

Who were the Plunderers of Salmydessus?

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Cover: A view from the south-eastern coast of Lake Terkoz, near the Village of Terkoz (photo by the author)

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In Memoriam
Maria Marinchevska (1932–2020)

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Miroslav Ivanov Vasilev

Troyan, October 2021

Preface

In 2015 I was invited by Gocha Tsetskhladze to participate in the Sixth International Congress on Black Sea Antiquities in Constanța (Romania). After long consideration, I chose *The Inhospitable and Dangerous Salmydessus* as the title of the paper. The initial idea was to present a short paper which would contain all available references to Salmydessus and discuss those that had to do with its bad reputation as an inhospitable and dangerous place. I quickly realised that references to Salmydessus were numerous and posed some problems that were difficult to solve and could not be examined in depth in a short paper, and that it would be necessary to make a separate study to deal with them. In the course of the work two problems attracted my attention – who were Ps.-Scymnus' and Strabo's sources for Salmydessus, and who were the plunderers of Salmydessus? Accordingly, over the next few months I worked on both the paper and the problem of the sources of the authors in question. The results of the researches were published in the proceedings of the congress (2021) and in *Orbis Terrarum* (2019). As for the identification of the Thracian plunderers at Salmydessus, my preliminary observations were presented at the '3rd International Workshop on the Black Sea in Antiquity' held in Thessaloniki in September 2018. The present study was going to be published in the proceedings of the workshop, but, as the work progressed, more and more questions arose that required too much time for detailed consideration. For this reason, I was unable to prepare and submit my results in time, for which I sincerely apologise to the organiser of the workshop, Manolis Manoledakis. The following pages, therefore, present my ideas as far as the identification of the plunderers of Salmydessus is concerned.

I. Introduction



Figure 1: Salmydessus.
(Created by the author, map data ©Google)

In antiquity, the name Salmydessus is associated with a coast, a cape, a settlement, a river, a gulf, a sea, or, simply, a place situated in south-western Pontus, between the Cyaneae and Cape Thynias (Figure 1). In a recently published paper, I have collected more than forty references to Salmydessus found in scholia and works of ancient and medieval authors (7th/6th century BC – 12th century AD).¹ Approximately twenty of these mention the negative reputation of Salmydessus as an inhospitable and dangerous place. This negative reputation was due to both the characteristics of the place described as shallow, stony, desert, without a harbour, difficult to land on, wide open to the north winds and the piratical activity of the local Thracians, who plundered and harassed any castaways. Information on these Thracians and their piratical activities is found in ten of the references to the inhospitable and dangerous Salmydessus, but only Strabo mentions their name – in his view they were ‘Astae’.

The aim of this present study is to identify, insofar as possible, whether the plunderers mentioned in the other nine references were Astae or other Thracians, who, during a given period, peopled, or at least exercised control over the Salmydessian coast. The goal set, the specificity of the references, and, above all, the probability that most of the authors discussed in the main body of the text were unfamiliar with the area of Salmydessus at first-hand, but relied on the works of their predecessors, define the character of this study and the research methods used. This is an historical work, having a strong element of *Quellenforschung*. In this particular case the finding of the primary source, or at least the earliest possible source, of each separate reference to the piratical activity of the Thracians at Salmydessus is of considerable importance, as the dating of these references and their comparison with the information found in other sources referring to roughly the same time period may answer

¹ See Vasilev 2021.

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the question (or at least make it possible to offer a reasonable suggestion) who the Thracian pirates at Salmydessus were.

The ten references presented in the main body of the text concern different periods. Since only the Astae were explicitly mentioned as pirates at Salmydessus, it seems more practical to deal with them first, as well as with the author who notes them, namely Strabo. This approach allows one – after establishing a chronological framework of the Astae presence at Salmydessus – to decide whether the other references also concern the Astae, or other Thracians. For that purpose, after analysing Strabo's information we shall continue with those references dealing with two earlier periods (from the later to the earlier) first, and after that with those dealing with the later periods. Thus, the references can be studied in the following order: Strabo, Xenophon and those who followed him (Diodorus, *Periplus Ponti Euxini*, and the anonymous *Periplus Ponti Euxini*), the Strasbourg Epodes, scholia on Apollonius Rhodes' *Argonautica*, and Dionysius of Byzantium.