CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

EGALITARIANISM, AMBITION, AND THE DISCIPLES OF THRACE

In *Gerytades*, a lost play by Aristophanes dating to the late fifth century, a group of poets gathers to choose envoys to send to their departed comrades in Hades, prompting the following exchange:

(A) And who to the pit of the dead and the gates of gloom has dared descend?
(B) One from each poetic field we chose together, meeting as an assembly: those we knew as Hades-haunters (*haidophoitai*) and regularly fond of yonder parts (*philochōrountes*).
(A) So there are men among you who are Hades-haunters?
(B) By Zeus, there are!
(A) Like Thrace-haunters (*thraikophoitai*)?
(B) You've got it! (F 156 K-A)[1]

Who were these "Thrace-haunters"? What exactly does Aristophanes mean by *thraikophoitai*, a term he seems to have coined?

[1] {A.} Καὶ τίς νεκρῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου πύλας
ἔτλη κατελθεῖν; {B.} ἕν' ἀφ' ἑκάστης τῆς τέχνης
εἱλόμεθα κοινῇ γενομένης ἐκκλησίας,
οὓς ᾔσμεν ὄντας ᾄδοφοίτας καὶ θαμὰ
ἐκεῖσε φιλοχωροῦντας. {A.} εἰσὶ γάρ τινες
ἄνδρες παρ' ὑμῖν ᾄδοφοῖται; {B.} νὴ Δία
μάλιστά γ'. {A.} ὥσπερ Θρᾳκοφοῖται; {B.} πάντ' ἔχεις.
Translated by Rusten (Rusten et al. 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations are my own. All dates are BCE, unless otherwise specified.

There is an obvious answer to the second question: *thraikophoitai* must denote a class of people who not only spent a great deal of time in Thrace but who were also deeply fond of the region. This notion is given further weight by the participial use of the verb *philochōreō*, which generally means "to be fond of or to frequent a place." In Herodotus the residents of Andros use this verb in their complaint that the gods Poverty and Helplessness are always present on their benighted island (8.111). Unfortunately for the Andrians, these malevolent deities are simply fond of Andros. Likewise, *thraikophoitai* found something in Thrace that they liked and consequently spent a lot of time there. According to LSJ, the noun *phoitētēs*, of which *phoitai* is a variant, means one who regularly goes or comes. Often, it specifically refers to one regularly visiting a teacher, in other words, a pupil or disciple. Plato, for instance, often uses the word in this sense (see *Rep*. 563a; *Euthd*. 295d; *I Alc*. 109d; *Laws* 779d). Aristophanes himself employs the related verb *phoitaō* to mean "to go to school" (*Clouds* 938; *Knights* 1235). Even in Modern Greek *phoitētēs* means "student." Perhaps, then, we should translate *thraikophoitai* as "students" or even "disciples" of Thrace. Indeed, they were disciples of Thrace in the full sense of the term, analogous to disciples of a particular teacher. There was a distinct line of Athenians – well known enough in Athens to be the butt of an Aristophanic joke – who went to Thrace time and again, and moreover *learned* from the Thracians as from a respected teacher.

Aristophanes' poets were searching for the ideal representatives to send to Hades, namely, those who were not merely fond of the underworld but were experienced in dealing with its denizens. In Athens, there was a group of people diplomatically valuable because of their ties to Thrace. For over two centuries, from the time of Pisistratus to the Battle of Chaeronea, Athens was keenly interested in securing and maintaining a foothold in the north Aegean, particularly in the regions adjacent to the Hellespont and the mineral-rich areas opposite the island of Thasos and along the Strymon River. Thrace was materially and strategically important for Athens, particularly

as Athens became a maritime power. Thracian minerals were a source of wealth (timber from the Strymon was important for ship construction), and the Hellespont waterway provided access to Black Sea trade and formed the bridge between Asia and Europe. Thrace also at times provided military allies and promised a ready supply of fierce and talented warriors to serve as mercenaries. The light-armed peltast, named for his small shield, the *peltē*, was much sought after by several Greek states as a complement to the heavy-armed hoplite. In the interests of furthering its foothold in such an important region, Athens turned to those of its citizens with ties to Thrace and the Thracians, the *thraikophoitai*.

