

From Kingdom to Province: Thrace Under Roman Control

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Abstract

This study examines the gradual integration of Thrace into the Roman sphere from the Hellenistic conflicts of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC to the eventual formation of the province of Thracia in AD 46. Thrace's strategic location made it crucial for Rome, functioning both as a buffer zone and a key land route to the eastern provinces. The Thracian kings played a significant role as Rome's allies and later as client rulers before the region was fully absorbed into the empire. Despite Romanization efforts, the province retained strong elements of Hellenic culture, with Greek remaining the dominant language. The Roman administrative system facilitated infrastructure development, urbanization and economic expansion. This research highlights the dynamic interplay between conquest and assimilation, demonstrating how Thrace transitioned from a tumultuous frontier region into an integral part of the Roman world.

Keywords: Thrace, Rome, Romanization, provincia Thracia, Hellenization, Roman Empire, Balkan history.

1. Rome and Thrace in the 2nd–1st centuries BC

With the establishment of the Roman province of Macedonia after 148 BC, Thrace became a strategic area for Rome, as it was a border region, but more importantly – it was the shortest land route to the eastern Roman provinces. At the same time, Macedonia inherited the vulnerability of its northern borders, which often attracted plundering raids by neighboring tribes of Thracians, Illyrians and Celts, with the most active being the warlike Celtic tribe of the Scordisci. Probably around 141 BC, the Romans suffered a significant defeat by the latter (Epit. *Oxyr.* 54). The next recorded large-scale attack occurred around 119 BC, when the Romans, after great efforts, repelled a massive invasion by the Scordisci and their allies, the Maedi, led by their king Tipas.¹ Rome apparently recognized the seriousness of the situation, and therefore, in 114 BC, instead of the usual praetor, the consul Gaius Porcius Cato was appointed as the governor of Macedonia. However, he suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Scordisci, losing his entire army in the battle (Liv. *Per.* 63). Although in the following years the Romans inflicted several defeats on the northern barbarians (Jul. Obs. 108), in 92 BC, the Maedi caused significant devastation (Jul. Obs. 113), and in 88 BC, the Thracians once again attacked Macedonia (Livy *Per.* 74, 76).²

¹ Brennan, 2000: 521-522.

² Delev, 2014: 137.

- Thracian resistance to Rome persisted through revolts, particularly in 21 and 26 AD.
- By splitting the Thracian kingdom in 12 AD, Augustus made a strategic mistake.
- The governor of provincia Thracia was subordinate to the governor of Moesia.

According to Walbank, Rome's policy in the region involved frequent punitive expeditions into the interior of Thrace, aimed at looting and weakening the native tribes, while also securing the northern borders of Macedonia. By capturing the coastal plain of Aegean Thrace and the Thracian Chersonese in 133 BC, the Romans gained control over the main river outlets of the Hebrus (Maritsa) and Nestus (Mesta), securing key strategic and economic routes to the Aegean. From that point on, the Thracian tribes were confined to the interior, becoming increasingly reliant on Rome's will and control.³ The Romans were able to establish a permanent presence in Thrace only in 100 BC with the victory of the Macedonian governor Didius over the Caeni in the hinterland of the Thracian Chersonese (Flor. 1.39; Ruf. Fest. 9; Amm. Marc. 27.4.10). The conquered land, the first territorial loss of Thrace from the Romans, was turned into *strategia* Caenica and placed under the military control of the Macedonian governor, who was obliged to stay there for 60 days annually in order to oversee the taxes and ensure the safety of the Romans and their allies. Only then did it become possible to continue the Via Egnatia toward Perinthus and Byzantium.⁴

Around 110–100 BC, large regions of eastern and southeastern Thrace, as well as the Black Sea coastline and the Greek colonies, came under the influence of the Pontic king Mithridates VI Eupator (120–63 BC) (App. *Mithr.* 15.41; Iust. *Epit.* 38.3; Cass. Dio 36.9). During the First Mithridatic War (89–85 BC), Thracians fought on both sides. Dromichaetes joined Mithridates' side, hinting he probably commanded Getic troops (App. *Myth.* 5.32, 6.41). In 86 BC, however, the Odrysian king Sadalas supported Sulla with cavalry, commanded by Amadocus, son of Teres.

