

ARTICLE

THE STUDY OF THE RIVERS OF THRACE BASED ON PSEUDO-PLUTARCH'S WORK *ON RIVERS*

1. *Introduction*

Water is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental elements that are necessary for life. Freshwater resources have not only met the vital needs of living organisms but have also enabled agricultural activities on the lands they irrigate. For this reason, throughout history, human communities have tended to establish settlements in proximity to freshwater sources. Over time, this tendency laid the foundation for the emergence of civilizations along rivers and other water bodies. As humans became increasingly aware of their dependence on water, they attributed sacred significance to it, sometimes conceptualizing it as a deity and sometimes as the primordial substance of the cosmos. Nevertheless, water has not only symbolized life, production, abundance, and fertility, but has also been associated with drought and destruction. In eschatological and etiological myths, water is regarded as the principal agent of great devastation and the ensuing annihilation, manifesting in almost every culture in the form of a great flood, and as the foundation of renewal and rebirth in some cases.

Beyond their terrestrial presence, mountains in the ancient Mediterranean world were inextricably linked to the hydrological cycle as the perceived primary sites of cloud formation and precipitation. This vital connection elevates their status in cataclysmic narratives; in the great flood myths, mountains transcend their physical nature to become sacred sites of eschatological refuge. As the last remnants of the world above the rising waters, peaks such as Parnassus, mountains serve as the liminal spaces where humanity is preserved and subsequently recreated¹. This dual identity of mountains—as both the harvesters of life-giving water and the solitary sanctuaries against its destructive force—provides a crucial thematic bridge to the study of high-altitude topography in relation to fluvial systems.

¹ Apollod. I. 7. 2.

This perspective also shaped geographical thought in antiquity. As in mythological narratives, the idea emerged that all waters originate from a great ocean encircling the world and ultimately return to it, which means that both the beginning and the end are constituted by water. This notion found expression in Ancient Greek mythology as well. The myth of Tethys and Oceanus, along with the flood narrative associated with Zeus, exemplifies the significance attributed to water in Greek mythological tradition. Furthermore, certain Presocratic natural philosophers in Ancient Greece claimed that water constituted the *arkhe*, the fundamental principle of the cosmos. Given the importance attributed to water, independent treatises were also composed on the subject. One of such works is Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers*, which compiles notable rivers from various regions of the ancient world.

Pseudo-Plutarch's work titled *On Rivers, Mountain Names, and the Things Found in Them* (Περὶ ποταμῶν καὶ ὄρων ἐπωνυμίας καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς εὕρισκομένων) is conventionally abbreviated as *On Rivers*². The text is preserved in manuscripts including *Palatinus Heidelbergensis gr. 398* (*Codex Palatinus Graecus 398, fols. 157r–173r*), dated to the ninth century and kept in the Heidelberg University Library, as well as Paris, *Bibliothèque nationale de France, Supplément gr. 443A (B)*^{2,3}. Since the author of the text was initially identified as Plutarch, it was once assumed that the work belonged to the renowned biographer Mestrius Plutarch (ca. AD 46–120). However, when Plutarch's lexical choices, intellectual profile, and use of sources are considered, it becomes evident that *On Rivers* must be attributed to another author having the same name. This conclusion is further supported by a marginal note found in one of the manuscripts, which states that « *this work has been falsely attributed since it is far away from Plutarch's genius in both thought and diction; it must belong to another Plutarch* ». Accordingly, the text is now attributed to Pseudo-Plutarch⁴.

² Ancient Greek Περὶ ποταμῶν; Latin *De fluviis*.

³ KINACI, M. "Pseudo-Plutarkhos'un Nehirler Üzerine Adli Eserine Göre Maiandros Nehri ve Yorumlanması", *Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, XXXIX, 68, 2020, p. 124; POIDOMANI, C. "Il De fluviis pseudoplutarcho nella redazione del codice Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Supplément grec 443A", *Commentaria Classica*, III, 2016, pp. 57–58.

