

COMMENTARII BREVIORES

THE DARK-SKINNED AND WOOLLY-HAIRED KOLCHOI (HDT. 2. 104 F.)*

Herodotus suggests that the Kolchoi on the river Phasis were descendants of the Egyptians. He admits that the idea is not new, but claims that he conceived of it before he had heard it from others. His main argument for the relationship of the both peoples is the common practice of circumcision. He also refers to the fact that both the Kolchoi and the Egyptians are dark-skinned and woolly-haired (μελάγχροες καὶ οὐλότριχες).

To portray the Egyptians as Herodotus does is somewhat surprising,¹ but to find Negroid population on the Black Sea shores is really sensational. A good number of artificial explanations were proposed. I need not comment on them since the tendency of scholars to suppress the difficulties of Herodotus' statement was already emphasised² and since I offer a possibility that has been never considered. I suggest that Herodotus' fancies were inspired by a vague echo of Scylax' account.

There are many reasons to conclude that Scylax (sent by Darius I) sailed down the Ganges and circumnavigated India.³ Now both the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (59) and Ptolemy's *Geography* (7. 1. 10) know the Kolchoi as the inhabitants of southernmost India, somewhere near the Cape Comorin.⁴ These

* English translations of Greek authors quoted in this paper come from the *Loeb Classical Library*; minor modifications are not specified.

¹ Not only in terms of colour, "as the Egyptians themselves shaved wholly or in part" (How and Wells, *ad loc.*).

² Detlev Fehling, *Herodotus and His 'Sources': Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Leeds 1989) 17 f.

³ See my "Scylax' Circumnavigation of India and Its Interpretation in Early Greek Geography, Ethnography and Cosmography, I", *Hyperboreus* 4 (1998): 2, 211–242.

⁴ See further *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, text with introd., transl., and comm. by Lionel Casson (Princeton 1989) 226. Eratosthenes (*apud* Strab. 15. 1. 14) calls the inhabitants of the southernmost India the Koniakoi. The southernmost Indian country is called Kolias in Dionys. *Perieg.* 1148 (cf. Eustaph. *ad loc.*).

Kolchoi were, of course, dark-skinned and woolly-haired indeed, and they were confused with the Kolchoi of the Phasis region.

The essence of what happened, I assume, is clear. The details are the matter of conjecture. I cannot say whether the circumcision was practised in southern India, but it is not a rare practice in areas of excessive heat. If it was practised in southern India, the common habit found in two distant groups of dark-skinned people should have been taken as a proof of a natural suggestion that Indian and Libyan Ethiopians were historically related to each other. It is not, however, excluded that the practice of the circumcision was attributed to the Kolchoi by Herodotus who wished to contribute his own argument to the discussion; it is characteristic that he dismisses the similarity of colour and hair as insignificant.

Herodotus' suggestion appears in the context of his story of Sesostris. His "inquiry" allows him to establish the "fact" that the Kolchoi were originally a part of Sesostris' army. This helps us to understand how the Kolchoi were transferred from India to the Phasis. Sesostris began his world-wide conquest with an expedition by sea: "he set out with a fleet of long ships from the Arabian Gulf and subdued all the dwellers by the Erythrian Sea, till, as he sailed on, he came to a sea which was too shallow for his vessels" (2. 102). The naval expedition of Sesostris should have been thought of to have reached India since there was no impassable sea on Scylax' way from India to Egypt. India also appears in Diodorus' version of the story (1. 55. 2). It is also worth noting that, according to Herodotus, "Sesostris was the only Egyptian king who also ruled Ethiopia" (2. 110: cf. Strab. 17. 1. 5) and that, according to Diodorus, the conquest of Ethiopia preceded the naval expedition (1. 55. 1-2). A good part of Sesostris' army could then consist of the Ethiopians.

It is easy to infer now that the story of Sesostris was originally related to the presence of the dark-skinned and woolly-haired population in southern India. Such a relation was established either to explain the existence of two similar races in two distant parts of the world or to provide a basis for the story of Sesostris' world-wide advancement.