During the Third Mithridatic War (74–63 BC), Eupator had control over southeastern and coastal Thrace by the end of 72 BC or early 71 BC, until they were captured by the Republican army of Marcus Lucullus. Lucullus, a close ally of Sulla, the Roman consul in 73 BC and proconsul of Macedonia, led the two legions from Macedonia. Initially, he launched an attack on southern Thrace and the Rhodopes. After prolonged and bloody battles, he defeated the Bessi, allies of Mithridates. Lucullus then captured Uscudama and Cabyle (Eutropius 6.10). Then he shifted eastward and targeted the Greek cities on the western Black Sea coast (Sallust *Hist.* 4.18). Apollonia Pontica, a Mithridatic stronghold, resisted, but the city was eventually besieged and looted by the Romans (Strabo 7.6.1). During this campaign, Lucullus seized the famous bronze statue of Apollo (about 15 meters high), crafted by Calamis in the mid-5th century BC, and sent it to the Capitolium in Rome (Pliny 4.92, 34.39). Soon after, Lucullus was summoned back to Italy to help defeat the slave revolt led by Spartacus (73–71 BC).⁵

During the whole first half of the 1st century BC Thracian attacks on Macedonia were followed by Roman retaliation. Governor Gaius Scribonius Curio (75–73 BC) fought against the Dardanians and reached the Danube to the north (Livy *Per.* 92, 95). Gaius Antonius Hybrida (62–60 BC) attacked the Moesi and Dardanians but was defeated (Livy *Per.* 103). Gaius Octavius (60–59 BC) defeated the Bessi, but he also visited their sanctuary of Dionysus, where he received an oracle that his son would be the ruler of the world (Suetonius *Aug.* 3.2; 94.5–6).

³ Walbank, 1981: 22.

⁴ Tacheva, 2004: 19. See also Petkov, 2011: 104–111.

⁵ Paunov, 2021: 66.

In October 42 BC, the Battle of Philippi determined the fate of Rome.⁶ An active part in the battle took the brothers Rhascus and Rhescuporis, who jointly ruled the Thracian Sapaean kingdom. The threat from the Roman conflict forced them to hedge their bets: Rhascus joined the triumvirs, while Rhescuporis sided with the murderers of Caesar. Each of them had 3,000 Thracian cavalry at their disposal, and they tried to earn trust and gratitude so that the one who ended up on the winning side could later plead for forgiveness for his brother. Rhescuporis helped the army of Brutus and Cassius, which had been blocked, by leading them along a path considered impassable, through the “Sapaean mountain”, and brought them into the plain of Philippi, securing a good position for the republicans before the decisive battle. His brother Rhascus, having anticipated this unexpected maneuver, timely warned the triumvirs about what was happening, saving them from being trapped behind the republicans, allowing them to retreat and unite with the main forces of Octavian and Antony (App. *B Civ.* 4.11-17).⁷

Despite the three major campaigns led by Lucullus, Hybrida, and Octavius in the 70s and 60s BC,⁸ the situation on Macedonia’s northern border remained unstable until the decisive campaign of Marcus Licinius Crassus against the Serdi, Moesi and Bastarnae in 29–28 BC. His main opponents were the Bastarnae, who invaded deep into Thrace through the frozen Danube and attacked the Dentheletae, who were Roman allies. After the Bastarnae were heavily defeated and driven beyond the Danube, Crassus defeated the Moesi and the Getae in the Lower Danube region. In the interior, the lands of the rebellious Maedi and the Serdi were devastated and subdued with exceptional cruelty – the hands of all prisoners were cut off. He then devastated all of Thrace, except for the lands of the Odrysians, as they had welcomed him unarmed. He also took revenge on the Bessi by handing over their sanctuary of Dionysus to the Odrysians, under the pretext that they worshiped this god (Cass. Dio 51.23-27), which caused a major revolt in 13/12 BC (see below). The Thracian lands conquered by Crassus along the Macedonian border were placed under the control of the Macedonian provincial governors, who, along with their proconsular authority, were often also pro-praetorian legates of Augustus.⁹

The first Roman efforts to construct a road in Moesia can be traced back to ca. 10–6 BC, when Cn. Cornelius Lentulus garrisoned the first Roman troops (Flor. 2.28). This led to the creation of the Danubian road, or Via Danubia, which ran along the southern bank of the river, connecting Singidunum and Viminacium through Ratiaria and Oescus to Novae. Later, during the reign of Nero (54–68) and the Flavian dynasty (69–96), the road was extended eastward to Durostorum, Noviodunum and Troesmis. Since the creation of the province of Moesia in c. 15 AD, the garrison ranged from 2 to 4 legions, equating to a force of 11 000 to 22,000 soldiers.¹⁰

⁶ See Bengtson, 1977: 139-151.

