

# Herodotus and Hippocrates on the Anthropology of the Scythians

ALEXANDER DOMBROWSKY

The geopolitical characteristics of southeastern Europe left definite imprints on its anthropological structure during the early historical epoch in both its physical-somatological and the spiritual-psychological aspects. The nomadism that characterized the vast Eurasian area during prehistoric and early historic periods, had dual significance. On the one hand, it continuously slowed down the process of ethnogenetical and socio-political development in this area; on the other, it ushered in ever new elements of a psycho-physical nature into the anthropological type of inhabitants of the Ukraine. Eastern Europe, in general, and the Ukraine, in particular, constituted an area where many cultures and ethnic elements crossed at various times. Its broad anthropological span wavered between the Indo-European and central Asiatic influences, including the Mongolian. Therefore, research in the anthropology of Eastern Europe in the prehistoric and early historic eras, and particularly in the anthropology of ancient Ukraine—based on the archaeological finds of skeletons of two main types, the dolichocephalic and the brachycephalic—is faced with a difficult task and can at best reach only general conclusions.

In addition to archaeological discoveries, the researcher has at his disposal ethnographic data recorded in ancient historiography—especially in Herodotus' "Scythia"—which, however, does not go back to the prehistoric era but begins with the Scythian period. To be sure, Herodotus does mention the Cimmerians, but the reference is very brief and does not contain much factual information. The mythological material of Herodotus' "Scythia" on the origins of the Scythians does not contribute much to research work on the Scythian question. But the examination of his ethnographic data—in this case, with regard to the anthropological question—requires a great deal of meticulous study, for early historic editing of the material has passed through various phases of mythologizing. Even some references of Hippocrates—an author preoccupied with problems of natural and medical sciences—bring confusion into anthropological research as

regards the ethnic composition of Eastern Europe in the early historic epoch.

Hippocrates, a physician of the fifth century B.C. and the founder of medical science, discussed in his work, "On Air, Water, and Places,"<sup>1</sup> the effects of climate on the human being; he included Scythia in his research. The work is a treatise on the relationship between the geographical (or anthropogeographical) and the ethnographic-historical factors of early historic man in certain geographical regions of the ancient world. Having described briefly the way of life and the customs of the Sarmatians and the Scythians (chapters 17-18), Hippocrates proceeds to a description of Scythia's climate and the physical structure of its inhabitants. Being firmly convinced that man's physique is determined by the climate in which he lives and his geographical environment in general, Hippocrates writes that Scythians, as inhabitants of a cold region with no drastic changes in the weather, were characterized by a thick, fleshy, nonmuscular body. Their abdomens, especially the lower sections, were soft. The entire Scythian tribe, according to Hippocrates, was redheaded. Finally, the ancient scientist comments on the barrenness of the Scythian women.<sup>2</sup>

Hippocrates' description of the physique of the Scythians had a definite influence on the writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concerning the problem of the ethnic classification of the Scythians. Some of them accepted the relation of Hippocrates: Potocki, Niebuhr, Neumann, and Kiepert shared the view that the Scythians were of Mongolian or of Turko-Tatar extraction.<sup>3</sup> Neumann even went as far as to state that he had found similarities between Scythian and Mongolian names. It was not until the twentieth century that scholars accepted the theory of the Iranian origins of the

<sup>1</sup> Περὶ ἀέρων, ὑδάτων, τόπων.

<sup>2</sup> Hippocrates' views are worthy of attention inasmuch as he was familiar, according to Gossen, with the Pontic lands, and thus with Scythia. See Pauly-Wisowa, *Realencyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Vol. VIII (1913).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Potocki, *Memoire sur un nouveau peryple du Pont Euxin, ainsi que sur la plus ancienne histoire des peuples du Taurus, du Caucase, et de la Scythie* (Vienna, 1796); Potocki, *Fragments historiques et géographiques sur la Scythie, la Sarmatie et les Slaves* (3 vols.; Brunswick, 1796); Potocki, *Recherches sur la Sarmatie* (2 vols.; Warsaw, 1789); Potocki, *Essay sur l'histoire universelle et recherches sur celle de la Sarmatie* (4 vols.; 1789-1792); Barthold Georg Niebuhr, "Untersuchungen ueber die Geschichte der Skythen, Geten und Sarmaten," *Kleine historische und philologische Schriften*, I (Bonn, 1828); Karl Neumann, *Die Hellenen im Skythenlande*, I (Berlin, 1855); Heinrich Kiepert, *Lehrbuch der alten Geographie* (Berlin, 1878).

Scythians on the basis of linguistic, ethnographic, and archaeological data. Yet the outmoded view of "Mongolizing" the Scythians had few supporters even in the twentieth century, such as Peisker<sup>4</sup> and particularly Minns.<sup>5</sup> Some remnants of Hippocrates' theory may still be found in general historical works. Thus, Nazaroff<sup>6</sup> feels that the Scythians can best be compared with the Kirghiz—a view which may be said to represent an indirect outcome of the conception emanating from the narrative of Hippocrates. Even *The Cambridge Ancient History* is not totally free from the theory of Hippocrates.

