Fridrik THORDARSON

HERODOTUS AND THE IRANIANS

ὄψις, ἀκοή, ψεῦδος

Symbolae Osloenses, t. 71, Oslo 1996, pp. 42-58

I

1. Since antiquity down to our own times scholars and literary critics have debated Herodotus' truthfulness and thus the utility of his work as a historical source. Whereas his gift as a story-teller has commonly been lauded and his literary merits extolled, the scholarly character of his Histories has frequently been challenged. In the eyes of his critics, starting from their own common sense, i. e. their narrow range of vision, his alleged θαυμάσια were simply too incredible to be true. To a ceratin degree, at least, modern social anthropology and our extended knowledge of the cultures of the ancient Near East have rehabilitated Herodotus' name as a serious historian; many of his θαυμάσια have become less marvellous than they were thought to be.

However, there is still no lack of critical scholars who question Herodotus' historical reliability and scholarly spirit, and who emphasize the fictitious character of his work. Among these critics D. Fehling is no doubt the most conspicuous (s. Bibliography). But also other scholars have, in part at least independently of Fehling, levelled their criticism against Herodotus as an earnest historian (but not necessarily as a man of letters). For the present discussion a couple of articles by O. K. Armayor are particularly interesting (s. Bibliography).

If this criticism is worthy of credence, Herodotus has deliberately lied in a number of passages where he supports his narrative by referring to independent sources or pretends to have been an eye-witness of the phaenomena he describes. Here, however, it is tempting to recall that the reference to fictitious authorities or the adduction of his own observations may be a part of a writer's or a story-teller's narrative technique; such practices do not necessarily preclude that he is telling the truth.

Needless to say these views have not been unanimously accepted by Herodotean scholarship, and have been severely criticised by a number of classical philologists. In particular, I want to refer to W. K. Pritchett's book, the

Liar School of Herodotus, published in 1993, where many of Fehling's and his supporters' arguments are examined in detail and rejected. (For a bibliography s. PRITCHETT 1993, passim.)[1]

2. At the outset of my Herodotean studies I had no ambition to make contributions to the exegesis of the text of Herodotus. I was mainly concerned with the question whether, or to which extent, Herodotus could be used as an authority on the culture of the Iranian peoples, above all on Iranian religions and epic poetry. But as frequently happens in philological scholarship, the problem was soon reversed: What (if anything) can Iranian studies contribute to the understanding of Herodotus and his working methods?

In the following and forthcoming πάρεργα a few remarks will be made on some of Herodotus' accounts of Scythian and other Iranian matters.

II

3. In a paper published several years ago I made some comments upon the Scythian burial rites described by Herodotus in Book IV, ch. 71-75 (THORDARSON 1988, pp. 539-547). A conclusion of these comments was that, in so far as archaelogical material and literary texts can be compared, Herodotus' account fits in well with funeral customs in the Kuban valley in the Northwest Caucasus in early Scythian times (6th–5th centuries B.C.), as they appear through modern excavations. On the other hand, they seem to tally badly with early Scythian archaeological finds in the Ukraine. The cruel burial rites that were practised in the Northwest Caucasus in the first half of the first millennium B.C., and are apparently due to influence from the Near East, only began to spread to the land west of Don after Herodotus' time (s. SULIMIRSKI in CHI, vol. 2, pp. 158 ff.; 194 ff.). From this we must conclude that Herodotus either deliberately chose the most macabre part of his information for his account, or that he was only imperfectly acquainted with Scythian matters.

If my conclusions are sound, they raise the question whether Herodotus based his description of the Scythian funeral customs on his own observations, or on some kind of second-hand information, i. e. ὄψις or ἀκοή.

4. In Book IV, ch. 11-12, Herodotus relates the legend of the origin of the Scyths which he finds most credible. According to this legend the Scythian immigration to the North Pontic lands resulted from a war between the Massagetians and the Scyths in Central Asia; this led to a wave of migrations in the Ponto-Caspian area and eventually to the Cimmerian and Scythian incursions into Media and the Near East. Herodotus seems to be the source of this wave theory, which according to Fehling (1989, p. 47) is a literary *topos,* although there is nothing incredible about such a migratory wave in this part of the world.

