

# CLASSICAL RECORDS AND GERMAN ORIGINS

Part Three, By: William Finck © 2007

Before further discussing the Scythian migration into Europe it is fitting to discuss the tribe called the Getae. The accounts concerning this people are not entirely clear. Strabo says at one point: "Now the Greeks used to suppose that the Getae were Thracians" (*Geography*, 7.3.2), and tells us that the Getae and the related Daci spoke the Thracian tongue (7.3. 10, 13), yet offers no other explanation of their origins. He again distinguishes them in an instance where he mentions "the country of the Thracians and of those of their number who are Getae" (7.3.4), but also says: "And see the statement of Menander about them, which, as one may reasonably suppose, was not invented by him but taken from history: 'All the Thracians, and most of all we Getae (for I too boast that I am of this stock) are not very continent'" (7.3.4). As expected from Strabo's statements, Herodotus believed the Getae to be Thracians, calling them "the noblest as well as the most just of all the Thracian tribes" (*The Histories*, 4.93).

Discussing the religion of the Getae, it certainly seems to have an Israelite origin, though Strabo repeats a tale (*Geography*, 7.3.5) similar to one recorded by Herodotus (*The Histories*, 4:94-96). Both writers gave accounts which claim that the Getae derived their religion from Pythagoras, who indeed seems to have studied and derived a good part of his own philosophy from the Hebrew scriptures. Nevertheless, such a tale may have been invented by some other writer, earlier than either Herodotus or Strabo, in order to account for similarities in the beliefs of the Getae with those of the famous Pythagoras. Herodotus states first that a certain Zalmoxis is the god of the Getae, but also gives another account, which he relates even though he rejects it, that Zalmoxis was merely a slave of Pythagoras from whom the Thracians acquired their religion, and this is close to the version of the story related by Strabo. The knowledge which this Zalmoxis (Zamolxis in Strabo) imparts to the Getae is said by Strabo to have come from Egypt. Also mentioned in these accounts are the beliefs of the Getae in the immortality of the soul, and their monotheism, along with other ideas which have parallels in the Israelite religion. In a discussion concerning lawgivers, Diodorus Siculus also mentions Zalmoxis, "among the people known as the Getae who represent themselves to be immortal" (*Library of History*, 1.94.2), but says nothing else of him or of the religion of the Getae. Discussing the Galatae, however, he compares their beliefs in immortality and metempsychosis to the similar philosophy of Pythagoras (5.28.6), things also related of the Kelts by both Strabo (*Geography*, 4.4.4) and Julius Caesar (*The Gallic War*, 6:14).

Thucydides, the Athenian general and historian, writing circa 420 B.C. in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, describing an earlier war between Thrace and the Macedonians, lists the nations levied for this war which were under the dominion of the Thracian King Sitalces, among them “The Getes [Getae] and the people of those parts [north of Thrace, who] are borderers upon the Scythians and furnished as the Scythians are, all archers on horseback ... He [Sitalces] also drew forth many of those Scythians that inhabit the mountains and are free states ... and are called Dii, the greatest part of which are on the mountain Rhodope ...” (2:95-96). As for these Dii, Strabo, writing about 400 years later, says that the Daci of his time, who he labels a division of the Getae, “were called Daï in early times”, but refused to connect them to the “Scythians who are called ‘Daae,’ for they live far away in the neighborhood of Hyrcania” (*Geography*, 7.3.12). Yet Thucydides does identify the Dii, who were certainly Strabo’s Daï, as Scythians. Elsewhere, Strabo had no problem explaining the relations between remote groups of Galatae, such as those Tectosages of both Celtica and Anatolia.

