

REPORT: Travel to Alexandroupoli and Aegean Thrace

Traveler: Andrea Santamaria (Kiel University)

Destination: Alexandroupoli and Western Thrace

Dates: 23.11.2025-07.12.2025

1. Introduction

The aim of this project is to produce the first comprehensive corpus and critical edition of the non-Hellenic documents from Archaic and Classical Thrace, most of which are conventionally attributed to the “Thracian” language. This corpus will mark a substantial advance in our understanding of the region’s historical dynamics and of the role that Greek colonization played in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the southeastern Mediterranean.

As a linguistic, political, and cultural entity, Thrace remains one of the most challenging areas of the ancient world to define, despite its central historical role from the Bronze Age through the Hellenistic period. It also represents one of the clearest examples of a multicultural society in the ancient Mediterranean. The term “Thrace” originally designated a geographical rather than political category, referring to the territory between the lower Danube and the northern Aegean coast, corresponding to parts of modern Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. From the earliest stages of Greek colonization, Thrace became a zone of intense cultural interaction due to the cohabitation of Greek poleis along the western shore of the Black Sea from the seventh century BCE (from Istros to Byzantium), the diverse Thracian tribes, rarely unified politically, and the intervention of the Persian Empire, which established the satrapy of Skudra in the region. Herodotus and Thucydides describe Thrace at length as a crucial interface between the Greek world and the sociopolitical realities of Central Europe. Understanding this complex milieu requires close examination of the interaction between historical sources emerging from distinct cultural traditions.

The Thracian language is known from approximately 400 inscriptions and from glosses preserved by Greek lexicographers and grammarians such as Hesychius and the Suda, in the absence of any surviving literary texts. It constitutes an independent branch of the Indo-European language family; while its close interaction with Greek is undeniable, the precise nature of this relationship, whether primarily contact-induced or indicative of deeper phylogenetic affinity, remains unresolved. The present project accordingly aims to assemble and reassess all direct sources for the language, namely the inscriptions.

Within this framework, the Reisestipendium of the Ernst Kirsten Society, complemented by the generous support of the ROOTS Cluster of Excellence at Kiel University, has enabled me to refine the analysis of Thracian epigraphy and to investigate its broader connections with the geography and archaeology of the northern Aegean coast between the Nestos and Hebrus rivers. In addition, decisive progress has been made toward the completion of the Corpus of Thracian Inscriptions through the documentation of all 271 Thracian graffiti from Zone (alongside 20 associated Greek graffiti), representing nearly three quarters of all material conventionally attributed to the “Thracian language.”

2. The travel

The research stay focused primarily on Alexandroupoli (Greece, Periphery of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace) and the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli, to which the documents under study were transferred a few years ago from the Archaeological Museum of Komotini. My work in Alexandroupoli was directed toward the preparation of documentation for the first comprehensive critical edition of the texts inscribed in non-Greek language(s) from Archaic and Classical Thrace, dated between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE and spanning the area from the northern Aegean to the lower Danube. In this context, I documented 291 graffiti from Zone, which belong to the largest assemblage of documents written in the Thracian language.

Although the inscriptions from Zone have been published and described (Tsatsopoulou-Kaloudi et al. 2015), a systematic epigraphic, paleographic, and linguistic analysis remains absent, especially one that situates these texts within their broader historical and geographical setting. The graffiti also employ a highly distinctive Greek-related alphabet not directly derivable from any known variant and never subjected to comprehensive analysis. Moreover, the *editio princeps* requires revision in several respects and does not consistently provide legible photographs, nor images and drawings of the complete potsherds on which the inscriptions were carved.

To address these issues and produce both a printed and digital critical edition meeting current quality standards, the documentation I collected includes (Figure 1):

- a) high-quality color photographs of all sides of each document;
- b) photographs at high magnification (30 \times to 250 \times) using a Dino-Lite digital microscope, focusing on features requiring closer examination and signs of uncertain reading;
- c) drawings of the entire objects, not only of the inscriptions;
- d) recording of all associated archival material, including precise geographical and stratigraphical data and the excavator's notes.

