



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 5 SCYTHIA, LIBYA, AND THE EDGE OF THE MAP

Chapters 17-20

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CONTENTS

THIS VOLUME

Chapter 17: Darius Goes North, and the Country Will Not Stand

Chapter 18: Customs North of the Wind

Chapter 19: Libya, Silphium, and the Founding of Cyrene

Chapter 20: What He Will Not Draw

ALL VOLUMES IN THIS RETELLING

Vol. 1 The Inquiry Begins

Vol. 2 Cyrus and the Fall of Kingdoms

Vol. 3 Egypt, the Gift of the River

Vol. 4 Cambyses, the Magi, and Darius

Vol. 5 Scythia, Libya, and the Edge of the Map (this file)

Vol. 6 The Ionian Revolt

Vol. 7 Marathon to Thermopylae

Vol. 8 Salamis, Plataea, and Reference

CHAPTER 17: DARIUS GOES NORTH, AND THE COUNTRY WILL NOT STAND

Darius wanted to punish the **Scythians**. They had once ruled upper Asia for twenty-eight years, Herodotus says, having come down when the Cimmerians fled before them, and the Medes had eventually driven them out. He also wanted the extension of his power. He bridged the Bosphorus, sailed to the Ister (the Danube), bridged that, and crossed into a country that refused to be a country in the Persian sense.

The Scythians held a council. Three peoples would fight with them. The rest said the war was not theirs, that the Persians had been provoked by Scythian raids long ago, and that they would fight only if the Persians struck first at them. The fighting Scythians did not offer a battle. They withdrew, filling the wells and destroying the pasture as they went, and sent a section of the army to beg help from the neighbours. Darius followed. The country went on ahead of him, emptier every day.

THE MESSAGE OF FOUR THINGS

He sent a herald at last, asking them either to stand and fight or to bring earth and water, the signs of submission. The Scythian kings answered that they had no cities and no planted land to defend, and so no reason to fight a pitched battle. They had graves. Let him find the graves of their fathers and disturb them, and he would see whether they fought. Until then they would continue as they were. And they sent him a gift: a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows.

Darius read the gift as a surrender. The mouse lives in the earth, the frog in the water, the bird is like a horse, and the arrows were the Scythians giving up their arms. **Gobryas**, one of the seven, read it the other way. Unless you become birds and fly, or mice and go underground, or frogs and leap into the water, you will not get home, but die by these arrows. The Persians were already uneasy. The Scythian horsemen rode circles around foragers. The Ister bridge, guarded by Ionian Greeks on Darius's order, was the only way back.

The Scythians rode to the bridge and told the Ionians their count of days was up, and that they might break the bridge and go free, and thank the gods and the Scythians. The Ionians debated. Miltiades of the Chersonese, who will matter later at Marathon, wanted to break it and free Ionia. Histiaeus of Miletus said each of them ruled his city by Darius's favour, and that if Darius fell their own people would choose democracy and depose them. They decided to pretend. They broke the bridge a bowshot in from the Scythian bank, so that the Scythians would see a gap, and kept the rest, and promised to guard it while the Scythians went to find the Persians. Then they rebuilt it for Darius when he came.

Historian's Note: A campaign without a battle

Darius did operate on the Danube frontier. The details of the retreat, the gift, and the Ionian debate are Herodotus's construction, and they do a great deal of work. They show an empire that wins when there is a city to take, and stalls when the enemy will not own a field. They also plant Miltiades and Histiaeus, who will return when the war moves to the Aegean. The bird, the mouse, the frog, and the arrows are one of his perfect objects: a message that means what the reader already fears.

Darius came back by the bridge at night, afraid, and the Ionians were there. He crossed. He left Megabazus to subdue Thrace, and went home. Scythia was not a province. It had declined to become one.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Scythians refuse battle because they have no cities to lose. What does a conventional empire not know how to fight?
2. Histiaeus saves Darius in order to save his own tyranny. Whose side is he on, in any sense that matters?
3. Gobryas and Darius read the same gift in opposite ways. Why is an ambiguous message such a useful thing to send an invader?

