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e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

ENLIGHTENED BODIES. THE SYMBOLOGY OF TATTOOING IN ANCIENT THRACE

Abstract: The use of tattoos in antiquity is a widely extended practice that, in the case of the Thracian people, was believed to be traditionally linked to the feminine element. However, as we will see through both Hellenic and Thracian written sources and iconography, this practice extended to the male element as well, and its function was not to be a symbol of sin committed or anger provoked by the murder of Orpheus. The Thracian tattoo really had a multiple meaning, related not only to social status but also to beauty, and, above all, it was an apparently voluntary practice, not imposed, that the Greeks tried to explain from the perspective of their own beliefs about the barbaric and foreign.

Keywords: *woman, gender, Thrace, tattoo, symbolism*.

Arturo SANCHEZ SANZ
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
asblade@msn.com

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INTRODUCTION

The Thracians were considered by classical Greek and Roman sources as a barbarian people,[1] not only as a culture alien to their own civilisation, but also because of the strangeness of many of their practices and traditions. They inhabited the eastern border of the Hellenic territory, as part of the anecumen that integrated the "Other" and characterised the outsider by opposition, despite the long tradition of contact and interaction between the two peoples throughout antiquity. Herodotus states that among the Thracians tattooing was considered a sign of nobility,[2] Artemidorus confirms this for young noblemen,[3] and Pomponius Mela and Amianus Marcellinus point out the same custom for the Agarthans, neighbours of the Thracians.[4]

However, Artemidorus himself argues in another passage that dreaming of tattooed people or animals with mottled skin was considered a sign of bad omen, as they personified evil and deceit, by association with the peoples who, like the Thracians, followed this practice.[5] His argument exemplifies the feelings of the Greeks towards this type of practice, considered despicable[6] and reserved for servile people, which also served as a cultural marker to identify the origin and status of its wearer among those who used

[1] One of the reasons for this was precisely the tattoo. ZIMMERMANN 1980, 163–196; JONES 1987, 139– 155 and JONES 2000: 15; LEE 2009, 173.
[2] "To be marked is among them a sign of noble people; not to be marked is a sign of vile and petty people" (5. 6); interpretation accepted by most experts, among them BOTEVA-BOYANOVA (2011, 84).
[3] ARTEMIDORUS, *ONEIROKRITIKÁ*, 1. 8.
[4] POMPONIUS MELA, *CHOROGRAPHIA*, 2. 1, 10; AMIANUS MARCELINUS, *HISTORIAS I*, 31. 2, 14. RENAUT (2011, 200) denies that these people were tattooed or, at least, that they did so as a sign of nobility, although he does not provide evidence to support this speculation.
[5] ARTEMIDORUS, *ONEIROKRITIKÁ*, 4. 56 and 2. 12.
[6] RENAUT 2011, 192.

it for purposes other than their own. Indeed, they reviled the death of Orpheus at the hands of the Thracian women,[7] scene which is depicted on several pieces of Hellenistic vase painting, where it is possible to recognise the origin of its protagonists thanks to this type of specific symbolic coding.

The tattoos worn by Thracian women in Hellenistic iconography were an indispensable part of a system of symbolic coding that enabled them to be recognised and thus to identify the scene. The Greeks despised tattoos, which they saw as a mark of vileness intended for criminals and slaves,[8] an unforgivable stain that denigrated the purity to which they aspired through their immaculate appearance. This concept even included animal sacrifices, which in both Greek and Roman culture had to be properly selected so as not to provoke the wrath of the gods.

The anger towards what they considered imperfect and inappropriate for them, which in the case of the Greeks was transformed into resentment towards those women who, in addition to being women and openly showing their appreciation for this type of mark, were responsible for the death of Orpheus himself. But is it really like that? We will see below that Thracian women were not the only ones who tattooed themselves, although to a greater extent than men, but also that it was not as widespread a practice as it may seem, as we know of several works that depict Thracian women without this type of element, not only on Greek pieces but also on Thracian ones. Moreover, the Athenian aristocracy itself appropriated Thracian symbolism as a means of social distinction at certain times in its history, which reflects a certain recognition and appreciation of their culture[9] that is also reflected in the confidence to leave their own children in the hands of these women, when they used them as matrons (*trophoi*),[10] all of which is a far cry from the paradigmatic image that the sources give us of the Greeks' regard for the Thracians.

THRACIAN TATTOOS IN GREEK SOURCES

Homer refers to the Thracians for the first time in different instances,[11] identifying them as an ethnic group whose extensive homeland was in the north of Greece.[12] For this reason, he recognises that relations between Thracians and Hellenes had been going on since time immemorial, to the extent of favouring the presence of Greek colonies in the territory of their northern neighbours very early on. However, the contacts were not always as peaceful as the colonists would have liked.

Much later, Herodotus considers them to be the most widespread nation in the world,[13] famous for their military prowess as horsemen and in the handling of their most characteristic weapons (such as the *pelta*, a small crescent-shaped light shield,[14] traditionally attributed to the mythical Amazon warriors[15]). As with other peoples regarded as equally barbaric, such as the Scythians, the Thracians were famous as purveyors of slaves, captured during conflicts involving various tribes. They were regarded as uncivilised barbarians, rude in appearance and behaviour,[16] who carried weapons designed to unleash their savage behaviour.[17]

Nevertheless, female slaves of this provenance achieved enormous prestige in Greece,[18] not only as midwives but also for their ability in the art of music,[19] as Orpheus himself is said to have been of Thracian origin. Hellenistic vase painting shows many examples of tattooed Thracian women, not only depicting the episode of the mythical death of Orpheus but also scenes from everyday life.

The word "tattoo" derives from the Greek word στίγμα "*stigma(ta)*",[20] whose origin is to be found in the marks left after a snake bite.[21] Its practice is an exclusively human phenomenon and, therefore, an unmistakable cultural symbol that can have multiple meanings in different peoples, periods and cultures. In fact, it could be considered as a purifying element in the spiritual sphere,[22] as a mark alluding to a taboo, acting as a reminder, punishment or evidence of a crime or sin,[23] as an apotropaic symbol that contributed

to warding off evil, having punitive, magical or medical functions, evidencing a condition of submission associated with slavery,[24] and other authors tell us about the taste for this type of cultural symbolism in other groups such as the Dacians and Sarmatians.[25] It even appears as part of the penalties imposed in the Code of Hammurabi,[26] and Ptolemy Philopator himself used them to register and mark the Maccabees during his reign, using a red iron in the shape of an ivy leaf, the symbol of Dionysus.[27]

Many classical authors argue in favour of the use of tattoos as a marker of nobility by men, and, in fact, there is no reason to doubt this assertion other than the fact that we know of very few examples in art compared to their common presence on female figures. However, these same classical sources say nothing about women, although they would become the protagonists of the few examples of decoration in Hellenistic vase-painting depicting this type of element associated with the Thracian people.

The absence of numerous material remains does not

[7] The Thracians had a reputation of libidinous barbarians (the incestuous Tereus is mentioned in Ovid's Book VI); it is the homeland of Dionysus, the proud Rhodope and Hemon, of King Diomedes who fed his horses with human flesh (OVID, *Met*, 9. 193–194), and it is Thracian women, in a scene of their rites, who will dismember Orpheus himself.

[8] HERODOTUS, 5. 6; MAYOR 2014, 97; ZIMMERMANN 1980, 163–196; JONES 1987, 139–155 and JONES 2000, 15; LEE 2009, 173. JONES (1987, 155) states that this conception was taken from the Persians.

[9] LISSARRAGUE 1990, 215–216; SEARS 2015, 315.

