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EXPEDITION TO THE END OF THE WORLD

An ethnographic τόπος in Herodotus¹

In an interesting study² Michèle Rossellini and Suzanne Saïd point out how there is a clear parallelism in Herodotean accounts of the confines of the inhabited earth, especially of Libya, Scythia³ and India. Moving from the centre — fully civilized Greece surrounded by more or less civilized barbarians⁴ — to the corners one is supposed to meet a diminishing degree of civilization coupled with increasing savagery. The characteristics of civilization and savagery are ethnocentric and social, the two poles together with the intermediate half-savage stage represent opposites in the way of living and food habits,⁵ residence,⁶ sexual behaviour⁷ and religion.⁸

In addition to this increasing savagery⁹ there is another set of characteristics only poorly combined with it. While the first represents the ethnocentric conceit of those living in the middle, the age-old prejudice towards foreign customs and different ways of living, the other is a kind of ethnographic idealism, an attempt to find in distant places what one

¹For classical literature the standard text editions are used, i. e. for Herodotus: Oxoniensis by Hude and the new Teubneriana by Rosén; for Homer: Oxoniensis; for Ctesias: Jacoby's *FGrH*.

²M. Rossellini & S. Saïd, "Usages de femmes et autres nomoi chez les 'sauvages' d'Hérodote: essai de lecture structurale", *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di lettere e filosofia*, Serie III, vol. 8, 1978, 949–1005.

³Of course the parallelism between the accounts of Libya and Scythia in Herodotus has been known for a long time.

⁴Cf. the discussion of the Herodotean account of the Thracians in Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 989ff.

⁵We already find in Homer bread-eaters (σιτοφάγοι)/wine-drinkers (οἶνοπόται) as opposed to meat-eaters (κρεοφάγοι)/milk-drinkers (γαλακτοπόται) or even cannibals (ἀνθρωποφάγοι) /blood-drinkers (αἱματοπόται). The Cyclopes are a good example in Homer; in Herodotus there are e.g. the long-living Ethiopians (4, 23) and several Libyan peoples (4, 186); see also Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 978.

⁶Settled agriculturalists with houses as opposed to nomads living in tents and chariots or with no fixed home.

⁷Marital relations controlled by fixed rules as opposed to various degrees of promiscuity or reducing the difference between the sexes.

⁸Elaborated cults of many gods and funeral customs as opposed to a simple cult of perhaps one god only and a simple funeral, if any; and, as extreme savagery, no religion, no cult, cannibalism instead of funeral. In the *Odyssey* the Phaeacians worship only Poseidon, while the Cyclopes are cannibals and do not respect the gods at all.

⁹Often it is difficult to say if the most remote peoples are still considered human, or beasts (e.g. οἱ ἄγριοι ἄνδρες καὶ γυναῖκες in Hdt 4, 191 and the Scythian Androphagoi with ἀγριώτατα ... ἦθεα in Hdt 4, 106). See also Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 960.

would like to have at home. While the centre has difficulty in surviving under the rigours of the iron age, the ancient golden age is still supposed to prevail in the most distant places. Therefore we also meet, often together with the characteristics of savagery,¹⁰ statements of exceptional wisdom and justice.¹¹ Of course, this is not similar to the civilized wisdom of the Greeks, but a share of the original, primitive wisdom of man, which disappeared long ago in the centre but still survives where the conditions of the golden age prevail. Another characteristic is the exceptional fertility of the remote places¹² often manifested in various marvels and superlatives of nature but also in greatly increased crops of the familiar kind as well as many strange and highly useful products.¹³ A connection with the savagery motif¹⁴ is to be found in the idea that this marvellous fertility makes normal, civilized agricultural labour superfluous as the soil produces everything by itself and one needs only to gather it.¹⁵ In addition to plants and animals, this includes extraordinary richness in other respects too, e.g. in an abundance of gold and precious stones.

