

Oracles of Dionysos in Ancient Thrace

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***Abstract:** The focus of the article is the available information about the oracles of Dionysos in ancient Thrace. After a careful analysis of the currently known sources the author states that in the ancient Thracian lands there was not only one or two (as most modern scholars assume) but several oracles of Dionysos. The author proves this point by giving a special attention to some details in the ancient information, such as the localization of the different oracles, the features of the mantic session, the officials etc. In conclusion is summed up that although the provided by the ancient writers' more or less detailed information, oracles of Dionysos in Thrace are not yet localized.*

Key words: Ancient divination, Dionysos, oracles, Thrace.

Dionysos, the famous ancient Greek god of vines and wine, was strongly connected with the Thracian lands.¹ In the following lines is paid attention to only one aspect of this connection – the available information about his oracles by the Thracians. The essential sources on this issue are only a few passages in the ancient literature, presented below.² They are repeatedly discussed by the modern scholars, which bring together all sources with only one or two oracles of that god in Thrace.³ However, here is suggested a new interpretation, based on a careful analysis of the ancient sources with a special attention over some important details neglected by the researchers, such as the localization of the different oracles, features of the mantic session, the officials etc.

¹ It had been discussed for a long time whether Thrace was the birthplace of Dionysos or the god only passed through the Thracian lands, as some ancient legends say, see FARNELL 2010 p. 85 sq.; SEAFORD 2006 p. 154. Wilhelm Tomaschek defined the Thracian gods in four groups, in which the first was called „Der dionysische Sagenkreis”; the other three groups are „Der apollonische Sagenkreis”, „Isolierte Hauptgottheiten” and „Die thrakischen Licht- und Donnergötter”, see TOMASCHEK 1980 II, p. 38 sq. Most of the ancient sources about the cult of Dionysos in Thrace are presented and commented by ФОЛ 1991; ФОЛ 1994; ФОЛ 2003.

² The original text of the Greek and Roman writers often allow differences in translation. By this reason below, in parallel with the English translations, the original texts are also attached.

³ It is useless all opinions to be presented, the more so as most of them are not sufficiently argued. In briefly, some researchers accepted that there was only one oracle of Dionysos in Thrace, which is sought in various places: in Rhodope (ЗАХАРИЕВ 1870 p. 6 sq.), in Pangaion (PERDRIZET 1910 p. 37 sq.), in Haemus (BOTEVA 1997 pp. 287-298), or in other Thracian mountains. Some think that there were two different oracles (COLLART 1937 p. 247; FARNELL 2010 p. 100).

The information passed down in the ancient literature concerning oracles of Dionysos in ancient Thrace can be differentiated in two main categories.

The first one incorporates sources without any details about oracle center or divination practices. For example, Pausanias (Description of Greece, 9.30.9) just states that „Libethrians received out of Thrace an oracle from Dionysos ... (ἀφικέσθαι δὲ τοῖς Λιβηθρίοις παρὰ τοῦ Διονύσου μάντευμα ἐκ Θράκης ...)”. It's unknown where and how that prediction was received.

The second category, which is extremely important to this work, consists of sources about oracles with more or less information about mantic details. They are presented and commented in this section, roughly following a chronological order. On this basis the oracles of Dionysos in ancient Thrace are at least five.

(1) Orpheus and the oracle in Haemus. A Scholia to Euripides (Alcestis, 968)⁴ maintains that according to information of the „physicist Heraclides”:

<p>τὸ δὲ τοῦ Διονύσιου κατεσκευάσται [ἐπι] τῆς Θράκης ἐπι τοῦ καλουμένου Αἴμου, ὅπου δὴ τινὰς ἐν σανίσιν ἀναγραφὰς εἶναι φασιν <Ὀρφέως>.</p>	<p>That [oracle] of Dionysos was built in Thrace on the so called Haemus, where is said, that there were some writings of Orpheus upon tablets.</p>
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This could be the earliest evidence of an oracle of Dionysos in Thrace. There is a clear location – in Mount Haemus, but it's unclear what this author means under that name.⁵ The identification of the originator of the anonymous scholiast – „the physicist Heraclides” – is not quite seamless. The author in question is identified with Heraclides Ponticus (ca. 390 – 310 BC) without the necessary explanations and arguments for such an assertion.⁶ However, it is not undoubtedly, because the latter even once wasn't called explicitly „physicist” and the quoted passage is not included among the fragments, attributed to him.⁷

By that reason it is not excluded in this case to be seen the philosopher Heraclites (ca. 535 – 475 BC), as far as can be judged by some of its fragments, concerning the Delphic oracle, which demonstrates his interest in the sphere of ancient oracles and divination.⁸

Of importance here is the fact that in the original Greek text it is not clear whether that place, dedicated to Dionysos, was actually oracle or some other object. The first is more likely, as it is also related to the writings of Orpheus on wooden tablets, as the next.

