

# Introducing the Scythians : Herodotus on Koumiss (4.2)

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## Introducing the Scythians: Herodotus on Koumiss (4.2)

By Stephanie West, Oxford

The North Pontic nomads enter Greek literature as noble milkers of mares (*Il.* 13.5f. ἀγαυῶν Ἴππημολγῶν γλακτοφάγων), and the Scythians are similarly characterized at the earliest occurrence of their name, in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (F 150.15 Σκύθας ἱππημολγούς, cf. F 151 Γλακτοφάγων ἐς γαῖαν ἀπήνας οἰκί' ἐχόντων)<sup>1</sup>. It is thus entirely appropriate that Herodotus, who is always rather inclined to use diet as a criterion of ethnicity<sup>2</sup>, should set this distinctive element of nomadic life on the Eurasian steppe in the foreground as he begins his account of Darius' Scythian campaign.

Reminding us of the part already played in his history by the Scythians (1.103.3–106), who (so he tells us) had some generations earlier subjected Western Asia to their rule for 28 years<sup>3</sup>, he gives a focus to Persian expansionism by presenting it as retaliation for an old injury<sup>4</sup>. His vignette of steppe dairy-prac-

\* This article would have remained unwritten if I had not enjoyed expert guidance over some unfamiliar terrain. My warmest thanks are owed to Professor G. L. Lewis, Dr. Carole Pegg, Mr. D. S. Richards, and Dr. G. C. Stone.

1 See further M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women* (Oxford 1985) 131; E. Lévy, "Les origines du mirage scythe", *Ktéma* 6 (1981) 57–68, esp. 58–60.

2 Cf. 3.23.1 (Ethiopians live on milk and meat), 9.82 (Pausanias illustrates the difference between the Persian and the Spartan ways of life by contrasted dinners; see further W. Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage u. Novelle bei Herodot u. seinen Zeitgenossen*, Göttingen 1921; 2nd ed. 1969, 192); the motif recurs, *mutatis mutandis*, in al-Tabari's account of the Arab conquest of Egypt; see *The History of al-Tabari: the conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt*, 13, translated and annotated by G. H. A. Juynboll (Albany 1989) 173f.

3 A gross historical exaggeration must be involved; no reflection of Scythian hegemony is to be found in Assyrian or Babylonian records. See further Asheri on 1.103–106; R. P. Vaggione, "Over all Asia? The extent of the Scythian domination in Herodotus", *JBL* 92 (1973) 523–530. In any case, if there is any historical substance to the tradition of an incursion into Western Asia by nomads from the steppe, the invaders must have come from further east, not from the North Pontic area.

4 On the fundamental importance of reciprocal activity in Herodotus see K.-A. Pagel, *Die Bedeutung des aitiologischen Moments f. Herodots Geschichtsschreibung* (Leipzig 1927); H. R. Immerwahr, "Aspects of historical causation in Herodotus", *TAPhA* 87 (1956) 241–280; J. de Romilly, "La vengeance comme explication historique dans l'œuvre d'Hérodote" *REG* 84 (1971) 314–337; J. Gould, *Herodotus* (London 1989) 42–47. 82–85; D. Braund, "Herodotus on the Problematics on Reciprocity", in: Christopher Gill et al., *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1998) 159–180.

tice is set within an account of the resistance which the Scythian force encountered on returning home<sup>5</sup> (4.1.3–3.1)<sup>6</sup>.

“Der Vater der Geschichte producirt hier nämlich eine so abgeschmackte Erzählung, dass sich in unsern Tagen wohl nur die vollendeste Leichtgläubigkeit bei ihr beruhigen kann”<sup>7</sup>; “This chapter comes in awkwardly, the matter it contains is suspicious, and the logic ... questionable.”<sup>8</sup> I could have assembled a much longer anthology of adverse comment; but it may be instructive to scrutinize more closely the various difficulties presented by this passage.

It looks inconsequential because Herodotus anticipates two questions which would probably have seemed more nearly self-evident to his contemporaries (or to members of any other slave-owning society) than they do to us: what use would pastoral nomads have for slaves, and how would they prevent them rebelling or running away? As J. W. Blakesley well put it<sup>9</sup>:

“The meaning of the writer is, not that the blindness of the slaves rendered them more serviceable for the duty imposed on them, but that they were blinded because they could perform this service – the only one put upon them – equally well. Of

5 Stephanus adverts to the very similar tradition about Novgorod related by Sigismund von Herberstein (1486–1566) in his *Muscovia* (Vienna 1549) (*Henrici Stephani Apologia pro Herodoto* (herausgegeben u. übersetzt v. Johannes Kramer, Meisenheim am Glan 1980) ch. 16. Though Herberstein says the episode is related “in their chronicles”, it is not mentioned in *The Chronicle of Novgorod 1061–1471* (translated by Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, London 1914), and the context suggests that he was told the story while he was sight-seeing. – On somewhat similar stories relating the origins of Tarentum and Locri see D. Briquel, “Tarente, Locre, les Scythes, Théra, Rome: précédents antiques au thème de l’amant de Lady Chatterley?”, *MEFRA* 86 (1974) 673–705, esp. 673–689.