Scylax is the only likely source of the fifth-century knowledge of the Kolchoi in southern India, but Herodotus, who locates the dark-skinned and woolly-haired Kolchoi on the Phasis, is unlikely to have had the first-hand knowledge of Scylax' account. Who were, then, the intermediaries between Scylax and Herodotus?

The one, though less important, is self-suggesting. Pindar, *Pyth.* 4. 212 calls the Kolchoi *κελαινώπεις*. Pindar shows elsewhere an interest in the

geography of the edges of the oikumene (*Nem.* 3. 19–26).⁵ He might have heard about the Kolchoi in the extreme south-east. He places, however, “the swarthy Kolchoi” on the Phasis. It was not necessarily just a mistake. The Argonauts were commonly thought of to have sailed westwards, as far as the land of Aeëtes, the son of Helios, and already Mimnermus locates the city of Aeëtes Ὠκεανοῦ παρὰ χεῖλεσιν (fr. 10. 5–7 Gent.-Pr.; Strab. 1. 2. 40). That was why Scylax heard the local name as *Kolchoi*.⁶ One may easily envisage, therefore, a fifth-century man of learning arguing that the Argonauts reached the easternmost parts of the world and that their land of destination should be identified accordingly.

Herodotus cites Pindar once (3. 38). But it was not Pindar’s poetry from which the association between the Kolchoi and Sesostris’ army came.

Strabo 1. 3. 21 mentions “the migration of Egyptians to Ethiopia and Colchis”. The whole passage begins with a reference to Democritus (68 A 168 DK; fr. 744 Luria): “Writers also add the changes⁷ resulting from migrations of peoples, wishing to develop in us, to a still greater extent, that virtue of not marvelling at things (a virtue which is lauded by Democritus and all other philosophers)”. The passage ends with a reference to the effects caused by “the expeditions of the princes to lands far remote”; Strabo’s list includes “Madys the Scythian, Tearko the Ethiopian, Cobus the Treran, Sesostris and Psammetichus the Egyptians, and Persians from Cyrus to Xerxes”. Strabo’s source seems to follow an old Ionian tradition: Alexander is not mentioned and the unique details on the Cimmerian invasion of the Asia Minor are given at the end of the paragraph.⁸ One may assume that Democritus cited the emergence of the Kolchoi as a result of Sesostris’ expedition. He meant the Indian Kolchoi, but had no

⁵ See also Adolf Schulten, *Tartessos*. 2. Aufl. (Hamburg 1950) 97 f.

⁶ According to Casson’s commentary on the *Periplus Mar. Erythr.*, “the name appears in Tamil literature as Korkei (= Korkai)”.

⁷ That is, the changes relevant to geographical descriptions.

⁸ The reference to the principle of not marvelling at things picks up Strabo’s remark a little earlier, 1. 3. 16. The text that immediately precedes the remark is worth quoting. Strabo criticises the view of Hipparchus according to which the Ister flows in both the Pontus and the Adriatic; he specifies: “this mistake of Hipparchus is shared with him by some of his predecessors, who supposed that there was a river of the same name as the Ister, which branched off from it and emptied into the Adriatic, and that the tribe of Istrians, through whose territory this Ister flows, got their appellation from it, and that it was by this route that Jason made his return voyage from the land of the Kolchoi” (1. 3. 15). The person who lived after Hipparchus, who knew well old scholarly traditions and who, being a Stoic philosopher, approved the virtue of not marvelling at things was, of course, Posidonius.

reason to specify this. Herodotus, having heard nothing about the Kolchoi in India, took it as a reference to the Kolchoi of the Phasis region.

One more famous remark in Herodotus belongs to the context of Sesostris' story. I mean Herodotus' assertion about Egyptian origin of geometry and Babylonian origin of astronomical instruments used by the Greeks (2. 109). The Father of History never studied geometry⁹ and there is nothing in his work to show his competence in astronomy. Therefore his remark was not due to his own inquiry, but it came ready-made from a Greek source. Democritus, who was competent in both geometry and astronomy and who spent many years travelling over the East, is an obvious candidate.¹⁰ It is remarkable that one finds in both Democritus (68 B 115 a; fr. 156 Luria) and Herodotus (1. 170) the assertions about Phoenician origin of Thales, the founder of Greek science.