Other scholia to Euripides (Hecuba, 1267)⁹, again with an unknown and – in any event – later author, summarizes:

⁴ Greek text after SCHWARTZ 1966 p. 239

⁵ The ancient Mount Haemus is commonly identified with modern Stara planina. However, some details in the ancient literature indicate that the concepts of the ancient writers about the Thracian mountains varied in significant borders. For example, in the case of Haemus only Thucydides (2.96.1-4) clearly distinguished Stara planina as a single mountain. Some writers obviously understood under Haemus not only Stara planina, but also modern Rila (see Strab. 7, fr. 36); others added to the conception of Haemus modern Strandzha and Sakar; these visions are seen better in some Renaissance maps of Europe, which are based in significant point over ancient information.

⁶ БОТОВА 1997 p. 294; ТАЧЕВА 2007 p. 253

⁷ SCHÜTRUMPF 2008

⁸ Heraclites can be defined as physicist on the basis of Cicero (On Divination, 2.133).

⁹ Greek text after DINDORF 2010 p. 510

οἱ μὲν περὶ τὸ Πάγγαιον εἶναι τὸ μαντεῖόν φασι τοῦ Διονύσου, οἱ δὲ περὶ τὸν Αἴμον, οὗ εἰσι καὶ Ὀρφεὺς ἐν σανίσιν ἀναγραφαί, περὶ ὧν φησιν ἐν Ἀλκίησιδι. ὁὐδέ τι φάρμακον Ἐρήσσαις ἐν σανίσιν, τάς Ὀρφεῖα κατέγραψε γῆρυς. ὅτι δὲ καὶ Διόνυσος μαντις, καὶ ἐν Βάκχαις. φησὶ ἄντις δ' ὁ δαίμων ὅδε· τὸ γὰρ βακχεύσιμον καὶ <τὸ> μανιῶδες μαντικὴν πολλὴν ἔχει'.

Some say, that the oracle of Dionysos was in Pangaion, other – in Haemus, where were some writings of Orpheus upon tablets, about which he speaks in *Alcestis*: „Not any drug in the Thracian tablets, where are written the sayings of Orpheus”. And because Dionysos was and prophet, in „*Bacchae*” he says: „This god is a prophet, too, for in his rites the Bacchic celebrations and the madness a huge prophetic power is unleashed”.

The anonymous author presents an interesting localization of the oracle – in Pangaion (near Lower Struma and Mount Symbolon)¹⁰ or in Haemus (usually identified with Stara planina)¹¹. The considerable distance between the normal identification of these two mountains and the missing of Rhodope makes an impression. The latter is among the permanently presented Thracian mountains in the ancient literature from Herodotus (*Histories*, 4.49.6; 8.116.1-2) onwards. Hence can be assumed, that in the source, on which the scholia was based on, the oronym Rhodope was still unknown.¹²

The unknown author does not provide any information about the divination in this oracle. Probably as an indication of that issue should be considered the marked prophetic power of the Bacchic celebrations (βακχεύσιμος) and the madness (μανιῶδης). As is known, the ancient Greeks believed that no one could be a mediator of oracular responses while is in normal state of consciousness (ἐννοῦς), although in all images on vases Apollo and Pythia were always presented in a peaceful state.¹³

As in the previous scholia, the oracle's localization is associated with some writings on tablets, whose authorship is attributed to Orpheus. This relationship is not specified. The questioned tablets can be interpreted as some oracles of Orpheus, as far he was concerned among the legendary personages, who possessed prophetic abilities. Furthermore, the post mortem oracles of Orpheus were inscribed and sent to their recipients, as shows a fragment of Philostratus (*On heroes*, 28.8-14). Such a plot can be seen in an ancient Greek kylix¹⁴, some gems¹⁵ and several Etruscan mirrors¹⁶ with the prophesying head of Orpheus. The available sources can not explain the connection between the questioned tablets, Haemus Mount and the oracle of Dionysos.¹⁷

(2) Oracle of the Satrians. Traditionally, and not without any reason, when it comes to an oracle of Dionysos in Thrace, most attention is paid to the statement of Herodotus (ca. 484 – 424 BC)¹⁸, who wrote (*Histories*, 7.111.1-2):

¹⁰ DETSCHEW 1957 p. 349 sq.; AVRAMEA 1993 p. 43

¹¹ DETSCHEW 1957 p. 9 sq.