In the North Pontic archaeological finds from the 8th–7th centuries B.C. there is nothing however, so far as I know, which supports the theory of an ethnic or cultural distinction between Scyths and Cimmerians. In the Babylonian and Assyrian sources the ethnic terms *Ašguzāi, Asguzāi, Iškuzāi* (=Σκύθαι) on the one hand, and *Gimirri, Gimirrāi* (=Κιμμέριοι) on the other hand are frequently used as synonyms of the North Caucasian peoples who at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 7th centuries invaded the Transcaucasian countries. Regarding this question, as well as the chronology of the incursions (Herodotus' dating is imcompatible with that of the Assyrian sources), I refer to I. Diakonoff in CHI, vol. 2, ch. 3, and his article from 1981, pp. 103 ff.

5. According to Herodotus' narrative (IV, ch. 12) the Scyths pursued the Cimmerians from the North Pontic steppes to the land south of the Black Sea, but lost their way and invaded Media along the west coast of the Caspian Sea (ἐν δεξιῇ τὸν Καύκασον ἔχοντες). The same information is given in Book I, ch. 104-105 (ἐν δεξιῇ ἔχοντες τὸ Καυκάσιον ὄρος). This is obviously the most expedient route to follow for a great invasion army.

On the other hand, Herodotus clearly assumes that the Cimmerians invaded Asia Minor along the east coast of the Black Sea (οἱ μὲν γὰρ Κιμμέριοι αἰεὶ τὴν παρὰ θάλασσαν ἔφευγον). This, however, is quite unrealistic, unless we are willing to believe that the Scyths went by sea (the text of IV, 12 does not support such an assumption). The terrain would have made a through-way along the coast completely impractical for a numerous invading cavalry, as pointed out by I. Diakonoff (CHI, vol. 2, p. 50). The Black Sea coast was in antiquity densely grown with a subtropical jungle; the narrow strip of land on the shore would not have allowed the passage of a great army, not to speak of a mass movement of immigrants.

The Cimmerian horsemen must have penetrated into Asia Minor and the Transcaucasus through Darial or the other high passes of Great Caucasus (Klukhor, Mamison), which connect Georgia with the Central and Northwest Caucasus. In summer time this route must have been practicable, even if arduous, for an invading cavalry.

Also the information given in Book I, ch. 104, that from Lake Maeotis (the Sea of Azov) to the river Phasis (Rioni in West Georgia) is a journey of thirty days for a fast (εὐζώνῳ) traveller, seems to presuppose that travelling by land along the Pontic east coast is practicable.

In an article, published in 1935 (Scythica, ch. 1), K. Meuli has convincingly asserted the opinion that the hemp smoking and vapour-baths described in Book IV, ch. 75, in actual fact reflect a shamanistic seance, where the participants accompany the dead on his journey to the other world. This custom

Herodotus evidently understands as a purificatory rite. His narrative indicates clearly that he has not attended to such a seance.

The assertions in Book II, ch. 104, about the negroid look of the Colchians (μελάγχροές εἰσι καὶ οὐλότριχες) can hardly be based on personal observation. Whatever its origin, this anthropological myth seems to have been a locus communis in Greek literature (cf. Pindar, Pyth. IV, 212: κελαινώπεσσι Κόλχοισιν).

6. Needless to say this evidence is not conclusive. But it is an indication that Herodotus was not acquainted with the local conditions of the Northwest Caucasus. Accordingly, we presume that his information about the Scythian funeral rites was obtained by ἀκοή and not by ὄψις. This, of course, is nothing new. As has frequently been pointed out, Herodotus' knowledge of the Scythian lands is largely limited to the western part of the Ukraine, while farther towards the east his narrative gradually merges into fairy-tales and entertaining thaumatologies, adopted either from Scythian oral traditions or the writings of his Greek predecessors (or both).

III

7. Book IV, ch. 2, apparently describes the preparation of *koumiss,* fermented mare's milk, a savoury beverage still popular in Central Asia. According to Herodotus' account the Scyths blind their slaves who do this work. Why *blind* slaves are needed, we are not told. This is one of the defective narratives, seemingly based on some misunderstood or only imperfectly understood information, that we so frequently run into in Herodotus' Histories.

We are unavoidably reminded of a scholar who is not willing to allow any piece of knowledge to go to waste, although he does not know where to fit it in the scheme of his work. As it appears in the text, there is no point in this part of the narrative.

