

Scythian Laughter: Conversations in the Northern Black Sea Region in the 5th Century BC

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In recent years there have been significant advances in the study of colonial experiences, from elusive colonial beginnings to subsequent relationships between colonies and local peoples, while colonists themselves sought to create and (re)invent their own origins. Approaches to the material record have become more sophisticated, while literary traditions are understood to shed more light on later colonial self-images than upon “what really happened” in Archaic times. Post-colonialism has played a large part in these methodological developments, though its contribution is seldom directly acknowledged. Perhaps the most important part of that contribution is a focus on the attitudes of the colonized, where once it was almost invariably the colonists’ perspective of the colonists that dominated modern scholarly approaches.¹

It may now be claimed, without undue optimism, that the study of Greek settlement in the Black Sea region (and elsewhere) has advanced beyond familiar questions about the date and purpose of civic foundations. As for the quest for foundation-dates, it is now understood that the creation of new communities was an extended process, within which any communal ritual of foundation was not a starting-point but a milestone on a long road of contact, interaction and settlement. Processes are much harder to date than events, since they entail a whole history of their own. However, we may reasonably suppose that any date which may be indicated by archaeological study of a colony is significantly later than the earliest contacts between the Greek world and a local region or its inhabitants. Accordingly, one can only view with scepticism attempts to argue, for example, that Greek authors could not write about Borysthenes (whether river, nymph or city) years before – in principle, centuries before – we have firm archaeological evidence of a Greek colony in the northwest Black Sea.² Contact brings knowledge, but it does not require settlement, even if settlement may subsequently develop. Meanwhile, intensive discussions of the *polis* serve to highlight the fluidity of Greek terminology on settlements, so that we need not expect to draw strong conclusions about the purpose of a colonial settlement from occasional descriptions of it as an *apoikia*, *polis*, *emporion* or something else or some admixture thereof. We may be sure that settlements sought to derive maximum benefit from all the

resources of their environs, while it is also to be expected that different settlements had different economic (and socio-political) tendencies and histories.

The purpose of the present discussion is not to recover chronology or to make inferences about Greek colonial intentions. Rather, I shall seek to gauge the atmosphere of cultural contact in the colonial context of the northern Black Sea region. In particular, encouraged by post-colonialism, I hope to offer a rather new perspective on the attitudes not only of the colonizing Greeks but also of the colonized locals, who are regularly characterised as Scythians. Key to this strategy is Herodotos, and especially Book Four of his *Histories*, which were completed in the early 420s and offer a series of observations and other data about the region and its inhabitants in the 5th century and before.

Herodotos is remarkably well-suited to this kind of analysis, for his whole historical endeavour was centred upon cultural interaction and especially cross-cultural misunderstandings. Herodotos' whole interpretation of war in general and the Persian Wars in particular turns upon the recurrent failure of cultures to understand each other and to grasp the unpredictability of outcomes. Again and again he shows the folly of imperialist ambition and the resilience of poverty, as the rich and powerful lose out to those who seem resourceless and weak. He proffers knowledge (which he claims to have and to show) as the way to a better understanding, centred upon an awareness of cultural difference and a respect for the *nomoi* through which that difference is expressed and ordered.³ As D. Lateiner acutely observes, mockery of others' customs is inappropriate in Herodotos' world-view, however much he may feel free to mock the (un)scholarly analyses of other writers. In the *Histories*, mocking laughter of the customs of others reveals a failure to understand and to reason adequately. Those who mock other cultures may feel their own power, but in fact they display their weakness. Accordingly, Herodotos takes Kambyses' mockery of Egyptian religious and other customs to be a clear indication of his madness. Indeed, he chooses to collocate that view with broader theorizing about a human tendency to assume that one's own customs are preferable.⁴ Herodotos' whole analysis, from the programmatic proem onwards, includes a constructive appreciation not only of Greek culture but also of non-Greek behaviour and achievements. That is not to say that Herodotos is uncritical with regard to non-Greek cultures: criticism abounds (e.g. Hdt. 4.46). The point is that he shows an unusual openness to other cultures which was unusual and remarkable: that is why Plutarchos later singled him out (extraordinarily) as a writer who was maliciously anti-Greek. Plutarchos' assessment both illustrates his own hellenocentrism and confirms the fact that Herodotos was able to find much that was positive and admirable in non-Greek cultures as well as in Greek.

As a Greek from Halikarnassos, Herodotos had his origins in a city founded at an interface between Greeks and non-Greeks. More important perhaps, he was an extensive traveller, with an essentially optimistic assessment of the benefits of travel and cultural context for deeper understanding, not least his

own.⁵ There is an abiding tendency among a minority of scholars to diminish the extent of Herodotos' travels (particularly with regard to Egypt) and even to hold him guilty of deliberate deception.⁶ However, there is no good reason to doubt that Herodotos made the journey to the Black Sea, where he seems to have been based (however briefly) at Olbia, which he considered – not unreasonably – to occupy a central position on the northern coast of the Black Sea.⁷ While the identity of Herodotos' sources continues to encourage scholarly speculation, he himself tells us that he had conversed with a certain Tymnes, a leading official (*epitropos*) of the Scythian King Ariapeithes. We cannot infer much about Tymnes' role, though some have seen him (rightly or wrongly) as particularly active as an agent for the king's interests in Olbia.⁸ But it can hardly be claimed without evidence that Herodotos met Tymnes in some location outside the region altogether. Certainly he does not say so. Moreover, Herodotos knows a great deal about Olbia.⁹ Indeed, it is remarkable that he says as much as he does about the place and its environs, for he has little enough to say about the other colonial communities around the region or about their environs.¹⁰ Moreover, it is easy to exaggerate the extent to which the Black Sea region was unfamiliar in the Aegean world in the 420s BC. For example, quite apart from Athens' long-standing involvement to the north-east since Archaic times, the expedition of Perikles there around 437 BC had brought many of the Black Sea colonies within the Athenian empire, including Olbia.¹¹

What did Herodotos and Tymnes talk about? The extent of their conversation remains obscure, but Herodotos tells us specifically that it included both the family-tree of Scythia's kings and, most interestingly, Anacharsis' place within it. Most important, Herodotos sets the information he gained from Tymnes very much in the context of a general Scythian refusal to acknowledge the existence of Anacharsis: "Scythians say that they do not know of him, because he travelled to Greece and adopted foreign ways. But as I myself heard from Tymnes..." (Hdt. 4.76).

