

## THE IMAGE OF A 'DRUNKEN SCYTHIAN' IN GREEK TRADITION

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### Abstract:

Since the Greeks first came into contact with Scythian populations (who should be understood as a great conglomerate of various groups of peoples inhabiting the north Pontic steppes), many negative clichés concerning the Scythians occurred in Greek tradition. One of them is the stereotype of drunkenness among the Scythians and their lack of urbane manners that were commonly accepted by Greek society. This image of a drunken Scythian may have been created in Greek tradition due to the fact that the Scythians (Scythian aristocracy in particular) adopted the Greek tradition of the drinking of wine. This is visible in archaeological material from the northern Black Sea areas, where many amphorae and wine jars have been found in Scythian tombs. However, written sources indicate that the Scythians did not mix wine with water and this did not correspond with Greek customs, according to which drinking unadulterated wine was extremely 'barbarian' and inappropriate. This in turn may have become a catalyst behind the concept of drunkenness amongst the Scythians.

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**Key Words:** Scythians, Greeks, symposion, wine, the Black Sea

### Introduction:

When studying the issue of the image of the Scythians in antiquity, the first thing that should be mentioned is the fact that the ancient Greeks used the name 'Scythians' to describe all nomadic populations inhabited vast territories of the steppes north of the Black Sea. In turn, in the territories of Asia, the Scythians were known as Saka. Both the Scythians and Saka were in fact a group of various tribes that shared a common Iranian origin, who were scattered across the Eurasian Steppe. The first time that the Greeks came into contact with the Scythians can be traced to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the first Greek settlements were established on the northern Black Sea shores. Since that time, the Scythians were constantly present in Greek tradition and many ideas were developed regarding these people. These ideas were often purely fictitious and they were based on commonly repeated notions of a nomadic people and their way of living. Since the time of Homer, nomads were associated with the people 'who drink mare's milk and live in poverty' (Hippemolgi and Abii, Hom. *Il.* 13.5; cf. Str. 7.3.7; for more information see Shaw 1982/3, 5-31).

A few centuries later, Herodotus wrote his famous Scythian *logos*, which had a great impact on later literature. The *logos* was also an important source of information about the Scythians and their customs, which was educational for those Greeks who did not have direct contact with the Scythian culture. Herodotean excursus on the Scythians, their customs, the geography and ethnography of Scythia, nomadic peoples, and the geography of north-east Europe created a larger corpus of Greek written tradition with regards to the Scythians. Resulting from this, a common myth was created amongst Greek writers and poets of the Scythian image, the so called 'Scythie imaginaire' (see Lévy 1981, 57-68). In his work, Herodotus tended to represent the Scythians as diametrically opposed to the Libyans in terms of both their culture and the land that they inhabited. According to this view, the Scythians were the youngest people in the world and their territory was placed in the far north where the weather is severe and wintery (unlike the Libyans who were considered to be the oldest people and who lived in an area where the climate was warm and summery), (see Hartog 1988).

It is visible in both written and archaeological sources that the Scythians were present in classical Athens as a police force. They were often represented on Athenian black-figured vessels as archers and they were also depicted as important comic figures (as a savage barbarian) in the Old Comedy (see Bäbler 2005, 114-122; Hall 1989, 38-54; Ivantchik 2005, 100-113; Jongkees-Vos 1963).

It is assumed that in Athens, the Scythians were commonly known as good archers and as a result they were often called 'toxotai' (gr. 'archers'); this was commonly understood as 'Scythian archers'. Moreover, by calling an Athenian 'toxotes' (gr. 'archer') was to call him a 'Scythian', although Greek archers are also attested in literary sources (Braund 1997, 49). It is also suggested by scholars that the representations of Scythian archers on Attic vases may have become a standard representation of an archer-hero in general, although this did not necessarily indicate the hero's ethnicity (Ivantchik 2005, 100-113). This demonstrates how popular depictions of the Scythians were in Athenian everyday life and how recognizable the Scythians were to Greek society.