¹² It seems that before the time of Herodotus the modern Rhodope Mountains and their neighbour mountains in south Thrace were called Haemus.

¹³ AUNE 2003 p. 33

¹⁴ GUTHRIE 1993 p. 36; GRAF 2009 p. 38

¹⁵ FURTWÄNGLER 1900 p. 248 sq.; GUTHRIE 1993 p. 36 sq.

¹⁶ DE PUMA 2001 pp. 18-29, fig. 4-9; DE GRUMMOND 2007 pp. 23-40

¹⁷ Furthermore, Orpheus was in closer connection with Apollo, rather than Dionysos, see GUTHRIE 1993 p. 41 sq. See another opinion in HARRISON 1992 p. 454 sq.

¹⁸ Original text after *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (= TLG); English translation after MACAULAY 2003 p. 452

(1) Σάτραι δὲ οὐδενός κω ἀνθρώπων ὑπήκοοι ἐγένοντο, ὅσον ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν, ἀλλὰ διατελεῦσι τὸ μέχρι ἐμεῦ αἰεὶ ἐόντες ἐλεύθεροι μούνοι Θρηίκων· οἱ κέουσι τε γὰρ ὑψηλὰ, ἴδησι τε παντοίησι καὶ χιόνι συνηρεφέα, καὶ εἰσι τὰ πολέμια ἄκροι. (2) οὗτοι τοῦ Διονύσου τὸ μαντήιον εἰσι ἐκτιμένοι· τὸ δὲ μαντήιον τοῦτο ἔστι μὲν ἐπὶ τῶν ὀρέων τῶν ὑψηλοτάτων, Βησσοὶ [Βισσοὶ] δὲ τῶν Σατρέων εἰσι οἱ προφητεύοντες τοῦ ἱεροῦ, πρόμαντις δὲ ἡ χρέωσα κατὰ περ ἐν Δελφοῖσι, καὶ οὐδὲν ποικιλώτερον.

(1) The Satrians, however, never yet became obedient to any man, so far as we know, but they remain up to my time still free, alone of all the Thracians; for they dwell in lofty mountains, which are covered with forest of all kinds and with snow, and also they are very skilful in war. (2) These are they who possess the oracle of Dionysos; which oracle is on their most lofty mountains. Of the Satrians those who act as prophets of the temple are the Bessians; it is a priestess who utters the oracles, as at Delphi; and beyond this there is nothing further of a remarkable character.

It has long been state the very general nature of Herodotus' information. The text shows that the ancient author knows about only one oracle of Dionysos in ancient Thrace. The question of its localization, however, is told very unclear (ἐπὶ τῶν ὀρέων τῶν ὑψηλοτάτων), and therefore to be read in mean that it is located among the lofty mountains and was served by prophets – Bessians, part (?) of the Satrians.¹⁹

The name Bissians (Βισσοὶ), attested in one of the caudexes²⁰, is always replaced by the modern scholars with the ethnonym Bessians (Βησσοὶ)²¹. An interesting here is that the latter are not known to the contemporaries of Herodotus and begin to discover regularly in the sources after Polybius (ca. 200 – 118 BC).

In this oracle the predictions were given by a priestess; in this aspect there was nothing different from the oracle in Delphi.²² It is not clear whether under this should be understood that the mantic session was identical.

The functions of the prophets in the ancient divination are unclear. Some conjecture that they were religious offices in the temple of the Delphic Apollo, who interpreted the answers, given by Pythia. Other says that they just announced the responses, obtained from Pythia. Still others think that the Pythia provided the answers to the enquirers as they have been already formulated by the prophets. It is expressed even a suggestion that the poets in the Delphic sanctuary were identical with the prophets, but again without evidences.²³

(3) Oracle in Crestonia. In an attributed to Aristotle text (Pseudo-Aristotle, On Marvelous Things Heard, 842a 122)²⁴ is written the following:

¹⁹ Besides here, the Satrians are mentioned one more time in the work of Herodotus (Histories, 7.112.1), where is explained that they were among the tribes, which possessed both of gold and of silver mines in Pangaion.

