

SCYLAX OF CARYANDA ON THE BOSPORUS AND THE STRAIT AT THE PILLARS

For Francesco Prontera

We owe due to the *Ora maritima* by Avienus a number of valuable references to early authors and explorers. One of them presents the statement of Scylax concerning the Strait of Gibraltar (*Or. mar.* 370 ff. = 709 *FGrHist* F 8):

sed ad columnas quidquid interfunditur
undae aestuantis stadia septem vix ait
Damastus esse; Caryandaeus Scylax
medium fluentum inter columnas adserit
tantum patere quantus aestus Bosporo est.

This piece of information about the man famous through his exploration of India and subsequent sail from Indian shores to Egypt (c. 518–515 BC) has not impressed scholars.¹ Moreover, the text of Avienus was cited to prove that Scylax had never been at the Strait of Gibraltar.² I shall argue that the evidence implies the contrary, which entails rather impressive conclusions.

It was repeatedly pointed out that since maximal breadth of the Bosphorus is about 4,5 km and minimal breadth is just above 700 m, while the Strait of Gibraltar is 14,2 km broad at the narrowest, their likening is out of the mark.³ This fair observation was not supplemented, however, by the ques-

¹ For Scylax in general and his Indian expedition in particular see: W. Reese, *Die griechischen Nachrichten über Indien bis zum Feldzuge Alexanders des Grossen* (Leipzig 1914) 39–52; F. Gisinger, “Skylax”, *RE* III A (1927) 619–646; H. Schiwiek, “Der Persische Golf als Schiffahrts- und Seehandelsroute in Achämenidischer Zeit und in der Zeit der Alexanders des Grossen”, *Bonner Jahrbücher* 162 (1962) 4–97; A. Peretti, *Il periplo di Scilace. Studio sul primo portolano del Mediterraneo* (Pisa 1979) 55–83; Klaus Karttunen, *India in Early Greek Literature* (Helsinki 1989) 40–48, 65–68; F. J. González Ponce, “Suda, s.v. Σκύλαξ. Sobre el título, el contenido y la unidad de *FGrHist* III C 709”, *Geographia Antiqua* 6 (1997) 37–51; and my papers in *Hyperboreus* 4 (1998): 2, 211–242; 8 (2002): 1, 5–12; 9 (2003): 2, 274–294.

² So Hermann Bengtson in his otherwise excellent paper “Skylax von Karyanda und Herakleides von Mylasa”, *Historia* 3 (1955): 3, 303–307.

³ A. Schulten, *Iberische Landeskunde* I (Strasbourg 1955) 405; Bengtson (n. 2) 307; in a similar way: Gisinger (n. 1) 631 ff.; Peretti (n. 1) 77.

tion of what might compel Scylax to take responsibility for an unwarranted statement and accept the risk of being severely criticized for his mistake. To be sure *errare humanum est*, but it is one thing if a person asked about the height of Tour Eiffel gives a wrong number of meters, and it is another matter if it is asserted that Tour Eiffel is as high as the Notre Dame de Paris. Moreover, the scale of mistake is not the only surprise of the passage. Scylax' reference to the 'middle part' of the Strait of Gibraltar reveals good knowledge of local topography. The channel is significantly larger at both eastern and western entrances than at the middle part, while its breadth in the middle part does not vary conspicuously. Scylax' mistake appears thus hardly comprehensible.

The paradox disappears as soon as one realizes that the original comparison involved the Cimmerian Bosphorus, the Strait of Kerch that fits the comparison well, and not the Thracian Bosphorus. The ancient authors typically specify which of the two *Bosporoi* they mean, yet not infrequently they assume that it is clear from the context. If the context is missing, no a priori conclusion is justified. It is the Cimmerian Bosphorus that is just Βόσπορος in the *Prometheus Bound* (729–735), in a fragment of Hellanicus (*FGrHist* 4 F 69) and probably in a fragment of Hecataeus,⁴ but it is the Thracian Bosphorus in Mandrocles' inscription commemorating his building the bridge for Darius (Hdt. 4. 88). Actually the triple division of the body of water between the Black Sea and Aegean Sea into the Bosphorus, the Propontis and the Hellespont is attested for the first time only in a geographical passage of Herodotus (4. 85), while the 'Hellespont' still includes the Propontis and even the areas of Byzantium and Chalcedon in historical passages of his work (4. 138; 144),⁵ and one may suspect that Mandrocles was the first to call the Thracian strait 'Bosphorus' in order to link the bridge that he built with a glorious name. To say the least, there is no a priori reason to assume that Scylax had in mind the Thracian Bosphorus rather than the Cimmerian.

