultural significance of tattooing among the Thracians, stating 'to be tattooed was considered a mark of noble birth, while those who were not tattooed were deemed of lower status'.⁵³ The historian provides this information

⁴⁹ Xenophan. *Silli* (D-K 21) F 16 *ap. Clem. Al. Strom.* 7.4.22.1.

⁵⁰ Tsiafaki 2000, 370–372; *ead.* 2021, 252–253; also cf. Vlassopoulos 2024. Attic red-figure bell krater by the Painter of London E 497 in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 24.97.30; BAPD 214496 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/130011979>

⁵¹ Tsiafaki 2000, 370–372; *ead.* 2021, 252–253. For typical examples of Greek bearded men cf. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1836-0224-173?selectedImageId=475736001 and <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103W04>

⁵² Cf. Lampinen in the 'Introduction' to this volume, p. 31–32.

⁵³ Hdt. 5.6: τὸ μὲν ἐστὶχθα εὐγενὲς κέκριται, τὸ δὲ ἄστικτον ἀγεννές. Translation by Godley 1920.

within the rest of his account for Thracians, in which he presents various ethnographical characteristics of them with this specific mention to highlight the social and hierarchical importance of tattooing within Thracian society.

3. Thracian tattoos: a cultural marker in antiquity

Tattooing, however, was not a practice confined to the Thracians; it was widespread in antiquity. The practice of tattooing is one of the most enduring and widely disseminated customs across human history.⁵⁴ Tattoos can be found among a diverse range of peoples, cultures, regions, and periods, each adapting the practice to suit their unique social, spiritual, and aesthetic needs. Cultures as geographically distant as the Egyptians, southern Chinese, and East Indians employed tattoos for various purposes, including religious, medicinal, and decorative. While ethnographically and geographically widespread, the significance and symbolism of tattoos have varied greatly, often presenting contradictory meanings across different societies. For some, tattoos signify belonging, protection, or status, while for others, they may embody punishment, subjugation, or magic. This duality underscores the fact that tattooing, like many cultural practices, resists any universal interpretation. Instead, its meanings are shaped by cultural beliefs, social structures, and historical circumstances.

The study of tattooing, both as a cultural practice and as a symbolic system, has a long and rich tradition in scholarship. Anthropologists, historians, and scholars of semiotics have traced the function of tattoos across time, examining how they reflect and shape individual and collective identities. In this discussion, the focus shifts specifically to tattoos within Thracian society, explored through the lens of ancient Greek perspectives, revealing how this practice served as a marker of cultural identity and social differentiation.

The word used by the ancient Greeks to describe tattoos was *stigma* (στίγμα), derived from the verb *stizein* (στίζειν), meaning ‘to prick,’ ‘to sting,’ or ‘to puncture.’ This term accurately reflects the physical process of tattooing,⁵⁵ in which ink was pricked into the skin using sharp tools, leaving permanent marks. Notably, the term ‘tattoo’ as we understand it today is of much later origin. It appears that the word derives from the Tahitian *tatau*, a term introduced to European languages in the 18th century by explorers such as Captain James Cook in 1769 and Louis Antoine de Bougainville in 1771.⁵⁶

As for the procedure and technique used for the tattoos in antiquity, the sixth-century CE physician Aëtius of Amida provides crucial insight regarding the technical aspects of tattooing.⁵⁷ He describes how ink was applied using needles to puncture the skin, thereby embedding the ink beneath its surface to create a permanent design. Aëtius also mentions the existence of methods for tattoo removal, suggesting that, even in antiquity, there was a desire for individuals to modify or eliminate their tattoos. This could indicate changing social circumstances, personal preferences, or even the shifting meanings attached to specific tattoos over time.

⁵⁴ The bibliography on the topic is immense. Some indicative references include Jones 1987; Caplan (ed.) 2000; Fisher 2002; Rush 2005; Lee 2009, 155–180; Della Casa & Witt (eds.) 2013; Renaut 2014; Deter-Wolf & al. 2016, 19–24; Krutak & Deter-Wolf (eds.) 2017; Zidarov 2017; Kloß (ed.) 2020. Cf. fn. 225, 227 in the ‘Introduction’ to this volume.

