

A 'Manual' of Table Manners in Ancient Thrace (according to Xen. Anab. 7.3)

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Abstract: Dining etiquette is not an invention of modern society. In Antiquity, the organization of the table for special occasions also followed certain rules. The reception of the guests, the sequence of serving the dishes, and the elements of tableware and furnishings correspond to the cultural traditions of individual civilizations. The article aims to present the Thracian royal feasts as events following a certain sequence and ceremonial, rather than celebrations of chaos and intemperance, referring mainly to Xenophon's account of the dinner organized by the Odrysian paradyntast Seuthes II at the beginning of the 4th century BC.

Ключови думи: траки, пиршество, банкет, симпозиум, етикет, трапезни маниери

Keywords: Thracians, feast, banquet, symposium, etiquette, table manners

Ceremonial eating and drinking are an indication of a civilized society

Joan P. Alcock



Illustration 1. Detail of the wall decoration in the Sarafova Tumulus near the town of Krun (Fol 2021: 101)

Илюстрация 1. Детайл от стенната украса в Сарафова могила край с. Крън (Fol 2021: 101)

The inspiration for this article came from reading Joan Alcock's book *Food in the Ancient World*, in which, in addition to the fascinating stories about the cuisine of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Celts, I found a cited passage from Lucian of Samosata. In his *De Mercede Conductis* from the 2nd century AD, he describes the embarrassment experienced by a guest unfamiliar with the specific etiquette¹,



Illustration 2. Detail of the wall decoration in the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak
Илюстрация 2. Детайл от стенната украса в Казанлъшката гробница

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who in the end finds salvation in repeating the actions of his fellow diners.

Acquaintance with the passage by Lucian made me look differently at Xenophon's account of the feast organized by the Odrysian *paradynast* Seuthes II at the beginning of the 4th century BC. Participation in this banquet was presumably also a new experience for the Greek generals and captains, some of whom tried more and others less to follow the table rules. Xenophon, who was the central guest during the feast, left an interesting description of the event (Xen. Anab. 7.3), which can also be seen as a kind of 'handbook' for Thracian dining etiquette. It is worthwhile to clarify that this is not an attempt to over-interpret the text. Undoubtedly, the ancient author did not intend and did not leave a 'manual' for table manners and etiquette regarding aristocratic feasts in Thrace. However, anyone who has read his account, and subsequently found himself in a Thracian environment, would not be surprised by what is transpiring before him, which is significantly different from the Greek symposium. Xenophon's text is useful not only for reconstructing dining etiquette but also as a point of reference for putting forward a hypothesis to counter the notion that the Thracian *banquet* followed no rules and indulged in chaos and *barbaric hedonism*. In

support of this, several other fragments from written sources will be used, which contain similar scenes of a Thracian royal revelry².

Written sources, archaeological excavations, and artifacts, as well as images on the tomb murals help us to restore the splendor of the Thracian aristocratic celebrations and the rich regales that accompanied them. Large spacious halls with walls painted red³, floors covered with expensive carpets⁴, resounding with the melodies of famous musicians⁵. According to Theopompus, the Odrysian ruler Cotys I, whose weakness was pleasure and luxury, built similar edifices wherever he saw shady wooded places near a freshwater source⁶. Although exaggerated, the account positively reflects a real phenomenon, namely the practice of Thracian rulers touring their realm, and staying for certain periods in different residences⁷. In all probability, halls were built in the so-called *turzis* (citadels), where the local aristocracy was received, and feasts and rituals accompanied the audiences. This practice was also preserved during the Hellenistic era with the creation of the royal cities. Thus, for example, Building No. 1 in Seuthopolis, which is associated with the person of Seuthes III, is supposed to have housed exactly one such hall⁸.

Written sources present the Thracian royal feasts as events lasting for several hours⁹, but

¹ Luc. Merc. Cond. 15.

² Theopompus's account, transmitted by Athenaeus, of the wedding of the daughter of the Odrysian ruler Corys I (Ath. 5.7) and the feast which the king of the Getae Dromichaetes arranged for the officer and successor of Alexander the Great Lysimachus (Diod. 21.12).

³ During the excavations of the great hall in Sevtopolis, D. P. Dimitrov wrote: 'On a four-layer base, a veneer was applied, resembling a marble lining; below a plinth of black marble slabs – *orthostats*, above it a wide convex strip imitating multicolored marble, and the rest of the walls were covered with red Pompeian' (Dimitrov 1984: 16).

⁴ According to Theopompus, the whole agora was covered with purple carpets for the wedding of the daughter of Cotys I (Ath. 5.7). In Xenophon's account of the feast of Seuthes II, one of the gifts for the host included a carpet worth ten minae (Xen. Anab. 7.3.27). A gold-woven carpet or shroud for the dead was found in the tomb in the Golyama Kosmatka mound, near the town of Shipka (Izdimirski 2017: 431).