It was apparently the words by Damastes in the same quotation from Avienus that made scholars look in the wrong direction. Damastes' estimate

⁴ *FGrHist* 1 F 196: ὁ μὲν οὖν Βόσπορος καὶ ὁ Πόντος οὕτω καὶ ὁ Ἑλλήσποντος κατὰ ταῦτά μοι μεμετρήαται. The words are so similar to those in Hdt. 4. 86 that Felix Jacoby thinks of a corruption in the source; for the contrary view see: O. Kimball Armayor, "Did Herodotus Ever Go to the Black Sea?", *HSCP* 82 (1978) 45–49.

⁵ Strab. 7, fr. 22 Radt knows authors who call 'Hellespont' the whole Propontis and even a part of the Aegean Sea. Felix Jacoby (ad *FGrHist* 1 F 139) admits that Hecataeus was one of them.

of the width of the strait at the Pillars immediately precedes Scylax' likening of that strait to the Bosphorus. Damastes' figure is seven stadia. Therefore, one naturally thinks of that of the two *Bosporoi* which fits with the figure just given. While the Strait of Kerch in no way fits, this very figure for the width of the Thracian Bosphorus is attested; it appears in that version of Scylax' periplus which was published in the time of Philip of Macedonia.⁶ Imagine now that the reference to Damastes is absent in the text by Avienus, and that we are left only with Scylax' comparison of the strait at the Pillars to the Bosphorus. In this case scholars would inevitably think of the larger of the two *Bosporoi*, the Strait of Kerch. That very figure which disoriented them, the seven stadia, provides a likely clue to what had happened. We are told that Damastes was both a plagiarizer (*FGrHist* 5 T 4) and a careless geographer (Strab. 1. 3. 1 = *FGrHist* 5 T 7 and F 8). It is not therefore surprising that Damastes tried to win credit for his own allegedly innovative report instead of modestly citing the authority of Scylax and that his trick resulted in confusion. On the basis of Scylax' equation, Damastes gave that figure for the breadth of the strait at the Pillars which, he knew, had been obtained for the breadth of the Bosphorus. He chose, however, the wrong Bosphorus.

The Strait of Kerch has rather complex configuration. It can be said to be constituted of two channels, northern and southern, and a part without a distinct shape in between. The southern channel is the longer and larger of the two, its breadth being about 15 km, which is roughly the breadth of the Strait of Gibraltar in its narrow or middle part. If Scylax compared the breadth of the Strait at Pillars with the breadth of the southern channel of the Strait of Kerch, he was quite correct. The difficulty remains that *pars pro toto* cannot work for the southern channel of the Strait of Kerch since it is not there where two seas join. At the same time, the northern channel is not wide enough (4–5 km) to be neatly compared with the Strait of Gibraltar (14–15 km). We have therefore to take a closer look at ancient ideas about the Cimmerian Bosphorus.

For advanced geography, it is τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος. This is not trivial since the strait is named after a minor and more remote sea. The term

⁶ A. Peretti (n. 1) has shown how strange are in fact ideas according to which the extant periplus is a forgery or a compilation. Along his lines, I assume that the preserved version of the periplus has nothing to do with the intention to deceive buyers or readers and that it is just, say, tenth up-to-date edition of the pilot of the sea from the Pillars to the Tanais, originally composed by Scylax. It still retains something of Scylax' work, but it is typically impossible to recover the original nucleus with certainty.

‘the mouth of the Maeotis’ was apparently established because of the current from the Sea of Azov; on an analogous reason, the Thracian Bosphorus was referred to as ‘the mouth of Pontos’ and the Hellespont as ‘the mouth of the Propontis’ – all three straits are named in the same way in the extant version of Scylax’ periplus (68; 70; 94). We are dealing, it seems, with an elaborate system affected by cosmographical debate – the southwards flow in all three straits⁷ was taken to prove the southwards slope of the earth (Aristot. *Meteor.* 354 a 28–32). Although the earth is high in the north already in Anaximenes, an older contemporary of Scylax, it is likely that the definition of the Bosphorus as τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος is later than Scylax’ work.

