

## Introduction

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The study of Early Hellenistic Thrace presents both a formidable challenge and a rare opportunity for the historian. The period following the fragmentation of Alexander the Great's empire left the Thracian world in a state of flux, subject to the shifting ambitions of neighboring powers and to the internal dynamics of its own rulers. The Thracian dynasts, often caught between the Diadochi and their Epigones, sought to secure legitimacy through the establishment of new centres of political power, monumental tombs revealing lavish funerary programs, and the strategic use of inscriptions in the most effective form of communication in the Hellenistic epoch, the Greek language. Yet despite decades of scholarship, much of this history remains piecemeal and conjectural. The main research objective of the present monography is therefore twofold. First, it aims at presenting in as much detail as possible the primary epigraphic sources, I had the chance to discover or identify over the past seventeen years. Using "shades" in the title does not only allude at the sepulchral context of most of the discussed epigraphic evidence but also implies the poor state of preservation of the letterings which faded over time or had been erased or left incomplete already in ancient times. Second, these findings encouraged me to expand the topical range and to critically revisit long-standing assumptions, that have been the subject of scholarly debate for decades, to challenge speculative reconstructions, and to engage anew with the fragmentary but compelling epigraphic, literary, numismatic, and archaeological evidence for Thrace in the Early Hellenistic period.

The interconnectedness of the evidence is central to this endeavor. Epigraphic finds cannot be understood without reference to their archaeological contexts; numismatic issues must be related to broader economic and political trends; and literary testimonies, however biased or fragmentary, must be considered in light of the material record and the hitherto retrieved episodes of historical events and processes. By bringing these strands together, this study not only seeks to deepen our understanding of Thracian socio-political life and identity but also to contribute to the larger project of integrating Thrace into the history of the Hellenistic world. In so doing, it underscores the vitality of a region often relegated to the periphery of classical studies, and it highlights the extent to which Thracian rulers participated in, and contributed to, the cultural and political currents of their age.

The reconstruction of Thracian history in this period requires a methodology that is both interdisciplinary and critical. In hope that scholarly endeavours would eventu-

ally approximate a coherent narrative, this study employs a combination of traditional methods of scholarship with innovative techniques, including raking-light and ultraviolet photography, which have proven invaluable in detecting faint inscriptions and dipinti on stone surfaces. This methodological breadth reflects the conviction that, for the time being, the history of Early Hellenistic Thrace should be regarded not as a seamless narrative but as a puzzle composed of scattered pieces – pieces which, though incomplete, may nonetheless yield meaningful patterns when carefully assembled.

This task has become increasingly pressing in recent decades. Archaeologists have unearthed a number of unique monuments of Thracian tumular architecture, yet mural paintings within these sepulchral structures remain a rarity. Among over 170 monumental tombs identified in ancient Thrace, only sixteen display painted features, and these vary considerably in quality and complexity.<sup>1</sup> Within this limited group, only four – the Ostrusha,<sup>2</sup> Alexandrovo,<sup>3</sup> Sveshtari,<sup>4</sup> and Kazanlak Tombs<sup>5</sup> (the latter two included in the UNESCO World Heritage List), located in now Bulgaria (Fig. 1) – contain multi-figure compositions, all dating from the Early Hellenistic period. Of these, however, only the Alexandrovo and Kazanlak Tombs can be regarded as truly comparable. They share common features in their architectural plans, traditionally shaped vaulted chambers, zone-style decoration, and relatively conservative line and contour drawing.<sup>6</sup> The parallels extend also to their figural friezes, some of which reveal thematic similarities, as well as to the unmistakable sense of historicity and the artistic integrity that underlies their decoration. Each of these monuments has raised as many and unique questions as it has answered, and each has highlighted the need for

