



## **The Greek Invention of Anthropology: The Pre- and Pre-Pre-Socratics**

Although *anthropologia* as a word does not occur in extant classical Greek, “anthropology” as we understand it goes quite as far back as we have documents. In fact, the actual character of the *historiai*, “investigations,” of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century Ionian-Anatolian Herodotus, the so-called **Father of History**, almost allows us to title him **Father of Anthropology** as well. The first anthropologists, however, antedate him by centuries. They also antedate those progressive thinkers whom the late Eric Havelock astutely characterized in *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, where Chapter 5 is titled “The Fragments of the Greek Anthropologists.”

A forerunner of the Ionian Greeks (Anaximander, Xenophanes, et al.) whom Havelock cites was an even earlier Hellene, the (Ionian!) *Odyssey*-poet’s title character Odysseus. That poem’s invocation identifies the “much-turning” man as one who “saw the towns of many human beings (*pollōn ...anthrōpōn*) and became acquainted with [their] mind (*kai noon egnō*).” As a number of scholars have astutely pointed out, The Ithacan mariner-hero’s first-person account of his adventures includes a **colonist’s**-eye view of distant *new* lands, of their flora and fauna and their inhabitants; but it also approximates an **anthropologist’s**. We see this even in his brief account of the indolent Lotus-eaters; but better examples appear when the adventurer shudders to recall, yet recounts in circumstantial and sometimes gruesome detail, his encounters with the gigantic

cannibalistic (Nordic?) Laestrygonians of the subarctic north and the huge, troglodytic one-eyed Cyclopes of the central sea. The poet indicates repugnance of their phenotypes in both cases as well as of their lawless brutishness to his protagonist. They would make terrible neighbors! The Laestrygonian queen, Mrs Antiphates, is so big and ugly that the Ithacan delegation who visit her detest her on sight, even before she calls her husband (the Laestrygonian seem to have been monogamous!) to begin the slaughter and the man-eating. The Cyclops whom Odysseus most closely studies—more closely than he might have wished to, though you may remember that it is the hero's curiosity to meet the huge cave-dweller that gets him into trouble, and half a dozen of his comrades into the monster's belly—Polyphemus is not only monstrous to see (*pélōros*), but is a primitive anti-social pastoralist, failing to **farm** potentially fertile ground and content with wild or “feral” grapes and the poor wine they yield. In sum, Odysseus gives us a brief but perceptive economic-cultural report.

In contrast, the poet's 3<sup>rd</sup>-person account of the highly civilized, almost decadent Phaeacians, who seem to be ordinary humans in size and shape, verges upon sociology. Their religion, for one thing, is familiar to Odysseus. His patroness Athena is worshiped in a poplar grove; Poseidon, dynastic ancestor of the local royalty, in a temple. The Phaeacians worship other Greek gods as well. Zeus and Hermes are mentioned early, and still others appear in their court singer's tale of divine scandal. In dealing with *this* nation their visitor takes a potential **immigrant's** eye-view, even though we know that the magic kingdom of Princess Nausicaä does not tempt him to end his travels there. He approves

the Phaeacians' own prior decision to emigrate far from the neighborhood of the Cyclopes to another island; but it's still not Ithaca.

Mentioned also in the *Odyssey*, though with amusingly contrasted exhibition of their ethics, are fully historic Phoenician sea-roving merchants. And the miserable Cimmerians on the edge of Ocean, who never see the sun for the fog and cloud, who population and city (*dēmos te polis te*, 11.14) lie under perpetual night. A nice place neither to visit nor to live!

The other, older “Homeric” epic, the *Iliad*, offers some perceptive incidental observations about different human types. A simile refers to “pygmy men” whom cranes lethally attack, a proof of their own diminutive size (a touch of physical anthropology, and likely based on a tradition from Egypt), where the poet compares the Trojans and their Asiatic allies to the deadly *cranes* (*Il.* 3.2-7). The narration itself notes *Kares ...barbarophōnoi*, “Carians whose voices go ‘bar-bar’” (2.867) and the confused polyglot din that the Trojan host make, bleating like sheep, “for they did not all have the same sound or one speech.” The messenger goddess Iris, whose specialty is diplomatic language, notes to Hector that his allied defense force consists of diverse Asiatics, who differ from group to group in “tongue” and therefore need leaders who can command them accordingly (2.804-806). This is simple cultural anthropology in one of its obvious manifestations. Moreover, the *Iliad*-poet distinguishes names of things for gods and for mortals, where supposedly divine vocabulary is believed to preserve an older, pre-Hellenic tongue that retained respect, even glamour among the Indo-European Greek interlopers. The “Homeric” *Hymn*