⁷ Delev, 2014: 142.

⁸ Other campaigns worth to mention are the ones of Lucius Manlius Torquatus (64–63 BC) and Lucius Calpurnius Piso (57–56 BC) (Broughton, 1952: 163, 169; 202-203, 210).

⁹ Tacheva, 2004: 21.

¹⁰ The date when Moesia was established is highly disputable, with the entire debate relying on two sources: Tac. *Ann.* 1.80 and Cass. Dio 58.25.4. For various suggestions of the date, see Ivanov, 1997: 477; Paunov, 2021: 103. Analysis of inscriptions from Callatis suggests that the province of Moesia was likely established around 15 AD (Avram, 1998). Initially, Moesia covered the territory between the river Drin near Sirmium and the river Utis, that is, the lands of the Moesi and the Triballi. After the creation of the province of Thrace in 46, the province of Moesia gradually extended to the Black Sea and to the foothills of Hemus in the south (Tacheva, 2004: 25-26).

Additionally, numerous legionary detachments and *auxilia* were stationed across much of the Danube and along the northwestern coast of the Black Sea.¹¹

2. Rome and the Thracian Kings

Before 27 BC, the Romans were largely focused on their internal political issues and did not give much attention to the situation in Thrace. Roman relations with the Thracians were unpredictable and influenced by the interests of individual Roman officials.¹² Initially, the Romans supported a local kingdom ruled by an Odrysian-Astaeon royal family. The presence of allies largely safeguarded their interests and prevented the rise of a significant local power that could have posed a potential threat. The Macedonian provincial governors' approach to Thrace was often shaped by personal ambitions rather than a unified Roman policy. Additionally, they lacked the power and authority to significantly alter the political landscape of the region. By the mid-1st century BC, the Sapaean had risen as a dominant tribe in Thrace.¹³ Under Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD), they became Rome's primary allies and client rulers, forming a sizable, Hellenized kingdom that allowed Rome indirect control over the region. Augustus deposed the Odrysian-Astaeon royal family and placed the entire kingdom under Sapaean rule, with Bizye serving as the initial center of this newly structured polity.¹⁴ The Sapaean were likely selected because of their longstanding alliance with Rome in key territories along the Aegean coast. Since the early 2nd century BC, they had demonstrated both loyalty and leadership. During the Roman civil wars in the 1st century BC, the Sapaean controlled strategic passages linking Macedonia with the eastern provinces (App. *BC* 4.11.87; Livy 42.13).¹⁵

The Thracian kingdom was created in a similar manner to the other client Hellenistic kingdoms – its territory was divided into *strategiai*, governed by *stratego*i, which had military and administrative duties. They were primarily Thracian elites, some thoroughly Hellenized, or loyal Greeks, subordinate to the king in Bizye and even served as his advisors, but they also had to be loyal to Rome, especially in the case of key *strategiai* that were crucial to Roman interests. Their loyalty was reinforced by granting them Roman citizenship, and consequently, Roman names such as Gaius Julius or Tiberius Claudius. According to the inscription near Topirus,¹⁶ dated to the early years of the new Roman province, between 46 and 54 AD, the number of *stratego*i was 33, which could also be their number in the client kingdom, given that almost nothing changed initially after the formation of the province of Thracia. As vassals of Rome, the Thracian kings were obligated to offer military support to Rome when required, as demonstrated by Rhoemetaces I during the Pannonian revolt at Sirmium in 6–9 AD. Rhoemetaces I (13 BC – 12 AD) benefited greatly from his friendship and loyalty to Augustus (Plut. *Rom.* 17.3), but also proved to be an effective ruler. Up until the reign of Caligula (37–41), Byzantium was granted to the Thracian kings in recognition of their support and loyalty, particularly to Rhoemetaces I. His reign marked the peak of late Thracian history – he united all of Thrace, including Bithynia. However, this unity did not result

¹¹ Because of the continuous threat of barbarian invasions along the Danube, Rome focused significantly on the organized establishment of the Lower Danubian *limes* and the Roman forces stationed to protect it (see Ivanov, 1997; 1999; 2008).