6 Τους δὲ Σκύθας ἀποδημήσαντας ὀκτῶ καὶ εἴκοσι ἔτεα καὶ διὰ χρόνου τοσούτου κατιόντας ἐς τὴν σφετέρην ἐξεδέξατο οὐκ ἐλάσσων πόνος τοῦ Μηδικοῦ, εὖρον γὰρ ἀντιούμενην σφι στρατιὴν οὐκ ὀλίγην· αἱ γὰρ τῶν Σκυθῶν γυναῖκες, ὡς σφι οἱ ἄνδρες ἀπῆσαν χρόνον πολλόν, ἐφοίτων παρὰ τοὺς δούλους. (2.1) τοὺς δὲ δούλους οἱ Σκύθαι πάντας τυφλοῦσι τοῦ γάλακτος εἵνεκεν, τοῦ πίνουσι, ποιεῦντες ὧδε· ἐπεὰν φουσητήρας λάβωσι ὀστεινοὺς αὐλοῖσι προσεμφορεστάτους, τούτους ἐσθέντες ἐς τῶν θηλέων ἵππων τὰ ἄρθρα φουσῶσι τοῖσι στόμασι, ἄλλοι δὲ ἄλλων φουσώντων ἀμέλγουσι. φασὶ δὲ τοῦδε εἵνεκα τοῦτο ποιεῖν· τὰς φλέβας τε πίμπλασθαι φουσώμενας τῆς ἵππου καὶ τὸ οὖθαρ κατίεσθαι. (2) ἐπεὰν δὲ ἀμέλξωσι τὸ γάλα, ἐσχέαντες ἐς ξύλινα ἀγγῆα κοῖλα καὶ περίξστήσαντες κατὰ τὰ ἀγγῆα τοὺς τυφλοὺς δονέουσι τὸ γάλα, καὶ τὸ μὲν αὐτοῦ ἐπιστάμενον ἀπαρῶσαντες ἠγεῦνται εἶναι τιμώτερον, τὸ δ’ ὑπιστάμενον ἦσσαν τοῦ ἐτέρου. τούτων μὲν εἵνεκα ἅπαντα, τὸν ἂν λάβωσι Σκύθαι, ἐκτυφλοῦσι· οὐ γὰρ ἀρόται εἰσί, ἀλλὰ νομάδες. (3.1) ἐκ τούτων δὴ ὧν σφι τῶν δούλων καὶ τῶν γυναικῶν ἐπετράφη νεότης, οἱ ἐπεῖτε ἕμαθον τὴν σφετέρην γένεσιν, ἠντιοῦντο αὐτοῖσι κατιοῦσι ἐκ τῶν Μήδων. – Rosén’s text, except that I have kept τοῖσι στόμασι (om. *d*) and adopted Dobree’s *cj.* περίξστήσαντες: περιστήξαντες, περιστήξαντες *codd.*; see further below, n. 32.

7 K. Neumann, *Die Hellenen im Skythenlande* I (Berlin 1855) 279.

8 R. W. Macan (cf. note 48), *ad loc.*

9 In his note on τούτων εἵνεκα; his commentary (1854) deserves more attention than it gets.

course their blindness prevented the possibility of their ever absconding, which would otherwise be rendered very easy by the nomad life their masters led.”<sup>10</sup>

This treatment of captured warriors may remind us of Samson, “eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves”, blinded and put to work by the Philistines (*Judges* 17.21). The practice on a large scale went back a long way. Shalmaneser I recorded that he had blinded 14,400 men from a defeated enemy army<sup>11</sup>; the captives could thus be employed in such hard and dreary work as milling without any security risk. Herodotus evidently viewed the processing of mare’s milk as similarly mechanical and tedious. The detail establishes ruthlessness as a Scythian characteristic<sup>12</sup>, but we should not infer from οὐ γὰρ ἀρόται εἰσί, ἀλλὰ νομάδες that Herodotus supposed cruelty to be a natural correlate of pastoralism.

