CHAPTER 45

ODRYSIAN CAVALRY ARMS, EQUIPMENT, AND TACTICS

CHRISTOPHER WEBBER

The Odrysian Army

Although by Strabo’s time Thrace had been devastated to an exceptional degree, he said that the region as a whole could send into the field 15,000 cavalry and 200,000 infantry.1 This would corroborate Herodotus’ statement that there were about a million Thracians, which allows an army 100 – 200,000 strong. It also makes credible Thucydides’ claim that when the Odrysian king Sitalkes called up all Thracian troops south of the Danube, 150,000 warriors poured “like a cloud of locusts”2 into Macedonia, carrying all before them. No wonder Herodotus says of the Thracians that “were they under one ruler, or united, they would... be invincible and the strongest nation on earth.”3 However, the army was not paid, but lived on booty, and the majority of troops would have supplied their own equipment. Consequently armies dissolved quickly if not successful.4

The Odrysian army was composed mainly of peltasts and cavalry, the remainder being lighter infantry (javelin men, archers, and slingers).5 In Sitalkes’ army, these warriors came from the Odrysai, Getae, eastern Paionians (Agrianians and Laeaeans), Treres, Tilateans, Apsinthii, Krobyzi, Dii (plus Bessi and other mountain tribes), and Thymi. None of the tribes from the Aegean coast (Edoni, Bisaltae etc) joined Sitalkes. Greek mercenaries were occasionally hired to make up for the lack of heavy infantry. Iphicrates had 8000 men in Thrace at one stage,6 but we cannot be sure if this was when he was in Kotys’ service or when he was campaigning in the same area on Athens’ behalf. Many of Iphicrates’ victories were gained using peltasts as the main arm, but what Kotys needed was hoplites, and these probably formed the mainstay of his mercenary force. Unfortunately, when the Macedonians invaded, the Thracians had no such infantry capable of defeating the Macedonian phalanx.7

1 Strabo Geography 7.147.
2 Aristophanes Acharnians, 145 – this was in autumn 429.
3 Herodotus V.3.
4 This might be one explanation for the brevity of Sitalkes’ campaign against Macedonia.
5 Thucydides 2.100; Head, AOTMAPW, p 29; Head D., TTT, pp14-17.
6 Polyaeus 111.9.46. This would be the largest body of mercenary troops who fought for the Thracians.

Tribes fought together as well as alone, but large agglomerations were rare. More typical were the four tribes that attacked Romans with 10,000 men in a mountainous defile in 189, or the Tribulli’s lone defence against Alexander the Great. Tribal fragmentation meant that most Thracian armies would have been 10-20,000 men strong.

One of the most powerful of these appeared in 400, when Seuthes II hired the 6,000 or so survivors of Xenophon’s army to get his own domain on the Black sea coast.8 They were mainly hoplites, but included nearly 1,000 peltasts, javelinmen, and slingers, and 50 cavalry.9 Xenophon says simply that Seuthes had an army larger than the Greek army; and that it tripled in size as the news of its success spread. This could mean that Seuthes’ army grew to a strength of around 20,000 men, including the Greeks.10 The Thracian contribution to this army would have been around 4,000 Odrysian light cavalry, 500 heavy cavalry, 500 archers and slingers, 7,000 peltasts, and 2,000 javelin-armed lighter infantry.11

The army was organised along tribal lines, with each contingent commanded by its own prince or his relatives. Since the leaders expected to be in the forefront of battle, they would have had little control over their armies once battle was joined. In Sitalkes’ case (when fighting the Triballi), this also meant

7 eg Arrian, 1.2 – 1.4.
8 Op. cit. VII.7.23; 1.7 – before the battle of Cunaxa there were 10,400 hoplites and 2,500 peltasts, but when they get to Thrace D. Head, “‘Thracian Troop Types’, in Slingshot, September 1979, p 21 and J.G.P. Best, Thracian Peltasts and their influence on Greek warfare, 1969, p76 wrote their number had dwindled to 6,000. While Anabasis VII, 2 “…and with Xenophon there were about seventeen hundred hoplites and about three hundred peltasts. Xenophon was the only one who had cavalry, a force of about forty horsemen.” Diodorus Siculus XIV. 31.5 says 8,300 survived to reach the Bosphorus but they then split up.
9 Xenophon, Anabasis III, 3.16; Anabasis VII. 3 also says “Seuthes then went off, and Timasion, with about forty Greek horsemen, went with him.”
10 Xenophon, Anabasis 7.5.15; 7.4.20.
11 These figures are based on the assumption that cavalry formed about one third of the army, peltasts formed the bulk of the troops, and the remainder were lighter infantry, with archers predominating over slingers.
the death of the commander and loss of the battle. Commands were transmitted by trumpet calls, Thracian musicians used horns for giving signals, and also trumpets of raw ox-hide that could play music like that of a harp.

It is probable that different Thracian tribes favoured different fighting styles and had different proportions of troop-types in their armies. For instance, in the Iliad, Euphemus arrayed the Ciconians, men of the spear, and Pryaechmes led Paeonians, armed with the bow. Mountain tribes were more warlike and favoured infantry, while those from the plains favoured cavalry. The Odrysai fielded 8,000 horse (28%) and 20,000 foot against Lysimachos. A detachment of Odrysians sent by Seuthes to aid the Spartans in Bithynia in 398 was composed of 200 cavalry (40%) and 300 peltasts. Thucydides says that the Getai and their neighbours by the Danube were all mounted archers in the Skythian style. However, Alexander faced a Getic army of 4000 horse and 10,000 foot, or about 28% cavalry. Seuthes hired 2,000 Getic light troops for use against the Athenians in the Thracian Chersonese, which shows they may have been a regular component of Odrysian armies. So an Odrysian royal army might contain between 25% and 40% cavalry, while the army of a single tribe or group of hill tribes might have much less.

**The Odrysian Cavalry**

Horse riding epitomised the Thracians. Euripides and Homer called the Thracians “a race of horsemen”, and Thrace, “the land of the Thracian horsemen”. This description seems justified, as even though the cavalry only made up a small proportion of their army, they were quite numerous. For instance, although Sitalkes’ army was only one-third cavalry, this represented about 50,000 men. The majority of these were Odrysians and Getai. Thus the Odrysians alone could outnumber all the fifth-century Greek cities and other tribal kingdoms collectively in cavalry forces. However, Macedonian heavy cavalry operated against them with impunity when Sitalkes invaded Macedonia. “The Macedonians... made cavalry attacks on the Thracian army when they saw their opportunity. Whenever they did so, being excellent horsemen and armed with breastplates, no one could stand up to them...” This happened again during the battle of Lyginus between Alexander and the Triballi.

The cavalry were chiefly unarmoured javelin-armed skirmishers, with relatively few armoured cavalry forming a bodyguard for the king. This might explain why Sitalkes had no troops able to stand up to the heavy Macedonian cavalry. Against the Greeks, though, they seem to have had more success, with several Greek armies being wiped out during colonisation attempts. Perhaps the best evidence for the success of Thracian cavalry is the way that the mainland Greeks took up Thracian cavalry dress, and horsemanship. Athenian riders wearing Thracian boots and/or Thracian headdress can be seen on the Parthenon frieze, and wearing Thracian cloaks on Athenian pottery.

Horses were very important to Thracians, and seem to have been of good quality. Studies of Thracian horses from fourth century tombs show that they were larger than steppe ponies and at least comparable to the breeds on the Greek mainland, which reached 1.34m or 13 hands. They had a long thick mane, a short tail, and carried their heads high. The biggest would have been between 1.36 and 1.44m, or 14 hands at the withers, similar to stallions of the Przewalski horse. This size, between that of a modern pony and a horse, is now called a Galloway. It was still small enough that riders who rode with their legs straight barely kept their feet off the ground.

Horses were trained and bred for racing, a prerequisite for successful cavalry warfare. Xenophon rates Thracian horses to be as good as Persian and Greek horses, and says that the Odrysians habitually ran their horses races downhill. In the Iliad, a Trojan spy reports that the Thracian king Rhesus has the finest and strongest horses he has ever seen, “whiter than snow and fleeter than any wind that blows.” The Megarians asked an oracle who were better then they. The extraordinary reply received was: “Better than all other land is the land of Pelasgian Argos, Thracian mares are the best, and the Lacedaemonian women.” Vergil describes three Thracian horses: One had white fetlocks and “a snowy star” on the forehead; another was a piebald, while a third was dappled with white. Horses in the Kazanluk paintings do not have any markings and are different shades of brown, except for a single white.