Thrace, though, was not simply a resource exploited for the material and political advantage of the Athenian polis and certain prominent individuals. For the Athenians there was far more to this strange land on the periphery of the Greek world than natural resources and strategic geography. Throughout the Late Archaic and Classical periods, Thrace by turns fascinated and terrified the Athenians. The Thracians were strange and barbaric, decadent and savage. They were also intriguing and mysterious, a source of powerful new gods and the inspiration for aspiring young cavalrymen. The intricate interplay between Athens and Thrace over the course of 200 years can perhaps be best described as a romance. Athens, the center of Greek learning, culture, and political innovation, was enamored of a barbarous people representing the very paradigm of primitive savagery. This is perceptible at every level of Athenian society, and the experiences of the *thraikophoitai*, the disciples of Thrace, afford us the clearest picture of the significance Thrace had for Athenian politics, society, and culture. Despite the historical importance of Thrace for Athens and the Greek world in general, no one has explored how a nexus of Thracian connections defined the careers of several of Athens' most prominent figures.[2] These leaders found in

[2] For a good general treatment of the role of Thrace in Greek history, see Isaac 1986.

Thrace both the resources to achieve power and prestige and a type of society that suited their predispositions more than did the Athenian polis. Thrace taught its disciples new ways of gaining wealth and power, new ways of waging war, and new – or perhaps more accurately, old – ways of living.

The Problem with Equality

For the disciples of Thrace, the allure of Thracian cultural practices was combined with the promise of material and political advantages far beyond those available in Athens. Several Athenians grew very wealthy and powerful through their Thracian connections. But they also made full use of Thracian cultural practices in order to live a pseudoheroic lifestyle reminiscent of that enjoyed by Homer's chieftains, the *basileis*. Why was Athens no longer able to satisfy the ambitions of many of its elite? The problem lies with the Greek egalitarian ethos. Every Greek citizen of a polis, especially a polis governed by democracy, was technically the political equal of every other citizen. Though it might seem an obvious inference, ambition and a desire for greater power still stirred in the hearts of certain individuals. Sometimes greater power was achievable, even within the Athenian democracy. Other times it was not.

In his stimulating book on the characteristics of leadership, Waller Newell addresses the appropriate limits to honor seeking or the desire for public recognition, a tension that has plagued every democracy throughout history. Newell focuses on an early speech of Abraham Lincoln's, long before he was president, in which he explains the impediments placed by egalitarian societies to achieving true greatness. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, had worried that American egalitarianism would discourage the emergence of great leaders under normal circumstances. For Lincoln, only the crisis of the Civil War eventually enabled him to exercise his leadership qualities to the utmost. As Newell observes, thinkers in the nineteenth century were ever haunted by the specter of Napoleon, a leader with incomparable talents and ambition

who disastrously went too far. How is a democracy to restrain the excesses of a Napoleon without preventing the emergence of a Lincoln? Even the Founding Fathers of the United States, having the worst extremes of Classical Athenian democracy in mind, struggled with how to deal properly with ambition.[3] Newell states what he considers the most vexing question of all: "What if the psychological traits of aggressiveness and victory seeking that might lead to tyranny are among the *same* traits displayed by true statesmen?"[4] Athens was never able to achieve the ideal balance between limiting ambition and giving free rein to potential tyrants like Alcibiades. Thucydides himself states that the exile of Alcibiades did as much as anything else to bring about the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War, because Athens had lost a frightening yet uniquely capable leader (6.15).

Despite the case of Alcibiades, there were many ways in which Athenian society tried to cope with the dichotomy of mass and elite, with varying degrees of success. For several ambitious Athenians, Thrace provided both an alternative to the stifling environment of egalitarian Athens and a means to win over the demos and overcome rival claimants to influence. Material resources played a key part in this. In Thrace, an ambitious figure could carve out an autonomous niche, complete with control of lucrative gold mines and the command of what amounted to private armies. Often these resources allowed one to achieve supremacy at Athens. Failing that, an Athenian adventurer could live quite comfortably abroad on his own Thracian estates and at the courts of Thracian rulers, as Alcibiades discovered at the end of his career.

We should not, however, dismiss the cultural draws of Thrace. Athens was egalitarian not only in a political sense but, ostensibly, in a sociocultural sense too. Displays of aristocratic pretension were frowned upon, and the old virtues of athletic and martial prowess and ostentatious wealth did not

[3] Newell 2009: esp. 136–62.
[4] Newell 2009: 34.

always guarantee the political power and recognition they once had. Among the Thracians, a determined Athenian could seek status and power as blatantly as he wished – and was in fact encouraged to do so. A good illustration of Thrace's openness to ostentation relative to Athens is that in the fifth and fourth centuries scarcely any gold vessels were buried in Athenian graves, though they had once been common. But we know the Athenians still made quality gold vessels in this period, primarily because many Attic gold cups have been found *in Thrace*, where demand for such ostentation remained high.[5] Many Greeks saw in the Thracians an image of their own past, akin to the heroic world immortalized by the epic poets. Thrace taught a significant number of Athenians how they could live like Homeric *basileis* once again, far removed from the egalitarian ethos of the democratic assembly and hoplite phalanx. This naturally had a profound social and political effect on Athens. It was also important in the military sphere, because several leading Athenians embraced the warlike qualities of the Thracians, coupled with unique and effective tactics that in Greece were stifled by the dominance of the hoplite.