The actual milking of course requires sight and skill, and Herodotus certainly does not suggest that the Scythians committed this task to their sightless slaves. Milking mares is more difficult than milking cows (or sheep or goats); in the absence of her foal the mare refuses to give milk, and the normal practice among the Mongol and Turkic peoples of the Eurasian steppe is to have the foal tethered nearby, and let it suck from time to time. With other animals stimulation of milk production by vaginal blowing is (or at any rate was) widely practised. It is worth quoting Bertram Thomas’ careful description of the technique among Arabian herdsmen:

“Next morning I went over to witness the practice of *nafakh* or vaginal blowing, which is universal among these tribes, as a stimulant to milk production. The animal stood, its hind legs firmly bound, while a boy coaxed it with food to be still. The owner took a deep breath, and holding the cow’s tail to the side, applied his lips to the vagina and emptied his lungs: he drew back for a moment, holding her with his other hand, so as to prevent the escape of air, then took another deep breath and repeated the performance, running his hand along the udder at the same time to see

10 Neumann, op. cit. (n. 7) 282, mentions a Kirghiz practice of making an incision in the sole of a captive’s foot and inserting a horse’s hair, so that after the wound is completely healed walking is very painful. A more terrible expedient is described by the Kirghiz novelist Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–), who has impressively condensed the theme of a society cut off from its past in the image of the *mankurt*, the captive slave deprived of memory and understanding in a horrific torture devised by his Tartar captors, so that he might be left to carry out patiently the dullest and hardest tasks and on his own replace many normal workers (*The Day lasts more than a Hundred Years*, English translation, London 1983, 124–127); in view of the importance of his Kirghiz heritage in his work this is unlikely to be his own invention.

11 See further I. J. Gelb, “Prisoners of war in early Mesopotamia”, *JNES* 32 (1973) 70–98; A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)* (Toronto 1987) 184. We should not of course overlook the function of atrocities as a form of psychological warfare, nor the *Schadenfreude* to be extracted from the humiliation of a defeated enemy, as with the mutilated Greeks who met Alexander outside Persepolis, kept by the Persians in *longum sui ludibrium* (Curt. 5.5.5–7).

12 Cf. 1.73.5; 4.62.3; 71.4–72.2. Ephorus adverts to other writers’ tendency to highlight Scythian savagery (*FGrHist* 70 F 42) εἰδότες τὸ δεινὸν καὶ τὸ θαυμαστὸν ἐκπληκτικὸν ὄν.

whether she was responding to his action. This practice is said sometimes to be undertaken by the practitioner with his mouth full of salt, but I have not seen this done, though I have often witnessed *nafakh* operations.”<sup>13</sup>

The use of any apparatus other than human lips is not easily paralleled<sup>14</sup>. The explanation offered (τὰς φλέβας ... κατίεσθαι) has a look of Greek medical theory<sup>15</sup>, but this could reflect an honest attempt to make sense of a native account<sup>16</sup>; an interpreter’s powers face a severe challenge in a foreigner’s curiosity about an unfamiliar technique.

What follows is even more eccentric. There is general agreement that Herodotus is attempting to describe the treatment of mare’s milk to produce the beverage commonly known by the Mongolian term *koumiss*<sup>17</sup>, and most likely to be familiar to Western readers from Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (Act 3), where the Polovtsian guards’ over-indulgence in this beverage sends them to sleep and allows the hero to escape<sup>18</sup>. In the latter part of the nineteenth century its health-giving qualities were very highly regarded. It is thus described by George Carrick, who was enthusiastic about its efficacy in the treatment of tuberculosis and for many years ran a steppe sanatorium near Orenburg for consumptives:

“Koumiss is a thin, homogeneous, white fluid, which differs in appearance from mare’s milk by small bubbles, like those seen in soda-water after it has stood a while, bursting on its surface, – their number being greatly increased on agitating the fluid.