⁴ RACINE, F. "Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers* and the School Tradition", in *Falsifications and Authority in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, PAPY, J. – GIELEN, E. eds., Brepols, Turnhout, 2020, p. 216; CAMPBELL, B. J. "Pseudo-Plutarch, on the Names of Rivers and Mountains and the Things in Them", in *Geographers of the Ancient Greek World II*, GRAHAM, D. – SHIPLEY, J. eds., Cambridge University Press, Croydon, 2024, p. 711

The work *On Rivers* consists of narratives related with twenty-five significant rivers of the known world. In composing his work, the author did not approach rivers only from a strictly geographical perspective. Rather, he considered them a multidimensional manner, incorporating the cultural perspectives of the populations living along their banks. The work thus takes the form of a catalog presenting geographical, onomastic, etymological, mythological, and paradoxographical information about those rivers. It also has a spatial dimension because the rivers examined correspond to real geographical entities. The author's purpose in composing this work, as well as the criteria by which the rivers were selected, cannot be determined with certainty, since the manuscript contains neither a preface nor any explanatory remarks. Nevertheless, when considered in light of the geographical knowledge of the period, it may be suggested that the selected rivers represent those that most significantly shaped the known world and the regions through which they flowed. The geographical information provided by the author regarding the location of these rivers is generally quite limited; in most cases, he confines himself to indicating only the broader region. After presenting geographical (and at times etymological or onomastic, often myth-based) information about a given river, he proceeds, where applicable, to discuss the etymology of a nearby mountain and the myths associated with it. He then describes stones and plants (and, in one instance, a fish) found in the vicinity of the river that have unusual medical, psychological, scientific, or religious properties, followed by narratives of local traditions and practices related to these natural elements. Particularly noteworthy are the paradoxographical details concerning these plants and stones. In the myths transmitted by Pseudo-Plutarch, a recurring theme is the punishment of individuals who commit sexual transgressions, often through divine justice, while victims are commemorated through the assignment of their names to rivers and mountains, thereby ensuring their remembrance and symbolic monumentalization. The myths utilized to explain the rivers sometimes seem as variants of well-known mythological traditions and, at other times, as narratives that may have been constructed by the author himself.

The work Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers* has been dismissed by some modern scholars as lacking reliability and has therefore been excluded from serious academic consideration. Others, however, have used its narratives as a source to support their own arguments. The present study aims to examine the reliability of the narratives concerning the rivers Hebrus (Ἑβρος; Meriç) and Strymon (Στρυμόν; Struma) as presented in the work *On Rivers*. By intentionally focusing on these two major Thracian arteries, this study does not seek to provide a universal assessment of the entire treatise, which covers diverse global geographies. Instead, it adopts a regional case-study approach to evaluate the

specific accuracy of Thracian topographies, the nature of the author's sources and, through selected examples, to determine whether the narratives concerning these two rivers can be considered reliable.

2. *Thrace*

As emphasized in a lesser-known myth, the union of Oceanus and Parthenope produced two daughters, Europa and Thraïke, whose names were subsequently given to continents⁵. The descendants of Thraïke then created the Thracian tribes, and the region in which these peoples spread and lived was known in Antiquity as Thrace. The geographical boundaries of Thrace varied over time⁶. These boundaries may be described as follows: to the east lay the Pontos Euxeinos (Black Sea), the Bosporos Thrakios (Bosphorus), and the Propontis (Sea of Marmara); to the south, the Aigaios Pontos (Aegean Sea); to the north, the rivers Danube (Istros) and Axios (Vardar)⁷. Different opinions have been proposed regarding the western boundary of the region, with some suggesting that it was defined by the Strymon, others by the Axios, and still others by the Nestos (Mesta)⁸. In general, the ancient Greeks referred to the region bounded by the Danube in the north, the Aegean Sea in the south, the Black Sea, and the Sea of Marmara in the east, and the Vardar River in the west as Thrace⁹.

3. *Hebros*

Pseudo-Plutarch states that the Hebros was one of the rivers of Thrace and that, thanks to its swirling currents, it had formerly been called Rhombos¹⁰. From the aspect of etymology of the word rhombos (ῥόμβος), it can be seen

⁵ JACOBY, F. ed., *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* I, Brill, Leiden, 1968, p. 162.

⁶ SEARS, M. A. *Athens, Thrace, and the Shaping of Athenian Leadership*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, p. 6.

⁷ Strab. VII. fr. 10; fr. 47; FOL, A. – MARAZOV, I. *Thrace & the Thracians*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1977, p. 140; SEVIN, V. *Anadolu'nun Tarihi Coğrafyası*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 2007, p. 18; BOUZEK, J. – GRANINGER, D. "Geography", in *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*, VALEVA, J. – NANKOV, E. – GRANINGER, D. eds., Wiley Blackwell, Oxford, 2015, p. 13.

⁸ SAYAR, M. H. "Eski Çağ'da Doğu-Batı Mücadelesinde Trakya ve Traklar", in *Trakya'da Arkeoloji* I, YAVAŞ, A. – ÜSKÜPLÜ AKGÜL, G. eds., Ege Yayınları, İstanbul, 2023, p. 123.