⁵⁵ Jones 1987, 142; Bremmer 2015.

⁵⁶ Jones 1987, 142.

⁵⁷ Aët. Amid. *Med.* 8.12; Jones 1987, 142–143.

Among the ancient Greeks, tattooing carried predominantly negative connotations, particularly because of its association with punitive practices. For the Greeks, the use of tattoos was likely introduced through Persian influence in the sixth century BCE, and from then on, tattooing became a form of punishment, branding criminals, slaves, and prisoners of war.⁵⁸ Greek culture dictated the use of these ‘penal tattoos,’ marking individuals who had committed crimes or been defeated in battle, thereby permanently stigmatising them within society.

The Greeks did not entirely reject the idea of tattooing; while they primarily associated it with shame and punishment, they also recognised its significance in other cultures. They viewed the Thracians as a distinctive group for whom tattooing served as a vital cultural marker. The Thracians stood apart in the Greek imagination due to their warlike nature, tribal organisation, and exotic customs, with tattooing featuring prominently among these practices. This ambivalence is further complicated by the interactions between the Greeks and the Thracians. Although the Greeks generally disapproved of tattoos, often perceiving them as indicators of barbarism, they acknowledged that, for the Thracians, these markings carried positive connotations and signified distinction rather than shame. Herodotus’ above-mentioned observation about tattoos being seen among Thracian men as signifying noble birth illustrates this. For the Thracians, tattoos were likely more than mere decoration; they indicated a person’s social status, tribal affiliations, and personal achievements, marking them as members of the elite warrior class.

Interestingly, while Herodotus emphasises the tattooing of noble men, it is another source – the anonymous author of the *Dissoi Logoi* – that mentions the practice of tattooing among Thracian women. In this work, the author notes that ‘among the Thracians, the tattooing of girls is a form of ornament.’⁵⁹ This observation adds an important gendered dimension to the practice of tattooing, suggesting that tattoos functioned not only as markers of male nobility but also as adornments for women, enhancing their beauty or signifying their status within the community.

4. Thracian tattoos as markers of northernness

As mentioned above, there are preserved representations of Thracian men on Attic vases, where they are recognised by their distinctive clothing, the moon-shaped shield (*pelte*), or occasionally through their stereotypically presented facial features. These depictions, found on Attic black- and red-figure vases dating from the sixth century BCE and continuing through the Classical period, do not showcase any tattoos on Thracian men.⁶⁰ In contrast, Athenian vase painters of the fifth century BCE consistently depict Thracian women adorned with tattoos, offering insight into how the Greeks perceived this cultural practice.⁶¹

This identification of Thracian women in Greek art is partly based on ethnographic information from ancient authors like Herodotus, who notes the presence of tattoos among

⁵⁸ Jones 1987, 146–150.

⁵⁹ *Diss. Log.* 2.13. See the ‘Introduction’ of this volume, 33 fn. 226.

⁶⁰ Best 1969, 144–145; Raeck 1981, 67–105; Zimmermann 1980a, 429–446; Sparkes 1997, 139–142; Tsiafaki 1998, 31–40; *ead.* 2021, 249–255.

⁶¹ Tsiafaki 2015, 89–114.

the Thracians. The mythological episode of Orpheus' death,⁶² in which the Thracian women are portrayed as his murderers, also plays a crucial role. In these depictions, the tattoos serve as a cultural marker that allows for the identification of these women as Thracian. Briefly, according to the myth,⁶³ the jealous Thracian women dismembered and decapitated Orpheus for having lured away their husbands, the Thracian men, with his music. This story was a popular subject in Athenian art, with numerous vases depicting the event.⁶⁴ Many of these show the Thracian women with tattoos,⁶⁵ emphasising their foreignness and wildness. The episode is supposed to have taken place in Thrace, where the *Thrassae* (Thracian women) lived free.

