

ONCE AGAIN “THE SCYTHIAN” MYTH OF ORIGINS (HERODOTUS 4.5–10)

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I

In the Coen brothers’ 2013 film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the title character offers a definition of the music he loves and plays: “If it never was new and it never gets old, then it’s folk.” One could make similar claims regarding myth, another genre that admits no originals, no singular masterworks produced by a solitary genius, no authentic or definitive versions, just recirculation through countless anonymous iterations. Like folk songs, myths represent themselves as eternal wisdom and the very voice of a people.

Such views, which derive from Herder’s theories of the *Volk* and German romanticism more broadly, remain as attractive as they are misleading. Most importantly, while mythic narrators may remain nameless, this does not make their products authorless, trans-temporal, or collective. Rather, it occludes the author’s identity, agency, position within the social whole, and situation of interest, as well as the ritual (or other) context in which a given variant was performed, all of which makes it easy to misperceive that variant as “the myth,” its narrator as “the people,” and the specific interests that narrator advanced through that performance on that occasion as “the people’s abiding values.”

Accordingly, critical scholarship on myth begins by declining the seductions of romanticism, insisting on the particularities of each variant, seeking to identify as best as possible the unnamed narrators, and attempting to understand the way the details of a given variant not only correlate with, but actively advance the interests of the narrator and that fraction of society s/he represents.

II

Herodotus provides us with a convenient example of how such inquiry might proceed – and what it can offer – In his summary of the Scythian myth of creation, which he presents in two variants. One of these has received considerable scholarly attention over many decades,¹ while the other has more recently become an object of interest.² The important task, however, is to consider them in relation to each other, exploring their commonalities, differences, and the implications of the latter. The first text reads as follows.

The Scythians say they are the youngest of all peoples and this is how it came to be so. A first man was born in this country, which was (previously) uninhabited. His name was Targitaos. The parents of this Targitaos, they say – saying things that aren’t credible to me – were Zeus and the daughter of the river Borysthenes. This was the lineage from

¹ Important discussions include Christensen 1918–34, vol. 1: 137–43; Benveniste 1938; Brandenstein 1953–55; Dumézil 1962 and 1978, 169–203; Cornillot 1981; Ivantchik 1999; Loma 2011; Barbara 2011.

² Ivantchik 2001; Visintin 1997 and 2000; Ustinova 2005. Other variants of the myth are found in Valerius Flaccus 6.48–59, Diodorus Siculus 2.43, and the Tabula Albana (IG XIV 1293 A 93–96).

which Targitaos was born and of him were born three sons: Lipoxais, Arpoxais, and Kolaxais, the youngest. In the time of their reign, golden products fell from the sky: a plow and also a yoke, a battle ax, and a *phialē* fell to Scythia. Seeing these first, the oldest went close, planning to take them, but as he approached, the gold burst into flame. When he had departed, the second son approached the gold, and it flared up again. And when the flaming gold had repelled them, the fire was extinguished at the approach of the third and youngest son, and he carried it off as his own. The older brothers then accepted that the whole kingship be handed over to the youngest. From Lipoxais was born the tribe of those Scythians who call themselves Auchatai, from Arpoxais, the middle brother, were born those who call themselves Katiaroi and Traspies, and from the youngest, who was king of them, those who call themselves Paralatai. The name of them all together is Skolotai, taken eponymously from the king. The Greeks call them Skythai.³

Although Herodotus recounts the story in Greek, most of its characters bear Scythian names with good Iranian etymologies. This includes the first man Targitaos (< Old Iranian **darga-tavah-*, “he whose strength is long-lasting”),⁴ the river deity Borysthenes (< Old Iranian **uaru-stānā-*, “wide-standing”),⁵ and the three brothers Lipoxais, Arpoxais, and Kolaxais, whose names all end in the element *-xais* (< Old Iranian **xšaija*, “ruling”).⁶ Finally, there is