[10] HERODOTUS, 5. 6; POLYB, 7. 22; PLINY, *NH*, 35. 70; PLATO, *Laches* 187b; EURIPIDES, *Rhesos*, 924–926.

[11] HOMER, *IL*, 2. 596, 844; 4. 519, 533, 537; 5. 462; 10. 559; 13. 13, 577; 23. 230, 808.

[12] TSIAFAKIS 2000, 365; TSIAFAKIS 2003, 43.

[13] HERODOTUS, 5. 3.

[14] HERODOTUS, 7. 75.

[15] VIRGIL, *AEN*, 1. 488–493; Hel, cfr. TZETZES, *AH*, 22; XENOPHON, *AN*, 4. PAUSANIAS (1. 42) even states that Hippolyta's tomb at Megara was in the form of a pelta.

[16] HERODOTUS, 5. 3–8.

[17] THUCYDIDES, 2. 96. 2.

[18] ARISTOPHANES, *THESM*, 280.

[19] STRABO, 1. 3, 17. TSIAFAKIS 1998, 20.

[20] JONES 1987, 140–144.

[21] HESIOD, *Sc*. 166.

[22] RUSH 2005, 7.

[23] MAYOR 1999, 54.

[24] As with Xerxes in his punishment of the Hellesponts. HERODOTUS, 7 35.

[25] PLINY, *NH*, 12. 2.

[26] DRIVER/MILES 1968, 306–309.

[27] III MACCABEES, 2. 29.

necessarily deny this practice, which is otherwise well attested in the female sphere and, as we shall see, there are some examples attributable to the Thracian culture itself that further affirm the opinion of the classical sources. Moreover, we know of some examples of this, as can be seen in a red-figure scypho (*ca*. 460 BC) attributed to the Painter of Pistoxenos, which shows Herakles receiving music lessons from Iphicles, accompanied by his old Thracian servant Geropso, who shows various vertical parallel lines on her right forearm (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Red-figure Scyphus (*ca*. 460 BC) attributed to the Painter of Pistoxenos. Schwerin, Staatliches Museum 708.

Actually, Greek representations of Thracian tattoos in ancient art are very scarce, with only 26 works in vase painting and one engraving, most of them dedicated to the death of Orpheus and attributed to different authors.[28] Nevertheless, it is possible to gather relevant information from these examples. It is possible to appreciate that there was a preference for certain symbols,[29] or groups of them, to characterise Thracian females, who are the most commonly depicted using this type of body decoration. In four cases, only one Thracian woman is represented in an isolated and armed form, whose intentionality seems to allude to this story even in the absence of the victim.[30]

Thus Valerius Flaccus describes them as barbarians "with painted hands and scorched chins",[31] who were "hardened by the fact that they were brought up on the milk of the wild beasts of their inhospitable territory and by their freezing cold,"[32] which serves to justify their ferocious behaviour towards Orpheus.

Undoubtedly, the association of a certain type of tattoo with a specific ethnic group must have become a widespread paradigm among the Greek population, as it allowed the identification of this mythical episode by anyone who decided to acquire this type of work or, at least, by those who had a minimum knowledge of Greek mythology.

According to the best-known story, when Orpheus was in the Thracian mountains, his singing and music aroused the desire of the "Bacchantes," who tried to obtain his favour without success. They understood his refusal as contempt, which provoked their anger, so they caged the animals that accompanied him and stoned the god. Not satisfied with this, they ripped his dead body to shreds and sent the limbs to different places.[33] His head and lyre were thrown into the river Hebro and ended up in the sea so that, near the island of Lesbos, a snake wanted to eat Orpheus' head, but Apollo turned it into a rock. We do not know what happened to the rest of his body, but his end is powerfully reminiscent of the death of Osiris. Dionysus punished the instigators by turning them into trees.

Another version relates that Orpheus, at the end of his life, abandoned the leadership of the Dionysian mysteries in favour of the cult of Apollo. For this reason, in anger, Dionysus sent his maenads to tear him to pieces while he was on Mount Pangaeus.[34] However, some nymphs gathered his pieces to bury him near Mount Olympus.

However, Pausanias believes that Orpheus forced the husbands of Thracian women to follow him on his travels. On one occasion, they got too drunk and killed him.[35] Other stories deny the Thracian women's involvement and explain his death as the result of a divine punishment ordered by Zeus, annoyed that Orpheus had decided to teach mortals some of the Dionysian mysteries. Hyginus recalls two other traditions. Calliope, Orpheus' mother, had participated as a judge in the dispute between Aphrodite and Persephone over the possession of Adonis. Aphrodite did not accept the verdict and, in revenge, made all

the Thracian women fall in love with Orpheus so passionately that they ended up tearing him apart out of madness.[36] The second version suggests that Orpheus had taught homosexual love to the Thracian men, and their wives decided to kill him blinded by hatred when their husbands ceased to be interested in them. Finally, Plato claims that the gods decreed Orpheus' death at the hands of the Thracian women as punishment for his cowardice, as distinct from the courage shown by Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, who had died in place of her husband Admeto.[37]

There are as many traditions of this story as in most Greek myths, but those that attribute the crime to Thracian women

[28] Twenty-three of these correspond to vase painting: Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD) 4396, 205400, 208349, 214046, 204053, 204136, 214178, 214179, 275230, 275231, 9027867, 208349, 9036857, 206135, 207455, 207524, 44684, 44685, 204442, 206284 and 211325; together with a red-figure column cratera ca. 470 BC (Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek Munchen 2378) as well as a red-figure stamno (Louvre G416); and a silver pitcher with an engraving on the death of Orpheus, dated to the 5th c. BC (Vassil Bojk Collection. Bulgaria). MAYOR (2014, 96), states that the Pistoxene Painter alone has 38 ceramic pieces with scenes of tattooed Thracian women, although, in fact, the Beazley Archive only records one of them (no. 211325).

[29] JONES 1987, 145.

[30] BAPD 204053, 207455, 208349; OSBORNE 2011, 132.

[31] VALERIUS FLACCUS, *ARG*, 2. 157–160.

[32] VALERIUS FLACCUS, *ARG*, 2., 148–150.

[33] OVID, *Met*, 10. 79–105.

[34] ERATOSTHENES, *CATAST*, 24.

[35] PAUSANIAS, 9. 30, 5–6.

[36] HYGINUS, *ASTR*, 7. 3.

[37] PLATO, *Symp*, 179d.

for one reason or another are the most widespread in the collective imagination, to the point of making this fact one of the main paradigms that explains their recurrent presence in Hellenic vase iconography. Whether they are depicted as offended wives or maenads, their origin is not disputed, which, together with their negative feminine and barbaric condition, inevitably leads to an absence of self-control. This lack of self-control is further stimulated by their alcohol intake or their status as maenads, making it impossible for them to control their inherent passions associated with woman's primal connection to nature.

In these representations, Thracian women show different tattoo designs that can be classified into several main groups. The first is made up of those composed of two small straight lines that converge to form an angle or vertex (V), which tend to appear mainly forming a line on both arms in a repetitive succession, almost always from the shoulder to the wrist[38], although on one occasion, they appear only down from the elbow (Fig. 2)[39] Only on two occasions are the vertices of the symbol seen inverted,[40] while frequently they are shown downwards. We know of seven examples in vase painting, all identical in appearance and form.

