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**Scythian Cultural Clichés:
Aspects of Interpretation**

Classical accounts of the Scythians are mainly interpreted in two ways: any episode is treated as either authentic or apocryphal. However, such an alternative cannot be applied to a number of the said accounts. Those require yet another - and probably more adequate - way of interpretation, to which we now proceed taking as a case in point certain passages from Herodotus's Scythian *logos*.

Herodotus cites, among other, two stories of Scythian princes. According to him, the stories are meant to show the Scythians' aversion to foreign customs. Let us dwell on the one dealing with the fate of Scyles, the son of king Ariapeithes and his Greek wife (Herod. IV, 78-80). Herodotus states that Scyles, owing to his origin, preferred the Greek way of life to that of the Scythians. Having succeeded to the throne he built himself a magnificent palace in the Greek city of Olbia and used to spend a long time there. His army and retinue were invariably left outside the city walls. During his stay in Olbia Scyles always put on Greek clothes and wandered about the city without an escort. In deference to Greek customs he asked to be initiated into Dionysian mysteries. Then the Olbian Greeks began to mock at the Scythians saying that they, while being reluctant to worship a god putting his adepts in a trance, were reigned by a king indulging in Bacchic orgies. The Scythians, having verified these allegations, overthrew their king. Scyles fled to the Thracians, yet was delivered into the Scythians' hands and killed by his own brother.

It appears that Herodotus tends to regard the participation of Skyles in ecstatic Dionysian rites running counter to the Scythian traditions as the main reason for his dethronement. However, this view is not supported by the figurative record recovered from Scythian barrows and pertaining to Scythian cults. Images of dancing maenads were found in the burials under the Ryzhanovsky and Deev barrows as well as in those of Bolshaya Bliznitsa, Denisova Mogila and Gaimanova Mogila. This proves conclusively that personages akin to the votaries of the Bacchic cult were inherent in Scythian religion (Riabova 1979: 50). This is also evidence that the Scythians adopted the images of precisely the same cult the adherence to which, according to Herodotus, had ruined Scyles, for the illustration of their own beliefs. True, the said images are approximately a century younger than the relevant Hero-

dotus's tale. Yet over a span of only a hundred years Scythian religion could hardly have acquired traits previously condemned as apostasy. Moreover, the existence of ecstatic cults amid the Scythians at the time of Herodotus and even earlier has been convincingly proved (Meuli 1935; Bongard-Levin and Grantovsky 1983: 94-98). One has therefore to look for another explanation of the clash between the Scythians and their king recorded by the Father of History.

It is worth noting that among the misdeeds laid to Scyles's charge there was the accusation that during his stay in Olbia he frequented the city square alone, not escorted either by his bodyguards or anyone else. Meanwhile it has been established that an old Iranian custom according to which a king, by virtue of the sacred nature of his office, could only be in direct contact with a restricted group of specially appointed courtiers was proper to the Scythians. The king's entourage included, in particular, those who accompanied him to the next world. Among the latter the so-called messenger or herald through whom alone the contact between the king and his subjects as well as any other mortals could be performed played a prominent part (Grantovsky 1980: 131; Grantovsky and Ivantchik 1995). In this connection it becomes clear that the Scythians regarded as misdeed not the participation of the king in ecstatic rituals they were quite used to but his reluctance to converse with people through a special herald and his mixing with commoners. The resulting breach of the sacred character of kingship threatened the kingdom entrusted to Scyles by gods. It is not for nothing that the latter, according to Herodotus, kept sending the king bad omens at first signs of his untoward behaviour. Yet Scyles was oblivious to them and therefore perished.

It seems that Herodotus reproduced fairly minutely an authentic Scythian tale of an unjust prince and his punishment. He was not able, however, to decipher the true semantics of the motifs based on cultural codes proper to the Scythian milieu. The revelation of these codes through the analysis of details involuntarily transmitted by a classical author enables one to reconstruct the original meaning of the tale (see also Rayevsky 1985: 71-73).

The use of certain codes not noticed by classical authors can also be revealed while analyzing their account of the Scytho-Persian war. As usual, the account recorded in the greatest detail by Herodotus contains a number of motifs the true meaning of which can only be established through the elucidation of Scythian cultural codes that the Father of History either understood only partially or did not make out at all. Among these is the account of the "gifts" presented by the Scythian king Idanthyrsos to Darius and of the latter's futile attempts to comprehend their meaning (Herod. IV, 131). The case of a hare that ran between the Persian and Scythian armies ready to fight (Herod. IV, 134) is even more interesting. The original meaning of this motif that Herodotus also failed to understand can be elucidated on the basis of certain subjects

of Scythian animalistic art and the folklore of other Iranian-speaking peoples (for further details see Rayevsky 1985: 66-68).

