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Chapter 1

Barbarian Bond: Thracian Bendis among the Athenians

Corinne Ondine Pache

In this chapter, I gather the evidence for the Athenian cult of the Thracian goddess Bendis, who was officially worshipped both by Thracians and by Athenian citizens from the end of the fifth century B.C. on. I also compare the historical record with the literary characterizations of the Thracians, and I examine the connection between religious, political, and ethnic identity and the ways in which the cult of Bendis reflects ambivalent Athenian attitudes toward their northern neighbors. The cult of Bendis in Athens reproduces on the level of ritual the polarity of Greeks versus barbarians that exists on the level of myth. While the mythical level of such a polarity is well-known through the studies of François Hartog, Edith Hall, and others, the ritual dimension needs further study. This chapter about Thracian Bendis addresses that need.

Robert Parker compares the status of Thrace among Athenians from the Classical period to what America was for Europeans in earlier centuries: a savage and frightening land that could not be ignored for economic and strategic reasons, “a land of promise and peril.”¹ The Thracians are often described as primitive and savage beings in the literary sources, but in fact the Athenians at the end of the fifth century enthusiastically welcomed the Thracian goddess Bendis in their city and entrusted her sanctuary and the annual festival in her honor to an association comprised of ethnic Thracians.

1. Parker 1996:174.

Thracians and Greeks

Before proceeding to Bendis and the Thracians in Athens, I propose to take a quick look at various Greek views of the Thracians in Thrace. From Homer to the tragedians, Thracians in Greek literature are often depicted as alien, violent people. In Homer, the Thracians have not yet acquired the explicitly barbarian image they have in Herodotus, and they are in some ways similar to Greeks, except that they fight on the side of the Trojans.² In the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus and his companions leave Troy, Thrace is the first stop on their way back to Greece, and Odysseus and his men engage in a day-long confrontation with the Kikonians. Odysseus describes them as men who are very skilled at fighting on horses, and who also know how to fight on foot (9.49-50). They outnumber and eventually overpower Odysseus and his companions. The Kikonians live in a territory familiar to the Homeric heroes and are worthy adversaries for them.

In Book 5 of his *History*, Herodotus describes the Thracians in some detail and makes it very clear that they are not at all like Greeks. The population of Thrace is greater than that of any other country in the world except India, he tells us, and if they could only be led by a single ruler or could unite, they would be the most powerful nation on earth and no one could cope with them (Herodotus 5.3):

ἄμαχόν τ' ἂν εἶη καὶ πολλῶν κράτιστον πάντων ἔθνέων κατὰ
γυῶμην τήν ἐμήν.

But since they are not united, they stay weak and manageable.

The Thracians also have customs that are very strange from a Greek point of view: some of them, the Getae, think they are immortal (ἀθανατίζοντες) and send messengers to their god Salmoxis every five years by throwing them onto upturned javelins (4.94)—if one of the messengers survives the ordeal, they put it down to his own bad character, tell him what they think of him, and “send” another messenger in his stead. Others mourn and lament the birth of children, thinking of all the misfortunes awaiting them, while they hold joyful funerals for those who have been freed from all evils and have reached a state of perfect blessedness (5.4). Some Thracians are polygamous; when a man dies, his many wives compete to prove who was the best loved of them all, and the winner is slain on her husband’s tomb (5.5).

2. In the *Iliad*, they are named as allies of the Trojans (2.846, 17.73).

Herodotus then goes on to describe the customs common to the rest of the Thracians: it is customary to sell children; they do not protect young girls, who can do whatever they wish; but they are very jealous of their wives, whom they buy for a great price from their parents. A tattoo (τὸ . . . ἐστ(χ)θαί) is a sign of nobility, lack of it a sign of baseness. Inactivity is considered most noble, while cultivating the land is despised. The life of the warrior and plunderer is the most honored (5.6). In another passage (8.116), Herodotus describes a Thracian king’s cruel treatment of his six sons: they join the Persian army against their father’s orders, and after they come back unharmed from the expedition against Greece, their father punishes them by tearing their eyes out. In short, Thracian customs according to Herodotus are very much the opposite of Greek customs.