³ Herodotus 4.5-6 (ed. Medaglia): Ὡς δὲ Σκύθαι λέγουσι, νεώτατον πάντων ἐθνῶν εἶναι τὸ σφέτερον, τοῦτο δὲ γενέσθαι ὧδε. ἄνδρα γενέσθαι πρῶτον ἐν τῇ γῇ ταύτῃ ἐούσῃ ἐρήμῳ τῷ οὐνομα εἶναι Ταργιτάον· τοῦ δὲ Ταργιτάου τούτου τοὺς τοκέας λέγουσι εἶναι, ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιστὰ λέγοντες, λέγουσι δ' ὧν, Δία τε καὶ Βορυσθέneos τοῦ ποταμοῦ θυγατέρα. γένεος μὲν τοιούτου δὴ τινος γενέσθαι τὸν Ταργιτάον, τούτου δὲ γενέσθαι παῖδας τρεῖς, Λιπόξαιν καὶ Ἀρπόξαιν καὶ νεώτατον Κολάξαιν. ἐπὶ τούτων ἀρχόντων ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ φερόμενα χρύσεα ποιήματα, ἄροτρον τε καὶ ζυγὸν καὶ σάγαριν καὶ φιάλην, πεσεῖν ἐς τὴν Σκυθικὴν, καὶ τὸν ἰδόντα πρῶτον τὸν πρεσβύτατον ἄσπον ἰέναι βουλόμενον αὐτὰ λαβεῖν, τὸν δὲ χρυσὸν ἐπιόντος καίεσθαι. ἀπαλλαχθέντος δὲ τούτου, προσιέναι τὸν δεύτερον, καὶ τὸν αὖτις ταῦτα ποιέειν. τοὺς μὲν δὴ καιόμενον τὸν χρυσὸν ἀπώσασθαι, τρίτῳ δὲ τῷ νεωτάτῳ ἐπελθόντι καταστῆναι, καὶ μιν ἐκείνον κομίσαι ἐς ἑωυτοῦ· καὶ τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους ἀδελφεοὺς πρὸς ταῦτα συγγνόντας τὴν βασιλείην πᾶσαν παραδοῦναι τῷ νεωτάτῳ. Ἀπὸ μὲν δὴ Λιποξάιος γεγενῆσθαι τοὺς τῶν Σκυθέων, οἱ Αὐχάται γένος καλέονται, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ μέσου Ἀρποξάιος οἱ Κατίαιοί τε καὶ Τράσπεις καλέονται, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ νεωτάτατου αὐτῶν τοῦ βασιλέως, οἱ καλέονται Παραλάται· σύμπασι δὲ εἶναι οὐνομα Σκολότους, τευ βασιλέως ἐπωνυμίην, Σκύθας δὲ Ἑλλήνες ὠνόμασαν. All translations in this article, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

⁴ Mayrhofer 2006, 17, following Schmitt 2003, 24 and n. 91. See also Humbach and Faiss 2012, 1–2.

⁵ Mayrhofer 2006, 11, following Thordarsson 1986, 502. *Pace* their reconstruction, the original gender of the name would have been feminine, as recognized by Humbach and Faiss 2012, 2. Greek authors treated it as masculine, however, associating the second element of the compound with Greek *sthenos* “bodily strength,” as in familiar names like *Demo-sthenēs*.

⁶ Mayrhofer 2006, 10-11; Schmitt 2003, 2; Humbach and Faiss 2012, 2. Cf. Old Persian *xšāyaθiya*, “king,” Avestan *xšāyant-* “ruling” (singular nominative *xšāyqs*). Numerous authors have attempted to establish etymologies for the names of the three brothers that would permit them to be understood as a coherent set, but there is little agreement on the details, as shown in the table below (continued on the next page).

	Lipo-xais	Arpo-xais	Kola-xais
Christensen 1918		King of the <i>Rpa</i>	“King of the <i>Skolotai</i> ”
Brandenstein 1953	“He who leads the <i>seniores</i> ”	“He who leads the middle age-class”	“He who leads the <i>juniores</i> ”
Dumézil 1978	“Chief of the young men belonging to a <i>Männerbund</i> ”	“Chief of (agricultural) work”	“Chief of the lineage”
Cornillot 1981	“He who bears the ax”	“He who bears the yoke”	“He who bears the crown (<i>skuḍa</i>)”

the name of the royal line (or tribe) founded by Kolaxais: Paralatai (< Old Iranian **para-dhāta*, “first-established” or “set in front”).⁷

The narrative itself unfolds in three episodes, each of which involves cosmological constructs well attested in Iranian cosmogonies. The first involves the sexual union of Zeus and a daughter of the Borysthenes, elsewhere given the Scythian name Api (“the watery”).⁸ Like the originary coupling of Ahura Mazdā (= sky) and Armaiti (= earth) in Zoroastrian myth,⁹ this is a conjunction of opposite principles – above and below, male and female, warm and moist – that produced the first human. In the second act of the drama, the unity embodied in Targitaos is subjected to fragmentation along multiple lines, including kinship (his three sons), class (the fiery golden objects, each associated with a different occupation and social stratum), ethnicity and territory (the four *genoi* that descend from his sons).¹⁰ The story then reaches closure by establishing kingship as the solution to the problem of fragmentation, insofar as the king encompasses and reintegrates all elements of the primordial whole. Thus, Kolaxais gains possession of all four golden objects, which constitute “the whole kingship” (*tēn basilēiēn pasan*), his elder brothers having been proven less worthy by the ordeal of the fiery gold.¹¹ Accordingly, the *genoi* these brothers were established in subordinate positions, as servants (*douloi*) of the line of kings descended from Kolaxais.¹² For their part, subsequent kings maintained the gold objects as the sign – and legitimating source – of their power and status, which they ritually renewed each year.¹³

The fact that the story of creation culminates in the establishment of kingship reveals the identity of those who were the narrative’s prime beneficiaries and the likeliest agents responsible for its production, reproduction, and circulation, just as the cosmogonic account produced by the Achaemenian scribes climaxes in the Wise Lord’s elevation of Darius (or one of his successors) to the Persian imperial throne.¹⁴ Given this, Herodotus is incorrect to describe this as the story “the Scythians tell regarding themselves.”¹⁵ More precisely, it is the

Ivantchik 1999	“King of the (mythic) mountain”	“King of the (watery) abyss”	“Sun King” or “Heavenly King”
Loma 2011	“Ruler of the peninsula”	“Small king”	“Ruler over all, i.e. Great king”

⁷ Mayrhofer 2006, 15; Humbach and Faiss 2012, 3. Cf. Younger Avestan *Para-dāta*, the standard epithet of the primordial king Haošyaŋha, also attested in the Elamite of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets as *Pa-ra-da-da* and *Par-da-ad-da*.