One of the earliest depictions of a free, tattooed Thracian woman appears on an Attic red-figure column krater by the Pan Painter (Fig. 3.4).⁶⁶ Worth of note is that a single Thracian female adorned with tattoos occupies the entire side of the vase, lending a monumental quality to the scene. Her Thracian identity is further emphasised by her light-coloured hair, rendered in a dilute glaze. Her long, unruly hair flows freely as she moves forcefully to the right. The movement of her body, the sword held in her hands, her untamed hair and above all, the tattoos that cover the naked parts of her body convey a fierceness that aligns with the picture provided by the literary sources of the Thracians as wild people. The woman's chin, chest, arms, and legs are completely covered with tattoos of various designs, including parallel lines, zigzags, rosettes, and depictions of deer. It is worth noting that earlier representations of the subject are noticeably more violent than later ones.⁶⁷

Another notable example is found on an Attic red-figure calyx krater dated to around 450–440 BCE and attributed to the Villa Giulia Painter (Fig. 3.5).⁶⁸ It portrays on side A of the vase a typical scene of the death of Orpheus identified as Thracian by the *embades* on his feet and legs. The musician is slain by two Thracian women whose tattoos adorn their arms and legs. Here, the tattoos consist of simple parallel lines. Tattoos in the form of V-shapes appear on the arms of the Thracian woman who attacks Orpheus on an Attic red-figure amphora by the Phiale Painter.⁶⁹ Dots adorn the arms of the Thracian female on a stamnos by Hermonax.⁷⁰

⁶² Schoeller 1969; Gareizou 1994, 81–105; Desbals 1997; Tsiafaki 1998, 48–62; *ead.* 2000, 372–376; *ead.* 2016a, 269–271; *ead.* 2024 48–49.

⁶³ Gareizou 1994, 81–83; Tsiafaki 1998, 44–48; Lissarague 2002, 120–121; Tsiafaki 2016a, 269–271.

⁶⁴ Schoeller 1969; Gareizou 1994, 81–105; Desbals 1997; Tsiafaki 1998, 48–62.

⁶⁵ For tattoos on Thracian women see Zimmermann 1980b, 163–196; Renaut 2011, 191–216; Tsiafaki 2015, 89–118; Dinter & Khoo 2020; Rees 2020.

⁶⁶ Attic red-figure column krater by the Pan Painter in Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2378; BAPD 206284. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pan_Painter_ARV_551_9_two_Thracian_women_\(01\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pan_Painter_ARV_551_9_two_Thracian_women_(01).jpg)

⁶⁷ Tsiafaki 2016a, 271.

⁶⁸ Attic red-figure calyx krater by the Villa Giulia Painter in Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum 80.AE.71; BAPD 22903. <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103TTM?canvas=857953f7-6449-454e-9d9e-e82d3804f658>

⁶⁹ Attic red-figure amphora by the Phiale Painter in Paris, Louvre Museum G 436; BAPD 214178. <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={DA51E9EB-C817-464C-8D10-AF33E0EAA4E8}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20214178>

⁷⁰ Attic red-figure stamnos by Hermonax in Paris, Louvre Museum G416; BAPD 205405. <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={9DA5963F-90E8-4ABD-AA87-B7841F8B94D2}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20205405>

The repetition of these tattooed figures in different artistic contexts creates a visual language that connects tattoos to Thracian identity. Even when Orpheus is absent from the scene, as on the krater by the Pan Painter mentioned above, the depiction of tattooed women alone is enough to indicate their Thracian ethnicity. This consistent motif speaks to how deeply the association between Thracians and tattoos had penetrated the Greek visual imagination.

