

SCYTHIA OR ELYSIUM? THE LAND OF THE HYPERBOREANS IN EARLY GREEK LITERATURE

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Replacing the obscure Cimmerians, whose land is mentioned briefly in the *Odyssey* as a place of constant darkness,¹ the suggestively named Hyperboreans became the canonical representatives of the Far North in Greek literary tradition.² Greek poets and mythographers understood their name to mean the people ‘beyond (*hyper*) the North wind (*Boreas*)’. As such a vision suggests, their land, as depicted in the literature of the age before Alexander, is as complete a fantasy as the Cimmerian gate to the netherworld. Like the ‘Cimmerians’, though, the name of the Hyperboreans retains a nebulous connection to the real world of antiquity.³ Preserved inscriptions from the fourth century BCE record that the temple of Apollo on the island of Delos

¹ Homer, *Odyssey* XI.13–19. Ancient texts are cited from standard editions, usually those digitized in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and *PHI Latin Texts* databases. Only fragment collections and cited translations are listed in the bibliography. If a translation is not explicitly cited, I am responsible for it.

² At least one author appears to have identified the two people, though: Hecataeus Abderita, *De hyperboreis*, frag. 8, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 264).

³ The Homeric Cimmerians have the same name as, but no relation to the historical people, mentioned by Herodotus and others (*Historiae* IV. 11, etc.), to which the Greeks may simply have applied the Homeric name as it sounded similar to what the people called themselves (Heubeck, ‘Book IX: Commentary’, pp. 77–79).

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received gifts, apparently symbolical sacrificial offerings, from somebody referred to as the Hyperboreans.⁴ One of the earliest extant literary accounts, that of Herodotus, also depicts individual Hyperboreans in ancient times bearing, and later sending by intermediaries, gifts to the temple of Apollo on Delos.⁵

In light of these sources, Franz Heinrich Ludolf Ahrens may have proposed the most plausible explanation of the origin of the name in myth. He suggests that it was a folk-etymological misunderstanding of a north Greek dialect word which literally meant ‘over-carrier’ and in the original, local context referred to people from the north of Hellas, Macedonia or Thrace trusted with the task of carrying offerings to Delos and possibly other prestigious temples in the south, a practice relating to the Greek traditional institution of *theoria*, ceremonial inter-state visits to religious feasts and sanctuaries.⁶ Other related explanations propose that the name refers to religious practices in the northern regions of Greece and the Balkans.⁷ The historical truth of the matter will not be a topic here, nor will be the learned, literary and political interactions with the myth of the Hyperboreans in later ages, for instance that of patriotically inclined Swedish men of letters from the seventeenth century onwards.⁸ Instead, we will revisit the oldest Greek sources and try to ascertain what they actually have to say about the way the ancient Greeks imagined and construed this northern country and its people.⁹ Apart from the Homeric Cimmerians, who vanished as soon as they appeared, the Hyperboreans constitute the first recorded example of Greeks, and consequently Europeans, concerning themselves with the Far North. Even if an almost entirely imaginary vision, the Hyperboreans remain the most productive and persistent Northern motif in ancient Greek literature, embodying as it were the canonical North of Greek myth.

⁴ *Inscriptiones deliae* 100.48–51, 104.3A.8–13, ed. by Coupry.

⁵ Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 32–36.

⁶ Ahrens, ‘Zur griechischen Monatskunde’, pp. 340–42.

⁷ See, e.g., Van Windekens, ‘Les hyperboréens’, pp. 167–68.

⁸ See, e.g., Roling, ‘Akademischer Hyperboreer-Kult’, passim. See also the chapter by Pihlaja in this volume.

⁹ I have elsewhere catalogued and translated into Swedish all Greek and Latin sources mentioning the Hyperboreans until the start of the Common Era (Sandin, ‘Hyperboreerna I’, ‘Hyperboreerna II’) and also catalogued all instances featuring individuals of Hyperborean extraction in Greek and Roman literature until the seventh century CE (Sandin, ‘Famous Hyperboreans’), in the latter case treating scholarly aspects of some of the texts.

Eastern Realities

Which Hyperborean appearance is the oldest is impossible to ascertain, as most ancient Greek poetry cannot be dated with precision, and the literary history of the Greeks is fraught with pseudepigraphic invention; that is, forgery. For instance, did the poet Aristeas mentioned by Herodotus really compose the epic *Arimaspea* in which the Hyperboreans featured, or is it entirely a product of the imagination of the historian?¹⁰

Ἐφη δὲ Ἀριστέης ὁ Καῦστροβίου ἀνὴρ Προκοννήσιος, ποιῶν ἔπεα, ἀπικέσθαι ἐς Ἴσσηδόνας φοιβόλαμπτος γενόμενος, Ἴσσηδόνων δὲ ὑπεροικέειν Ἀριμασποῦς ἄνδρας μονοφθάλμους, ὑπὲρ δὲ τούτων τοὺς χρυσοφύλακας γρύπας, τούτων δὲ τοὺς Ὑπερβορέους κατήκοντας ἐπὶ θάλασσαν· τούτους ὦν πάντας πλὴν Ὑπερβορέων, ἀρξάντων Ἀριμασπῶν, αἰεὶ τοῖσι πλησιοχώροισι ἐπιτίθεσθαι, καὶ ὑπὸ μὲν Ἀριμασπῶν ἐξωθέεσθαι ἐκ τῆς χώρας Ἴσσηδόνας, ὑπὸ δὲ Ἴσσηδόνων Σκύθας, Κιμμερίου δὲ οἰκέοντας ἐπὶ τῇ νοτίῃ θαλάσῃ ὑπὸ Σκυθέων πιεζομένους ἐκλείπειν τὴν χώραν. Οὕτω οὐδὲ οὗτος συμφέρεται περὶ τῆς χώρας ταύτης Σκύθησι.