- 13 *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (London 1932) 81. The practice is very probably depicted in the dairy-farming scenes from the temple of Ninhursa at Tell Ubaid near Ur; for reproductions see e.g. J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London/New York 1992) 163 fig. 8.2; M. A. Beck, *Atlas of Mesopotamia* (trans. D. R. Welsh, London/Edinburgh 1962) 52 Ill. 92 (where the comment “the cows are being incompetently milked from behind” suggests that this nicety was not appreciated); see also G. Herzog-Hauser, *RE* 15,2 (1932) 1569 (s.v. Milch); B. Martiny, *Kirne und Girbe: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte, besonders zur Geschichte der Milchwirtschaft* (Berlin 1894) 7f. and Ill. 75, depicting “Melken und buttern bei den Hottentoten nach Peter Kolbe (1719)”.
- 14 Stein (ad loc.) suggested that Aristophanes intended a parody of this passage at *Ach.* 863, ὄσοι Θείβαθεν ἀύληται πάρα, τοῖς ὀστίνοις φουσητε τὸν πρῶκτὸν κυνός. I suspect a connection, but a less direct one.
- 15 τὰς φλέβας should not be taken to imply that Herodotus thought that there were blood vessels connecting vulva and udder; on the use of φλέψ in the Hippocratic Corpus for vessels which carry fluids of any kind, or air, see I. M. Lonie, *The Hippocratic Treatises “On Generation”, “On the Nature of the Child”, “Diseases IV”: a commentary* (Berlin/New York 1981) 105. If the practice appeared to work, some communication between vulva and udder must seem reasonable.
- 16 But I doubt if it is relevant that bone pipes of uncertain purpose have been discovered in the neighbourhood of the *gorodishche* of Bel’sk, identified by some archaeologists with Herodotus’ mysterious city of Gelonus (4.108), on which see R. Rolle, *The World of the Scythians* (English translation, London 1989) 117–119; bone pipes have many other uses.
- 17 Mongolists and Turkologists prefer the spelling *qumis* or *qimiz*. Further orthographic variation will be observed in authors quoted elsewhere in this article, but should cause no problems. Of course, other terms are used among other steppe peoples.
- 18 As recorded in the Russian *Hypatian Chronicle*, s.a. 1185.

It has a pleasant, sweetish, acid taste – the latter decidedly predominating – and leaves on the tongue a curdy or rather creamy flavour. It reminds one somewhat of butter-milk, only that it is more tart, while the creamy after-taste is not so decidedly pronounced.”<sup>19</sup>

Its medical value had, he explains, been suggested by observation of its effectiveness among the steppe peoples in making good the results of food shortages in winter (when the mares do not yield milk):

“The remarkably rapid manner in which, after leaving his tent, the thin and wan nomad grows stout and regains his healthful look and ruddy complexion, had attracted the attention of travellers ... it was observed that this wonderful improvement – generally within a few weeks – in the physical condition and appearance of these men ... had to be referred chiefly to the addition of fermented mare’s milk, unlimited in amount, to their usually humble and scanty winter fare.”<sup>20</sup>

I have quoted this (relatively) modern account at some length because Herodotus fails to explain what was special about mare’s milk or why the Scythians treated it as they did, and we may easily get the impression that he describes a curious ethnic delicacy rather than a dietary staple, of central importance in the life of the Eurasian steppe peoples, who depended for subsistence on their herds (οὐ γὰρ ἀρόται εἰσί, ἀλλὰ νομάδες<sup>21</sup>). The tough steppe horses needed no winter shelter and could be expected to provide food for themselves throughout the year, scraping away the snow with their hooves to get at the vegetation underneath, while for herdsmen making long seasonal migrations they are preferable to cattle in that they are more easily moved over long distances in a comparatively short time<sup>22</sup>. During the intense heat of summer (an aspect of steppe conditions to which Herodotus, like Hippocrates, is quite blind<sup>23</sup>) fresh milk quickly goes off; fermented mare’s milk keeps well, and not only quenches thirst but also assuages hunger.

The continuities of steppe culture were splendidly illustrated by a photograph published in *The Times* (8 September 1995) to illustrate a report on President Clinton’s visit to Mongolia and showing Mrs Clinton drinking koumiss “offered by a Mongolian nomad couple in a traditional greeting”. Though wag-

19 G. L. Carrick, *Koumiss, or fermented mare’s milk and its uses in the treatment and cure of pulmonary consumption and other wasting diseases* (Edinburgh/London 1881) 94. See also John H. Appleby, *A Selective Index to Siberian, Far Eastern, and Central Asian Russian Materia Medica*, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine Research Publications 8 (Oxford 1987) 22–25.

20 Op. cit. (n. 19) 4.

21 Cf. 4.46.3 ζῶντες μὴ ἀπ’ ἀρότου ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ κτηνέων; the passage, which encapsulates Herodotus’ theory of nomadism, is echoed at 7.50.4, ἐπ’ ἀροτήρας δὲ καὶ οὐ νομάδας στρατεύομεθα ἄνδρας.

22 See further S. Vainshtein, *Nomads of South Siberia: the pastoral economies of Tuva* (ed. with an introduction by Caroline Humphrey, translated by Michael Colenso, Cambridge 1980) 94.