Another vase from the Athenian Kerameikos can be placed within the same framework, which however, displays an especially interesting variation. It is the well-known, white-ground Orpheus cup from the Athenian Acropolis, attributed to the Pistoxenos Painter.⁷¹ The scene depicting the killing of Orpheus by a Thracian woman, has often been linked with a prototype in Early Classical mural painting. At first glance, the fragmentary state of this white-ground composition might mislead the viewer into interpreting it as a young couple engaged in a romantic tryst. But to the discerning observer, the proximity of death becomes apparent. The Acropolis cup offers an alternative portrayal of the moment before Orpheus's death. The woman is identified as Thracian, as usual, by the tattoos on her body, which include abstract motifs and a deer. However, she is rendered differently from the typical representations of this theme mentioned earlier. She is beautiful and calm, with carefully styled long hair and jewellery adorning her neck and ears. Were it not for the tattoos – and the subject – she could easily be mistaken for an Athenian lady, akin to the maidens depicted in the representation of Boreas and Oreithyia. Of particular interest here is the shape of one of her tattoos. It is the deer – *elaphos* (ἔλαφος) in Greek – that is reminiscent of a certain Theocritus, whom Lysias refers to as the ‘son of *Elaphostictus* (= Deer-tattooed)’.⁷² Lysias possibly means that the father of Theocritus was a Thracian bearing a deer-shaped tattoo, and it is likely that tattoos were so common in Thracian culture that this was even used as an epithet.⁷³ Moreover, Lysias' reference confirms the ethnographic information that Thracian males were tattooed. A deer-shaped tattoo is also found on the arm of the Thracian woman on the Pan Painter krater discussed before. This might suggest that such tattoos were not only common in Thracian culture but also served as identifiers even in Greek society, as the epithet likely referred to a Thracian origin.

This also offers a tempting clue about the identity of the vase painter Pistoxenos, whose name means ‘faithful foreigner’. While this may be coincidental, it is worth considering that a great number of foreigners – including Thracians – lived in Athens and fulfilled various roles.⁷⁴ We cannot rule out the possibility that this *xenos* (foreigner) had connections to Thrace or perhaps was even Thracian himself. Another vase by the same painter, a skyphos from around 460 BCE, depicts a tattooed Thracian female slave, further emphasising the role of tattoos as ethnic markers in Greek art.⁷⁵ The vase shows the young Herakles on his way to a music lesson with his teacher Linos. The hero is escorted by his nurse, identified by an inscription as Geropso (meaning ‘Old’ in Greek),

⁷¹ Attic white-ground cup by the Pistoxenos Painter in Athens, Acropolis Museum GL II.439; BAPD 211325. <https://theacropolismuseum.gr/en/kylix-3>

⁷² Lys. 13.19.

⁷³ Jones 1987, 145; Dinter & Khoo 2020, 89.

⁷⁴ Bäbler 1998, 183–198.

⁷⁵ It is a well-known Attic red-figure skyphos in Schwerin, Staatliches Museum 708 of around 460 BCE; BAPD 211358. <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/record/4F136666-4352-4FE2-A5B3-54505DEAF556>

who hobbles along, leaning on her crooked walking stick as she carries his lyre. Geropso is recognisable as Thracian through the tattoos decorating her body, which appear as parallel wavy lines on her arms, feet, and neck.

This vase introduces us to the next category of Thracian women depicted in Athenian iconography: slaves. Herodotus mentions that the Thracians customarily sold their children as slaves,⁷⁶ and Thracian slaves were highly sought after in Greece. Various literary sources confirm that in antiquity Thrace was renowned for its resources, including metals, timber, grain, and people – such as warriors, slaves, and skilled metalworkers. Thracian women, in particular, were highly regarded as nurses (*trophoi*, τροφοί).⁷⁷ Aristophanes even notes that the playwright Euripides himself had a Thracian nurse.⁷⁸ In a slave-owning society, this geographic and ethnographic knowledge held significant value and was intertwined with the commodification of the bodies of ‘others’.⁷⁹ Within this context, tattoos became a recognisable feature that helped to identify Thracians in Athenian society, particularly in a culture where the qualifications and capabilities of slaves were frequently assessed based on their place of origin. For Athenians, other Greeks, and mercenaries – as well as anyone purchasing slaves – understanding a person’s skills was often simplified by their origin, which served as indicative to their abilities. Once again geography and ethnography played a significant role in shaping society and the economy. The northern neighbours of the Greeks – Thracians in this case – were known as skilled warriors, expert metalworkers, reliable slaves, and trusted nurses. Tattoos served as markers of their identity and as a means of recognition. Furthermore, literary sources attest that many Thracians lived in Athens, with a large number of them in slavery.⁸⁰ Therefore, the depiction of tattooed female slaves on Attic vases not only identifies their Thracian origin but also corroborates the written sources, seemingly portraying realistic scenes from daily life.

