

## Greco-Hyperborean Contacts in Antiquity

Asen Bondzhev

*New Bulgarian University, Department of History, Sofia, BULGARIA*

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### *Abstract*

The Hyperboreans appeared at key moments in the history of Ancient Greece, bringing innovations to its culture and helping in time of need. They had important dealings with the Greeks until historical times. This study presents some of their contacts, mainly focusing on the Hyperborean maidens and the philological interpretations of Herodotus (4.35). Special attention is given to pseudo-Plato's account of Opis and Hecaergus (Agre) having brought sacred bronze tablets with eschatological teachings from the Hyperboreans to Delos, which remarkably resemble the Orphic gold tablets. Olen, although being from Lycia, is also mentioned, in the context of Pausanias (10.5.7-8) account, where the poet seems to have close connections with the Hyperboreans.

**Keywords:** Hyperborea, Hyperborean maidens, Olen, mythology, Ancient Greece, history of religion.

### 1. Introduction

Hyperborea is one of the most interesting and mysterious aspects in the history of the ancient world. It has remained a legitimate subject of scientific interest in historiography, archeology and linguistics, despite all speculations and attempts to be appropriated by various racial and nationalist theories, ideologies and pseudoscientific doctrines (Palavestra, 2016: 121).<sup>1</sup> For the Greeks Hyperborea was a completely real, although extremely difficult to reach territory – “neither by ships nor on foot” (Pind. *Pyth.* 10.29).<sup>2</sup> Hyperborea was an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which was both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature (Bridgman, 2005: 3).

Apollo's mother – Leto, was born in Hyperborea (Diod. 2.47). When Apollo was born, his father – Zeus gave him a chariot pulled by swans and sent him to Delphi “to expound justice and law to the Greeks” from there (Himer. *Orat.* 48.10). But Apollo got on his chariot and flew to his favorite place – Hyperborea. When Zeus killed Apollo's son, Asclepius, because he was afraid that men might learn the art of medicine from Asklepius and help each other out, this angered Apollo who in turn killed the Cyclopes who made the thunderbolts for Zeus (Apollod. 3.121). Later,

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of pseudoscientific doctrines see Edelstein, 2006, Arnold, 2018, Mosionjnic, 2012: 81-86, Matveychev, 2018, Roling, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

according to Eratosthenes, Apollo had to hide his arrow in Hyperborea (ps.-Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.15).

- Legrand suggests a different translation of Herodotus 4.35.
- The Delos purification of 426 BC, the preserved inscriptions from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 1920s excavations seem to suggest that some mythological stories could originate in authentic memories.
- The supposed “Orphic-Hyperborean connection” is an echo of another connection – between Abaris and Pythagoras.

## 2. Contacts

The Hyperboreans bring innovations to ancient Greeks culture, revealing the mysteries of the universe and helping in time of need. According to Pausanias (1.4.4), during the defense of Delphi against the Gauls who intended to plunder the treasures of Apollo, two warriors came from the Hyperboreans to help the Greeks – Hyperochus and Amadocus. Sandin (2014: 216) notes the story is later repeated by Pausanias (10.23.2), but Amadocus is called Laodocus instead. The warriors have been conjectured to originate in the poem of Boeo (Paus. 10.5.7), but the names may also connect them with the maidens Hyperoche and Laodice mentioned by Herodotus (4.35).<sup>3</sup>

## 3. The Hyperborean maidens

Herodotus (4.32-36), clearly reporting on the Delian strand of the Hyperborean myth, was the first extant Greek author to mention sacred offerings, sent by the Hyperboreans to Delos by way of Scythia, the Adriatic, Dodona, the Malian Gulf, Euboea, Carystus and Tenos. As Delos was one of the most sacred and important religious shrines in Greece and was dedicated to Apollo, Herodotus was connecting Apollo with the Hyperboreans, agreeing with Pindar’s (*Pith.* 10.35) testimony that the Hyperboreans were fervent worshippers of Apollo. He continues the Hyperborean story by giving details of the legend: the Delians reported that two Hyperborean maidens, called Arge and Opis, accompanied Leto to Delos, while she was with child by Zeus, and were present when the divine twins were born on the island (Hdt. 4.35). Arge means “bright”, “white”, “rapid” and “agile” in Greek; Opis means “divine providence,” “protection of the gods” (Bridgman, 2005: 36).