When it comes to religion, Herodotus is very succinct and identifies the Thracian gods with Greek names. The Thracians worship only three gods: Ares, Dionysos, and Artemis, while their princes, unlike the rest of the Thracians, worship Hermes most of all and claim to be descended from him (5.7). Classical authors are famous for identifying foreign gods with their own, but both Ares and Dionysos may in fact have Thracian connections: Ares, the savage war god, seems to have been worshipped in Thrace already in prehistoric times, and Dionysos’ first home, before he became part of the Greek pantheon, is reportedly in Southern Thrace, where he was known under local cult names such as Sabazios.³ Artemis is the only one of the three who does not have any Thracian connection, and she is usually identified as Bendis, with whom she shares the same hunting costume.

During the fifth century, the tragedians develop their own variation on the theme of the mythical barbarian,⁴ and help create a strange web of associations between the Athenians and the Thracians. In his *Tereus*, Sophocles transforms the traditionally Megarian eponymous hero into a Thracian king.⁵ Through his marriage with the Athenian Procne, Tereus provides a justification for the intriguing claim that there exists a συγγένεια, a kinship, between the Thracians and the Athenians.⁶

Thucydides also devotes a brief excursus to the Thracians, in a somewhat unusual ethnographic digression. At the end of Book 2, the Thracians start on an

3. How and Wells 1928, 2:3.

4. Hall, E. 1989:102.

5. Hall, E. 1989:103-104; cf. Pausanias 1.41.9, about the tomb of Tereus at Megara. Tereus is first attested in Aeschylus’s *Suppliant Maidens* (60), though it is unclear whether he is Megarian or Thracian in this context.

6. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 7.2.31 and 7.3.39. On *suggeneia*, see Jones 1999, Hornblower 1996:61ff., and Curty 1995, especially 224-241.

expedition to invade Macedonia, partly as a result of the treaty between Sitalkes, the Thracian king, and Athens (2.29). Thucydides describes the different tribes summoned by Sitalkes; he also describes the physical location of Thrace and the custom of the Odrysian kings to request gifts, which is the opposite of the Persian Kings' custom of giving gifts (2.95-98).

Thucydides himself owned property in Thrace and might have had relatives there, which helps explain his interest in the Thracians. Earlier in Book 2, when he describes the alliance between the Athenians and the Thracians, he takes great pains to distance the mythical Tereus from the Thracian king Teres, the father of Sitalkes. Sitalkes himself is described as a noble king who keeps his promise to Athens even as Athens abandons him in Macedonia. Thucydides also relates how Sadokos, the son of Sitalkes, was made an Athenian citizen in 431 (2.29).⁷

Although Thucydides seems somewhat partial to the Thracians in Book 2, in Book 7 he includes a description of the brutal way in which Thracian mercenaries attack Mykalessos, a Boeotian city, in 413. There the Thracians burst into the unprotected city, plunder houses and temples, and systematically kill everyone they come upon; they break into a school and savagely kill all the children there (7.29).

Bendis and the Thracians in Athens

The first literary mention of Bendis is in a fragment of Hipponax, the sixth century B.C. satirical poet, who names Bendis as a Thracian goddess along with Kybebe.⁸ The next extant literary reference to the Thracian goddess is in a comedy by Cratinus, *The Thracian Women*, dated to 442 B.C.⁹ In a fragment, Cratinus calls Bendis δῖλογγον, "two-speared." Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine in what way Bendis and the Thracians were portrayed in this play, of which only a few fragments are extant. The mention of Bendis, however, does show that the Thracian goddess must have been familiar to the Athenian audience by the 440s. Bendis is also depicted on a cup dating from the same decade and on a skyphos from around 425 B.C.: on the cup, a woman is running toward the left, her right arm extended, holding two spears in her left hand.¹⁰ On

7. Also mentioned in Aristophanes's *Acharnians* 134-150, produced in 425.

8. Hipponax, fr. 127: καὶ Διὸς κούρη Κυβήβη καὶ Θρηκίη Βενδῖς. See Masson 1962:89, and 168 for commentary.

9. Fr. 85 in Kassel/Austin 1983; about date see Simms 1988:60.

10. Verone, Mus. Teatro Romano 52 (ex-coll. Alessandri)—*ARV²* 1023, 147, Phiale Painter = LIMC I.

the skyphos, Bendis is identified with an inscription.¹¹ Bendis, then, seems to have been well known and popular in Athens by the second half of the fifth century B.C.