So it seems that while the Getae may indeed have been a division of the Thracians, they may rather have been Scythians who fell under Thracian dominion at an early time, yet such cannot be stated with any certainty. Diodorus Siculus used the terms *Thracians* and *Getae* interchangeably, such as where he describes the defeat and capture, and subsequent release, of Lysimachus, the Macedonian King who invaded the land of the Getae about 292 B.C. (*Library of History*, 21.12.1-6). But Strabo, realizing that the origins of the Getae were not entirely clear, states that “as for the Getae, then, their early history must be left untold” (*Geography*, 7.3.11). Yet neither did Strabo consider the Getae or Daci to be German, as he distinguishes these when discussing the struggle against the Romans (7.3.13). It must be conjectured here, that if the Getae were indeed Thracians, and not Scythians, the attainment of their religion, described by the Greeks in a manner which makes it seem so much like the Hebrew, may have come from the Israelites in a different manner. For it is evident that many centuries before any of the writers cited here, the early Thracians had much intercourse with the Phoenicians and Trojans, both of whom can be shown to have been of the stock of the Israelites.

Speaking of a time much nearer his own, Strabo tells us that the land of the Getae adjoins that of the Suevi (Suebi), who are to their west (*Geography*). Surely Strabo is counting the Germanic tribes of the Marcomanni and Quadi as Suebi, as Tacitus did (*The Germania*, 42, 43), and Strabo also mentions these tribes individually (*Geography*, 7.1.3; and 7.3.1 where Strabo tells us that the Quadi had a common border with the Getae). The Marcomanni had displaced the Boii, who dwelt north of the Danube in Bohemia, which retains its name from the Boii, by 8 B.C., by which time also the Quadi had come to inhabit the districts in and around Moravia to the east. The land of the Marcomanni was roughly equivalent to what is in modern times the Czech Republic and part of northern Austria, and that of the Quadi to what is now Slovakia (anciently Moravia) and part of Hungary. The land of the Getae, as described by Strabo, would occupy much of modern Romania and eastern Hungary, and was known

to the Romans as Dacia. Strabo then says that the Getae “not only laid waste the country of the Celti who were intermingled with the Thracians and the Illyrians, but actually caused the complete disappearance of the Boii who were under the rule of Critasirus, and also of the Taurisci” (*Geography*, 7.3.1, 11; 7.5. 2). These Boii here had at this time dwelt south of the Danube, northeast of the Adriatic Sea. By the time of Tacitus, as he describes in *The Germania* (43), there are no Getae dwelling north of the Danube, for he makes no mention of them. Rather, he places in their lands two tribes of the Suebi, the Marsigni and Buri, a tribe which he says is Keltic, the Cotini, and a tribe which he described as Pannonian, the Osi. (Tacitus’ distinction between German and Keltic shall be discussed at length in a latter part of this essay.) Pannonia, roughly equivalent to the northern, inland part of modern Croatia (and Illyria was roughly equivalent to the coastal portion of modern Croatia), seems to have been occupied in ancient times by a mixture of Keltic, Illyrian, and Thracian tribes (Strabo, *Geography*, 7.5.3, 4, 10); the provinces of Noricum, Pannonia, Moesia and Rhaetia south of the Danube were created by Augustus Caesar early in the first century. The Osi may well have been Getae, since Tacitus distinguishes them and the Cotini by language alone. Yet it is evident that at least most of the Getae were forced south by the encroachment of more powerful German tribes from the north and east. Leaving the account of the Getae here, it is now expedient to return to the earliest accounts of the Scythians and their migrations into northern Europe.

Diodorus Siculus informs us that the Scythians originated along the Araxes river in northern Media, and spreading out towards the north came to occupy all the lands from the Caucasus mountains in the south to the Tanaïs river (the modern Don) and to the east as far as India. Then he relates that crossing the Tanaïs, the Scythians brought their western borders to Thrace (*Library of History*, 2.43.1-4; 3.55.10). The Tanaïs river was regarded as the border between Europe and Asia (i.e. Strabo, *Geography*, 2.5.26, 31). Elsewhere, discussing amber, Diodorus says that “Directly opposite the part of Scythia which lies above Galatia there is an island out in the open sea which is called Basilea (“king”). On this island the waves of the sea cast up great quantities of what is known as amber, which is to be seen nowhere else in the inhabited world” (*Library of History*, 5.23.1). By “Galatia” here Diodorus means the lands of the Galatae in Europe. A footnote in the Loeb Classical Library edition identifies this island as Heligoland, citing “... Cary in Cary and Warmington, *The Ancient Explorers*, 38”, which would put the western border of “Scythia” in the north at least as far west as the mouth of the Elbe. Yet Tacitus, in *The Germania* (45), speaking of the Germanic tribe of the Aestii, says: “They are the only people who collect amber – glaesum is their own word for it [surely the Old English *glaes*, our *glass*] – in the shallows or even on the beach.” The Aestii are described as occupying the Baltic shores, and so we see that Diodorus’ “Scythia” extended, if not as far west as the Elbe, then at least nearly as far, beyond the Vistula, and well into historically Germanic territory. Tacitus called the Baltic “the Suebian Sea”, after the Germanic tribe known by that name. Later, Diodorus Siculus describes the land of the Galatae as “lying as it does for the most part under the Bears, [it] has a wintry climate and is exceedingly cold”, and proceeds to