But nevertheless, the blindness of the slaves is to all appearances an essential theme of the story.

8. For 28 years the Scyths held sway of the "upper parts of Asia" (the former Median empire, Book IV, ch. 1); the same information is given in Book I, ch. 106. During the absence of their masters, the blind slaves take the law into their own hands; they cohabit with the neglected Scythian wives and beget children with them. When the Scyths after 28 years return from their excursion in the Near East, a new generation of bastards has sprung up who have seized control of the country. On the battlefield the sons of the blind slaves are superior to their Scythian masters. But when the latter show their bondmen the horsewhips, they acknowledge their social status and take flight.

The morale of this story hardly needs a long comment. For 28 years, during the absence of the masters, social order is suspended, moral and political chaos rules supreme. At the end of this period the masters reappear, and order is restored.

9. Still, some of the themes seem to call for a few remarks.

Of course, we can not preclude that there existed a popular tradition in the Near East that the Scythian rule of the 7th century actually lasted 28 years (one generation?).

In the second place, 28 may be a round figure, a variation of 27 (a multiple of 3 or 9?), which is widely used to express an indefinite high number: the Scyths were abroad for 27 years, but returned in the 28th (inclusive method of reckoning, common among the Iranians as well as the Greeks).

In the following a third explanation will be ventured.

10. It is tempting to ask whether the 28 years are a rationalization, a pseudo-historical or epic transformation of a mythological period of 28 (27) *days,* reflecting a sort of periodic ceremony repeated at the interval of some years.

If the Iranian (and other) tribes of the North Pontic lands reckoned the months by the moon, but the year by the sun, as seems likely, they had before them the problem of adjusting the solar year of 365 1/4 days to a lunar year of 354-355 ($29^1/_2$ x 12) days. One way of solving this problem (if it was solved) would be the periodic insertion of a 13th month, ideally after the 3rd year, if regularity was to be maintained. A regular intercalation of an additional month would, however, need some permanent central administration or a priestly caste; but it is doubtful if this kind of social organization can be assumed to have existed in the Scythian tribal societies at this early date. More likely intercalation would take place as the need arose to bring the calendar into correspondence with the seasons.

Secondly, a year of 13 months each containing 28 days would make a total of 364 days.

A lunisolar year of 12 months alternating with 13 months at some years' interval was common in the ancient Mediterranean and Oriental countries (and in various other places, at various times, all over the world).

In Greece the calendars were regulated by more or less haphazard intercalations of extra months (or fragments of months) or by the suppression of days (s. BICKERMAN 1968, pp. 27 ff.). In Athens intercalations were cyclically regulated, at least in part, by the introduction of a period of 8 years (ὀκταετηρίς, ἐννεετηρίς), during which an extra month was inserted 3 times.

The early Achaemenids used a lunisolar calendar, like the Babylonians, until at least 459 B.C. Intercalations of additional months were practised by

both, but probably according to different systems (HARTNER, CHI, vol. 2, 1985, pp. 744 ff.).

In Sasanian times a calendar was in use where the cumulative lag of an additional quarter-day per year was corrected (theoretically at least) by the insertion of one month at the interval of 120 (or 116) years (al-Bīrūnī (973-1048), Chronology of Ancient Nations, transl. Sachau, pp. 12-13, cited by Ginzel 1906-14, B. I, pp. 290 ff.). Approximately the same information is given by al-Bīrūnī's contemporary Abu'l Hasan Kušyār (GINZEL, I.e.; PANAINO in EI. IV, p. 660). The date of the introduction of the intercalary calendar is still an open question, but most Iranian scholars seem to be in agreement about early Achaemenian times.

In Belardi's (1977, pp. 13 ff.; s. also EI, IV. p. 660) view the year of the earliest Iranian calendar may have been lunar and sidereal, consisting of 13 months, each containing 27 days (27,3 x 13 = 354,9).

The irregular intercalation of a 13th month is attested in India in Vedic times by both the Samhitas and the Brāhmanas (GINZEL, o.c., I, ip. 313).

This is not the place to enter a detailed discussion of these chronological matters[2]. Suffice it to say that, when we take into consideration the calendrical systems of the neighbouring and kindred peoples, it seems likely that the Scyths practised the intercalation of a 13th month at irregular intervals, unless they reckoned time in years of 13 months each containing 27 days. But, of course, both systems may have been in use among the Iranian tribes and their neighbours in the North Pontic lands. Most likely each tribe or locality had their own system of time reckoning[3].