From the 5th century BC onwards, the red-figure technique began to be widely used by Hellenistic craftsmen, initially in parallel to the traditional black-figure technique.[41] However, all known pieces correspond to this new trend in pottery decoration, which may indicate a clear preference for this type of subject matter. Two other variants are less common in this type of work. The first is made up of isolated, schematic animal symbols that correspond mainly to cervids (Fig. 3) or, perhaps less likely, equids and serpentine forms that could allude to snakes (Fig. 5). They are also usually located on the upper and/or lower extremities, sometimes combined with repetitive geometric forms that cover the rest of the compositional space (in which case the area occupied by the animal figure is framed by horizontal lines at the bottom and top to emphasise its presence[42]) or only on the extremities where no animal symbolism is used.[43]

The third group is made up of various geometric shapes that present repetitive patterns, either in zigzags, successions of small vertical and/or diagonal lines covering the upper and/or lower limbs completely, crenellated shapes and/or sequences of small vertical parallel lines, solar symbols and stars (Figs. 4–5),[44] dots, broken lines, etc., only on the arms[45] and also covering the legs (Fig. 4), but always in the absence of animal symbols. The geometric style characteristic of Thracian art appears as early as the 7th century BC, perhaps as a reminder of traditions already existing in the Late Bronze Age,[46] and its animal-style variant probably developed under the influence of Scythian art from at least the 6th century BC.

Fig. 2. Red-figure neck amphora from Nola (475–425 BC, BAPD 214178).

All these works have been dated between the 5th and 4th centuries BC, although they do not always show the Thracian assassins of Orpheus wearing such decorative motifs. We know of several examples where the arms and legs are perfectly visible and immaculate.[47] Meanwhile, on other pieces showing Orpheus surrounded by women intoxicated by his talent, the feminine figures have been identified as muses, both because of the absence of violence and the absence of tattoos and weapons in the scene. Apart from this preferred theme, there are only three isolated examples of ceramic pieces depicting Thracian women, recognisable by their tattoos, engaged in tasks that have nothing to do with the god, such as carrying water,[48] scenes alluding to the madness induced by Dionysus on the Thracian king Lycurgus (Fig. 6), performing the prothesis in a funerary context[49] or carrying a child in their usual role as matrons (Fig. 5).

Classical sources state that the Thracians used to sell their compatriots as slaves, as did other peoples such as the Scythians, whose females frequently acted as matrons in great demand in Greece,[50] at least during the 5th century BC, which is the period to which most of these representations correspond. Sometimes, it has been attempted to deny the veracity of the authors who attributed this type of tattooing to the Thracian nobility by alluding to the depictions of slave matrons showing this type of tattooing. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that their use was so widespread that they were beyond the control of the elites, that their noble status was not really represented by their presence but was due to the use of certain motifs or to their greater or lesser profusion. This view even seems to rule out the possibility that members of the elite could be sold as slaves to other peoples, such as the Greeks, who would be even more in demand for the purchase of educated and well-trained women.

[38] BAPD 4396, 214178, 214179, 204053, 205400, 206135, 275230 and 9027867, 205691, 208349, Louvre G416, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek Munchen 2378 and J. Paul Getty Museum 80.AE.71.
[39] BAPD 214046.
[40] BAPD 204053 and 207524.
[41] BEAZLEY 1966, 29.
[42] BAPD 9036857.
[43] BAPD 204136, 211325, 9036857 and Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek Munchen 2378.
[44] In this case, perhaps associated with the version of the myth of Orpheus that tells us of the cult of Apollo, although it does not seem likely that the maenads of Dionysus showed it to avenge Orpheus' abandonment of the Dionysian cult. ERATOSTHENES, *CATAST*, 24. So, we can relate it to the cult of the Sun practised by the Thracians.
[45] BAPD 206284, 204442, 207455 and 206822.
[46] FARKAS 1981, 35.
[47] BAPD 19195, 204533, 208067, 212435, 213539, 352525 and 205449.
[48] BAPD 205691.
[49] A red-figure lutrophore attributed to the Painter of Bologna 228, ca. 460–450 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1170.
[50] HERODOTUS, 5. 6.

It should be recalled that the Thracians did not constitute a single state but were organised into tribes that were permanently at war with each other, as a result of which the aristocracy of a given territory could become merchandise of the victorious side, if not all, at least part of it, which would explain the existence of Thracian matrons bearing this type of body decoration. In fact, this element serves to recognise them unequivocally in the iconographic field, as there are numerous representations of women with children on Attic pottery that do not show visible tattoos on their bodies and could correspond to women of Hellenic origin.

Indeed, as we have indicated, if their use extended to other social sectors in Thracian culture, it could be argued that the depictions of tattooed women carrying water (Fig. 12) do not really refer to Hellenistic slaves, but may show Thracian women in their own environment and acting freely. It is claimed that their short hair identifies them as slaves,[51] even though several of the women depicted in the images of Orpheus' death also wear their hair short,[52] and in no case is there any indication that the murder was perpetrated by slaves. Moreover, we also know of scenes where some of Orpheus' attackers are profusely tattooed on their arms and legs, while their companions bear no markings (Fig. 4).

There are isolated ceramic representations dedicated to the death of Orpheus, but the representation of females showing only a kind of tattoo formed by lines around the upper part of the wrist, as if they were simulating some kind of bracelet or adornment, also supports the idea that

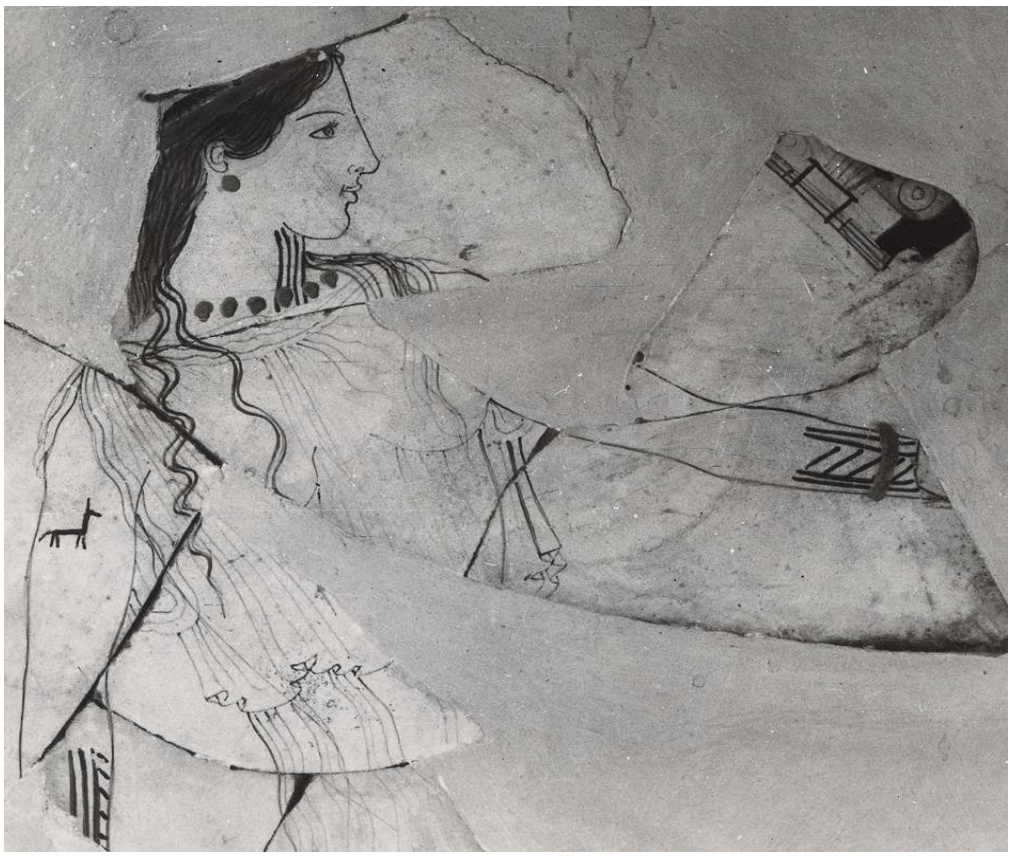

Fig. 3. White-bottomed cup from Athens (475–425 BC). BAPD 211325.