---

12 Xenophon, Anabasis, 7.4.19.
13 Ibid, 7.3.32.
14 Iliad, Chapter 2.
15 Diodorus Siculus XVIII.14.2.
16 Xenophon, Hellenica III 2.2.
17 Thucydides 2.96.
18 Arrian, 1.4 –1.5.
19 Polyaeus, Stratagems of War 7.38.
20 Euripides, Hecabe, 7-10 (Penguin)
21 Polydorus: “To Thrace, to the palace of his old friend Polymestor, who farms the fertile plain of this peninsula and rules over a race of horsemen with his sword.”
22 Homer Iliad 13.1 (Loeb)
23 Now Zeus, when he had brought the Trojans and Hector to the ships, left the combattants there to have toil and woe unceasingly, but himself turned away his bright eyes, and looked afar, upon the land of the Thracian horsemen. Homer, Iliad, XIV
24 Venus now went back into the house of Jove, while Juno darted down from the summits of Olympus. She passed over the Phebe and fair Emathia, and went on and on till she came to the snowy ranges of the Thracian horsemen, over whose topmost crests she sped without ever setting foot to ground.
25 Thucydides 2.100.
26 Archibald Z., op. cit. p 204.
Figure 1. 5th century Thracian light cavalryman with zeira, boots, fox skin cap, two javelins and a pelte slung on his back. Note the small size of the horse (From a red figure pelike found near Sozopol).
Figure 2a. Reconstruction of silver gilt harness ornaments 1 to 4, left to right. 1. 4th century, from Simeonovgrad, near Haskovo HM Haskovo P.49. 2. 3rd or 2nd century, from Ravnogor, near Pazardzik (found with a hair from the forelock in the hollow “horn”), HM Pazardzik A4646-4652, 4707, 157. 3. c. 400 - 350, from Letnitsa 4.4th century, from the Lukovit treasure. Archaeological Museum, Sofia. © Linda Dicmanis 2001

Figure 2b. Reconstruction of some other harness ornaments, by Linda Dicmanis. © Linda Dicmanis 2001. 1. Kralevo treasure, Targoviste region, turn of 4th-3rd centuries BC (probably Getic). HM Targoviste 2298-2306 2. 4th century harness ornaments from the Lukovit treasure, Archaeological Museum, Sofia 3. The silver headstall from Mramor Moglia Panagyurishte district, 350-300., previously thought to have been a shield applique. It was found with five circular ornaments. Archaeological Museum, Sofia. It is 32 cm long, which Linda Dicmanis found to fit exactly onto a horse’s head. © Linda Dicmanis 2001
Figure 3. Triballi or Getic horsemen on Silver-gilt jug from the 4th century Rozogen treasure, National Museum of History inv. No22459. Note the saddle and chest strap decorations, and the “horn” on the horses’ heads.
Figure 4. The tombstone of a 1st century AD Thracian auxiliary cavalryman, from Gloucester. He uses a lancea, but may also have had a case of javelins. The details of his clothes and armour were probably painted on, but have now disappeared. The inscription reads: “Rufus Sita, cavalryman of the 6th cohort of Thracians. 40 years old and 22 years of military service. His heirs erected this stone in accordance with his will. Here he lies.” Author’s photograph.

Figure 5. The Alexandrovo tomb, 400-375. It consists of two rooms - a rectangular entryway and a round chamber with a high dome. Both rooms are covered with murals: men, animals, plants and geometric motifs. Note the unusual shape to the spears, the similarities to the Kazanluk paintings, the horse trappings, and the Greek costumes.
Figure 5 (Continued).
horses. White horses were evidently special, as one was presented to Seuthes II at the banquet attended by Xenophon. In the Alexandrovo tomb, the horses are wholly painted grey, white, brown, or yellow.

It is interesting to note that Thracian horses seem to have been larger than Skythian and Saka horses, which were of the Przewalski type - small, stocky ponies with naturally short manes and long tails. Skythian horses found in permafrost graves were chestnut, brown, bays or jet black. None were dapple grey, mottled bay, skewbald, roan or grey. White patches, which are common on modern brown horses, were absent. It is thought the Skythians avoided light coloured or white marked horses, as they had a corresponding light coloured hoof that was easily injured. So apparently, it was not until the invention of the horseshoe, that we start to see white patches on horses extremities.

The horse trappings were well crafted and highly decorative, and horses wearing all the items discovered in Thracian tombs must have made a fine sight. A variety of harnessing methods was used, some of which resembled Skythian and Persian practice. Leather bridles in red or dark brown colour consisted of side-straps, nose bands with or without chinstraps, often forehead-straps and throat-lashes. Reins were the same colour. The harness fittings (most often disks or rings,) were made of a mixture of iron, bronze, gold, and silver, or bronze and silver.

Harness fittings were adorned like the those of the Skythians, featuring real or fantastic animals, but many featured distinctive anthropomorphic motifs, including the Thracian horseman and Thracian mythology. Sometimes hundreds of exquisitely crafted ornaments were used on a single horse. “There was a separate native tradition which nevertheless grew closer to similarly evolving Royal Skythian schemes during the fourth century. At the same time, Greek influences became increasingly more prominent.”

The meaning of these ornaments has often been discussed, but apparently not their usage. The horse decorations painted in the Alexandrovo tomb now show definitely how they were worn - one on the nose, one on the forehead, and two on each side of the head. Except for the nose decoration, the Alexandrovo paintings confirm positions shown in the Kazanluk tomb paintings, which show disks in these locations.

There are a lot of similarities to the Kazanluk figures: the pose of the horses, fancy saddlecloths, clean-shaven faces, and the low shoes. The nose and forehead ornaments in the Alexandrovo tomb are significant in that similar decorations have been found in other tombs but their use had not previously been illustrated. Where more than six appliques have been found, the most likely location for the adornments would be on the chest strap and along the forehead strap. Horses with the most basic ring decorations generally only had them on each side of the head.

250 silver appliques from Vratsa, 206 of which were tiny heads, might have been attached to the reins, or sewn onto a saddle cloth. Apart from the use of the saddle cloth, horses were ridden bareback, as stirrups, horseshoes, and saddles were yet to be invented. Although horses are often shown without saddle cloths, this may have been artistic convention, meant to show off the lines of the horse’s body. Xenophon says a man may ride bareback, but assumes saddlecloths are standard, at least for war. Most cloths were simple rectangles. The Skythians used what was essentially a cushioned saddle cloth. Leather covered cushions, stuffed with deer hair or straw, were stitched with sinew thread with wooden supports. Xenophon recommends a thick quilted saddlecloth, and the pad may derive from this.

The southern Thracesians learned of the simple Skythian saddle through their northern cousins, and it seems the Odrysians were using it by the third century. One of the horses from the Kazanluk paintings has a low dark brown saddle on a cream and brown cloth. The 3rd century Sveshtari tomb shows a Hellenised king of the Getai sitting on a richly decorated saddle with four long pendants, painted red.

Many brightly coloured saddlecloths are shown on the Kazanluk and Alexandrovo paintings. One is red with yellow decoration, except that the tassels on the rear points are white. Others are straight-edged and plain red. In the Alexandrovo tomb, the saddle cloths are coloured blue and red, blue and white, or red and white. Animal-skin saddle cloths were also used.

All have simple geometrical patterns - none show the elaborate decorations used by the Skythians and Persians, who included birds and flowers in their designs. The material used for Thracian saddlecloths is unknown, but Skythian and Persian cloths were made of felt, sometimes with leather edging or backing. Wool and hemp are other possibilities. They were

Xenophon, *Anabasis* 7.3.34.


Head D., *AOTMAPW*, pp 127-128, 173-174; Webber Ch., op. cit., loc. cit; one is shown on the dome of the Kazanluk tomb.
Later cavalry developments

The fourth century saw the start of many changes in cavalry dress and equipment. The distinctive Thracian dress was discarded, additional armour of new types was worn, shields and saddles came into use, and light infantry was trained to support cavalry.39 Light cavalry was now likely to have the basic protection of helmet and shield, while heavy cavalry took to wearing iron helmets and composite corselets.