(There is also a story related in a poem by Aristeas son of Caüstrobius, a man of Proconnesus. This Aristeas, being then possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these [he said] dwell the one-eyed Arimaspians, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold, and beyond these again the Hyperboreans, whose territory reaches to the sea. Except the Hyperboreans, all these nations and first the Arimaspians ever make war upon their neighbours; the Issedones were pushed from their lands by the Arimaspians, and the Scythians by the Issedones, and the Cimmerians, dwelling by the southern sea, were hard pressed by the Scythians and left their country. Thus neither does Aristeas' story agree concerning this country with the Scythian account.)¹¹

Note that the Cimmerians encountered by Greeks of the age of Herodotus lived just north of the Black Sea, meaning that they could no longer serve as emblems of the Far North. Whether the *Arimaspea* is an invention of Herodotus or an actual ancient poem, the material is unrelated to the tale of the Hyperborean maidens bringing gifts to the temple of Apollo on Delos, told by Herodotus somewhat later. The latter will be treated only in passing here, as it does not pertain to the North or Hyperboreans as such.¹²

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 14–15.

¹¹ Aristeas, *Arimaspea* frag. 2, ed. by Bernabé = Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 13, trans. by Godley. Herodotus's report of an epic *Arimaspea* gave rise to an obviously forged hexameter version, produced around the beginning of our age, presumably to be sold as a rarity on the book market (Aristeas, *Arimaspea* frags. 4–6, 11, ed. by Bernabé; cf. Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *Thucydides* 23).

¹² There are no peculiar markers of ethnicity or any information about the homeland of

(
 Hy]perboreans with good horses:
] fertile [land] that feeds the numerous people
] deep-flowing [Eridanus']s steep currents
] amber.)

Here, too, the Hyperboreans are assimilated to the Scythian paradigm. One of the scraps of information we learn about them is that they are a people known for *good horses*. Without doubt, this places them in the great Eurasian steppe, close to the Scythians, with whom horses were intimately associated.¹⁶ The Scythians and Hyperboreans are probably not identical, though, as the 'Horse-milking Scythians' are mentioned in a catalogue section a little bit before (unfortunately with uncertain geographical relation to the latter due to the damage to the papyrus). The Scythians proper were only one of several tribes in East Europe and Central Asia with similar language, dress, and cultural practices, all of whom could and often were lumped together under the same name.¹⁷

Another case of culturally Scythian Hyperboreans is found in a fragment of the comedy *Delian Women* by the Athenian poet Cratinus, cited by Hesychius: Αἶθρια· Κρατῖνος Δηλιάσιν· Ὑπερβορέους αἶθρια τιμώντας στέφη· τὰ γὰρ Ὑπερβορέων ἱερὰ κατὰ τινα πάτριον ἀγιστεῖαν οὐχ ὑπὸ στέγην, ἀλλ' ὑπαίθρια διαφυλάττεται (*Aithria*: [The word is used by] Cratinus in the *Delian Women*: 'Hyperboreans revering *open-sky* wreaths'. According to hereditary ritual, the sacred places and offerings of the Hyperboreans are not kept under roof, but under the open sky).¹⁸ The sense of the adjective *aithria* describing the wreaths in the fragment is not undisputed. But if the interpretation of Hesychius is correct, which seems likely to me, this is an interpolation of an aspect of Scythian worship that was notorious to the Greeks: they did not build temples to the gods.¹⁹ The title of the comedy and the mention of the Hyperboreans could suggest that Cratinus included the tale of the Hyperborean maidens visiting Delos, but nothing in the preserved fragments gives any hints as to the general theme of the play.

¹⁶ Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 48–49; Talbot Rice, *Scythians*, pp. 69–74; Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, pp. 101–10. See especially Hippocrates, *De aëre aquis et locis* 18, 20–22.

¹⁷ Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 35–36; Talbot Rice, *Scythians*, p. 20; Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, p. 16; Finley, 'The Black Sea and Danubian Regions', p. 56.

¹⁸ Cratinus, *Deliae* frag. 24, ed. by Kassel & Austin, cit. by Hesychius, *Lexicon* α 1869.

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Historiae* iv. 59; Megasthenes frag. 12, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 715), cit. by Arrianus, *Indica* 7; cf. Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* iv. 89.

A cultural and even ethno-stereotypical ‘Scythian’ reading is found also in Plato, who mentions ‘Abaris the Hyperborean’ (see below) together with the Thracian Zalmoxis as people that might know spells to cure a headache.²⁰ The Thracians, situated immediately to the north of Greece and Macedonia, were often conflated with the Scythians in the general sense of ‘barbarians of the North East’.²¹ The Scythians themselves appear to have been notorious for their skill in, or foolish devotion to, pharmacology and witchcraft.²²

Perhaps significantly, the hitherto mentioned sources originate from Greeks belonging to the Ionic literary tradition, the cultural epicentre of which before the rise of Athens was the West coast of Asia Minor. As opposed to the Dorians, who colonized South Italy and Sicily, Ionic culture was mostly oriented eastwards. It is only natural that to the Ionians, the imaginary North should be assimilated to the most prominent ethnical and geographical features pertaining to the regions north of the Greek mainland and Anatolia; namely, the Scythians and the Eurasian plains. Accordingly, the notion that the Hyperboreans were ethnically Scythians or closely related appears as a main literary thread in their fragmentary saga. But another, potentially discordant thread appears as well; namely, that they were the chosen people of Apollo.

The earliest source for the Hyperboreans as Apollo’s chosen ones is the poet Alcaeus of Lesbos. Although the text is lost, it is paraphrased in prose by the late antique rhetor Himerius.