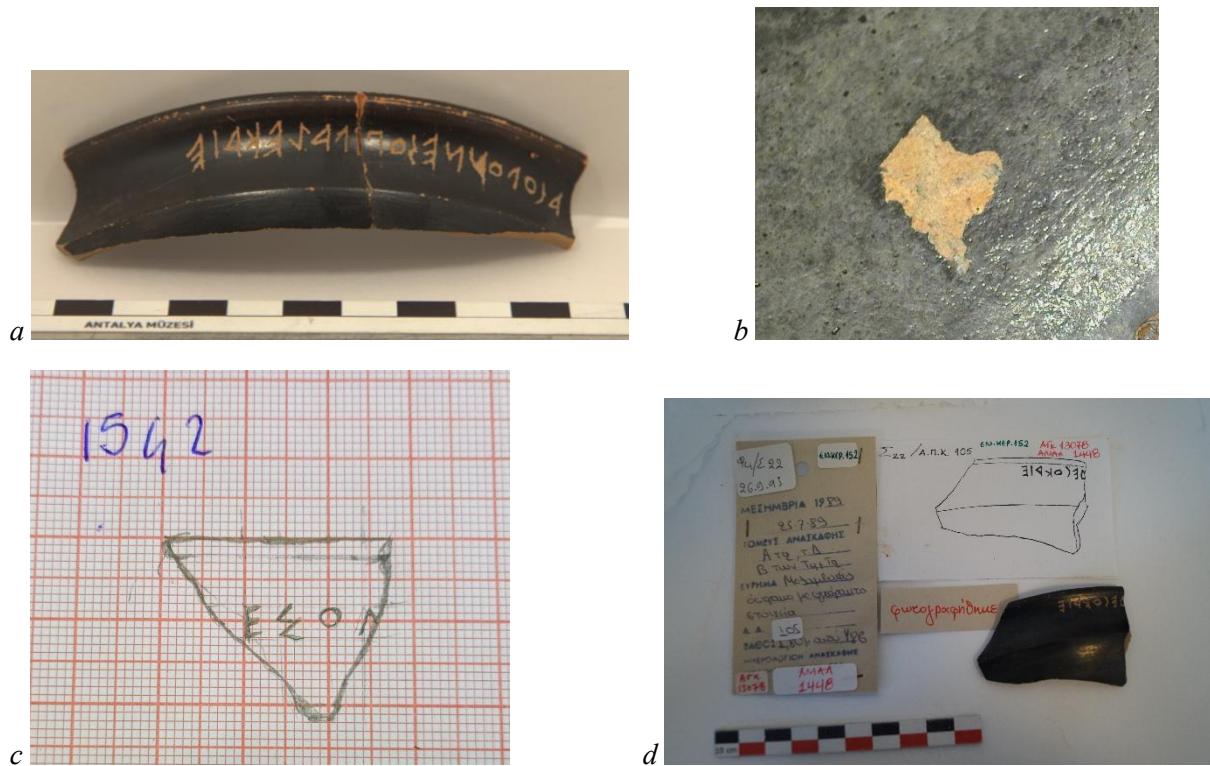


Figure 1. a: Photograph of an inscription; b: Dino-lite examination of a difficult-to-read detail of an inscription; c: drawing of an inscription; d: Supplementary data on an inscription available at the Museum.

This work not only enabled me to document and reassess materials largely neglected since their *editio princeps*, but also to identify items that were not accurately described in the original edition. For example, a case of a Greek inscription written in retrograde ductus came to light, while this feature had previously been considered restricted to writers using Thracian. In addition, the work will update the inventory references of the material, which in the *editio princeps* were still given according to the

outdated numbering system of the Komotini Museum. Overall, this research constitutes a decisive step toward assembling the material for a Corpus of Thracian Inscriptions and will be followed next year by equivalent work on the remaining documents from Samothrace and Bulgaria.

Beyond the work conducted at the Museum, I was able to visit and examine directly the principal sites relevant to the study of Thracian documents, their associated material culture, the geographical context of the region, as well as to visit the related archaeological museums. In particular, I was able to visit the site of Zone, whose sanctuary of Apollo yielded the graffiti studied in the Museum; the site of Maroneia and the “Tavaniotis Mansion” Museum, where I conducted preliminary exam of one of the two existing Greek–Thracian bilingual inscriptions; the acropolis of Petrota; the site of Abdera and its archaeological museum; the visible remains of the sites in the Hebros valley (Traianoupolis and Doriskos); the site of Makri; and Thessaloniki together with its Archaeological Museum.

The following table summarizes the stages of my research and travel.

Day	Activity
23.11.2025	Travel from Kiel to Alexandroupoli
24.11	Visit of the Archaeological Museum of Komotini and the site of Paradimi; preparation of the material for the fieldwork.
25.11	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
26.11	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
27.11	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
28.11	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
29.11	Visit of the archaeological site of Maroneia, of the archaeological museum “Tavaniotis Mansion”, and of the archaeological site of Petrota.
30.11	Visit of the archaeological sites of Zone and Makri.
01.12	Visit of the Hebros Delta and the archaeological site of Traianoupolis.
02.12	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
03.12	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
04.12	Recording of Thracian graffiti at the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli
05.12	Visit of the archaeological site of Abdera and of the associated archaeological museum
06.12	Visit of the Thessaloniki archaeological museum and the UNESCO World Heritage monuments of the city center.
07.12	Return to Kiel

3. Future perspectives

This work will allow me, over the coming year, to complete the recording of Thracian documentation through research visits to the Archaeological Museum of Samothrace and to several museums in Bulgaria. The completion of the corpus will constitute a significant advance in the field and provide a solid foundation for future paleographic, epigraphic, linguistic, and historical-geographical investigations of ancient Thrace.

Beyond its significance for the recording of a *Triümmersprache*, this corpus will, for example, enable me and other scholars to map the geographical distribution of specific epigraphic and paleographic features in Thracian and Greek inscriptions, thus determining whether identifiable areal patterns are present and how these relate to cultural dynamics in southeastern Europe. To interpret paleographic data, my study of alphabetic variation integrates a largely overlooked theoretical model based on Aldo Luigi Prosdocimi’s framework for alphabet transmission (Rizza 2018). This model, which would largely benefit from the digital corpus, allows for the reconstruction of networks of interaction, understood in terms of teacher–student relationships, by identifying where a particular alphabetic form was acquired and tracing the channels of its transmission within the Greek writing tradition.

The corpus will be produced in both a digital and a print-online format. The digital version will include a greater number of images and will fully comply with FAIR standards, for example through the use of EpiDoc. All material will be made available in Open Access.

4. Acknowledgments

This research stay would not have been possible without the assistance of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, in particular Dr. Irini Marathaki, and the exceptionally kind and supportive staff of the Ephorate of the Evros and the Archaeological Museum of Alexandroupoli, especially the Ephor Dr. Domna Terzopoulou, and the administrators Ms. Efthatia Peppa and Ms. Irini Manta, who ensured optimal working conditions and a highly positive atmosphere.

I am obviously grateful to the Ernst-Kirsten-Gesellschaft (in particular Prof. Dr. Michael Rathmann and Dr. Vera Sauer) and to the Subcluster *ROOTS of Inequalities: Social, Economic, and Environmental Developments* within the ROOTS Cluster of Excellence (funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft under Germany's Excellence Strategy, EXC 2150–390870439) at Kiel University.

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