Early 2nd century Thracian noble cavalry had a force of light infantry attached to them.40 These may have been trained to fight alongside the cavalry and to hamstring the enemy horses. Bithynian cavalry too seem to have been closely supported by attached infantry. This is not recorded before the early 3rd century and is probably a result of Hellenistic influence, as Greek and Macedonian generals were using light infantry in close support of their cavalry long before.41

From the late fourth century onwards, Odrysian cavalry operated mostly as allied or subject troops. In particular, Thracian troops were critical to the success of Alexander the Great. They formed about one fifth of his army (25% of the infantry and 20% of the cavalry to begin with) and took part in almost all his battles. Of the forces that crossed to Asia, there were 7,000 Odrysians, Triballi and Illyrians plus 1,000 archers and Agrianians (a Paionian tribe) out of a total of 32,000 foot soldiers.42 There were also 900 Thracian and Paeonian scouts, out a total of 4,500 cavalry. A further 500 Thracian cavalry joined Alexander’s army while it was at Memphis.43 A body of Odrysian horse (probably heavy cavalry), commanded by Sitalikes, an Odrysian prince, was likewise present.44 600 Thracian cavalry and 3,500 Trallians joined Alexander after he left Babylon.45

At the battle of the Granicus in 334, Alexander deployed the Thracians on his left flank, but they were not engaged during the battle.46 Thracian cavalry took part in Alexander’s rapid march to Miletus,47 and Thracian javelinmen screened the Macedonian left flank in battle against the Pisidians.48 Before the Battle of Issos (333) we find Alexander using the “light armed Thracians” to reconnoitre the mountainous surroundings of the Cilician Gates.49

At the subsequent battle the Thracians were initially in the van of the army,50 then they were again posted on the left wing, brigaded with Cretan archers.51 They were also on the left wing at Gaugamela (331), when the savage Thracians (cavalry and infantry) helped beat off a sustained attack by superior numbers of Persian cavalry.52 However, the Thracian infantry had mixed success defending the baggage against the Indian

---

38 National Museum of History inv. No. 22459 (AG plate 83; AG Helsinki No. 33); See Fig. 3.
cavalry. Although many other troops were allowed to return home before or during the march to India, the Thracians stayed on. 3,000 infantry and 500 horsemen would be left as a garrison on the Indus river near the present day city of Rawalpindi. At the battle of the Hydaspes (326), the Thracian light infantry attacked the Indian elephants with “copides” (curved swords or rhomphaia). The Agrianians in particular were given many critical missions.

Many other battles in the struggle for Alexander’s empire involved Thracian troops. Eumenes deployed Thracians on his left flank at the battle of the Hellespont in 321. At Paraitakene (317), 500 Thracian cavalry fought on one side and 1000 cavalry fought on the other (possibly colonist Thracians versus native Thracians— the native Thracians won). Thracian cavalry next rose to prominence in the wars with the Romans. In 171 Perseus was joined by Kotys, king of the Odrysai with 1,000 picked cavalry and about 1,000 infantry. Perseus already had 3,000 “free Thracians under their own commander” in his forces. These fought “like wild beasts who had long been kept caged” at the Kallinikos skirmish that year, defeating the Roman allied cavalry. They returned from battle singing, with severed heads as trophies. Their performance at the Battle of Pydna (168) was less remarkable—they are only mentioned when running away. Thracian cavalry are recorded switching sides in 109, when two mercenary squadrons were bribed to let Jugurtha into a Roman camp. The last significant instance of the use of Thracian horsemen seems to be in 71—while Lucullus was campaigning in Pontus, he used Thracian cavalry to successfully charge Armenian cataphracts in the flank.

However, Thracian cavalry continued in use. In 48 at the Battle of Pharsalus, Kotys, the Odrysian king sent around 500 cavalry with his son Sadalas to join Pompey’s army in Greece. Among Pompey’s infantry were members of the Bessi tribe, some of them mercenaries, others conscripted or volunteers. Pompey’s camp was “zealously defended by the Roman cohorts left to guard it, but more fiercely still by the Thracian auxiliaries.” but Pompey was defeated by Caesar. 2,000 Thracian, Illyrian, Parthian, and Thessalian cavalry were at Philippi in 42, while Thracian mercenaries and allies also participated on the losing side in 31 at the Battle of Actium, when Octavian defeated Mark Antony.

After Thrace became a province in 46 AD, troops raised there fought throughout the Roman world, including Britain. The tombstone of a 14th century AD Thracian cavalryman, Rufus Sita (presumably he had red hair like his ancestors), was found in Gloucester and is now on show in the city museum, and a Thracian shrine has been excavated in Dorset. Another Thracian cavalryman has his tombstone from Wroxeter on display in Shrewsbury’s Rowley House museum. At the other end of the empire, in the Crimea, Lucius Furius Seuthes left his equestrian tombstone.

Costume

From the 7th to the 4th centuries, Thracian light cavalry wore a tunic, cloak (zeira), cap (alopekis) and boots (embades). Thracian warriors with this dress are common in 6th-5th century Greek art, and still described by Xenophon in the early 4th. Other less sophisticated examples of Greek pots show Thracian cavalry dressed very simply in a pointed hat and long flowing tunic, and they are indistinguishable from Skythian cavalry. This costume would probably still be in use in middle of the fourth century, as the costume is still worn by the Thracian warrior goddess Bendis on an Athenian relief of about 350—though newer styles had already begun to supplant it. Some 4th century Thracian metalwork shows the cavalryman bareheaded and with bare feet, a medium length flowing cloak and simple tunic. The exact colours of earlier Thracian costume, although described as brightly coloured, are unknown. The tomb paintings use rather dull colours, and are not much help prior to 350. Thracian clothing was made of hemp, flax, or wool and was well regarded for its fine quality and texture. Outer garments were sewn, naturally or artificially dyed, with woven or embroidered decoration. The way in which the clothes were worn depended on the season and on the type of work practiced, with certain regional differences. The northern Thracians wore narrow trousers and a short shirt tucked into them, combined with an outer tunic, tied at the waist. Over

53 Arrian 3.13 – 3.15. 54 They remained in India until 317, after which they came back to Asia Minor, where they joined the mercenary armies of Alexander’s successors. Florov & Florov, op. cit. p 47. 55 Curtius VIII. 14, 24-30 56 eg the flank attack on the Persian Gates (Arrian 3.18); During the siege of Tyre Alexander took only the shield bearing guards and the Agrianians and set out to Sidon” (Arrian 2.19). They were also on the right flank in nearly all the battles, usually brigaded near the Companions or Royal Guards. 57 Diodorus XVIII 30-32; Plutarch, Eumenes. 58 Diodorus Siculus, XIX. 27.5 and 29.3. At the same time, Diodorus XIX 14.5 says that Peucetes, Satrap of Persia had 600 Greek and Thracian cavalry. 59 Livy XLII.52. 60 Ibid. 61 Livy XLII.52. 62 Livy XLIV, 42: nevertheless, the cavalry (deployed on the Macedonian right) survived the battle virtually unscathed, which means that they either ran away without a fight, or must have made a good account of themselves, as they were outnumbered and probably had to face the more heavily armoured Pergameon cavalry. 63 Sallust, Jugurthine War, XXXVIII. There are several other recorded instances of Thracian troops switching sides in the middle of a battle. 64 Plutarch, Lucullus.
this clothing, cloaks, fur coats and the characteristic Thracian zeira were used. These were decorated with fibulae, leather or textile bells, and various other articles of adornment. The total effect was quite impressive — Plato says he thought the Thracian contingent marching in an Athenian religious festival put on a better show than the citizens (they must have looked really good, as this is saying that barbarians are better than citizens, even in a small way).

The cap was called alopekis, meaning fox-skin, in Greek. Art shows a wide variety of Thracian caps, in three main styles. One was clearly made of a fox’s skin, its face perched above the wearer’s forehead, with neck- and cheek-flaps of patterned cloth. A second style shows the same neck- and cheek-flaps attached to a low-crowned cap of cloth or felt, or sometimes perhaps dappled cowhide. The third style is a simple high-crowned “Phrygian” cap, again with neck and cheek-flaps all apparently made in one piece.

Noble Odrysian cavalry may have worn tattoos. Tattooing was a sign of birth, though there is no evidence that it was practiced by Odrysian men. Noble Thracian women showed off their status by wearing richer and more brightly coloured designs, some of which are shown on the Vratsa greave. They were tattooed on their faces and with spots on their arms, supposedly to commemorate the murder of Orpheus (by Thracian women). Although there are no known depictions of tattooed Thracian warriors, the noblemen may have adopted this practitce, for the Agathyrsi (a Skythian tribe near the Thracians with some Thracian customs) are said to have tattooed both their faces and their limbs with distinctive tribal marks. The sort of tattoos worn were probably similar to the spirals and animal motifs worn by Skythian chiefs. The Getai, being under heavy Skythian influence, are especially likely to have followed this custom.

