

# THE HYPERBOREANS – MYTH AND HISTORY

The legend of the Hyperboreans appeared probably in connection with different notions in the Eastern Mediterranean about the sun and its cult. Herodot, who offers the most detailed and profound narrative about this myth, connects it namely with the oral traditions of the Greeks on the island of Delos. Probably in an earlier period they were acquainted with some mythic-folklore tale about tribes, inhabiting very remote lands – to the utmost north, compared to all known tribes. From that place can be followed the genesis of many cults, venerated in the sanctuary, connected with different images of the Great Mother Goddess in the Mediterranean. She also originates from there and this explains too her dependence on the sun's movement during the different seasons of the year.

In that way Herodot connects the Hyperboreans with the remote north and says above all, that his knowledge of these lands comes from the stories of the epic poet Aristeus from Proconnessos, who had lived in VII-VI c. B.C (Hdt. 4, 13). The information of Aristeus, which reached us, is too cursory. But from Herodot we know, that Aristeus had written a poem, in which he mentions that when being Φοιβόαμπος, i. e. embraced by Phaebus, he reached the Isidons and after that he tells one after another the fabulous people of Arimasps, who were one-eyed, followed by the Griffons, the gold-keepers, and over them at last come the Hyperboreans, who are contiguous to the sea. It is quite obvious that this tale reminds of the folklore motifs about the sun and its remote dwelling, in which he retires in some moment of the twenty-four hours or during the year. Except that all these people fight against each other and change their places of habitation, with the exception of the Hyperboreans, who, according to the legend, are represented as a some kind of a sacred tribe, directly connected with the sun, called in this case Phaebus. That's the reason why Herodot underlines, that "when it (the sun) captured Aristeus' consciousness, this gave him the possibility to learn and describe these things". Maybe later on this base, when the sun begun to be connected with Apollo, somewhere about V c. B.C., the legend of the Hyperboreans is also connected with Apollo. Quite interesting is, that in the tales, which Herodot learned from the inhabitants of Delos, this made no impression on him or is not mentioned at all. This specification is missing at all by Herodot. He really speaks of the the Hyperboreans' gifts, which they are sending to Delos, but he does not connect the sun with its cult there, as well as with the cult of Artemis and Leto.

Information about this region before Herodot can be found by Pindar, who also mentions the Hyperboreans in connection with the origin of the Olympic Games, founded by Heracles. But his information is very obscure and not correct. His notions about this region's geography are also not correct and unclear. His mentioning of the Hyperboreans, who according to him should live near the Istros' springs, has no special importance. But much more interesting is the fact, that he connects them with Apollo in a quite poetic text, in his desire to underline the veneration of Zeus as a protector of the Olympic Games and leaving the Hyperboreans without significance (Pind. Ol. Od. III, 15-17). The scholiast to this text is hurrying to explain that the Hyperboreans are connected everywhere with Apollo and he tries to explain in a quasi-scientific way the tribe's name in long explications. This is very inherent to the Hellenistic commentators, when something is unclear to them, but in our case things remain unclear to the end, in spite of the fact, that the scholiast is even trying to connect the Hyperboreans with the Titans. All this only underlines the unclear origin of the Hyperboreans and their mythological essence.

We know the legend of the Hyperboreans in its entirety, in all its details, in its most pure kind, in the way it was retailed on Delos, by Herodot. We shall stop basically on it in order to clarify some of its peculiarities. Herodot is the person to be occupied in the deepest and most detailed way with it, he pays attention at full length to some special things, which give some new direction for deliberation. Herodot's information about the Hyperboreans is so important, that next authors either repeat him or try to offer some new interpretation on his base, which is really new only in rare cases. In the later versions new elements are introduced, which represent the myth's development and the appearing of new, predominantly Greek interpretations and explanations. Most of them are usually connected with the later venerated delphian cult of Apollo, whom the Greeks are trying to connect with the Hyperboreans as well.

Herodot himself (Hdt. 4, 32-36), when speaking in details about the Hyperboreans, underlines, that they have inhabited the most remote northern lands after the Scythians. But the strange and shocking in this case is the fact underlined by him: “Υπερβορέων οὔτε τι Σκύθαι λέγοσι οὐδὲν οὔτε τίνες ἄλλοι τῶν οἰκημένων ἐῖ μὴ ἄρα .”Ισσηδώντες . , i. e.”

Neither the Scythians, nor the other local inhabitants, except the Isidons, speak of people of Hyperboreans”. For the latter Herodot considers, that they rather know nothing, because they don't speak anything. On the other side he doubts himself, that there has existed some information about the Hyperboreans as early as Homer and Hesiod, but he only supposes and gives no details.

