



Aristeas' Journey to Hyperborea

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Abstract

The *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. But it belongs to the memory of the worlds of Homer and Hesiod and simply cannot hold its own against the *Histories* in the contest of ethnographic authority. This study presents Aristeas' alleged mystical journey to Hyperborea, preserved mainly in the accounts of Maximus of Tyre, and compares it to Herodotus' rational mindset.

Keywords: Hyperborea, mythology, Aristeas of Proconnesus, Ancient Greece, history of religion, shamanism.

1. Arimaspea

Hyperborea was an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which was both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature.¹ The Hyperborean myth may date from as early as the 8th century BC, and possibly even earlier (Bridgman 2005: 3, 71). The first extant written sources explicitly discussing Hyperborea, however, date back to the 5th century BC with Herodotus, Pindar, Simonides of Ceos, and Hellanicus of Lesbos, who referenced earlier, mostly lost sources describing Hyperborea by Hesiod, Homer, and Aristeas. The oldest reference to Herodotus was the 7th-6th century BC, now lost, poem *Arimaspea* of Aristeas of Proconnesus.²

The situation with Aristeas is typical for ancient studies: on the one hand, there is an extremely narrow range of known facts, on the other hand, a wide range of interpretations, often as radical in their conclusions as speculative in the ways they are substantiated. *Arimaspea*, composed in three books (Suda, s.v. Aristeas), remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. Many other manifestations of the revolutions of wisdom were built on dialogue with the heritage of the poem and it continued to be read at least into the Imperial period. It

¹ For a full overview on the Hyperborean myth and its further development refer to my forthcoming paper *Hyperborea on Maps – Always to the North* (2023).

² The scholarship on Aristeas is abundant. Note Meuli 1935: 153-64; Dodds 1951: 135-78; Phillips 1955; Bowra 1956; Bolton 1962; Ivantchik 1989; Shcheglov 2001, 2010; Bremmer 2002: 27-40, 145-51; West 2004; Pyankov 2005; Musbahova 2012; Zhmud 2016; Dowden 2019; Gagné 2021: 243-265; Bianchetti 2021.

disappeared before the founding of the Library of Alexandria, and therefore it is unlikely that any large passages from it can be found in papyri (Bolton 1962: 20-38). The surviving fragments of *Arimaspea* do not mention the Hyperboreans, and are very small and few in number – the longest extant fragment consists of six lines quoted by Pseudo-Longinus in *On the Sublime* 10.4. However, a number of borrowings from the poem are contained in the works of Pindar, Herodotus, Hellanicus, and possibly Hecataeus of Abdera, Alcman, Pliny, Aelian, Plautus, Ennius, Aeschylus (Bolton 1962: 39-73). *Arimaspea* is probably to be dated in the middle third of the 7th century BC (Phillips 1955: 163); 615-595 BC (Dowden 2019); early-to-mid 6th century BC (Gagné 2021: 246); end of 6th or first quarter of 5th century BC (Ivantchik 1989).³

- *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world.
- *Arimaspea* became a rich new source about Hyperborea.
- We find accounts about Aristeas' mysterious journey to Hyperborea in Pliny, Maximus of Tyre and Suda.

Aristeas is the protagonist of his own adventure in the text, indicating that we are dealing with a first-person travel account – a tale of marvel and discoveries. He was citizen of the small Greek city Proconnesus on an island of the same name in the Sea of Marmara and came from a noble family. Very important is the fact that he was connected with the cult of Apollo. It could be said that there were two main factors for the formation of Aristeas' personality – the Hellenic colonization and the invasion of the Cimmerians. They encouraged him to embark on the journey. But his end goal, according to Pyankov, was to reach the Hyperboreans – Apollo's chosen ones. That is why his voyage should be considered more as a kind of pilgrimage than a trade-route initiative (Pyankov 2005: 16; cf. Phillips 1955: 177). The narrative consisted of his travel from his small island city to the deepest reaches of far-away lands, and his return to Proconnesus. His travels lasted seven years. After reaching the northern coast of the Black Sea, Aristeas continued ever further inland through the steppes on his way towards Hyperborea, which he never physically attained in the end. He mentions seven populations: Greeks, Cimmerians, Scythians, Issedones, Arimaspians, Griffins and Hyperboreans.⁴

