Hermes, Ancestor of the Arabs

> Ἡσίοδος δ᾽ ἐν Καταλόγῳ φησί· "καὶ κούρην Ἀράβοιο, τὸν (Casaubon : τὴν codd.) Ἑρμάων ἀκάκητα / γείνατο καὶ Θρονίη, κούρη Βήλοιο ἄνακτος" (fr. 137 M.-W.)[1]. οὕτω δὲ καὶ Στησίχορος λέγει (fr. 286 Finglass). εἰκάζειν οὖν ἐστιν ὅτι ἀπὸ τούτου καὶ ἡ χώρα Ἀραβία ἤδη τότε ὠνομάζετο, κατὰ δὲ τοὺς ἥρωας τυχὸν ἴσως οὔπω (Strab. I 2,34).

In the last issue of «Eikasmós» XXV (2014) 181-183 P. Finglass considers why Hermes seemed particularly suitable as the father of Arabos, ancestor of the Arabs. He focuses on two factors, Hermes' association with prosperity and trade in the first place and, secondly, with deceit and tricks. «We may imagine that Greeks first encountered Arabs, or became aware of their existence, in a mercantile context» (*o.c.* 182). But a reputation for trickery is bad for business.

I suggest that Hermes' role as guide and escort, διάκτορος, is more relevant here, in accordance with the derivation of his name from ἕρμα, the cairn that serves as a waymark[2]. Merchants seeking trade outside a familiar environment need reliable guides and interpreters. That such was the context in which Greek contacts with Arabs developed is suggested by Herodotus' elaborate description of the Arab procedure for taking a solemn oath (III 8). This is the more remarkable in that Herodotus has very little to say here about Arab manners and customs; the context (III 107-113) is rather the harvesting of spices, guarded as they allegedly are by strange and dangerous animals. A caravan in the desert was very vulnerable; a treacherous guide, colluding with a local group of bedouin, meant disaster. Fear of the self-invoked divine punishment involved in violation of an oath was the nearest thing to travel insurance available. Herodotus' detailed report strongly suggests an observer aware that his life might depend on an Arab's good faith and alert to any deviation from what was believed to be the normal procedure. It would not be surprising if Greeks were often inclined to suspect that the Arabs in whom they must put their trust were operating a protection racket; but exposure to casual

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[1] Fr. 54 Hirschberger; she does not explain why she prefers the unmetrical text given by the mss. of Strabo, whereby not Arabos but his daughter is begotten by Hermes, to Casaubon's emendation.

[2] See further W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*, Stuttgart 2011², 241-245.

raiding or simply the danger of getting lost were not risks worth taking. Equally, a reputation for reliability was important for those who provided escorts; short-term profit from a single successful raid was unlikely to bring the solid advantages to be gained from regular fees paid to secure a safe passage through regions where it was customary to enliven animal husbandry with banditry.

With insurance policies it is prudent to digest the implications of the small print; so too, the wording of an oath must be scrutinized with the greatest care. Odysseus' grandfather Autolycus owed to Hermes his outstanding ability in theft and the use of the oath; diligence in sacrifice to the god proved a canny investment (XIX 395-398). The poet cannot have meant that Autolycus had no qualms about forswearing himself; perjury was a recipe for disaster, not only to the guilty man himself but also to his descendants[3]. Meticulous fulfilment of the terms of an oath is a prudential matter. Autolycus' skill lay in framing the oath in a manner more favourable to himself than was realised by the other party. Herodotus credits the Persians with this type of trick in his narrative of the siege of Barka (IV 201); it is a widespread motif in popular story-telling[4].

In the course of his Scythian ethnography Herodotus gives a similarly detailed description of the procedure for taking a solemn oath (IV 70, cf. 68,2). Again, we may suspect a connection with long-distance trade, as exemplified by the route which leads from Scythia to the bald-headed Argippaioi, a journey which, Herodotus claims, called for communication in seven languages and seven interpreters (IV 20,2, cf. 24). Linguistically, this must be taken with a pinch of salt; but the material culture and way of life of the different peoples of the Eurasian steppe were so similar that language provided the only obvious distinction between them. A Greek traveller should have been able to tell where Scythians could make themselves understood without difficulty and where not. We may also compare his description of the Nasamonian procedure for giving solemn undertakings (IV 172,3f.), here too one item in an ethnographic catalogue; a Nasamonian interest in long distance desert travel is implied by the venture in trans-saharan exploration of which reports reached Cyrene from Siwa (II 32).

Herodotus is not well informed about Arabia; the distinction between *Arabia deserta* and *Arabia felix* escapes him, and he was surely unaware of the further complication of the use of the name for a more northerly region of barren steppe, familiar from the *Prometheus Vinctus* (420-422) and from Xenophon (*Cyr.* VI 2,10, VII 4,16, 5,14, VIII 6,7)[5]. Like 'Scythian', the ethnic had

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[3] As impressively illustrated by Herodotus' story of Glaukos, son of Epikydes (VI 86). Similarly instructive is Euripides' depiction of Pylades' concern that he may, through circumstances beyond his control, be unable to fulfil his oath to Iphigeneia and deliver her letter at Argos (*IT* 735-765).

[4] See further W. Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen*, Göttingen 1921 (1969[2]), 135; W. Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread*, Ithaca, N.Y. 2002, 447-450.

[5] For further witnesses, see S. West, *Alternative Arabia; a note on Prometheus Vinctus*

a very wide application, conveying a common culture (or what seemed such to Greek observers).

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Abstract

In «Eikasmós» XXV (2014) 181-183 P.J. Finglass considered why the Greeks derived the Arabs' ancestry from Hermes, as evidenced by the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 137 M.-W.) and Stesichorus (fr. 286 Finglass). Emphasising the god's association with trade Finglass focuses on deceit and trickery. It is here argued that sharp practice in the clever wording of oaths is particularly relevant, an aspect of Hermes' role conspicuous in the *Odyssey*'s description of his gifts to Autolycus (XIX 395-398). Expertise in framing an oath in terms more favourable to the man administering it than the other party initially realises is a widespread motif in popular story-telling.

420-424, «Hermes» CXXV (1997) 374-379. English 'street Arab' (*OED*^{2} *s.v. Arab* A.3) for a homeless city child highlights the lack of a permanent home seen as characteristic of the steppe dwellers, not ethnicity.