The other idea is certainly early, since it is attested in the *Prometheus Bound*. For Aeschylus and his source, ‘Bosphorus’ is a narrow body of water at which one crosses from Europe to Asia. It is not specifically τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος, and all passages that describe Panticapaeum as a Bosporan city and all names related to the Bosporan kingdom reflect a similar perception.

In his description of Europe, Strabo seems to harmonize two traditions. The Cimmerian Bosphorus for him is τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος, but he makes us realize that this is not to be understood in too narrow a sense (7. 4. 3); he further observes that the Cimmerian Bosphorus is significantly larger at the beginning, near Panticapaeum, where people cross to Asia (7. 4. 5). Thus the area near Panticapaeum is included in the definition of the Cimmerian Bosphorus.⁸ It is not easy to locate the place of crossing on such a vague account; besides the coastline on the Asian side has undergone significant changes, so that some ancient sites are now under water.⁹ In any case when Strabo asserts that the breadth of the Cimmerian Bosphorus is approximately 70 stadia, he explicitly refers to the area of crossing near Panticapaeum (7. 4. 5):

τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος καλεῖται μὲν Κιμμερικὸς Βόσπορος, ἄρχεται δὲ ἀπὸ μείζονος πλάτους ἑβδομήκοντά που σταδίων καθ’ ὃ δι-

⁷ The experts say that these upper currents are counter-balanced by deeper currents in the opposite direction.

⁸ Plin. *NH* 4. 87 locates Panticapaeum at the very beginning of Bosphorus (*in ipso Bospori introitu*). Panticapaeum does not belong to τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος in Ps.-Sc. 68, but it is characteristic that the term ‘Bosphorus’ does not appear in the context.

⁹ *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World. Map-by-Map Directory II*. Ed. by Richard J. A. Talbert (Princeton 2000) with further references.

αίρουσιν ἐκ τῶν περὶ Παντικάπαιον τόπων εἰς τὴν ἐγγυτάτω πόλιν τῆς Ἀσίας τὴν Φαναγόρειαν.

In his description of Asia, Strabo is more specific. He estimates the breadth of the straits as 70 stadia between Corocondame (at the end of the Cimmerian Bosphorus on the Asian side) and Acra, a village in the land of the Panticapaeans.¹⁰ It seems to follow from this and related data that the southern border of the strait was mentally drawn roughly along the line Corocondame – Panticapaeum, that is, along what is now *kosa Tuzla*, assuming that the location of Corocondame in the *Barrington Atlas* is correct. The distance between two shores here is roughly from 14,5 km to 15 km – both along the line I suggest and across what I call the southern channel in the east-west direction, which corresponds very well to the breadth of the Strait of Gibraltar in its ‘middle’, narrow part. We see that there was a definition of the Cimmerian Bosphorus in antiquity to justify the equation of its breadth to that of the strait at the Pillars. It is also significant that the 70 stadia is Strabo’s figure not only for the breadth of the Cimmerian Bosphorus (7. 4. 5; 11. 2. 8), but also for the breadth of the Strait at the Pillars at the narrowest (2. 5. 19). Both points strongly support my contention as to which of the *Bosporoi* Scylax had in mind.

The figure of 70 stadia for 14,2 km implies a stadion of c. 203 m, which makes one wonder whether one is dealing with the result of actual measurement of the Strait of Gibraltar or still with an application of Scylax’ formula. At all events, ancient accounts of the strait at the Pillars, on the one hand, and the Bosphorus (whichever is meant), on the other hand, display a number of interesting correspondences.