As Sandin (2014: 210) notes, it is uncertain what Herodotus (4.35) means exactly by Arge and Opis coming “at the same time as the gods themselves”. Legrand (1938: 231) ingeniously suggested that ἀντοῖσι τοῖσι θεοῖσι (“the gods themselves”, referring to Apollo and Artemis) should be read as ἀντῆσι τῆσι θεοῖσι, “the goddesses themselves” (see also Gagné, 2021: 118) – Leto, who came to Delos to give birth to Apollo and Artemis, and Eileithyia, who came to assist. This possibility is supported by Pausanias (1.18.5). Both goddesses are said to have come from the Hyperboreans. Approximately the same sense may perhaps be intended by the reading of the manuscripts, if sound. The masculine gender then implies that Herodotus includes Apollo (and Artemis) in the number of gods who “came” to Delos, in this case brought *in utero*, in order to be born. This is in accordance with a version of the myth preserved in a few sources, which has the elder Hyperborean maidens nursing the infants Apollo and Artemis, hence giving their own names as epithets to the gods.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The names are indeed absolutely consonant: Hyperochus/Hyperoche and Laodocus/Laodice.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sale 1961: 82-83. He comments the possibility of the maidens and both goddesses not arriving together and delivering the twins on the very same day, but only in the same general timeframe (as opposed to the

The other pair of maidens were Hyperoche and Laodice, accompanied by five Hyperboreans to protect the girls on their dangerous trip. All maidens could not return home and died on Delos.<sup>5</sup> For that reason the Hyperboreans started sending gifts to the temple of Apollo on Delos not in person, but through intermediaries.<sup>6</sup>

Preserved inscriptions from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC record that the temple of Apollo on the island of Delos received gifts, apparently symbolical sacrificial offerings, from somebody referred to as the Hyperboreans (Sandin, 2018: 14; see Coupry, 1972). The historical reality of the gifts of the Hyperboreans was thus confirmed. In 426 BC, a purification took place on Delos as a response to an oracle. All dead bodies in the area of the sanctuary, save those believed to be those of the Hyperborean maidens, were dug up and transported off the island, as the oracle had said there should be neither births nor deaths on Delos (Thuc. 1.8, 3.104; Diod. 12.58). The Hyperborean legend and the story of the Hyperborean maidens coming to Delos would seem to be a very strong and important myth for the Greeks to go against an oracle by leaving the graves of the Hyperborean maidens on the island while all others had to be removed (Bridgman, 2005: 39).

#### 4. "Hyperborean" eschatology

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* (371-2), Opis and Hecaergus (Agre) are said to have brought sacred bronze tablets from the Hyperboreans to Delos, containing elaborate descriptions of the underworld and the place where the soul continues its journey after death:

371. [...] after the soul was released from the body, it departed to the uncertain spot, and some dwelling under ground, where is the royal palace of Pluto, not less than the hall of Zeus, inasmuch as the earth possesses the middle portion of the world, and the pole (of heaven) is spherical; of which the gods of heaven have obtained by lot one portion of the hemisphere, and the gods below the other, being some of them brothers, and others the children of brothers; and that the propyla before the road to Pluto's domain are fast bound by iron locks and keys; and that the river Acheron receives him, who has opened them, and, after it, Cocytus, both of which it is necessary for him to pass over, and to be led to Minos and Rhadamanthus, (where is) what is called the plain of Truth. There are they seated as judges to sift each of the comers as to what life he had led, and in what pursuits he had dwelt in the body; and that to tell a falsehood is out of his power. On such then as a kind daemon has breathed during life, these are located in the region of the pious. There without stint the seasons bloom with every kind of produce, and fountains of pure water flow; and

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much later Hyperoche and Laodice). As Sandin (2008) suggests, Herodotus may have been intentionally vague: if he knew of a legend depicting the physical delivery of gods in the presence of mortals, he may have considered explicit mention of it as improper, just as he consistently avoids mentioning the death of gods when treating foreign myths and ritual.