23 Herodotus’ description of the Scythian climate suggests the Arctic circle (4.28), as does Hippocrates’ (*Aer.* 19); both writers are over-influenced by the idea of Egypt and Scythia as completely antithetical.



gon-borne homes were long ago superseded by the completely demountable yurt which could be carried more conveniently on pack-animals, most of the usages which Herodotus mentions as distinctively Scythian are inseparable from the pastoral way of life in that region. The reports of mediaeval travellers on Mongol manners and customs coincide very strikingly with Herodotus' Scythian ethnography and can properly be used to supplement it<sup>24</sup>. An excellent account of the traditional method of preparation is given by the Franciscan monk William of Rubruck, who was sent on a mission to the Mongol Khan in 1253; like Herodotus he starts with the milking process:

“*Comos* – namely mare’s milk – is made in the following way. They stretch above the ground a long rope between two stakes stuck in the soil, and around the third hour [nine o’clock] tether to the rope the foals of the mares they intend to milk. Then the mares stand beside their foals and let themselves be milked peacefully. In the event of any of them proving intractable, one man takes the foal and puts it underneath her to let it suck a little, while the milker takes its place. So having collected a great quantity of milk, which, when fresh is as sweet as cow’s milk, they pour it into a large skin or bag, and set about churning it with a club which is made for this purpose, as thick at the lower end as a man’s head and hollowed out. As they stir it rapidly, it begins to bubble like new wine and to turn sour or ferment, and they keep it churning until they extract the butter. Next they taste it, and when it is moderately pungent they drink it. While one is drinking, it stings the tongue like *râpé* wine<sup>25</sup>, but after one has finished drinking it leaves on the tongue a taste of milk of almonds. It produces a very agreeable sensation inside and even intoxicates those with no strong head.”<sup>26</sup>

He goes on to describe the superior product *caracomos*, black *comos*, “made for the great lords”, and the vast number of beasts required to supply Baatu’s court.

William undoubtedly knew what he was talking about<sup>27</sup>. He was introduced to the drink before he had left the Crimea, and found it very palatable, though strange<sup>28</sup>. By the time he returned from Karakorum in 1255 he was evidently an enthusiast<sup>29</sup>. His report clearly demonstrates its importance in the cul-

24 See further E. H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913) 47f.

25 Apparently inferior wine, obtained either by using unripe grapes or by adding water to the marc.

26 Peter Jackson with David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: his journey to the court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253–1255* (London 1990) ch. 4.1–3, pp. 81f.

27 His description is not quite adequate as a recipe; some ferment is needed. The process takes three or four days.

28 Marco Polo too found it to his taste: “Their drink is mare’s milk, prepared in such a way that you would take it for white wine; and a right good drink it is, called by them *Kemiz*.” (Sir Henry Yule/H. Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian concerning the kingdoms and marvels of the East*, 3rd ed., revised by H. Cordier, vol. I, London 1903, 252).

29 “I visited Baatu’s dwelling, and he gave us wine to drink while himself drinking *comos*, which I should have preferred to have if he had offered me any. The wine was admittedly new and of excellent quality, but *comos* does more to satisfy a man who is hungry”: op. cit. (n. 26) ch. 37.24, pp. 263f.

ture of the steppe peoples; an abundance of koumiss was essential for Mongol hospitality<sup>30</sup>. The general excellence of his account of its production, thoroughly confirmed by more recent observers, highlights Herodotus' inadequacies.

Herodotus has clearly not understood the process. Koumiss requires fermentation as well as agitation, and the latter, though frequent, is not continuous. "It is customary for visitors who may drop in to give a turn or two at the churn-stick", notes Sir Henry Yule<sup>31</sup>; the churn-staff stands constantly in the vessel, which hangs on the right of the entry. Herodotus does not mention a churn-staff at all; his description suggests that the necessary agitation is provided by collaborative movement<sup>32</sup> of the wooden vessels into which the milk is poured. We also can hardly avoid the conclusion that Herodotus supposed that what the Scythians relished was simply the top of the milk; the whole laborious process is just a method of separating the cream, as he sees it. These deficiencies suggest that there is a good deal of guesswork in his account.