There are, however, lots of paintings of the Thracian tunic and cloak. The Thracian tunic was knee-length and sleeveless. It was tied at the waist, and belt buckles with wolf motifs were common. The tunic was frequently patterned like the cloak, but sometimes was unmarked or patterned at the hem only. The cloak (zeira) was worn over the top of the tunic and was the most striking article of Thracian dress. The peltasts and cavalry wore it, but probably not the lighter infantry. It covered the whole body like a blanket, and seems to have been of heavy material, since the paintings show it as stiff and not hanging in folds. This would suit the mountain tribes, who had to deal with very cold winters and cool nights during the summer. It was very long, often reaching to the feet. The top portion could be folded over as a sort of collar, or the top corners could be turned in to hang over the chest or thrown back over the shoulders. It was held on by a single fibula or brooch at the left shoulder, and was often worn like a Greek cloak (draped over the left shoulder, leaving the right arm free). The cloak was boldly patterned with lozenges, zig-zag and castellated lines, and other geometric motifs. Like the clothes worn by Balkan people until recently, the patterns probably indicated the owner’s tribe and region of origin, and groups of warriors from the same area probably wore similar patterns (though this is hard to establish as few Greek vases show groups of Thracians).

Thracian boots (embades) were another distinctive feature. They were made from fawnskin, and (in contrast to Greek and Roman styles) entirely covered the feet and part of the lower leg. The boots were laced up at the front, usually with a number of flaps hanging down from the top. These boots were ideal for the colder climate of the mountains, or for cavalry use. They may even have provided some protection for the legs against wounds.

Thracian costume of the Hellenistic and Roman eras

A dramatic change in appearance began during the fourth century, reflecting Greek influence. The evidence comes from wall paintings in tombs near Kazanluk (early 3rd century), Alexandrovo (early 4th century), and Sveshtari (3rd century). These also provide the first colour references. They show that the beards, tattoos, cloaks, boots, hats, and top-knots have all disappeared. At this time also, archaeological evidence proves that some Thracians began to wear (usually three) bronze or gold torcs around their necks. Bare feet, sandals, or yellowish or red-brown shoes with turned-up toes replaced the boots. As a result of these changes, the Thracians who fought for Alexander would have been very similar in appearance to the Macedonians and Greeks in his army.

Most tunics at Kazanluk are simple, single colour garments, either with patterned borders, or free of any decoration. Some are short-sleeved, and others are sleeveless. In the latter case it was probably fastened at the shoulder with pins, as it is occasionally shown leaving the right shoulder and chest bare. The colours of the cloaks and tunics at Kazanluk include red, white, and black. Blue or red fibulae were often worn on the tunics, suggesting a high status or special role. We also see examples of different styles at Kazanluk, including a combination of a dark cloak with a patterned tunic and a lighter cloak with a dark tunic.

The Thracian Tomb Near the Village of Sveshtari, 3rd century (3rd century), Alexandrovo (early 4th century), and Sveshtari (3rd century). These also provide the first colour references. They show that the beards, tattoos, cloaks, boots, hats, and top-knots have all disappeared. At this time also, archaeological evidence proves that some Thracians began to wear (usually three) bronze or gold torcs around their necks. Bare feet, sandals, or yellowish or red-brown shoes with turned-up toes replaced the boots. As a result of these changes, the Thracians who fought for Alexander would have been very similar in appearance to the Macedonians and Greeks in his army.

Most tunics at Kazanluk are simple, single colour garments, either with patterned borders, or free of any decoration. Some are short-sleeved, and others are sleeveless. In the latter case it was probably fastened at the shoulder with pins, as it is occasionally shown leaving the right shoulder and chest bare. The colours of the cloaks and tunics at Kazanluk include red, white, and black. Blue or red fibulae were often worn on the tunics, suggesting a high status or special role. We also see examples of different styles at Kazanluk, including a combination of a dark cloak with a patterned tunic and a lighter cloak with a dark tunic.
white, red-brown, pale blue, pale green, cream, light blue, and off-white. At Alexandrovo there is one tunic that is brown with two white vertical stripes down both sides. It is like the tunic of one servant on the dome of the Kazanluk tomb. It is red-brown with one white stripe on each sleeve and two down each side. Another Alexandrovo cavalier wears a red tunic; another wears a white tunic decorated with a few vertical thin orange lines, and a third wears a white tunic decorated with thick brown vertical lines down the sides. They are clean-shaven, two with short hair and one with long hair. The caval-ryman in the white tunic might have a Greek petasos hat on, but it is more likely just a random white splotch instead. The Sveshtari horseman (a Getic king) wears an unmarked short tunic and chlamys, but the colour cannot be determined. The Thracians at the battle of Pydna (168) wore black tunics.89 Few of the infantry at Kazanluk, and none of the figures at Alexandrovo wear cloaks.90

One of the riders in the Alexandrovo tomb wears a long-sleeved blue top under his white tunic (which is decorated with a few thin vertical orange lines). This figure’s combination of long sleeves showing under the short-sleeved tunic is similar to Dacian dress centuries later. It may have been inspired by the Persians. On both the Alexander Mosaic and Sarcophagus (including the Hunt Frieze from Philip II’s tomb and several other visual sources) long sleeved tunics are shown being worn by Philip, Alexander and aristocratic cavalrymen - this is also repeated on bronze and terracotta figures. Such tunics may have been borrowed by the Macedonian court, inspired or influenced by high ranking Persian dress (along with purple cloaks). But then again, perhaps the Thracian nobles took the fashion from the Persians first, and it was in turn taken up by their neighbours, the Macedonians. It seems that vertically striped tunics became all the rage during the 4th century in this general part of the world. A figure on the Alexander Sarcophagus (often identified as a servant) wears a tunic with two thin vertical stripes - and a number of servants (and/or grooms?) appear to the left of the soldier symposium tomb painting from Agios Athanasios (near Thessaloniki) wearing similar tunics - not dissimilar to those worn by figures from both Kazanluk and Alexandrovo.91

Since the paintings are early 4th century, they help to answer the perennial question of what Alexander’s Thracians may have looked like – his armies are located chronologically in between Kazanluk (and Sveshtari) and Alexandrovo. It looks like the Hellenisation of the Thracians began much earlier than previously thought, and had a longer time to percolate down to the lower levels of society.

Thracian heroes and gods carved in stone and metalwork during the early Roman era show that the Thracians took to wearing Roman and Celtic dress. Some also wore trousers. They had curly hair, may have worn torcs, and a tunic or cloak held on by a single circular brooch on the left shoulder.92 The tunic is in some cases folded and pleated many times vertically and tucked in around the waist. The folds almost concealed a belt that was won together with a baldric. In this case, the length of the tunic was adjusted by pulling it up through the belt.93

Armour

Armour was initially restricted to the noble cavalry, but in the fourth century many troops began wearing helmets, and peltasts started wearing greaves. There was a marked difference between northern and southern Thracians wearing Skythian-style panoplies, and the southern Thracians wearing Greek equipment (with Thracian alterations). Thracian warriors commonly used armour that was older than the rest of their equipment, or a mixture of armour and weapons from different styles and periods.94 Some types of armour persisted long after they ceased to be used elsewhere. Assuming burials reflected actual practice, Thracians in this period often wore a mixture of Thracian and Greek equipment, and only one or two pieces of armour, not a complete panoply.95 Finally, Thracian troops of the Thracian client-kings were equipped “in the Roman style”,96 which may have meant that they wore Roman mail shirts and helmets, and carried Roman shields. They continued to use these when they became Thracian auxiliaries in Roman service.97

Shields

Thracian light cavalry are sometimes shown with a pelt strapped to their back.98 Although Clement of Alexandria’s Stromata99 asserts that the Thracians were the first to use shields on horseback, it is assumed that the shield protected against attacks from the rear, as they are not depicted using them in battle. The cavalry only used their shields (if they had any) for dismounted action, until the 3rd century.100 Until then, it seems even the heavy cavalry used a pelta.

The pelta101 was usually crescent-shaped but which might also be circular or oval.102 Greek pots provide our only visual record of peltai. Some sources mention bronze and even gold as materials used in their construction.103 However, for the most

89 Plutarch, Aemilius Paulus 18.
90 Webber Ch., op. cit, pp 47-49; Head, op. cit, p 17; Head D., AOTMAPW, pp 124-129.
91 This information supplied by David Karunanithy from his research for his forthcoming book on the Macedonians.
92 See above.
part these small shields lacked a rim or any kind of bronze facing, and were made of perishable materials (generally a wood or wicker frame covered with goat or sheep skins). Traces of such a shield made of some organic material, fixed with bronze nails, have been found in a tumulus near Debnevo in the Lovech district.

Most vase-paintings show the pelte decorated, either with a simple face, animals, or with more complex designs quite different to those on hoplite shields. The pelte was usually carried with an arm-strap and a leather or cord handle at the rim, or slung on the back using a back strap. Although the arm-strap is sometimes shown as indistinguishable from the bronze porpax of the hoplite shield, this could be a heroic artistic convention on the part of Greek vase painters. The single central grip would then have been more common. Xenophon describes a Thracian whose slung pelte caught between the stakes of a fence he was trying to clamber over.