⁹ GÜNEY, E. – GÜNEY, U. *Türkiye Coğrafyasının Uygarlıkları: Anadolu'nun, Trakya'nın Tarihi Coğrafya Bölgeleri ve Antik Kentleri*, Nobel Yayıncılık, Ankara, 2015, p. 79.

¹⁰ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 1.

that in Ancient Greek it denoted something “whirling”, “spinning”, or “rushing”,¹¹ a meaning that plausibly reflects the character of the river’s current.

Pseudo-Plutarch also transmits a myth explaining the river’s later renaming. According to this narrative, Hebros was the son born from the marriage of the Thracian king Kassandros and Kratonike. After abandoning his first wife, Kratonike, King Kassandros married Damasippe, the daughter of Atrax. Damasippe conceived a desire for her stepson Hebros and sent word to arrange a meeting with him. Hebros, however, rejected his stepmother’s immoral proposal and instead departed for the hunt. In retaliation, Damasippe falsely accused him, claiming that Hebros had attempted to force himself upon her. Having heard the allegations from his wife, King Kassandros was overcome with jealousy and went into the forest with his men to seize his son. Surrounded and with no means of escape, Hebros threw himself into the River Rhombos and took his own life; thereafter, the river was renamed Hebros in his memory. Pseudo-Plutarch notes that he derived this information from Book 11 of Timotheos’ *On Rivers*¹². No information regarding this author Timotheos or the work in question could be achieved, and the reference cannot be independently verified. As for the etymology of the name Hebros, it has been suggested that the Thracians pronounced as Ebros a Proto-Indo-European term “*h₂wérus*”, meaning “broad” or “spraying”, which then entered Greek as Hebros, allegedly with the sense of “the splashing one”¹³.

Pseudo-Plutarch identifies the Hebros as a river of Thrace¹⁴. Even though he does not provide a precise localization, his description of the region through which it flows corresponds broadly with the narratives of other ancient authors. Rising in the Dunax (Rila) Mountain, the highest peak of the Rhodope range¹⁵, the Hebros flows in a southeasterly direction, joins with many tributaries, traverses nearly the entirety of Thrace, and empties into the Aigaios Pontos (Aegean Sea) to the west of the city of Ainos (Enez)¹⁶. Originating in

¹¹ LIDDELL, H. G. – SCOTT, R. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 1574.

¹² Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 1.

¹³ GORGIEV, V. I. *Introduction to the History of the Indo-European Languages*, Publishing House of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, 1981, p. 351.

¹⁴ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 1.

¹⁵ Hdt. VII. 59; Claudian. *Paneg.* VII. 140–150; Sen. *Her. Oet.* 1810–1820.

¹⁶ Thuc. II. 96. 4; Ptol. *Geogr.* III. 11. 5; KARACA, E. “Antik Çağ’da Hebros (Meriç) Irmağı”, in *Çağlar Boyunca Nehirler, Denizler ve Göller, Dumankaya*, O. ed., Doruk Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2021, p. 220; ŞAHİN, R. “Antik Çağ’da Hebros. (Meriç) Nehri’nin Trakya’nın İç Kesimlerinde Yerleşim Topografyasına ve Bölge Ekonomisine Etkileri”, in *Çağlar Boyunca Nehirler, Denizler ve Göller, Dumankaya*, O. ed., Doruk Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2021, p. 601.

the Dunax Mountain, the river initially flows eastward, where it is joined by smaller streams descending from the Haimos (Balkan) and Rhodope ranges; it then continues across Thrace and forms a delta bearing its own name. It merges with the Tonzos (Tunca) River at Hadrianopolis and then receives the waters of the Harpessos (Arda) River before turning southward. Finally, near Kypsela (modern İpsala), it joins the Agrianes (Ergene) River and empties into the Aegean west of Ainos in two branches¹⁷. From its source at Dunax Mountain to its mouth, the Hebros extends for approximately 490 kilometers.

Pseudo-Plutarch further states that Mount Pangaïos was situated near the river. A myth about the naming of this mountain is transmitted solely by Pseudo-Plutarch. According to this narrative, Pangaïos, the son of Ares and Kritoboule, unknowingly laid with his sister and, unable to endure his remorse, went to Mount Karmanios and committed suicide; the mountain was thereafter renamed Pangaïos¹⁸. The author's geographical information regarding Mount Pangaïos, however, is incorrect. Mount Pangaïos lies not near the Hebros but beside another Thracian river, the Strymon (Struma)¹⁹. The earlier name given for the mountain, Karmanion, also bears resemblance to Karmenorion, which the same author cites as the former name of Mount Tmolos²⁰. In Antiquity, Mount Pangaïos was renowned and highly valued for its mineral wealth; ancient writers frequently referred to its abundant gold and silver deposits²¹. Pliny the Elder even stated that gold mining and gold smelting were first discovered on Mount Pangaïos by the Phoenician Cadmus²². Pliny further notes that gold was extracted from the alluvial deposits carried by the Hebros²³.