Simultaneously with the treaty of alliance with Sitalkes in 431 B.C. and the naturalization of his son Sadokos described by Thucydides, an important change occurred in the status of Thracians in Athenian civic life: sometime between 434 and 429, Bendis appears in the accounts of the Treasurers of the Other Gods.¹² Her inclusion indicates that the Thracian goddess had a public shrine in Athens.

Plato gives us the only extant description of the Bendideia, the festival for Bendis, in the *Republic*, whose dramatic date is generally put at around 411 B.C. At the beginning of the dialogue (327a), Socrates says "I intended to say a prayer to the goddess, and I also wanted to see how they would manage the festival, since this was its first celebration. I thought our own procession was a fine one and that which the Thracians had organized was no less outstanding." A little later, Socrates is persuaded to stay in the Piraeus to see the torch race on horseback in honor of the goddess and the all-night festival, the *pannukhís* (328a).

As the cult of the Thracian goddess Bendis was officially recognized, a sanctuary was established on the Munychia hill in the Piraeus at the end of the fifth century B.C. Xenophon describes the site in his *Hellenica* (2.4.10-11) in a passage about the battle at the Piraeus between the forces of Thrasybulus and the army of the Thirty in 403. No remains of the shrine of Bendis have been discovered, but three fragments from a late fifth century stele with an inscription mentioning Bendis and her cult were found on the Munychia hill in this century.¹³

Foreign cults in and of themselves were not uncommon in classical Athens, but the cult of Bendis is unique in that it was a public cult under the control of noncitizen Thracians who were organized into *orgeónes*. As a third century B.C. inscription boasts:¹⁴

11. Tübingen Univ. S/10 1347 = LIMC 2; inscribed with ΘΕΜΙΣ ΒΕΝ(ΔΙΣ).

12. *IG I²* 310, line 208. Since the records of the Treasurers are not extant for the years between 434 and 430, Bendis must have been introduced among the Other Gods sometime between 434 and 429 B.C. For summary of inscriptions mentioning Bendis, see *Appendix*.

13. *IG I³* 136; cf. Ferguson 1949. About controversial date of inscription, see Simms 1988:64-66. Nilsson 1960 and Ferguson date it to 429 B.C., Roussel to 413 B.C., closer to the traditional dating of the Bendideia in the *Republic*. On the cult of Bendis in Athens, see also Foucart 1903 and Blomart 1996-1997.

14. *IG II²* 1283.4-7, dated from the third century B.C.

ἐπειδὴ τοῦ δήμου τοῦ Ἀθηναίων δεδωκότος τοῖς Ἰθαίοις μόνοις τῶν ἄλλων ἐθνῶν τὴν ἐγκτήσιον καὶ τὴν ἰδρυσιον τοῦ ἱεροῦ κατὰ τὴν μᾶλινταίαν τὴν ἐν Δωδώνῃ καὶ τὴν ποντιῆν πέντε ἀπὸ τῆς ἐστίας τῆς ἐκ τοῦ πρυτανείου

to the Thracians alone of all foreign peoples has the Athenian people granted the right to acquire land and found a shrine, in agreement with the oracle from Dodona, and to lead a procession from the Prytaneum.

Orgeōnes are typically members of a group devoted to performing sacred rites, *orgia*, for heroes or gods. A law quoted by Philochoros in the fourth book of his *Atthis* proclaims that phratries must admit *orgeōnes*, which show that *orgeōnes* are by definition also citizens.¹⁵ The dating of this law is controversial, but Ferguson makes a case for dating it to the time of Solon.¹⁶ An exception to the law thus was made when the Thracian *orgeōnes* in charge of the cult of Bendis were granted the right to organize themselves as *orgeōnes* without being members of a phratry.

Some argue this exceptional status of Bendis should be linked with Athens' foreign policy in Thrace, while others think that it was necessary to placate Bendis in connection with the outbreak of the plague in 430 and an oracle.¹⁷ One or both of these reasons could have motivated the introduction of the cult in Athens, but Bendis' popularity among both Thracians and Athenian citizens points to a somewhat more complex process of assimilation: her appeal goes much deeper, and lasts much longer, than is warranted by a diplomatic concession to Thrace or by a palliative in time of crisis.