### Main Text:

What is of most importance is the fact that the Greeks created common stereotypes about the Scythians; one of the most striking is the depiction that these people had a strong tendency for drunkenness. This was strongly combined with the fact that the Scythians were commonly known in Athens as those who drank unadulterated wine. From a Greek point of view, this practice was both radically opposed to their own custom and was directly associated with immoderate drinking, which was considered to be barbarian, that is inappropriate and 'uncivilised'. The Greek poet, Anacreon encouraged drinking wine that was diluted to the ratio 1:2. He also suggested to give up the Scythian fashion of drinking unmixed wine and listen to beautiful songs, instead of the uproar and din that was usually heard over the cups (Anacreon 76, preserved in Ath. 11.427a; transl. Lissarrague 1990, 91):

Ἄγε δὴ φέρ' ἡμῖν, ὦ παῖ,  
 κελέβην, ὅκως ἄμυσιν  
 προπίω, τὰ μὲν δέκ' ἐγγέας  
 ὕδατος, τὰ πέντε δ' οἴνου  
 κυάθοθς, ὡς ἀνυβριστὶ  
 ἀνά δηῦτε βασσαρήσω.  
 Ἄγε δηῦτε μηκέτ' οὔτω  
 πατάγω τε κάλαλητῶ  
 Σκυθικὴν πόσιν παρ' οἴνω  
 μελετῶμεν, ἀλλὰ καλοῖς  
 ὑποπίνοντες ἐν ὕμνοισ.

Boy, bring me  
 A cup, to drink at a gulp;  
 Mix ten measures of water and five of wine,  
 So that once again and peacefully  
 I may honor Dionysus.  
 Let's not fall  
 Into riot and disorder  
 With our wine, like the Scythians,  
 But let us drink in moderation  
 Listening to the lovely hymns.

In the Classical period this representation of the Scythians, as barbarians that drink neat wine, was used as an example of how the Greeks should not behave during the symposium. This is visible on sympotic vessels where some Athenian drinkers appear wearing a characteristic Scythian cap (Lissarrague 1987, 111, Lissarrague 1990, 90-1; Osborne 2007, 38). As Osborne demonstrates, this kind of image played an important role in 'projecting identities' during the symposium. In this particular case, the image of the drinker with a Scythian cap represents a bad symposiast, someone who projects a Scythian identity and acts in a barbarian manner. The drinkers who viewed such images on vessels were aware of how they would be seen by other symposiasts if they did not keep to the urbane rules of the symposium, that is they would be projecting a Scythian identity, an identity of a savage 'barbarian' with no manners (Osborne 2007, 38). The Greeks even created words for this

practice. Σκυθίζειν means to drink or behave like a Scythian, i.e. to drink immoderately, and ἐπισκυθίζειν, which means to pour out drink in Scythian fashion, that is with unmixed wine (Lissarrague 2002, 111; Liddell-Scott 1996). This depiction of wine-drinking Scythians has a very long written tradition. Since Anacreon appears to provide the example of the Scythian drinking manner as an obvious and well-known literary *topos*, it can be assumed that this motif must have occurred as early as the 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The Scythian custom of drinking unmixed wine is also attested in later written sources. When mentioning the problem of drunkenness, Plato informs us in his *Laws* that the Scythians and Thracians drink neat wine (Plato, *Laws* I 637 d,e, transl. R. G. Bury):