The best and most numerous examples are found in the ethnographic parts of the *History* of Herodotus, but both sets of characteristics — savagery and golden-age conditions — are met in many sources, beginning with Homer. In the island of the Cyclopes the soil produces by itself wheat and barley and grapes,¹⁶ but the inhabitants are savages unable to exploit these blessings. Instead they tend sheep, drink their milk and eat their flesh and cheese. If an opportunity presents itself they are also fond of human flesh as

¹⁰It is not always easy to keep these two separate. One more contrast is the eternal peace of remote regions as opposed to the war in the centre. The peace is easily explained as a characteristic of the golden age, but then men living there are also often devoid of military honour and ability, so much esteemed as belonging to every free man in Greece. Examples of this peaceful way of living are e. g. the bald-headed Scythians (Hdt 4, 23) and the Libyan Garamantes (4, 174), but the eternal peace of the remote places was also enjoyed by the Phaeaceans of Homer (see e. g. *Odyssey* Z, 270).

¹¹E. g. Hdt 4, 26.

¹²See Albrecht Dihle, "Der fruchtbare Osten", *Rheinisches Museum* N. F. 105, 1962, 97-110 (now also in A. Dihle, *Antike und Orient, Gesammelte Aufsätze*. hrsg. von V. Pöschl und H. Petermann, Supplemente zu den *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 2, Heidelberg 1984, 47-60, Nachträge 217f.). This fertility motif has been very long-lasting. Exceptional fertility is ascribed to China in western literature up to the 19th century.

¹³In Hdt e.g. Indian cotton, Scythian "figs", Arabian incenses and aromatics etc. Lotus already in Homer (and Hdt 4, 177).

¹⁴As pointed out in Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 964f.

¹⁵This makes one suspicious of the vegetarian "hermits" of India mentioned by Herodotus. From the structural viewpoint of Rossellini & Saïd (1978, 955ff., especially 959) the only real difference between the three most distant Indian peoples is their food. And these three sets of alimentary customs — eating raw fish, wild plants or human flesh — are just various stages of savagery, also met with in other remote corners of the earth.

¹⁶*Od.* I, 106ff.

Κυκλώπων δ' ἐς γαῖαν ὑπερφιάλων ἀθεμίστων
 ἰκόμεθ' οἳ ῥα θεοῖσι πεποιθότες ἀθανάτοισιν
 οὔτε φυτεύουσιν χερσὶν φυτὸν οὔτ' ἄρῶσιν,
 ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,
 πυροὶ καὶ κριθαὶ ἢδ' ἄμπελοι, αἳ τε φέρουσιν
 οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὕμβρος ἀέξει.

Odysseus' men have the misfortune to discover. They have neither laws nor social institutions; instead of houses they live in caves¹⁷ and they do not respect the gods.¹⁸

All this is known from Rossellini — Saïd and others. But there is also a recurring motif connected with the products of the golden age and their exploitation and this is my present theme. The peoples living on the spot are mostly described as too primitive properly to exploit the richness of their country. But there are also many peoples who do not live in the middle of this fertility and happiness of the golden age, but near enough to exploit it. Therefore they have to make a long expedition in order to reap its fruits. In Herodotus we meet this expedition motif recurring in many geographical contexts and later literature contributes its share. Very often the expedition is an annual one and may thus to some extent be explained as deriving from the yearly wanderings of many nomadic peoples, especially as most of these semi-savages are described as milk-drinking nomads. But there is also the Greek model, in the travels of such heroes as Heracles, Jason, Odysseus and Aristaeus of Proconnesus.