11. We can easily imagine that the periodic (irregular) insertion of an intercalary month might be accompanied by a sort of social and moral relaxation. During this period the established order would be suspended, and social norms abolished; slaves and masters would feast together; sexual licence would be allowed or even the rule. Primordial chaos was, so to say, restored, followed by the cosmogonic act, the recreation of the world order. The social chaos found its expression in the myth of the periodic absence of the masters, and was possibly represented in a sort of ritual drama. Classical scholars will no doubt be reminded of the Greek Χρόνια and the Roman Saturnalia *(Saturnalibus tota servis licentia permittitur,* Macrobius, Saturnalia 1,7,26).

Admittedly, however, no evidence is known to me, according to which the intercalary 13th month was celebrated by lascivity and moral and social chaos in the countries of the Near East. But in various places of the earth intercalation is associated with chaotic and evil forces. Thus, according to Nilsson (o.c., p. 248), in Loango, in Central Africa, the intercalary month that is inserted about every 3 years is "the evil time, when the wandering spirits are at

their worst". In Polynesia the 5 epagomenal days are regarded a tabu (Nilsson, o.c., p. 249).

If the intercalary month was inserted at the turn of the year, it would (in part) coincide with the festival of the New (or Old) Year.

Ceremonials for the New (or Old) Year, where the reactualization of primordial chaos and reestablishment of the cosmic order were enacted in a dramatic form, were widespread all over the ancient Near East (for a summary s. ELIADE 1971 (1949), pp. 51 ff.). Collective orgies, a sort of a carnival, were celebrated, accompanied by sexual licence and the abolition of social norms. At the Babylonian New Year's celebrations, e.g., the king was symbolically dethroned and humiliated in various ways, and later reinstated.

12. To the above explanation it may be objected that we expect an intercalary month of 29 or 30 days, rather than of 28 (27).

As shown by Nilsson (o.c., p. 147), the number of days reckoned to the month varies greatly in the calendrical systems of the world. Frequently the 27-28 days in which the moon is visible in the sky are more important than the 2-3 days when it can not be seen (a sidereal month of 27-28 days, as against a synodic month of $29^1/_2$ days).

According to Nilsson (o.c., p. 150) the Ibo-speaking peoples of Nigeria reckon (or reckoned) only 28 days to the month, and so do also the Dakota of North America. Cf. also Belardi's hypothesis of prehistoric Iranian time-reckoning mentioned above.

A month of 27-28 days either necessitates periodic calendrical regulations, or the dark days do not count ("the moon sleeps").

All this remains necessarily hypothetical and can not be either proved or disproved. It is therefore advanced here only as a possible subject of further studies.

13. In a paper published in 1938, and repeated in a somewhat abbreviated version in 1978, G. Dumézil compared Herodotus' narrative of the blind slaves' sons and their unsuccesful revolt with a folkloristic or epic motif that is widespread in the countries south of the Black Sea, among the Armenians as well as the Anatolian and Azerbaijanian Turks: the *köroğlu-motif* (Turk. *köroğlu* "son of the blind"). This motif is also found, in a somewhat modified form, in the epic traditions of the North Caucasus.

An usurper, the son of a blind man, arrogates power to himself for some time. His father, a vassal, has been blinded by his vassal or feudal lord by way of punishment, as a rule because he has tried to cheat at the delivery of a horse of inferior quality. The son revolts in order to avenge his father, but is unmasked by his lawful master by some ruse and reduced to obedience, but not killed.

The motif is well-known in the popular traditions of Anatolia and Azerbaijan, but is also found in mediaeval Armenian literature, in the History of the Armenians by Movsēs Khorenats'i (traditionally dated to the 5th century, but probably of a much later date; 9th century?), and the Armenian History of Faustus of Byzance, a historical novel originally written in Greek, but only handed down in a fragmentary Armenian translation from the 5th century; in the latter text, which relates events of the 4th century, the motif is used in a long and dramatic narrative[4].

14. A kindred motif is found in the Nart epic cycle, which is widespread among the Ossetes and the other peoples of the North Caucasus, but is no doubt to a large extent rooted in ancient Iranian (and Aryan) epic and mythological traditions.