ἔτι γὰρ οὖν εἴπωμεν πλείω περὶ ἀπάσης μέθης: οὐ γὰρ σμικρὸν ἔστιν τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα οὐδὲ φαύλου διαγνῶναι νομοθέτου. λέγω δ' οὐκ οἴνου περὶ πόσεως τὸ παράπαν ἢ μή, μέθης δὲ αὐτῆς πέρι, πότερον ὥσπερ Σκύθαι χρῶνται καὶ Πέρσαι χρηστέον, καὶ ἔτι Καρχηδόνιοι καὶ Κελτοὶ καὶ Ἰβηρες καὶ Θρᾶκες, πολεμικὰ [637ε] σύμπαντα ὄντα ταῦτα γένη, ἢ καθάπερ ὑμεῖς: ὑμεῖς μὲν γάρ, ὅπερ λέγεις, τὸ παράπαν ἀπέχεσθε, Σκύθαι δὲ καὶ Θρᾶκες ἀκράτῳ παντάπασι χρώμενοι, γυναικῆς τε καὶ αὐτοῖ, καὶ κατὰ τῶν ἱματίων καταχέομενοι, καλὸν καὶ εὐδαιμον ἐπιτήδευμα ἐπιτηδεύειν νενομίκασι. ('So let us deal more fully with the subject of drunkenness in general for it is a practice of no slight importance, and it requires no mean legislator to understand it. I am now referring not to the drinking or non-drinking of wine generally, but to drunkenness pure and simple, and the question is—ought we to deal with it as the Scythians and Persians do and the Carthaginians also, and Celts, [637e] Iberians and Thracians, who are all warlike races, or as you Spartans do; for you, as you say, abstain from it altogether, whereas the Scythians and Thracians, both men and women, take their wine neat and let it pour down over their clothes, and regard this practice of theirs as a noble and splendid practice; (...).')

Aristotle in his book on the drinking of wine and drunkenness also mentions that the Scythians, like other people who are courageous and have a hot temperament, tend to drink wine (Aristotle, *Problems* 3, 7 = 872a3). Another illustration of the Scythian tendency for heavy drinking can be found in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*. In the scene where the Scythian policemen appear, one of them is reprimanded by his leader for gazing in search of a tavern. This should be understood as an allusion to the Scythian fondness for drinking (Hall 1989, 46). This Scythian reputation must have been well known to the Athenian audience at the time of Aristophanes, since he took it for granted that the scene with the Scythian policemen would raise a laugh.

The same cliché was not only limited to the Scythians, but was also extended to the rest of the northern barbarians, such as the Celts and Germans. Posidonius mentions that the Germans drink milk and unmixed wine (preserved in Athenaeus 4.153e, transl. S. Douglas Olson):

Γερμανοὶ δέ, ὡς ἱστορεῖ Ποσειδώνιος ἐν τῇ τριακοστῇ, ἄριστον προσφέρονται κρέα μεληδὸν ὠπτημένα καὶ ἐπιπίνοθσι γάλα καὶ τὸν οἶνον ἄκρατον. ('The Germans, according to Posidonius in Book XXX (*FGrH* 87 F 2 = fr. 73 Edelstein-Kidd), eat whole joints of roasted meat for lunch, and drink milk and unmixed wine along with it').

The same stereotype of the barbarians drinking unadulterated wine (lat. *merum*) was also known amongst Roman historians. Tacitus informs us of a wine trade among the Germans and he adds that they are immoderate at drinking (Tac. *Germ.* 23, transl. A. J. Church, W. J. Brodrigg):

proximi ripae et vinum mercantur. cibi simplices, agrestia poma, recens fera aut lac concretum: sine apparatu, sine blandimentis expellunt famem. adversus sitim non eadem temperantia. si indulseris ebrietati suggerendo quantum concupiscunt, haud minus facile vitiis quam armis vincentur. ('The dwellers on the river-bank also buy wine. Their food is of a simple kind, consisting of wild-fruit, fresh game, and curdled milk. They satisfy their hunger without elaborate preparation and without delicacies. In quenching their thirst they are not equally moderate. If you indulge their love of drinking by supplying them with as much as they desire, they will be overcome by their own vices as easily as by the arms of an enemy').