The most important counterbalancing view to the Hippocratic conception on the anthropological type of the Scythians comes from Herodotus' "Scythia." The ethnographic material in this work greatly contributed to the theory of the Iranian origin of the Scythians. In addition, some linguistic remnants of Scythian origin, including names, indicate that the Scythians belonged to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European linguistic family. It would not be irrelevant to mention the names of the Scythian forefathers given in the mythological material of Herodotus' "Scythia": Lepoxais, Arpoxais, Colaxais (IV, 5-7). The ending *xais* is similar to the old Indian (Sanskrit) word *kshaya* (ruler, king), and to the old Persian *khshâya* or *thiya* (king). Thus, Iranianism is quite evident here.<sup>7</sup> In addition, a certain number of Scythian names are provided by the Greek inscriptions in Tanais, Panticapaeum, Phanagoria, Olbia, and Tyras.

The linguistic question of the Scythians is closely connected with that of the Sarmatians. According to Herodotus' narrative, the Sarmatians (*Sauromatai* in Herodotus' work) evolved as a result of the merging of two tribes: the Amazon females and the Scythian males (IV, 110-17). It is possible that Herodotus in his *History* was trying to explain, by means of the above-mentioned narrative, the relationship between the Scythians and the Sarmatians, both of whom belonged to a common ethnic group. The result of the merging was that "the *Sauromatai* speak the Scythian language, but

<sup>4</sup> J. Peisker, "Die älteren Beziehungen der Slaven zu Turkotataren und Germanen," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, No. 3 (1905).

<sup>5</sup> Ellis Howell Minns, *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge, 1913).

<sup>6</sup> P. S. Nazaroff, "The Scythians, Past and Present," *The Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 250 (1929).

<sup>7</sup> Otto Schrader, *Reallexikon der indogermanischen Altertumskunde* (2d ed.; Berlin and Leipzig, 1917-29), II, 408.

they speak it incorrectly" (IV, 117).<sup>8</sup> It can be inferred from this that the Scythian and Sarmatian languages differed only in dialect.

The linguistic remnants of the Sarmatians, which are more numerous than the Scythian ones, clearly attest to the Iranian origin of the Sarmatian language. Since both Scythian and Sarmatian, according to Herodotus, were quite similar, differing only in dialect, and since the Sarmatian language, according to the prevailing views of present-day scholars, belonged to the Iranian linguistic family, then the language of the Scythians belonged also to the Iranian linguistic group and the Scythians must have belonged to the Iranian family—to the Aryans, and not to the Mongols.<sup>9</sup> Müllenhoff argues convincingly that anyone trying to disprove the Aryan origin of the Scythians, would have to prove first that the Sarmatians were not of Iranian origin and that the Scythian names can be explained easily and completely with the aid of another language.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the direct as well as the indirect linguistic material substantiates the view of the Iranian origin of the Scythians.

Some of Herodotus' ethnographic material also points to the Iranian origin of the Scythians—as, for example, special reverence for fire (IV, 5, 68), high penalties for untruthfulness and breach of oath (IV, 68), and a general lack of images and statues in honor of the gods (IV, 59).

It would not be irrelevant to emphasize that Herodotus—who completely parted with the logography and idealization of the Barbarians—and Hippocrates both appear to be quite realistic in their description of the Scythians. Nevertheless, they differ in many respects. The father of history assumed a pragmatic approach in ancient historiography and rejected, by and large, the mythological element; as Heiberg<sup>11</sup> states, he knew the Pythagoreans but did not allow himself to be swayed by their cosmological theories which had a great deal of influence on the geographical science of that time. However, Herodotus could not divest his knowledge of the spirit of

<sup>8</sup> φωνῆ δὲ οἱ Σαυρομάται νομίζουσι Σκυθικῆ, σολοικίζοντες αὐτῇ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρχαίου, ἐπεὶ οὐ χρηστῶς ἐξέμαθον αὐτὴν αἱ Ἀμαζόνες.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Dombrowsky, "Lingvistychni remanenty antychnoyi Ukrayiny" (The Linguistic Remnants of Ancient Ukraine), *Kyiv* (Philadelphia), No. 5 (1951), p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde* (Berlin, 1892), III, 124; Kaspar Zeuss, *Die Deutschen und die Nachbarstämme* (München, 1837).

<sup>11</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Mathematics and Physical Science in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1922), p. 11.

his era; he approached the anthropological problems from the ethnographic point of view, as Myres<sup>12</sup> points out. Hippocrates was a realist in the description of the Scythians, but much more as a physician and a scholar in the field of natural science and anthropogeography. Thus, these were two distinct types of realism: that of a historian-ethnographer and that of a physician-scientist.