CHAPTER 18: CUSTOMS NORTH OF THE WIND

Having failed to conquer Scythia, Herodotus describes it, which is his usual revenge. The Scythians are nomads, without towns, living in wagons, expert at two things above all: keeping an invader from escaping, and preventing anyone from finding them. They sacrifice to Ares in a peculiar way, heaping up brushwood into a platform and setting an ancient iron sword on top as the image of the god, and pouring blood on it. They drink the blood of the first man they kill. They scalp, and hang the scalps from their bridles, and some sew them into cloaks. Once a year each district governor drinks wine mixed with the blood of enemies, and those who have no kill sit aside in disgrace. The skulls of their worst enemies they saw off below the brows and use as cups, gilded if the man was rich.

This is grim, and he means it to be. He also says they have a horror of adopting foreign customs, which he illustrates with two stories of men who did, and died for it. **Anacharsis**, who had travelled and seen Greek rites, was killed by his own brother for celebrating a festival of the Mother of the Gods in the woods. **Scyles**, a Scythian king with a Greek mother, used to leave his army outside the walls of the Greek city of the Borysthenites, change his clothes, and live as a Greek inside, and was killed by his brother when he was caught being initiated into Dionysus. Herodotus, who admires people who travel and ask questions, records a society that kills its travellers.

AMAZONS, BALD MEN, AND THE FALLING FEATHERS

The **Sauromatae**, he says, come from a party of Amazons who were captured by Greeks, killed their captors at sea, and landed on the Scythian shore. Scythian young men attached themselves to them. The women would not come and live behind wagons with the other Scythian wives. We shoot, we ride, we have not learned women's work, they said. If you want us as wives, go to your parents and collect your property, and let us live on our own. Their descendants, the Sauromatae, have women who hunt and fight, and a girl does not marry until she has killed an enemy.

Beyond, the reports thin. Bald men, who live on a tree-fruit and claim to be protected from the cold by their smoothness. A goat-footed people, whom he reports and does not vouch for. Men who sleep for six months of the year. East of these, the Issedones, who eat the dead flesh of a father mixed with the flesh of cattle, and gild the skull and offer it sacrifice. Beyond them, in what the Issedones say and he will not confirm, one-eyed men, the Arimaspians, who steal gold from griffins. He has a better explanation for a wonder closer in. The Scythians say the air is full of feathers, which fill the northern country and cannot be travelled. He thinks the feathers are snow.

Historian's Note: Ethnography and exhibition

Some of this is real nomad practice, distorted by hostile reporters: wagon-life, scalp-taking as a known steppe custom in later centuries, a martial place for some women among Sarmatian peoples that archaeology has not dismissed. Some of it is the edge of the map doing what edges do. He is better when he interprets (snow for feathers) than when he accumulates. The killing of Anacharsis is a story about the cost of becoming the kind of man Herodotus is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus admires inquiry, and shows you a people who execute men for foreign rites. Can a traveller describe that fairly, or does the description already take a side?
2. The Amazons refuse the wagon of ordinary wives. What bargain do they offer, and what do they refuse to give up?
3. He decides the feathers are snow. Apply that move to one other marvel in this chapter. What might it be, if it is not what it is called?

CHAPTER 19: LIBYA, SILPHIUM, AND THE FOUNDING OF CYRENE

The second half of this stretch of the inquiry goes south and west, into **Libya**, which for Herodotus means Africa as far as anyone claimed to know it. The occasion is a Persian expedition sent by Aryandes, governor of Egypt, against Barca, which pulls the narrative across to Cyrene and the Greek cities planted in the sand.

Cyrene was founded from Thera, and Thera from Sparta, and the story of the founding is an oracle that will not let go. The Theraeans were told to found a city in Libya. They did not know where Libya was, and did nothing. Seven years of no rain later, they asked again, and the priestess said the unplanted city was the cause. They sent to Crete, found a murex fisherman named Corobius who had been driven onto an island called Platea off the Libyan coast, and hired him as guide. A small party left him there with provisions and sailed home to report. The provisions ran out. A Samian ship bound for Egypt, driven off course, fed him for a year. The Theraeans eventually settled Platea, failed to thrive, and were told by the oracle they had not settled Libya itself, only an island. They moved to the mainland, to Aziris, and in the sixth year the Libyans led them west, passing by the fairest place in the dark, which was Cyrene, so that Greeks would not occupy it, and brought them to a spring called the Fountain of Apollo. There the city stood.