Lastly, in dealing with Herodotus's description of the Scytho-Persian war one should pay attention to the peculiarities of the itinerary of the warring armies. The confrontation of their alleged route and the duration of the campaign as stated by Herodotus reveals an obvious discrepancy. This fact sets one to assume that one deals with a conceptual construct reflecting the epic perception of the war rather than with a genuine account of the war in question. The itinerary of the Scythians and the pursuing Persians lying along the whole perimeter of Scythia is designed to show that the whole of Scythian land was involved in the war, while the anticlockwise movement (cf. the Old Indian *apasavya*; see, e.g., Mbh. VIII, 11, 17-18) foisted on Darius by the Scythians betokens, according to Indo-Iranian beliefs, his ultimate disaster (Rayevsky 1985: 68-70).

These interpretations, although perforce concise, enable one to assume that among the "Scythian accounts" of classical authors there are, besides the *obviously authentic and obviously misrepresented ones, those belonging to the third type discussed above*. An author dealing with such a tale narrates its story fairly accurately, yet misconstrues it owing to the use of cultural codes inherent in classical culture. However, certain details involuntarily recorded in the resulting account enable one to reconstruct the authentic codes that gave rise to a given motif. Essentially, such motifs consist of cultural clichés embodying either specifically Scythian or just 'barbarian' norms of ritual or traditional behaviour, folklore plots, ways of interpreting real or quasi-real events, etc. Such clichés are of primary import for the understanding of any pre-literate culture. To give a broad outline of the issue, let us now dwell upon yet another 'Scythian fragment' of classical literature.

Herodotus's account of Scythian campaigns in the Near East contains, *inter alia*, the following passage: "The Scythians had held sway over Asia for 28 years and during that time they, full of impudence and disdain, ravaged everything" (Herod. I, 106). Another passage of the same work runs as follows: "As I have already mentioned, the Scythians had held sway over Asia for twenty-eight years" (Herod. IV, 1). According to Herodotus, the Scythian domination ended when the Median king Cyaxares, indignant at their enormities, had invited them to a feast, got them drunk and exterminated them. Thus Media got rid of the Scythians and restored her domination over Upper Asia (Herod. I, 106).

It has been repeatedly noted that Herodotus's account is far from embracing the whole period of the Scythians' stay in Asia. It deals merely with a limited part of it. The comparison of the classical and cuneiform data shows that in fact the Near Eastern adventures of the Scythians had lasted at least for

nearly a century, from the 670s B.C., when an inscription of Assarhaddon mentioned a Scythian chief Išpaka(i), up to the events pertaining to the expulsion of the Scythians from the Near East that the majority of scholars tend to date to the early 7th century B.C. Moreover, the actual time-span of the Scythians involvement in the Near East could have been even longer.

Herodotus's account deals mainly with the last stage of Scythian invasions in the Near East, i.e. with the campaign headed by Madyes. This very campaign, according to Herodotus, led to the twenty-eight-year Scythian rule over Asia. True, the Father of History also mentions Prototyjes/Bartatua known from cuneiform sources as a participant of the first period of Scythian campaigns in the Near East. Yet he is mentioned only as Madyes's father. It has been noted that Herodotus rarely refers to the barbarians' patronymics; in this case it may be due to the presence of a story of Prototyjes in those parts of Herodotus's work that have not survived (Diakonoff 1956: 273, note 2). In any case the account of Herodotus looks like an integral story and its temporal aspect should be taken into account.

Herodotus's testimony about the duration of the Scythian sway over Asia has been repeatedly discussed. There is some controversy as to whether the time-span of 28 years given by Herodotus reflects an authentic tradition and, if so, how to correlate it with absolute chronology. It is also debatable whether the 28 years in question should be included into the period of the reign of Cyaxares as it is stated in the majority of the MSS of Herodotus's work (I, 106). Alternatively, the said 28 years of Scythian dominance should be added to the 150 years during which, according to the Father of History, four Median kings, namely Deioces, Phraortes, Cyaxares and Astyages, had reigned (for the relevant bibliography and overviews of the existing hypotheses see: Dovatur et al. 1982: 179-180, n. 31; Grantovsky 1998: 145 ff.). Thus, the explanation of that number depends to a large extent on one's treatment of the above-mentioned controversy.