²⁰ GAISFORD 2009 p. 312

²¹ DETSCHEW 1957 p. 57 sq.

²² The Sacred Year in Delphi was divided between Apollo and Dionysos. According to a legend, during the winter months Apollo was by the Hyperboreans in north, while in the meantime Dionysos ruled at Delphi. Namely during the cold season were celebrated festivals of Dionysos and these in honor of Apollo – from spring to autumn. See on this issue ISLER-KERÉNYI 2007 p. 235 sq.; GRAF 2009 p. 139 sq.

²³ After AUNE 2003 p. 31

²⁴ Original text after TLG

Φασὶ δὲ καὶ ἐν τῇ Κραστωνίᾳ παρὰ τὴν Βισαλτῶν χώραν τοὺς ἀλισκομένους λαγῶς δύο ἥπατα ἔχειν, καὶ τόπον τινὰ εἶναι ὅσον πλεθριαῖον, εἰς ὃν ὅτι ἂν εἰσέλθῃ ζῶον ἀποθνήσκει. ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἄλλο αὐτόθι ἱερὸν Διονύσου μέγα καὶ καλόν, ἐν ᾧ τῆς ἐορτῆς καὶ τῆς θυσίας οὔσης λέγεται, ὅταν μὲν ὁ θεὸς εὐετηρίαν μέλλῃ ποιεῖν, ἐπιφαίνεσθαι μέγα σέλας πυρός, καὶ τοῦτο πάντας ὁρᾷν τοὺς περὶ τὸ τέμενος διατρίβοντας, ὅταν δ' ἀκαρπίαν, μὴ φαίνεσθαι τοῦτο τὸ φῶς, ἀλλὰ σκότος ἐπέχειν τὸν τόπον ὥσπερ καὶ τὰς ἄλλας νύκτας.

They say, that the rabbits, caught in Crestonia near the land of the Bisaltians, had two liver [two hearts] and had one spot sizes as one pletar [~1 decare], in which each animal entered, dies. There is also a large and beautiful temple of Dionysos, in which was held a celebration and a sacrifice. When the god intends to make fruitful year, there appeared a great flame of fire, and it all, which are in the sacred area, see it. When the year will be barren, that light does not appeared and darkness covers the site, just as in the other nights.

What is important here is that the predictions were performed by fire; such information is missing in the cited above sources. On the site²⁵ (once a year?) was organized a celebration and was made a sacrifice. Judging by this statement, it seems that the oracle was limited to predictions while the year will be fruitful or not. Nothing is mentioned about the administration of the sanctuary. It is unknown where in Crestonia was situated the oracle.²⁶

(4) Oracle by the Ligyrians. Another text, attributed to Aristotle or to mythographer named Aristocles²⁷, is preserved in the Saturnalia of Macrobius (1.18.1)²⁸, drawn at the end of the 4th or beginning of the 5th century AD:

Haec quae de Apolline diximus possunt etiam de Libero dicta existimari. Nam Aristoteles qui Theologumena scripsit Apollinem et Liberum patrem unum eundemque deum esse quum multis aliis argumentis asserat, etiam apud Ligyreos [Ligireos] ait in Thracia esse adytum Libero consecratum ex quo redduntur oracula, sed in hoc adyto vaticinaturi plurimo mero sumpto, uti apud Clarium aqua pota, effantur oracula.

What was said about the Apollo can be said and for Liber. Aristotle, who wrote „Study of the Gods”, claims that Apollo and Liber Pater are one and the same god, and many other evidence suggests that: even, he says, by the Ligyrians in Thrace was a temple, dedicated to Liber Pater, where predictions are issued, but they pronouncing their prophecies after drinking pure wine; as those on Claros drink water.

Of significance here is the indication about the location of the oracle – in the land of the Ligyrians in Thrace. Unfortunately, the ethnonym²⁹ is unknown from other sources.³⁰ Some scholars give attention to the proximity of this ethnonym with the name of the river Lyginos (Λύγινος)³¹, located on three days south of the Danube, mentioned by Arrian (The Anabasis of Alexander, 1.2.1) in connection with the campaign of Alexander the Great in Thrace in 335

²⁵ Perhaps the author means a cliff, cave or another similar object?