⁸ Herodotus 4.59. On the name (cognate to Avestan *āp-* “water”), see Mayrhofer 2012, 9; Humbach and Faiss 2012, 9.

⁹ Regarding the Zoroastrian comparandum, see Skjærvø 2002. Although Armaiti was identified with earth, this also included the terrestrial waters. Scythian Api seems to have the same associations, as evidenced by the fact that Herodotus identified her with *Gē* (4.59).

¹⁰ See further Lincoln 2012*b*. Molé 1952 is also relevant.

¹¹ Ordeals by fire are attested in the earliest Avestan texts, as is the association of fire with the cardinal virtue of truth, as at Yasna 31.19, 32.7 and 51.9. The heavenly gold of the Scythian myth ought is also comparable to Avestan *x^{ra}arənah* (a term with Old Persian, Median, and Scythian cognates), the radiant nimbus that identifies and bestows good fortune on legitimate kings, on which see Gnoli 1983– vol. 9, 312–319 and the large literature cited therein.

¹² Regarding the relation of Scythian kings to their non-royal countrymen, Herodotus reports the following (4.20): “Across the Gerrhos are the ones called royal, the best and most numerous of the Scythians, who consider all other Scythians to be their slaves.” *πέρην δὲ τοῦ Γέρρου ταῦτα δὴ τὰ καλεῖμενα βασιλῆιά ἐστι καὶ Σκύθαι οἱ ἄριστοι τε καὶ πλείστοι καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους νομίζοντες Σκύθας δούλους σφετέρους εἶναι.*

¹³ Kolaxais’s possession of “the whole kingship” is specified at Herodotus 4.5, his founding of the royal lineage at 4.6, and the kings continued possession of the gold at 4.7: *τὸν δὲ χρυσὸν τοῦτον τὸν ἱρὸν φυλάσσουσι οἱ βασιλεῖς ἐς τὰ μάλιστα, καὶ θυσίῃσι μεγάλῃσι ἱλασκόμενοι μετέρχονται ἀνὰ πᾶν ἔτος.*

¹⁴ Most extensively on the Achaemenian cosmogony, see Herrenschildt 1977 and Lincoln 2012*a*.

¹⁵ Herodotus 4.8: *Σκύθαι μὲν ὧδε ὑπὲρ σφέων τε αὐτῶν ... λέγουσι.*

story Scythian kings and their apologists liked to tell to their countrymen, as it established the divine origins of kingship and the right of Kolaxais’s descendants to rule. Presumably, the story was attractive to non-royal Scythians for the way it legitimized and stabilized their central political institution and an intriguing detail also contributed to its appeal. Thus, in thematizing the superiority of the youngest (*neōtaton*) brother, the myth imputed similar preeminence to the Scythians, who regarded themselves as “youngest of all peoples” (*neōtaton pantōn ethneōn*) and thus, by implication, superior to Greeks and others.¹⁶

This claim of preeminence was countered by a minor revision to the story effected, in all probability, by Greek colonists on the Black Sea, who had close relations with Scythians and served as Herodotus’s informants.¹⁷ This is the name given the god at the head of the mythic genealogy, whom the Scythians knew as Papaïos (“Daddy”),¹⁸ but who bears the name “Zeus” in the Herodotean text (Figure One). Although this might represent nothing more than the normal workings of *interpretatio Graeca*, the revision invited Herodotus’s readers to view the Scythians as patrilineal descendants of the Greek god and thus half-Greek in their origins.¹⁹

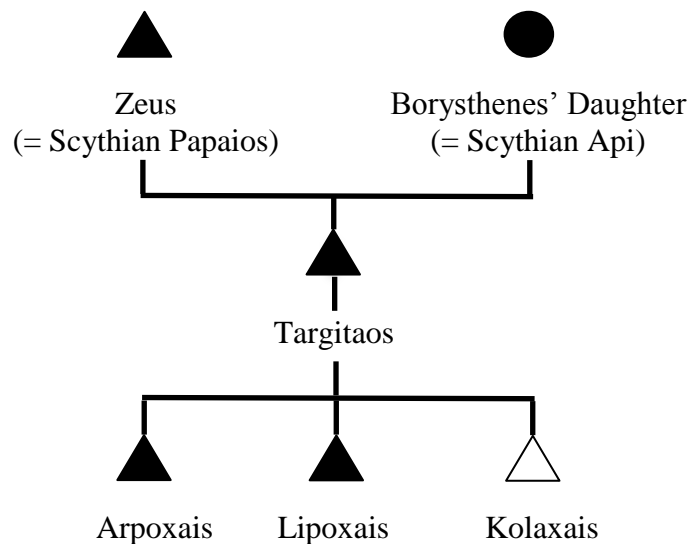


Figure One: Mythic genealogy presented in the first version of the Scythian origin myth (Herodotus 4.5–6). The white triangle indicates the son who won the four heavenly objects constitutive of kingship.