ὅτε Ἀπόλλων ἐγένετο, κοσμήσας αὐτὸν ὁ Ζεὺς μίτρα τε χρυσοῦν καὶ λύρα, δούς τε ἐπὶ τούτοις ἄρμα ἐλαύνειν, κύκνοι δὲ ἤ<ρο>σαν τὸ ἄρμα, εἰς Δελφούς πέμπει <καὶ> Κασταλίας νάματα, ἐκείθεν προφητεύοντα δίκην καὶ θέμιν τοῖς Ἑλλήσιν. ὁ δὲ ἐπιβάς ἐπὶ τῶν ἀρμάτων ἐφῆκε τοὺς κύκνους ἐς Ὑπερβορέους πέτεσθαι. Δελφοὶ μὲν οὖν, ὡς ἤσθοντο, παιᾶνα συνθέντες καὶ μέλος, καὶ χοροὺς ἠθέων περὶ τὸν τρίποδα στήσαντες, ἐκάλουν τὸν θεὸν ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων ἐλθεῖν. ὁ δὲ ἔτος ὅλον παρὰ τοῖς ἐκεῖ θεμιστεύσας ἀνθρώποις, ἐπειδὴ καιρὸν ἐνομοθέτει καὶ τοὺς Δελφικοὺς ἠχῆσαι τρίποδας, αὐθις κελεύει τοῖς κύκνοις ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων ἀφίπτασθαι. ἦν μὲν οὖν θέρος καὶ τοῦ θέρους τὸ μέσον αὐτό, ὅτε ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων Ἀλκαῖος ἄγει τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα.²³

²⁰ Plato, *Charmides* 158b.

²¹ For example, Plato, *Res publica* 435e, *Leges* 637e. *Suda* records (s.v. Ἀβαρις, α 18) that the name of the father of the Hyperborean Abaris is the same as that of several Thracian kings, and Virgil, *Aeneid* xi. 858 refers to one of the famous Hyperborean maidens as a Thracian.

²² Talbot Rice, *Scythians*, p. 85; Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 86–87. Cf. Herodotus, *Historiae* iv. 67–69, 105; Theophrastus, *Historia plantarum* ix. 15.2.

²³ Alcaeus, frag. 307c, ed. by Voigt, cit. by Himerius, *Oratio* 48.

(When Apollo was born, Zeus adorned him with a golden crown and lyre, and on top of that having given him a chariot — and swans lifted up the chariot — he sent him to Delphi and to the streams of Castalia, therefrom to pronounce justice and law to the Greeks. But he entered the chariot and ordered the swans to fly to the Hyperboreans. The Delphians, as they became aware of this, composed a paean with melody, set up a chorus of youths by the tripod, and called on the god to come from the Hyperboreans. He, having pronounced law among the people there a whole year, as the time had arrived to let also the Delphian tripods sound, called again on his swans to fly from the Hyperboreans. It was summer, and the very midst of summer, when Alcaeus brought Apollo from the Hyperboreans.)

The sojourn of Apollo among the Hyperboreans may have been a canonical mythical motif in Greek and Roman literature, but no preserved source treats the matter comprehensively.²⁴ The religious sect of the Pythagoreans offered the theological doctrine that Pythagoras was identical with the ‘Hyperborean Apollo’, possibly a claim professed by Pythagoras himself.²⁵ Neo-Pythagorean authors fused this religious tenet with the tale of Abaris, a Hyperborean who was supposed to have visited Greece and, in the version of the Pythagoreans, become a disciple and friend of Pythagoras.²⁶ Like the tale of the Hyperborean maidens coming to Delos, these theological narratives will only be treated cursorily here, as they contain nothing that pertains to ethnical, geographical, or other characteristics of the Hyperboreans or their country (except that Abaris is supposed to have been a very righteous man).²⁷

Apart from Alcaeus, two other pre-Hellenistic sources seem to refer to the journey of Apollo to the Hyperboreans, both in an oblique manner and lesser stylistic register, and both proceeding from the Ionic literary tradition. The Hyperboreans are mentioned in passing in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, perhaps of the sixth or even seventh century BCE. Pirates have captured the god

²⁴ Cf. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* II. 674–76; Eratosthenes, *Catasterismoi* 29; Hecataeus Abderita, *De Hyperboreis* frag. 10, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 264), cit. scholium in Apollonii Rhodii *Argonautica* II. 675; Cicero, *De natura deorum* III. 57; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca* III. 59.6–7; Boeus and Simias ap. Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 20; Callimachus *Aetia*, frags. 186.9–10, 492, ed. by Pfeiffer.

²⁵ Aristotle, frag. 173, ed. by Gigon, cit. by Aelianus, *Varia historia* 2.26; Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 28; Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorae* 6.30, 19.91, 28.140; Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* VIII. 11.

²⁶ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 28–29; Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorae* 19.90–93, 28.135, 138, 140–41, 147, 32.215–17, 221, 36.267.

²⁷ For a complete review of the sources and a discussion, see Sandin, ‘Famous Hyperboreans’, pp. 205–08, 213.

Dionysus, but they do not recognize him for what he is, except for the observant helmsman:

Δαιμόνιοι τίνα τόνδε θεὸν δεσμεύεθ' ἐλόντες
καρτερόν; οὐδὲ φέρειν δύναται μιν νηὺς εὐεργής.
ἢ γὰρ Ζεὺς ὄδε γ' ἐστὶν ἢ ἀργυρότοξος Ἀπόλλων
ἢ ἑ Ποσειδάων [...].
'Ὡς φάτο: τὸν δ' ἀρχὸς στυγερῶ ἠνίπαπε μύθῳ:
δαιμόνι' οὖρον ὄρα, ἅμα δ' ἴστιον ἔλκεο νηὸς
σύμπανθ' ὄπλα λαβῶν· ὄδε δ' αὐτ' ἀνδρῆσσι μελήσει.
ἐλπομαι ἢ Αἴγυπτον ἀφίξεται ἢ ὄ γε Κύπρον
ἢ ἐς Ὑπερβορέους ἢ ἑκάστέρῳ· ἐς δὲ τελευτήν
ἕκ ποτ' ἐρεῖ αὐτοῦ τε φίλους καὶ κτήματα πάντα.