Fig. 4. Silver pitcher dated to the 5th c. BC. (Vassil Bojk Collection. Bulgaria).

[51] OAKLEY 2000, 246; MARGARITI 2018, 128; STEARS 2008, 141.

[52] For ex. BAPD 207455, 275230, etc.

they were used as a symbol of beauty (Fig. 7). Another piece showing a single female armed with a spear seems to show several scattered dots without a defined outline along the arm carrying the weapon, which could be due to the wear and tear of the piece and not to a tattoo,[53] as we do not know of examples of similar isolated shapes, only of surrounding circular shapes, but which appear ordered.[54]

The Attic pieces correspond to a wide variety of ceramic typologies, including: cups (5),[55] stamnos (4),[56] lecythos (3),[57] neck amphorae,[58] column craters (2),[59] and chalice craters (1),[60] hydrias (1),[61] chylices(1)[62] and fragments,[63] all decorated in the red-figure technique, with the exception of one cup with a white background.[64] For this reason, it seems that there was no preferred form for this type of scene. Some provide information on their location, which is also very scattered, although, in this case, usually linked to southern Italy: Nola,[65] Capua,[66] Taranto[67] and Sicily,[68] which became the main export destination, although examples have been found in more northerly regions of the Italian peninsula such as Adria[69] and Spina.[70]

Fig. 5. Fragment of Apulian red-figure pottery attributed to the Circle of Sisyphus, 4th c. BC (British Museum E 509, RVAP 1/94).

Fig. 6. Red-figured chalice crucifix in Apulian pottery dated to between 350–340 BC, discovered at Ruvo (British Museum 1849,0623.48).

Only in exceptional instances have they also appeared in other geographical contexts, associated with Greece itself, such as the Athenian Acropolis[71] and Lesbos.[72] The majority of these pieces are chronologically dated to between 525–425 BC. This indicates a greater preference for these representations throughout the 5th century BC, even more so in the first half of the 5th century BC.[73] This is even more evident in the first half of the Classical Period. Only two pieces of Apulian pottery, dated to the 4th century BC,[74] are known to us, which respect the symbolic and compositional conventions of Greek works, especially in terms of the presence of tattoos. However, Apulian ceramics also show interest in other types of representations related to Thracian culture, where they are also used, as in the case of the slave matrons or the madness of Lycurgus (Fig. 11), which shows that this type of symbolism is well known and widespread not only in the Hellenistic sphere.

This could be evidence of some kind of deterioration or lack of interest in the relationship between Greeks and Thracians from this time onwards,[75] but it could also be due to a change in iconographic tastes. However, not even in the 5th century BC did Hellenistic craftsmen seem to have made extensive use of this theme if we take into account the scarcity of pieces dedicated to it in comparison with Greek vessel painting as a whole, which in no way implies that this type of visual element associated with Thracian culture

disappeared from the Hellenistic collective imagination, as later classical sources show.

[53] BAPD 275315.
[54] BAPD 9036857.
[55] BAPD 4396, 9027867, 204053, 204136 and 204442.
[56] BAPD 275230, 205400, 275231 and Louvre G416.
[57] BAPD 214046, 207455 and 208349.
[58] BAPD 214178, 214179 and 207524.
[59] BAPD 206135 and Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek Munchen 2378.
[60] Red-figured Cratera, 450–440 BC (Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum 80.AE.71).
[61] BAPD 205691.
[62] BAPD 9036857.
[63] BAPD 206822.
[64] BAPD 211325.
[65] BAPD 214178 and 205400.
[66] BAPD 207524.
[67] Apulian pottery (BAPD 9036857).
[68] BAPD 214179, 214046 and 207455.
[69] BAPD 204442.
[70] BAPD 206135.
[71] BAPD 204136.
[72] BAPD 206822.
[73] Among 500–450 BC (BAPD 4396, 275230, 204053, 204136, 204442, 205400, 205691, 206135, 206822, 208349), 525–475 BC (BAPD 9027867), and 475–425 BC (BAPD 214046, 214178, 214179, 207455, 207524, Antikensammlungen Munchen 2378, Louvre G416 and J. Paul Getty Museum 80.AE.71).
[74] BAPD 9036857; British Museum 1849,0623.48.
[75] TSIAFAKIS 1998, 48–77.

Most of the scenes dedicated to Orpheus show his attackers armed mainly with swords, and to a lesser extent spears, or exceptionally also carrying daggers, sagaris, labrys, sickles and even rocks, intended to end the life of their victim. They never carry defensive elements, such as shields, since Orpheus is not only never depicted armed beyond his lyre but does not even show any intention of attacking in self-defense. Nor do they ever appear using other types of weapons characteristic of Eastern barbarian peoples in vase painting, such as the bow.

On the other hand, and contrary to what Valerius Flaccus stated, who emphasised the presence of tattoos on the hands and chin,[76] it is precisely in these places where we hardly notice the presence of tattoos, as they are mainly concentrated on the upper and/or lower extremities. Only a few pieces seem to show females with small tattoos composed of simple parallel lines on the face,[77] sometimes combined or not with tattoos on the extremities, for example, in scenes related to *prothesis*, which could be evidence of their appreciation for their masters (Figs. 10b–11).

In any case, it is difficult to believe that Thracian women tattooed their chins as a means of giving a masculine appearance by means of a simulated beard,[78] especially if we take into account that they also tatooed other parts of the body, sometimes very profusely, such as the face, neck, and upper and lower limbs.

The woman on the left of the image shown in Figure 10a represents the mother of the deceased, while the woman on the right is a slave because of her short hair; moreover, she is of Thracian origin, as can be seen by the tattoo on her face. As we have already mentioned, this does not mean that this woman did not originally belong to the nobility before being captured and sold, as we will see that the Thracian artistic pieces discovered in princely tombs predominantly show the use of tattoos on the faces of men and women, although the extremities appear free of symbolism in both genders.

Often, the attire favours their observation, as happens when they wear the chiton, but other times, it does not allow certain parts of the body to be observed, although it does not seem that the use of tattoos covering other areas, such as the torso or even the whole body, was common.[79] This could be assumed in cases where arms and legs are profusely decorated, but we do not know of any depictions of Thracian women showing full nudity[80] to support this assertion.

The Greeks regarded tattooing as a sign of barbarism, for they only used it, as we have mentioned, to mark the lower strata of society, i.e. slaves and criminals, or both, when a slave had committed the crime of trying to escape by being captured and marked for it.[81] It was not only a sign of low social status (which also acts as a differentiator in relation to Greek women), but also a punishment that made it easy to identify those who had offended against the recognised norms of society.[82]

Fig. 7. Athenian red-figure stamno (500–450 BC). BAPD 275231.