⁵ Athenaeus describes the musicians at the wedding feast of the Odrysian king Cotys I's daughter. Antigenides played the flute (αὐλεῖν), Cephisodotus the guitar (κιθαρίζειν), and Argas sang (Ath. 5.7). The scene from the Kazanlak tomb also depicts musicians (see Fol: <https://www.thracians.net/religion-bg-bg/52-музика/630-рисуваните-громпегти-в-казанлъшката-гробница-паралели-с-громпегтите-на-тутанкамон,-инструментални-и-изпълнителски-хипотези> (accessed 01.04.2023).

⁶ Ath. 12.42.

⁷ For this tradition of the Thracian rulers see: Popov: <https://www.thracians.net/kings-bg-bg/27-царска-обредност/89-царска-обиколка> (accessed 17.04.2023). For the royal residences see Porozhanov: <https://www.thracians.net/state-organization-bg/38-селища-градове-резиденции/204-одриски-владетелски-резиденции-крепости> (accessed 18.04.2023).

⁸ Dimitrov 1958: 683-699; Dimitrov 1960: 12.

⁹ Georgieva 1999: 93.

did they follow a certain protocol? I believe there is evidence to suggest that indeed there was an established order in the conduct of these feasts and this article offers a sequence in which they might have occurred.

RECEPTION AND ACCOMMODATION OF THE GUESTS

The first stage of the ceremony was the welcoming and accommodation of the guests. The local Thracian nobles arrived first and foreign participants appeared afterward¹⁰. Written sources do not provide information about the presence of women during the feast¹¹. The invitees sat in a circle on *diphroses* rather than reclining on a *klinç* as was the custom in the Greco-Roman world. This was probably a local Thracian custom¹². During the arrival and accommodation of the guests in the same room, drinks or foods were mixed in large metal containers. In Anaxandrid's account, transmitted by Athenaeus, the ruler himself – Cotys I, in his capacity as a host, presided over the preparation of the wine and then sipped from each *kratçr* to determine its degree of readiness¹³. All ancient texts

reporting on Thracian aristocratic feasts pay attention to the special role played by the host as the guarantee of their successful conduct¹⁴. He participates in the selection of guests, the organization and arrangement of places, the selection of food, the performance of rituals, and even at the end of the official part of the celebration, he is a leading figure in dancing and merriment.

SERVING THE DISHES

After all the guests were seated, the serving of the dishes began. Next to each of the participants of the feast, seated in a circle, the servants placed three-legged tables strewn with food¹⁵. The actual beginning of the feast was marked by a special ritual – a Thracian custom, in which the host broke the bread and the meat, tore pieces, and tossed them at his fellow diners, leaving only enough for himself to taste. The same action was repeated by the other participants. An explanation of this tradition can be sought in the desire to emphasize sharing in eating, as well as the will of everyone to give up their share and provide it to others¹⁶.

¹⁰ Xen. Anab. 7.3.27.

¹¹ In Antiquity, the space of women was strictly separated from that of men. There are reports, however, that on certain occasions in Persia, women took part in royal feasts (Brosius 1996: 94-97). In Greece, one of the rare examples of the gathering of both sexes in the same room is the wedding banquet, but even then there is division (Plato. Leg. vi. pp. 775, 784; Lucian. Conv. 8 (as cited in Becker 1889: 488). If one of its interpretations as a wedding is taken into account (Marazov 1978: 21-25), the scene in the Kazanlak tomb could be seen as evidence of the presence of women at certain public events. In such a case, unlike the custom in Greece – for the bride to sit veiled at a separate table with the other women, in Thrace she stood possibly next to her husband. Of course, one should not forget the following of certain iconographic patterns in the performance, which is associated with the 'funeral feast' plot (Rabadjiev 2002: 59-60).

¹² Although, Xenophon's text explicitly states that the Thracians sat while eating, which is also confirmed by the frescoes in the Kazanlak and Alexandrovo tombs depicting seated individuals, the custom of reclining probably also penetrated among a part of the Thracian elite. For example, a stone *klinç*, a *diphros*, and a feasting table were found in the tomb at Naip near Tekirdag (Delemen 2006: 257, fig. 5). Gicheva-Meimari considers the stone beds built in the tombs as *klinai* and associates them with organization of ritual meals and *mysteries* (Gicheva-Meimari 2019: <https://eprints.nbu.bg/id/eprint/4122> (accessed 20.05.2023). According to Elizabeth P. Baughan, the symbolism of *klinai* is multi-layered and has many, often competing, cultural connotations (Baughan 2013: 279).

¹³ Ath. 5.7.

¹⁴ Georgieva 2008: 14–15.

¹⁵ Xen. Anab. 7.3.21.

¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the scene described by Xenophon can be interpreted in another way, but the only evidence of such a practice is found in some Jewish communities, who prepared a special ritual bread – *challah* that was not cut with a knife but rather broken up by hand. Afterward, the pieces were thrown away to remind them that bread does not come from the hand of man, but from God (Bacon 1991: 53-54). Of course, this custom's cultural and temporal remoteness only provides an opportunity for reflection when interpreting the Thracian tradition. Still, taking into account the symbolism of the *challah*, the scene of the food distribution might be interpreted in the sense of 'bread and meat coming from the ruler'.

The archaic nature of the food served – bread and meat – is striking¹⁷. According to Diodorus Siculus Dromichaetes, king of the Getae, also served only meat and vegetables a century later, although there was a deliberateness to his choice. Dromichaetes prepared two meals – one rich, with gold dishes and draperies according to Macedonian royal custom, and one modest, illustrating Thracian traditions. He then proceeded to ask Lysimachus, a successor of Alexander the Great, which of the two options seemed more suitable for kings. The Diadochos chose the ‘Macedonian’ style. Dromichaetes then cleverly retorted that if the royal Macedonian meal is more illustrious why then did he come with an army to the lands of the Getae. It remains unclear what mixture exactly Cotys I stirred up for his daughter’s wedding. The term *zomos* (ζωμός) is most often used to mean a sauce or broth specially intended for dipping meat and fish¹⁸. The type of food served at feasts is an illustration of the conservatism and adherence to the tradition of Thracian society.

SERVING THE BEVERAGES

The feast continued with the serving of drinks. Xenophon’s account has led some scholars to assume that during feasts there was no clear division between the serving of food and the time devoted to drinking¹⁹, but it is possible to interpret the cited passage differently.

When the cupbearer reached Aristus of Arcadia, he refused to drink because he had not yet finished his meal, but instead pointed to Xenophon, who had already finished. However, Xenophon had earlier noted that the Arcadian in question was a voracious eater, and because

of this fact did not follow the others in throwing the pieces of bread and meat, disregarding local tradition.

In this case, the fact that he continues to eat while wine drinking had commenced may be taken not as an argument for the serving of food and drink at the same time, but simply as an exception, in consequence of the guest’s insatiability²⁰.

In support of this is an already mentioned passage by Diodorus, in which he mentions that Dromichaetes poured wine for his guests in gold and silver cups ‘at the end’ (τὸ δὲ τελευταῖον)²¹. Also of interest is the image from the Alexandrovo Tomb, in which a scene with a royal feast was presented. Some researchers assume that an element of it, which is unclear due to the poor condition of the frieze, is an animal sacrifice or a table similar to that of the Kazanlak tomb²². Although the possibility of the presence of such a motif in the scene cannot be ruled out, in it the emphasis is rather not on the food, but on the stage of the Thracian banquet devoted to serving the drinks. According to Diodorus, the ancient Thracian custom was to pour wine into horns, Xenophon testifies to the same thing, as well as the scene from the Alexandrovo tomb. Of course, there were other types of vessels. Both metal wine sets and their ceramic equivalents were used²³. Some of them were imports, while others were local samples. The introduction of Greek forms even gives reason to some researchers to assume that the Hellenic symposium was adopted in Thrace²⁴. However, the ancient texts explicitly emphasize that the Thracians drank the wine neat²⁵, and the name ζελᾱ mentioned by Hesychius was precisely the wine not mixed with water²⁶.

¹⁷ Comments on the different traditions, older and newer, regarding the organization of the table and their parallels, see *Georgieva* 2008: 12-13.

¹⁸ *Ath.* 4.7. For the meaning of ζωμός, see *Liddell, Scott* 1940: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=zwmō/s> (accessed 20.04.2023).

¹⁹ *Wecowski* 2014: 102. In contrast to M. Wecowski, R. Georgieva previously wrote that ‘drinking begins only after each of those present has eaten’ (*Georgieva* 1999: 93.).

²⁰ Although this was probably another disregard for local traditions, the scene with Aristus jealously guarding his food made the host laugh (*Xen. Anab.* 7.3.25).

²¹ *Diod.* 21.12.

²² *Kitov* 2004: 159-160. For commentary and interpretation of the scenes see *Stoyanov* 2008.

²³ *Bozhkova* 2016: 19-31.

²⁴ *Rouillard, Verbanck-Piürard* 2003: 27.

²⁵ *Plat. Leg.* 637e, as cited in *Bozhkova* 2016: 27-28.

²⁶ *Georgieva* 1999: 83.