Thracian cavalry appear to have followed the Greeks in adopting shields around 275. Cavalry shields could be round with a central boss (shown on 1st century carvings of the Thracian hero) oval like the thureos (shown on the Abdera tombstone), or very large and circular with a spine boss (the style on the Pydna monument). Greek hoplite shields were rare in Thrace. Parts of only two have been found: a bronze rim and palmetto-decorated handgrip were found in a fourth century tomb near Topolovgrad, and a fragment of a similar rim (plus armour) was in a grave at Svetlen. The late fifth century silver-gilt belt from Lovets apparently depicts armoured riders carrying hoplite shields, but it is more likely that these are just dents or other damage.

Other large circular shields are shown on a relief from the Apadana, Persepolis, on a stag head gold rhyton from the Panagyurishte treasure, and on a Bithynian coin. None of these are shown in use by cavalry. The Persepolis shield is very

---

104 Warry J., pp 50-51, 61.
105 Archibald Z., op.cit. pp 203-204.
106 See Fig. 8.
107 Head D., loc. cit.
109 Xenophon, Anabasis 7.4.17.
110 Head D., AOTMAPW, p 127. Thracian cavalry on the Pydna monument, the Abdera tombstone, and some (later) depictions of the Thracian hero all carry shields. All these artifacts are dated to the 3rd century or later.
112 See Fig 2.
113 Archibald Z., op. cit. p 204.
Figure 9. 5th century silver gilt belt from Lovech depicting heavy cavalry in leather armour with pteryges. The left-hand rider appears to be wearing a Corinthian helmet and carrying a shield, though the latter is unlikely as he would be carrying it in his right hand. Archaeological Museum Sofia inv. No. 6617. Drawing © Daniella Carlsson 2001

Figure 9 (Continued).

Figure 10. Reconstruction of a late 5th century Thracian noble cavalryman in bell cuirass and Chalkidian helmet. © Johnny Shumate 2001.
Figure 11. The procession drawn on the lunette (back wall) of the 3rd century Sveshtari tomb. The drawing is in charcoal, as the tomb was unfinished. It shows a Hellenised king of the Getai being crowned by the Thracian mother goddess. The richly decorated saddle has four long pendants, painted red. The horseman is wearing a short tunic and chlamys. His right hand is outstretched towards the Goddess. Behind his ear there is a ram’s horn, like those of other 3rd century monarchs. Two men, probably servants, walk behind the horseman. The first man, wearing a strange hat that may be a helmet or pilos, carries a long spear over his left shoulder, while his right hand holds a scabbard, from which dangles the shoulder-strap. The second man, dressed in a knee-length garment, holds a shield in his right hand.
convex in section, and apparently made of uncovered wicker. The Nikomedes I (279-255) Bithynian coin shows a large round shield, slightly smaller than an aspis, carried by the goddess Bendis, along with two javelins and a straight sword with scabbard and baldric. The shield is either decorated with circles of rivets, or perhaps has an embossed metal facing. Athena’s circular shield on the rhyton (circa 300 BC), has a sunburst design, and a wide rim similar to an aspis. This indicates that it is a standard depiction of Athena, who wears Greek dress, so this probably does not indicate Thracian use (even though two other figures on the rhyton wear Thracian or Phrygian dress). The thureos may have been borrowed from the Illyrians, who had been carrying similar shields from at least the 7th century. The Kazanluk friezes, which predate the Celtic invasions in 279, show several examples of long flat oval shields being used by Thracian foot warriors. One of these has the distinctive rib of the thureos, but the others do not and it is possible they may represent a flat ribless shield. A large, flat, oval-shaped fourth century shield found near Kyustendil was faced with bronze, which glitters even today. This may have been the type of shield carried by the Kazanluk men. Alternatively the Kazanluk shields might have been wicker, as they are painted rimless, wicker-coloured and flat. They have three loops hanging down on the inside, used for a single hand grip, or perhaps for slinging on the back.

The thureos shown in use by the cavalryman on the Abdera tombstone was made of wood, with a central wooden spine and usually an iron boss. It could be oval or rectangular in shape, covered in leather, and painted. The thick rim sometimes depicted was probably the leather covering doubled over at the edges. The shield’s strong construction and central handgrip may have allowed it to be used as a weapon to crush an opponent. Sekunda says that a mid-2nd century version of this shield from Sidon seems to have had a metal rim (perhaps bronze, not iron) and with a metal spine on top of, or even replacing, the wooden one. However there is no evidence that the Thracians used this later type, which would have made skirmishing difficult. A c. 2nd century stele from Phrygia shows two more likely possibilities. It displays two men who have been killed by the Bithynian Menas. One has a conventional ribbed oval thureos, while the other has a ribbed rectangular thureos. One of these two men, but we don’t know which, is a Thracian. Another grave stone from Bithynia also shows

---

114 Head D., TTT, p 15.
117 Head D., AOMAPW, p 126.
118 Head D., TTT, p 15.
119 Connolly P., op. cit. pp 118-120.
120 I gained this insight from discussions with dark age re-enactors, who used similar shields for this purpose.
Bithynian infantry with the oval *thureos*, so the oval shield is more likely. A 2nd century Bithynian warrior’s tombstone from Alexandria also shows a (yellowish or white) oval *thureos* with a spine boss. Menas’ stele is close in date to the battle of Pydna (168), so perhaps the Thracian infantry at Pydna carried one of these types of shield.

**Helmets**

The most important Thracian helmets styles were Chalkidian, Corinthian, Thracian, Attic, and Skythian (or Northern). Helmet styles continued in use in Thrace after they had gone out of fashion elsewhere, and it took some time before newer versions were taken up by Thracian troops. A lot of helmets found in Thrace show signs of repeated wear and tear, with riveted inserts and tenons. Many hybrids and variants also occur; one Thraco-Boeotian model, from Moldavia, has the skull of the former and the downswept brim of the latter. Helmets were lined in felt or leather, or worn over caps, as the remains of a felt cap have been found inside a Thracian helmet from Pletena, and leather remains inside other helmets.

The Chalkidian helmet (in two models) was the most common found in central and southern Thrace. Before 350 the most frequently used form was the simple version, with engraved, stylised eyebrows. This has a slight ridge separating the skull and sides, the neckguard recessed inwards; a curved opening for the ears; deep, rounded cheekpieces hammered out from the sides, and a short nosepiece. An advanced late fifth-century version from Rouets has a relatively high crown, longer, sickle-shaped cheekpieces, and long, pronouced eyebrows meeting in a curved “V”-shape across the front. Two bands of engraved ornament separate the skull from the sides. Another late fifth century example of unknown provenance is decorated with griffins on both sides of the crown, and palmettos on the eyebrows. It may have had iron cheek pieces but it is badly damaged and these have disappeared.

After 350, a new version of the Chalkidian helmet came into use. The new type had two variants, with fixed or hinged cheekpieces. One fabulous example of this later construction is all bronze except for iron cheek pieces. It looks like a Hollywood barbarian’s helmet, as it has tall bronze horns and fittings for a Greek style horsetail crest. It was found in a 4th century grave at Bryastovets near the Black Sea. In the fixed form, “the neckguard, shaped to fit the back of the neck, extends towards the shoulders, while the broad cheekpieces have vertical sides toward the cheeks, curving up at the back and over the ears. The brows are lightly profiled and there is a vestigial nosepiece. The crown is raked back sharply from the

---

**Figure 12b. Kazanluk tomb.**

---

123 Rumsheid F. & W. Held ‘Erinnerungen an Mokazis’, *IstMitt* 44, 1994, pp89-106, Tafel 20. This shows an early 2nd century Bithynian funary banquet, battle scene, and hunting scene on a grave monument for members of an indigenous family of notables, with Thraco-Bithynian names. It was found under 8m of sediment at Adliye on the Sangarius, thought to be the site of ancient Tarsos.

124 Sekunda N., op. cit Fig 77.

125 Archibald, op.cit, p 201

126 Archibald Z., loc. cit.

127 Archibald Z., op. cit. p 252.

128 Archibald, op.cit, p 201.

129 National Archaeological Museum Inv. No. 4013; *Gold der Thraker* No. 187.


Figure 12d. Reconstruction of peace negotiations between two belligerents in the eastern frieze from the dromos of the Kazanluk tomb. The figures on the left side are thought to be from a Macedonian army. Note their long lances, all carried underarm. © Johnny Shumate 2001

Figure 12e. Reconstruction of the battle scene on the western side western frieze from the entrance corridor (dromos) of the late fourth–early third century Kazanluk tomb. Many of the figures are badly damaged, and their appearance is conjectural. The soldiers in both friezes are lightly armed and have almost the same weapons – long spears, curved swords (some possibly rhomphaias) and oval shields. © Johnny Shumate 2001
Figure 13. Phalera (bridle cheekpiece) 7cm diameter, from Letnitsa, mid-fourth century BC. This shows clearly how horses were harnessed. Museum of History, Lovech, inv. No. 591.