(‘Madmen, which of the gods is this that you would bind prisoner? — a mighty one, our sturdy ship cannot support him. This is either Zeus, or silverbow Apollo, or Poseidon [...].’ So he spoke, but the captain rebuked him harshly: ‘Catch all the sheets together. Leave this fellow for men to worry about. I fancy he will get to Egypt, or Cyprus, or the Hyperboreans, or beyond, and in the end he’ll speak out and tell us his kinsmen and their possessions.’)²⁸

Here, the Hyperboreans primarily represent a place situated far away,²⁹ which pirates speculate could be the homeland of the captured man. But the helmsman has suggested that the man might be Apollo, which is probably what prompts the villainous captain to condescendingly refer to the Hyperboreans, Apollo’s mythical people.

The final pre-Hellenistic source which likely refers to the journey of Apollo to the Hyperboreans is the sixth-century iambic poet Ananius. Unfortunately, the fragment that remains of the text is corrupt at the crucial point:

Ἄπολλον, ὅς που Δῆλον ἢ Πυθῶν' ἔχεις
ἢ Νάξον ἢ Μίλητον ἢ θείην Κλάρον,
ἴκειο †καθ' ἰέρ' ἢ† Σκύθας ἀφίξεαι.³⁰

²⁸ *Hymnus Homericus in Bacchum* 17–21, 26–30, trans. by West.

²⁹ The Hyperboreans in the sense of ‘Timbuktu’, that is an unfeasibly distant place, is a literary figure that will become common, with added layers of meaning, in the Roman authors: see the subsequent article by Lewis Webb in this collection. It is less frequent in Greek, but cf. Pindar, *Isthmian ode* 6.23; Epicurus, *Epistulae* frag. 121, ed. by Arrighetti.

³⁰ Ananius, frag. 1, ed. by West, cit. by Aristophanes, *Ranae* 659, scholium in Aristophanis *Ranae* 659.

(Apollo, you who may hold Delos or the Pytho
or Naxos or Miletos or holy Klaros,
come †[...]† you go to the Scythians.)

Suggested emended readings translate into ‘come to your temples, before you go to the Scythians’, ‘[...] lest you will wind up among the Scythians’, ‘[...] why should you go to the Scythians?’. The iambic style is in the lower register, and the point may well be that Apollo should keep to his Greek domains rather than dally among Scythian barbarians. At any rate, it is clear that it is the Hyperboreans, the traditional destination of Apollo’s journey, who are here referred to as Scythians.

Western Ideals

The ethnical simplification and less than venerable attitude towards the Hyperboreans as Scythians presented in the lower style and, perhaps, Ionic culture, is in stark contrast to the preserved instances in Greek lyrical poetry, mostly belonging to the Doric cultural tradition. However, little or nothing that pertains to the Hyperboreans is left from the lyrical poetry of the sixth century or earlier. Apart from Himerius’s paraphrase of Alcaeus, where we saw nothing of actual descriptions of the people and their land, Simonides is said to have treated the theme, but nothing of the content of the poems in question is known, although he may possibly have referred to the Hyperboreans as *chilieteis*, ‘thousand-year-old’.³¹ The outstanding representative of the high-register, lyrical view of the Hyperboreans is Pindar. If Herodotus’s or Aristeeas’s description of the land of the Hyperboreans as situated north of the Scythians and other ‘Asiatic’ peoples is the emblematic version of a realist or low-register view on the matter, Pindar’s depiction in the tenth *Pythian ode* is the fundamental and perhaps seminal text of an ‘idealist’, sacral, and religious approach.

³¹ Simonides, frag. 65, ed. by Page (*PMG* no. 570), cit. by Strabo, *Geographia* xv. 1.711. The word is not explicitly attributed to Simonides but used by Strabo, who states only: ‘he [Megasthenes, frag. 27b, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 715)] says the same things about the thousand-year-old Hyperboreans as Simonides, Pindar and the mythologists.’ ‘Thousand-year-old Hyperboreans’ looks like a learned citation, though, and the Greek style and metre of *chilietōn Hyperboreōn* might well be choral lyric. Those who have understood the words as a quotation has attributed them to Pindar (frag. 53, ed. by Boeckh; frag. 257, ed. by Schroeder), but if so, this reference must come in addition to the tenth *Pythian ode*, to which Strabo most certainly refers here.

ὁ χάλκεος οὐρανὸς οὐ ποτ' ἀμβατὸς αὐτῶ·
 ὄσαις δὲ βροτὸν ἔθνος ἀγλαΐαις ἀ-
 πτόμεσθα, περαίνει πρὸς ἔσχατον
 πλόον· ναυσὶ δ' οὔτε πεζὸς ἰὼν <κεν> εὐροις
 ἐς Ὑπερβορέων ἀγῶνα θαυμαστὰν ὁδόν.

παρ' οἷς ποτε Περσεὺς ἐδαίσατο λαγέτας,
 δώματ' ἐσελθὼν,
 κλειτὰς ὄνων ἑκατόμβας ἐπιτόσσαις θεῶ
 ῥέζοντας· ὦν θαλίαις ἔμπεδον
 εὐφαιμίαις τε μάλιστ' Ἀπόλλων
 χαίρει, γελᾷ θ' ὀρών ὕβριν ὀρθίαν κνωδάλων.