Let us now examine some representative examples of Thracian female slaves depicted with tattoos as ethnic markers. Their portrayal on vases as servants in a Greek household reflects three distinct roles: (a) performing typical household tasks, (b) serving as *paidagogoi* (παιδαγωγοί) or nurses (*trophoi*) for the children, and (c) acting as mourners.

We find these women depicted in domestic settings, such as in fountain scenes, as seen on an Attic red-figure hydria attributed to the Aegisthus Painter.⁸¹ The short, cropped hair of the women indicates that they are slaves. Upon closer inspection, we see tattoos on their chins, arms, and legs, signifying their Thracian origin. In other scenes, Thracian slaves appear as nurses or attendants, such as the aforementioned skyphos depicting Geropso, the tattooed nurse accompanying young Herakles.

⁷⁶ Hdt. 5.6.

⁷⁷ For Thracian women as nurses see Tsiafaki 1998, 37–40; Bäbler 1998, 183–198; Oakley 2000, 242–245; Tsiafaki 2000, 372–376; Oakley 2004, 164. Harrison 2019 and 2025, 301 observe the significance of foreign slaves in Athens for the development of imagery about these groups; cf. Parmenter 2024, 172–174.

⁷⁸ Ar. *Thesm.* 280.

⁷⁹ Harrison 2020, 156; Braund 2011b, 123, 128.

⁸⁰ Osborne & Byrne 1996, 106–110; Bäbler 1998, 183–198; Vlassopoulos 2013a, *passim*; Sears 2013, 13–14, 31, 140–173; Avramidou & Tsiafaki 2015, 58–60; Vlassopoulos 2023, 70–78.

⁸¹ Attic red-figure hydria by the Aegisthus Painter in Paris, Louvre Museum CA2587 (470–460 BCE); BAPD 20569. <https://shorturl.at/MhiU8>.

In the third category – acting as mourners – we observe them participating in *prothesis* (πρόθεσις) scenes, where tattooed Thracian women tend to the deceased, mourning over the laid-out bodies of their mistresses. Such examples appear on some Attic red-figure loutrophoroi depicting the scene of *prothesis*, which include Thracian female servants.⁸² Among them there is one in Athens, attributed to the Painter of Bologna 228 (460–450 BCE), which comes from a grave at Pikrodaphne in Attica.⁸³ Here, a servant with simple linear tattoos on her face tends to the body of a deceased woman, likely her mistress. The Thracian ethnicity of this tattooed slave is further emphasised by her light-coloured hair, rendered in a dilute glaze. In these scenes, the mourning Thracian nurses appear as loving, caring figures, almost like family members.⁸⁴

The preserved depictions confirm the written sources' indications that arms, legs, bodies, and faces could be tattooed. The motifs of the tattoos found in the Athenian iconography varied in form, ranging from simple patterns to more elaborate animal designs.⁸⁵ Namely, the tattoos could depict animals, such as a deer or a snake, or consist of various abstract patterns. These include vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines, sometimes arranged singly and other times grouped to form patterns like zigzags and chevrons. Additionally, they could incorporate curvilinear elements, including rosettes, dots, and spirals. Together, these designs create complex and visually striking patterns that marked the Thracian identity and artistry.