Pseudo-Plutarch reports that along the Hebrus River there grew a plant very similar to *origanon*, and that after satisfying their hunger with Demeter's food, namely wheat, the Thracians would gather the tops of this *origanon* plant and throw them into the fire²⁴. Inhaling the smoke of the burning *origanon*, the Thracians would fall into a trance and drift into sleep. The plant referred

¹⁷ Hdt. IV. 90; Strab. VII. fr. 10; fr. 47; Plin. nat. IV. 43; CAMPBELL, B. *Rivers & the Power of Ancient Rome*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2012, p. 299.

¹⁸ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 2.

¹⁹ Hdt. VII. 113; Thuc. II. 99; Strab. VII. 8. 34; Arrian. *Anab.* I. 11. 3–5.

²⁰ Campbell, "Pseudo-Plutarch, on the Names of Rivers...", *op. cit.*, p. 719. fn. 20

²¹ Eur. *Rhesus* 920–925; Xen. *Hell.* V. 2. 17; Strab. VII. 34; XIV. 5. 28.

²² Plin. nat. VII. 197.

²³ Plin. nat. XXXIII. 66.

²⁴ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 3.

to here as *origanon* corresponds in English to *marjoram* or *thyme*²⁵; however, no such intoxicating or sedative effects have been observed from the smoke of these plants. Herodotus, in describing the geography of Scythia, which may be considered proximate to Thrace, reports a similar practice among the Scythians. As narrated by him, the Scythians would scatter hemp (*kannabis*) seeds over heated stones and, enveloped within felt coverings, would become exhilarated and cry out since they took pleasure in the resulting vapor bath²⁶.

Pseudo-Plutarch also mentions that on Mount Pangaios there grew a plant called *kithara*, and he relates the widely known myth of Orpheus to explain its naming. According to this narrative, after Orpheus' body had been torn apart by women, his limbs were cast into the Hebrus River. By the decree of the gods, the head of the dead man was transformed into a serpent. Orpheus' lyre (*kithara*), however, was transferred among the stars by the will of Apollo. A plant known as *kithara* sprouted from the blood dripping from Orpheus. During festivals celebrated in honor of Dionysus, this plant was said to emit the sound of a lyre. According to information, which Pseudo-Plutarch quotes from Book 3 of Kleitonymos' *Thrakika*, the inhabitants of the region, wearing fawn skins and brandishing *thyrsos*, chanted the following hymn: «*Do not display wisdom whenever you will be wise in vain!*»²⁷.

Pseudo-Plutarch refers to the *kithara* plant growing on Mount Pangaios; however, no plant known by this name has been identified²⁸. The *kithara* is an instrument used by the ancient Greeks and closely associated with their cultural identity. In Greek mythology, the *kithara*, regarded as one of the symbols of Apollo, was also used by Orpheus, who was considered to be Apollo's son²⁹. Pseudo-Plutarch's association of Orpheus with the rivers, mountains, and flora of the Thracian region is entirely natural, for Orpheus is evidently Thracian. Although Apollo is often regarded as his father, there are also traditions asserting that the Thracian king Oeagrus was his father³⁰. Orpheus sought to bring his deceased wife Eurydice back to life. To this end, he descended into the underworld and attempted to persuade Hades, who agreed to grant his request on the condition that Orpheus would not look upon his wife until he had returned to the world above. Yet before reaching the surface, Orpheus

²⁵ Liddell – Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, op. cit., p. 1250.

²⁶ Hdt. IV. 75.

²⁷ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 4.

²⁸ Kınacı, M. *Antik Çağda Müzik*, Doğu Batı Yayınları, Ankara, 2025, pp. 142–145.

²⁹ Kınacı, *Antik Çağda Müzik*, op. cit., p. 42.

³⁰ Apollod. I. 14; Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* I. 20–30.

looked upon her face and thus lost her forever. Thereafter, returning to Thrace, Orpheus discovered the mysteries of Dionysus and was subsequently torn apart by the female followers of Dionysus³¹. Pseudo-Plutarch states that the place where Orpheus was dismembered was Mount Pangaios³²; however, other ancient authors claim that he was killed on Mount Pieria³³ or at Libethra in Boeotia³⁴. It is further reported that Orpheus' severed head was cast into the Hebrus River and, carried along by the current, first reached the Aegean Sea and then the island of Lesbos³⁵.