Batraz or Batradz (I use the Ossetic forms of his name), the great Nart hero, is away from home on a predatory raid, in some variants in the company of his brothers-in-arms. In a part of the tradition he is visiting the heavens to see Kuyrdalægon, the celestial smith. During his absence the son of a blind giant (Oss. *wæiyg)* takes the opportunity to get mixed with the Nart youth, joining in their games and dances. At first he is in luck; but then Batraz returns and puts an end to the fun; the giant's son gets a beating and must turn back to his father in the mountains.

The giants (plural *wæiguytæ)* are a stupid and hostile race of mountain-dwellers living outside the precincts of the domesticated world of the Narts, to whom they are a continuous threat. In the North Caucasian epic cycle the giant is now blind, now one-eyed; this flaw is the work of the Narts. In some variants of the tale the giant's son makes sexual advances to the Nart girls[5].

15. If my reasoning is sound, it is natural to assume that Herodotus in ch. 2 of Book IV retells, of course summarily, the contents of a Scythian epic or folkloristic tradition, where (at least) two motifs, originally probably independent of one another, had been contaminated: *The Revolt of the Blind Slave's Son* and *the Slaves' Licence during their Masters' Absence.* It is highly improbable, to say the least, that all the variants of these motifs found in modern popular traditions on both sides of the Caucasus and in mediaeval Armenian literature derive from Herodotus' narrative; in the first place, for that the variants are too great and too numerous; secondly, it is unthinkable that the Nart cycle owes anything to classical Greek literature.

16. If we presume that Herodotus knew a Scythian epic tradition where the two motifs were blended, the Iranian scholar will unevitably bring up the question in which language he became acquainted with this tradition. Did Herodotus know any of the idioms spoken in the North Pontic lands, either an Iranian or a non-Iranian language?

Herodotus frequently shows some interest in linguistic matters. As a rule his linguistic data are naive, a sort of lexical *interpretatio Graeca;* a Greek word, mostly a concrete noun, is supposed to have a semantic duplicate in other languages: What is "bread" in Phrygian (βεκός, βέκος, s. IV, 2)? and the like. As regards the Iranian languages, in some cases his lexical information has been verified, in others not.

Occasionally, Herodotus' linguistic information is somewhat more ambitious. In Book IV, ch. 117, in the romantic story about the Amazons and the Scythian youths, he tells us that the Sauromatians east of Don and the Sea of Azov speak in broken Scythian. The reason is, he says, that the Amazons could not learn their husbands' language properly (unfortunately we are not told which language they spoke before they took up with the Scythian men). In spite of the naiveté of this story there is every reason to believe that Herodotus' statement about the linguistic relations between the Scyths and the Sauromatians is basically correct, and that it refers to dialectal differences within the Saka tribes of the Ponto-Caspian lands. (S. Compendium linguarum Iranicarum 1989, the relevant chapters.)

In Book IV, ch. 27 Herodotus explains the ethnic name 'Αριμασποί, the Scythian designation of an one-eyed human race (μουνόφθαλμοι ἄνθρωποι) living in the uttermost north, as a derivative of ἄριμα "one" and σποῦ "eye". These words can hardly be identified as Iranian. The fabulous people of the Arimaspeans were the subject of an epic poem (τὰ 'Αριμάσπεα ἔπεα) ascribed to the reputed shaman Aristeas of Proconnesus, who is said to have visited their part of the world (IV, 13-14). To all appearances this name is compouned of Iranian *aspa-*, the common word for "horse", plus an attributive adjective, perhaps *aryaman-,* approximately "comrade, companion", in which case it is a bahuvrīhi compound "cui (quibus) equus socius est" (φίλιππος, Benveniste, cited by Legrand's commentary ad locum (LEGRAND 1960).

The occurrence of Iran. *aspa-* in the Scythian-Sarmatian dialects is substantiated by Greek sources. 'Ασπουργος is found several times as a proper name in Sarmatian times. Thus a Bosporan king of the first century A.D. is called by this name. The word is evidently an inverted bahuvrīhi "who owns strong horses" (O.Iran, *ugra-, uğra-* "strong"). 'Ασπουργιανοί occurs as a tribal name east of the Sea of Azov in Roman times. In modern Ossetic *æfsurğ* is the name of a mythical breed of horses (apparently an inverted tatpuruṣa 2 "strong horse"). Βαιορασπος is found as a proper name in Tanais, at the Don estuary, in the 3rd century A.D., a bahuvrīhi meaning "who owns many (ten thousand?) horses" (Iran. *baiwar-* "many, ten thousand")[6].