Evidently, Tymnes was prepared to talk in a way that other Scythians were not, if we may assume the royal *epitropos* himself to be a Scythian. Since Anacharsis was primarily a figure of Greek culture, it is tempting to explain Scythians' claim to ignorance about him as no more or less than reality. He was important to Greeks, but may well have been unknown among the people from whom Greeks thought him to have originated. The role of Tymnes is to locate Anacharsis in a Scythian context for Herodotos. It is likely enough that Herodotos was not the first to mention the name to him in search of information, especially if Tymnes spent much of his time in Olbia.

Herodotos is the earliest extant author to mention Anacharsis, though his text shows that he expected his audience to be familiar with the Scythian's name. For when Herodotos first mentions Anacharsis, he feels no need to explain, who he was (4.46). And subsequently, Herodotos also alludes to local stories told about Anacharsis in Greece, specifically among the Pelopon-

nesians (4.77). The tradition of Anacharsis entails some variations in specifics, but in essence remains consistent throughout Antiquity. He appears as a man moving between cultures (broadly, between Greek and Scythian cultures). The usual perspective on him is overwhelmingly Greek: Anacharsis moves around Greek society and draws attention to its idiosyncrasies, so that what is familiar to a Greek audience is made to seem rather strange. Accordingly, a satirist like Lukianos can make substantial use of Anacharsis to give Greeks a supposedly Scythian view of Greek cultural norms, notably the practices of the gymnasium. In his *Anacharsis* Lukianos deploys the Scythian as the voice of an intelligent other-world, so as to offer perspectives on Greek society which are both playful and challenging.¹²

A few decades after Lukianos, Diogenes Laertios composed a summary life of Anacharsis which gives a broad impression of the tradition about the Scythian sage. He cites some Hellenistic authorities, upon whom he clearly draws, but we cannot be sure how much of his summary has its roots in stories which existed even before Herodotos. Diogenes' summary contains a series of the Scythian's pointed remarks about wine-consumption and sea-travel (and/or sea-trade) and the marketplace. His father was a royal Scythian, but his mother was Greek: that is not mentioned by Herodotos, though it may still have been in the tradition he and his audience knew. On account of his parentage, Anacharsis was born the product of two cultures, indeed of cultural relations. Diogenes states that he was bilingual. By contrast with Scythians in general, Anacharsis appears in Diogenes' summary biography – as also in Herodotos – as a man who had travelled extensively in the Greek world only to be killed on his return to Scythia. Diogenes seems to include Herodotos' version of his death, slain by his brother for performing imported religious ritual, but he was also aware of another tradition which involved the killing of Anacharsis during a hunt. However, Diogenes places a strong emphasis on the impact of his experience of the Greek world upon the Scythian. He had brought Greek culture back with him and evidently been overwhelmed by its superiority. That was very gratifying to Greeks, a confirmation of the greatness of their culture. For the intelligent Anacharsis, who had come to see both the Greek and the Scythian world – himself both Greek and Scythian –, had been struck by the power of Greek culture. And, on Diogenes' account, he had sought to spread Greek culture in Scythia, for which he was killed. This Anacharsis is not only an explorer of cultural difference but also, in the light of his exploration, the champion of Hellenism, albeit with criticisms of drunkenness, sea-travel and the marketplace which themselves could be (and were) accommodated comfortably within Greek philosophies of austerity.¹³

Herodotos is not named by Diogenes, though other authors are mentioned by name. And there is nothing in Diogenes' summary biography that need be traced specifically to Herodotos. Accordingly, it is all the more difficult to gauge the extent to which Diogenes' Anacharsis reflects the tradition which Herodotos knew. Yet Herodotos shows himself to be engaged dynamically

with pre-existing tradition, in that he firmly rejects a Peloponnesian story that Anacharsis had declared the Greeks of the Peloponnese to be the only ones worth talking to. Evidently, Herodotos is as willing to be polemical about Anacharsis as he is about other matters pertaining to Scythia and elsewhere.¹⁴ However, Herodotos is in no doubt that Anacharsis was a historical figure, although he observes a general Scythian tendency to deny all knowledge of him. He had gained information about him from Tymnes, the royal *epitropos*, whether or not after the usual Scythian denial (Hdt. 4.76; Anacharsis' reality is implied at 4.46 too). And, within the larger context of Herodotos' journey to Olbia and discussions with Scythians, it is Tymnes' authority as a source that underpins Herodotos' account of Anacharsis. Whereas others, before and after Herodotos, had related Anacharsis' story in Greek contexts and from Greek perspectives, Herodotos claims to offer a version which is informed and so validated by exploration of Olbian and especially Scythian views and places. And that version is both similar and significantly different from the hellenocentric tradition summarised by Diogenes.

Herodotos' Anacharsis is consistent with the rest of the tradition about him insofar as he is shown at the interface of Scythian and Greek cultures. However, Herodotos shows us – on the authority of Tymnes in part – an Anacharsis who was not overwhelmed by the superiority of Greek culture in general, for that is not said of him either by Diogenes or Herodotos. The Scythian is shown to be impressed only by the cult of the Great Mother, whose festival he had experienced at Kyzikos and to whom he sacrificed in performance of a vow for his safe return across the sea from Kyzikos to Scythia. Like other Scythians Anacharsis seems not to have relished sea-travel, particularly across the notoriously dangerous Black Sea. Meanwhile, the cult of the Great Mother is (in Herodotos' account) new to Scythia, but it is not straightforwardly Greek. For, however much adopted by the city of Kyzikos, the cult was profoundly Phrygian associated with the forested Mount Dindymene above the city. Anacharsis had fulfilled his vow, after reaching Scythia in safety, by performing the ritual for the Great Mother in the appropriately forested region of Hylaia. There he had been seen and summarily executed. Of course, we are left to wonder whether Tymnes had said all this to Herodotos, and in this manner: we need not imagine Herodotean deception (though some have done so), but there is every chance that the author's own project and assumptions may have shaped his narrative. It is of some assistance to know that the cult of the Great Mother was well established in Hylaia well before Herodotos visited the region.¹⁵ There the cult was under the control of the Greek city of Olbia: Anacharsis may well have been imagined in the city as the founder of the cult, the man who had brought it across the sea from Kyzikos, for there is no sign in Herodotos' account that the Olbian cult was thought to have existed before the travels of the Scythian sage. If that is right, the Scythians' execution of Anacharsis expresses not only Scythian resistance to Greek cultural influence (as Hero-

dotos stresses), but also and more specifically Scythian resistance to the cultural influence of Olbia.¹⁶