Pseudo-Plutarch cites Book 3 of Kleitonymos' *Thrakika* as a source for his narratives. Kleitonymos seems to be an author known solely through references by Pseudo-Plutarch. He refers to Kleitonymos' *Italika*³⁶ and *Sybaritika*³⁷ in the work attributed to Pseudo-Plutarch, *Parallela Minora*, while he cites his *Thrakika*³⁸ in *On Rivers*. The description, allegedly quoted from this work, of the Thracians wearing fawn skins and carrying "thyrsos" actually corresponds to standard practices within Dionysian ritual in Thrace³⁹. The existence of the traditions reported by Pseudo-Plutarch can therefore be corroborated.

In antiquity, the Hebrus River was regarded as one of the most important rivers of Thrace. In addition to irrigating the lands through which it flowed, it clearly provided many benefits to the populations living along its banks. In particular, in the ancient world, where ships constituted one of the principal means of transport for trade, the ability to navigate inland via rivers stimulated economic activity in such regions. The Hebrus River similarly allowed vessels to penetrate, at least to a certain extent, into the interior of Thrace, thereby contributing significantly to the regional economy. Strabo notes that the Hebrus River was navigable as far as the city of Cypsela⁴⁰. Cypsela lay approximately 22 km inland from the sea, and a bridge was constructed over the river at the point where the via Egnatia reached the Hebrus River; as the road continued, goods

³¹ Paus. IX. 30. 5–6.

³² Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* III. 4.

³³ Apollod. I. 14.

³⁴ Paus. IX. 30. 5–6.

³⁵ Verg. *georg.* IV. 220–225.

³⁶ Plut. *mor.* 308 C.

³⁷ Plut. *mor.* 310 F.

³⁸ JACOBY, F. ed., *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* III, Brill, Leiden, 1940, p. 176.

³⁹ Eur. *Bakkh.* 170–175.

⁴⁰ Strab. VII. 8. 47.

transported there could be conveyed in an east-west direction⁴¹. Thus, many cities were established along the banks of the Hebrus River, where trade was conducted, and commercial vessels engaged in the exchange of goods even in the interior regions of Thrace⁴². Major Roman imperial roads, such as the *via Egnatia* (extending from Dyrrachium on the Adriatic coast to Byzantium and the Propontis) and the *via Militaris* (running from Singidunum (Belgrade) to Perinthus (Marmara Ereğlisi) also passed through cities constructed along the Hebrus River⁴³. These routes further increased the trade volume of the region.

In the imagination of people in antiquity, rivers were personified, conceived as gods, and worshipped; they were sometimes depicted as deities in human form⁴⁴. The Hebrus River was also regarded as a god and represented as a river deity on many coins⁴⁵.

4. *Strymon*

Pseudo-Plutarch notes that the Strymon, one of the rivers flowing through Thrace, passes near the city of Edonis⁴⁶. The geographical information he provides regarding the Strymon River appears to be accurate, since the river flows between Macedonia and Thrace and effectively constituted a boundary between the two regions⁴⁷. Even though his narratives about the city of Edonis have been regarded as doubtful by some modern scholars⁴⁸, the mention of a Thracian tribe known as the Edonians living between the Strymon and Nestos rivers⁴⁹, the designation of these territories as Edonia⁵⁰, and references to

⁴¹ Campbell, *Rivers & the Power of Ancient Rome*, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁴² TSONCHEV, D. "La navigabilité de l'Hebros-Maritza dans l'Antiquité", *Latomus*, XXI, 1962, p. 849; DE BOER, J. G. "River Trade in Eastern and Central Thrace from the Bronze Age till the Hellenistic Period", *Eirene*, XLVI, 2010, p. 176.

⁴³ CROOK, J. A. – LINTOTT, A. – RAWSON, E. *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 9, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 31; Campbell, *Rivers & the Power of Ancient Rome*, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁴⁴ Ostrowski 1991, 21 ff.

⁴⁵ Tsonchev, "La navigabilité de l'Hebros-Maritza...", *op. cit.*, pp. 850–852; ALTINOLUK, S. *Eskiçağ'da Irmak Tanrıları (Türkiye Trakyası ve Anadolu)*, Türk Eskiçağ Bilimleri Enstitüsü Yayınları, İstanbul, 2010, pp. 57–61.

⁴⁶ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* XI. 1.

⁴⁷ Strab. VII. fr.10.