The common word for "horse" in proper and ethnical names is hardly a surprise in this part of the world. Did Herodotus not know this word, which

must have belonged to the core vocabulary of the Iranian-speaking Scyths, and consequently accept an explanation given by an unreliable source? – or did he miscomprehend some information? or even himself invent an etymology? As already mentioned, in many cases Herodotus seems to have based his accounts on misunderstandings or undigested knowledge[7].

17. But Herodotus did not have to know Scythian (nor any other language of the North Pontic area) in order to obtain information about the popular traditions or the epic poetry of the indigenous peoples. In his time the Greek colonies on the north coast of the Black Sea had existed for more than 200 years. In these colonies a great part of the population must have been bilingual, speaking both a Greek and a Scythian dialect; to these may be added languages of less certain affiliations. Ἕλληνες Σκύθαι are mentioned in Book IV, ch. 17; no doubt a mixed population of Greeks and Scyths is meant. Μιξέλληνες occurs as tribal name in a Greek inscription in Olbia, dating from the 3rd-2nd cent. B.C. (LATYSCHEV 1885, I, 16 B,17). An evidence of this bilingualism are the numerous proper names of Iranian derivation found in the Greek inscriptions in the North Pontic lands (s. ZGUSTA 1955). A further evidence are Greek loan translations of Iranian words. A possible example of such a calque is mentioned in my paper of 1988 (p. 539). Μελάγχλαινοι, which appears several times as a tribal name in Book IV (s., e.g., ch. 20), is most likely a translation of Iran. **šau-dar-* "dressed in black", from O. Iran. *syāva-* "black" and the verbal root **dar-* "to hold"; cf. Ossetic *sau-dar(æg)* "dressed in black, mourning". Σαυδαρατοι occurs as a tribal name in an inscription from Olbia (3rd-2nd cent. B.C., LATYSCHEV 1885, I, 16 B, 9)

This bilingualism implies a broader community of culture, reflected, e.g., in the Scythian art. In such a community, no doubt largely illiterate, bilingual oral poetry and folkloristic traditions must have played an important part. In a similar way the Nart epic cycle, mentioned above, has been diffused all over the North Caucasus by bilingual minstrels and story-tellers.

More than 20 years ago I tentatively explained a familiar Graeco-Roman motif, *Achilles' heel,* as an adoption of a Scythian motif recorded today in the Nart cycle, where it plays a central religious role (THORDARSON 1972). Although this may be a moot question, I still stick to the other part of my reasoning, that **we must presume a mutual interchange of epic and folkloristic traditions between the Greek and Iranian populations of the Scythian lands.**

To make a long story short, I feel natural to presume that about the middle of the 5th century B.C. there existed a legend or an epic tradition in *Greek* among the colonists of the North Pontic shore, where the two motifs, the motif of the blind slave's son and that of the licentious revolt of the slaves, had been

blended. At some time this epic or popular tale had been combined with a historical tradition of the Scythian and Cimmerian incursions into Media and the other countries of the Near East in the 8th-7th centuries. This tradition Herodotus learnt from an indigenous authority, no doubt through a Greek intermediary. He did not invent it.

18. Herodotus did not need to go to Scythia, if he wanted to obtain a more or less trustworthy information about the geography and culture of the country. There must have been a reasonably good intercourse between the colonies along the coasts of the Black Sea and the mother cities of Asia Minor; in Miletus and other Anatolian cities visitors from Scythia might impart knowledge about North Pontic conditions. **In Athens the police force of Scythian τοξόται could be a valuable source of information to an inquisitive scholar. During his stay in Athens in the 440'ies Herodotus only needed to go into the streets to acquire knowledge about the semi-fabulous lands north of the Black Sea and obtain themes for his historical studies and entertaining λόγοι.**

19. If our reasonings hold true, in his account of the social upheavals during the 28 years of Scythian raids on the Transcaucasian countries, Herodotus reproduces a Greek variant of a North Pontic or North Caucasian oral epos or popular tradition. This tradition, current in the Pontic colonies, must have been transmitted to the Greek-speaking population through bilingual communication with their Scythian neighbours and compatriots.