Herodotos explicitly connects the story of Anacharsis with that of Skyles, whose story is still more clearly linked with Olbia and also illustrates in the *Histories* Scythian cultural conservatism in the face of Greek influence, especially in the field of religion. As with Anacharsis, Skyles' story too is that of a royal Scythian (king, no less) who adopts Greek religious practice and is executed by his fellow Scythians in consequence. There is a powerful parallelism between the two stories which has been sufficiently explored elsewhere. Moreover, the story of Skyles has so much in common with the myth of Pentheus, as told some twenty years later in Euripides' *Bacchae*, that we should probably take it to have been a tale of the Greek city, with or without some contribution from Scythian informants.¹⁷ Skyles had a Greek mother, who had schooled him in Greek (rather like Anacharsis, as we have seen): she herself was from this colonial world, a woman of Istros, on the coast close below the delta of the Danube. Drawn to the Greek culture of Olbia, he had created a secret life for himself in the city, while his people spent months outside the city gates. Scythians were notable, according to Herodotos himself, for their lack of city-walls (4. 46): Olbia's walls separate the two worlds of Greek city-life and the pastoral nomadism beyond, however much the contrast may be softened by the hellenization of the Scythians of the city's environs (e.g. 4.17).¹⁸ Within the walls, Skyles changes into Greek clothes and sets aside his royalty to become like an Olbian citizen, even participating in some of the city's cults. As his visits become more frequent and longer, he builds a fine house and takes an Olbian wife. Finally, and disastrously, Skyles decides to be initiated into the cult of Dionysos, which we know to have been significant within the city.¹⁹ His dealings with other Greek cults in Olbia had been unproblematic, but Dionysos was different. Skyles is not deterred even by the god's destruction of his house with a lightning-bolt. It is in this context that Herodotos' story provides an insight into the atmosphere of cultural interactions. The story puts flesh on the bare bones of Scythian resistance to the religious impulses coming from the Greek city of Olbia, while it also shows the greater power of Greek culture as expressed in the cult of Dionysos. The conversations given and implied by Herodotos demand quotation and closer attention than they have usually received:

Scythians reproach Greeks in regard to bacchic frenzy. For they say that it cannot be proper to invent this god who leads people to madness. But when Skyles was performing Bacchic rites, one of the Olbians rushed to the Scythians and said, "You Scythians laugh at us because we perform Bacchic rites and the god takes us. Now the deity has taken your king too, and he performs Bacchic rites and is made mad by the god. If you don't believe me, follow me and I'll show you."

The leading Scythians followed him and the Olbian took them up, unseen, to a tower. And when Skyles appeared with the company of revellers and the Scythians saw him performing Bacchic rites, they took it to be a grave matter and went out of the city to tell the whole army what they had seen (Hdt. 4.79).

As with Anacharsis' worship of the Great Mother, Skyles' initiation in the cult of Dionysos was very much a personal matter. Neither is shown to have been interested in spreading these cults among other Scythians. However, even that is deemed sufficiently unacceptable within Scythian society to require the death of both men. While Herodotos is concerned to stress Scythian conservatism, he also offers rare glimpses of the broader cultural interactions – conversations – involved. This story, which he has evidently gleaned in Olbia itself, as we have seen, shows a local tension between Scythians and Greeks which is specific to an important cult of the Greek city. But at the same time Herodotos explicitly presents the Scythian denial of Dionysos and mockery of his cult as a general phenomenon in Scythian-Greek relationships. The issue is bigger than the local situation at Olbia. Further, it is not only that the Scythians are said not to want the cult. The point is that they are actively hostile to the cult itself: for them, Dionysos is not a god but an improper invention. Moreover, the whole issue is shown in Herodotos' story to be couched in laughter. The Scythians actively mock Greek Dionysos. Not that Dionysos is straightforwardly Greek either. For, like the Great Mother, Dionysos was recognized as a deity brought into Greek culture from outside, whether from Thrace or from the distant East. And the cults had much else in common, for both were mystery cults with secret rituals of initiation.²⁰ It is worth stressing that Skyles had experienced no problems in his engagement with other Greek cults in Olbia, as Herodotos notes. Mystery cults were challenging within Greek society itself. And – as the stories of Anacharsis and Skyles show – they were especially resistant to easy accommodation with Scythian religion. We should note that Herodotos feels able to identify other Greek deities with Scythian counterparts:

As for gods they worship only the following: Hestia especially, then Zeus and Earth (thinking Earth to be Zeus' wife), then Apollo and Aphrodite Urania and Herakles and Ares. All the Scythians worship these, while the so-called Royal Scythians also sacrifice to Poseidon. In Scythian Hestia is named Tabiti, Zeus is named (entirely appropriately in my view) Papaaios, Earth is named Api, Apollo Goitosuros, Aphrodite Urania Argimpasa, and Poseidon Thagimasadas (Hdt. 4.59).

It seems to follow that Scythian religious conservatism should have been able to accommodate key Olympian deities, at least in Herodotos' judgment,

because these were largely identifiable already in Scythian religion. Presumably the Olympian deities who are not mentioned by Herodotos, might have constituted a problem. However, the stories of Anacharsis and Skyles draw specific attention to the alien cults of the Great Mother and Dionysos. The latter, in particular, is identified as a context for friction in cultural interactions in and around Olbia.