⁴⁸ Campbell, "Pseudo-Plutarch, on the Names of Rivers...", *op. cit.*, p. 727 fn. 47

⁴⁹ Athen. *Deip.* XI. 479c; Plin. *nat.* IV. 41; Paus. I. 29. 4.

⁵⁰ Hdt. V. 124; Aeschyl. *Pers.* 490–500; Thuc. C. 2.

certain settlements as Edonis⁵¹ collectively indicate the existence of such a city or settlement and, support the reliability of the geographical information provided by Pseudo-Plutarch.

In recounting a myth regarding the naming of the river, Pseudo-Plutarch states that it was formerly known as Palaistinos, after a son of Poseidon. When Palaistinos fell ill during a war with neighboring cities, he appointed his son Haliakmon as commander. However, after Haliakmon was killed in battle, Palaistinos, unable to endure the grief of his son's death, threw himself into the Konodzios River; as a result, the river came to be called Palaistinos. Strymon, the son of Ares and Helike, also cast himself into the Palaistinos River in his grief after receiving news of the death of Rhesos, and thus the river was again associated with the name Palaistinos⁵². There is, however, no other attested tradition in which Ares is united with Helike and fathers a son named Strymon; this narrative is therefore most likely one of the alternative myths constructed by Pseudo-Plutarch. The Thracian Rhesos, who was killed by Diomedes in the Trojan War, is well attested in the literary tradition⁵³. Pseudo-Plutarch may have brought these figures together within a newly constructed narrative framework.

Pseudo-Plutarch further reports that in the Strymon River there is a stone called *pausilypon* (*pain-relieving*)⁵⁴. According to the information he cites from the work *Thrakika* by Jason of Byzantium, whoever found this stone would immediately be freed from their suffering⁵⁵. However, no evidence has been found to substantiate either the existence of this stone or the reliability of the source to which Pseudo-Plutarch refers.

Noting that the Rhodope and Haemus mountains lie near the Strymon River, Pseudo-Plutarch also transmits a myth concerning their naming. As emphasized in this narrative, Rhodope and Haemus were two siblings in love with one another. The male addressed the female as Hera, and the female addressed the male as Zeus. Since this behavior was considered an affront to the gods, the gods transformed the siblings into mountains that would bear their names⁵⁶. Narratives regarding the naming of these mountains are seen in the works of many ancient authors; since these authors recorded the myth before

⁵¹ Val. Flacc. *Argon.* VI. 330–345; Ptol. III. 12.

⁵² Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* XI. 1.

⁵³ Hom. *Il.* X. 470–500.

⁵⁴ Liddell – Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, *op. cit.*, p. 1350.

⁵⁵ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* XI. 2.

⁵⁶ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* XI. 3.

Pseudo-Plutarch, it may be concluded that this narrative does not belong to the category of alternative myths invented by him⁵⁷.

Pseudo-Plutarch also mentions that there are jet-black stones resembling human figures, known as *philadelphoi*, in the Strymon River. Their distinguishing feature is that, when placed apart and called by name, they immediately come together. Pseudo-Plutarch states that he derived this information from Book 3 of *On Stones* by Thrasyllus of Mendes, and he adds that the same author provided more detailed narratives in his work *Thrakika*⁵⁸.

In Ancient Greek, *philadelphoi* means «those who love their siblings»⁵⁹. The term may refer either to siblings who genuinely care for and protect one another⁶⁰ or, in some contexts, to siblings who are erotically attracted to each other⁶¹. Unfortunately, the narratives about these stones appear to be entirely fictitious and seem to function as paradoxographical elaborations intended to render internally coherent the etymological explanations given for the names of the aforementioned mountains. In *On Rivers*, Pseudo-Plutarch frequently cites authors about whom little or no information can be obtained, leading to the assumption that such figures either never existed or have left no trace in the extant record. In this case, Pseudo-Plutarch claims to have drawn his information about the *philadelphoi* stones from the works *On Stones* and *Thrakika* by Thrasyllus of Mendes. Thrasyllus of Mendes, however, is known as a grammarian, astrologer, and intellectual who lived between the first century BC and the first century AD⁶². Even though his works have not survived, fragments were identified through references in later authors⁶³. Given his known areas of study, it seems unlikely that he would have written on Thrace or on stones. In this context, it seems that Pseudo-Plutarch may have cited a recognized authority such as Thrasyllus of Mendes, attributing to him unknown or possibly nonexistent works in order to lend credibility to his own narrative.

The Strymon River, which rises in Mount Skombros (Vitosha Mountain), flows first westward and then eastward for approximately 415 km before emptying into the Aegean Sea⁶⁴. It also constitutes a natural boundary between

⁵⁷ Ovid. *Met.* VI. 80–100.