Hippocrates devoted more attention to the Scythians because they differed from all other peoples and constituted a distinct anthropological type, much like the Egyptians. The specific elements of the anthropological character and the extreme differences between the Scythians, from a cold climate, and the Egyptians, from a hot climate, induced Hippocrates to utilize this contrasting anthropogeographical material for his medical-naturalist work, "On Air, Water, and Places." This subject matter of research was generally quite similar to the scholarly preoccupation of the old center of ancient Greek science, the Ionic school, with which Herodotus was not in agreement. Diller<sup>13</sup> provides additional Scythian-Egyptian extremes, well-known in ancient times, which may have affected the comparison of these two peoples in the anthropogeographic work of the ancient physician-scientist. Egypt had its distinct customs, Scythia had its distinct characteristics emanating from the cold climate. The Egyptians considered themselves to be the oldest people, while the Scythians spoke of themselves as the youngest of peoples. According to the geographic map of Hecataeus, there are some similarities between the Nile River of Egypt and the Ister (Danube) River of Scythia. The rivers flowing through Scythia were compared to the canals of Egypt. And finally, the women of Egypt were famous in the ancient world for their fecundity; in the case of the Scythian women, it was just the opposite. Hippocrates tries to "pragmatize" the anthropogeographic data of both lands, drawing conclusions from the point of view of medicine and natural science, and presenting the anthropological type of the Scythians as having characteristics of the Mongolian race.

With regard to the relation of Hippocrates, Ebert comments that the images of the Scythians on ancient vases found in Chertomlyk,

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Myres, "Herodotus and Anthropology," in *Anthropology and the Classics*, edited by R. R. Marett (Oxford, 1908), pp. 121-68.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Diller, *Wanderarzt und Aitiologie* (Philologus, Supplementband XXVI, Heft 3) (Leipzig, 1934).

Voronezh, and Kul Oba represent persons of middle height, stocky, with broad bearded faces, low foreheads, straight noses, with hair falling in braids to the neck—thus, a people “that may, perhaps, have also some Mongolian blood in their veins; but, on the whole, their physique is still that of the Iranians.”<sup>14</sup> The question arises as to why Hippocrates would give misleading information about the anthropological type of the Scythians. A partial answer to this question is given by Ebert<sup>15</sup> as well as other scholars; Ebert asserts that Hippocrates may have been misled by the existing similarities in the customs of the Iranian Scythians and the Mongolians, which were common to all nomads as a result of similar conditions of life. In addition, the ancient author could have easily lost himself in the ethnic web of the vast Eurasian expanse which was constantly subjected to the migratory movements of the nomads.

It is our opinion that most students of anthropology of Eastern Europe in prehistoric and early historic periods fail to consider one significant fact, namely, that the representatives of ancient historiography frequently confused the geographical concepts with the ethnic and ethnological ones. The problem of the Hyperboreans and the very conception of Scythia may serve as classic examples of this confusion. The Hyperboreans, a mythical people, constituted at first a purely geographical concept as indicated by the name itself; but gradually, as the horizons of geographical concepts of the ancient world broadened, this concept assumed an ethnic coloring in the light of mythical geography and the philosophically and religiously idealistic imagination of the Greeks. In the case of the concepts of “Scythia” and “Scythians,” the situation was just the reverse: the purely ethnic concept in time assumed a political and geographic character, that is to say, all of the territory dominated by the Scythians (in all probability, a rather small dominating class of nomads in contrast to the large ethnic substratum of the native agrarian population) was named “Scythia” and all of its inhabitants “Scythians.” This name remained even after the Scythians ceased to dominate the territory.

14 “Leute, die vielleicht auch etwas mongolisches Blut in den Adern haben, im ganzen aber doch den körperlichen Habitus der Iranier besitzen.” Max Ebert, *Südrussland im Altertum* (Bonn and Leipzig, 1921), pp. 87–88; see also figures 34, 68, 56.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.

In all probability, Hippocrates erroneously included among the Iranian Scythians those Mongolian and semi-Mongolian nomadic tribes which moved constantly across the part of the Eurasian region known throughout the ancient world as Scythia. It should be remembered that, as Niederle<sup>16</sup> and other scholars emphasize, the Nomad Scythians as well as the so-called Royal Scythians were nomads. Hippocrates confused all of them with the Mongolian tribes of Eurasia. This ethnic and ethnological chaos prevalent in the nomadic web of Eurasia could also have confused such scholars as Peisker who gave serious consideration to the conception of Hippocrates. Peisker's view is refuted by Niederle who points to the Scythian iconography as evidence of the fallacy of the theory of the Mongolian origin of the Scythians.<sup>17</sup>

In the author's opinion, Hippocrates considered only that Mongolian or semi-Mongolian type which was an insignificant minority in the countries of southeastern Europe; he failed to consider other anthropological types, those of the Indo-European family, types which constituted a predominant majority in this area, as shown clearly by the ethnographic data of ancient historiography, particularly, in the works of its foremost representative, Herodotus. These overwhelming Indo-European elements prevailed in both the somatological and the psychological aspects over the minor islands of the Mongolian types which had wandered as nomads into the territory of ancient Ukraine.

### *New York*

<sup>16</sup> Lubor Niederle, *Manuel de l'antiquité slave*, I (Paris, 1923), p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> Lubor Niederle, "Les theories nouvelles de Jan Peisker sur les anciens slaves," *Revue des études slaves*, Vol. II (1922), pp. 19-37; Niederle, *Slovanské starožitnosti*, I, 2 (Praha, 1925), p. 258.