And consideration of Scythian mockery of Dionysiac cult takes us back to the aphorisms of the imaginary Anacharsis. The particular focus of Anacharsis' criticisms, for example in the summary version of Diogenes Laertios, is sea-travel, trade and especially wine. Dionysos is regularly presented as a seaborne traveller, specifically conveying fine goods from across the sea. At Athens, for which our information is best, the *Anthesteria* was celebrated by the introduction of Dionysos into city on a cart made to look like a ship. This was also the festival which marked the opening of the wine from the previous year's harvest. The interplay in Greek culture between the symposium and sea-travel has often been observed. In that context we should also bear in mind the famous fragment from Hermippos' *Basket-bearers*, a comedy performed in Athens at very much the time that Herodotos completed his *Histories*: Hermippos lists the fine goods which Dionysos has shipped in across the wine-dark sea.²¹

Herodotos implicitly rejects stereotypes of Scythian drunkenness, for he shows wine being used among the Scythians in controlled circumstances.²² He says nothing directly about Scythian drunkenness or any other misuse of wine among them. However, he does report a self-serving Spartan tradition that Kleomenes' madness was the result of a habit of drinking unmixed wine which he had picked up from carousing with Scythian envoys. But, although he reports the story, Herodotos firmly rejects it in favour of a religious explanation.²³

However, we are left to consider what was said in and around Olbia. For at Olbia the trade in wine brought from the Greek world was a key feature of interaction with the Scythians. Scythians wanted wine, not least for the collective rituals which Herodotos mentions. We are not told that the elite bought and bestowed this wine, but that must be a strong possibility. For we may be sure that imported wine constituted a prestige good, to be deployed by the wealthy and powerful in order to express, strengthen and confirm their elite status in Scythian society. The deposition of imported wine in rich Scythian burials tends to confirm its significance in Scythian society. Rather by contrast, however, Herodotos shows us Scythians mocking the worship of Dionysos. It seems that Scythian society wanted wine, but saw no reason to find a god in it or to import the Greek notions of deity that accompanied wine in Olbia.

In Herodotos' version of the story of Skyles, Scythian mockery of Dionysiac cult is directed at the madness which Dionysos induces. The Olbian response in the story is that the Scythian king himself has been possessed by the god. Skyles' possession demonstrates that Dionysos was *not* an improper

invention by Greek culture. In that way the Scythians' misplaced and foolish mockery of Dionysos emerges – through the sufferings of Skyles – as a story which validates Olbian culture²⁴ in general and Olbian worship of Dionysos in particular. In other words, the Olbian story not only acknowledges Scythian criticism, but comes with an in-built counter-case in the sufferings of Skyles. Of course, simply by raising the notion that Dionysiac cult might be thought an improper invention, Herodotos might be thought to open a door to criticism of the cult, but the demise of Skyles in the face of the god's warning lightning-bolt soon slams that door firmly shut again.

But what was the usual response by Greeks of the region, away from this specific Olbian tale? While there is no place for certainty here, we must observe that the Spartan story of Kleomenes offers a response in terms of familiar Greek notions about the Scythian abuse of wine. In short, however troped, Scythian mockery of Dionysiac madness was readily countered by Greek assertions that the Scythians do not know how properly to handle either wine or the deity. Given the prominence of wine in Greek-Scythian interactions, we seem to hear conversations surrounding such exchanges which will have been frequent enough. The tone is harder to gauge, but Herodotos' observation of the grave Scythian reaction to Skyles' initiation, leading to his execution, suggests that there is a depth of hostility to this badinage. At the same time, Greeks too presumably responded with some hostility to Scythian mockery of Dionysos. At the very least a Greek perspective might well claim that Scythians should get to know Dionysos in order to form a more balanced relationship with wine. After all, the wine that was important to Scythian society was, from a Greek perspective, the gift of Dionysos. Was that indeed the ideological context within which Scythian society – or at least some part of it – came to embrace the Dionysiac cult?²⁵

At the same time, we may well be persuaded by those scholars who argue that the Scythian elite was much more open to Greek influence than the average Scythian.²⁶ After all, the elite had special reason to deal with Greeks, whether economically or politically. We should note that Skyles' regular and extended visits to Olbia seem to have caused no disquiet: the rest of the Scythians spent long periods outside the walls, presumably engaged in exchange with the people of Olbia. And Herodotos' conversation with the Scythian *epitropos* Tymnes presumably took place within the city. Indeed, while S.D. Kryžickij has shown that the notion of a "Scythian protectorate" over Olbia in the 5th century BC has nothing to recommend it,²⁷ we may even reverse the notion. For the Scythian elite, Olbia may have been attractive as a haven which offered not only prestige goods but also new ideas and a different lifestyle which evidently had attractions for leading Scythians other than the half-Greek Skyles. While King Skyles marks an extreme example, his dealings with the culture of Olbia serve to express the dangers for a Scythian leader whose very status demanded that he form relationships with the city and with Greek culture in general. While Scythians mocked Dionysiac cult, they

seem broadly to have valued the goods of Greek culture which were available at Olbia. We hear little in our literary accounts about Scythians who rejected goods as well as beliefs, though Anacharsis sometimes comes close. In that sense the Scythians were quite different from Herodotos' Ethiopians, who are so distant and distinct from Mediterranean culture that they see nothing in Persian gifts except deception and grounds for just humour.²⁸

Slave-trading offered further scope for friction and badinage, as Herodotos tells us. We know in any case that slaves were of great importance in the trade between Scythians and Greeks: to a large extent it was the Scythians' ability to supply slaves that allowed them to purchase Greek wine.²⁹ But how did Scythians and Greeks converse about slaves and slavery? Or how did slavery figure in conversations between Scythians and the Greeks of Olbia? Remarkably enough, Herodotos gives us an insight. Of course, slavery is a key theme of the *Histories* in general and is important also in Book Four, which opens with the theme and carries it through until the end of the Scythian *logos*. Meanwhile, Herodotos draws attention to the view of the Royal Scythians that other Scythians are their slaves (4.20) and to the particularly vigorous Scythian reaction to Darios' implication that they should acknowledge that they are his slaves. Clearly, Herodotos, who was well-placed to know, found Scythians very sensitive about slavery, but he also shows them asserting that the Ionians are themselves servile:

Scythians...judge Ionians, insofar as being free, as the worst and least manly of all mankind, but, considering the Ionians as slaves, they say that they are servile master-lovers and most unlikely to run away. This is what among Scythians is thrown at Ionians (Hdt. 4.142).