We prefer to leave aside chronological calculations. As E. Grantovsky has shown in his posthumous work, the Greek tradition tended to elaborate arbitrary chronologies based on the number of generations including both mythological and real personages while the duration of the generation varied depending on a given author's preference. The details of classical authors' narratives and the outline of events, which go back to a much later period, are far more reliable (Grantovsky 1998: 173 ff.). The same scholar has demonstrated that from both historical and textological considerations the period of Scythian dominance should be included into that of Cyaxares's reign instead of being added to it. As to textological reasons, the testimony of an Oxyrhynchus papyrus containing the original text of the relevant passage of Herodotus is of utmost importance (Labat 1961; Grantovsky 1998: 177). As to the problem we

are mainly interested in, i.e. that of the origin of number 28, the latter is, according to E. Grantovsky, "nothing but a result of either misunderstanding or an unfortunate historical-chronological calculation of Herodotus or one of his predecessors who dealt with... an artificial pattern of Asian chronology" (Grantovsky 1998: 172).

Meanwhile it is precisely in view of the assumed arbitrariness of Herodotus's chronological calculations that the question of the origin of the twenty-eight-year time-span acquires additional importance. Since, according to Herodotus, the period of Scythian dominance should be included in that of Cyaxares's reign, it leaves the overall duration of his calculations unchanged. The indication of this dominance time-span cannot therefore be either the result of Herodotus's calculations or their starting point; it has to be an independent element of the narration. Evidently, it was borrowed from an external source as a datum.

It is all the more interesting since, as Grantovsky rightly pointed out, "no classical author except Herodotus ever mentions this number" (1998: 172). Indeed, it is worth noting that, according, for instance, to Trogus Pompeius, the Scythians had reigned Asia three times. That writer held that the invasion related to a plot akin to that mentioned by Herodotus had lasted for eight years (Iust., II, 5). Polyæn (VII, 44) tells the same story without mentioning any duration of the Scythians' stay abroad. M. Pogrebova and the present author have already confronted Herodotus's and Trogus's accounts and have highlighted both the agreements and certain differences between them (Pogrebova and Rayevsky 1992: 179-180). At present we should examine not only the data of various authors on the duration of the Scythians' stay in the Middle East but also the context in which they appear in the sources compared and thus reveal the origin of the number in question. Let us now turn to this context.

According to Herodotus, the Scythians pursuing the Cimmerians, who had fled before them from the North Pontic steppes, found themselves in Media and eventually reached Egypt. They had ruled Asia for twenty-eight years and, far from being content with the tribute, ravaged the local population. The Median king Cyaxares, reluctant to accept the situation, used a stratagem and annihilated the majority of them (Herod., I, 103-106). Those who were able to return home had to face "hardships akin to those inflicted by the Medians", since during their husbands' absence Scythian women formed associations with their slaves. The children born of those liaisons were set on preventing the Scythians' return and joined battle with them. The armed attacks proving futile, the Scythians remembered their adversaries' slave origin and turned to the whip. Thus the slaves' progeny were quickly subdued and the Scythians recovered their land (Herod., IV, 1-4). Trogus Pompeius (Iust., II, 5) and Polyæn (VII, 44, 2) outline a similar story, the only difference being that it was the slaves proper and not their sons that confronted the Scythians. Although

Polyaen mentions the slave offspring of Scythian women, the fact seems of no significance for his narration.

As it has been repeatedly pointed out, the motif of subduing slaves or their progeny with whips instead of weapons is of purely folklore character (Grakov 1947: 76; Smirnov 1966: 143; Shelov 1972: 74; Terenozhkin 1977: 18; Lelekov and Raevsky 1979: 71-72). The folklore origin of certain numerical values is also quite evident in classical authors' stories. Thus, according to Trogus Pompeius, "the Scythians had thrice held sway over Asia" and their first campaign resulted in the tribute paid to them by Asians for 1500 (!) years (Iust., II, 3). In this connection one should be careful while evaluating the reliability of his time reckoning (Pogrebova and Raevsky 1992: 179-180).

It is evident that the 1500 years mentioned by Trogus Pompeius are no more than a hyperbole intended to illustrate the long duration of Scythian rule. Yet one can only wonder at other numbers, neither so rounded nor so enormous, that appear in a similar context.