describe deep snowfalls and frozen rivers. The phrase “under the Bears” refers to the constellations, and places this land in the extreme north of Germany, as Diodorus also describes the Rhine and the Danube in this chapter (*Library of History*, 5.25.1 ff.).

Writing long before Diodorus, Herodotus says of the amber trade: “I do not allow that there is any river, to which the barbarians give the name of Eridanus, emptying itself into the northern sea, whence (as the tale goes) amber is procured” (*The Histories*, 3:115). In his edition at this passage George Rawlinson says in a footnote: “Here Herodotus is over-cautious, and rejects as fable what we can see to be truth. The amber district upon the northern sea is the coast of the Baltic about the Gulf of Dantzic, and the mouths of the Vistula and Niemen, which is still one of the best amber regions in the world. The very name, Eridanus, lingers there in the Rhodaune, the small stream which washes the west side of the town of Dantzic. The word Eridanus (= Rhodanus) seems to have been applied by the early inhabitants of Europe, especially to great and strong-running rivers.” Part of Herodotus’ protest against the account is that “in the first place the name Eridanus is manifestly not a barbarian word at all, but a Greek name”, and such is true, for the name even appears for rivers in Greece and Italy (i.e. Strabo *Geography*, 5.1.9; 9.1.19; Hesiod, *Theogony* 337-345; *Batrachomomachia*, 20). The Latin name for the Rhone river was Rhodanus, equivalent to the Greek Eridanus. The existence of such a name in Dantzic, where Rome never ruled, may reveal an early Greek hand in the Baltic amber trade. Both Milesians and Thracians had colonies upon and north of the Danube, as history and archaeology reveal, before the Scythian presence in Europe, and both must have exploited the surrounding regions for such resources. Recalling the island which Diodorus called “Basilea”, Herodotus mentions a tribe of Scythians who migrated into Europe called the “Royal Scythians” to whom other Scythian tribes were subject (*The Histories*, 4:6, 7, 11, 20, 56, 57, 59), and Strabo also mentions a tribe of Scythians called “Basileians”, or “Royals”, in northeast Europe (*Geography*, 7.3.17).

While Herodotus does not give an account of Scythian origins which corroborates Diodorus Siculus, his historic narratives concerning the Scythians surely do support Diodorus’ account. Reading Herodotus, the Persian King Cyrus fails in an attempt to conquer the Scythians after Cyrus crossed the Araxus river north of Media, and the Scythians whom Cyrus engages here are identified as Massagetae (*The Histories*, 1:201-216), whom Diodorus explains are a division of the Scythians (*Library of History*, 2.43.5). A couple of generations later, as the Persian King Darius was preparing for an invasion of Greece (conducted later by his son Xerxes), he first endeavored to conquer Macedonia and Thrace, where he succeeded, and then the Scythians to the north of Thrace, for which he crossed the Danube, and though returning safely, he failed to subject the Scythians of Europe (*The Histories*, 4:93; 97 ff.; 5:17 ff.). Strabo also discusses Darius’ expedition against the Scythians north of Thrace (*Geography*, 7.3.8), and explains that these people whom Darius had campaigned against were indeed Sakae, “of Scythian stock”, who “used to live in wheat-producing Asia”, quoting Choerilus of Samos, an epic poet who flourished towards the end of the 5th century B.C. (7.3.9). It was the “Desert of the Getae” which