The Thracians in charge of the worship of Bendis in Athens introduced a cult that quickly became popular with the local population. Besides the Thracian *orgeōnes* in charge of the Munychia sanctuary and sacrifices, there existed a parallel organization of Athenian citizens who participated in the annual festival of the Bendideia and also performed sacrifices in the sanctuary alongside the Thracians. Moreover, Bendis was popular not only in Athens; there is also evidence that she was worshipped in Corinth and Salamis.¹⁸

15. Fr. 94, cf. Suda, s.v. *orgeōnes* and Harpocration s.v. *gennētai*.

16. Ferguson 1944:69.

17. Athens's foreign policy, Nilsson 1960:68 (179); plague and the oracle, Ferguson 1949:161-162.

18. About Corinth, cf. Hartwig 1897:18-22. About Salamis and the *thiasotai* of Bendis

By the third quarter of the fourth century B.C., the feast of the Bendideia in the Piraeus was surpassed only by the City Dionysia and the Olympia in terms of number of animals sacrificed.¹⁹ In 334 B.C., the state received 457 drachmas for the hides of the animals killed in the Bendideia, which probably was the result of a hecatomb.²⁰ As the cult was growing, another temple was built for Bendis in Athens itself by a second group of Thracian *orgeōnes*. The same third century B.C. inscription that describes the original establishment of the cult of Bendis on the Munychia hill details the arrangements made by the Thracian *orgeōnes* from the Piraeus with the group from the city.²¹

While ritual practice is often described by the ancient Greeks as one way in which ethnic groups define themselves (for example in the famous passage in Herodotus 8.144.2, where he describes common shrines and sacrifices as one of the components of *to hellēnikon*), the cult of Bendis offers a complex test case of Herodotus' assertion: two different ethnic groups worship the same goddess, participate in the same sacrifices and festival, are organized into similar associations bearing the same name, yet never mix or fuse into one single group.

How can the distinction between Greek and barbarian subsist when members of both groups engage in the same ritual? Although the rhetoric of alterity is at work in the Greek definition of the Thracians as barbarians in myth, the historical record shows that the Athenians' view of the Thracians was strikingly ambivalent: barbarians and *suggeneis*, savages and *orgeōnes*, feared and despised, yet the inspiration for a popular and long-lasting cult and festival in which both Athenians and Thracians participated alongside one another. The Athenian cult of the Thracian Bendis indeed both reflects the Athenians' ambivalence toward the Thracians, and helps illuminate the ancient Greek polar approach to the religious and political dimensions of ethnicity. By welcoming the barbarian goddess in their midst, the Athenians manage to characterize the cult of Bendis as foreign while simultaneously adopting it as their own. By institutionalizing and incorporating a barbarian ritual into the cults of the *polis*, the Athenians can both participate in the ritual while also remaining distinct from their Thracian counterparts. The cult of Bendis in Athens thus mirrors on the level of ritual the polarity of Greeks versus barbarians that exists on the level of myth: both Thracians and Athenians perform the same ritual side by side, while

there, see *IG* II² 1317, 1317b, and *SEG* 2.10.

19. In that same year, 858 drachmas for the city Dionysia and 671 drachmas for the Olympia; cf. Nilsson 1960:64 (175).

20. Ferguson 1944:101; *IG* II² 1496, line 86.

21. *IG* II² 1283.

the notional boundary between Greek and barbarian does not collapse and categories remain stable.

Appendix

Bendis on Inscriptions

Bendis at the Piraeus:

- IG I*² 310 line 208, 429 B.C.—Bendis in accounts of Treasurers of the Other Gods
- IG I*³ 136 c. 410 B.C., close to the dramatic date of *Republic*, decree of the *demos* concerning sacrifices, *pannukhis*, oracle, procession, statue, etc.
- IG II*² 1496 Aa line 86, 334 B.C., the state receives 457 drachmas for hides of animals sacrificed at feast of the Bendideia

Thracian Orgeōnes:

- IG II*² 1284 third century B.C.—meeting on the eighth day of the month and crowns of oak leaves

Citizen Orgeōnes:

- IG II*² 1361 late fourth century B.C.—fee for sacrifice—meetings on the second of the month
- IG II*² 1255 337/6 B.C.—in honor of citizen *hieropoioi*
- IG II*² 1256 329 B.C., with relief of Bendis—crowns of olive leaves
- IG II*² 1324 late fourth B.C.—crowns of olive leaves

Bendis in Athens:

- IG II*² 1283 third century B.C., second association of Thracian *orgeōnes* with sanctuary in Athens

Bendis in Salamis:

- IG II*² 1317, 1317b 272 to c. 240 B.C.—*thiasotai* of Bendis on Salamis