- 1 Giurdzhiiska 2013, 151, <https://be-ja.org/index.php/journal/issue/view/be-ja-3-1-2013> (accessed January 7, 2019); cf. Chichikova 2004, 211, on the discovery of 80 monumental tombs in Thrace dated from the late 5th to the late 3rd c. B. C. E.; adopting a broader definition of a monumental Thracian tomb, including those cut into the ground, Stoyanova 2015, 158, counts more than 200 monuments.
- 2 The earliest tomb of this group is dated by Valeva 2005, 163–166 to “the years around 330–310 B. C. E.”; see also Valeva 2005, 12 noting that the 43 coffers placed in a symmetrical grid pattern on the ceiling of the monolithic chamber were originally covered with paintings, now only partly preserved; cf. Stoyanova/Manetta 2019, 145: “the erection of the chamber and the manufacture of the antefixes can be assigned to the final years of the third quarter and the beginning of the last quarter of the 4th century BC;” Tzochev 2025, 64–65: “all dateable transport amphoras, belong to the third quarter of the 4th century BC ... Rituals continued for some time after ca. 300 BC but not long after,” <https://doi.org/10.57573/be-ja.15.55-77> (accessed October 7, 2025).
- 3 Kitov 2005, 15–28; Kitov 2009; further secondary literature is provided in **Ch. 1.1**.
- 4 Fol/Chichikova/Ivanov/Teofilov 1986; Chichikova/Stoyanova/Stoyanov 2012; further secondary literature is provided in **Ch. 6.1**.
- 5 Mikov 1954; Vasiliev 1958; Zhivkova 1974 [1983]; cf. Zhivkova 1975; Tsanova/Getov 1978; recently for a broader readership, Parvin 2015; further secondary literature is provided in **Ch. 2.1**.
- 6 Chichikova 2004, 214–215; Bilde/Bøgh/Handberg/Højte/Nieling/Smekalova/Stolba/Baralis/Birzescu/Gergova/Krapivina/Krusteff/Lungu/Maslennikov 2007/2008, 124; Stoyanov 2008, 59, 61; Kitov 2009, 5; Giurdzhiiska 2013, 137–154, <https://be-ja.org/index.php/journal/issue/view/be-ja-3-1-2013> (accessed January 7, 2019); Valeva 2015, 185; Stoyanova 2015, 175; Valeva 2021, 52.

a sustained and interdisciplinary engagement with the extant records. It is within this framework that the following chapters unfold.

The inception of this study can be traced back to the winter semester of 2006/2007, when, while preparing my lectures as a guest professor at Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg, I was searching for high-resolution images of the Kazanlak Tomb. During this search, an extremely faint, barely perceptible string of letters was observed in the severely damaged upper area of the vaulted chamber. This area had consistently escaped closer attention from the camera lens. Upon returning to my duties at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, the following year was devoted to research in public and private photographic archives, along with consultations with photographers, museum specialists, and restoration experts to determine the specific parameters of documentation. These efforts developed into a small research project and led to authorization from the responsible institutions in Bulgaria to document the area of lettering using technical UV and standard artificial light photography, carried out by a professional photographer and under strict safety protocols. Given the time constraints, the fragile condition of the lettering, and the fact that the Kazanlak Tomb remains one of the earliest and most iconic monuments of Thracian funerary art – regarded by many as a symbol of the convergence of millennia-old cultural traditions in what is now Bulgaria – the investigation had to be carried out with the utmost care. The outcomes exceeded expectations. Following a three-month research stay at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, the preliminary results were reported in various media to both the academic community and the broader public.<sup>7</sup> The dipinti reading in Greek, “Kozimases painted (this)” and “Rhoigos, son of Seuthes,” located in the Charioteer Frieze, not only provided the names of a Thracian ruler with his patronymic and of a Thracian artist, but also pointed to Seuthopolis, the nearby residence of Seuthes III, as their locus of power and work, while at the same time identifying faces on the hitherto silent frescoes (**Ch. 2**).<sup>8</sup>