It is worth noting that some scholars, e.g. B. Grakov and A. Terenozhkin, trace the folklore plot in question back to the Scythian oral tradition, while others, like A. Smirnov and D. Shelov, regard it as Greek. True, the plot shows unmistakable signs of Greek polishing. Thus, Trogus Pompeius's testimony that the vanquished slaves had been crucified, while their wives, "driven by pangs of conscience, either stabbed themselves to death or hanged themselves," being completely inconsistent with the realia of Scythian life, is indicative of the underlying Greek ideology. The fact, however, does not imply a similar genesis of the plot. What if the numbers cited in various versions of the story can support a particular ethno-cultural attribution of the tale? To check this assumption let us turn to the epic poetry and traditional ethnography of the Ossetes.

V. Miller, G. Dumézil, E. Grantovsky, not to mention V. Abaev, demonstrated that the core of the Ossetian Nartic epics had taken shape in the Scytho-Sarmatian epoch. It becomes especially obvious in dealing with traditional military institutions. Descriptions of Scythian Near-Eastern campaigns recorded by classical tradition have much in common with such epic -- and ethnographic -- phenomena as the *balc*'s, i.e. raids into neighbouring territories, regularly conducted, for instance, by the characters of the Nartic epics. Note in this connection the remark of Trogus Pompeius (Iust., II, 4) that one of the Scythian Near-Eastern campaigns was headed by two young men of royal blood "driven away from their motherland by the intrigues of nobility." A similar motif can be seen in Herodotus's tale of a feud amid the Scythians resulting in a Scythian band's withdrawal towards Media (I, 73). The Scythian custom of raising a troop of warriors described in detail by Lucian (Tox., 47-48) is also reminiscent of the *balc* tradition. According to it, a Scythian willing to raise a force should sacrifice a bull, cut up and cook the meat, spread the

hide out on the ground in a public place and then take a seat on it, thus appealing for armed support. Anyone eager to join a future campaign should set his right foot upon the hide and eat a bit of sacrificial meat. The resemblance between this custom and the Ossetic practice of raising a band to avenge a kinsman's blood has been noted by A. Chochiev (1985: 117-118).

The data on the traditional age-sex stratification of Ossetian society compiled by Chochiev are of vital importance for elucidating the origin of the 28-year time-span mentioned by Herodotus. It can be safely assumed that the formation of these traditions was antecedent to the Scytho-Sarmatian period. According to Chochiev, the Ossetian man's life was divided into four main periods. The first three years he was a baby. From three to seventeen he was regarded as an adolescent. During that time he was not allowed to take part in military campaigns but gradually mastered men's skills, especially pasturage. At 17, after certain initiation rites, the young man was to get married. Three nights later he set out for his first year-long *balc*, thus entering the period of warring. He belonged to the age-set of manly warriors until he turned 45, taking part in various kinds of *balc*'s, namely one-, three- and seven-year-long ones. From 45 onwards the man ranged among the elderly (Chochiev 1985: 53-77).

The succession of numbers delimitating the age groups, i.e. 3, 17 and 45, shows no apparent regularity. Yet, if one subtracts the three years of infancy, which is a class apart in many traditions, it appears that the system of age reckoning is based on the seven-year cycle. In this case the life span of the Ossetian man follows the formula $3+(7 \times 2)+(7 \times 4)$. The subdivision of adolescence into two seven-year periods is clearly seen in the Ossetian tradition; certain elements of the same cyclic subdivision, although less clear-cut, can be traced in the structure of the warrior's period (Chochiev 1985: 78). The figure 7 was sacred to many Aryans; the fact is attested, among other things, by the number of gods in the Scythian, Alanian and Ossetic pantheons (Abaev 1962) and lends support to the validity of the above calculations.

It is easy to check that the Ossetian man's warring activity lasted for 28 years – the time-span mentioned by Herodotus. Such an approach enables one to reinterpret Herodotus's testimony. The latter proves to be of Scythian, rather than Greek, folklore origin. In the light of the Ossetian tradition Herodotus's account can be understood as follows.

Leaving for the Middle East, the Scythians left behind their wives. It implies that they had gone through the marriage ceremony, marking the passage from the second age category into that of the warriors. By the time they returned home 28 years later, even the youngest of them would have been past the warlike age. Hence an imminent controversy: the younger generation consider themselves entitled to prevent the former warriors from regaining their high position in Scythian society. The elderly, in their turn, have a grudge

against the adolescents – not so much because the latter are slaves' progeny, but first and foremost for being uninitiated youths. One should bear in mind that no youth can be initiated without the older warriors conducting the ceremony: in the Ossetian tradition, for instance, it was the uncles of those initiated that played the leading part in the rite (Chochiev 1985: 67-68). With all the warriors away waging the Middle Eastern campaign/*balc*, the initiation rites could not be properly performed. An armed conflict with the uninitiated defies the traditional world outlook and can even be humiliating to the epic warrior. As for the stay-at-home Scythians, not to mention their offspring, they perforce belonged to the age class whose main activity was pasturage.