Μοῖσα δ' οὐκ ἀποδαμεί
 τρόποις ἐπὶ σφετέροισι· παντᾶ δὲ χοροὶ παρθένων
 λυρᾶν τε βοαὶ καναχαὶ τ' αὐλῶν δονέονται·
 δάφνα τε χρυσέα κόμας ἀναδήσαν-
 τες εἰλαπινάζουσιν εὐφρόνως.
 νόσοι δ' οὔτε γήρας οὐλόμενον κέκραται
 ἱερά γενεᾶ· πόνων δὲ καὶ μαχᾶν ἄτερ

οἰκέοισι φυγόντες
 ὑπέρδικον Νέμεσιν. θρασεῖα δὲ πνέων καρδίᾳ
 μὸλεν Δανάας ποτὲ παῖς, ἀγείτο δ' Ἀθήνα,
 ἐς ἀνδρῶν μακάρων ὄμιλον.

(The bronze heaven is never his to scale,
 but as for the all the glories which our mortal race
 attains, he completes the furthest voyage.
 And traveling neither by ships nor on foot could you find
 the marvelous way to the assembly of the Hyperboreans.

With them Perseus, the leader of the people, once feasted,
 upon entering their halls,
 when he came upon them sacrificing glorious hecatombs
 of asses to the god. In their banquets
 and praises Apollo ever finds greatest delight
 and laughs to see the beasts' braying insolence.

And the Muse is no stranger
 to their ways, for everywhere choruses of maidens,
 sounds of lyres, and pipes' shrill notes are stirring.
 With golden laurel they crown their hair
 and feast joyfully.

Neither sickness nor accursed old age mingles
with that holy race, but without toils or battles

they dwell there, having escaped
strictly judging Nemesis. Breathing courage in his heart,
the son of Danaë once came — Athena led him —
to that throng of blessed men.)³²

This is the first extant text that describes the Hyperboreans as a supernatural people, and possibly the seminal version of this variant of the myth, being dated to 498 BCE as the oldest preserved poem of Pindar (unless the supernatural aspect was found earlier in Simonides). The entire description expands on the theme of the ‘furthest voyage’ or ultimate reach (the *non plus ultra*). This refers to the ultimate conditions of superiority attainable by mortals, which are contrasted to the gods, represented by the unattainable brazen heavens. The Hyperboreans in Pindar are emblems of the perfect mortal condition, reached also by heroes such as Perseus during their lifetime of achievement. They are not supernatural in the sense of divine or even superhuman, but rather the best possible for human beings. What we know of Pindar, his poetical style, and thematic preferences may suggest that this existentialist approach is his innovation rather than a traditional description, even if it was a logical interpolation of traditional descriptions of the Hyperboreans and their relation to Apollo to mirror those of Homer on Poseidon and the Ethiopians.³³ Superiority may be potentially inherent in the notion of a people particularly favoured or visited by a god, but unless Simonides referred to the Hyperboreans as living a thousand years, there is nothing in the admittedly scant evidence before Pindar that explicitly suggests such a notion.³⁴

That Perseus visited the Hyperboreans may also be an innovation of Pindar, who hints that this took place during his quest for the head of the Gorgon Medusa.³⁵ Significantly, I will argue, there is nothing in Pindar that suggests a Hyperborean affinity with, or geographical locality close to, the Scythians. On the contrary, he seems deliberately to render his Hyperboreans as distinctly *non-Scythian* as possible. There are a number of details pertaining to their cus-

³² Pindar, *Pythian ode* 10.29–44, trans. by Race.

³³ Homer, *Iliad* I. 423–24, XXIII. 205–07, *Odyssey* I. 22–26, v. 282–87.

³⁴ Nor is there any hint in Homer about any supernatural characteristics of the land or people of the Ethiopians, visited by the gods, who are only said to be *amymones*, ‘blameless’ (Homer, *Iliad* I. 423), and affluent enough to offer meals to the gods.

³⁵ Pindar, *Pythian ode* 10.45–46.

toms and geographical region in two of his poems that suggest that the intention of Pindar may have been to turn them into veritable *anti-Scythians*.

In the poem cited above, the locality seems almost supernatural, being unreachable by foot or ship. It is implied that Perseus flew there.³⁶ As is evident from the third *Olympian ode*, cited below, the unreachable location should be understood as a mountainous rather than otherworldly region, the opposite of the Scythian horse-friendly plains. The Hyperboreans are portrayed as having customs similar to the Greeks, with choruses, laurels, and identical musical instruments. The only distinction is that they sacrifice asses, not cattle or sheep, to the god. This peculiar notion, retained in some Hellenistic poetical descriptions of the Hyperboreans,³⁷ may be the innovation of the poet, and a strategy to separate them from the Scythians, for Scythia was thought to have no asses or mules. According to an anecdote from the Persian invasion in 513 BCE, the formidable Scythian battle horses were frightened by the braying of Persian asses, leading to defeat in several battles. This event should have been known to Pindar, who came from Thebes, notorious for ‘Medizing’, that is, friendliness to Persians. It is now known from the version of Herodotus:

Τὸ δὲ τοῖσι Πέρσησι τε ἦν σύμμαχον καὶ τοῖσι Σκύθησι ἀντίξοον ἐπιτιθεμένοισι τῷ Δαρείου στρατοπέδῳ, θῶμα μέγιστον ἐρέω, τῶν τε ὄνων ἢ φωνῆ καὶ τῶν ἡμίονων τὸ εἶδος. οὔτε γὰρ ὄνον οὔτε ἡμίονον γῆ ἢ Σκυθικὴ φέρει, ὡς καὶ πρότερόν μοι δεδήλωται· οὐδὲ ἔστι ἐν τῇ Σκυθικῇ πάσῃ χώρῃ τὸ παράπαν οὔτε ὄνος οὔτε ἡμίονος διὰ τὰ ψύχρα. ὑβρίζοντες ὧν οἱ ὄνοι ἐτάρασσον τὴν ἵππον τῶν Σκυθῶν· πολλακίς δὲ ἐπελαυνόντων ἐπὶ τοὺς Πέρσας μεταξύ ὅκως ἀκούσειαν οἱ ἵπποι τῶν ὄνων τῆς φωνῆς, ἐταράσσοντό τε ὑποστρεφόμενοι καὶ ἐν θῶματι ἔσκον, ὀρθὰ ἰστάντες τὰ ὦτα, ἅτε οὔτε ἀκούσαντες πρότερον φωνῆς τοιαύτης οὔτε ἰδόντες τὸ εἶδος.