was said to be the place from which Darius was forced to retreat (7.3.14). Diodorus Siculus tells us of the later Greek wars against the Scythians of Europe, first under Philip of Macedon, “when he had conquered in war Illyrians, Paeonians, Thracians, Scythians, and all the peoples in the vicinity of these” (*Library of History*, 16.1.5), and later by Lysimachus, who ruled Macedon, being one of the successors of Philip’s son Alexander the Great (19. 73.1-5). Diodorus placed these Scythians west of the Black Sea. Polybius also mentions the passing of Darius through Thrace to attack the Scythians of Europe (*The Histories*, 4.43.2). Elsewhere, however, Polybius does not mention Scythians in Europe, but only Galatae, whom he still considered a threat to the Greeks in his own time, likely as he wrote, about 146 B.C. (2.35.9).

Herodotus, describing the Ister (the Danube river), says: “Counting from the west it is the first of the Scythian rivers”, and names five “genuine Scythian” rivers which empty into it from the north, beginning with the Pyretus in the east, “called by the Scythians Porata”, surely the modern Prut (*The Histories*, 4:48). While it cannot be ascertained exactly which five rivers Herodotus had in mind, since not all of their names are recognizable today, in the *National Geographic Atlas of the World, Eighth Edition*, plate 55, a “Physical Map of Europe”, there are eight named rivers shown which feed the Danube from the north, six in modern Romania (the land described by later writers as that of the Getae and Daci, discussed above) which are from east to west the Prut, Siret, Ialomita, Arges, Olt and Jiu, and two in modern Hungary, the Timas and Tisza. Yet where Herodotus counts the Danube as a Scythian river “from the west”, he must have meant that portion of the river which flows from north to south, dissecting modern Hungary today. Without doubt, this brings Herodotus’ perception of Scythia as far west as modern Austria. While it is unknown why Herodotus named only five of the lower Danube’s tributaries from the north, and not eight, surely he seems to have known the course of the Danube and the rivers which fed into it as far as Austria. He described the tributaries which feed it from the south as far west as the “country above the Umbrians”, or in northern Italy (4:49). From this region, two rivers, the Sava and the Drava (as they are now known) flow out of the Alps and into the Danube. Herodotus called the Danube itself “one of the great Scythian rivers” (4:51).

The Scythian land around the northern coast of the Black Sea was first held by those Scythians whom the Greeks called Kimmerians (as explained in Part One of this essay), hence the name *Crimea*, and later (as has also been demonstrated), Galatae. Pushing west, the Scythians also migrated south of the Danube at an early time, and took lands there from the Thracians which later became known as “Little Scythia”, adjacent to the Black Sea. Strabo says that the Scythians also pushed the Getae entirely south of the Danube (*Geography* 7.3.13; 7.4.5; and 7.65, where the Scythians are said to have “often crossed the Danube”). Herodotus distinguished the region of the Scythians south of the Danube from “Old Scythia” north of the Danube (*The Histories*, 4:99). Many modern commentators assume that the ancient Getae were the Goths who had much later invaded Rome (in the 5th century A.D.). However, such is not possible since the later Gothic invasions are well recorded and it is well known that the Goths did not cross the Danube until the 3rd century A.D. It is possible, however,

that if the Getae were originally Kimmerians or later Scythians who had merged with the Thracians (as Strabo attests happened often), rather than being Thracians originally, that the names are indeed related, describing different divisions of the same people. However, such cannot be determined with certainty.