Another famous remark of Herodotus is worth recalling: "I laugh to see how many have ere now drawn maps of the world, not one of them showing the matter reasonably; for they draw the world as round as if fashioned by compasses, encircled by the river of Ocean, and Asia and Europe of equal size".¹¹ Aristotle criticises the maps he knows in similar words. They make him "laugh" too.¹² It is highly unlikely that Aristotle could follow Herodotus in scientific matters.¹³ Now according to Agathemerus (1. 1. 2; Democr. fr. 407 Luria; 68 B 15 DK), "the ancients draw the oikumene as being round... Democritus was the first to recognise that the oikumene is elongated and that its length is half as much against its breadth". One may infer that Democritus was the first to criticise round maps of the oikumene. The context of Agathemerus also implies that Democritus' work marked an important stage in the history of Greek geography. It was probably the recognition of the size of India that made Democritus stretch the oikumene.¹⁴ In that case,

⁹ Hdt., 1. 93 implies a ratio between the circumference and diameter of a circle less than three, and in 2. 124 Herodotus fails to repeat the achievement of Thales in measuring the height of a pyramid.

¹⁰ Not so for numerous *Commentaries* on Herodotus. Surprisingly, the idea seems to have never occurred to Salomo Luria who edited the fragments of Democritus and who published books on Herodotus as well as early Greek science.

¹¹ Hdt. 4. 36: Γελῶ δὲ ὀρέων γῆς περιόδους γράψαντας πολλοὺς ἦδη καὶ οὐδένα νόον ἔχόντως ἐξηγησάμενον, οἳ Ὠκεανόν τε ῥέοντα γράφουσι πέριξ τὴν γῆν, εὐῶσαν κυκλωτέρα ὡς ἀπὸ τόρνου, καὶ τὴν Ἀσίην τῇ Εὐρώπῃ ποιεῖνται ἴσην.

¹² *Meteor.* 362 b 12: διὸ καὶ γελοίως γράφουσι νῦν τὰς περιόδους τῆς γῆς· γράφουσι γὰρ κυκλωτερῇ τὴν οἰκουμένην. Cf. Gemin. *Isag.* 16. 4.

¹³ Aristot. *Gen. an.* 756 b 5 calls Herodotus "the fable-teller" (μυθολόγος).

¹⁴ See *Hyperboreus* 4 (1998): 2, 236 f.

Asia and Europe could not be of equal size according to Democritus, which further points to the relationship between Democritus' views and Herodotus' critical remark.

Thus we may formulate a series of likely conclusions:

Scylax observed the striking similarity of Indian and Libyan dark-skinned and woolly-haired peoples. The author of Sesostris novel used this similarity to show the advancement of Sesostris' army. Democritus cited the alleged fact that the Kolchoi were descendants of Egyptian army in order to illustrate the changes on the world map in the course of time. Herodotus took his reference as pointing to the Kolchoi of the Phasis region. Herodotus' criticism of traditional maps also depends on Democritus.

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Bibliotheca Classica Petropolitana

Геродот говорит о темнокожих и курчавоволосых колхах, обитающих у реки Фасис. Он считает их потомками египетской армии фараона Сесостриса. За парадоксальным утверждением Геродота не следует искать какой-либо этно-исторической реальности. Греческие авторы знают также других колхов – обитателей наиболее южных областей Индии, действительно темнокожих и курчавоволосых. Этим колхов, судя по всему, открыл Скилак. Писатель, сконструировавший историю завоевательных походов Сесостриса, объявил их потомками армии фараона, состоявшей из египтян и эфиопов. Другой автор, которым скорее всего был Демокрит, мельком упомянул происхождение колхов от египетской армии. Геродот же, будучи знаком с рассказом Скилака только из вторых рук и ничего не зная об индийских колхах, заключил, что речь идет об обитателях Колхиды.