On helmets with hinged cheekpieces, there is a high, well-rounded crown from front to back. A gentle curve separates the skull from the straight neckguard, shaped at the lower edge, and the tongue-shaped cheekpieces are longer. These more complicated helmets are likely to have belonged to the noble cavalry and Thracian commanding officers, who also wore elaborate Greek parade helmets, including a sheet gold composite version found at Panagyurishte.

After the Macedonian conquest, many of the helmets mimicked the Thracian caps, so that these helmets are known as Phrygian (or Thracian) helmets. The “Thracian” helmet appeared in Greece in the middle of the 5th Century, but strangely enough, although more of this type have been found in Thrace than anywhere else, it is rarely found in Thracian burials before the Hellenistic era. It was distinguished by a peak to shade and protect the eyes, a short neck guard, and long cheekpieces shaped to fit the face, pointed at the chin, and was sometimes decorated with a stylised beard and moustache in relief. The skull shape varied enormously; sometimes it was low and rounded, sometimes conical, but the most spectacular and distinctive was the Phrygian type with a high, forward sweeping metal ridge, very similar to the shape of the traditional cap. They were made mostly from bronze (often in a single piece), but some included iron. A Phrygian style helmet found at Pletena, in the Rhodopes mountains of Bulgaria (with a rhomphaia) was made with a sheet of bronze to cover the lower face, moulded to imitate beard locks and a moustache. The top part of the helmet was made of iron sheets joined together with the aid of iron bands and rivets. Such helmets were often crested and sometimes had extra crests or feathers as side-ornaments. A recently discovered early 4th century Thracian example from Pletena is also extensively decorated with silver appliqués. In the Kazanluk tomb paintings, the Thracian helmet is commonest but two warriors wear strange yellow circular flat-topped hats. These may be from an unknown Thracian tribe, but it is more likely that they are Macedonian nobles wearing variants of their distinctive leather cap, the kausia.

One figure however is bare-headed and long-haired, like another figure at Alexandrovo. Other infantrymen in the Kazanluk paintings wear bronze Attic helmets, most with a pale blue crest.

Body Armour

Body armour is rare in Thracian graves, although it is also rare in tombs from coastal Macedonia and Chalkidike, which clearly does not match the real-life situation there. It was limited to Thracian commanders and nobles, such as Seuthes’ heavy cavalry bodyguard, until the presumed wider introduction of mail shirts for infantry by the Roman client-kingdom. There were two traditions, from northern and southern Thrace. Initially, the armour was made of leather and/or bronze, but

---

134 Archibald Z., op. cit. p 253.
135 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
139 Fol A. (ed), op.cit, No. 34, p79.
140 Saatsoglu-Paliadeli C., ‘Aspects of Ancient Macedonian Costume’, JHS 1993, p 136; Head, AOTMAPW, p135, says the kausia –like caps are painted in the ochre used for bronze, so they could be some type of helmet, but this seems unlikely.
142 Archibald Z., op. cit, p 204.
iron armour started to appear in the fourth century.

Descriptions of Homeric Thracians, and archaeological evidence show that Greek armour was in use in Thrace long before the classical period. Rhesus had “marvellous golden armour, of the rarest workmanship.” His sleeping bodyguard laid their splendid armour on the ground beside them in an orderly three rows. The “bell” corselet was used in Thrace until the fifth century, when it was obsolete in Greece. The most interesting example is a fifth century bronze bell cuirass from Rouets. It has an abdominal plate or mitre still attached by means of silvered nails to the bottom of the breastplate. This attachment is unique in Thrace; indeed it has rarely been found outside Crete. It is unlikely to have been used except for dismounted action as the mitre would have made riding extremely uncomfortable.144

The primitive “bell” type made few allowances for comfort and ease of movement. “The armholes were rather sharp, and there was a pronounced waist band with rolled edges projecting outwards at the lower end.” They were decorated simply, with the chest muscles ending in three-petalled lotuses, fish’s tails, or engraved marine monsters, and with other anatomical details enhanced by seven- and nine-petalled palmettes. The marine monsters (ketoï) had a long snout, snapping jaws, and spiky mane—rather like a chinese dragon. Unlike Greek examples, which were worn with pteryges attached to an undergarment, the Thracian cuirasses have a row of holes along the edges to take a lining, which indicates they were worn without pteryges.146

Other, non-metallic armour was in use at the same time. It is possible that groups of gilded silver appliqués found in fifth century Thracian tombs were originally attached to a leather corselet, similar to the later iron corselets from Vergina and Prodromion. These were decorated with sheet gold ornaments (gorgons and lions’ head masks). Something similar belonging to a composite outfit may have been found at Panagyurishte. There, the armour had rusted away, leaving gold strips and studs, as well as six rectangular silver appliques with the head of Apollo, and two low-relief silver discs showing Heracles and the Nemean lion. Another leather jerkin found near Lovets had a belt to which were attached thongs for a scabbard. This was fixed with a bronze ring decorated with a reclining doe. A late 2nd century coin of Mostis, a Thracian king, shows a smooth corselet with short sleeves, but no other detail is discernable. The mounted warriors on the 5th–6th century Lovech silver gilt belt wear leather armour with pteryges. Other warriors wore broad scale iron belts, two of which have been found in Thrace. These belts are like Uratian bronze belts of around 600, used later by the Skythians and in various parts of the Achaemenid Empire, so it may be that Thracian warriors wore something similar. They were originally fixed to some organic substance, either leather or linen. It is not clear whether such a belt would have been worn below the cuirass, or as an alternative to it. At the Battle of Issus (333) one translation of Curtius III.9.9 says of the Thracians “these too were in light armour” 152 This has been used to suggest they wore non-metallic corselets, but the Penguin translation says “who were also light armed”, which seems more likely.

Xenophon records Seuthes’ Odrysian cavalry “wearing their breastplates” in 400.153 This probably represents an armoured bodyguard rather than suggesting that all Thracian cavalry were armoured. They most likely wore the late improved version of the “bell” type bronze plate cuirass. This was used in Thrace until the middle of the 4th century. The waist band disappeared, replaced by a narrow out-turned flange, and more carefully modelled anatomical relief lines. Instead of an upstanding collar to protect the throat, the neck was cut low, leaving the upper chest exposed. This was covered by a crescent shaped pectoral of silver-plated gilded iron, decorated with bands of relief vegetal ornamentation. It had a forward collar, and was held on by a narrow hinged strip fastened round the back of the neck with some form of catchplate.

Such iron-backed collars were worn both in Thrace and Macedon, but seem to have had a longer tradition in Thrace. They were designed to be symbols of rank. There may have been two types of collar, one for parade, and one for battle, as a gorget of sheet gold was found with a plain iron collar in a Macedonian tomb at Vergina. Also, two other collars (from the 4th century) Mal tepe tumulus and Vurbitsa), were found without cuirasses. At Gaugamela Alexander wore an iron gorget, quite probably of the same type as these pectorals. A c. 350 advanced form of iron pectoral with sheet metal inlay from Katerini was worn over a composite cuirass decorated with gilded silver appliqués. This contrasts to a more workmanlike Macedonian gorget of bronze scales on leather that is dated from around the same time. It is not known what armour was worn when the “bell” style went out of fashion, but a composite iron type with iron collar seems likely, to be replaced later amongst officers by the muscled cuirass.

Greaves

Only a few early Thracian cavalry (possibly only the officers)

143 Homer, Iliad, X.
145 Archibald Z., op. cit. p 197.
146 Ibid., pp 197-198.
147 Z. Archibald (pp 199, 256) does not show these, but mid 5th century silver-gilt appliques from another suit of armour were found in Golyamata Mound, Douvanli (north of Plovdiv) – 5 lions’ heads, a gorgon’s head, and two showing winged Nike on a chariot. Ognenova-Marinova L. “L’Armure des Thra ces”, Archaeologia Bulgarica 3/2000, p16 has a reconstruction; while the best pictures of the appliques are in Venedikov I. & T. Gerassimov Thrakische Kunst, Leipzig, 1976, figs 226-228.
148 Archibald Z., ibid, p199, pp 256-257.
149 Youroukova Y., op. cit. pp 34-38.
wore greaves. There is no evidence that any Thracian infantry wore greaves until the fourth century. One pair was found near Kyustendil with fourth century infantry gear (including an oval shield), and probably belonged to a Thracian mercenary, or a Macedonian. Greaves later became more popular - At Pydna (168) “First marched the Thracians, who ... inspired...the most terror; they were of great stature, with white [or bright] and glittering shields [thureoi] and black tunics under them, their legs armed with greaves.”