(Most strange it is to relate, but what aided the Persians and thwarted the Scythians in their attacks on Darius’s army was the braying of the asses and the appearance of the mules. For, as I have before shown, Scythia bears no asses or mules; nor is there in the whole of Scythia any ass or a mule, by reason of the cold. Therefore the asses, when they brayed loudly, alarmed the Scythian horses; and often, when they were in the act of charging the Persians, if the horses heard the asses bray they would turn back in affright or stand astonished with ears erect, never having heard a like noise or seen a like creature.)³⁸

³⁶ With his winged sandals, often depicted on vases from the period, e.g., *BAPD* nos 201820, 206328.

³⁷ Callimachus, frags. 186.10, 492, ed. by Pfeiffer; Boeus and Simias ap. Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 20.

³⁸ Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 129, trans. by Godley, cf. IV. 28.

We should observe that Herodotus uses the word *hybrizantes*, here translated as ‘brayed loudly’, while Pindar says that Apollo takes delight in the *hybrin orthian* of the asses, the sense of which has been debated but which Race chooses to understand as ‘braying insolence.’³⁹ If Pindar and Herodotus accordingly both use the word *hybris*, properly an act of violence or outrage, to refer to the shrill braying of the asses, this could suggest that their depiction has a common source.⁴⁰ At any rate, Pindar chooses to associate the Hyperboreans with asses, which were not only thought to be unheard of in Scythia, but which were associated with defeats of the Scythians in battle by the Persians.

In two other lyrical examples, one of Pindar and one of Bacchylides, the Hyperboreans are mentioned briefly as inhabitants of a country far away, to which a magical temple and the Lydian king Croesus, respectively, are transferred through the intervention of Apollo.⁴¹ In the latter case, Bacchylides takes the sacral, Pindaric interpretation of the Hyperboreans as far as to understand their land as a sort of Elysium, a place for the blessed elect to inhabit as an alternative to death, but this is an eccentric approach.⁴² We learn nothing of the Hyperboreans or their land in these examples, but there is one more depiction in Pindar’s third *Olympian ode*, which, while shorter and more convoluted than the one in the tenth *Pythian*, gives more information about his view of its location and climate. Pindar here contradicts the notion that the Hyperboreans are unreachable on foot, yet the one who does reach them this way is Heracles, who can do anything. Heracles goes north in order to find the olive tree and introduce it to Hellas, not primarily for the purpose of agriculture and improved sustenance, but to use its leaves for crowning the victors in the Olympic contests:

γλαυκόχροα κόσμον ἑλαίας, τὰν ποτε
 Ἴστρου ἀπὸ σκιαρᾶν
 παγᾶν ἔνεικεν Ἀμφιτρωνιάδας,
 τῶν Οὐλυμπία κάλλιστον ἀέθλων,
 δᾶμον Ὑπερβορέων πείσαις Ἀπόλ-
 λωνος θεράποντα λόγω.

³⁹ Accordingly understanding *orthian* to refer to the shrill note of the braying.

⁴⁰ It might also support this understanding of the passage of Pindar, which is that of the scholium *ad loc.*, in opposition to those modern scholars who take *hybrin orthian* to refer to the erect phalluses of the asses.

⁴¹ Pindar, *Paeon* B2 (VIII) 61–67, ed. by Rutherford = frag. 52i.61–67, ed. by Maehler; Bacchylides, *Epinikion* 3.57–62.

⁴² Cf. Jebb, *Bacchylides*, p. 261.

(The gray-colored adornment of olive, which once
Amphitryon's son brought
from the shady springs of Ister
to be the fairest memorial of the contests at Olympia,
after he persuaded the Hyperborean people,
Apollo's servants, with his speech.)⁴³

The precinct of Olympia seemed naked to Heracles, not yet adorned with trees.

δὴ τότ' ἐς γαῖαν πορεύεν θυμὸς ὄρμα
Ἰστρίαν νιν.

(Then it was that his heart urged him to go
to the Istrian land.)⁴⁴

For here he had once (before, presumably) arrived in search of the Golden-horned doe:

τὰν μεθέπων ἶδε καὶ κείναν χθόνα
πνοιαῖς ὀπιθεν Βορέα
ψυχροῦ· τόθι δένδρεα θάμβαινε σταθεῖς.

(In pursuit of her he saw, among other places, that land
beyond the blast of the cold
North Wind, where he stood and wondered at the trees.)⁴⁵

As we can see, Pindar in this poem states that the land of the Hyperboreans is situated near the *sources* of the Ister (Danube), which as far as the Greeks knew lay to the north-west, very far, indeed at the opposite end of Europe, from the Scythians: ῥέει γὰρ δὴ διὰ πάσης Εὐρώπης ὁ Ἴστρος, ἀρξάμενος ἐκ Κελτῶν, οἱ ἔσχατοι πρὸς ἡλίου δυσμῶν μετὰ Κύνητας οἰκέουσι τῶν ἐν τῇ Εὐρώπῃ· ῥέων δὲ διὰ πάσης Εὐρώπης ἐς τὰ πλάγια τῆς Σκυθικῆς ἐσβάλλει (For the Ister traverses the whole of Europe, rising among the Celts who, save only the Cynetes, are the most westerly dwellers in Europe, and flowing thus clean across Europe it issues forth along the borders of Scythia).⁴⁶ Herodotus is not unlikely to follow Hecataeus here.⁴⁷ The location of the Hyperboreans close to the sources of the Danube also indirectly confirms the hints in the tenth *Pythian ode* that they

⁴³ Pindar, *Olympian ode* 3.13–16, trans. by Race.