Herodotos roots the Scythian assessment in his story of Darios' bridge across the Danube. The Greek tyrants whom Herodotos had left to hold it for him had not only decided to follow his orders but had deliberately tricked the Scythians who had come to urge its destruction. The Greeks at the bridge had come to the judgment that it was in their interest to have Darios in power, since their own positions depended on the Persian king's. Be that as it may, however important was the incident at the bridge, Herodotos is clear that Scythians reproached Ionians with slavery as a general tendency. Of course, Olbia itself, where Herodotos had been, was an Ionian city. It follows that Scythians could reproach Olbians not only over Dionysiac frenzy but also over their servility. Indeed, Olbia is the most likely location for Herodotos' experience or knowledge of Scythian humour on this topic.

Meanwhile, there were other important differences between Scythians and the Greeks of the Black Sea, including Olbia. As Book Four unfolds, Herodotos relates different versions of Scythian origins which show a substantial gulf between Scythian and local Greek conceptions of Scythian origins and in that

sense of Scythian identity. For Herodotos reports that Scythians derived their origins from their own heroic progenitor Targitaos, the son of Zeus (presumably Scythian Papaaios) and a daughter of the River Borysthenes. His successor was identified with the help of gold objects which had dropped from the heavens and became the great religious treasures of the Scythian people, which their kings honoured with great sacrifices (4.5-7). All this stands in marked contrast with the story told by the Greeks of the Black Sea. Their version has no place for Targitaos or for the heaven-sent gold which remained so important to Scythian society. Nor do we find Zeus/Papaaios or the daughter of Borysthenes. Instead we have a story linked to Herakles' labour with regard to Geryon. This Greek version denies the whole Scythian account and replaces it with a less elevated tale which traces Scythian origins to the negotiated union of Herakles and a creature who is half-woman and half-snake. A proto-Scythian son of Herakles emerges with the name Scythes, which suits Greek aetiological notions, but has little to offer the Scythians who (as Herodotos observes) call themselves not Scythians but Skolotai (4.8-10; cf. 6). Meanwhile, Herodotos does not explain how this Greek notion of Herakles as the Scythian progenitor related, if at all, to the Scythian reverence for a deity whom he himself describes as Herakles (4.59, above). For there is no sign of Herakles in the Scythians' own version of their origins.³⁰

Herodotos presents these two accounts of Scythian origins simply as different, locating them in Scythian and local Greek society respectively. Both versions tend towards Olbia. The Scythian version gives prominence to the River Borysthenes, whose name echoes Olbia (named Borysthenes in Herodotos) and whose estuary – shared with the Hypanis – provided the city with its location. And the Greek version draws attention to Hylaia, within the civic territory of the city of Olbia. In that sense we have a Scythian version and an Olbian version. However, we may reasonably wonder how Scythians and Greeks talked about Scythian origins. All the more so, perhaps, in this colonial world where the origins of the Black Sea cities were substantial issues. For real friction is latent in the two accounts. The former is elevated, with supernatural validation and an abiding relevance to current Scythian religion and identity. By contrast the latter hardly flatters Scythians and fails to acknowledge the importance of their name or their gold relics. Indeed, the Greek version would even lend itself to the creation of a comedy, though Herodotos does not present it in that fashion. Be that as it may, there was scope for hostility and badinage between Scythians and Greeks in matters of origin too.

That scope is all the more evident when we consider Herodotos' account of Thracian Salmoxis, where again we find a gulf between the stories told respectively by Thracians and by Greeks of the Black Sea and Hellespont. Here the latent friction is clearer still. Salmoxis was a deity of enormous significance in Thracian culture, especially among the Getai. For Salmoxis was central to a Thracian belief in life after death. In particular, those who died were believed to go to join him, while messengers were regularly "sent to him", having

been chosen by lot and sacrificed (4.94). The local Greeks turned this central Thracian belief into a story of Thracian stupidity and gullibility in the face of Greek cunning. For on their view Salmoxis was not a god but a Thracian man. He had been a slave in the Greek world, like many another Thracians, but had the particular advantage of serving the philosopher Pythagoras. Having been granted his freedom, Salmoxis returned home to Thrace, with the material and intellectual riches which he had acquired as a slave among Greeks. Salmoxis saw that the Thracians lived at an inferior level, materially and intellectually. And so, by a simple ruse extended over some years, Salmoxis convinced his fellow Thracians that he had died and come to life again. No doubt in the service of Pythagoras he would have become familiar with notions of immortality. In accordance with Greek symposium-culture and the renowned Thracian propensity for feasting, Salmoxis hosted a meal for the leading Thracians and affirmed that they would enjoy immortality. He promptly vanished into an underground chamber which he had prepared beneath his house. There he stayed for three years, mourned by the Thracians, until he re-appeared and thereby convinced the Thracians about immortality (4.95-96).

Herodotos rejects the chronology of the local Greek version, on the grounds that Pythagoras and Salmoxis cannot have been contemporaries. He leaves open the question of which version of Salmoxis is true. But what matters most in all this is the sharp and abrasive contrast between the two versions. The account of Salmoxis given by the Greeks of the Black Sea and Hellespont demonstrates their colossal disregard and disrespect for Thracian culture and religious belief. For these Greeks deny that Salmoxis was a deity at all: instead he is a cunning ex-slave. His powers are, on their account, not divine, but the product of his Greek knowledge. Their belief is the result of their stupidity and inferiority to Greek wisdom. Accordingly, their notions of immortality are muddled and debased versions of Pythagorean philosophy. Salmoxis is not a god but a Thracian who has learnt a lot among Greeks, so that he can exploit the stupidity of his fellow-countrymen. In consequence, there is no sound basis for key Thracian beliefs and rituals. Rather as Scythians denied Dionysos' divinity, so local Greeks denied that of Salmoxis.