Illustration 3. *Fresco* opposite the entrance in the tomb near the village of Alexandrovo (Ророва 2021: 93)

Илюстрация 3. Фреска срещу входа на гробницата при с. Александрово (Ророва 2021: 93)



Illustration 4. Details of the *fresco* in the lower part of the wall in the tomb near the village of Alexandrovo (Ророва 2021: 94)

Илюстрация 4. Детайли от фреската в долната част на стената на гробницата при с. Александрово (Ророва 2021: 94)

TOASTS AND GIFT EXCHANGE

Traditional Thracian toasts did not occur right before taking the first sip of wine, but guests were allowed to initially enjoy the drink, and only after some time of general drinking did toasting begin²⁷. The raising of a toast could be in honor of an important guest²⁸, but mostly it was for the health of the host/ruler and was accompanied by the presentation/exchange of gifts²⁹. An interesting element of the toasting

and subsequently shared drinking was a gesture described by Xenophon and performed by Seuthes II which involved sprinkling the last drops of wine³⁰. The symbolism of such an action was probably not unambiguous. According to R. Georgieva wine was considered identical to blood, and in this sense, drinking from a common vessel was an expression of brotherhood, and spilling the liquid was tantamount to a sacrifice³¹. Several ancient religions made such an association³². Homer

²⁷ *Xen. Anab.* 7.3.26; *Ath.* 4.35; *Diod.* 21.12.

²⁸ *Diod.* 21.12.

²⁹ *Xen. Anab.* 7.3.26; *Ath.* 4.35.

³⁰ Συγκατεσκεδάσατο is found in Xenophon and Athenaeus, and also in the Byzantine lexicon Suda – κατασκεδάζειν.

³¹ *Georgieva* 1999: 95-96.

³² An Iranian legend said that wine originated from the sacrificial blood of the first bull (*Sechrist* 2017: 249). Christianity regarded the drink as the blood of God himself, while at the same time, Jesus was called the sacrificial lamb (John 1:29; John 1:36).



Illustration 5. Ceramic horn (Vasilchin 2006: 111, table IV.28; Стоянов 2008: 62-3)
Илюстрация 5. Керамичен рог (Василчин 2006: 111, табло IV.28; Стоянов 2008:62-63)

also describes a ritual that required them to dedicate the first drops of wine to the gods as a sacrifice before drinking³³. It is also probable that Seuthes II, in addition to honoring the gods, wanted to strengthen the bond between him and his newfound ally.

THE END OF THE OFFICIAL PART

With the end of the official part, the feast itself was put to an end³⁴, or it continued with merriment, including music, dancing, and the jokes of buffoons³⁵. Etiquette already allowed for a freer communication and getting up from the table. Seuthes II himself, who, to Xenophon's astonishment, despite the amount of wine he had drunk, showed no signs of intoxication, and took part in the dancing.

Written sources indicate that the finale of the feasts was marked by the coming of night. In Xenophon's account, he and his companions left shortly before sunset³⁶. Whether such an ending was due to military discipline, sustaining illumination in a large hall for a long period, or related to the Thracian daily regime remains debatable³⁷.

Tracing the stages of Thracian aristocratic feasts shows the existence of rules observed by both the hosts and their guests. The sequence in the performance of individual actions demonstrates not just a lack of chaos and intemperance, but the presence of a strict ceremonial.



Illustration 6. Detail of the fresco in the domed chamber of the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak (Ророва 2021: 61)
Илюстрация 6. Детайл от фреската в куполното помещение в Казанлъшката гробница (Ророва 2021: 61)

³³ Suk Fong Jim 2011: 39–58, note 78. For the meaning of ἐπάρχεσθαι δεπάεσσιν see Hom. Il. 1.471; 9.162.

³⁴ Diod. 21.12.

³⁵ Xen. Anab. 7.3.26; Ath. 4.35; 4.7.

³⁶ Xen. Anab. 7.3.

³⁷ For room illumination during Antiquity see Moullou et al. 2012: 237 – 244. For the daily routine in Thrace see Georgieva 1999: 91-92.

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„Наръчник“ за трапезен етикет в Древна Тракия (по Хен. Anab. 7.3)

Ели Филипова

Във фокуса на настоящата статията е разказът на Ксенофонт за пиршеството, организирано от одriskия парадинаст Севт II в началото на IV в. пр. Хр. Гръцкият военачалник, който е централен гост по време на пира, оставя интересен разказ за събитието, който би могъл да се разгледа и като своеобразен „наръчник“ за тракийския етикет по време на угощение. Разбира се, тук не става дума за свръхинтерпретация на текста. Ксенофонт не е имал намерение и не е оставил същински „указания“. Всеки, прочел разказа му обаче и впоследствие попаднал в тракийска среда, не би останал изненадан или смутен от случващото се, което значително се отличава от гръцкия симпозиум. Текстът на Ксенофонт е полезен не само като средство за реконструкция на етикета, но и като опорна точка за излагането на хипотеза, която да се противопостави на схващането, че тракийският пир не следва никакви правила, а се отдава на хаоса и варварския хедонизъм.