⁴⁴ Pindar, *Olympian ode* 3.25–26, trans. by Race.

⁴⁵ Pindar, *Olympian ode* 3.30–32, trans. by Race.

⁴⁶ Herodotus, *Historiae* 49. Cf. Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 350a–b.

⁴⁷ Cf. Jacoby, 'Hekataios von Milet', pp. 349–50.

inhabit mountainous regions, the normal place for sources of rivers to appear. This geographical location may be an innovation of Pindar.⁴⁸

Living in the mountains, not the Scythian plains, in the far north-west at the opposite end of the great river Ister, and sacrificing asses, unheard of by Scythians and feared by their horses, the Hyperboreans are depicted by Pindar as a highly civilized people dedicated to music and a service of the god which is similar to that of the Greeks, with choruses and hecatombs. Perhaps unjustly, the Scythians in contrast were notorious among the Greeks for intolerably harsh customs, including excessive drinking and promiscuity, human sacrifice, taking body parts from slain enemies as trophies, and burning mages and their families alive in the case of mistaken prophecies.⁴⁹ The cultural and religious customs of the Scythians were thought to be the exact opposite of those of the Greeks and the Hyperboreans as described by Pindar: they did not have temples to the gods (see above), they did not employ music in their religious cult, and flutes (*auloi*), which Pindar says were heard 'everywhere' among the Hyperboreans, were entirely unheard of.⁵⁰ According to Herodotus, the Scythians were extremely hostile to foreign customs in general and Greek ones in particular, and killed kinsmen who adopted them.⁵¹ There is accordingly much to suggest that Pindar's Hyperboreans are intentionally portrayed as the exact opposites of the popular Scythian stereotype.

⁴⁸ It is also ascribed to Aeschylus in the lost drama *Prometheus solutus* (frag. 197, ed. by Radt, cit. by scholium in Apollonius Rhodius iv. 282–91b), but I subscribe to the view that this drama like the *Prometheus vincetus* is most likely spurious and at any rate later than 476/75 BCE, when the third *Olympian ode* was performed.

⁴⁹ See Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, pp. 7–10; Herodotus, *Historiae* iv. 59–81; Anacreon, frag. 11b, ed. by Page (*PMG* no. 356); Sophocles, frag. 473, ed. by Radt; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae* 1001–25; Plato, *Leges* 637e.

⁵⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* i. 104; Aristotle, *Analytica posteriora* 78b; Plutarchus, *Septem sapientium convivium* 150d–e. This information is attributed to Anacharsis, a Scythian wise man who was said to have visited the Greeks in the early sixth century BCE (Herodotus, *Historiae* iv. 76–77). Anacharsis is said by some sources to have admitted to be un-Scythian, i.e., comparatively gentle and civilized, in his manners (Stobaeus, *Anthologium* iv. 29a.16; *Gnomologium Vaticanum* 22, ed. by Sternbach). There is evidence that not only the famous Anacharsis but the Scythians as such, and in particular the northernmost living Scythians, were sometimes later seen in a positive light, as 'unspoiled barbarians' (Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, pp. 45–49; Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, p. 114). But this notion, the opposite ideological construction, as it were, from the view of the Scythians as outrageously barbaric, may have been partly influenced by the literary motif of the Hyperboreans.

⁵¹ Herodotus, *Historiae* iv. 76–80.

Summary and Divergent Views

Despite the scant evidence, it is possible to identify these two main directions taken by the motif in its earliest form: either the Hyperboreans are a Scythian type, or they are supernatural and sacred and live in the north-west. The latter view may have arisen as an intentionally revisionist version, possibly depending on the personal preferences of Pindar. The Pindaric examples predate Plato, Antimachus, Cratinus, and Herodotus, but the examples from Ananius, Hesiod, and possibly 'Aristeas' show that the Scythian understanding of the Hyperboreans predated Pindar and Herodotus.⁵² The western location of the Hyperboreans may also be seen as an expression of the general geographic orientation of the Dorians, and the magical interpretation of their existence may reflect Doric religious sentiment, in which the god Apollo was held in greater honour than among the Ionic Greeks.

Pliny the Elder observes the divergence of Scythian versus western Hyperboreans in the ancient texts: 'verum Asiae quoque magna portio adposita septentrioni iniuria sideris rigens vastas solitudines habet. ab extremo aquilone ad initium orientis aestivi Scythae sunt. extra eos ultraque aquilonis initia Hyperboreos aliqui posuere, pluribus in Europa dictos' (A great portion of Asia however also, adjoining the north, owing to the severity of its frosty climate contains vast deserts. From the extreme north-north-east to the northernmost point at which the sun rises in summer there are the Scythians, and outside of them and beyond the point where north-north-east begins some have placed the Hyperboreans, who are said by a majority of authorities to be in Europe).⁵³ Immediately afterwards he speaks of a people 'Arimphaei, [...] not unlike the Hyperboreans', who are said to be mild-mannered vegetarians, considered holy and affording asylum to fugitives, something which is respected by their neighbours.⁵⁴ This description is almost identical to the one used by Herodotus for the Argippeans, another north Central Asian people of more or less Scythian kind, except for their gentle customs.⁵⁵

⁵² The epic poem *Epigoni*, possibly of the sixth or even seventh century BCE, also featured Hyperboreans according to Herodotus, but nothing more specific is known (*Epigoni* frag. 2, ed. by Bernabé, cit. by Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 32).