Herodotus (4.13-16) remains the main source of information about Aristeas and the starting point for all hypotheses and interpretations. His story consists of three parts: information drawn from the poem of Aristeas (4.13, 16 = fr. 1-2 Bolton), and then two stories told to Herodotus in Proconnesus and Cyzicus (4.14) and in Metapontum (4.15). For some of his information Aristeas claimed his own experience when he visited the Issedones (Hdt. 4.13), and for much else beyond their frontiers he claimed their authority (Hdt. 4.16). His reports on these unknown peoples were so remarkable that the early historians could not entirely neglect him. On the other hand, Aristeas seems not to have been content with this but to have claimed supernatural powers.

³ One of the reasons for Ivantchik's relatively radical downdating of the poem is because he made a case for a Pythagorean Aristeas. Gagné (2021: 292) does not believe that the *Arimaspea* was composed in a Pythagorean orbit, or that it reflects Pythagorean ideas, whatever date we want to give to the poem.

⁴ For Pausanias still, many centuries later, the very sight of a Griffin on a statue could immediately conjure references to the Arimaspians of Aristeas. Pausanias (1.24.5-6) supplies details that do not come from Herodotus. The Arimaspians of the Aeschylean play are obviously not entirely independent from Aristeas' poem. The iconographic theme of the battle between the Arimaspians and the Griffins was particularly popular in Attic red-figure ceramic of the late 5th–4th century BC. While it certainly resonated with *Arimaspea*, and possibly even derived from it, that exponentially widespread theme clearly followed its own autonomous path (Gagné 2021: 276). Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound* 803-06) calls the griffins “the sharp-toothed unbarking hounds of Zeus”.

2. Aristeas' soul journey to Hyperborea

Besides all controversial elements, the *Arimaspea* has another peculiar aspect – part of Aristeas' travel is described as a mystical soul journey. These unusual legends about Aristeas' soul flying like a bird were particularly famous among the worshipers of the Apollo, notably among the Pythagoreans. The stories of Aristeas were introduced into the circle of notions of soul travel and states of trance. Some scholars think that in *Arimaspea*, besides specific information about Scythia, we also find reflections from a mystical practice of a shamanic cult, which was widespread in Scythia (Bongard-Levin 1983: 97). The majority of contemporary scholars accept the real travel and explain the soul journey with later Pythagorean influence. However, both points of view can be reconciled. The sources do not give ground for doubt that Aristeas was in Scythia and reached the Issedones. At the same time, the “mystical element” in *Arimaspea* definitely existed even before and regardless of the influence of the Pythagoreans and Platonists.⁵

Bowra (1956: 2) tried to convince us this way: Herodotus (4.13) says that Aristeas went to the Issedones „being possessed by Phoebus [epithet of Apollo]”. When Suda (s.v. Aristeas) says “whenever he wanted, his soul would leave and return again”, when Pliny (*NH* 7.52) says that his soul could take the form of a bird, we are not surprised that he should claim to be more than an ordinary traveller and to have more than usual sources of information. Such are indeed described by the 2nd century sophist Maximus of Tyre (38.3), who tells with relish how Aristeas' soul could leave his body, fly into the air, and traverse sea and land until he came to the Hyperboreans; by such means he was able to learn not only about natural phenomena but about the ways of men:

There was also once a philosopher in Proconnesus called Aristeas. His wisdom was at first regarded with mistrust, because he could produce no teacher for it. Eventually, therefore, he invented an explanation to counter this mistrust. He used to say that his soul, leaving his body and flying straight up to the bright sky, made a circuit of both Greek and foreign lands, along with all their islands and rivers and mountains. The far point in his soul's excursion was the land of the Hyperboreans, and it surveyed systematically all laws and civic customs, types of landscape and variations in climate, expanses of sea and mouths of rivers; what is more, the view it then had of the heavens was much clearer than from below on earth. Aristeas was more convincing when he said this than Anaxagoras or the celebrated Xenophanes or any other exegete of the nature of reality. Men did not yet understand clearly about his soul's peregrinations, nor about the nature of the “eyes” with which it saw all, but believed that the soul had literally to travel abroad if it was to give a wholly true account of all things. (Aristeas fr. 20 Bolton, T13, F1 Bernabé, T 11 Davies)⁶

According to West (2004: 57), Maximus supposed the *Arimaspea* to be something other than a record of straightforward travel enlivened with strange tales told to its author in the course of his journey. His view is further clarified by an earlier passage (10.2-3: the first part = Aristeas fr. 19 Bolton, T12 Bernabé, T1 1 Davies) in which he treats the case of Aristeas as similar to Epimenides' sleep and Pythagoras' claim to be a reincarnation of Euphorbus who fought at Troy:

⁵ Instead of “mystical element” most scholars use the term “shamanism”. Which, although having the same contextual meaning, I don't like (see n. 8). On shamanism see Meuli, 1935; Chadwick, 1942; Eliade, 1964; Lewis, 1971; Burkert, 1972: 120-165; Dodds, 1973; Burkert, 1996: 67-69; Humprey, 1996. According to Kindstrand (1981: 18), “it is notable that when barbarians, known for their wisdom, arrive in Greece, they always come from the North and their wisdom is displayed in the religious sphere, connected in most cases with the cult of Apollo. We may here recall Orpheus who came to Greece from Thrace”. For Thracian “shamanism” see Marazov (1989). For Aristeas' connection with Pythagoras see Burkert (1972: 462): “As for Aristeas, this poet and traveller inspired by Apollo was born too early and reappeared too late after his death to have come in contact with Pythagoras.”

⁶ Translated by Trapp (1997: 300, 86), modified by West (2004: 57).

There was a man from Proconnesus whose body lay prostrate, still animate, but faintly and in a fashion not far removed from death. At the same time, his soul, escaping from the body, travelled through the air like a bird, surveying all beneath it - land and sea, cities and races of men, events and natural phenomena of every kind; then, re-entering his body and raising it up again, it used it like an instrument, to expound the different sights and sounds it had experienced in different nations of the world. What is it that Epimenides and Pythagoras and Aristeas are all trying to hint at? Can their theme be anything other than the freedom of the good man's soul from the pleasures and sufferings of the body, when by escaping from the tumult of the physical world and turning its intelligence in on itself, it re-encounters pure truth, free from imperfect images? This does indeed resemble a beautiful slumber, full of vivid dreams; it does indeed resemble a lofty soaring of the soul, not over mountain peaks in the misty and turbulent lower atmosphere, but beyond this in the heights of the calm ether, as peace and tranquility escort it serenely to truth and revelation.⁷

There might seem to be some contradiction between Herodotus' account of a traveler who gets information by hearsay and Maximus' account of an initiate who gets it by vision,⁸ but the answer is not far to seek if we assume that Aristeas presented himself in both roles and that Herodotus chose to stress the one and Maximus the other (Bowra 1956: 2). According to West (2004: 58, 64) "Herodotus has toned down the more sensational or fantastic elements in Aristeas' self-presentation", "he has quite drastically rationalized Aristeas' account", "those features of the *Arimaspea* which did not fit this view he apparently dismissed as mere poetic embellishment". Herodotus would simply have left it out of his narrative, as he so often does when faced with fantastic poetic material (Gagné, 2021: 257).⁹ Although not having "special commitment to the

⁷ Speaking about Pythagoras, a statement of Bolton (1962: 174) should be mentioned, according to whom "in *Arimaspea* it was stated that a feature of the righteousness of the Hyperboreans was their vegetarianism; it would follow that vegetarianism must particularly commend itself to Apollo, and so Pythagoras adopted it" (cf. Burkert 1963). But Bolton did not supply any evidence on which to base this hypothesis. Although this seems more like the doctrines of Pythagoreanism, Orphism, the teachings of the sophist Protagoras, or some school of philosophy, we find account in direction vegetarianism in a fragment of Hellanicus of Lesbos, an author of the late 5th century BC, preserved from 2nd century AD in Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 1.15.72). Hellanicus was reported to have written that the Hyperboreans lived to the north of the Rhiplean Mountains (he may have used Herodotus as his source), learned Justice, did not eat meat, but only wild fruits.