¹² Lozanov, 2015: 75; Delev, 2015: 69-70.

¹³ Delev, 2016a: 49.

¹⁴ Delev, 2016b: 125; Kolev 2017: 127. Cf. Sullivan 1979, who thinks that the Odrysian-Astaeon and the Sapaean dynasties merged.

¹⁵ Terziev, 2017: 134. The earliest evidence of the Sapaean rulers' alliance with Rome dates back to the 2nd century BC, during the conflict between Abrupolis and Perseus (Polyb. 22.18). For the location of the southern borders of the client Thracian kingdom, see Terziev, 2017: 135-136.

¹⁶ *IThrAeg* E84; Sharankov, 2015: 67, fig. 6.

in internal stability, as seen by the major revolt of the Bessi led by the priest Vologaeses in 13/12 BC, which together with their allies fought a difficult three-year war with the Romans.

Upon the death of Rhoemetaces I around 12, his vast and prosperous kingdom was divided by Augustus between his heirs: his brother Rhescuporis and his son Cotys (Tacit. *Ann.* 2.61). After Augustus' death in 14, Rhescuporis decided to unite the kingdom by killing Cotys. When the Romans became aware of this, Tiberius ordered an investigation to be conducted in the Senate regarding the Thracian inheritance dispute. Cotys' widow, Antonia Tryphaena, testified at the trial, and Rhescuporis was found guilty and exiled to Alexandria. Thrace was split between his son Rhoemetaces II (19–37), who had opposed his father's policy, and the sons of Cotys. Since the latter were still minors, they were placed under the guardianship of a former praetor, Trebellenus Rufus, who was entrusted with overseeing the kingdom during the *interregnum* (Tacit. *Ann.* 2.64).

By splitting the Thracian kingdom, Augustus made a strategic mistake. That not only led to internal strife in the client kingdom but also created a strong and sizable group within Thracian society and the elite, which began to openly express its growing resentment toward interference of Rome in its internal affairs. It seems that anti-Roman sentiments spread among the common Thracians as well and as a result, in 21, a major revolt broke out, led by the Dii, Odrysians, and Coelaetae, and Rhoemetaces II was besieged in Philippopolis. A Roman army was summoned by the provincial governor of Macedonia, Achaëa and Moesia to crush the rebellion (Tacit. *Ann.* 3.38–39).¹⁷ Five years later, in 26, a second major revolt broke out in southern Thrace (Tacit. *Ann.* 4.46–51). This time, the cause was the unwillingness of certain Thracians to be enlisted as non-citizen troops in the Roman *auxilia*, which were most often used as “cannon fodder”. This second revolt had to be suppressed with great cruelty, which strengthened the anti-Roman sentiments, but also served as an indication of a division within society. It seems that the Thracian kingdom was no longer only incapable of performing the functions it was created for, but had also shifted from a reliable ally to a problem for Rome.¹⁸

Shortly after Caligula (37–41) came to power, Rhoemetaces III (37–44) was enthroned. He was brought up by his mother Antonia Tryphaena in Rome and named C. Iulius Rhoemetaces. He became a playmate of Caligula, a circumstance that significantly influenced his later life (Suet. *Cal.* 16.9). Some of the coins issued by the last Thracian kings, besides their own image, depicted also the image of the Roman emperor, for example Rhoemetaces I with Augustus and Rhoemetaces III with Caligula, indicating their loyalty.¹⁹ Being a Roman puppet, Rhoemetaces III was assassinated during a coup in 44. This clearly demonstrated to the Romans that a significant portion of the Thracian elite, including some members of the royal family, were strongly anti-Roman in sentiment, also attested by the intervention of three Roman legions from Moesia.²⁰ Seeing no future in the existence of the client Thracian kingdom, in 46, Claudius (41–54) decided to incorporate it into the empire as *provincia Thracia*.²¹ The final record concerning the Thracian kingdom could be the appeal in 53 by the citizens of Byzantium to Claudius, in which they expressed grievances over their losses in the recent conflicts in Thrace and the Bosphorus. In reply, their tribute was waived for the following five years (Tacit. *Ann.* 12.63).²²

¹⁷ See Tacheva, 1997: 90–91.

¹⁸ Topalilov, 2025: 178–179.

¹⁹ Youroukova, 1976; Burnett et al., 1992: 312–315.

²⁰ For the death of Rhoemetaces III being organized by his wife Pythodorus II, see Sullivan, 1979: 211.