Seeing the descriptions of “Scythia” in Europe provided here, it is shown to extend along both the banks of the Danube and the shores of the Baltic (which Tacitus called the Suebian Sea, after the Germanic tribes of that name). There is also a quote of Ephorus, a 4th century B.C. historian who wrote a treatise, *On Europe*, provided by Strabo, where Ephorus said that the Kelts dwelt in “the part on the west”, and the Scythians in “the part from which the north wind blows” (*Geography*, 1.2.28). With Diodorus Siculus and Herodotus, we have seen that “Scythia” was perceived as extending well into Central Europe. The Scythians were a northern people at this time, and not merely an Asian people, but we have also seen the testimony that these people of the north had originated in Asia. Yet of the people north of the Danube, Diodorus and Polybius, when speaking of their own times, mention Galatae and not Scythians. So with Strabo in his own descriptions of northern Europe, and his use of the terms Galatae and German for these same people inhabiting this same land, it is evident that the geographer is straddling the earlier Greek terminology, such as that used by Diodorus, and then the Roman. For the Romans of Strabo’s time were in control of much of the inhabited world, and as Strabo was writing, the Romans were making continual failed attempts to conquer the German people north of the Danube and east of the Rhine. So Strabo quotes the most ancient writers, where the people of the north were known as Scythians, and then writing of his own time, he is calling them Galatae and Germans. One must not forget, however, that while Strabo often distinguishes between Galatae and Germans, he has fully described those Galatae south of and along the Danube as having mixed themselves with the Illyrian, Thracian, and other tribes, while he considers the Germans to be the genuine Galatae. Diodorus Siculus – even though he wrote during the time of Julius Caesar (who used the term *German*) and revered him greatly – did not use the term *German* but only *Galatae*, (interchangeably with *Kelt*) to describe these people, as Polybius did before him. The term *German* in Strabo should always be interpreted to mean *genuine Galatae*, as he himself explained of the origin of the term among the Romans (*Geography*, 7.1.2), and says that the Galatae and Germans, while they are distinguished, are kin (4.4.2).

Strabo tells us that the Rhine divides Celtica and Germany (*Geography*, 2.5.28, 30). Speaking of the Galatae of Celtica, Diodorus Siculus describes them as being “tall of body, with rippling muscles, and white of skin, and their hair is blond”, and goes on to relate how they made their hair even blonder by washing it in lime-water (*Library of History*, 5.28.1). Strabo says of the Germans that they are “taller, and have yellower hair” than the Galatae of Celtica (*Geography*, 7.1.2). Diodorus Siculus apparently places the borders of Scythia at the Elbe (*Library of History*, 5.23.1; 5.32.1-3), yet Strabo tells us that the Elbe (which he calls “Albis”) divides Germany into two parts (*Geography*, 1.2.1). Herodotus, as we have seen, calls the lands of Central Europe north of the Danube *Scythia*. By all of these descriptions, the eastern portion of

Strabo's Germany is clearly the European Scythia of the earlier writers: Ephorus, Herodotus, and Diodorus. As we shall see in subsequent parts of this essay, the Germany of Tacitus extends all the way to the Black Sea.

Strabo tells us of the earlier writers: "Now all the peoples towards the north were by the ancient Greek historians given the general name 'Scythians' or 'Celts-scythians'; but the writers of still earlier times, making distinctions between them, called those who lived above the Euxine [Black Sea] and the Ister [Danube] and the Adriatic 'Hyperboreans,' 'Sauromatians,' and 'Arimaspians,' and they called those who lived across the Caspian Sea in part 'Saciens' [Sakae, or Sakans, all the same in Greek] and in part 'Massagetans,' but they were unable to give any accurate account of them, although they reported a war between Cyrus and the Massagetans" (*Geography*, 11.6.2), and here Strabo is being critical of Ctesias, Herodotus, and Hellanicus, among others, although his criticism is surely harsher than Herodotus deserves. Strabo himself here confuses "Hyperboreans" by listing them along with historical peoples, since he himself explains elsewhere that the name is a general description meaning "most northerly peoples", and is not the name of any specific tribe (1.3. 22). Yet after rebuking Herodotus for doubting whether there actually were "Hyperboreans" (referring to *The Histories* 4:13, 32-36), Strabo himself later calls them "mythical", revealing his own confusion on the matter (*Geography*, 7.3.1). Yet hopefully the links between Kelts, Galatae, Germans, Kimmerians and Scythians, through the different stages of history, are becoming quite apparent here.