²⁶ Crestonia is located near the river Echeidoros and the lake Bolbe, see DETSCHEW 1957 p. 266 sq.

²⁷ He was author of a work entitled „Study of the Gods”, see KASTER 2011 p. 244, not. 470

²⁸ Latin text after KASTER 2011 p. 244

²⁹ DETSCHEW 1957 p. 276

³⁰ The Ligyrians are associated with the ethnonym Digirians/Digerians or with the adjective λιγυρός, -οι, see ΦΟΛ 1991 p. 153 sq.

³¹ ЙОРДАНОВ 2000 p. 109 with the older literature

BC.³² However, both names are not found in other sources and are not generally characteristic of the Thracian language remains.

(5) An unknown oracle in Thrace. The later direct evidence about prediction, received in a Thracian oracle of Dionysos, is preserved by Suetonius (The Life of Augustus, 94.6)³³:

Octavio postea, cum per secreta Thraciae exercitum duceret, in Liberi patris luco barbara caerimonia de filio consulenti, idem affirmatum est a sacerdotibus, quod infuso super altaria mero tantum flammae emicuisset, ut supergressa fastigium templi ad caelum usque ferretur, unique omnino Magno Alexandro apud easdem aras sacrificanti simile prouenisset ostentum.

Later, when Octavius was leading an army through remote parts of Thrace, and in the grove of Liber Pater consulted the priests about his son with barbarian rites, they made the same prediction [that the ruler of the world had been born]; since such a pillar of flame sprang forth from the wine that was poured over the altar, that it rose above the temple roof and mounted to the very sky, and such an omen had befallen no one save Alexander the Great, when he offered sacrifice at the same altar.

It's suggested that Suetonius excerpt the story from the autobiography of Augustus (written in 24 BC) directly or through the mediation of Titus Livy.³⁴ This is the only exactly dated prediction, received in the Thracian lands, because Gaius Octavius was proconsul in the Roman province of Macedonia between 60 – 58 BC and his campaign in Thrace is dated to 59 BC.³⁵

This passage does not tell neither for an oracle, nor for a sanctuary, but for a sacred forest, or rather to a temple and surrounding park. For a „sacred forest” in Thrace mentions and Cassius Dio during the presentation of the Thracian campaigns of M. Licinius Crassus in 29 – 28 BC (Roman history, 51.24.5): in the pursuit of the Bastarnians near the Danube „some of them hid in a sacred forest and were burned along with it (... και οι λοιποι οι μὲν ἐς ἄλλος τι καταφυγόντες περιεπρήσθησαν...)”. However, there is no proof whether the sacred forest was one and the same.

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The main contributions of the article so far were a systematization of the ancient sources and a critical commentary of the information that they provided. In the following lines is shed more light on several important aspects of the available sources. Its aim is to convince the reader that we haven't work with one or two but with several oracles of Dionysos in Thrace.

(1) Date of the sources. All of the available information dates from the pre-Roman age. If we bring out the problematic dating of the two scholia to Euripides (Alcestis, 968; Hecuba, 1267), the earliest sources are not later by the first half of the 5th century BC, when works Herodotus (Histories, 7.111.1-2). The last oracle was received in 59 BC (Suetonius, The Life of Augustus, 94.6). Between these two chronological points are dated the rest of our sources,

³² ИЛИЕВ 2011 pp. 276-284

³³ The original text is after Packard Humanities Institute / Latin Literature.

³⁴ DEN HENGST 2010 p. 73 sq.

³⁵ СΥΜΕ 1999 p. 138 sq.

attributed to Aristotle (Macrobius, Saturnalia 1.18.1) and Pseudo-Aristotle (On Marvelous Things Heard, 842a 122).

It can only be supposed why there is no information about oracles of Dionysos in Roman times, when the geography of the Thracian lands is better known than ever before.³⁶

(2) Localization problems of the oracles. Oracles of Dionysos in Thrace are not yet localized, although the presented above more or less detailed information about their geographical position.

