

The Riverlands of Aegean Thrace: Production, Consumption and Exploitation of the Natural and Cultural Landscapes – An Overview

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Macedonia and Thrace are considered as the ‘river-and-lake districts’ of Greece. Large rivers and lakes, most of which keep their names since antiquity, define the geography and the history of the settlements which develop near them.

The papers of this section elucidate the natural and cultural character of the river lands of Aegean Thrace, i.e. the northeast part of Greece and the European part of Turkey. Herodotos (VII. 59, 108–109) is the first ancient writer who in the 5th c. BC made an extensive reference to the rivers and lakes of the area, while describing the march of Xerxes’ army in 480 BC: “The territory of Doriskos is in Thrace, a wide plain by the sea, and through it flows a great river, the Evros; here had been built that royal fortress which is called Doriskos, and a Persian guard had been posted there by Darius ever since the time of his march against Scythia... On his [i.e.Xerxes] road from Doriskos he first passed the Samothracian fortresses of these, the city built farthest to the west is called Mesambria. Next to it is the Thasian city of Stryme; between them runs the river Lissos, which now could not furnish water enough for Xerxes’ army, but was exhausted... After he had crossed the dried-up bed of the river Lisos, he passed by the Greek cities of Maroneia, Dikaia, and Abdera. He passed by these, and along certain well-known lakes near them: the Ismaris lake that lies between Maroneia and Stryme, and near Dikaia the Vistonis lake into which the rivers Travos and Kompsatos discharge. Near Abdera Xerxes passed no well-known lake, but crossed the river Nestos where it flows into the sea...” (my italics – cf. also Herodotos IV.90: “...the Evros, which empties into the sea near the city of Ainos”).

Almost all rivers of the Aegean Thrace run from north to south, i.e. from the Rhodopi mountain range via the fertile coastal Thracian plain to the Aegean Sea or to Lake Vistonis. Their gradually and constantly altering routes, deltas, marshlands, wetlands, dunes and lagoons form a rather complex natural environment, which influenced all aspects of life in antiquity, in both positive and negative ways.

For the most part these rivers were vital supports for people and economies. They provided water for people and animals, irrigated the land, facilitated trade and commerce through small vessels or rafts, aided industrial activities, formed a rich area for fishermen and hunters, and offered raw materials such as sand and gravel. At the same time, their deltas and marshlands, especially in periods of flood, created an inhospitable environment, often unsuitable for habitation, causing illnesses like malaria that affected the local population in a variety of ways. Furthermore, these rivers connected the sea and the littoral zone with the hinterland, and thus they allowed the interaction between

the Greek colonies on the Aegean coast with the local Thracian tribes, which inhabited the inland part of this region.

Recent research in Aegean Thrace includes two systematic surveys in the deltas of the Nestos and the Lissos (papers by C. Kallintzi et al., and N. Arrington et al.), a rescue excavation in the city of Doriskos near Evros (extensive summary by Ch. Karadima), a project on the harbor city of Ainos on the Evros delta (extensive summary by T. Schmidts) and a project utilizing spatial technology along river courses (paper by D. Tsiafaki and V. Evangelidis). These projects adopt a variety of approaches and methodologies: collecting and studying archaeological material, utilizing satellite images, conducting geophysical surveys, employing geoarchaeology and geoinformatics, etc. They all aim at defining the character of various ancient riverside sites, integrating them into their broader landscape and understanding aspects of exploitation, production, consumption, communication and trade.

The aim of this panel was to bring together experts working in both Greece and Turkey in order to address topics such as (among others) the reconfiguration of ancient river routes and the settlement patterns that were formed around them; the various uses of land and the means of exploitation through time; the boundaries of the *chora* of various cities, towns, villages and farmsteads; the density of population in various landscape settings and the movements of (or tensions between) different groups that moved or expanded beyond their original habitation zone due to environmental and/or economic reasons.