⁵³ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* VI. 33–34, trans. by Rackham. Pliny in fact himself earlier (IV. 88–89) endorses the version of Herodotus, placing the Hyperboreans north of the Black Sea.

⁵⁴ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* VI. 34–35, trans. by Rackham.

⁵⁵ Herodotus, *Historiae* IV. 23.

We may finally observe that one more early description of the Hyperboreans exists, which is related to the Arimphaei of Pliny and Argippeans of Herodotus. This description is accordingly eccentric and not possible to sort into either of the two categories identified above. Incidentally, the author is not an Ionic or Doric but an Aeolic Greek, Hellenicus of Lesbos: τοὺς δὲ Ὑπερβορέους Ἑλλάνικος ὑπὲρ τὰ Ριπαῖα ὄρη οἰκεῖν ἱστορεῖ· διδάσκεσθαι δὲ αὐτοὺς δικαιοσύνην μὴ κρεοφαγοῦντας, ἀλλ' ἀκροδρόιους χρωμένους. τοὺς ἑξακονταετείς οὗτοι ἔξω πυλῶν ἄγοντες ἀφανίζουσιν (Hellenicus records that the Hyperboreans live above the Ripaeian mountains, and that they profess righteousness through not eating meat, using fruits and nuts for food. They bring their sexagenarians outside the gates and do away with them).⁵⁶

That the Hyperboreans here live beyond a mountain range separates them from the Scythians, wherever this mountain range is imagined to be situated,⁵⁷ but the description is in the realist vein, without suggestions of superiority or supernatural characteristics of the Hyperboreans, and in explicit contrast to the descriptions of extreme longevity in Pindar and perhaps Simonides. In this respect, Hellenicus's description is notable as the oldest and perhaps seminal version of the legendary Nordic *ättestupa* or 'kin precipice', the practice of killing people of one's tribe who have reached a certain venerable age. The verb used in the quotation, *aphanizousin* (do away with, make disappear) is ambiguous, but the Latin grammarian Solinus takes up the motif with regard to the Hyperboreans in what became the canonical version, in which the old men voluntarily throw themselves off a cliff, a version Procopius also later uses in his description of the Thulean Heruls.⁵⁸

Authors of the Hellenistic age used the earlier written sources more or less innovatively to create new literary and faux-historiographical works. An important example with regard to the Hyperboreans is Hecataeus of Abdera, who wrote a comprehensive work *On the Hyperboreans*, lost except for frag-

⁵⁶ Hellenicus, frag. 187b, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 4), cit. by Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* I. 15.72.2 (≈ frag. 187c, cit. by Theodoretus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* XII. 44).

⁵⁷ The Ripaeian Mountains, like the river Eridanus (see Hesiod cited above; Herodotus, *Historiae* III. 115; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* IV. 482–87, 596–617), feature in legendary descriptions of the North in general and Hyperboreans in particular; cf. especially Hippocrates, *De aëre aquis et locis* 19, who claims that Boreas, the North Wind, starts from these mountains. Later writers with more geographical knowledge tried to place them accurately on the map of the world or identify them with known mountains (Protarchus, frag. 1, ed. by Müller; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* IV. 88; cf. Strabo, *Geographia* VII. 3.295).

⁵⁸ Solinus, *De mirabilibus mundi* 17; Procopius, *De bello gothico* VI. 14.2–3.

ments cited by later authors.⁵⁹ Hecataeus follows the Pindaric, Western version of the myth but places the Hyperboreans on an island, 'opposite the Celtic regions'.⁶⁰ But there is nothing which suggests that later authors had recourse to substantially more material concerning the Hyperboreans and their land than that cited in this article. The new material which appears, for example, the fragments of Boeo in Pausanias, has the semblance of pure innovation for literary or political reasons.⁶¹ More scholarly inclined Hellenistic authors, also preserved in scant fragments, interpret the older texts in light of their increased knowledge of geography, placing for instance the Pindaric Hyperboreans in or beyond the Alps.⁶²

We may conclude on a prosaic note. Apart from the myths of Abaris and the Hyperborean maidens, which could originate in authentic memories of remarkable pilgrims from the north, the Hyperboreans in older literature do not have the appearance of reflecting venerably ancient oral tradition. Rather they are a comparatively late, purely literary construction, based on the stimuli to the imagination provided by the strikingly suggestive name, the 'People beyond the North Wind'.

⁵⁹ Hecataeus Abderita, *De Hyperboreis* test. 6, frags. 7–14, ed. by Jacoby (*FGrHist* no. 264).

⁶⁰ Hecataeus Abderita, *De Hyperboreis* frag. 7, cit. by Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca* II. 47. As opposed to Bridgman, *Hyperboreans*, passim, I think there is an exclusively literary reason for the instances that associate the Hyperboreans with the Celts, namely the tradition from and authority of the major canonical authors followed in the Hellenistic period. Pindar says that the Hyperboreans are to be found near the sources of the Danube, *ergo*, some learned authors conclude that they live in or near the Celtic regions. Others, such as Boeus and Simias fr. 2, ed. by Powell, cit. by Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 20, place them in the east (north of Babylon!), following the Scythian paradigm in Herodotus and other Ionic authorities.

⁶¹ Boeo, frags. 1–2, ed. by Powell, cit. by Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* x. 5.7–8. Cf. Sandin, 'Famous Hyperboreans', p. 218.

⁶² Protarchus, frag. 1, ed. by Müller, cit. by Stephanus Byzantius, *Ethnica* s.v. Ὑπερβόρειοι; Posidonius, frag. 70, ed. by Theiler (= frag. 103, ed. by Jacoby, *FGrHist* no. 87), cit. by scholium in Apollonii Rhodii *Argonautica* II. 675.

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