There were two types of greave found in Thrace - the native and Greek types. Two elaborately decorated silver gilt Thracian ceremonial greaves have been found, one at Vratsa in Triballian territory, and one at Agighiol, on Getic land. They show the face of the Thracian mother goddess at the knee. An armoured Thracian horseman wearing the same greaves is on one of the Letnitsa plaques. As these greaves gleam with white and glittering metal, “white and glittering shields (thureoi) and greaves” could possibly mean that both the shields and greaves worn at Pydna were faced with polished white metal - silver or tin laid over the bronze. A pair of 5th century greaves found at Starosel in 2000 (possibly in Sitalkes’ tomb) were decorated with double axe-heads, the symbol of royalty. Greaves of Greek type were rarer than other pieces of imported armour. Only four pairs have been found in Thrace. Two pairs of these greaves (from different locations) had been repaired. One pair had been lengthened in the process, and the left one had originally been made for the right leg. This pair had also been fitted with iron chains at the back. Most were held in place by their own elasticity, except for some Hellenistic examples, which were strapped. A 4th century pair from Pletena has traces of the tying straps below the knee and above the ankle.

**Weapons**

**Spears**

Thracian cavalry would be mainly armed with sword, (usually the kopis) and 2 cornel wood javelins, or the composite bow (kept in a leather gorytos) if they were Getai. They are always illustrated with only one or two javelins, but it is clear from battle accounts that the infantry carried more, the number

This is the pair I photographed in Kyustendil museum; it is not mentioned elsewhere - the description comes from Evgeni Paunov, and another description of the associated helmet in the Helsinki exhibition catalogue.

Plutarch Aemilius Paulus 18.

Fol A., T&T, pp 41, 87, & 96; www.the-thracians.com/greaves_main.htm; Archibald Z., op. cit. p255; items 151 and 152 from I Daci; D Head, T&T, pp18-19.

These suggestions and alternative translations were supplied by Duncan Head during discussion about this book.


Archibald Z., op. cit, p 255.

Head D., AOTMAPW, pp 127-129; Head D., T&T, pp 17-20; Grant Ch., loc. cit; Barker Ph., op. cit, fig. 5.

depending on their length (between 1.1m and 2m). Odrysian Cavalry javelins were 1.5 to 1.8 metres in length, and tipped with iron or bronze heads. They could be thrown immediately before contact or used as a thrusting weapon. Xenophon appears to have favoured this arrangement - two short javelins, one to be thrown, and the other kept for hand-to-hand combat.

There are references in Greek texts to “Thracian spears”, but these are unfortunately not further described. Most warrior burials contained multiple spearheads with blades of varying lengths. The principal forms were derived from older Iron Age types, though the total length is often equal to or smaller than the blades of their early predecessors. Sixth-century and later examples tend to be much shorter and narrower. Javelin heads tended to be smaller, thinner, and longer than other spear heads, though often there is no difference. Some javelin heads were obviously specifically designed for throwing rather than used hand to hand.

Three principal shapes were in use between the fifth and third centuries. The straight -sided type had a pronounced midrib, the blade base jutting sharply away from the socket. This was the commonest form used by the Getai. With the leaf-shaped type, the blade base curved smoothly into the socket. The third type was the barbed Skythian type of javelin head. The number and range of types increased in the later fourth and during the third century.

Xenophon says that the javelin should be hurled from horseback as far away as possible, in order to give enough time for the horse to turn around and for the transfer of the second javelin to the right hand. “The horseman should throw forward his left side, while drawing back his right; then rising bodily from the thighs, he should let fly the missile with the point slightly upwards. The dart so discharged will carry with the greatest force and to the farthest distance; we may add, too, with the truest aim, if at the moment of discharge the lance is steadily eying the mark at the instant of discharge”.

In the Alexandrovo tomb, the riders are armed with a single knobbed spear (with a butt spike) and a straight sword, hanging from the left hip. All the spears are wielded over arm. The presence of the butt spike is really interesting as it indicates that this spear was not meant to be thrown, but used in hand-to-hand combat, like the Macedonian xyston or the Greek kamax.

Two such weapons, about 2m long, one possibly with a butt spike, are also held by a helmeted groom painted on the dome of the Kazanluk tomb. Alexander at the battle of the Granicus is described as using the xyston, which had a narrow blade like a spear and had a butt spike which could be used in a pinch if the spear was shattered in combat. He is described as using the xyston overhand much like the Hoplite fighting style to thrust at the necks and faces of his foes. The (probably Macedonian)
cavalry on the left-hand side of the eastern frieze of the Kazanluk tomb dromos are all armed with this weapon, wielded under-arm. The other cavalry figures in the dromos paintings all brandish their spears overarm except for the figure supposed to be Seuthes III, who wields his spear underarm. Unfortunately the presence of butt spikes can’t be determined due to position of the figures and the poor state of the painting.

The knobbled spear shafts are new - they look almost like cane. A similar knobby-shafted javelin can be seen on the Alexander Mosaic, fallen to the ground. That is usually identified as Persian, but the prevalence of these weapons on the Alexandrovo paintings means the mosaic javelin could have belonged to one of Alexander’s Balkan troops. However, the mosaic javelin looks quite different – it is thorny, not knobby, so this is highly speculative. One of the gold amphora-rhytons from the 4th century Panagyurishte treasure shows similar knobby philosopher’s staffs, but otherwise these types of spear shafts are unknown. Probably they are still made from cornel wood, known for its exceptionally strength and durability (though apparently it was best used after nine years’ seasoning). The cornel tree is short but long enough to be used for spear shafts. Perhaps only cornel wood trees from the Alexandrovo area produce wood with this knobby appearance, or else the spearshafts shown were produced in a hurry, perhaps during the hunt. Hawthorn is another possibility.

Swords & Knives

The Thracians were famous for their forward curved swords, but they also used a long sword and the Skythian akinakes. Swords were most often only secondary weapons and to begin with, only nobles could afford them; the rest of the troops became more common. From an early date there was a typically Thracian sword known for being longer than other swords. The Thracians were famous for their forward curved swords, but they also used a long sword and the Skythian xiphos. The cornel tree is short but long enough to be used for spear shafts. Perhaps only cornel wood trees from the Alexandrovo area produce wood with this knobby appearance, or else the spearshafts shown were produced in a hurry, perhaps during the hunt. Hawthorn is another possibility.

An unpublished fourth century Thracian tomb excavated near Shipka in Bulgaria in 1993 contains paintings of two long straight swords that would be good candidates. These longer swords may have inspired Iphicrates to introduce longer swords for his Greek troops. Despite the apparent similarity to Celtic swords, and the large numbers of long Celtic swords in Bulgarian museums, it is unlikely that the Celtic swords influenced the Thracians. Length or the curved blade may be what distinguished Thracian swords from other early (Greek) swords. The straight Greek xiphos was commoner in Thrace during the fourth century and was widespread in soldiers’ graves of the third. In the Hellenistic period, a straight Macedonian style was also widespread – this had a bone or ivory handle, and the hilt and pommel were cast in one piece with the blade. Swords would probably be worn from a baldric.

There are a few instances of Thracians using swords as their primary weapon, instead of just as a sidearm. The Dii hill tribesmen are always referred to by Thucydides as “swordsmen” or “armed with swords” (machiärophoroi). The only other time that Thracian swordsmen are mentioned is when Croesus hired “many Thracian swordsmen” for the Lydian army. Thracian infantry probably continued to use a variety of native sword styles until the Roman conquest.

Thracian cavalry, however, are always shown on metalwork, tomb paintings, and reliefs with long, straight swords (probably the xiphos) from around the 3rd century onwards. For instance, in the Alexandrovo tomb, the rider in the white tunic has a long, straight sword in a scabbard of a ridiculously large size. This scabbard is very like those found elsewhere with the xiphos. The bulbous shape of the xiphos meant it worked reasonably well both as a slashing and stabbing sword, in contrast to the curved sword, which could only be used for slashing. Nevertheless, the change to the straight sword is curious. Xenophon recommends the kopis for cavalry use, and modern experiments have shown that the chief advantage a cavalryman has over an infantryman is in the downward stroke of his sword, which has greater force with a curved blade.

For fighting other cavalry it seems that swords were only used as a last resort. Livy relates that the Macedonians were surprised and disheartened when they saw the unusually severe wounds caused by the Roman “Spanish” swords to Macedonian cavalrymen – “They had seen wounds caused by spears, arrows, and rarely, by lances, since they were accustomed to fighting with Greeks and Illryrians”. It is quite likely that the Thracians fought in the same style as the Greeks and Illryrians.