His failure to mention the instrument normally used in agitating the milk may be partially explained by a mildly obscene modern joke, in the light of which it becomes easier to see why Herodotus set this description within a narrative of sexual impropriety on the part of grass widows. Travelling in Kirghizstan in 1991, the Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani was told that the Kirghiz word *bishkek* not only meant "the stick used to stir mare's milk" but also "the stick with which women console themselves when their husbands are away"<sup>33</sup>. Yudachin's Kirghiz-Russian dictionary gives only the first sense<sup>34</sup>. We may leave open the question whether *bishkek* is really used to mean a

30 He also discovered that for Eastern Christians its consumption was held to be incompatible with their faith – op. cit. (n. 26) ch. 10.5 p. 101; ch. 11.2 p. 102; ch. 12.2 p. 104 –, though no scriptural basis for this veto was advanced; he ascribed to Russian influence this view of the beverage as characteristic of the pagan steppe world.

31 Op. cit. (n. 28) 259; his very valuable note includes an engraving of a koumiss "churn", a bottle-necked container of horseskin. See also Neumann, op. cit. (n. 7) 279.

32 There is some uncertainty about the participle expressing the manner in which the Scythians deployed their slaves; the MSS. are divided between *περιστιξαντες*, *περιστήξαντες* and *περιστήσαντες*; some omit *κατά*. Most editors read *περιστιξαντες* (from *περιστιζω*), but the sense, apparently "having set them at intervals around", is strange, and hardly supported by the only other instance of the verb in Herodotus at 4.202. *περιστήσαντες* is too obviously a *lectio facillior* to inspire confidence; *περιστήξαντες* presupposes the late form *στήκω*, and need not be considered; similarly to be ruled out is Saerens' cj. *περιστειξαντες*, postulating a factitive sense of *στείχω* (*Euphrosyne* 17, 1989, 235–244). There is much to recommend Dobree's cj. *πέριξ στήσαντες*; but the problems may be more serious. Van Herwerden proposed deleting *κατά τὰ ἀγγήια* and *τὸ γάλα*; certainly the repetition of *ἀγγήια* within so short a space is odd.

33 Tiziano Terzani, *Goodnight, Mister Lenin: a journey through the end of the Soviet Empire* (translated by Joan Krakover Hall, London 1993) 153.

34 K. K. Yudachin, *Kirgizsko-russkij Slovar'* (Moscow 1965). Confusingly, with the break-up of the former Soviet Union the capital, formerly Frunze, has been re-named Bishkek; its earliest known name was Pishpek.



dildo. The temptation to pull the leg of a foreign visitor dependent on interpreters is nothing new; I suspect that Herodotus' informant had been confused by a similar witticism<sup>35</sup>. At all events, the rather disjointed association of ideas with which Book 4 opens becomes more comprehensible on this assumption.

A somewhat better description of the process is offered in Hippocrates (*Morb.* 4.51.2), where this rather far-fetched analogy is used to illustrate the effect on the human body of agitation of the humours resulting from unfavourable weather conditions: ἔοικε δὲ τοῦτο ὡσπερ οἱ Σκύθαι ποιέουσιν ἐκ τοῦ ἰππείου γάλακτος· ἐγχείοντες γὰρ τὸ γάλα ἐς ξύλα κοῖλα σείουσιν· τὸ δὲ ταρασσόμενον ἀφριᾶ καὶ διακρίνεται, καὶ τὸ μὲν πῖον, ὃ βούτυρον καλέουσιν, ἐπιπολῆς δίσταται τοῦτο, ἔλαφρον ἔόν· τὸ δὲ βαρὺ καὶ παχὺ κάτω ἴσταται, ὃ καὶ ἀποκρίναντες ξηραίνουσιν· ἐπὴν δὲ παγῆι καὶ ξηρανθῆι, ἰππάκην μιν καλέουσιν· ὃ δὲ ὄρρος τοῦ γάλακτος ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν. The choice of illustration suggests a current interest in Scythian matters. Unfortunately the treatise is not precisely dateable; Lonie favours a date between 420 and 400<sup>36</sup>.

While Hippocrates has a more accurate conception of the end-product than Herodotus does<sup>37</sup>, his idea of the method of production is no better. He too omits any reference to the churn-staff and envisages wooden vessels<sup>38</sup>, whereas the vessel normally used was (and is, in a traditional setting) made of smoked horse-hide (like the psalmist's "bottle in the smoke", *Ps.* 119.83), with the hair turned outwards. It is hard to imagine why any alternative to this conveniently available receptacle should have been tried before nineteenth-century physicians sought to impose Western standards of hygiene. It cannot be rash to suggest that Herodotus and Hippocrates must have been mistaken in supposing wooden vessels to be in normal use for this purpose, though we might guess that the drink was generally served in wooden beakers or bowls (pottery being ill-suited to the nomadic lifestyle)<sup>39</sup>. Neither author has anything to say about taste or other qualities.