²¹ For a discussion on the exact dating, see Boteva, 2017. Cf. the brief overview in Slawisch, 2007: 35–39 and the lack of date in Danov, 1979: 145.

²² Ivanov, 1997: 505–506.

3. Provincia Thracia

The transition from a kingdom to a Roman province was relatively smooth compared to the prolonged instability during the reign of Rhoemetaces I. The Roman administration quickly consolidated control, stabilizing the region. Perinthus in southeastern Thrace became the administrative capital of the new province, governed by *procurator* of equestrian rank with financial and administrative functions and appointed by the emperor. As an internal, non-border province, Thrace was annexed to the senatorial provinces with the status of *inermis*, meaning that the governor commanded only the garrison and was subordinate to the governor of Moesia, who commanded four legions. The use of the old system of the *strategiai* in the administration of the new province was a characteristic method of the Roman administration to utilize the authority of the *stratego*i for the peaceful imposition of Roman power.²³ One of the first actions taken by the Romans was to build a quick and efficient road across the diagonal of the territory, called Via Militaris or Via Diagonalis, allowing the rapid movement of Roman troops through the region.²⁴ The first phase of this project was finished during Nero's reign in 61. Again, under Nero, a crucial internal road was built across the Haemus Mons. This road linked the Danube to the heart of Thrace, stretching from Oescus to Philippopolis, and served as the shortest route for the legions of Moesia to access the southern Balkans.²⁵



Figure 1. Roman road network in Thrace and Moesia. Madzharov, 2009: 68.

²³ Tatscheva, 2007.

²⁴ Madzharov, 2009: 70-129.

²⁵ Paunov, 2021: 43-44.

Rome founded only two colonies in the province of Thracia, both consisting of discharged army veterans: Aprus/Apri/Aproi (*Colonia Claudia Aprensis*), under the reign of Claudius (Pliny 4.47-48; Ptol. 3.11.7), not far from the provincial capital Perinthus, and Deultum (*Colonia Flavia Pacis Deultensium*), during the early years of Vespasian (69–79), most probably in 70 (Pliny 4.45). It is assumed that the first settlers of Deultum, likely around 1000, were veterans of the VIII Augusta legion. Philippopolis, used as residence of Rhoemetalces II and III (Tac. *Ann.* 3.38-39), became one of the main centers of Roman Thrace, actively used for Romanization and veteran settlement.²⁶ The process began as early as under Claudius, perhaps shortly after the annexation and intensified under the Flavian dynasty.²⁷

Thrace was poorly urbanized and with the exception of the coastal ancient Greek colonies, as well as Philippopolis, Uscudama (future Hadrianopolis) and the old capital Bizye, which were located inland, the rest of the region lacked urban centers. All cities had to pay taxes and provide recruits for the Roman army, except for the coastal Greek cities, which were exempt from military duties and except for Maroneia, Abdera and Ainos, which were allied and free cities (*civitates liberae*), paying only half of their taxes. The most significant city in the interior was Philippopolis. Under Domitian (81–96), it became the seat of the provincial assembly, the Thracian *koinon*, where ten prominent Thracians hosted an annual meeting with delegates from across the province. It organized various games, had the right to issue its own coins and oversaw the emperor cult. Later it had the right to appeal the actions of the governor directly to the emperor. The leader of the *koinon*, called *thrakarches* after the middle of the 2nd century, was the main priest of the emperor cult.²⁸

The main territorial unit was the village (*kome*). Several villages were united into a community (*komarchia*). According to Pliny (4.40), Thrace was divided into 50 *strategiai*. However, over time, these tribal areas were absorbed by urban territories, especially after the urbanization of Thrace, which began under Trajan (98–117) and continued by his successors. Ptolemy (3.11.6) mentions only 14 *strategiai*. By 136, under Hadrian (117–138), the *strategiai* were almost entirely abolished, with only some remaining as rural territories. Soon, migrants from the provinces of Asia Minor and Syria flock to Thrace, bringing with them skilled artisans and traders. Not only do they significantly contribute to the economic development of the local cities and the province as a whole, but in some cases, they also radically change the communities, connecting them with other provinces and cities in the empire. Thrace became a full-fledged province with a diverse population: Hellenized and Romanized Thracians (see below), Hellenes and Hellenized migrants from Southeast Asia, veterans, and less frequently citizens from the western provinces and Italy. Some of them were Roman citizens, others retained their local citizenship, while still others retained their native one.