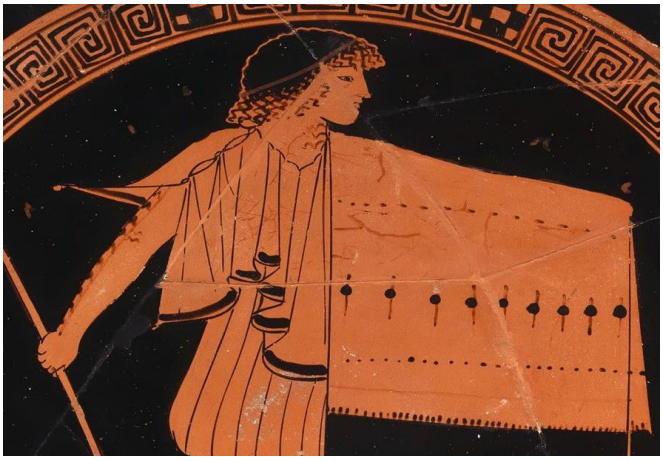

Fig. 8. Red Figure Cup (500450 BC). BAPD 204053.

Fig. 9. Red figure lecythos (475–425 BC). BAPD 208349.

The Athenians marked Samnian prisoners with a symbol that alluded to one of the most characteristic models of ships that they themselves produced (*samaina*); while, on the contrary, the Samnians tattooed Athenian prisoners with the image of an owl on their foreheads, thus employing easily recognisable images to indicate not only their status, but also their origin.[83] However, it may well have been the other way around, giving rise to Plutarch's error, so that each prisoner bore the characteristic sign of the polis that acted as owner. In fact, it seems that the Syracusans tattooed

[76] VALERIUS FLACCUS, *ARG*, 2. 157–160.

[77] BAPD 205827; Red-figure lutrophore attributed to the Bologna Painter 228, *ca*. 460–450 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1170.

[78] RENAUT 2011, 195.

[79] Contrary to what TSIAFAKIS claims (2015, 96).

[80] BÉRARD 2000, 390–391; BONFANTE 2011, 20–21.

[81] DUBOIS 2010, 132.

[82] FOUCAULT 1979, 26; HARDING/IRELAND 1989, 193. Not only among the Greeks, but also the Jews forbade the use of tattoos, perhaps as a way of avoiding this type of stigma, recognised among them as negative by this type of association. LEVITICUS, 19:28.

[83] PLUTARCH, *Pers*, 26. 4.

Athenian prisoners using the symbol of an equid,[84] which appears associated with the city on coinage.[85]

The cervids and snakes depicted on Thracian women in iconography did not follow this pattern but were very common symbols in Thracian art. In any case, according to Aetius (8, 12), the possibility of removing tattoos already existed in antiquity by means of a compound consisting of nitrate and cornicabra, which had to be applied to the tattoo. However, the process caused unbearable pain for 20 days,[86] which undoubtedly affected the hope of erasing this stigma among those who received it involuntarily. There are frequent mentions of freedmen who tried, with little success, to cover their faces with human skin-like dressings or bandages to hide their former servile status. The only alternative was to cut or burn that part of the skin (which caused severe ulcerations[87]) or to cover it with a different tattoo, which in contexts such as the Thracian reached the realm of fashion and beauty.[88]

In Rome, a "K" identified the condemned as *Kalumniator*,[89] "FVR" alluded to thieves;[90] even slaves were branded with the name of their owner (as happened with Caligula's condemned[91]) on their foreheads to stigmatise them for all of their lives,[92] since this type of badge was also used to recognise a fugitive.[93] Not surprisingly, a slave who was a recidivist, and without the need to be one of Thracian, Scythian, etc. origin, who already wore this type of element before ending up in this condition could accumulate tattoos on his body throughout his life, sometimes practised by different owners as a means of reminding them of their condition as "objects" and/or their former faults.[94]

However, Constantine indicated that a person condemned to the gladiatorial games or the mines should not be tattooed (*scribatur*) on the face but on the hands or calves since the face was considered a reflection of the image of divine beauty that should be "contaminated" as little as possible.[95] In fact, in Late Antiquity, we know that tattoos were also used to mark armourers (*fabricenses*) and conscript soldiers, using dots on the arm that, in the latter case, bore the symbol of the unit that they were assigned to (*puncta signorum*).[96] This was a public marking, as it was understood that it would prevent them from trying to avoid the obligation of service in times when there was a shortage of troops.[97]

Lucian of Samosata describes how evil behaviour during life will leave invisible tattoos on the skin that will later serve to judge the soul of the deceased.[98] Greeks understood nudity as an ideal of human perfection,[99] which could not be "stigmatised" by such symbols. Anyone who wore such bodily symbols and did not belong to certain social elements was undoubtedly a foreigner, so their identification was relatively simple and revealed his foreign status.[100]

The representation of Thracian men in Greek iconography usually takes place by showing them in calm or relaxed attitudes, riding horses, or even enjoying the talent of Orpheus; savagery, violence, etc., associated with this people considered barbaric is only evident through women, although not always, but only in those who apparently act freely, as if it were part of their nature, which was only tempered or dominated through their servile condition at the hands of the Greeks themselves.

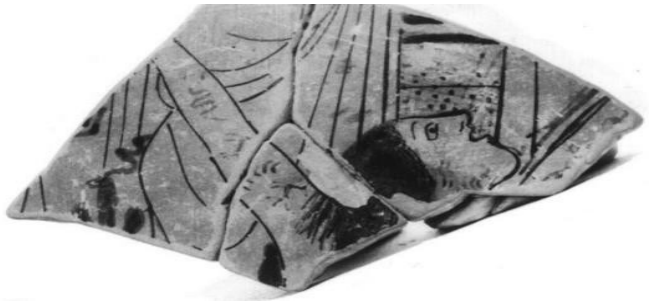

Fig. 10a. Red-figure lutrophore (500–450 BC). BAPD 205827.

Fig. 10b. Red-figure lutrophore attributed to the Bologna Painter 228, (*ca*. 460–450 BC). Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1170.

Some authors have argued that Thracian males show tattoos in their iconography, which would indicate that this was not an exclusively female fashion.[101] In 1980, Zimmermann catalogued as many as 38 pieces of Hellenistic vase paintings depicting Thracian males without tattoos,[102] but we know of a few examples that do seem to show them.

[84] PLUTARCH, *Nic*, 29. 2.
[85] As in the case of Dionysius II (365–357 BC). Corpus Nummorum Saeculorum: 10, Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum ANS 1176.
[86] DINTER/KHOO 2019, 86. And they were not the only ones to offer alternative solutions already in antiquity. DIOSCORIDES, *MATERIA MÉDICA*, 2. 175. 2; PLINY, *NH*, 25. 173; GALEN, *DE SIMPLICIUM MEDICAMENTORUM*, 6. 2, 5. In Rome, there were also apparent experts in their elimination, although presumably the most reliable were those who were also involved in creating them (SCRIBONIUS LARGUS, *Compositiones*, 231).
[87] CASSIUS FELIX, *DE MEDICINA*, 13. 2; AECIUS OF AMIDA, *TETRABIBLION*, 8. 12.
[88] RENAUT 2011, 197.
[89] CICERO, *ROSCIO AMERINO*, 57.
[90] PLAUTO, *Aulularia*, 325–326.
[91] SUETONIUS, *Caligula*, 27.3.
[92] OLIVIERI 1950, 417–418.
[93] In a wanted slave warrant issued in 156 BC in Alexandria. P. Par. 10 = UPZ 121.
[94] MARTIAL (*EPIG*, 2. 29) mocks a freedman who tries desperately to hide his marks of slavery with patches that covered much of his face.
[95] Cod. Teod. 9. 40. 2 = Cod. Iust. 9. 47. 17.
[96] VEGETIUS, 1. 8; 2. 5.
[97] Cod. Teod. 10. 22, 4.
[98] LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA, *The journey or the Tyrant*, 24.
[99] BÉRARD 2000, 390–391; BONFANTE 2011, 20–21.
[100] OSBORNE 2011, 130.
[101] RENAUT (2011, 192, 200–201 and 211) denies their presence on men, although only on the basis of comparative ethnographic studies with present-day societies, including Hawaii and Polynesia, where tattoos are associated solely or mainly with the feminine identity, although he himself acknowledges the difficulty of connecting the two contexts.
[102] ZIMMERMANN 1980, 163–196.