⁸ Instead of "initiate", Bowra used the, what I think not quite appropriate, word "shaman". My concern is that "shaman" is used as a general expression applicable to the magico-religious life of all primitive peoples. As Gagné 2021: 53 notes, the "Greek shamanism" starts with Levesque 1789 (who researches the influence of Thracian "Orphic shamans" in Greek society) and is further developed by Creuzer, 1803, Lobeck, 1829 and Meuli, 1935. For Greek shamanism in general, and for Aristeas' relation to the beliefs of his age, see Dodds (1973: 135-178). He states (p. 135), that *Arimaspea* "may have been modelled on the psychic excursions of northern shamans" (cf. Bremmer, 2002: 27-40; 2016; Gagné, 2021: 53, 252). Burkert (2004: 74) called these opposing views among scholars "battlefield between rationalists and mystics".

⁹ It should be noted that in Book 3 already, in a long disquisition on the furthest North, the poem of Aristeas is indirectly singled out both as a false report and a reflection of truth. Hdt. 3.116: "Then again towards the North of Europe, there is evidently a quantity of gold by far larger than in any other land: as to how it is got, here again I am not able to say for certain, but it is said to be carried off from the griffins by Arimaspians, a one-eyed race of men. But I do not believe this tale either, that nature produces one-eyed men which in all other respects are like other men. However, it would seem that the extremities which bound the rest of the world on every side and enclose it in the midst, possess the things which by us are thought to be the most beautiful and the most rare." See also Nesselrath (1995; 1996; cf. Bridgman 2005: 73), who concludes that: "Aristeas' account in Herodotus is a composite one. The Hyperboreans themselves appear to be Greek, unless they were originally brought from Thrace by Orpheus or someone like him." Another devastating blow against Aristeas comes from Hdt. 4.32: "Concerning the Hyperborean people neither the Scythians nor

notion that the historical Aristeas actually travelled to the territory of the Issedones”, Gagné (2021: 256, 258) thinks that the fact that the two passages from Maximus reflect similar matter differently, independently and without contradiction, and that they do not derive directly from Herodotus, argues in favor of their value as a legitimate source of information, albeit “adapted to its own medio-Platonician diction”; there is no strong opposition between the flight of the soul and the land voyage described by Herodotus, or between the fact that Herodotus has him go no further than the Issedones, and that Maximus locates the boundary, the furthest point of his journey, far beyond this, in the land of the Hyperboreans itself.

Bowra (1956: 9) concludes, that the surviving scanty lines of the *Arimaspea* show that Aristeas, who knew the Homeric or epic language, used it in his own way to produce new effects and to introduce new subjects in such a manner as to acclimatize them, despite all their strangeness, to a familiar world of poetry. In relating his wonderful tales, he adopted an easy, persuasive manner, which has no traces of mystification or desire to impress. Despite his shamanistic claims, he was treated more or less seriously by serious authors.

According to Shcheglov (2010: 14), two things undermine the credibility of Maximus’ story. On the one hand, he ignores all those specific circumstances that Herodotus mentions: the Cimmerians, Scythians, Issedones, Arimaspians and Griffins. Meanwhile, it is these circumstances that are the most reliable part of our knowledge about the content of *Arimaspea*, and only their mention could testify to the reliability of Maximus’ information. The information of Maximus can be deduced and explained from the story of Herodotus, but Herodotus’ information from Maximus’ story cannot.