Almost the same expression occurs in Diodorus with regard to the Celts (Diod. *Sic.* 5.26.3, transl. C. H. Oldfather):

κάτοινοι δ' ὄντες καθ' ὑπερβολὴν τὸν εἰσαγόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐμπόρων οἶνον ἄκρατον ἐμποροῦνται, καὶ διὰ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν λάβρω χρώμενοι τῷ ποτῷ καὶ μεθυσθέντες εἰς ὕπνον ἢ μανιώδεις διαθέσεις τρέπονται ('The Gauls are exceedingly addicted to the use of wine and fill

themselves with the wine which is brought into their country by merchants, drinking it unmixed, and since they partake of this drink without moderation by reason of their craving for it, when they are drunken they fall into a stupor or a state of madness’).

### Conclusion:

When analysing this Scythian cliché in ancient literature and art, it is worth noting that this stereotype was created by the Greeks who did not have direct contact with the Scythians. This image was based mainly on constantly repeated literary sources and was created not by the Greeks from the territories of the mixed Greek-Scythian ethnicity, but by the Greek poets (and craftsman) working in a Hellenocentric environment such as Athens. The stereotype was then repeated throughout the Roman period, and was extended to include other northern barbarians.

At the same time when this image occurred in mainland Greece, the Black Sea cities constantly came into contact with the Scythian world and created a new common space for mutual Greek-Scythian relations. Therefore, the source of this Scythian cliché should be found both in the relationship between the Black Sea Greeks and Scythians, and between the Black Sea Greeks and Athens. It is commonly known that both grain and wine were important factors behind establishing trade relations between the Black Sea cities and mainland Greece. Trade connections between Athens and the Black Sea area can be traced to at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Rutishauser 2007, 465-473). Wine may have been shipped to the Black Sea cities in exchange for grain. Rutishauser suggests a possible commercial triangle (attested in Pseudo-Demosthenes, *Against Lakritos*), according to which Athenian ships that were sent to the Black Sea region for grain, stopped at ports in the northern Aegean and took aboard cargoes of wine amphorae (Rutishauser 2007, 470). This trade model also allowed merchants information as well as commodities.

The custom of drinking wine was adopted by the Scythians (mainly by the Scythian aristocracy) from the Black Sea Greeks. This is visible in Scythian material culture, such as amphorae that have been found in the Solokha kurgan in the Ukraine, which contained two royal Scythian tombs and is dated to 500-450 BC (Rutishauser 2007, 471; Trofimova 2007, 28-29). The stamps that have been found on the amphorae indicate a north Aegean provenance. Also, a large number of Greek wine jars have been found in the vast Scythian territory north of the Black Sea, which indicates that wine became a very important feature of Scythian everyday life, which may have caused the reputation that they had for heavy drinking (for archaeological material see Minns 1913, 49; Kocybala 1978, 49-50). The first account of the Scythians and their tendency to drink wine might have been transferred to Athens and the Aegean islands via the Black Sea cities, which traded with the Scythian customers. This transference had an important impact on the process of creating the Scythian image amongst the Greeks through literature and art.

The reason why the Scythians were considered to be heavy drinkers may be closely related to the way that wine was drunk in Scythian culture. However, it does not have to be combined with the quantity of wine that was drunk, but rather with the custom of drinking itself. It is possible that the Scythian aristocracy did not mix wine with water, because it was not their tradition to do such a thing. Perhaps the Scythians preferred the taste of pure unmixed wine as we do nowadays. If we assume this to be the case then it seems likely that the Scythians did not use wine as a daily drink used to quench thirst, since they used other liquids for this purpose, such as water, unlike the Greeks, to whom the drinking of water (gr. ὕδροποσία) was as odd as drinking of unmixed wine. Another possible explanation might lie in the Greek idea, according to which the Scythians were a barbarian people of a hot temperament (according to Hippocratean category) and due to this fact they were naturally ‘attracted’ to heavy drinking. But what is of most importance is that this image of a drunken Scythian was vivid throughout centuries in Greek tradition and had a great impact on the understanding of the ‘Others’ (that is non-Greeks) by the ancient Greek society.<sup>271</sup>

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