Fig. 11 Red-figure chalice krater in Apulian ceramics (350–340 BC). British Museum 1849,0623.48.

Fig. 12. Red-figure hydria (475–450 BC). BAPD 205691. Louvre CA 2587.

Let us remember the red-figure scyphus attributed to the Pistoxenos Painter (Fig. 1).

THRACIAN TATTOOS IN CONTEXT

This is undoubtedly an exception, as we do not know other examples of vase painting. However, we could find another similar reference, this time belonging to the Thracian area itself, in the frescoes of the Tomb of Alexandrovo, discovered in 2000 and dated to the 4th century BC. It is a royal tomb whose owner is still unknown, but which was decorated with a hunting scene showing several Thracian horsemen and warriors. Up to eight of them are depicted, at least four of them showing similar geometric markings composed of several parallel vertical lines in the same area of the face, i.e. around the cheekbones (Figs. 13–16). We might think that this is a whim of the artist, but not all of them have it (as seen in Fig. 16), and they acquire a different tone from the one used to highlight the body hair when seen in detail.

We cannot be sure whether these were tattoos or scarifications, but the geometric motifs used correspond to those found on female figures on Hellenic pottery. In fact, Pliny

Figs. 13–16. Frescoes from Tomb of Alexandrovo (4th c. BC).

Fig. 17. Peretu helmet (4th c. BC). Bucarest, National History Mus. of Romania.

Fig. 18. Varbilau helmet (4th c. BC). Bucarest, Nat. History Mus. of Romania.

had already stated that the men of peoples related to the Thracians, such as the Dacians and Sarmatians,[103] tattooed themselves; as also stated by Sextus Empiricus about the latter, including the Egyptians,[104] Strabo about the Illyrians and Thracians, and Isidore of Seville about the Scots.[105] At the very least, we can affirm that the figures depicted were nobles since not only were they carrying out an activity closely linked to the aristocracy, but they also appeared decorating a royal tomb.

Not knowing of iconographic representations of a particular custom does not mean, for this reason alone, that it was not practised. Only a minimal part of the vase paintings produced in antiquity has survived, and, despite everything, not only do we have the assertions of various written sources, which we cannot refute so lightly, but we have already mentioned at least one piece of pottery that corroborates them.

It is true that the above-mentioned work refers to a Thracian slave, but it is not possible to rule out that before becoming a prisoner of war at the hands of another tribe to be sold, he did not belong to the aristocracy of his own environment, as perhaps happened in the case of the females. Moreover, we cannot deny that this was a free and conscious choice (more or less common among different social sectors) rather than an imposition, and given that there were several Thracian tribes,[106] it is possible that many of their nobles decided not to follow this tradition or to do so in less visible areas of the body. In any case, it is difficult to admit that the elites could control its use among the rest of the population, much less when there were several tribes, since it was not only a traditional practice, but it was probably also used as another symbol of beauty among other options available, including attire, jewellery, weapons, etc.[107] Indeed, the members of lower social strata could even use specific motifs.

Thracian men and women depicted in Hellenic vase painting do not always display this type of symbolism,[108] and we will see the same thing happen in Thracian art itself, which supports the idea that there was a high degree of choice. In fact, there are more depictions of Thracian women tattooed in Greek art than the reverse, which makes it difficult to suppose that all of them always belonged to the nobility.

Even if we think that the Alexandrovo frescoes do not show male tattoos, we have additional examples. The excavations carried out in the funerary complexes belonging to different contemporary Thracian tribes in Agighiol, Peretu, or Varbilau have provided important pieces of their grave goods that are relevant to our study. All of their owners were buried with ceremonial helmets and greaves, among other sumptuary objects, very similar in their manufacture, to which we must add a similar helmet found in the Getic region of Mehedinți, which is currently on display in the Detroit Museum.

In addition to their profuse decoration, the four helmets referred to above show an essential characteristic that is

[103] PLINY, *NH,* 22. 2.
[104] SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Pyrrh*, 3. 24, 202; STRABO, 7. 5, 4.
[105] ORIGEN 9. 2, 103 and cf. 14. 23, 7.
[106] TACITUS, *ANN*, 4. 46, 1.

[107] It is very difficult to affirm, without further evidence, that "Thracian elites, linked to the Greco- Macedonian and Persian world, did not tattoo" as RENAUT (2016, 1268) indicates, and contrary to what classical sources, including DION CHRYSOSTOM (*OR*. 14. 19–20), affirm. RENAUT himself (2008, 4–5) contradicts himself, acknowledging that tattoos may have existed as a social marker among the Thracian elites, as the classical sources already indicate, which is why he supposes that they were able to control their use using power (NEVADOMSKY/AISIEN 1995, 62–73).
[108] This is the case for most males, although with important exceptions, and for many females (e.g. BAPD 19195), even in scenes alluding to the death of Orpheus.

Fig. 19. Agighiol helmet (4th c. BC). Bucarest, Nat. History Mus. of Romania.

Fig. 20. Helmet of the "Iron Gates" (Mehedinti, 4th c. BC). Detroit Museum.

repeated identically (Figs. 17–20). We refer to the presence of eyes, probably of an apotropaic nature, located on the part that covers the forehead, and which are divided by a central vertical strip interpreted as alluding to a tattoo.[109] The presumed high status of the owners of such majestic burials seems to lend credibility to the words of Herodotus and the other classical sources that explain Thracian tattoos as symbols of nobility.

The Agighiol tumulus also contained other sumptuary objects, including a pair of greaves that are important to us. Both show at the top human faces, one of which is decorated with several horizontal and vertical lines that run along its entire length and may also represent tattoos (Figs. 21–22).[110] Two very similar pieces were found in the burial mound discovered in 1965 at Moguilanskata Moguila (Figs. 23–24), which, in this case, have the same design but only on the left side of the face, without including the long vertical line that marks the axis of symmetry (only one of them includes it solely for the chin), and replacing the horizontal lines of the forehead with plant motifs, by means of a stem from which numerous leaves emerge, the direction of which converges towards the centre.

On the first object, one of the lines

Figs. 21–22. Algighiol greaves (4th c. BC). Nat. History Mus. of Romania.

Figs. 23–24. Moguilanskata Moguila greaves (4th c. BC). Mus. of Vratza.

[109] FARKAS 1981, 43.
[110] MARAZOV 1998, 94; OPPERMANN 1984, 119; FARKAS 1981, 45.

runs continuously vertically across the face and forehead, in the same way seen partially on the aforementioned helmets. If we consider that this type of decoration emulated the use of real tattoos and that, although these incorporate very similar patterns and designs, their bearers could choose whether or not to use them, to do so on the whole face or only on part of it, it is difficult not to think that perhaps the images of Thracian warriors in Hellenic art did not include this detail, not only because it was uncommon (although not non-existent), but also because of their own taste for representing the figures in profile, thus concealing part of the face. This was probably not an imposed tradition, even among the elites, but a choice that not everyone accepted or was not allowed to accept according to their social rank, as can be seen in the tomb of Alexandrovo.

On the latter object, the face shows several parallel horizontal lines running all the way from the forehead to the chin, topped by the long vertical line that divides the face symmetrically, while the noble figures in the Alexandrovo fresco have a much simpler design, consisting of several parallel vertical lines located on each cheekbone (or only on one of them, as all are shown in profile; still several appear showing one or the other, in the same way seen on the greaves mentioned above).