¹⁶ Herodotus 4.5: Ὡς δὲ Σκύθαι λέγουσι νεώτατον πάντων ἐθνέων εἶναι τὸ σφέτερον.

¹⁷ The sole informant Herodotus cites by name is Tymnes, the deputy, steward, or viceroy (*epitropos*) of the Scythian King Ariapeithes (4.76; further on Ariapeithes, 4.78). Debate continues about whether Herodotus visited the Black Sea, as he claims, but most who find this credible acknowledge it is unlikely he got far beyond Olbia, although a trip to Exampaios is mentioned at 4.52 and 81. The most skeptical view remains Armayor 1978. More sympathetic and nuanced is the discussion of Stephanie West 2000; 2004; 2007. On Greek-Scythian relations in the region, see the essays brought together in Braund and Kryzhitskiy (eds.) 2007 and in Braund (ed.) 2005.

¹⁸ Herodotus 4.59: Ζεὺς δὲ ὀρθότατα κατὰ γνώμην γε τὴν ἐμὴν καλεόμενος Παπαῖος. For the etymology of this *Lallwort*, see Mayrhofer 2006, 15; Humbach and Faiss 2012, 6. Note that Ahura Mazdā is also designated the divine father in Zoroastrian mythology, as at Yasna 31.8, 44.3, 45.4, and 47.2.

¹⁹ The point is emphatically restated in a speech put in the mouth of the Scythian king. Responding proudly to Darius’s call that he submit, Idanthysos is reported to have said “I acknowledge only Zeus, *my ancestor*, and Hestia, Queen of the Scythians, as my masters.” Herodotus 4.127 (emphasis added): δεσπότης δὲ ἐμοὺς ἐγὼ Δία τε νομίζω τὸν ἐμὸν πρόγονον καὶ Ἰστίην τὴν Σκυθέων βασιλείαν μούνους εἶναι.

III

The second version involves a much more thorough reworking of Scythian materials by the Olbian Greeks to better advance their interests.²⁰ Here, the union of heaven and earth disappears, as does the primordial unity represented by Targitaos. When the story begins, humanity has already come into existence, as have divisions of gender, geography, status and ethnicity.

Driving the cattle of Geryon, Herakles arrived at this land, which was desolate, but which the Scythians now inhabit... Having arrived there, he pulled the lion-skin over himself to fall fast asleep, for he was overtaken by winter and frost. At this time, his horses, which had been grazing under the chariot, disappeared by divine fortune. When Herakles awoke, he searched for the horses, roaming over all of the country. Finally, he arrived at the land called Hylaia and in a cave there, he found a certain half-maiden, a biform viper who was a woman above her buttocks and a serpent below. Seeing and marveling at her, he asked if she had seen his horses wandering about. She said that she had them herself and would not give them up to him until she had slept with him. Herakles slept with her for this reward. She delayed restitution of the horses, planning thus to be together with Herakles for a long time, since he would wish to depart once he obtained them.

At last, having given them back, she said: "These horses came here and I kept them for you, and you have furnished me with a reward, for I have three sons from you. Tell me what is right to do with them when they have grown big. Should I settle them here (for I myself hold power over this country) or should I send them to you?" They say he responded this: "When you see the boys grown to men, if you do these things, you will not err. Whichever one of them you see stringing this bow and girding himself in this way with this belt (*zōstrē*), make that one the inhabitant of this land. Whoever of them leaves these things that I command undone, send him away from this land. Having done these things, you will make yourself happy and you will accomplish the things I ordered." Then, having drawn one of his bows (for until then, Herakles carried two), he presented to her that bow and a belt that had a gold *phialē* at the top of its clasp, and having given them, he departed.

And when the sons born to her had grown to be men, she assigned names to them: Agathysos to the first of them, Gelonos to the next one, and Skythes to the youngest. And remembering Herakles's instructions, she did the things he had ordered. Two of her children, Agathysos and Gelonos, not having become capable of the task set before them, were cast out by their mother to dwell apart from their country. Having accomplished it, Skythes, the youngest of them, settled down in the country. This alone his mother contrived for Skythes. These things are told by the Greeks dwelling in Pontus.²¹

²⁰ Herodotus begins and ends his presentation of the second variant by attributing it to "the Greeks dwelling on the Black Sea" (4.10: ταῦτα δὲ Ἑλλήνων οἱ τὸν Πόντον οἰκέοντες λέγουσι; cf. 4.8).