Based on vase iconography,⁸⁶ all exposed body parts of Thracian women could be adorned with tattoos; however, 'adorned' here does not imply that these tattoos were purely decorative. Instead, they likely carried deep cultural significance within Thracian society, serving as markers of status, identity, and affiliation. As already discussed by different scholars in studies of body modification in pre-modern societies, the body functions as a canvas on which social status, tribal affiliation, and cultural values are inscribed.⁸⁷ In this context, Thracian tattoos represented more than individual expression; they embodied cultural values and a shared ethnic identity that the Greeks readily recognised and interpreted on the basis of their own cultural values and knowledge pool.

In Thrace, tattoos likely functioned as a form of social identification, distinguishing individuals and reinforcing group affiliation. The body thus became a social and cultural medium, carrying visual symbols of Thracian identity that marked belonging to a specific ethnic or social class, while also expressing collective values. Alongside other distinguishing features, such as distinctive clothing styles, tattoos created a cohesive visual identity that reinforced group unity and commonality while simultaneously reflecting each individual's adaptation to these values.

For the Greeks, these tattoos were especially striking and contributed to their perception of Thracians as a unique, culturally significant group. This was not only due to

⁸² Margariti 2018, 130–131 with earlier bibliography.

⁸³ Attic red-figure loutrophoros by the Bologna 228 Painter in Athens, National Museum CC1167; BAPD 205750. [https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={D9BBE878-9FE6-452D-BA51-62908A8EC6A3}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20\[Vase%20Number\]%20205750](https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={D9BBE878-9FE6-452D-BA51-62908A8EC6A3}&noResults=1&recordCount=1&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20[Vase%20Number]%20205750)

⁸⁴ Tsiafaki 2015, 98–101.

⁸⁵ Renaut 2011, 191–2016; Tsiafaki 2015, 107–108; Rees 2020, 285.

⁸⁶ Zimmermann 1980b, 163–196; Renaut 2011, 192–216; Tsiafaki 2015, 89–118.

⁸⁷ Turner 1992, 5–6; Lee 2009, 155–180; Rapp 2010, 3; Dinter & Khoo 2020, 92–97; Rees 2020, 277–284.

the visible tattoos themselves but also to what these tattoos represented within the broader Greek worldview. Thracians were often seen as wild and fierce, a reputation supported by their roles in Greek society as both mercenaries and slaves. Tattoos, therefore, functioned as a type of ethnic branding – a visible shorthand through which Greeks could categorise and understand people from the North. Seen in this light, Thracian tattoos were symbols of ‘otherness,’ encoding and embodying a foreign identity that was both admired and feared.

In summary, Thracian tattoos, as depicted in Greek art and noted in Greek literature, served as potent markers of identity that allowed the Greeks to define and categorise the Thracians as distinct, culturally significant figures. Whether in mythological depictions, such as scenes of Orpheus’ death, or in everyday representations of Thracian slaves or mercenaries, tattoos visually signified the Thracians as northern, foreign, and ultimately, ‘other.’ The Greek approach could, in some respects, be likened to ‘judging books by their covers’.⁸⁸ Tattoos were among the cognitive tools that Greeks used to classify those around them according to appearance and cultural markers.

5. Conclusions

Thrace, as a prominent northern region, became emblematic of the conceptual ‘North’ in Greek thought, with the Thracians embodying many traits the Greeks associated with northern peoples: distinctive clothing, physical features, and, notably, the practice of tattooing. In the Greek worldview, these markers solidified the Thracians’ identity as a quintessentially northern people and positioned them as representatives of the cultural and geographic ‘Other.’

Through Greek art and literature, Thracian tattoos emerge not simply as decorative features but as significant indicators of status, ethnicity, and identity. From the Greek perspective, tattoos visually reinforced Thracian ‘wildness’ and difference, amplifying the perception of Thracians as exotic and inherently foreign. This is consistent with the broader Greek tendency to define foreign groups through visible physical and cultural practices that contrasted with Greek norms. Tattoos, along with distinct attire and weaponry, became a powerful marker in the Greek construction of Thracians as untamed and otherworldly, reinforcing a perception of northernness that was both dangerous and captivating.