⁵⁸ Pseudo-Plut. *de Fluv.* XI. 4.

⁵⁹ Liddell – Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, *op. cit.*, p. 1931.

⁶⁰ Plut. *Sol.* XXVII. 5.

⁶¹ Athen. *Deip.* XIII. 576d-f.

⁶² Tac. *Ann.* VI. 20–22; Suet. *Tib.* III. 14. 4; IV. 19. 3; Cass. Dio. LV. 11.

⁶³ TARRANT, H. *Thrasyllan Platonism*, Cornell University Press, London, 1993, p. 244.

⁶⁴ Hdt. VIII. 115; Thuc. II. 96; Aristot. *Meteor.* 350b; Strab. VII. 7. 4.

Macedonia and Thrace⁶⁵. In addition, the Strymon had considerable importance to the regional economy. Besides enabling agricultural activity in the lands through which it flowed, it also served as a major commercial artery⁶⁶. The city of Amphipolis, established on its banks, functioned as a significant trade center situated along the *via Egnatia*⁶⁷. Similarly, the city of Eion, founded at the river's mouth, was a harbor through which goods transported from inland regions via the Strymon and its adjoining routes were exported to external markets⁶⁸. As previously noted, the banks of the Strymon and Mount Pangaios had substantial reserves of gold and silver⁶⁹. Moreover, the surrounding forests contained timber highly that were suitable for shipbuilding, and this timber was transported via the Strymon River⁷⁰. While some narratives claim that the river did not permit navigation and thus precluded maritime transport, others report that triremes and various vessels were able to advance far into its interior stretches⁷¹.

Like the Hebrus River, the Strymon River was also personified, regarded as a deity, and worshipped accordingly. Hesiod includes Strymon among the river gods born of Oceanus and Tethys⁷². Highly revered by the local population, Strymon was also depicted on coinage and in vase paintings⁷³.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the accuracy and reliability of the narratives concerning the Hebrus and Strymon rivers, presented as the principal rivers of Thrace in the work Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers*, have been critically assessed. The analysis

⁶⁵ Strab. VII. 34; 36.

⁶⁶ Theoph. *plant.* IV. 9.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Rivers & the Power of Ancient Rome*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁶⁸ Hdt. VII. 25; 112–113.

⁶⁹ Strab. VII. 34; 36.

⁷⁰ Diod. XII. 68. 4; Borza, E. N. *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990, p. 49.

⁷¹ Thuc. VII. 9; Liv. XLIV. 44; PAUNOV, E. I. "Introduction to the Numismatics of Thrace, ca. 530 BCE–46 CE", in *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*, VALEVA, J. – NANKOV, E. – GRANINGER, D. eds., Wiley Blackwell, Oxford, 2015, p. 266.

⁷² Hesiod. *Theog.* 335–340.

⁷³ AMANDRY, M. – BURNETT, A. – HOSTEIN, H. – MAIRAT, J. – RIPOLLÉS, P. P. – BUTCHER, M. S. *Roman Provincial Coinage Supplement 5*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, p. 82
658A SPIER, J. – POTTS, T. – COLE, S. E. – DAMYANOV, M. eds., *Ancient Thrace and the Classical World*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2024, p. 54.

demonstrates that while Pseudo-Plutarch's geographical information generally corresponds to the physical realities of the region, it is frequently superficial and lacks topographical precision. The erroneous placement of Mount Pangaios near the Hebrus River, despite its actual proximity to the Strymon, clearly illustrates the limitations of the author's spatial accuracy. Moreover, many of the etiological myths concerning the naming of rivers and mountains appear to be alternative narrative constructions rather than reflections of widely attested mythological traditions.

Beyond these specific observations, the results of this study allow for broader methodological conclusions regarding the use of classical topographic literature in modern scholarship. The examination of *On Rivers* reveals that such texts should not be approached as repositories of empirically verifiable geographical data, but rather as culturally embedded compilations that blend geography, mythology, etymology, and paradoxography. Consequently, classical topographic works must be situated within their literary and intellectual contexts, with due attention paid to authorial intent, narrative conventions, and the epistemological limits of ancient geographical knowledge.

The study further highlights the problematic nature of source citation within Pseudo-Plutarch's work. The frequent reference to authors and treatises that are otherwise unattested or poorly documented raises serious questions about the reliability of certain narratives and suggests that some citations may have been employed rhetorically to enhance the authority of the text. This finding underscores the necessity of applying rigorous source criticism when engaging with classical topographic literature, particularly with regard to unverifiable references and internally consistent yet externally unsupported traditions.