²¹ Herodotus 4.8-10: Ἡρακλέα ἐλαύνοντα τὰς «Γηρυόναο βοάς» ἀπικέσθαι ἐς γῆν ταύτην ἐοῦσαν ἐρήμην, ἦντινα νῦν Σκύθαι νέμονται ... ἐνθεῦτεν τὸν Ἡρακλέα ὡς ἀπικέσθαι ἐς τὴν νῦν Σκυθικὴν χώραν καλεομένην (καταλαβεῖν γὰρ αὐτὸν χειμῶνα τε καὶ κρυμόν), ἐπειρυσάμενον τὴν λεοντὴν κατυπνῶσαι, τὰς δὲ οἱ ἵππους τὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ ἄρματος νεμομένας ἐν τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ ἀφανισθῆναι θείῃ τύχῃ. ὥς δὲ ἐγερθῆναι τὸν Ἡρακλέα, διζῆσθαι, πάντα δὲ τῆς χώρας ἐπεξελθόντα τέλος ἀπικέσθαι ἐς τὴν Ὑλαίην καλεομένην γῆν· ἐνθαῦτα δὲ αὐτὸν

Set in Hylaia (“Woodland”),²² the story begins with two people who have markedly different relations to that territory: Herakles, a Greek who enters from outside, and a woman identified as an autochthon by the serpentine lower members that connect her to the soil and her dwelling inside the earth.²³ An ambiguous creature (*mixoparthenon... ekhidnan diphuea*), simultaneously human and bestial, high-ranking and base, monstrous and seductive, she is the model of the Scythian “native.” Initially, her situation is characterized by isolation, deprivation, and lack. Although she rules over the land, her realm is empty (*gēn... herēmēn*), wintry, without other inhabitants, assets, or marks of civilization. The arrival of Herakles changes things, however. As a “stranger-king” of the sort described by Marshall Sahlins, he embodies the power of alterity and the radical alterity of power.²⁴ Union with him provides the means to transform the pre-civilized status of Scythia into something more like the world of the Greeks to introduce the potent, but morally ambiguous institution of kingship. To accomplish that end, the serpent-woman makes use of her thievish and feminine wiles, stealing Herakles’s horses and refusing to return them until the hero shares her bed.

As a result, she bears three sons and before the hero departs, she seeks to define her children’s identity. “Tell me what is right to do with them when they have grown big?” she asks, “Should I settle them here or send them to you?”²⁵ Which is to say: Are they mine or yours? Scythian or Greek? By way of answer, Herakles gave her three novel instruments of culture – a bow, a belt, and a *phialē* – and told her to use them as a test. When the boys reached adulthood, he explained, the one able to string this bow and to gird himself with the