During the first half of the 2nd century, under the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (138–161), Thrace undergoes rapid urbanization. The following cities were built in the Roman style: Nicopolis ad Istrum, Marcianopolis, Augusta Traiana, Plotinopolis, Traianopolis, Serdica, Pautalia, Nicopolis ad Nestum, Hadrianopolis and Kela.²⁹ Philippopolis and Anchialos also underwent complete transformations. The new cities became a source of soldiers for the Roman legions and *auxilia*, and later for the Praetorian Guard in Rome. However, recruitment was moderate, considering the need for workers to cultivate the fertile lands. This was not the case with the distant and non-urbanized regions – the mountainous areas, especially the Rhodopes and Haemus – from where the Bessi were mass-recruited into the fleet, where mortality reached up to

²⁶ Boyanov, 2008: 194-203.

²⁷ Topalilov, 2012: 11-12.

²⁸ Sharankov, 2007. For the emperor cult, see Raycheva, 2021; 2023.

²⁹ See the map of Thrace and its variety of urban forms (2nd–3rd century) in Raycheva, 2015: 1624.

70%. Since the Bessi were a traditional enemy of Rome, a deliberate policy of depopulation was carried out against them, and by the second half of the 2nd century, they were significantly weakened.³⁰

The arrival of large groups of barbarian peoples from the north into the lower Danube region and near the Haemus passes in the late 230s marked a new phase for the Roman Empire's Balkan territories began. The invasions of the Goths, Carps, Vandals, and others through the lower Moesian sector of the limes in 238, 242–245, 248, and 250–251 wreaked havoc on the Thracian provinces. Most cities had their territories plundered, with fierce battles fought near Marcianopolis, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Novae and Augusta Traiana. Philippopolis endured a catastrophic siege by the Goths in 250, as weakened defenses left the prosperous town vulnerable to barbarian attacks. This situation caused panic and uncertainty within the Roman government, which was forced to call upon local commanders from the Moesian garrisons to address the threat. The subsequent invasions of the 250s were even more widespread, reaching as far as Thessalonica. Emperor Claudius II's (268–270) enormous military effort, which culminated in his victory over the Goths and their allies at Naissus in 269, laid the foundation for greater military and economic stability in the region. Between 270 and 272, Aurelian (270–275) ordered the evacuation of Dacia's garrisons and most of the Romanized civilian population to the south bank of the Danube, reestablishing the river as the frontier of the Roman world, which significantly strengthened both the military presence and the civilian countryside of the region.³¹

4. Roman and Hellenic influence

The Thracian elite began using Greek already in the Hellenistic period and it gradually became the official language for many Thracians. It is therefore not surprising that Greek was chosen as the official language of *provincia Thracia*. Rome made no effort to impose Latin in Thrace, even for official documents. During the Roman era, the process of Hellenization deepened, influencing all levels of society, with Greek eventually supplanting Thracian as the spoken language in the towns. The towns were organized in a Greek fashion with Greek institutions and magistrates: *βουλή* and *δημος*; colleges of *ἄρχοντες*; division in tribes (*φυλαί*), which had their assemblies (*κοινά*), presided by phylarchs. All official documents were issued in Greek and speakers of Latin were never numerous, with only a few people whose knowledge of Latin was good. It was primarily used by individuals who had to write or speak it because of their role or social status: Roman officials in the provincial administration, soldiers stationed in Thrace and veterans living in the two Roman colonies and certain cities. These three groups were responsible for nearly all of the Latin inscriptions in the province. As a result, the number of Latin inscriptions in Thrace is extremely low, with Greek texts outnumbering Latin ones by nearly 20 times.³²

The Roman colonies of Aproi and Deultum had a very limited impact on the local population, and only in their immediate surroundings, from which some of the few Latin inscriptions in Thrace originate. In the lands north of the Haemus, the degree of Romanization was significantly higher, expressed in the more frequent use of the Latin language, including in the territories of the cities organized in the Greek model, such as Nicopolis ad Istrum and Marcianopolis. Regarding *provincia Thracia*, it is more plausible to speak of a process of Hellenization of the local population, because even the obvious signs of Roman civilization penetrated and imposed themselves on the Thracian lands as elements of Greek culture, only after a long period of existence and changes in a Hellenic environment. The signs of Romanization, as far as they can be distinguished, were quite superficial and were often caused by foreigners or, to

³⁰ Topalilov, 2025: 183-186.