Herodotus' use of epic poetry as a historical source is in no way unique; for all I know, it is still practised by modern historians. In the Archaeology, at the beginning of Book I of the History of the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides refers to the Homeric poems and, as it seems, other ancient epic traditions too. He makes certain reservations concerning poetical exaggerations and embellishments, but he presumes that the theme of the poetry is in all essentials in accordance with the truth. Thucydides does not question the Trojan War as a historical fact. Evidently the thought has not occurred to him that this war might have taken place only in the imagination of poets and story-tellers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ABAEV, V.I., 1979: Skifo-sarmatskie narečija. In: Osnovy iranskogo jazykoznanija. Drevneiranskie jazyki, 272 ff. Moskva.

ARMAYOR, O.K., 1978: Did Herodotus Ever Go to the Black Sea? In: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 82, 45 ff. Cambridge, Mass.

Idem, 1980: Sesostris and Herodotus' Autopsy of Thrace, Colchis, Inland Asia Minor, and the Levant. In: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology,* vol. 84, 51 ff. Cambridge, Mass.

BELARDI, W., 1977: Mithra nella preistoria del mese. In: *Studi mitbraici e mazdei,* 113 ff. Roma.

BICKERMAN, E.J., 1968: *Chronology of the Ancient World.* London.

Idem, 1983: Time-Reckoning. In: *CHI,* vol. 3,2, ch. 21.

BOYCE, M., 1982: A *History of Zoroastrianism,* vol. II. (Handbuch d. Orientalistik. Abt. 1, B. 8, Abschn. 1, Lief. 2, Heft 2a.) Leiden.

CHI = *The Cambridge History of Iran.* Vol. 2-3,2. Cambridge 1985, 1983.

CHODZKO, A., 1842: *Specimens of the Popular Poetry of Persia, as Found in the Adventures and Improvisations of Kurroglou, the Bandit-Minstrel of Northern Persia; and in the Songs of the People Inhabiting the Shores of the Caspian Sea. Orally Collected and Translated, with Philological and Historical Notes.* London.

CHRISTENSEN A., 1921: *Textes ossètes.* (Det kgl. Videnskabernes Selskab. Hist.-fil. Meddel. VI, 1.) København.

Compendium linguarum Iranicarum 1989. Hg. von R. Schmitt. Wiesbaden.

DIAKONOFF, I.M., 1981: The Cimmerians. In: *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne,* I (Acta Iranica, 21), 103 ff. Leiden.

Idem, 1985: Media. In: *CHI,* vol. 2, ch. 3.

DUMÉZIL, G., 1930: *Legéndes sur les Nartes.* (Bibliothèque de l'Institut français de Léningrad, t. XI.) Paris.

Idem, 1938: Les légendes de "Fils d'aveugles" au Caucase et autour du Caucase. In: *Revue de l'histoire des religions, t.* 117, 50 ff. Paris.

Idem, 1965: *Le livre des héros. Légendes sur les Nartes.* Paris.

Idem, 1978: *Romans de Scythie et d'alentour.* Paris.

EI = *Encyclopaedia Iranica.* Ed. by E. Yarshater. Vol. IV. London etc. 1990.

ELIADE, M., 1971 (1949): *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History.* English translation. Princeton. (Orig. French title: *Le Mytbe de l'éternel retour: Archétype et répetition.* Paris.

FEHLING, D., 1971/1989: *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot.* Berlin etc. – English translation: *Herodotus and His Sources. Citation, Invention and Narrative Art.* Leiden.

GINZEL, F.K., 1906-14: *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie. Das Zeitrechnungswesen der Völker,* I-III. Leipzig.

HARTNER, W., 1985: Old Iranian Calendars. In: *CHI,* vol. 2, ch. 16.

JACOBY, F., 1913: Herodotus. In: *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft,* suppl. 2,205 ff. Stuttgart.

KINGSLEY, P., 1994: Greeks, Shamans and Magi. In: *Studia Iranica,* t. 23, 187 ff. Leuven.

LATYSCHEV, B., 1885: *Inscriptiones antiquae orae septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae.* Vol. I. Petropoli.

LEGRAND, Ph.-E., 1960: *Hérodote. Histoires. Livre IV. Texte étbli et traduit.* 3ème éd. Paris.