DEFINING THRACE

Thrace, or the territory inhabited in the main by "Thracians," represents a very broad category.[6] The geographical boundaries of what the Greeks and Romans called Thrace varied over time. The Danube might be considered its northern extent, but from antiquity on, many have conceived of territory far to the north of this line as Thracian.[7] To the southwest, prior to the Persian Wars the area west of the Axius River surrounding

[5] As discussed by Morris 2000: 26–27.

[6] For the most comprehensive modern treatments of Thrace and the Thracians available in Western European languages, see Danov 1976; Fol and Marazov 1977; Hoddinott 1981; Archibald 1998; Theodossiev 2000b; 2011. See also the collection of papers in Poulter 1983. For more specific treatments of Aegean Thrace, see Isaac 1986; Parissaki 2007; and the collection of papers in Fol 2002.

[7] See, for example, the map provided by Hoddinott (1981: 11–13).

the Thermaic Gulf was inhabited by Thracians, though this region came increasingly under the Macedonian sphere of interest after Xerxes' invasion in 480–479.[8] Even well into the fifth century, though, the Athenians still considered the Chalcidice and Thermaic Gulf region to be part of the Thraceward district for the purposes of collecting tribute.[9] Virtually all the northern Aegean coastline was inhabited by Thracians at some point, including islands such as Thasos, but over time Greek settlements were found increasingly throughout the area.[10] The edge of the Black Sea formed the eastern border, but there were Thracian elements in the Spartocid dynasty as far east as the Crimea in the fourth century.[11] To the southeast, Thracians inhabited the Chersonese – the modern Gallipoli Peninsula – and the northern shore of the Propontis, today's Sea of Marmara. The Greeks considered the lands immediately south of the Hellespont – the strait now called the Dardanelles – and Propontis, including the Troad, to be part of Thrace. Herodotus tells us that the Thracians who had migrated to Asia, that is, to the southern shore of the Black Sea, continued to live exactly as their European brethren, becoming known as Bithynians (7.75). Other writers, including Xenophon, call the Thracians in Asia simply Bithynian Thracians (*Hell*. 1.3.2).[12]

What will be considered Thrace, or at least a "Thracian context" for the purposes of this study, includes the following: all

[8] Hammond et al. 1972–1988: vol. 1, 435–40; Baba 1990: 16–17. Buck (1978: 78–81) examines the ancient sources indicating that Thracians at one point lived as far south as Boeotia.

[9] Meritt et al. 1939–1953: vol. 3, 317.

[10] Isaac (1986) provides an account of the Greek settlements in this region, and also eastward to the Hellespont and Propontis. He looks in depth at the level of blending that occurred between the Greek and Thracian populations. For the issue of the ethnic makeup of the population, see also Parissaki (2007), who studies the prosopography of the area. For Thasos, see Owen 2000.

[11] Moreno 2007: 168.

[12] See further Stronk (1995: 59–60, 283), who correctly argues that the entire Propontis region should be conceived of as one "coherent historico-geographical complex" and stresses the historical presence of Thracian tribes in the Troad.

of modern Bulgaria, especially the Haemus (modern Balkan) and Rhodope mountain ranges and the plain lying in between, known as the "Thracian Plain"; northeastern Greece east of the Axius River, including the Chalcidice and all of the northern Aegean coastline; all of European Turkey; a sizable section of northwestern Anatolia, including the northern Troad, the territory abutting the Propontis, and the southwestern shore of the Black Sea; and the northern Aegean islands lying between the Athos peninsula and the Chersonese. It should be noted that many cities in Asia, such as Lampsacus, Cyzicus, and Sigeum, which today are not normally considered to be part of Thrace, were considered so by the ancients and will be treated as such in the following analysis.

In discussing groups of Thracians, the word "tribe" is used for the sake of consistency. Those scholars, such as Archibald and Theodossiev, who write about Thrace all use "tribe" to refer to the different groups living in Thrace. Greek writers, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, variously refer to different divisions of Thracians by *ethnos* and *genos*, and even the Thracians as a whole are labeled an *ethnos*. It seems that *genos* usually denotes a subgroup within an *ethnos*, but the ancient writers show little consistency in the use of these terms in relation to the Thracians.[13] "Tribe" is used to refer to various nonpolitical groups, as opposed to, say, the Odrysian kingdom that incorporated many tribes into a larger federation led by a king.[14] It is uncertain what exactly differentiated Thracian tribes, whether territory, language, origins, or the like. It surely varied from case to case.[15]

[13] See J. Hall (1997: 34–36) for the Greek use of these terms, especially in Herodotus.