³¹ Lozanov, 2015: 87.

³² Sharankov, 2011: 139, 145.

a much lesser extent, by soldiers and veterans. The processes of Hellenization took on a clearer form after the middle of the 2nd century, during the late Antonines and the Severans, when marble or limestone reliefs became a mass form of votive offering. Along with the images of the Thracian Horseman, dedications also found a place in the sanctuaries, in which the deities were represented in their classical Greco-Roman iconography.³³ The population of the vast plain territories, far from the cities and roads, as well as the population of the semi-mountainous and mountainous areas, was much less affected by the process of Hellenization/Romanization, as evidenced by the widespread presence of Thracian personal names. Its religion was more conservative and there were almost no votive tablets and epigraphic monuments. This is clearly visible in the mountain sanctuaries, where the rituals remained almost unchanged. The contacts of this population with urban centers and settlements along the main roads were very limited, even minimal.³⁴



Figure 2. Bilingual inscription for the city walls of Philippopolis from 172 (IGBulg III.1 878).

The limited processes of Romanization are also evidenced by the fact that in order to make their message understandable, soldiers and veterans, as well as Latin speakers from the western provinces, often set up Greek or bilingual inscriptions, especially in the case of epitaphs, as seen in Philippopolis, Perinthos, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Maroneia and Plotinopolis.³⁵ The presence of bilingual inscriptions suggests that most Thracians were not proficient in Latin, just as Roman officials and soldiers had limited Greek proficiency. This divide between the two languages is most evident in the bilingual inscription from 172 about the new fortification walls of Philippopolis (fig. 2). The Latin version states that the walls were built for the city by Marcus Aurelius, while the Greek version proudly credits “the most brilliant metropolis”, highlighting that the emperor provided the funds. It seems that only a few people understood both Greek and Latin, and each inscription was meant for a different audience: the Latin text praised the emperor for the benefit of his officials and soldiers, while the Greek text emphasized the apparent independence of the “brilliant city” to inspire the Greek-speaking population.³⁶

³³ Valchev, 2015: 181-182.

³⁴ Valchev, 2015: 184.

³⁵ Sharankov, 2011: 152, n. 99.

³⁶ Sharankov, 2011: 151-152.

The primary influence of Latin on Greek in Thrace is seen in loanwords. These loanwords mostly include military terms, the names of the months in the calendar, a relatively small number of words related to administration and social situations, as well as terms for weights, measures, coins, architecture, sepulchral monuments, and roads. The limited number of Latin loanwords in Greek inscriptions, along with the tendency to replace them with Greek equivalents, shows the minor role that Latin played in the province. The use of Latin loanwords increased after the mid-3rd century, especially after the imperial court was established in Constantinople. Many Roman terms were introduced at that time, often replacing their Greek counterparts from the earlier period. However, the Greek language continued to thrive in the following centuries and remained the primary written language in Thrace.³⁷

Literary sources indicate that the Thracian language survived in some ecclesiastical contexts until the 6th century. A Bessian (i.e., Thracian) translation of the Bible was created, and the size of the Thracian-speaking population in the 6th century was large enough to support the existence of several Bessian monasteries.³⁸ It is reasonable to conclude that Thracian was used as a sacred language, at least to some extent, during the Roman period.³⁹

5. Conclusion

Rome's initial interactions with Thrace were dictated by the need to secure its northern borders, defend against frequent incursions by Thracian and Celtic tribes, and maintain stability in the Balkan region. The Thracian kings played a crucial role as intermediaries, balancing their traditional authority with Roman expectations. However, internal conflicts, coupled with shifting Roman policies, led to the gradual dissolution of local governance and the direct annexation of Thrace into the empire. Despite its formal incorporation, Thrace remained distinct due to its strong Hellenistic influences. Unlike other provinces where Latin took precedence, Thrace retained Greek as its administrative and cultural language. Urbanization efforts, particularly during the first half of the 2nd century, significantly reshaped the province, leading to the development of key cities. Nevertheless, segments of Thracian society resisted Romanization, particularly in rural and mountainous regions where indigenous traditions persisted.

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³⁷ Sharankov, 2011: 152-153.

³⁸ Tacheva, 2000: 54-56.

³⁹ Sharankov, 2011: 138

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