BATTUS AND THE PLANT THAT WAS WORTH A WAR

The founder was **Battus**, a stammerer, whose name the oracle at Delphi had used before he understood it as a title. Under his house Cyrene grew, and under one of his successors, Battus the Fortunate, it grew fast, because an oracle invited all Greeks to share the land, and a great number came. The Libyans, losing ground, asked the king of Egypt for help. Apries sent the army that was destroyed, the disaster that began his fall. Later Arcesilaus of Cyrene quarrelled with his brothers, left, gathered an army in Samos by promising land, came back, and burned his enemies in a tower. He was assassinated in Barca. His mother Pheretime asked the Persian governor in Egypt for vengeance, and got an army. Barca was taken by a trick after a siege: a Persian general swore the army would stay only so long as the earth beneath them stayed, having undermined his oath by standing over a hidden trench. The leading men were impaled. Pheretime's own end, Herodotus notes with a grim satisfaction, was to die eaten by worms, so that people could see how far the jealousy of the gods reaches when a human vengeance goes too far.

The wealth of the region, in his account, is **silphium**, a plant the Cyrenaeans harvested under regulation and that has no certain modern survivor. He is interested in the coast, the three harvests (coast, hill, and desert edge) and in the peoples inward: the nomads who cauterise the veins on children's heads, the tribe where the women wear leather anklets to mark their lovers, the Nasamonians who swear on the graves of the justest men, and who once sent five young men across the desert, southwest, until they came to a great river running east with crocodiles in it, and black city-dwellers who did not know their language. He thinks the river was the upper Nile. He may have been right that a river was there. He was guessing the connection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Theraeans ignore an oracle until a drought makes it expensive. What does a foundation story gain by making the settlers reluctant?
2. Pheretime gets her revenge and dies of worms. Is Herodotus reporting a medical fact, delivering a moral, or doing both without admitting it?
3. Five young men cross the sand and find a river with crocodiles. What can you responsibly conclude, and what can you not?

CHAPTER 20: WHAT HE WILL NOT DRAW

Herodotus stops the Libyan tour to say something about method, and it is one of the passages that makes later historians claim him and disown him in the same breath. He will not describe the Eridanus, the river said to flow into the northern sea, from which amber comes. The name is Greek, not foreign, and no one who claims to have seen the river has convinced him. He does not believe in a race of one-eyed men, or in goat-footed men, in any stronger sense than that he has recorded the claim. Tin and amber do come from the ends of Europe. He will not say how.

He has a principle, and he states it. For his own part, he is obliged to report what is said, but he is not at all obliged to believe it. Let that sentence stand over the ants, the griffins, the cinnamon birds, and the dolphin. It is the contract. He is a collector of accounts. Belief is a second act, and he does not always perform it, and he does not always tell you when he has.

AGAINST THE CIRCLE

He returns to the map. He laughs at the many who have drawn the world round, as if turned on a lathe, with Ocean running around it, and Asia made the same size as Europe. He will show, in a few sentences, how large each is, and what the boundaries actually are, so far as anyone knows them. Libya is washed by the sea except where it joins Asia. Europe no one has discovered whether it is washed to the east and north. It is longer than the other two put together. He refuses a symmetry he cannot see.

On the Nile he has one more inquiry. He sailed as far as Elephantine himself, and beyond that he has hearsay: a great lake, and beyond it Ethiopian nomads, and a river, and a city of deserters from Egypt twelve days' march from Meroe. He thinks the Nile's course, and the Danube's, may be in some sense counterparts, one draining the south and one the north, and he is constructing a balance he has just mocked in other men. The impulse to make the world rhyme is hard to kill, even in the man who mocks it.

Historian's Note: The sentence to keep

'I am obliged to report what is said, but I am not obliged to believe it.' Later enemies called him the father of lies. He had already built the answer into the book. The fairer charge is that he does not always show his work, and that a marvellous story, once told at length, convinces even when he has waved at disbelief. Use the sentence on him as well as with him.

Book Four ends with the edges unfinished on purpose. Scythia has not been taken. Libya has been crossed by five young men and a rumour. The map has been refused its circle. Darius is home, and the Greek cities of Asia are still his, held by tyrants who kept his bridge. The next fire starts in one of those cities, and the man who lights it has already appeared, arguing at the Danube that a tyrant should save a king.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If a historian must report what is said and need not believe it, what does he owe the reader beyond the story?
2. Herodotus mocks symmetrical maps and then pairs the Nile with the Danube. Where do you catch him wanting the world to be neat?
3. Why leave the north and the south unfinished, instead of inventing an end for them?