As with the different versions of Scythian origins (Scythian and local Greek), Herodotos does not draw out the implications of the differences between the versions of Salmoxis' story told by local Greeks and Thracians. But they are inescapable for all that. And in Scythia, too, what emerges from the contrasting versions is a local Greek disdain not only for the Scythian past but also for the Scythian present. Herodotos could hardly be clearer that the gold objects which fell from the heavens to become the arbiters of power in Scythia, continued to be of prime importance to Scythian society in general and to Scythian kings in particular (4.7). The Black Sea Greeks give them no acknowledgment. It is true that even on the Greek account Scythian kings can claim descent from Zeus, the father of Herakles. But when Herodotos

shows us King Idanthyrsos referring to his descent from Zeus as well as his reverence for Hestia (4.127; cf. 59), he presumably should be taken to mean the Scythian versions of these deities. As for the Scythian Herakles, whom Herodotos mentions (4. 59), we can assume nothing. Certainly the Scythian Ares – embodied in a sword and receiving human sacrifice – looks rather different from his more familiar Greek counterpart (4.61).³¹

The story of Salmoxis serves to remind us that, while Olbia was a major forum for exchange (verbal and economic) between Scythians and Greeks, it was not the only one. Istros, for example, was well-placed for interaction between Greeks and the Getan devotees of Salmoxis. We happen to be told that it was also the homeland of the Greek mother of Skyles, who was to meet his death towards Thrace.³² We must locate most Greek-Scythian interaction on the coasts of the Black Sea and Hellespont, not least because these waters are used by Herodotos to characterise the Greeks of the region. The Greek colonies of the region, as also around the Mediterranean, are overwhelmingly orientated upon the sea. But that is not to say that all Scythian-Greek contact was limited to the coast, for it clearly was not. In particular, the great rivers of the region which so impressed Herodotos offered a network of routes into and out of the hinterland.

As for the interior, Herodotos' account of Gelonos is very revealing (4.108-109). Herodotos is convinced that its population – the Gelonoi – were of Greek origin, and so distinct from their Scythian neighbours, the Boudinoi. In fact he is so convinced as to denounce Greek accounts which have failed to see as much. His description of Gelonos and the Gelonoi displays his criteria for difference between Scythians and Greeks, which echo other sections of Book Four. Gelonos has substantial walls (together with houses and temples – all of wood), whereas Herodotos' Scythians do not (cf. 4.46). While Scythians have no temples proper (4.59-61), the Gelonoi have temples of Greek gods, fitted out with statues, altars and the like in a Greek fashion. Moreover, the Gelonoi celebrate a triennial festival for Dionysos and give themselves over to Bacchic frenzy. The story of Skyles demonstrates in the *Histories* that Dionysos and Bacchic frenzy were wholly alien to Scythian culture. Meanwhile, the language of the Gelonoi was a mixture of Scythian and Greek. At the same time, Herodotos offers an explanation for the existence of this Greek community deep in Scythia: they had moved – he asserts – to settle among the Boudinoi from the *emporía*, presumably sites on the coast. It is worth stressing that Herodotos says nothing about the reasons for that move. Scholars and translators often introduce into his text the notion that these Greeks had moved as a result of violence, but he does not say that. We should do better to make the more obvious assumption that they had moved deeper inland from the coastal *emporía* in search of better economic opportunities. And that does not mean only trade. For the Gelonoi practise agriculture and horticulture, by contrast with the pastoralist Boudinoi. Finally, the Greekness of the Gelonoi is confirmed by their physical appearance, which is very

different from that of the Scythian Boudinoi. According to Herodotos, Greeks had moved to build Gelonos and to develop their semi-Scythian language in the hinterland in *Antiquity*, long before he completed his *Histories* in the later 5th century (4.108-109).

Doubts abide as to the existence of Gelonos, but archaeology shows very clearly that the wooded steppe of the hinterland in fact contained a series of major settlements, notable for their substantial use of timber. While modern scholarship treats the populations of these large settlements as Scythians, it is clear that their lifestyles were very different from the pastoralist world of the steppe grasslands to their south. Accordingly, it is not hard to see why Herodotos could regard such sites as un-Scythian and as the importation into the hinterland of the Greek urbanism of the coast. Such Greeks might come from large communities, notably from Olbia itself, but also from lesser communities, like Kremnoi on the Sea of Azov.

Moreover, we should also acknowledge that such communities did indeed provide opportunities for some measure of Greek settlement – however limited – which were much less practicable among the Scythian pastoralists. For we may be confident that there were Greeks – traders in particular – who journeyed deep into Scythia and even made lives for themselves there. Herodotos happens to mention such pioneers, whom he terms *the Greeks dwelling in the Scythian land*, distinguishing them from the Greeks of the Black Sea. These were the Greeks who (as well as Scythians) reported that the Neuroi of the distant hinterland turned into wolves for a few days each year (4.105). Meanwhile, the hinterland was also explored, as Herodotos indicates, by Greeks from the *emporía* of the Black Sea coast, including the region of Olbia. For such men, and also Scythian informants, had penetrated as far inland as the bald Argippaioi (4.23-24). Nor should we assume that all journeys into the interior followed riverine routes. Archaeologists have long suspected that there was a lively trade across the hinterland between Olbia and the Tanais (Don).³³ Meanwhile, there is a scatter of indications that some Greeks were indeed visitors and residents at Scythian settlements of the interior.³⁴ Of particular interest is a burnished jar from an Archaic pit at the settlement of Nemirovo, located deep in the hinterland from the north-west coast of the Black Sea (Fig. 1). The body of the jar has survived with a little damage and some random scratching. The jar was made on site, as the rest of the pottery assemblage shows. While it has been scratched here and there, evidently by chance, the concentration of marks at the shoulder seems to be a group of Greek letters (Fig. 2). Hitherto, these letters have been optimistically interpreted to give a meaningful invocation of a religious nature, but they are better seen as something more simple, most probably a name.³⁵ Of course, the use of Greek letters in the hinterland at Nemirovo does not demonstrate the presence of Greeks there in the Archaic period,³⁶ but it does show a small detail of the penetration of Greek culture into the interior at that time. Meanwhile, a range of fragments of imported east Greek fine-ware and amphorae illustrates the fact of ex-