In fact the story of Herodotus on this topic is based first of all on the oral tales of the inhabitants of Delos. Most probably the greater part of the description is based on what he may have learned on place, connected with the concrete manifestations of the venerated there cult and the monuments at disposal. This makes

his tale from one side purified from many layers over in the later existing literature and on the other side with the numerous details, directly connected with the cult practices on Delos. Here obviously the notion of Hyperboreans' essence was very exact, as a legend about the tie of the Mediterranean with the remote north. Herodot accepts them rather as different tales, connected with the sun's cult and of that of the Great Mother Goddess, who is dependent on the sun's movement during its movement in the different periods of the year. Again from the inhabitants of Delos Herodot has heard about the transference of gifts from one people to another, with initial point of departure the land of the Hyperboreans, via the Scythians and then follows a detailed story of the gifts' journey to the Hellenic lands to the south and a trip around different places is drawn, which spreads over a significant region of the Eastern Mediterranean, until it reaches Eubeia and from there "the Greek cities transfer the gifts to each other up to Karist"<sup>1</sup>, and from there the Karistians send them to Tenos and the transfer continues to the South and South East until the island of Delos.

In fact according to Herodot the history of this ritual is much more complex. It begins and is directly connected with the sending of two girls, Arga and Opida, which traveled to Delos and accompanied two goddesses, Leto and Ilitia. Herodot tells us, that the latter were given veneration with gifts and a hymn, created by the Lykian Olen. Their tomb was situated behind the Artemission, turned to the east, remains there up to now and is shown in the sanctuary. The remains of meat after offering have been thrown over the tomb. It is clear that the matter is an old cult with different manifestations of the Mother Goddess, coming from the north. Probably the cult of both girls, send by the Hyperboreans with gifts to the goddess Ilitia, demonstrating a pray to help the successful birth, is later. It is very impressive, that in the text the names of Apollo and Artemis are not mentioned. The gifts are offered only because of the goddess' skill to help successfully the birth of children.

In another variant both girls, called Huperohe and Laodike, were together with a group of men, accompanying them, the so called perpherei, who also were strongly venerated in Delos. They were sent to bring the first gifts of the Hyperboreans, wrapped with straw, "but they didn't come back". It is obvious, that this is a veneration to the Mother Goddess, connected both with birth and fertility. Very interesting is Herodot's comment. Faithful to the correct explanation of facts, he notes: "I am familiar that the Peonian and the Thracian women also are bringing such gifts to Artemis Basileia".

Herodot was impressed by one thing in the legend, showing the well known habit to send in this way gifts to the Goddesses Mothers. This is supported by the concrete epithet of Artemis, defining her as a Great Goddess, venerated as such in all this area of the Eastern Mediterranean. The girls' ritual in Delos is connected with the same notion, when they cut off as a symbolic sacrifice one of their plaits

<sup>1</sup> A city on the island of Eubeia. According to Homer (Il, 2, 539) it was inhabited by the Thracian tribe Abanti.

before marriage and put it on the tomb of both Hyperborean messengers. And tomb of the latter is besides the Artemission and an olive tree is growing over it. The same has been done by the young boys, who are leaving a part of their hair, scrolled over a green grass. This detailed description of the veneration of the Mother Goddess' personification in the persons of two ancient goddesses supports our conviction for a legend, which confirms that this cult existed on Delos from early times. Herodot skips the legend of Abaris, only mentioning him as a Hyperborean, who according to it is rambling over the whole world. Herodot's conclusion on the given by him description and everything connected with the Hyperboreans is that this myth for the tribe was a legend, connected with the remote north. Herodot underlines the legendary character of the story with the categorical generalization, that "if the Hyperboreans exist, Hypernots should exist as well", which is clearly illustrating the character of the Hyperboreans' myth.

The interesting fact, underlined already by us, is that in the retailed by Herodot myth of the Hyperboreans Apollo does not figure at all and has no connection with the sanctuary in Delphi as well. In this sense it is interesting for us to know how the new elements enrich the myth of the Hyperboreans in the later Greek literature, after transferring in the lands of all these people in the Eastern Mediterranean and reaching to the utmost west known land for the period, and the route of the gifts, carried by both girls according to the legend. As a result the tale of the gifts is freely passing from one people to another as an oral tradition, enriched by the literary burden in the course of time. It is interesting as well that this description finds a very exact according to Herodot place in the Hellenistic poetry – in the hymn for Delos, belonging to Kallimach (Kall. Hymn in Delium IV, 282-299). In it Kallimah extols the island and already connect it with Apollo, but calling him Phaeb, in this way clearly underlying the sun elements in his cult. After that Kallimah reminds of the gifts, brought to the island again by Ilitia, but this time connected concretely with his birth, and he describes almost the same places the gifts has passed, and in the way they follow by Herodot. So Kallimah outlines the same areal of veneration of the cult.