In fact, the remaining greave of the pair found at Agighiol was also decorated with a female face on the upper part without any markings, although it was also profusely decorated with jewels that do not appear on its counterpart, and we also know of other similar examples discovered in the Thracian royal burial mounds of Golyamata Mogila or Zlantinitsa-Malomirovo. The tattooed greave from Agighiol has even been identified as corresponding to a male face,[111] as opposed to its counterpart, which would further support our assertion, although we cannot be completely sure.

It is possible that these greaves are intended to represent the face of a Thracian deity,[112] although it seems more likely that they were Thracian nobles characterised as such by means of these status symbols already mentioned in classical sources.[113] They could even be portraits alluding to the deceased himself, in whose honour and that of his family these burial mounds were prepared. Although the use of tattoos was considered by the Thracians as a symbol of social status, and no doubt also as an ethnic marker towards other peoples, it is not possible to rule out different or, at least, complementary interpretations, which would give the tattoos an apotropaic function of connection with the deities or the forces of nature, perhaps as signs of sexual maturity, of ancestral lineage, tribal affiliations or with a propitiatory character within the sympathetic magic,[114] etc. always on the basis of symbolic codes known to the group and accepted as such.

We know that Thracian animal art included various types of representations, both real (snakes, deer, boars, etc.) and fantastic (dragons, gryphons, etc.), but Hellenic artists depicted only two of them (both shown in Fig. 6): the stag, as a symbol of the goddess Artemis, to represent the wild and liminal character of Thracian women and, by extension, of their people; the serpent, because of its association with Gaea, which emphasises the link that the Greeks established between women and Mother Earth, or because of its own dark character associated with chaos, reminding us of the need to impose the superiority of Hellenistic civilisation on those peoples.

Phanocles and Plutarch offered an alternative explanation for the presence of tattoos among Thracian women in antiquity, claiming that they were forced to wear them by their husbands as punishment[115] or as a sign of mourning[116] after the horrendous crime committed against Orpheus. However, in iconography, Thracian women already bore these tattoos before Orpheus' death, so they would have had to have been done prior to his murder for other reasons.

Certainly, these explanations are rooted in the Hellenic mythical imaginary itself, excluding any option attributable to the Thracian sphere itself. It is, therefore, necessary to be wary, since a cultural characteristic is explained from a foreign context, which, moreover, confers a negative character capable of stigmatising an entire genre.

Rather, it seems that such assumptions were intended to offer an acceptable explanation among the Greeks themselves, one that did not conflict with their own negative conception of tattoos. Even among those authors who offered a non-mythological explanation, such as Herodotus or Artemidorus, the same connotation was accepted.[117] Not surprisingly, this also established a clear distinction between female tattoos, as a consequence of the anger that Orpheus' death arouse among Thracian men, and male tattoos, which acquired in the sources a positive character associated with nobility.

The poet Phanocles embraced the same view in the 2nd century BC, although not as a means of atonement for their crime, but as a punishment imposed by the Thracian men after they had killed the one who had taught them the pleasures of male love, as Phanocles believed that this practice eliminated their desire for the female gender. For this reason, women felt despised and acted in retaliation.[118] For the Greeks, this episode demonstrated that women were unable to contain their wild nature, provoking a disproportionate but appropriate response to their feminine and barbaric condition. Orpheus became collateral damage that serves to explain the Thracian female tattoos as the product of a despicable action that would always remind them of their crime, just as with the slaves, turning its original function into a mark, a symbol of the anger aroused by their actions.

Plutarch will share this opinion shortly after (1st–2nd c. AD),[119] although the Palatine anthology is more conciliatory and willing to forgive this crime, stating that the Thracian women already showed their repentance by shedding tears during the funeral procession in honour of their victim.[120]

[111] As stated by BOTEVA-BOYANOVA (2000, 109–118 and 2011, 84) or FARKAS (1981, 45).
[112] MARAZOV 1998, 159; THEODOSSIEV 2000, 34; TORBOV 2005, 135; AGRE 2006, 181.
[113] BOTEVA-BOYANOVA 2011, 84.
[114] NORMAN 2011, 142.
[115] PLUTARCH, Moralia, 557d; PHANOCLES, Amores o Los jóvenes hermosos, frg 1. 25–29.
[116] Pal. Ant. VII, 10, 1–3..
[117] ARTEMIDORUS, *ONEIROKRITIKÁ*, IV, 56 y II, 12.
[118] PHANOCLES, *Amores o Los jóvenes hermosos*, frg. 1. 23–27.
[119] PLUTARCH, *On the delay of divine justice*, 12. 557d.
[120] PALATINE ANTHOLOGY, 7. 10, 1–4.

Classical historiography still offers other possibilities that suggest the same caution. Clearchus of Solos blames the Scythians for the presence of such markings on their Thracian counterparts when their territory came under Scythian control, as they were already using them. Thus, he states that they later tried to erase these marks by adding other tattoos until they completely covered their arms and legs,[121] becoming an element of adornment in order to forget such a sad event. However, we do not know at what time the alleged occupation of the Thracian territory by the Scythians took place, and it seems easier to try to erase or hide them than to display an even greater number of them, so his allegation seems only to try to explain why the women of both cultures so similarly practised the same custom, just as many classical authors linked the mythical Amazons with the Scythians in order to explain the warrior character of their women.[122]

Clearchus seems to believe that Thracian women shared the Greek view of tattooing as something degrading, in order to bring them closer to his own conception, and that Scythian men did not tattoo, although we know that they did so as a status symbol,[123] which lends even greater credibility to Herodotus' account. We can admit that these tattoos were also used in the same way as cosmetics, hairstyles, clothing, etc., as a sign of beauty characteristic of Thracian culture,[124] but never exclusively, since we know that they were also used in other cultural contexts such as at the Scythians,[125] Egyptians, etc., for the construction of identity.

In non-graphic cultures, such as the Scythians, of which we only know information provided by third parties or archaeology, tattoos acted as an important means for the transmission of ideas, beliefs, etc.[126] According to Xenophon, the Mossynoeci, a tribe of Pontus, covered their whole forehead and back with flower designs,[127] probably with a purpose not only cultural but also associated with beauty;[128] the same practice is mentioned among the Iapods who inhabited the Eastern Alps,[129] the Daunians of Apulia,[130] Illyrians,[131] Dacians, Sarmatians,[132] Agarthyrs[133] or Picts[134] using geometric or animal designs (Fig. 25).

The negative concept of the tattoo was not even shared by all Greeks. We know that the poet and philosopher Epemenides (6th c. BC)[135] had tattoos, which have been interpreted as lines from his own poems,[136] and in the Elegy of the Tattoo, it is stated that the Greeks voluntarily used them for narrative or symbolic and decorative purposes,[137] albeit in less exposed areas such as the back.[138] Indeed, we have evidence that scarifications, along with flagellation, ice baths, etc., were used as tests of endurance among aspiring philosophers.[139]