Traditionally is believed that an oracle of Dionysos was situated in the Mount Pangaion.³⁷ Besides two of the above sources³⁸ such a hypothesis is supported by the following verse of Euripides (Rhesos, 972), which is referred to Orpheus or Rhesos³⁹: „[...] just as the prophet of Bacchus dwelt in a grotto beneath Pangaeus ... (Βάκχου προφήτης ὅστε Παγγαίου πέτρων ὄκησε)”. Besides this, in the same area some other ancient sources about the cult of Dionysos are known. In the vicinity of the city of Drama was found a sanctuary of that god with a rich epigraphic repertoire.⁴⁰ This sanctuary is probably identical with the Hill of Dionysos near Philippi, reported by Appian (The Civil Wars, 4.106.1). There is even a tribe called Diony(sii), as evidenced by several coins.⁴¹

An attempt to localization of any oracle of Dionysos will be prevented by the very general character of the available information and the still insufficient archaeological data. There are formulated some observations on the characteristics of the Thracian sanctuaries⁴², but divination practices are not detected. In such a situation the forced interpretation of the so-called Perperikon in the East Rhodope Mountains⁴³ not only as the oracle of the Bessians, but also as the one and only oracle of Dionysos in Thrace is insufficiently supported by sources.⁴⁴

(3) Terms, which are used to assign the objects. In the two scholia to Euripides (Alcestis, 968; Hecuba, 1267) it comes to μαντήιον, while Herodotus (Histories, 7.111.1-2) reports about a μαντήιον and a ἱερόν, having in mind one and the same object. Among the other available sources only Pseudo-Aristotle (842a 122) tells about a ἱερόν, who also had a τέμενος. The oracle, which was known to Macrobius (Saturnalia, 1.18.1) is labeled „adytum Libero”. Suetonius (The Life of Augustus, 94.6) narrates for a „lucus”, having at disposal „templum” and „altarium”.

Some scholars accept that another two sources were also connected with an oracle of Dionysos in Thrace.⁴⁵

³⁶ Augustus is not the only one Roman emperor, whose future was predicted in Thrace. When the principate of Domitian was drawing to a close, the future emperor Hadrian was transferred to the province of Lower Moesia: „There, it is said, he heard from an astrologer the same prediction of his future power which had been made, as he already knew, by his great-uncle, Aelius Hadrianus, a master of astrology... (ibi [in inferiorem Moesiam] a mathematico quodam de futuro imperio id dicitur comperisse quod a patruo magnum Aelio Hadriano peritia caelestium callente praedictum esse compererat)” – Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian, 2.4.

³⁷ ΣΑΜΣΑΡΗΣ 1980 p. 205 sq.; CURNOW 2004 p. 84

³⁸ See Scholia ad Euripides, Hecuba 1267 and Herodotus, Histories 7.111.1-2 in connection with 7.112.1.

³⁹ PERDRIZET 1910 p. 27

⁴⁰ ΚΟΥΚΟΥΛΗ-ΧΡΥΣΑΝΘΑΚΗ 1996 p. 67-107; PILHOFER 2009 p. 544 sq.

⁴¹ LARSON 2001 p. 172 with literature.

⁴² DOMARADZKI 1994 pp. 69-108; NEKHRIZOV 2005 pp. 153-158

⁴³ The main argument is an open hall with a round altar in its center, see last SEARS 2013 p. 29

⁴⁴ In recent years this localization is pushed forward by the media; see discussion in ТАЧЕВА 2007 p. 251 sq.

⁴⁵ БОТЕВА 1997 p. 297 sq.

Macrobius (Saturnalia, 1.18.11) noted „that in Thrace the Sun and Liber are considered the same: they call him Sebadius and worship him in a splendid ritual, as Alexander [Polyhistor] writes, and on the hill Zilmissus they dedicate to him a round temple, its center open to the sky. The temple’s round shape points to the sun’s shape, and light is let in through the roof to show that the sun purifies all things when it shines down from on high, and because the whole world opens up when the sun rises.”⁴⁶ The text does not mention an oracle, but a temple (aedis).

Cassius Dio (Roman History, 51.25.5) tells the following: „He [M. Licinius Crassus] overran the rest of the country [Thrace] except the territory of the Odrisians. These he spared because they are attached to the service of Dionysos, and had come to meet him on this occasion without their arms; and he also granted them the land in which they magnify the god, taking it away from the Bessians who were occupying it.”⁴⁷ This passage is associated with an oracle of Dionysos in ancient Thrace, although the text itself provides no reason for such an interpretation. It is expressly stated that it is a land (χώρα), in which Dionysos was worshiped; there are no indications of its location.⁴⁸

(4) Officials of the oracles. Major role in the existence of any oracle had its officials. Only two of the above cited ancient passages contain such information: in the oracle of the Satrians there was a priestess (χρέωσα) and unknown number of prophets (προφήται); Suetonius reports only for priests (sacerdotes).