εὐρεῖν ἐν ἄντρῳ μιζοπάρθενον τινά ἐχιδναν διφυέα, τῆς τὰ μὲν ἄνω ἀπὸ τῶν γλουτῶν εἶναι γυναικός, τὰ δὲ ἔνερθε ὄφιός. ἰδόντα δὲ καὶ θουμάσαντα ἐπειρῆσθαι μιν, εἴ κου ἴδοι ἵππους πλανωμένας· τὴν δὲ φάναι ἐωυτὴν ἔχειν καὶ οὐκ ἀποδώσειν ἐκείνῳ πρὶν οἱ μιχθῆναι, τὸν δὲ Ἡρακλέα μιχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ μισθῷ τούτῳ. κείνην τε δὴ ὑπερβάλλεσθαι τὴν ἀπόδοσιν τῶν ἵππων, βουλομένην ὥς πλεῖστον χρόνον συνεῖναι τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ, καὶ τὸν κομισάμενον ἐθέλειν ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι· τέλος δὲ ἀποδιδούσαν αὐτὴν εἰπεῖν· «ἵππους μὲν δὴ ταῦτας ἀπικομένας ἐνθάδε ἔσωσά τοι ἐγώ, σῶστρο δὲ σὺ παρέσχε· ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκ σεῦ παῖδας τρεῖς ἔχω. τοὺτους, ἐπεὶ γένωνται τρόφεις, ὅ τι χρὴ ποιέειν, ἐξηγέο σύ, εἴτε αὐτοῦ κατοικίζω (χώρης γὰρ τῆσδε ἔχω τὸ κράτος αὐτῇ) εἴτε ἀποπέμπω παρά σέ». τὴν μὲν δὴ ταῦτα ἐπειρωτᾶν, τὸν δὲ λέγουσι πρὸς ταῦτα εἰπεῖν· «ἐπεὶ ἀνδρωθέντας ἰδὼι τοὺς παῖδας, τάδε ποιέῃσα οὐκ ἂν ἀμαρτάνοις· τὸν μὲν ἂν ὀρᾷς αὐτῶν τόδε τὸ τόξον ὃδε διατεινόμενον καὶ τῷ ζωστήρι τῷδε κατὰ τάδε ζωννύμενον, τοῦτον μὲν τῆσδε τῆς χώρης οἰκήτορα ποιεῦ· ὅς δ’ ἂν τουτέων τῶν ἔργων, τῶν ἐντέλλομαι, λείπηται, ἔκπεμπε ἐκ τῆς χώρης. καὶ ταῦτα ποιέῃσα αὐτὴ τε εὐφρανέαι καὶ τὰ ἐντεταλμένα ποιήσεις». τὸν μὲν δὴ εἰρύσαντα τῶν τόξων τὸ ἕτερον (δύο γὰρ δὴ φορέειν τέως Ἡρακλέα) καὶ τὸν ζωστήρα προδείξαντα παραδοῦναι τὸ τόξον τε καὶ τὸν ζωστήρα ἔχοντα ἐπ’ ἄκρης τῆς συμβολῆς φιάλην χρυσέην, δόντα δὲ ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι, τὴν δὲ, ἐπεὶ οἱ γενομένους τοὺς παῖδας ἀνδρωθῆναι, τοῦτο μὲν σφι οὐνόματα θέσθαι, τῷ μὲν Ἀγάθυρσον αὐτῶν, τῷ δὲ ἐπομένῳ Γελωνόν, Σκύθην δὲ τῷ νεωτάτῳ, τοῦτο δὲ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς μεμνημένην αὐτὴν ποιῆσαι τὰ ἐντεταλμένα. καὶ δὴ δύο μὲν οἱ τῶν παίδων, τὸν τε Ἀγάθυρσον καὶ τὸν Γελωνόν, οὐκ οἴους τε γενομένους ἐξικέσθαι πρὸς τὸν προκείμενον ἄεθλον οἶχεσθαι ἐκ τῆς χώρης ἐκβληθέντας ὑπὸ τῆς γειναμένης, τὸν δὲ νεώτατον αὐτῶν Σκύθην ἐπιτελέσαντα καταμεῖναι ἐν τῇ χωρῇ. καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν Σκύθῃ τοῦ Ἡρακλέος γενέσθαι τοὺς αἰεὶ βασιλέας γινομένους Σκυθῶν, ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς φιάλης ἐτι καὶ ἐς τότε φιάλας ἐκ τῶν ζωστήρων φορέειν Σκύθας· τὸ δὴ μούνον μηχανήσασθαι τὴν μητέρα Σκύθη. ταῦτα δὲ Ἑλλήνων οἱ τὸν Πόντον οἰκέοντες λέγουσι.

²² While discussing Scythian resistance to foreign customs (4.76), Herodotus treats Hylaia as a territory geographically internal to Scythia, but exposed to the risk of Greek influence. Thus, when Anacharsis was making his way through the Hellespont, he stopped at the Greek city of Cyzicus, where he promised the Mother of the Gods that if she granted him a safe return to Scythia, he would establish her worship there. Upon entering Hylaia, he began performing her rites, hidden in the forest. There, however, he was observed by the native Scythian residents and subsequently slain by their king.

²³ As discussed by Visintin 1997 and 2000 and Ustinova 2005.

²⁴ Sahlins 1985, 73–103; 2008; 2011. Greek authors commonly cast Herakles in this role, thereby redefining other peoples as subordinate and somewhat lesser versions of themselves, a move first recognized by Elias J. Bickerman 1952.

²⁵ Herodotus 4.9: τούτους, ἐπεὶ γένωνται τρόφεις, ὅ τι χρὴ ποιέειν, ἐξηγέο σύ, εἴτε αὐτοῦ κατοικίζω (χώρης γὰρ τῆσδε ἔχω τὸ κράτος αὐτῇ) εἴτε ἀποπέμπω παρά σέ.

belt should remain in place and assume royal power (4.9).²⁶ Note, however, that the Greek visitor claimed none of these youths as his own. The ablest – i.e. the one most Heraklean in his physical and cultural capacities – was to inherit Scythia. His less able brothers – i.e. those who received a lesser portion of their father’s gifts – were to be sent, not to their father, but in the opposite direction. Thus, the first-born son, Agathyrsos emigrated to the northwest and founded the people known as Agathyrsoi, whom Herodotus elsewhere describes as living a dissolute, unmanly existence.²⁷ Similarly, Gelonos moved to the northeast, where his people lead a sedentary, non-heroic and non-nomadic life, working the soil, tending gardens, eating bread, and speaking a language half Greek and half Scythian.²⁸

Bringing Herakles into the story thus serves to construe the serpent-woman’s offspring as Greek in their descent, but only partially so. That Skythes was more Greek than his brothers is suggested in four different ways. First, it was the physical excellence he inherited from his father that let him win the kingship. Second, he obtained implements of Greek culture (bow, belt, *phialē*) that his brothers were denied. Third, as an adult he dwelt closer to the Greeks, while his brothers were exiled far to the north. Finally, he established a more virile cultural style for his people than did his brothers, whose mores would strike a Greek audience as deriving from their Asian mother (Figure Two).