In this connection implements allegedly used to tame the rebels are worth noting. While Trogus Pompeius mentions "lashes, whips and other implements instilling fear into slaves", Herodotus refers only to horse-whips (ἄλι του ἵππου μαστιγες) and Polyæn to whips without further amplification. It is Herodotus's wording that is reminiscent of the Scythians' adversaries' social status regardless of their alleged slave origin. The latter does not seem to be an original element of the plot, although it is explicit in all the versions. It is perfectly plausible that it was introduced into the narration by the classical tradition, since the "freemen *versus* slaves" opposition is of primary import for its ideology. On the contrary, the Scythians, and especially the epic Scythians, would stress the "warriors *versus* non-warriors (resp. herdsman)" opposition, the very pivot on which the plot turns. Although the original idea is more obvious in Herodotus's version, it can also be reconstructed for those of Trogus and Polyæn. Thus, Trogus says that the "slaves" were left behind by the Scythians to guard their herds - the function proper to uninitiated youths in traditional society.

True, the above-described situation in which the society cannot initiate a whole generation of youths looks unthinkable from the rationalist point of view. The same is true of the plot opening when *all* the warriors of a given community leave their land rendering it completely defenseless for nearly three decades. It is, however, perfectly natural and, indeed, typical in the epic context; one may refer to the long absence of Achaean forces set out to conquer Troy. The logical incongruity of the plot seems to be yet another proof of its folklore origin while the fact that the Ossetic tradition gives one many valuable insights into the narration motifs points to the Scythian milieu.

These observations are particularly true of Herodotus's version. The explanation of the discordances between it and the other versions presents certain difficulties. As we have seen, some elements were undoubtedly introduced into the plot by the Greeks. As to the testimony of Trogus Pompeius about the eight-year Scythian stay in Asia, the figure can be compared to the Ossetic conception of the one-, three-, and seven-year *balc*'s and thus explained, although it would be stretching the point. However, one can propose an alternative interpretation as well.

Grantovsky rightly pointed out that there is a semantic correlation between the duration of the Scythian campaign according to Trogus and the fact that in his version the Scythians have to fight not the slaves' sons but the slaves themselves; the children born in the Scythians' absence simply could not have come of age within eight years (Grantovsky 1980: 149-150). As to the Scythians' children being under age before the campaign and therefore left "to guard the herds", as Trogus put it, they would have grown up yet as non-initiated would not have acquired the warlike status. Thus, Trogus's version is in itself perfectly coherent and quite consistent with the reconstructed original plot and could therefore be borrowed as such from Scythian folklore. At the same time it is not improbable that the co-ordination pointed out by Grantovsky was carried out by the Greeks who "fitted together" the two elements, i.e. the eight-year duration of the Scythian *balc* and the treatment of the Scythians' adversaries as the slaves left behind and not as their sons.

Nevertheless, comparing the versions of Herodotus, Polyaeus, and Trogus one gets the impression that the first one is closer to the Scythian original. Provided that the later versions go back to that of Herodotus - which is by no means certain - one can hypothetically reconstruct the evolution of the plot in question in classical milieu. Polyaeus omitted the data on the campaign duration that probably seemed to him exaggerated and made the Scythians - apparently for the same reasons - fight their slaves instead of the latter's sons. Yet the superfluous mention of the slaves' sons survived as a trace of the original version. Trogus's account, being in general agreement with that of Polyaeus, got rid of this, now completely unwarranted element. However, the indication of the duration of the Scythians' absence reappears in a 'modified' form coordinated with the adopted identification of the Scythian' adversaries. Needless to say that such a reconstruction is only tentative.

Be it as it may, in view of the clearly folklore traits of the plot the use of any of its versions and the alleged time-spans of Scythian campaign in historical-chronological calculations should be abandoned.

The materials dwelt upon in this paper enable one to elaborate the general principles of interpreting the 'historical' information on 'barbarian' societies that has survived in classical literary tradition. It appears that the data on illiterate societies often go back to their own folklores serving as the treasury of their 'historical memory.' Such a conclusion, perfectly justified from the theoretical point of view (see Lelekov and Raevsky 1979), gains substance if a certain motif present in classical descriptions of 'barbarians' and inexplicable from any classical tradition is encountered in a relevant 'barbarian' culture or amid typologically kindred cultures. The study of cultural clichés can provide convincing interpretations of such motifs.

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