Accordingly, this study proposes several applicable standards for the scholarly use of classical topographic sources. First, such works should be cited with explicit acknowledgment of their composite and often non-empirical character. Second, information derived from these texts—especially concerning geography and local traditions—should be systematically compared with archaeological evidence, other ancient literary sources, and modern geographical data. Finally, unverifiable citations should be treated with caution and clearly distinguished from information corroborated by independent sources.

Finally, it is worth noting that the methodological issues identified in this study—geographical inaccuracies, speculative botanical narratives, and unverifiable citations—are not exclusively confined to ancient literary production. Structurally analogous patterns have been observed in the outputs of contemporary generative AI systems employed in academic contexts: formally coherent references that direct readers to non-existent works, incorrectly attributed sources, or fabricated bibliographical data reflect these systems' tendency to

generate plausible-seeming information on the basis of statistical patterns embedded in their training data, rather than through genuine epistemic verification. This parallel is not merely incidental. It suggests that the critical principles developed for the evaluation of ancient topographic literature—namely, the insistence on independent corroboration, systematic comparison with archaeological and material evidence, and principled scepticism toward unverifiable references—retain a broader epistemological relevance that extends well beyond the boundaries of classical philology. In an intellectual environment increasingly shaped by AI-assisted research, the rigorous source-critical methods long established within ancient history and classical studies may offer a productive methodological model for addressing the reliability challenges posed by algorithmically generated knowledge.

In conclusion, although Pseudo-Plutarch's *On Rivers* constitutes a rich and valuable source for understanding ancient perceptions of rivers and landscapes in Thrace, its narratives cannot be employed uncritically. The findings of this study reaffirm that classical topographic literature is most productively used not as a factual geographical record, but as a historical testimony to the ways in which ancient authors conceptualized space, nature, and cultural memory. Such an approach not only enhances the reliability of regional studies in ancient geography, but also contributes to the development of more consistent and transparent methodological standards within the discipline.

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Abstract

L'acqua e le montagne, in quanto elementi fondamentali della vita e dell'inse-diamento umano, occupavano un posto centrale nelle strutture mitologiche e geogra-fiche del mondo antico. L'opera De Fluviis et Montibus (Sui fiumi e sui monti), attribuita allo Pseudo-Plutarco, costituisce un catalogo culturale significativo, seb-bene controverso, del mondo antico. Pur essendo stata inizialmente ascritta a Mestrio Plutarco, la critica moderna la identifica come prodotto di un autore anon-imo, verosimilmente riconducibile al periodo della Seconda Sofistica. Il presente contributo esamina l'attendibilità delle narrazioni relative a due importanti fiumi della Tracia — l'Hebrus (odierno Maritsa) e lo Strymon (odierno Struma) — avvalendosi di un'analisi onomastica, etimologica e paradossografica. Attraverso un esame comparativo di questi casi regionali, lo studio individua specifici errori geografici, resoconti botanici fittizi e il frequente ricorso dell'autore a citazioni non verificabili. I risultati dimostrano che, pur contenendo taluni dati mito-geografici di un certo interesse, l'opera si configura più come una paradossografia letteraria che come un trattato geografico di carattere scientifico. Il presente lavoro fornisce, pertanto, un quadro metodologico per un impiego cauto e critico dei dati pseudo-plutarchei negli studi di topografia classica.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Pseudo-Plutarco

Tracia

Ebro

Strimone

Pangeo

Water and mountains, as fundamental elements of life and settlement, held a central place in the early mythological and geographical structures of antiquity. The work De Fluviis et Montibus (On Rivers and Mountains), attributed to Pseudo-Plutarch, serves as a significant yet controversial cultural catalogue of the ancient world. While initially attributed to Mestrios Plutarch, modern scholarship identi-fies it as a product of an anonymous 'Pseudo' author, likely from the Second Sophis-tic period. This study examines the reliability of the narratives concerning two major Thracian rivers—the Hebrus (Maritsa) and the Strymon (Struma)—by utilizing onomastic, etymological, and paradoxographical analysis. Through a comparative examination of these regional examples, the paper identifies specific geographical

errors, fictionalized botanical accounts, and the author's frequent use of untraceable citations. The findings reveal that while the work contains certain useful mythogeographic data, it functions more as a literary paradoxography than a scientific geographical treatise. Consequently, this paper provides a methodological framework for the cautious and critical utilization of Pseudo-Plutarchean data in classical topographical studies.

KEYWORDS

Pseudo-Plutarch

Thrace

Hebrus

Strymon

Pangaïos