35 Our "dumb waiter" might suggest that the churn-staff could be termed a "blind slave".

36 *Op. cit.* (n. 15) 71.

37 His tripartite description seems to include the precipitate of casein which settles at the bottom of the vessel, though we should perhaps be cautious about accepting his identification of this sediment with *hippake*. It is usually supposed that βούτυρον and ἰππάκη are Greek terms substituted for Scythian; but it is perhaps more likely that Greek *Volksetymologie* has been at work on the Scythian words (as with Enarees in *Hdt.* 1.105.4, which is said to be Scythian, but looks as if it means "accursed").

38 Is Hippocrates' text sound here? ξύλα κοῖλα, "hollow pieces of wood", is an extraordinarily clumsy counterpart to Herodotus' (admittedly pleonastic) ξύλινα ἀγγήια κοῖλα.

39 Yule, *op. cit.* (n. 28) 260, pioneered the view that Herodotus was simply wrong here.

Fermented mare's milk is only very mildly alcoholic<sup>40</sup>; but a more potent beverage can be distilled from it. There seems to be no agreed English term for this vodka-type drink; it is variously designated “milk-vodka”, “milk-arrack”, “milk-brandy”, and “milk schnaps”. This interesting beverage may provide the solution to a problem raised by Herodotus' description of the cult offered to the Scythian war-god, where he mentions as an element in the ritual a libation of wine (4.62.3): ἐπεὰν γὰρ οἶνον ἐπισπείσωσι κατὰ τῶν κεφαλῶν. As it is generally supposed that any wine drunk in Scythia must have been imported<sup>41</sup>, it is disconcerting to find that it has a place in religious ritual, particularly since Herodotus emphasises Scythian resistance to foreign customs (4.76.1): ξεινικοῖσι δὲ νομαίοισι καὶ οὔτοι αἰνῶς χρᾶσθαι φεύγουσι, μήτε τεῶν ἄλλων, Ἑλληνικοῖσι δὲ καὶ ἥκιστα<sup>42</sup>. It is tempting to suppose that what is meant by οἶνος here and in the description of the annual banquet at 66 is distilled koumiss; Herodotus certainly uses οἶνος of other alcoholic drinks besides wine (cf. 2.77.4 οἶνος ἐκ κριθῶν πεποιημένος; 86.4; 3.20.1; 4.177)<sup>43</sup>. The English traveller E. D. Clarke, having observed the distillation process as carried out by the women in a Kalmuck encampment, commented “The simplicity of the operation, and of their machinery, was very characteristic of the antiquity of this chemical process. Their still was constructed of mud, or of coarse clay; and for the neck of the retort they employed a cane. The receiver of the still was entirely covered by a coating of wet clay.”<sup>44</sup> The technology ought not to have been beyond the fifth-century Scythians. On this point, then, Herodotus' information may be more reliable than has sometimes been supposed.

Notwithstanding the deficiencies of his description of this staple of steppe life, we must approve Herodotus' decision to highlight it by setting it at the start

40 The point is specifically addressed by Wilhelm Radloff (Vasilij Vasilevich Radlov, 1837–1918), in the course of his excellent account of the preparation of koumiss and its place in the life of the Turkic tribes whose poetry he recorded (*Aus Sibirien: lose Blätter aus meinem Tagebuche*, 2nd ed., vol. I, Leipzig 1893; repr. 1968, 450f.): “Zum Berauschen gehören für einen an den Kumys gewöhnten Menschen etwa 4–6 Quart. Ich habe oft und sehr viel getrunken, aber nie ein Gefühl von Berauschtsein empfunden, wohl aber wirkte er auf mich einschläfend, so dass ich mich hüten musste, viel Kumys zu trinken, wenn ich noch einen weiten Ritt im Sonnenbrande vorhatte.” Yule, *op. cit.* (n. 28) 259, notes that “the Mahomedan converts from the nomad tribes seem to have adhered to the use of Kumiz even when strict in abstinence from wine.” However, according to the Danish explorer Henning Haslund, it becomes markedly more intoxicating if kept for more than three days, *Tents in Mongolia (Yabonah): adventures and experiences among the nomads of Central Asia* (translated by E. Sprigge and C. Napier, London 1934) 337f.; perhaps this was what Prince Igor's Polovtsian guards had been drinking.

41 Cf. Antiphanes F 58 (K.–A.): κακοδαίμων σφόδρα | ὅστις γαμεῖ γυναῖκα πλὴν ἐν τοῖς Σκύθαις. | ἐκεῖ μόνον γὰρ οὐχὶ φύετ' ἄμπελος.