According to Avien. *Or. mar.* 355, Euctemon of Athens (who is probably identical with the prominent calendar-maker, and if so, is roughly contemporary with Damastes) maintained that the Pillars are 30 stadia apart, while Polybius gives the same figure for the breadth of the Cimmerian

¹⁰ Strab. 11. 2. 8: Πλησίον δὲ κόμη Πατραεὺς, ἀφ’ ἧς ἐπὶ κόμην Κοροκονδάμην ἑκατὸν τριάκοντα· αὕτη δ’ ἐστὶ τοῦ Κιμμερικοῦ καλουμένου Βοσπόρου πέρας. καλεῖται δὲ οὕτως ὁ στενωπὸς ἐπὶ τοῦ στόματος τῆς Μαιώτιδος ἀπὸ τῶν κατὰ τὸ Ἀχίλλειον καὶ τὸ Μυρμήκιον στενῶν διατεινῶν μέχρι πρὸς τὴν Κοροκονδάμην καὶ τὸ ἀντικείμενον αὐτῇ κωμίον τῆς Παντικαπαίων γῆς ὄνομα ἼΑκραν ἑβδομήκοντα σταδίων διειργόμενον πορθμῶ· μέχρι γὰρ δεῦρο καὶ ὁ κρῦσταλλος διατείνει, πηττομένης τῆς Μαιώτιδος κατὰ τοὺς κρυμοὺς ὥστε πεζεύεσθαι. ἅπας δ’ ἐστὶν εὐλίμενος ὁ στενωπὸς οὗτος.

Bosporus (4. 39. 3), which is quite a reasonable estimate if the northern channel is meant.

Further, several authors give the same length, 120 stadia, for both the strait at the Pillars (Strab. 2. 5. 19; Ps.-Scymn. 139; Plin. 3. 3: 15 miles) and the Thracian Bosporus (Hdt. 4. 85; Polyb. 4. 39; 43). Since 120 stadia for the Thracian Bosporus implies a giant foot of more than 40 cm,¹¹ one may consider the possibility that this figure was initially connected with the Cimmerian Bosporus.¹² Pliny (4. 87) gives its length as 12,5 miles, which on his regular equation means 100 stadia. It is tempting to combine Pliny's data with the 20 stadia of the distance between Panticapaeum and τὸ στόμα τῆς Μαιώτιδος in Ps.-Sc. 68 (20 stadia = 2,5 miles are also present in the Pliny's context, though as the distance from Panticapaeum to Cimmerium on the other side of the strait). Be that as it may, Pliny's explicit figure, 12,5 miles = 100 stadia finds exact correspondence with the length of the strait at the Pillars in the manuscripts of Strab. 17. 3. 6.¹³ Actually *inter columnas* in Avienus' formulation of Scylax' statement does not preclude the comparison of the length of two straits, since the identification of the Pillars with two opposite mountains, Calpe (Gibraltar) and Abila (spectacular Jebel Musa), was not the only ancient tradition; for instance, the Pillars are said to have been separated by one day's sail in the extant periplus that bears the name of Scylax (1).

There is also suspicion about one more figure. The breadth of the strait at the Pillars is 60 stadia in Polybius (16. 29. 9), Philostratus (*Vit. Apoll.* 5. 1) and another passage by Strabo (17. 3. 6). The same figure is attached to the Cimmerian Bosporus, though to its length, in Polybius (4. 39. 3), and also appears in relevant, though not unambiguous, passages of Arr. *Per. Pont. Eux.* 19. 1 and Anon. *Per. Pont. Eux.* 50. It is characteristic that when we finally encounter correct figures for the breadth of the straits at the Pillars, 80 stadia (Agathem. 20; Marcian. 1. 3) or 10 miles (Mela 1. 6), they have no parallels in reports on either the Thracian or Cimmerian Bosporus.

¹¹ The stadion of both Herodotus and Polybius was defined as equal to 600 feet (unlike the stadion of Eratosthenes, which was equal in all probability to 100 double paces).

¹² While the length of the Thracian Bosporus is about 30 km, the distance from the line Corocondame – Panticapaeum to the Asian edge of the Cimmerian Bosporus is about 25 km and less than 15 km to its European edge.

¹³ One manuscript gives, however, 120 stadia, which can easily be correction on the basis of Strab. 2. 5. 19 and related tradition.