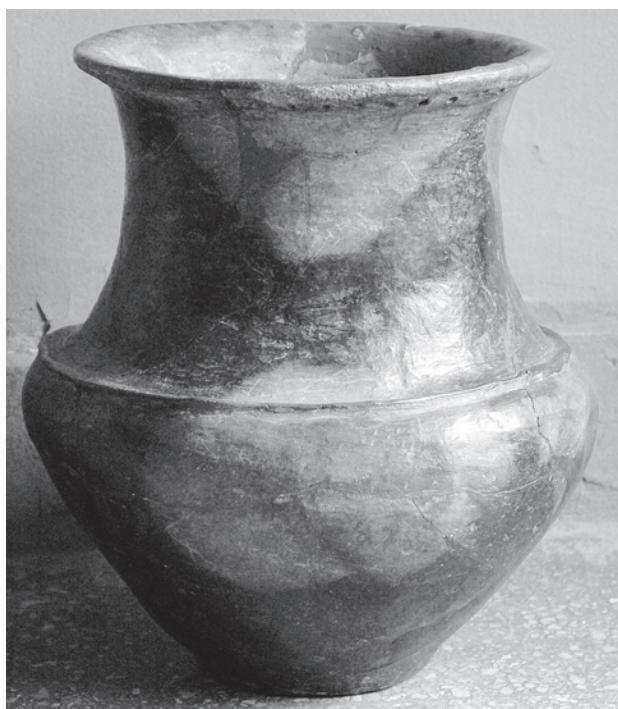


Fig. 1. Burnished jar from Nemirovo.

change between Nemirovo and the Greek world. We do not know how that exchange was conducted and mediated, but it is not hard to imagine traders (Scythians, Olbians or whatever) bringing Greek goods and Greek culture from the coast of the Black Sea into the interior.³⁷ At the same time, we may reasonably wonder what the local population of Nemirovo made of Greek fineware. Did they consider it valuable in some sense? Or was it a source of mild consternation, even laughter?

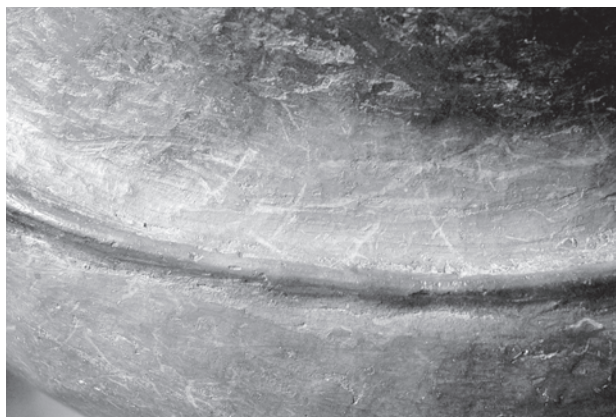


Fig. 2. Letters scratched on shoulder of jar.

Clearly, interaction between Scythians and Greeks occurred at a range of locations around the north of the Black Sea and its interior. It also occurred with different degrees of intensity, both where Scythians were in the majority and where Greeks were, as in Olbia. Throughout, economic factors seem to drive much of this interaction, but the concomitant conversations between the different cultures (both literal and metaphorical) extended far beyond short-term economic exchanges. We have seen how economic exchanges were interwoven with diplomatic exchanges, as between the Scythian elite and the Olbians. We have seen also how exchanges of wine and slaves could become conversations about religion and political freedom. Throughout, there was dangerous scope for conflict on these and other subjects besides, such as origins. And, with the story of Skyles, Herodotos draws attention to the hostility inherent in the mutual misunderstandings, mockery and abuse which could arise from discussions of these kinds. All the more so when Greeks of the region demonstrated such cultural chauvinism as is most apparent in their account of Salmoxis. Herodotos specifically excludes Scythians from his general view that the peoples of the Black Sea people are backward, but we should not suppose that other Greeks gave them that benefit. All the more so, when Herodotos' exception arises substantially from Anacharsis, a Scythian who could be accommodated within Greek culture more easily than among Scythians (4.46). Certainly, the unreflective and over-confident Scythian misunderstanding inherent in the Olbian story of Skyles does not suggest much respect for Scythian wisdom in general, whether in Olbia or elsewhere.

Greeks commented on the blunt wit of Scythians, the proverbial "Scythian speech" as demonstrated by Herodotos' Idanthysos and Diogenes' Anacharsis. This is part of their general austerity, which both recalls the Spartans and further expresses the gulf between themselves and the wordy culture of the Ionians. That explains the Peloponnesian notion (rejected by Herodotos) that Anacharsis saw them as the only Greeks worth speaking with (4.77). In large part, on this view, Scythians and Greeks not only have different things to say, but also speak in different ways.³⁸ It was not only the content of conversations but also their very manner that set Scythians and Olbians apart. There was ample scope for offence. We have noted Idanthysos' violent reaction to Persian talk of slavery, which was hardly controversial from a Persian perspective. Still more extreme was the reaction of Scythians in the service of Kyaxares, set out in Book One of the *Histories*. For Scythian society hunting was a key concern, so that when Kyaxares was harsh to his Scythians for a rare hunting failure they reacted by killing and serving up for the king the flesh of a youth placed in their charge (1.72). It was important not to insult Scythians.