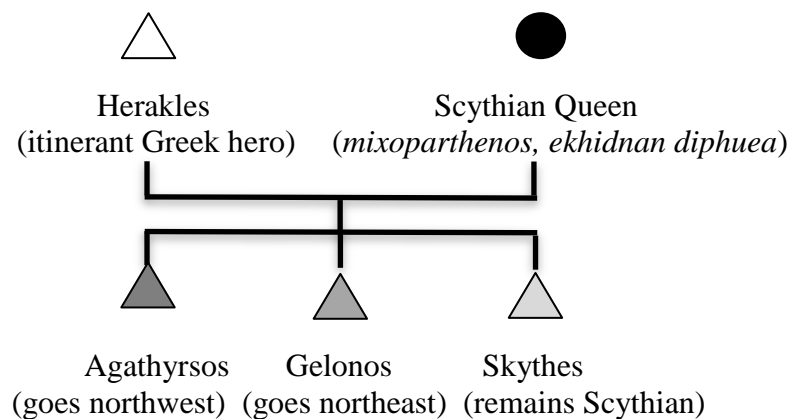


Figure Two: Mythic genealogy presented in the second version of the Scythian origin myth (Herodotus 4.8–10). White indicates Greek identity; Scythian, black; and grays depict intermediate mixes of Greek and Scythian. The most Greek (= least gray) of the three sons wins the Scythian kingship.

²⁶ Herodotus never names Skythes as king, but at 4.6 he does state that the *Skythai* take their name from their first king, with implicit reference to Skythes (σύμπασιν δὲ εἶναι οὐνομα Σκολότους, τευ βασιλέος ἐπωνυμίην, Σκύθας δὲ Ἑλλήνες ὠνόμασαν). Diodorus Siculus 2.43.3 also makes Skythes the eponymous first king of the Scythian people, born of Zeus and an earth-born snake-woman. Hesiod also knew Skythes as primordial ancestor of the Scythians, although he makes no mention of kingship and identifies him as Zeus’s, rather than Herakles’s son. Fragment 150 (Merkelbach-West), lines 15-16: Σκύθας ἱππομολγούς. / Σκύθης μὲν γένεθ’ υἱὸς ὑπερμενέος Κρονίωνος.

²⁷ Herodotus 4.48-49 and 4.102 establish the locus of the Agathyrsoi. The first text places them second in the sequence of Scythia’s northern neighbors, who are listed from west to east; the second puts them at the headwaters of the Ister (Danube), westernmost of the rivers that flows into Scythian territory. At 4.104, he says of them: “The Agathyrsoi are the most luxurious of men, particularly given to wearing gold. They have promiscuous sexual relations with women... and in other customs, they resemble the Thracians.” Ἀγάθυρσοι δὲ ἄβρῳτατοι ἀνδρῶν εἰσι καὶ χρυσοφόροι τὰ μάλιστα, ἐπικοινωνοῦν δὲ τῶν γυναικῶν τὴν μῆξιν ποιεῦνται... τὰ δὲ ἄλλα νόμοιαι Θρήϊξι προσκεχρήκασιν.

²⁸ Herodotus 4.102 places the Gelonoi sixth of eight in the list of the Scythians’ northern neighbors, just before the Boudinoi and Sauromatai. Their *nomoi* are described at 4.108-9: εἰσὶ γὰρ οἱ Γελωνοὶ τὸ ἀρχαῖον Ἑλλήνες ... καὶ γλῶσσῃ τὰ μὲν Σκυθικῇ, τὰ δὲ Ἑλληνικῇ χρέωνται ... Γελωνοὶ δὲ γῆς τε ἐργάται καὶ σιτοφάγοι καὶ κήπους ἐκτεμνέουσι.

Understanding Skythes as largely, but not fully Greek helps one recognize the cultural goods he received as an incomplete set. Thus, the bow, belt, and horses Herakles introduced to Scythian terrain are construed as the Greek gifts that gave Scythian troops their powers of offense, defense, and mobility. Herakles's club, however, goes unmentioned, implicitly explaining why the Scythians, unlike the Greeks, preferred to avoid close combat. In contrast, the first version of the myth gave Scythians a battle ax (*sagaris*) as their distinctive offensive weapon, an object derived not from the Greeks, but from heaven itself.²⁹

The Greek adaptation of the Scythian origin myth thus retains a plot in which the youngest of three brothers becomes first king of his people. At the same time, it drops the first version's cosmological concerns (divine origins, conjunction of opposites, fragmentation, reunification through kingship), erases most of the Iranian terminology,³⁰ and reworks the genealogy to introduce an ethnogonic, rather than sociogonic line of analysis. Toward that end, it construes the Scythians as largely, but not entirely Greek in their origins and ethnic identity, while characterizing certain traits as defects peculiar to non-Greeks (e.g. the luxury and promiscuity of the Agathyrsoi, the agrarian passivity of the Gelonoi, Scythian avoidance of close combat and their thefts of livestock), all of which the barbarians in question inherit from their primordial, autochthonous mother.