<sup>5</sup> According to Herodotus, the grave of Hyperoche and Laodice stood on the left at the door to the temple of Artemis (4.34); Opis' and Arge's grave was behind the sanctuary (4.35). The graves were identified and excavated in the 1920s by French archaeologists (Courby, 1921, Picard, 1924). The tomb of Hyperoche and Laodice was a carved into the ground platform, surrounded by a wall. Near the tomb were found fragments of pottery from the 16<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century BC. Arge and Opis were buried in a Mycenaean type tomb with a wide dromos. In Hellenistic times the tomb was surrounded by a wall. In front of the wall a rectangular slab was found which is believed to have been the base of an altar. This grave contained human remains and two Cycladic and three Mycenaean pottery. Both graves were places of veneration of the Hyperborean maidens, whose cult was not interrupted on Delos during the Greek Dark Ages in 12<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century BC (Kolosovskaya, 1982: 66-67; cf. Burkert, 1985: 49).

<sup>6</sup> The origin of the Hyperborean gifts is to be found in the thank offering for the birth goddess Eileithyia for her role in the birth of Artemis and Apollo. Thus, the original gift was not to Apollo, but became associated with his cult (Bridgman, 2005: 40).

every where are meadows made beautiful by flowers of varied hues, and places of discussions for philosophers, and theatres of poets, and cyclic choirs, and the hearing of music, and elegant banquets, and feasts self-furnished, and an unmixed freedom from pain, and a delightful mode of living. Nor is produced there violent cold or heat, but a well-tempered air is diffused around, mixed with the sun's mild beams. There is the seat of honour to those, who have shared in the Mysteries; [...] But they, whose life has been passed in a course of evil doings, are driven by the Furies to Erebus and Chaos through Tartarus, where is the region of the impious, and the unfilled urns of the daughters of Danaus, and the thirst of Tantalus! and the entrails of Tityus, and the uncompleted stone of Sisyphus, To whom begins again his labours end.

372. There too are persons licked round by wild beasts, and terrified by the torches of the Furies glaring around them; and enduring every kind of ignominious treatment, they are by eternal punishments worn down. (Borges)

The supposed Hyperborean belief of afterlife brings close connections with the Orphic gold tablets which serve as a guide for the soul in the afterlife. The Orphic tablet from Hipponion, Italy, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC:

This is the work of Memory, when you are about to die down to the well-built house of Hades. There is a spring at the right side, and standing by it a white cypress. Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves. Do not even go near this spring! Ahead you will find from the Lake of Memory, cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it. They will ask you, with astute wisdom, what you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades. Say, "I am a son of Earth and starry Sky, I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink." And they will announce you to the Chthonian King, and they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory. And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other glorious initiates and bacchoi travel. (Graf, 2007: 5)<sup>7</sup>

According to Herodotus (2.81) Orphic practices are close to the Pythagorean.<sup>8</sup> So it should not surprise us that this supposed "Orphic-Hyperborean connection" is an echo of another intentionally created connection – between Abaris and Pythagoras in Iamblichus' *The Life of Pythagoras* (see Zhmud 2016: 6-16). The legend has here been incorporated into that of Pythagoras in a cultic identity as "the Hyperborean Apollo".<sup>9</sup> The Neopythagoreans invoke the testimony of the Hyperborean Abaris as a verification of this pretension (Iambl. *VP* 19.90-93; 28.135, 138, 140-41, 147), Abaris in effect playing the part of predecessor (as John the Baptist to Christ) to the divine protagonist (Sandin, 2014: 207).