7 An official press conference for Bulgarian national and private media was held on 16 May 2008 at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia; interviews were also given to Bulgarian National Television, Nova TV, Darik Radio, and the newspapers *Trud* (17 May 2008, 31) and *Express* (17 May 2008, 6).; see further Zlatina Rousseva’s documentary *Seuthes, the Immortal: The Secrets of a Thracian King* (2008); public lectures at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (May 2008), an IEMA lecture at the State University of New York at Buffalo (February 2009), the University of Waterloo (March 2014), and McGill University (May 2014); first publication in Bulgarian: Boshnakov 2008, 5–12 (with photographs, drawings, and reproductions); Boshnakov/Lekov/Radeva 2013, 119 (textbook); first and recent comments in Dimitrov 2008, 66–68; SEG LIV 628; SEG LVI 816; Bull. Ép. 122, 328 (Avram 2009, 491); Dimitrov 2011, 14, 14, 19; Dana 2014, 98; Dana 2015, 250; Chichikova/Dimitrov 2016, 28–29, 75, 123; Rabadjiev 2016, 301 n. 166; Janouchová–Weissová 2018, 70; Purcell/Pérez 2023, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/kazanlak-royal-tomb-thrace-wwii-bulgaria> (accessed January 21, 2023); Pavlov 2025, 13.

8 Note that **Ch. #.#/Chs. #-#**, in parentheses and bold, indicate the corresponding chapters and sections, as listed in the Table of Contents, and serve as self-references throughout the text.

In a ripple effect, these findings opened the potential for reinterpreting further inscriptions, redating related monuments and artifacts – some of which may have been decades younger than previously thought – and refining the broader chronological framework of Hellenistic Thrace. Moreover, the names, together with their paleographic features, revealed clear lines of interconnectedness with other discoveries. They also provided firm grounds for reviving several long-neglected scholarly debates.

Appearing in the light absorption on objective UV photographs from the Kazanlak Tomb, the frescoes' artist bearing the extremely rare Thracian name Kozimases reopened a scholarly debate, considered by some to have been closed in 2005. The debate concerned the case of "Kozimases chrestos," mentioned on a tiny graffito with a portrait discovered in the Tomb of Alexandrovo and located about 80 km south of Kazanlak. Some scholars provided inadequate evidence to support the contested view that the graffito represents an artistic signature. Others, drawing on the more typical sepulchral Greek context of an epitaph, advanced the arguably unrealistic opinion that the graffito was unrelated to either the artist or the Thracian ruler buried there, but instead referred to a deceased person mentioned and portrayed years or decades after the tomb's closure. Inadequacies and inconsistencies in both positions necessitated an independent revision of the possible meanings of *chrestos* as an attribute to Kozimases' portrait and of the cultural-historical significance of a graffito in a sepulchral setting, viewed this time through the prism of the new epigraphic evidence from the Kazanlak Tomb (**Ch. 1**). On the assumption that Kozimases participated in the painting of at least the Bottom Frieze in the Alexandrovo Tomb and the epigraphic evidence that he painted the frescoes in the Kazanlak Tomb, the study developed into an attempt to reconstruct his summative artistic profile as a *zographos chrestos*. This reconstruction considered his position among contemporary artists, analyzed topical parallels in murals attributable to his independent work in both tombs, examined compositional and stylistic patterns, and assessed his professional qualities and personal integrity, as reflected in the act of leaving signatures, within the versatile and competitive world of Hellenistic artistry (**Ch. 3**).

Taken together, the dipinti from Kazanlak and the graffito from Alexandrovo suggested a network of artisans and patrons, linked through dynastic and familial ties, whose activities could reshape our understanding of the cultural landscape of Early Hellenistic Thrace.

The evidence of Rhoigos' direct kinship with Seuthes III prompted a thorough critical reassessment of the grounds for the previously proposed "high" and "low" chronologies of the rich burial inventory discovered in the so-called "Tomb of Seuthes III." The inquiry extended to the inscriptions on metal vessels bearing the name of Seuthes and their weight values. Taken together, this body of evidence has led to a revised dating of the tomb and to a new hypothesis concerning Seuthes III's lifespan and the approximate time of his death. In turn, it has drawn attention to the need for a more precise chronology of Rhoigos' reign (**Ch. 4**).