The eschatological ethnography of the *Arimaspea* served as one of the foundations for a radical claim on knowledge. On the basis of the extraordinary visions offered in the poem, Aristeas eventually came to be seen as one of the great magicians of the age, together with other purifiers and wonder-workers like Epimenides or Empedocles. The *Arimaspea* is one of the most intriguing experiments of the early Archaic period with hexameter narratives of distant travel and the descriptions of lands and peoples.¹⁰ Aristeas did not invent Hyperborea. He built on the affordance of the resonant tradition of northern mirages. But his monumental and detailed

any other dwellers in these lands tell us anything, except perchance the Issedones. And, as I think, even they tell nothing; for were it not so, then the Scythians too would have told, even as they tell of the one-eyed men. But Hesiod speaks of Hyperboreans, and Homer too in his poem the Epigoni, if that be truly the work of Homer.” Herodotus concludes that the Issedones themselves do not know about the Hyperboreans. They come from the fantasies of Greek poetry, the memory of worlds of Homer and Hesiod, and that is where the *Arimaspea* also squarely belongs. The old poem simply cannot hold its own against the *Histories* in the contest of ethnographic authority. The new cosmography classifies and neutralizes its predecessors and all their ontologies (Gagné, 2021: 312). In 4.33 Herodotus relates to the Hyperborean maidens and their gift offerings, describing similar customs of the Thracian and Paeonian women, alluding to the probable point of origin for the offerings, which does not point to the further North, but more prosaically to nearby Thrace. Herodotus clearly does not believe in the existence of the Hyperboreans, but felt compelled to mention them, as they were such a part of Greek myth and literary history (How & Wells, 1936; Fehling, 1994; Bridgman, 2005: 60; Gagné, 2021: 314). Romm (1989) and Priestley (2014: 113-114) think the opposite. In 4.36 Herodotus laughs – it is the only place in the *Histories* where we are made to see him actually laugh at the arguments of his rivals.

¹⁰ For the authority of *Arimaspea* we can judge from the fact that in the middle of Metapontum’s agora (cf. Keesling, 2017: 843) was a statue that, according to Herodotus’ (4.15) local interlocutors, represented Aristeas of Proconnesus. It will remain impossible for us to know the “true” origin of that statue, but Gagné (2021: 285) sees no good reason to doubt Herodotus: in the second half of the 5th century BC, a local form of knowledge current in Metapontum attributed the monument to the poet of the *Arimaspea*. The great eschatological traveller, otherwise bound to no place and no relation, was given a permanent presence in the city of Magna Graecia: something like an emblem of the great movement of the Ionian sages to Italy after the fall of Miletus and its neighbors, like Xenophanes himself, or Pythagoras.

portrait of the wondrous road to Hyperborea would enduringly transform this tradition, in depth, and it made it a vital point of reference for all further recompositions of the possible worlds of the furthest point (Gagné, 2021: 264-5).

3. Conclusion

The *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. Two are the main notions about Aristeas' contact with Hyperborea.

An extended, profoundly original reconfiguration of the epic travel narrative, *Arimaspea* saw Aristeas go beyond the maritime routes of his Odyssean and Argonautic predecessors to reach deep inland into the realm of the Issedones. If we are to accept something of Maximus of Tyre's testimony, and Gagné (2021: 303) sees no good reason not to, Aristeas claimed to have reached the road to Hyperborea through soul flight, thus making his journey one that escaped the constraints of mortal travel through land or sea.

Maximus of Tyre's sources about Aristeas portray him as a mystic, but say nothing about his journey and discoveries. On the contrary, the fragments of *Arimaspea* and the sources based on it, provide interesting information about the geography, ethnography, and folklore of the Scythians, but say nothing about Aristeas himself and provide no grounds to believe his poem sets forth a mystical experience (Shcheglov, 2010: 30; cf. Gagné, 2021: 247).

For the Archaic Greeks Hyperborea was a completely real, although extremely difficult to reach territory – “neither by ships nor on foot” (Pind. *Pyth.* 10.29). Thus, Aristeas' alleged extraordinary ability seems to be the only possible way to reach the mythical and otherworldly northern utopia.

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