Sandin (2018: 30) concludes that "the myth of Abaris could originate in authentic memories of remarkable pilgrims from the north". According to Hippostratos (Harpocration, s.v. Abaris), Abaris came to Athens in the fifty third Olympiad (568 BC). Others (Harp., s.v. Ab.) dated Abaris in the twenty first Olympiad (696 BC). But Pindar (fr. 270), he adds, makes Abaris a

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<sup>7</sup> "Memory" is Graf's preferred translation of "Mnemosyne" – the goddess of memory and remembrance. In Orphic notions Mnemosyne possesses a lake of living water and awakens the memory of past rebirths (Yordanova, 2004: 86). Orphic texts are undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian Book of the Dead, with common plots being: quenching the thirst of souls with cold water, a ban on passing certain paths, guards asking questions, underground kings (Merkelbach, 1999: 5ff). The guidance of the soul after death is also the purpose of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

<sup>8</sup> 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 the life of Orpheus refer to Bondzhev 2022.

<sup>9</sup> In Aelian's *Varia Historia* (2.26) Aristotle claims that the followers of Pythagoras considered their master to be "the Hyperborean Apollo".

contemporary of king Croesus of Lydia (585-546 BC). Which is more in harmony with 568 BC. If the lexicographer cites accurately, Abaris is then the Hyperborean individual mentioned first in known Greek sources, while at the same time being one of the youngest of the known Hyperboreans, belonging in the historical rather than mythical age. And it makes the contact between Abaris and Pythagoras plausible.

But than, on the other hand, we have the account of Herodotus (4.36), who is more than sceptic about the the Hyperborean topic. He is the first to reveal concrete details of the legend about Abaris, dismissing it as unworthy of his attention (cf. Gagné, 2020: 243):

Thus, much then, and no more, concerning the Hyperboreans. As for the tale of Abaris, who is said to have been a Hyperborean, and to have gone with his arrow all round the world without once eating, I shall pass it by in silence.<sup>10</sup> (Rawlinson, 1910)

## 5. Olen

The legendary poet Olen is another example of someone bringing knowledge to ancient Greece. We find information about him in only three ancient sources – Herodotus (4.35), Callimachus (*Del.* 305) and Pausanias (5.7.8, 8.21.3, 9.27.2), and all of them consider him a Lycian. But in Pausanias (10.5.7-8) we read the following: “Boeo, a native woman who composed a hymn for the Delphians, said that the oracle was established for the god by comers from the Hyperboreans, Olen and others...”, “After enumerating others also of the Hyperboreans, at the end of the hymn she names Olen...”

Olen, according to Boeo, was not only the first prophet of Apollo, but also the only male oracle in Delphic history.<sup>11</sup> He was also the first to utter his prophecies in hexameter, thus becoming the first poet to invent the very form of poetry.<sup>12</sup> Generally presented as older than Orpheus or Pamphos, and thus much older than Homer and Hesiod, Olen is cast as the primordial poet of Archaic and Classical Greece. All the hymns of Olen sing of female figures, such as Hera. His songs were sung by the women of Delos, and he was himself sung by Boeo. The Hyperborean Maidens Opis and Arge, the First Maidens, were prominently linked to the birth of Apollo and Artemis in Olen’s verses.

It can be illuminating to briefly contrast Olen’s hymn to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (156-176). In the Homeric Hymn, the voice of the poet directly addresses the chorus of Delian

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<sup>10</sup> Dodds (1973: 141) comments, that Abaris was so advanced in the art of fasting, that he had learned to dispense altogether with human food. Could we find a link with the orphic and later – ascetic practices? Macurdy (1920: 139) describes Abaris as a Sun-priest, like Orpheus. His magic arrow and his purity of life are the most striking points in the legend, and these may well bring him into connection with the Thracian Sun-worship, which produced Orpheus.