Every summer the Libyan Nasamones make every summer an expedition to an oasis called Augila. This oasis produces plenty of dates and they collect them as well as the locusts. In Augila every palm produces dates, while the tree elsewhere is dioecious. The locusts they grind and mix with milk.¹⁹

The Arabians make several expeditions. One is directed to the lake where casia is said to grow; a kind of ferocious bat which lives there makes harvesting difficult.²⁰ More difficult is the expedition they make to the high mountains that yield cinnamon. Cinnamon itself grows somewhere else — some say where Dionysus grew up — apparently beyond the reach of human kind. But there are large birds nesting in those mountains, and they carry cinnamon to their nests; from those birds the Arabians obtain it, using the curious method described by Herodotus.²¹ The collecting of Libanotus is also dangerous as the trees producing it are guarded by winged snakes.²²

The Indians obtain ant-gold from the distant desert in a dangerous and long expedition.²³ Again the peculiar method of obtaining the gold and escaping safely with it is used by Herodotus in order to make a good story.

We are often reminded that Herodotus liked to modify his motifs.²⁴ Therefore I think that we may include the griffin-gold of the extreme north or north-east too. It is fetched by the one-eyed Arimasps, though we are not told if an expedition is needed.²⁵

¹⁷*Od.* I, 111ff.

τοῖσιν δ' οὐτ' ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι οὔτε θέμιστες,
ἀλλ' οἳ γ' ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων ναίουσι κάρηνα
ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι, θεμιστεύει δὲ ἕκαστος
παίδων ἢ δ' ἀλόχων, οὐδ' ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσι.

¹⁸See e. g. *Od.* I, 272ff.

¹⁹*Hdt.* 4, 172, also 4, 182.

²⁰*Hdt.* 3, 110.

²¹*Hdt.* 3, 111.

²²*Hdt.* 3, 107.

²³*Hdt.* 3, 102ff.

²⁴See e. g. Rossellini — Saïd 1978, 1004.

But probably it became a trade-article, and as nobody but their neighbours the Issedonians had ever seen the Arimasps, it seems likely that the Issedonians were the gold-traders. This gold was probably the reason why the Scythian merchants made the long and difficult journey to their country.²⁶ The same journey was also made, or at least said to have been made, by the Greek, Aristeas of Proconnesus.²⁷ Here it is not so important that the griffin-gold was probably Siberian gold traded to the west and there is no need to discuss the various attempts to put Arimasps and Issedonians on a map. This does not necessarily mean that there is no place for them in a real map. It seems that despite the many recurrent motifs required in the theory of early Greek ethnography Herodotus was in his way reliable as an ethnographer. In theory he knew what the ἑσχατιαί were probably like, but he did not place the motifs there without ascertaining their truth in any particular case. Of course it is not so difficult to get the impression that things are exactly as one has assumed. Columbus knew from Classical literature that there were Amazons and dog-heads in India and had no difficulty in ascertaining their existence in *his* India.²⁸

Far-off gold is also found in Libya. Somewhere in western Libya, near the Gyzantes, there is an island called Kyrauis. It is near the mainland; one can wade across the channel. The island is full of olive trees and vines, apparently growing by themselves. There is also a lake, and from this lake gold sand is obtained by virgins using feathers brushed with pitch.²⁹ It is not wholly clear if the local virgins (παρθέναι τῶν ἐπιχωρίων) live in the island itself; more probably they belong to the neighbouring Gyzantes. In this case wading across the channel represents a transition to the gold-age region.

These are the clear cases in Herodotus. Unfortunately he does not tell us how amber is fetched from northernmost Europe;³⁰ perhaps the expedition motif was also involved here.³¹

We may also notice some cases of attempted expeditions. The Nasamons apparently made one to the south of the Sahara and again found a paradise of the golden age, but the circumstances did not allow its exploitation. Again, the possible historicity and exact geography of the expedition³² do not interest us here. In any case the story contains elements common to the motif. Similarly the Ethiopian military expedition of Cambyses, as interpreted by Herodotus, seems to have been an attempt to go beyond the iron age,³³

²⁵Hdt 3, 116 and 4, 27 (see also 4, 13).

²⁶Hdt 4, 24.