IV

To propagate this version, presumably in competition with the other, the craftsmen of Olbia and other Greek outposts on the Black Sea produced splendid artistic renditions of the story for distribution as trade goods to their Scythian neighbors. Surviving examples include representation of the serpent woman from Tsymbalova Moguila (Figure Three), the vase from Voronezh that seems to show Herakles bestowing his bow on Skythes (Figure Four), or the one from Kul Oba, which, as D.S. Raevskij first recognized, juxtaposes a scene of Skythes stringing that bow (Figure Five) with pictures of his two brothers receiving medical attention for the kind of wounds typically suffered from the recoil of an unsuccessful attempt (Figures Six and Seven).³¹

²⁹ Herodotus mentions a *sagaris* four times only, always as the weapon of Scythians (4.5, 4.70, 7.64) or Massagetes (1.215).

³⁰ The name *Skythēs* is the sole exception and that is revealing in its details. Ultimately, the name is derived from Iranian **Skuḍa* or **Skōḍa*. Given normal phonologic developments, this became **Skolo* in Scythian (attested in the royal name *Skylēs* and the ethnonym *Skolo-tai*), but *Skythēs* in Greek renditions of the Scythian name. See further Cornillot 1981; Loma 2011, 84–85.

³¹ Raevskij 1977, 30–36; 1982–83; 1993, 48–54. Raevskij's interpretation has been widely accepted. See, inter alia, Schiltz 1994, 170–178 and Ivantchik 2001, 208–209.



Figure Three: Scythian horse frontlet in gold from the Tsimbalka kurgan near the Dnepr (4th century BCE), depicting the serpent-woman. Greek manufacture for Scythian trade. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets. Image courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Collection #Dn 1868, 1/8).



Figure Four: Silver vessel from Tchastje Kurgan #3 (near Voronež, 4th century BCE) showing an older warrior bestowing a bow on an unbearded youth. The figures quite probably represent Herakles and Skythes. Greek manufacture for Scythian trade. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets. Image courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Collection #Do 1911).



Figure Five: Vase from the Kul-Oba kurgan in the Crimea (4th century BCE). Skythes stringing the bow. Greek manufacture in electrum for Scythian trade. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets. Image courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Collection #KO 11-3).



Figure Six: Agathyrsoi (?) treated for a tooth broken by the bow's recoil. Greek manufacture in electrum for Scythian trade. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets. Image courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Collection #KO 11-2).



Figure Seven: Gelonos (?) treated for a leg wound inflicted by the bow's recoil. Greek manufacture in electrum for Scythian trade. Collection of the Hermitage (KO 11-1).

V

What we have been able to establish is that neither of the two variants Herodotus preserved is rightly regarded as a “Scythian” myth, if that term designates a story of, by, and about the people as a whole. Rather, as we have seen, the first variant does not originate with “the Scythians,” but with Scythian kings and their apologists, who disseminated it to the Scythian population more broadly. At some point it came to the attention of Greek colonists at Olbia and elsewhere on the Black Sea, who retouched it lightly and transmitted it to Herodotus, who retold the story once more. Prior to revision, it asserted the superiority of the royal line to all other Scythians and the corresponding superiority of Scythians to all other peoples. Revision rendered the latter half of this argument slightly more problematic by raising the question of whether the Scythians really were Greeks.

The second variant represents a more thorough appropriation and transformation of the narrative, which was reworked by Greek colonists in ways that assert a) the superiority of Greeks to Scythians, b) the dependence of Scythia on Greece for whatever civilizing arts it has come to possess, and c) the superiority of the most hellenized Scythians to their more barbarous northern neighbors.

Beyond the intrinsic interest of these materials lies a broader point of theory and method. Here, as elsewhere, rescuing a variant from its posture of anonymity by identifying those who told the story *in precisely this way* and the audience they hoped to influence thereby, is the crucial step in discovering what it was all about. Doing this permits one to recognize that details distinctive to individual variants represent the instruments through which rival narrators jockeyed for position, as they attempted to turn the story into a brief for the superiority of the groups they represented.

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English summary

Far from being authorless texts, eternal truths, and the authentic voice of the *Volk* (as Romantic theories have it), myths are narratives that disguise both their authorship and their tendentious nature. The two variants of “the” Scythian origin myth preserved in Herodotus 4.5–6 and 4.8–10 provide a convenient example of how close reading permits one to identify the interests advanced by each variant through the ways they rework details of the structure they have in common.

Latin summary

Etiam si mythi non sunt sine auctoribus, neque veritatem aeternam neque vocem propriam *populi* (ut in theoriis romanticis dicitur) exprimentes, iidem sunt narrationes, quae et auctores et naturam suam unilateralem occultant. Duae variationes “ipsius” originis Scythicae illius mythi, qui apud Herodotum 4.5–6 et 4.8–20 asservatur, exemplum conveniens praebent illius modi, quo lectio exacta concedit, ut momenta unāquāque variatione promulgatā percipiantur illis modis, quibus res singulas structurae communis retractant.

Keywords

Myth, Scythia, Scythian Origins, Scythian Kingship, Herodotus, Stranger-King.