<sup>11</sup> In all other traditions only women speak the oracles. Here again the evidence, such as it is, shows only an original male prophet succeeded by the Pythia and not a Pythia who speaks on a tripod and a prophet who announces the message orally or in writing to the enquirer. According to Fontenrose (1978: 215), “Olen is really a Delian figure: he came to Delos from Lycia and first sang hexameters there. Boeo’s story has a Delian myth transferred to Delphi.” Cf. Laidlaw, 1933: 12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jacoby (1954: 477): “The lines from the hymn quoted by Pausanias [10.5.7] pursue a very definite tendency: they are to prove the antiquity of male divination at Delphi, and in order to do so they replace Phemonoe by Olen who is made a Hyperborean.” Page (1955: 248) calls him “the earliest singer of Apolline hymns”. Pausanias, when it came to ancient hymns, still had some real access to the hymns of Olen. Kalkmann (1886: 244-245) believed that his knowledge was filtered through Alexander Polyhistor, which is possible, but hardly demonstrable. Gagné (2021: 118) notes, that what seems more crucial to him, is that Pausanias’ testimony is largely independent of Herodotus.

Maidens, and that dialogue famously establishes his authority over every song (Gagné, 2021: 117, 127; see also Peponi, 2009, Nady, 2013):

And besides, this great wonder, the fame of which will never perish: the Maidens of Delos, the servants of the Far-shooter, who, after first hymning Apollo, and then in turn Leto and Artemis profuse of arrows, turn their thoughts to the men and women of old and sing a song that charms the peoples. They know how to imitate all people's voices and their babble; anyone might think it was he himself speaking, so well is their singing constructed. But now, may Apollo be favorable, together with Artemis, and hail, all you Maidens! Think of me in future, if ever some long-suffering stranger comes here and asks, 'O Maidens, which is your favorite singer who visits here, and who do you enjoy most?' Then you must all answer with one voice (?), 'It is a blind man, and he lives in rocky Chios; all of his songs remain supreme afterwards.' And we will carry your fame wherever we go as we roam the well-ordered cities of men, and they will believe it, because it is true. (West, 2003: 83)

The maidens of the Homeric hymn are cast as the arbiters of all hymns, the masters of mimesis and poetic embodiment, and the mortal reflection of the paradigmatic chorus of Muses, led by Apollo himself. What they are not is Hyperborean, or singers of the hymns of Olen. That is a striking difference.<sup>13</sup> Eileithyia doesn't come from Hyperborea in the Homeric hymn, but from Olympus, and she is the daughter of Zeus. In Olen's song, the sanctuary projected itself on the world through the chorus (Gagné, 2021: 128).

## 6. Conclusion

In Antiquity the Hyperboreans – living in an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which is both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature – were thought to have traversed Greece during its mythical prehistory and to have left their mark on some of its innermost and sanctified places, thus helping to create, and sometimes to maintain, important values in Greek thought, such as justice, right and moral purity (Bridgman, 2005: 3, 71). The godlike Hyperboreans seem to outshine the Greeks at every turn (Romm, 1992: 61). The Delos purification of 426 BC, the preserved inscriptions from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 1920s excavations seem to suggest that some stories that we accept as pure mythology, might require reassessment. Sandin (2018: 30) concludes that "the myth of the Hyperborean maidens could originate in authentic memories of remarkable pilgrims from the north".

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<sup>13</sup> Here Gagné makes a note, that the, generally unexamined, idea that the Homeric Hymn to Apollo gives us or reflects the "original, local traditions" of Delos and Delphi, against which all other "traditions" are to be read as deviations, remains the default position of much scholarship on the question. With the evidence we have, and the unresolvable issues of relative chronology at hand, I do not believe a case for direct influence can be demonstrated in one direction or another.

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