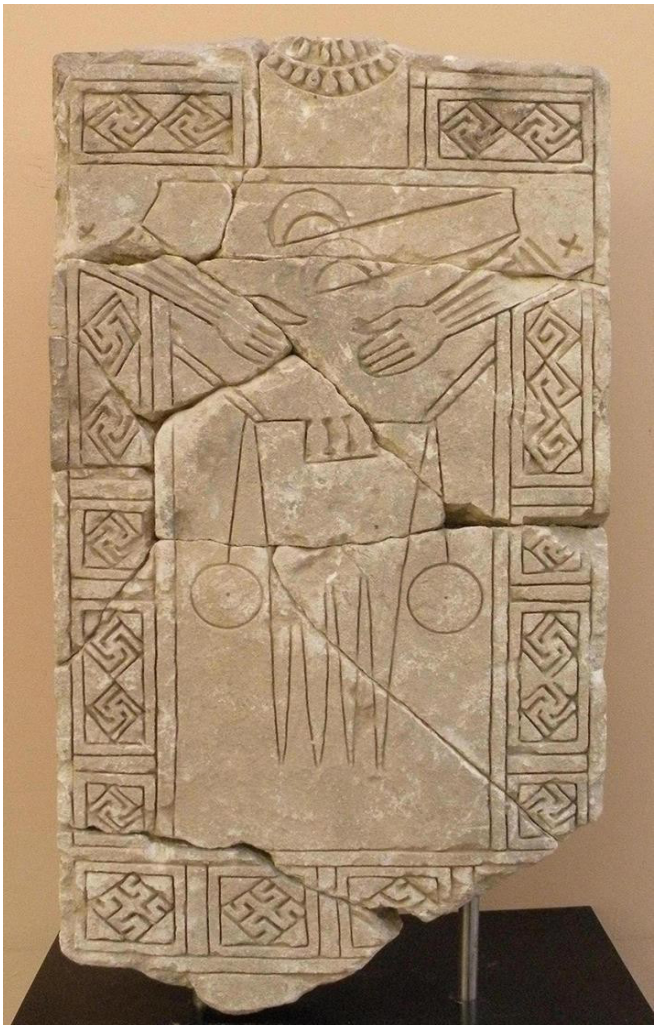

Fig. 25. Stele from a Daunian female burial (7th–6th c. BC). Mus. Archeologico Nazionale di Manfredonia.

In Egypt, women used tattoos made from scarifications[140] or designs composed of successions of dots and stripes along the belly to improve fertility[141] and the proper development of pregnancy,[142] as well as on other parts of the body as a sign of beauty (breasts, thighs, etc.). However, we only have evidence of their presence among women from the end of the 3rd millennium BC, especially associated with women of

[121] ATHENAEUS, 12. 524D–E = CLEARCHUS fr. 46; JONES 1987, 145.
[122] ISOCRATES, 4. 68–70 and 12. 193; DIODORUS SICULUS 4. 28; APPIAN, *MITH.* 1. 69; JUSTIN, *EPIT*, 2. 26; HERODOTUS, 4. 110–117; PLINY, *NH.* 6. 19; EPHORUS, FHG 78 (cfr. Scymnus Chius 5. 102 ss., *Epit*. 5. 847 ss.); JUSTIN, *EPIT*, 2. 1. 1; DIODORUS SICULUS 2. 44–46.
[123] YATSENKO 2011, 99; POLOSMAK 1999, 127–128; YAO 2021, 253.
[124] *DISSOI LOGOI* 13; JONES 1987, 145.
[125] SIMPSON/PANKOVA 2017, 107–108.
[126] OLSEN 1996, 91.
[127] *Anab,* 5. 4, 32.
[128] DUBOIS 2010, 69.
[129] STRABO, 7. 5, 4.
[130] HERRING 2007, 270–276. Where females also show a particular propensity for tattoos, often consisting of parallel lines and dots covering the whole arm between the upper elbow and the wrist, often reaching up to the knuckles. NORMAN 2011, 138.
[131] Where whom the original homeland of the Daunos is. DE JULIIS 1988, 10–15.
[132] PLINY, *NH,* 22. 2.
[133] VIRGIL, *AEN,* 4. 136; VALERIUS FLACCUS, *ARG,* 6. 13.
[134] CAESAR, *BELLO GALLICO*, 5. 14.
[135] *SUDA* sv Epimenides.
[136] SVENBRO 1993, 137.
[137] *ELEGY OF THE TATTOO,* 1. 20–4.
[138] *ELEGY OF THE TATTOO,* 1. 5–7.
[139] LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA, *Nigrinus*, 27.
[140] JONES 1987, 142. As was the case with the Ethiopians, just as PETRONIUS (*Sab*, 102) states that with the right markings anyone could pass himself off as an Ethiopian.
[141] HANSEN/MELDGAARD/NORDQVIST 1991, 111–112.
[142] TASSIE 2003, 95–96.

high rank. They were even used in figurines, which were then placed in tombs, perhaps as a means of promoting fertility even in the afterlife,[143] to intercede on behalf of their living relatives,[144] or because of their apotropaic nature.

The Egyptians also tattooed their faces and wrists with arcane symbols to invoke divine protection, especially in the case of babies,[145] using highly elaborate methods that included the subsequent disinfection and care of the skin to favour its durability.[146] Thus, we see how tattoos also acquired religious connotations in various cultures, even in the case of the Mayans[147] or the Christians themselves.[148] Egyptians, Christians, Manichaeans, etc. attributed propitiatory and magical characteristics related to divinity to them or turned them into symbols of confirmation of faith and belonging to a group.

Even in Syria, it is said that all followers of the goddess Atargatis wore tattoos on their wrists or necks as a symbol of their devotion.[149] In Greece and Rome, they served as a warning of criminal activity or marker of ownership. The Romans considered tattooing to be demeaning, as did many Hellenes,[150] so Christians may have decided to employ them as a subversive act that reversed the original pejorative meaning of punitive tattoos.[151] Tattooing implies an unlimited visual vocabulary that must be interpreted in the social and cultural contexts of the groups that use them. Among Thracians and Scythians, the aesthetic and social choice prevailed, which Greek and Roman observers interpreted as an extravagant practice that, in their opinion and according to their traditions, could not have had a voluntary and positive origin.

CONCLUSION

We have established how the Greeks created specific symbolic codes to refer to other peoples on the basis of their own cultural characteristics, which were incorporated through Greek prism. Their own tradition was thus incorporated into the Hellenic collective imaginary in an accepted way, which was also connected with the Hellenic religious vision, according to which the *anecumene* was populated by barbarian peoples who thus embodied the concept of barbarism as opposed to the notion of civilisation.

Greeks and Romans preferred to preserve the integrity of the skin and its whiteness[152] appearance as symbols of perfection and beauty, and the same was true for the animal sacrifices offered to the gods, as they could not show any defect that could hurt the deity's susceptibility and, therefore, provoke his wrath.[153] The works of the classical authors include a multitude of advice on how to keep the skin perfect and recipes for removing imperfections such as warts, blemishes, etc. However, the Thracians and other peoples did not share this conception, nor did tattoos have such negative connotations; they were exhibited and shared as a means of expression of ideas and concepts, perhaps also of fashions and standards of beauty. Contrary to what we might think, it is likely that their use also extended to men, although maybe with less success than among women, and always based on their own free and conscious decision, so that the only limitations could be associated with the restriction of certain patterns more common among the elites.

[143] CAPEL/MARKOE 1996, 65; WARAKSA 2009, 97–98; ALBERTI 2001, 189–205.
[144] NYORD 2009, 449; HAWASS 2009, 85; GRAVES-BROWN 2010, 114.
[145] SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Pyrrh,* 3. 202.
[146] SMEATON 1937, 60.
[147] FOSTER 2002, 337–338; SCUTT/GOTCH 1974, 22.
[148] Tattoos were also used in antiquity as a means of belonging to religious or ideological groups (CAINS/BYARD 2008, 197, 206–210).
[149] LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA, *De Syria Dea*, 59.
[150] OUSTERHOUT 2015, 99.
[151] DINTER/KHOO 2019, 96.
[152] HOMER, *IL*, 11. 573 and 15. 316.
[153] DELGADO 2016, 977.

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