A few bronze coins of Rhoigos, long puzzling scholars regarding the ruler's obscure identity and domain, including one unearthed during the excavations of Seuthopolis in the 1950s and others preserved in private collections, can now be securely situated in their authentic context of minting and locus of power: Seuthopolis (**Ch. 5.1**). The observation that Rhoigos was not listed in the *Great Seuthopolis Inscription* (IGBulg III.2, 1731) among Berenike's sons, namely Hebryzelmis, Teres, Satokos, and Sadalas, all considered to have been fathered by Seuthes III, proved crucial for further epigraphic analyses. These were supported by a text-critical rereading of ancient literary accounts and a revision of the dating of individual artifacts as well as richer archaeological contexts. In this light, the inscription "Goniomaseze, wife of Seuthes," incised on the façade of a monolithic Thracian tomb at modern-day Smyadovo, was reconsidered as a possible reference to Rhoigos' otherwise unknown mother, particularly in connection with one of the most obscure stratagems recorded by Polyaeus (7.25) (**Ch. 5.2**). The review of all previously proposed hypotheses, including the widely accepted asylum hypothesis regarding the date and possible historical context of the *Great Seuthopolis Inscription*, suggested that parallels to other similar cases made the termination of Epimenes' hostageship the most likely subject of Berenike and her sons' oath sworn to Spartokos of Kabyle. (**Ch. 5.3**). Independently and indirectly, the hostageship hypothesis was corroborated through the first proposed reconstruction of the letterings incised on a bronze statue's marble base from Seuthopolis, previously considered completely unintelligible and irretrievable. The legibility of the text was greatly improved through the effective use of raking-light photography. Collectively referred to as the *Seuthopolis Statue Base Inscriptions*, the two overlapping and effaced texts attest to a civil strife involving Seuthes III, Spartokos, and the four sons of Berenike (**Ch. 5.4**). In light of the new epigraphic evidence, the historical figure of Rhoigos and the period of his reign were examined within a relative chronological reconstruction of the developments during and after this civil conflict. Alongside a critical analysis of related ancient literary accounts, papyrological, numismatic, and archaeological records, this reconstruction required the reassessment of additional epigraphic monuments, including the Komotini inscription (Inv. No. 84) of Hebryzelmis, son of Seuthes, the Mesambrian decree of Sadalas (IGBulg I<sup>2</sup> 307), and the Apollonian decree of Rhaiskouporis (IGBulg I<sup>2</sup> 389) (**Ch. 5.5**). To determine as precisely as possible the approximate time of Rhoigos, given the scarcity of primary sources concerning this ruler, the conversion of the relative into absolute chronology was supported by paleographic observations of all inscriptions bearing the names of Rhoigos and Kozimases (**Ch. 5.6**).

The iconography of the deified Alexander the Great with the horn of Zeus-Ammon, adopted by Rhoigos on the obverse of his coins, drew attention to this phenomenon within a broader 3rd-century B. C. E. Thracian context – particularly to the unfinished fresco in the central chamber and the incomplete lettering in the lateral chamber of another UNESCO World Heritage site, the Sveshtari Tomb, also known as the "Tomb of the Caryatids." The use of high-resolution close-up images, focused on specific areas of

the doorpost where the incomplete lettering had been incised, enabled the reconstruction of a *kionedon* most likely referring to Meda, daughter of the Getic king Kothelas and sixth wife of Philip II (**Ch. 6**).

It is important to acknowledge that this work stands on the foundation laid by generations of Bulgarian and international researchers. Their dedication has brought to light monuments of extraordinary significance and has opened avenues of inquiry that were unimaginable less than a century ago. Yet it is equally important to recognize that the evidence remains fragmentary, and that certainty is elusive. The task, therefore, is not to construct a definitive history of Early Hellenistic Thrace, but to refine the questions we ask and to situate new discoveries within a broader interpretive framework. In this respect, the study does not seek closure but rather aims to keep the discussion open, dynamic, and responsive to future discoveries.