The whole colonial experience to the north of the Black Sea was played out around and through interaction between cultures. Herodotos is unusual in seeking to draw distinctions in the region between those who were Scythian and those who were part Scythian or something else. He is unusual also, as we have seen, in showing significant respect for non-Greek cultures. Such

respect was the safest and surest route to successful Greek settlement, especially in its earlier nascent and vulnerable stages. There was everything to be gained from symbiosis and cultural osmosis, as exemplified by the emergence of peoples around Olbia whom Herodotos terms “Helleno-Scythians” (4.17). And this was a two-way process: Greeks of Olbia, for example, could be seen by Athenians and others as less than properly Greek.³⁹ But the hard realities of security, diplomacy and trade demanded that a successful colony engage constructively with its local neighbours. From earliest contacts, intermarriage was a central issue, for Greek colonists were overwhelmingly male while women from the colonies were subsequently taken as Scythian wives. Most important, constructive engagement meant viable conversation (whether or not mediated by interpreters). Above all the colony had to maintain working relationships with local rulers, whatever the tensions at play – economic, diplomatic, military and personal. It is salutary to recall the laudatory narrative inscribed in Hellenistic Olbia to honour the civic champion Protogenes. He had gone to negotiate with King Saitapharnes, a regular visitor to the region with his forces. The conversation had gone badly wrong so that the king had flown into a rage. That was not the recipe for colonial success but a disaster, which (as the honorific decree informs us) Protogenes managed to overcome, together with his other achievements for his city and for himself.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Osborne 1998; Gosden 2004. This paper has benefited from discussions at the conference and after: I am particularly grateful to David Harvey and M.Ju. Vachtina for their comments. All responsibility for views expressed remains with me.
- 2 On West 2002, presenting this and other arguments, see the critical remarks of Braund 2005a.
- 3 I have argued this in detail in Braund 1989.
- 4 Lateiner 1977; cf. e.g. Munson 2001, 169-70. Further, Dewald 2006, esp. 162 note 9 for bibliography on humour in Herodotos.
- 5 Redfield 1985; Friedman 2006.
- 6 A balanced example of that tendency is West 2004; cf. also West 2007. Observe the reflections of Cartledge & Greenwood 2002.
- 7 Braund 2007, with West 2007, who accepts that (whether he went there himself or not) Herodotos had fine knowledge of Olbia.
- 8 Tymnes is discussed by all the commentators, among whom the useful Dovatur, Kallistov and Šišova 1982 is often ignored, presumably because it is in Russian: cf. Skržinskaja 1998, 72-130, esp. 102 and 116, asserting that Tymnes was an Olbian without argument. West 2004 observes that the *epitropos* seems to embody Ariapeithes’ own openness to Greek culture.
- 9 Argued in detail in Braund 2007.
- 10 West 2004, 78 finds this lack of interest surprising. Perhaps, but Herodotos is most interested in Scythians in Book Four: much of his information about Olbia (as e.g. the Skyles’ story) is primarily there to illustrate Scythian society.

- 11 For detailed argument, see Braund 2005b. West 2004, 79 makes too much of the self-serving suggestion of Polybios about the remoteness of Byzantium and the Euxine (4.38.1). Much depends on the imagined location of his audience. Meanwhile, Arrianos seems to have travelled only along that part of the coast (the east) which lay within his provincial realm, which lay far from Olbia. It is true that Herodotos could have said more about the location of the city (as West 2004, 78 expects), but while the map may be taken to show the estuaries of the Dnieper and Bug as a single body of water, the more important point is that visitors to Olbia have no sense that they are on a river at all.
- 12 On Lukianos, see, for example, Branham 1989.
- 13 Note the Cynics in particular: Martin 1996.
- 14 Hdt. 4.108-109; cf. 4.36.
- 15 Braund 2007.
- 16 If that is right, Anacharsis is even more like Skyles than has been observed: cf. Hartog 1988.
- 17 Hartog 1988. On the echoes between Skyles' story and Euripides *Bacchae*, see Braund 2001.
- 18 See further Marčenko 2005 with the different perspective of Kryžickij 2006; cf. Braund 2007.
- 19 On Dionysos in Olbia and Olbian religion, see Kryžickij *et al.* 1999, 538-604; cf. Rusyayeva 2007.
- 20 Note also that the Great Mother at Olbia seems close to Demeter: Braund 2007. At Athens, Demeter and Dionysos were a familiar pair: Seaford 2006, 22.
- 21 Gilula 2000.
- 22 Hdt. 4.62; 66; 70. There seems no good reason to imagine that Herodotos could mean something other than wine in these passages, though West 2004, 84-85 sees some merit in the notion.
- 23 Hdt. 6.84. For the stereotype, see also Platon, *Laws*, 637e, contrasting Spartans and Scythians. On Kleomenes' death, Griffith 1989.
- 24 Pace Scullion 2006, 202, who finds here a Herodotean technique of indirect criticism.
- 25 Bessonova 1983; Raevskij 1985.
- 26 Rusyayeva 2007, with further bibliography.
- 27 Kryzhitskiy 2005.
- 28 Hdt. 3.22 with Lateiner 1977, 177. In general, Dewald 2006.
- 29 Gavriljuk 1999; 2003. Note also Taylor 2001.
- 30 See especially Grakov 1950; cf. Bessonova 1983.
- 31 See, for example, Bessonova 1984.
- 32 Note the discovery of the "ring of Skyles" towards Histria: SEG 30. 800; Vinogradov 1997, 613-633. For discussion and further bibliography, see West 2004, 83-84.
- 33 See esp. Medvedev 1997.
- 34 Rusjaeva 1999; Vachtina 2005.
- 35 On Nemirovo in general, see Smirnova 1998. I am most grateful to the author for discussion and access to this jar, kept in the State Hermitage Museum. I am also very appreciative of the good offices of M.Ju. Vachtina and to A.Ju. Alekseev, with whom I examined the jar. I wish also to thank colleagues in the Hermitage who provided the photographs printed here. None of the above bear any responsibility for my views on the jar. For an optimistic reading, see Grakov 1959.
- 36 Such is illustrated well enough at Caesar, *Gallic War*, 1.29.

- 37 On imported fine-ware at Nemirovo, see especially Vachtina 1998; cf. more extensive discussion in Vachtina 2005.
- 38 On Spartan humour in the *Histories*, see Dewald 2006, 148-149; cf. David 1989. Note the Peloponnesian claim at Hdt. 4.77.
- 39 Dion Chrysostomos' account of Olbian culture at the end of the first century AD centres upon the idiosyncrasy of their Hellenism, both antiquated and showing local barbarian influence: see further Braund 1997.

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Abbreviations

SEG *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Leiden.