²⁷Hdt 4, 13ff. On Aristeas, see J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus*, Oxford 1962.

²⁸See B. Laufer, "Columbus and Cathay", *JAOS* 51, 1931, 87-103.

²⁹Hdt 4, 195. The story is ascribed to the Carthaginians.

³⁰Hdt 3, 115.

³¹There were many different stories about the origin of amber (see e. g. the summary in Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 37, 11, 31ff.) and though it is not mentioned in our short fragments, the expedition may have been included in some of them. On the other hand, several stories ascribe the origin of amber to the confines of the earth, but instead of men going there to fetch it it is brought by the Ocean to their own shores.

³²See e.g. R. Hennig, *Terrae incognitae* [I.] *Alttertum bis Ptolemäus*. Leiden. 1944, 127ff.

³³Hdt 3, 17ff.

but as Cambyses was no semi-savage in-between-dweller, but fully subject to the iron age hardships of the middle region, it was bound to be a failure.³⁴

I shall not attempt to make any systematic survey of later literature. From Ctesias we may note the other version of the griffin story, this time provided with an expedition,³⁵ as well as Mount Sardo with its precious stones situated near the Indian desert.³⁶ Later the Seres are described as living at the eastern end of the earth and they are given several characteristics already known in Herodotus with respect to other far-off peoples.³⁷ The miraculous golden age product of their country is, of course, silk; they sell it through "silent commerce" to the merchants who come there.³⁸

The essential point is the expedition made to a place where some form of gold-age fertility and richness still prevails, in order to exploit it. It is a common motif of folklore that the fabulous wealth is often guarded, preferably by some fabulous creatures, which makes the expedition very dangerous to undertake. There are the bats with casia, giant birds with cinnamon, ferocious giant ants and griffins guarding gold etc. The expedition seems to be reserved mostly for the peoples living in between, not in the civilized centre, nor in the remote gold-age country, but in between as semi-savages.³⁹ There are many accounts of the savages themselves, but they make no expeditions. They may pluck the fruits growing nearby, but it is apparently part of their savagery that they are unable to exploit properly the richness of their soil. On the other hand, this remote richness is definitely beyond the reach of the fully civilized peoples; only the great heroes of the past could reach it.⁴⁰

We may also notice another motif connected with the expedition. The very boundary of the inhabitable world was often thought to be either a desert⁴¹ or a chain of mountains, and in nearly every case the goal of the expedition is situated near one or the other. That the old idea of ocean confining the earth does not come up here is due to the fact that Herodotus himself did not believe it.⁴² The epic expeditions were often naval ones (e.g. Odysseus and Jason). Thus the proper expedition was really directed towards the very ends of the earth.

³⁴Note what Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 962 say about its phases. They contain the same three forms of savage food as we noticed in his Indian λόγος: raw flesh, wild plants and human flesh.

³⁵Ctesias F 45, 26 and 45h.

³⁶Ctesias F 45, 11 and 17. Here an expedition is not mentioned.

³⁷According to Ammianus 23, 6, 67 *agunt autem ipsi quietius Seres, armorum semper et proeliorum expertes...Caeli apud eos iucunda salubrisque temperies, aeris facies munda leniumque ventorum commodissimus flatus...* See also the accounts in Pliny 6, 54 and *Periplus maris Erythræi* 65 (all these are collected in G. Cœdès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient*, Paris 1910 [repr. Hildesheim & New York 1977]).

³⁸Cf. Hdt 4, 196 on silent commerce between Carthaginians and people in the west coast of Africa.

³⁹On semi-savages see also Rossellini & Saïd 1978, 966ff.

⁴⁰E. g. Odysseus going to Scheria and Argonauts to Aeaea.

⁴¹See Hannelore Edelmann, "Ερημία und ἔρημος bei Herodot", *Klio* 52, 1970, 79-86.

⁴²See e. g. Hdt 2, 23.