There are known several priests of Dionysos in pre-Roman Thrace. An inscription, found in Seuthopolis, was set up by Amaistas, son of Medista, priest of Dionysos.⁴⁹ In 11 BC one Vologaesius, a Thracian of the Bessians, priest of Dionysos (Βουλογαίσις Θραξ Βησσός, ἱερεὺς τοῦ παρ’ αὐτοῖς Διονύσου) „gained followers by practising many divinations (προσεποιήσατο τινὰς πολλὰ θειάσας)” and led a revolt of the Bessians (Cassius Dio, Roman History, 54.34.5-7). Several priests are mentioned in epigraphic documents from Dionysopolis and Mesambria.⁵⁰ During the Roman period of control over Thrace are known over a dozen inscriptions related to the cult of Dionysos; some of them contain religious offices and organizations, but any connection with divination cannot be found.

(5) Details about the mantic session. The two scholia to Euripides does not provide information on this issue.

Herodotus reported that in the Thracian oracle of Dionysos there was a priestess (ἡ χρέωσα), who utters the oracles, as at Delphi.

According to Pseudo-Aristotle in Crestonia predictions were performed by fire. The emergence of a large flame of fire was a good omen and foretold fertility. However, it is not

⁴⁶ „Item in Thracia eundem haberi solem atque Liberum accipimus, quem illi Sebadium nuncupantes magna religione celebrant, ut Alexander scribit: eique deo in colle Zilmisso aedes dicata est specie rotunda, cuius medium interpatet tectum. Rotunditas aedis monstrat huiusce sideris speciem: summoque tecto lumen admittitur, ut appareat solem cuncta vertice summo lustrare lucis inmissu, et quia oriente eo universa patefiunt.” Original text and English translation after KASTER 2011 p. 250 sq.

⁴⁷ Τὰ δ’ ἄλλα πλὴν τῆς τῶν Ὀδρυσῶν γῆς κατέδραμε. τούτων γάρ κατέδραμε. τούτων γάρ, ὅτι τῷ τε Διονύσῳ πρόσκεινται καὶ τότε ἄνευ τῶν ὄπλων ἀπὴντησάν οἱ, ἐφείσατο· καὶ αὐτοῖς καὶ τὴν χώραν ἐν ἧ καὶ τὸν θεὸν ἀγάλλουσιν ἐχαρίσατο, Βησσούς τοὺς κατέχοντας αὐτὴν ἀφελόμενος. Original text after TLG.

⁴⁸ In the periphery of Rhodope Mountains is found an inscription, which states: „Border of the sacred land (ὄρος ἱερᾶς χώρας)”, see ΛΟΥΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ ET AL. 2005 No. 434 (from the village of Lutra, district of Evros). The editors of the inscription connected it to land of the sanctuary of the Samothracian gods in Traianopolis, which is known from other similar inscription.

⁴⁹ ΜΙΗΛΙΩΝ 1961 No. 1732; ΤΑΤΣΕΒΑ 2000 p. 43

⁵⁰ ΜΙΗΛΙΩΝ 1970 No. 13, 13 bis, 20, 22, 308

specified what actions preceded the emergence of this „big flame of fire”, which was seen by everyone in the temenos.

Another attributed to Aristotle fragment specifies that in the temple of Liber Pater, the Latin equivalent of Dionysos, was prophesied by drinking of wine (Macrobius, Saturnalia, 1.18.1).

Suetonius claims that Gaius Octavius had been consulted through „barbarian rites” for the future of his son. The priests made the prophecy by pouring of wine on (a burning?) altar and in consequence of this „it rose above the temple roof and mounted to the very sky”.

* * *

Summing up, it is clear that any of the quoted ancient authors know about only one oracle of Dionysos in ancient Thrace. However, there are significant differences in some important aspects, on which was already paid attention. In the Thracian lands there were several oracles of Dionysos. One of them probably was in the area of Pangaion Mount, but the others are not yet localized.

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