In this short report I shall not stop on the different information by Pausanias, which decorate with much more details the story of Herodot (especially about the way of the gifts to Delos, as wel for the existing other temples of Ilitia, for instance in Athica – Paus. 1, 31, 2-3). First of all in many places of his description he is engaged with different female cults, connected with Apollo's birth, with details for the spreading of the cult of Ahaina and Ilitia, with the hymns devoted to both of them, etc. Everything is centred around Apollo as a representative of the sun cult and around the cult of the Mother Goddess, expressed in the person of the ancient Pelasgian cult of Ilitia and partly of Leto with her also Protogreek origin. But in reality the main cult, preserved up to now, is on Delos, where are concentrated all these religious notions, supported by concrete monuments.

The direct connection of the Hyperboreans with Apollo appears in the mythological notions much later and rather as a literary working of the basic eastern

Mediterranean legend. First of all the additions to the myth of the Hyperboreans originate in Greece and aim to show the appearance of Apollo's cult in the Greek religious notions. This inevitably leads to his connections with the already Greek sanctuary in Delphi, which also is a later development of Apollo's cult, as well as its connection with the sun aspect. Here the variety of information is very huge. The base of this version is imputed to a lost hymn of Alcei, known to us by Himerij (a Vitinian orator from IV c. B.C, who lived in Athens – Op. 14.10). The poetically treated legend, ascribed to Alcei, represents Apollo, who after staying one year in Hyperboreans' lands, was sent by his father Zeus on a gold chariot with swans, with a gold wreath and a gold lyre to travel to Delphi in order to become an impartial arbiter of the Greeks. In connection with this many information, especially by Pausanias, with details, appear on his first visit to Delphi, his ties with some priestess named Bojo, with which Pausanias speaks of a definite hymn, and Apollo, brought here by the Hyperboreans, among them Olen, the first prophet of Apollo, etc. I shall not stop the attention on all these details, already known and handed down, as I already mentioned, by Pausanias. But of special interest is some contradictive information for temples of the Hyperborean Apollo. According to the legend the oldest one, made by laurel branches, is situated in Thessaly. It is said also about a temple in Delphi, made of honey, beeswax and feathers, sent to it by the Hyperboreans, or by an inhabitant of Delphi, named Pteros (from "feather"), etc. on which information we shall not stop. Every information in the case has its explanation and there is a sense to be analysed in details, in order to enrich the notion of different layers in the Hyperboreans' legend, but we have no place for this here.

It is natural to look for the spread of the Hyperboreans' myth or to look for some its connection or appearance in Thrace, especially in the Westpontic area, because of both their geographic location in the centre of the area of the myth's circulation. Except that namely in the West Pont littoral are to be expected some influences of the legend in its more authentic kind, penetrated here directly with the colonists from Asia Minor. The connections of this region with the notions of the Hyperboreans, as we know, were probably very strong in the Greek colonies on the West Pont since antiquity.

The Hyperboreans are often mentioned and a connection is looked for with them in Bulgarian scientific literature, but not always was done in a profound way. One can read, but without any reason, about Apollo, Artemis and Leto as a "Hyperborean Triad", and even about such a triad, connected with the burial cult. With the Hyperboreans is tied too the cult of immortality of the Thracians and the Mother Goddess. The cases of common veneration of Apollo, Artemis and Leto, already under Roman influence, does not exist earlier neither in the Greek religion, nor in the Greek literature. Also as "Hyperborean" in literature are claimed to be some very close phenomena such as the idea of the sun cult, or the Mother Goddess, the veneration of a couple of deities in West Thrace and the iconography of the Thracian Rider. One can also read of some "Hyperborean diagonal" across Thrace and

about the non existing in reality influences of the Hyperborean legend. They can't be explained namely with the Greek redaction, or they should just have a little bit different character from the ideas on the Hyperboreans and the legend connected with them in Greek literature. Naturally, such elements should exist, because the basic idea of notions is very familiar and common for all this area. But instead of this one should rather look for one more Thracian trace here, where even Apollo reveals not a typical manifestation of his cult, or one can look for the Mother Goddess and the faith in immortality and eternal life. For the Thracians of much more importance was the sunny trace in the legend of Hyperboreans and the development of the sun cult, connected with the Mother Goddess, clearly demonstrated in the Thracian religion. In the latter they cannot be followed in this way, because there miss any data for the common cult of Apollo, Artemis and still more Leto. The search should be pointed to the revealing of the connection between the legend of Hyperboreans and the sanctuary in Delos, strongly expressed in the basic Thracian religion.

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