MEULI, K., 1975 (1935): Scythica. In: *Gesammelte Schriften.* B. 2, 817 ff., Basel etc.

NILSSON, M.P., 1920: *Primitive Time-Reckoning. A Study in the Origins and First Development of the Art of Counting Time among the Primitive and Early Culture Peoples.* (Skrifter utg. av Humanistiska vetenskapssamfundet i Lund. I.) Lund.

NK = *Narty kaddžytæ.* Dzæudžyqæu 1946.

PANAINO, A., 1990: Pre-Islamic Calendars. In: *EI.* vol. IV, 658 ff.

PRITCHETT, W.K., 1993: *The Liar School of Herodotus.* Amsterdam.

SAMUEL, A.E., 1972: *Greek and Roman Chronology. Calendars and Years in Classical Antiquity.* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft. Abt. I, T. 7.) München.

SCHROETER, J.Fr., 1923-26: *Haandbog i Kronologi,* I-II. Kristiania/Oslo.

SULIMIRSKI, T., 1985: The Scyths. In: *CHI,* vol. 2, ch. 4.

TAQIZADEH, S.H., 1938: *Old Iranian Calendars.* (Prize Publication Fund, vol. XVI.) London.

THORDARSON, F., 1972: Die Ferse des Achilleus – ein skythisches Motiv? In: *Symbolae Osloenses,* 47, 109 ff. Oslo.

Idem, 1988: The Scythian Funeral Customs. Some Notes on Herodotus IV, 71-75. In: *A Green Leaf. Papers in Honour of Professor Jes P. Asmussen.* (Acta Iranica 28.), 539 ff. Leiden.

ZGUSTA, L., 1955: *Die Personennamen der nördlichen Schwarzmeerkuste.* Praha.

NOTES:

---

[1] In passing I feel tempted to cite the words of Peter Kingsley (Studia Iranica 23/1994, pp. 193-94): "Fehling's thesis [...] that Herodotus' descriptions of foreign peoples are simply the product of his own fantasy is one of the more bizarre progeny of modern scholarship".

[2] It would take us too far to dwell upon the complex questions of the various Iranian calendars. For details I refer to HARTNER, CHI, vol. 2, pp. 714 ff.; BELARDI 1977, pp. 113 ff.; BICKERMAN, ibid., vol. 3,2, pp. 778 ff.; BOYCE 1982, pp. 243 ff.; TAQIZADEH 1938. – Concerning Greek time-reckoning I refer to BICKERMAN 1968, pp. 27 ff.; details in SAMUEL 1972. For more general questions I refer to GINZEL 1906-14, SCHROETER 1923-26, and BICKERMAN 1968. As to the calendar regulations among various peoples of the world, and how they are solved or left unsolved, s. NILSSON 1920, in parti-cular ch. IX.

[3] In actual fact nothing seems to be known about the chronological systems of the Scyths and their North Pontic neighbours; we do not know, e.g., whether they were acquainted with the lunisolar calendar of the Babylonians. No inference can be drawn from the calendars of the modern Ossetes (s. EI, IV, p. 676, with bibliography). A report on the Ossetic New

Year's (Nog bon) celebrations, published by CHRISTENSEN 1921, pp. 50 ff., does not indicate any kind of orgiastic excesses on this occasion.

[4] The narratives are summarized by Dumézil in the papers cited above. S. also CHODZKO 1842.

[5] An Ossetic text is found in NK 1946, pp. 213 ff.; French transl. in DUMÉZIL 1965, pp. 196 ff. S. also DUMÉZIL 1930, pp. 54 ff.

[6] S. ABAEV 1979, pp. 281 ff.; ZGUSTA 1955, pp. 73 ff.; 79.

[7] There is, of course, a lot of other evidence that Herodotus did not know the languages of the peoples he visited, or is supposed to have visited.

It goes without saying that the words that Herodotus refers to as Scythian may derive from a non-Iranian idiom of the North Pontic or North Caucasian area. The ethnic name Σκύθαι is, of course, not an unambiguous *linguistic* term, but is used as a common designation of the various tribal communities north of the Black Sea. Among these tribes it is natural to look for the linguistic ancestors of the modern Northwest Caucasian peoples, the Circassians, the Ubykhs and the Abkhaz. But their languages, recorded only in modern times, throw no light on the two "Scythian" words of Herodotus.