[14] Archibald (1998: 5) calls the Odrysian kingdom a "supra-tribal polity."

[15] J. Hall (1997) provides the most useful discussion of the concept of ethnicity among the ancient Greeks. For Hall, the Greeks constructed their identity through written or spoken discourse. Genetic traits, language, religion, and even common cultural forms are merely symbols of this socially constructed ethnic identity (2). For the Thracians, of course, we have no recourse to such written texts that might shed

Defining Thrace

No one can say how many distinct tribes composed Thrace. Strabo, for one, counts twenty-two in the comprehensive treatment of Thrace in his seventh book (7a.48), whereas Pliny the Elder describes Thrace as divided into fifty *strategiae*, a Roman administrative unit that might reflect some sort of ethnic or tribal division (*Nat. Hist.* 4.11.40). The problem is compounded by our inability to ascertain to which chronological period each tribe mentioned in the sources belongs, because Strabo and Pliny wrote centuries after the activities of Athenian Thracophiles. Some tribes were larger and more powerful than others and are consequently better known to us, such as the Triballoi and Getai in northwestern and northeastern Bulgaria, respectively, and the Odrysians, who for a period in the fifth and fourth centuries controlled a grouping of tribes spread over most of southeastern Bulgaria and European Turkey.[16] There were numerous smaller tribes that were at different points incorporated into larger units, such as the Odrysian kingdom, but others seem to have remained independent. For his part, Herodotus judged who should be considered Thracian by a set of criteria that included physical appearance, dress, customs, and traditions of common origin. He was probably influenced by the definition of Thracian then current at Athens.[17] We do not have to accept Greek or Roman notions of tribal and ethnic groups, but as with so much of Classical antiquity we are at the mercy of their terminology. Thracian tribes are thus referred to by the names given to them by Greek literary sources.

The Athenians – as most Greek powers – dealt primarily with the Thracians inhabiting the Aegean littoral. However, some of the tribes with whom the Athenians interacted were from

light on how they viewed their own identity. Archaeology, though, as Hall (111–42) argues, can help identify ethnic groups by illuminating different dietary preferences, the different types of ceramics used, and so forth. For Greek ethnic terminology, see also Fraser 2009.

[16] Archibald (1998) offers a useful study of the Odrysian kingdom and provides a map showing the location of the Bulgarian Thracian tribes (108).

[17] Asheri 1990: 167.

regions farther inland, such as the inhabitants of the Rhodope Mountains. Also, Sitalces, the Odrysian king allied to Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, ruled tribes quite distant from the Aegean, as did some of his successors. The Odrysian kingdom, however, even at its greatest extent was confined to the southeast corner of Thrace. It should be borne in mind that an Athenian Thracophile usually had a relationship with only one of the many Thracian tribes, centered on a specific region. From Pisistratus to the rise of Philip, Athens was most interested in two particular areas of Thrace: the Chersonese along with the general vicinity of the Hellespont and Propontis in the east, and the mainland opposite Thasos in the west, including the mining region of Pangaeum and the settlements along the lower Strymon River. Other scholars, especially Isaac and Archibald, have produced excellent historical outlines of Greek interest in Aegean Thrace.[18] For the sake of clarity, I provide here a very brief outline of the specific tribes with which Athenians had extensive contact and the relevant historical and geographical circumstances.[19] They are listed in alphabetic order:

- *Apsinthioi*: Known primarily from Herodotus (6.34; 9.119), they lived in the vicinity of the Chersonese and often harried their neighbors, the Dolonkoi. The elder Miltiades was invited by the Dolonkoi to the Chersonese in the mid-sixth century in order to protect them from the Apsinthioi, which he succeeded in doing.
- *Bessoi*: A relatively well-known tribe, they dwelt mostly in the Rhodope range but also perhaps further north, in the Haemus Mountains. They were possibly related to another tribe, the Dioi, who were fierce mercenaries hired by the

[18] Isaac (1986) offers the best general survey of the Greek settlements in Aegean Thrace, including the histories of various sites and an account of the tribes involved. Archibald (1998) focuses mainly on the Odrysian polity, from its origins to collapse, but she also describes Greek interaction with the Odrysians, including Greek colonization efforts in the north.

[19] More complete listings of the ancient sources for these tribes have been usefully gathered in the work of Dechev 1957.