42 I have adopted Stein's text here. καὶ οὔτοι: cf. 2.79.1; 91.1.

43 See also Neumann, *op. cit.* (n. 7) 284–285. 307.

44 *Travels in various countries of Europe Asia and Africa. I: Russia Tartary and Turkey* (London 1810) 240. Interestingly, Clarke notes that the Kalmucks, in offering some of this beverage to his party, called it *vina*, though their own word was *rack* or *racky* (i.e. *raki*).

of his account of Scythia<sup>45</sup>, though its inadequacies suggest that Herodotus was not able to draw on informants who had enjoyed the hospitality of a nomad encampment. It is difficult to resist the suspicion that he was rather bold in combining heterogeneous items of information, and misleadingly confident in his presentation of what was largely guesswork. Greek contacts with the nomadic world were poorer than seems often to be assumed, and we ought to bear in mind the possibility that slaves imported from the North Pontic area (not necessarily themselves Scythians) contributed significantly to Hellenic views of Scythian culture<sup>46</sup>. We shall do well to heed Sir John Boardman's warning<sup>47</sup>: "We think we know a lot about Scythian life, but most comes through Greek eyes and texts. The Greek-style finds and Herodotus are given prominence, but the majority of the sites and tombs tell a different story, of a people immune to most Mediterranean ways of life and probably more likely to exploit than be exploited by the newcomers from the south."

A little more than a hundred years ago the great Herodotean commentator R. W. Macan adverted to the difficulty of coming to any general conclusion "concerning the historic quality, credibility, or truth, of the matters" in Books 4–6<sup>48</sup>. "There is no page on which fact and fiction – if so crude a distinction may be admitted for the sake of argument – are not to be found lying side by side, or indissolubly interpenetrated, mutually affected, not as oil and vinegar, but as water and wine." H.-G. Nesselrath has persuasively defended Herodotus' good faith and standards of evidence with reference to some notoriously improbable stories in Books 3 and 4<sup>49</sup>. But the problem of formulating general guidelines for assessing the reliability of what Herodotus retails is hardly nearer a solution than it was in Macan's day. An air of authority suggesting first-hand observation or informants of impeccable credentials is part of Herodotus' narrative stock-in-trade, as is the display of precise (and sometimes irrelevant) detail which will distract attention from shortfalls in his material. He must often himself have been uncertain about the provenance (leave alone the reliability) of paradoxographical nuggets accumulated over the years, and we can hardly hope to trace the extent to which he himself tacitly rationalized the *prima facie* improbable or supplied links between data which were in reality unconnected or connected in

45 His example is followed by a scholar with long and varied experience of steppe culture, who starts his brief introductory account of "The world of the nomad" with William of Rubruck's account of the preparation of koumiss: see Karl Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: traditions, forms, poetic structure* (New York/London 1992) 17.

46 See further M. I. Finley, "The Black Sea and Danubian regions and the slave trade in antiquity", *Klio* 40 (1962) 51–59. Hippocrates' reference (*Aer* 21) to Scythian slave girls is more naturally taken to mean slave-girls imported from Scythia than slaves of the Scythians themselves.

47 *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (London 1994) 216f.

48 *Herodotus: the fourth, fifth, and sixth books* (London/New York 1895) xxvii.

49 "Herodot und die Enden der Erde", *MusHelv* 52 (1995) 20–44.

quite a different way<sup>50</sup>. We need to be constantly alert to the effects of such treatment of material derived from hearsay, often at several removes and across language barriers. The disguise of industrious marmots as ferocious gold-digging ants (3.102–105)<sup>51</sup> and the distortion of steppe dairy practice combine to reinforce Macan's admonition that "Every separate story, every individual statement is to be tried on its own merits"<sup>52</sup>.

50 Thus I believe that while the conception of Sesostris as a world-conqueror (2.102–106.110) is genuinely Egyptian, Herodotus' account of his wide-ranging campaign of conquest derives its geographical specificity from the (reasonable but wrong) assumption that hieroglyphic inscriptions must be of Egyptian origin: see further *Historia* 41 (1992) 117–120.

51 Their identification as marmots, long suspected, has been put on a sound footing by the adventurous French anthropologist Michel Peissel, *The Ants' Gold: the Discovery of the Greek El Dorado in the Himalayas* (London 1984): see further Nesselrath, *op. cit.* (n. 49) 31–37.

52 *Op. cit.* (n. 48) xiii.