The Machaira, or Kopis, and Other Thracian Curved Swords

The kopis, or machaira, was a heavy slashing sword with the cutting edge on the inside of a long, slightly curved blade. It came into general use in Greece early in the fifth century. A well-preserved example equipped with an ivory-decorated hilt was found near Duvanli. However, this sword was rare in classical Thrace. Only two other pre-Hellenistic examples have been found there. During that time this weapon was reserved for use by the noble heavy cavalry, and had considerable pres-

---

177 This was brought to my notice by Duncan Head, author of AOTMAPW.
178 Florov I. & N. Florov, the authors of The 3000 year old hat, in an email received 26 November 2001.
179 See www.the-thracians.com/swords.htm
181 Homer, Iliad, XIII.
182 Homer Iliad 23.805.
183 Ovid Metamorphoses 13.778.
184 This information was supplied by Evgeni Paunov during a visit to the area. He said that unfortunately a large number of tombs that were excavated decades ago still have not been published.
185 There are also many fine, long, bronze rapiers and other bronze age swords.
tige value. One 3rd century kopis found in Thrace is 46cm long and 5.5cm wide. It is decorated with a longitudinal groove in the centre and a band of engraved circles with central dots arranged between the groove and the outer edge.

Mercenary Thracian cavalry of the late Hellenistic period also used the sica, a large curved sword. This seems to be the Roman name for any curved sword or knife, as it was also used for the sword of the Thracian style of gladiator, and for Celtic knives, so the cavalry sica was probably like the kopis or the traditional Thracian curved swords. In 130 a Thracian cavalryman fighting for a Pergamene pretender cut off the head of the Roman consul Crassus with a single blow from his sica. In 163 at the battle of Marissa, a Thracian cavalryman (probably using a sica) chopped an arm off a Jewish rebel, also with a single blow.

Several styles of curved blades have been found all over Thrace. Similarly, the Kanaluk paintings show a mixture of strange long curved swords being used by infantry - perhaps these are what Thucydides is calling “machaira”, that being the nearest Greek equivalent. These swords are curved both ways, and look unlike any other Greek or Roman sword (some may in fact be rhomphaiai).

The light cavalry were probably armed only with curved knives as their secondary weapon, at least until the end of the classical era. Knives are not often depicted in art, but the most common found in Thrace are the curved, tanged dagger and the T-shaped knife. The single-edged curved knife was a popular weapon that even penetrated into the Pontic regions in the second half of the fourth century.

**Tactics & Formations**

Not much is known about Thracian cavalry tactics. Xenophon describes how the cavalry was moved to the rear for a night march, and also how the cavalry charged to the rescue when he was attacked, trumpet sounding. Iphicrates describes Odrysian cavalry being kept back by torches being put into the horses or the traditional Thracian curved swords. In 130 a Thracian cavalryman fighting for a Pergamene pretender cut off the head of the Roman consul Crassus with a single blow from his sica.

The encounter between Xenophon’s 10,000 and a combined Bithynian-Persian army in 401 is another good example of the strengths and weaknesses of Thracian armies. In this battle, the Greek peltasts were placed on the flanks of the phalanx, but charged ahead of the main body. They were met by Persian cavalry and the Bithynians (peltasts and light cavalry), and driven back. However, when the hoplites came up, sang the paean, and raised a shout as they brought their spears down for the attack, the Bithynians and Persians ran away.

Little is known about Thracian formations and deployment. The cavalry formed into a wedge, which made a charge more effective. The Thracians learnt this formation from the Skythians, and the Macedonians learnt it from the Thracians. In one battle, the Triballi drew up their forces in four ranks. In the first rank were placed the weaker men, and behind them, the stronger men. The cavalry formed the third rank but the rear rank was of women, who, if the men wavered, rallied them with cries and taunts.

Night attacks were a favourite Thracian tactic. The Brygi night attack on the Persians was so successful that (in combination with the loss of the Persian fleet) it induced the Persians to retreat. It seems to have been a Thracian custom to march to battle drunk, as well.

“Clearchus... encamped near the mountains of Thrace. When the Thracians gathered, he knew that, drunk and rushing...”

Rhomphaia

Variations of rhomphaia have been found in Thrace. Several styles of curved blades have been found all over Thrace. Similarly, the Kanaluk paintings show a mixture of strange long curved swords being used by infantry - perhaps these are what Thucydides is calling “machaira”, that being the nearest Greek equivalent. These swords are curved both ways, and look unlike any other Greek or Roman sword (some may in fact be rhomphaiai).

### References

- Sekunda N., op.cit., p18. He suggests that the sica may have been similar to the Rhomphaia when used in Thracian hands, but the rhomphaia would have been too unwieldy for cavalry use, so a curved sword is more likely.
- Archibald Z., loc. cit.
- Demosthenes, *Against Aristocrates* 8.
- Polyaenus *Stratagems* 3.9.60
- Livy XXXI.36; although this describes later Macedonian cavalry it is likely that Thracian cavalry used the same methods.
- Cheshire I., op. cit. p15.
- Curtius VIII.14, 24-30.
- Cheshire I., ibid; Head D., *AOTMAPW*, p 51; regarding the terrain, Livy XL.22 (181 BC) says that Philip V tried to climb Mount Heamus but “as they reached the high levels they were increasingly faced with wooded and often impassable ground. Eventually they came upon a track so shaded that it was scarcely possible to see the sky for the density of the trees and the interlacing branches.”
- Xenophon *Anabasis* VI.5.
- Arrian, *Takitka* 16, 6-9.
- Herodotus VI. 46.
from the mountains, they would attack at night.\textsuperscript{207}

Polyaenus mentions many stratagems employed by generals such as Iphicrates and Clearchus to defeat Thracian night attacks.\textsuperscript{208} One of these included the Thracian practice of banging your weapons together even when engaged in a night attack.\textsuperscript{209} Xenophon also says that Seuthes regarded night marches as commonplace. However, he also relates that even a small force of Thracians that marched at night would often become disorganised - the cavalry would get separated from the infantry.\textsuperscript{210} It may be that their success led to the adoption of this tactic by the Greeks, and the disastrous (but almost successful) night attack on Syracuse by Demosthenes.\textsuperscript{211}

The Roman client-king of Thrace, King Rheometalces, accustomed the Thracians to the use of Roman weapons, military standards, and discipline.\textsuperscript{212} Assuming that his infantry were trained as Roman-style auxiliaries rather than legionaries, they may have practiced a more disciplined version of the same basic tactics. Only a proportion would have received such training – the rest would have remained untamed savages. An account of Thracian auxiliaries destroying a Gallic force on a mountaintop shows that they retained their effectiveness while in Roman service.\textsuperscript{213}

---

**ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE NOTES**


TTT - D. Head, *Thracian Troop Types*, Slingshot, September 1978


---

**EXTENDED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Further information is available at the author’s web site: http://www.the-thracians.com.


---

\textsuperscript{207} Polyaeus, *Stratagems* 2.2.6.

\textsuperscript{208} eg Polyaeus *Stratagems* 2.2.6, 16.2, 2.2.10, 3.9.50, 31.3.

\textsuperscript{209} Polyaeus *Stratagems* 2.2.6.

\textsuperscript{210} Xenophon, *Anabasis* VII, 3.

\textsuperscript{211} Best J.G.P., op. cit, pp 17-29.

\textsuperscript{212} Florus, II, XXVII *The Thracian War*.

\textsuperscript{213} Tacitus, *Histories*.
Thracian Hoards at Vratsa and the Vratsa District, catalogue from the Vratsa museum, 1981
Topalov S., ‘Thracian Contributions to the Coinage in Early Antiquity’ Problemi na Izkistyvoto 1997 3/4
Tsanova Gh. & L. Ghetov, The Thracian Tomb at Kazanluk, Sofia, 1983
Union Académique Internationale, Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum, Berlin, 1959
Velkova Z. , The Thracian Glosses, Amsterdam, 1986
Venedikov I., Thracian Treasures from Bulgaria, 1976 (British Museum exhibition catalogue)
Verdiani C., ‘Original Hellenistic Paintings in a Thracian Tomb’, American Journal of Archaeology, 49, 1945
Vos M.F., Skythian Archers in Archaic Vase Painting, J B Wolters, Groningen, 1963
Webber Ch., ‘The Alexandrovo Tomb and Other Recent Discoveries’, in Slingshot 216, July 2001, pp 47-50
Webber Ch., ‘The Bithynians’, Slingshot 204, July 1999, pp48-52
Wiesner J., Die Thraker, Stuttgart, 1963
Xenophon: On Horsemanship, Translated by MH Morgan, JA Allen & Co, 1967
Youroukova Y., Coins of the Ancient Thracians, BAR Supplementary Series 4, Oxford, 1976
Zhivkova L., The Kazanluk Tomb, Verlag Aurel Bongers Reckinghausen, West Germany, 1975