Whatever particular cases, one may conclude that not only Damastes, but also many other Greek geographers based their judgments about the size of the strait at the Pillars on the comparison formulated by Scylax.¹⁴ Their interpretations of Scylax' formula were, however, different. This suggests that they were typically not aware of the original context. From where, then, did they get the formula? One inevitably thinks of Hecataeus, a key figure in early geographical tradition.¹⁵ It is commonly agreed, and for a good reason, that Hecataeus used Scylax' account of his Indian journey. It now seems to emerge that Hecataeus also used his periplus, for which there are other signs as well.¹⁶ In that case Scylax appears to be the originator of *ora maritima* genre (to use the title of Avienus' poem), the first author of a periplus of major scale. He is thus a half-predecessor, so to speak, of Hecataeus, the first author of the *Tour of the World*.

A few further suggestions seem appropriate. An account of an Indian journey could hardly fit with the style of a periplus, and so the periplus must be a different work. We have no reliable information concerning its title. The Suda (s. v. Σκύλαξ = *FGrHist* 709 F 1) gives meaningless Περίπλους τῶν Ἡρακλέους στηλῶν. Scholars proposed to supplement it with either ἐκτὸς, or ἐντὸς τῶν Ἡρακλέους στηλῶν, or with both. But early works in prose were sometimes named just after their opening words. One may suppose that the original title (in the specified sense) has been preserved in the opening words of the extant version of Scylax' periplus: ἀπὸ Ἡρακλείων στηλῶν. We are told that Scylax presented his work to Darius (*FGrHist* 709 F 4). One usually thinks of his Indian account. But the context of the testimony implies that this was his periplus, and we know from Herodotus that Darius was interested not only in obtaining information about the Indian Ocean, but in the description of the Mediterranean shores as well (3. 136). Scylax' ability to provide a comprehensible and trustworthy de-

¹⁴ The frequently assumed Carthaginian blockade of navigation in the westernmost Mediterranean may explain the lack of new knowledge about the strait at the Pillars over a long period of time.

¹⁵ For Damastes at least we have explicit testimony that he borrowed a lot from the work of Hecataeus: τὰ πλεῖστα ἐκ τῶν Ἑκαταίου μεταγράψας Περίπλουσιν ἔγραψεν (Agathem. 1. 1 = *FGrHist* 5 T 4).

¹⁶ Felix Jacoby, "Hekataios", in *RE* 7 (1912) 2731–2734 pointed to striking similarities in description of the Libyan coast by Herodotus and extant version of Scylax' periplus. He concluded that both depend on Hecataeus. But why might not both Hecataeus and Herodotus depend on Scylax (cf. Peretti [n. 1] 121)? Hecataeus displays a fuller knowledge of the Iberian peninsula than the periplus (Peretti [n. 1] 140); this may suggest a later date for Hecataeus' work relative to the original periplus by Scylax.

scription of the routes and shores could have been one of the reasons to entrust to him an important role in Indian and subsequent maritime expedition (cf. Hdt. 4. 44 = *FGrHist* 709 F 3). Accordingly, Scylax' periplus can be dated to c. 520 BC, after Darius' accession in 522 and before Scylax' departure for India in c. 518.

Even if the proposals of the preceding paragraph are, as I hope, plausible, they remain of course conjectural. Yet one important truth seems to emerge with almost complete certainty. An adequate comparison of the Strait of Gibraltar with the Strait of Kerch unambiguously points to an eyewitness account. If one does not resort to artificial assumptions (there was a certain captain whom Scylax trusted as he trusted himself), one concludes that Scylax was at both straits. In combination with his exploration of Indian Ocean, Scylax' sailing to both straits constitutes the records of the most widely travelled ancient mariner of whom we know the name.¹⁷

Dmitri Panchenko

*Bibliotheca Classica Petropolitana and
Smolny College*

По утверждению Скилака из Карианды, сохраненному в поэме Авиена, пролив у Геракловых Столбов столь же велик, как и Боспор. В статье доказывается, что Скилак при этом имел в виду Боспор Киммерийский, а не Боспор Фракийский, и что такое уподобление мог сформулировать лишь человек, побывавший в обоих проливах. Выясняется также, что целый ряд утверждений древних географов о размерах Гибралтарского пролива был основан не на новых измерениях, а на формуле Скилака, не всегда правильно понятой.

¹⁷ Bill Mullen has kindly checked my English.