In Thracian culture, however, tattoos held a much deeper significance, serving as markers of nobility, tribal affiliation, and individual achievement. In a warrior society, tattoos might have indicated martial skill, rank, or rites of passage, while for women, they might have symbolised beauty, fertility, or ties to familial and spiritual traditions. Thus, Thracian tattoos were not merely body decoration, but complex symbols woven into the fabric of their social and cultural life. While Greeks associated tattooing primarily with punishment or control, they also recognised Thracian tattoos as symbols of pride, nobility, and cultural distinction – a testament to the Greeks’ nuanced view of Thracians as both admirable and alien.

For the Greeks, the tattoos served as visible indicators of identity that allowed them to categorise Thracians as distinct and culturally significant figures within the northern

⁸⁸ Rapp 2010, 4–5.

periphery. The Greek fascination with Thracian tattoos reflects a broader ethnographic tendency to emphasise physical attributes when classifying foreign peoples. Greek writers and artists used these traits to construct a cohesive image of northernness and, in our case, blending observation with imaginative elements to emphasise the exoticism of their northern neighbours. This focus on external markers highlights how the Greeks constructed their knowledge of the world, relying on visible distinctions to understand and categorise non-Greek societies. Through this lens, tattoos became a kind of ethnic branding, reinforcing the Thracians' position as a unique and identifiable northern group in Greek ethnographic thought.

This chapter has sought to shed some light on how cultural markers like tattoos were instrumental in constructing and maintaining ethno-geographic identities, revealing the complexities of ancient Greek ethnographic and geographic thinking. Thracian tattoos, alongside practices observed among other 'barbarian' northern groups – such as the Scythians and Celts – formed part of the Greek vision of the wild, mysterious North, presenting Thracians as embodying qualities that both fascinated and unsettled Greek audiences.⁸⁹ In this context, tattoos became a form of ethnic branding, a visible shorthand for the Greeks to interpret and categorise those from beyond their own cultural sphere.

In conclusion, the Thracians' practice of tattooing offers valuable insights into the intersections of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and personal expression in the ancient world. Greek portrayals of Thracian tattoos reveal a complex interplay of fascination and fear, marking Thracians as the archetypal 'northern other.' For Thracians, tattoos were symbols of social status and cultural pride; for the Greeks, they reinforced boundaries and cultural distinctions. Through these artistic and literary depictions, we gain a deeper understanding of how the Greeks constructed and reinforced their identity by defining the foreignness of their northern neighbours.

Ultimately, Thracian tattoos serve as a reminder of the diversity of human expression and the capacity of body art to communicate profound cultural meanings. While the Greeks may have viewed tattooing as a reflection of Thracian 'otherness,' their depictions also reveal an intricate, layered view of identity, status, and cultural significance that enriched their understanding of the northern people in their midst.

⁸⁹ On the extension of the ideas of tattooing (and body-painting, not always clearly distinguished from one another in the proverbial knowledge pool) to other northern groups, see the 'Introduction', p. 33–34.

Illustrations



Fig. 3.1: Boreas and Oreithyia. Attic red-figure trade amphorae by the Oreithyia painter, 480–470 BCE. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek 2345. © Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 3.2: Thracians. Attic red-figure calyx krater by the Villa Giulia painter, 450–440 BCE. Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California. © Photo/drawing by The J. Paul Getty Museum



Fig. 3.3: Orpheus and Thracian. Attic red-figure bell krater by the painter of London E 497, ca. 440 BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 24.97.30. © Photo/drawing by the New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 3.4: Thracian woman. Attic red-figure column krater by the Pan painter, *ca.* 470 BCE. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2378. © Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 3.5: Death of Orpheus. Attic red-figure calyx krater by the Villa Giulia painter, 450–440 BCE. Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California. © Photo/drawing by The J. Paul Getty Museum

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