to *Aphrodite*, moreover, possibly as ancient as the *Iliad* (and older than our *Odyssey*) looks behind the familiar narrative convention that most archaic hexameter poetry exploited—and one still routine in science fiction and fantasy writing today—namely, that everybody can converse with everybody else in the same dialect. The author of the hymn puts into the love-goddess’s mouth a plausible explanation of how come the disguised goddess of love and sex, posing as a *Phrygian* princess, can address the *Trojan* prince Anchises idiomatically in his own language. She had, she explains, a Trojan nanny! (Needless to say, she speaks excellent epic Ionian *Greek*.)

Among lost pre-historic narrative poems we must especially regret not having the *Aethiopsis*, which included episodes involving newly arriving allies of Troy, first the culturally odd Amazon warrioresses, then the demigod hero Memnon and his racially distinctive soldiers of “burnt face”—for that is what “Aethiopians” probably means. Both the extant “Homeric” epics know something about this exotic nation in northeast Africa or Arabia, a pious one whose sacrifices are so appealing to all the Olympians (in the *Iliad*) or to Poseidon (in the *Odyssey*) that gods take vacations among them. They did no such thing among the Greeks. The *Aethiopsis* must have offered further cultural data, although we may suspect that little if any linguistic information was offered.

We are also missing the Archaic accounts of Jason’s Argonautic expedition, outward into the Black Sea as well as homeward bound, to places that should be on the southern shores and central reaches of the Mediterranean. The tradition as we know it from subsequent literature—some from Pindar in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, much more from Apollonius in the

3<sup>rd</sup> and his Roman imitators and from Imperial-period handbooks—brought Jason and his crew to many exotic places and races. Some were fabulous, no doubt products of sailors’ and merchants’ tall tales; on the other hand, the Chalybes of north-central Anatolia were early and well established as miners and workers of iron in a poetic tradition replete also with *bronze*-age reminiscences. Embedded, moreover, in Hesiod’s well-known myth of the Ages of Man in *Works and Days* and its cultural-technological history—from the so-called Chalcolithic Age, when native gold silver and copper were known, to archaeologically accurate “Bronze” and “Iron” periods—are recollections of economic development, societal complication, and moral deterioration in the human race. This reflects the dour Boeotian poet’s mood during a dark age that in its heroic epics preserved memory of better times and friendlier gods. Such a morose view of history became commonplace for ancient moralists, who preferred imagined “primordial” simplicity, even a “state of nature,” over duplicity and corruption of an unnatural money-driven and war-torn world.

Fascination with weird human or semi-human beings also marks several of the Labors of Heracles, which were early known though not transcribed in a continuous Archaic account. One version of one expedition, for example, sends him to the exotic Hyperborean in the Danubian far north (according to Pindar’s version of the Capture of the Doe with Golden Antlers, *Ol.* 3), and more than one adventure—fetching apples of the Daughters of Evening and rustling the triple giant Geryon’s cattle—takes him far westward, as far as the Pillars of—himself, of Heracles. All of the adventures are sensational and are set outside the audience’s normal time-and-space references, nearly so

much so as the fabulous exploits of Heracles' intercontinental ancestor Perseus, winged boots and all. These myths preserve few humanly plausible circumstances. Nevertheless interest is clear in other places *and in their un-Hellenic inhabitants* during an age of commercial expansion, whether exploration led to colonization or only to the planting of trading-posts.

A bit later, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century Solon of Athens undertook a kind of cultural tourism—Odysseus-like in his desire to know others, though in his case entirely voluntarily. Herodotus and other sources may embellish Solon's alleged sojourns in Lydia (plausible, though Croesus reigned too late to have met the retired Athenian statesman) and in Egypt. In any event, the curious traveler is reported to have visited only what we would classify as high civilizations, ones that the Greeks acknowledged to be older than their own. The information that, if Solon did not gather it himself, someone did gather and attached to his prestigious name, attributes *cultural difference*, described, but also *moral worth*, admired, to other nations which, as enlightened Greeks realized, hardly deserved to be grouped together with savages as *barbaroi*. Herodotus, to whom we return later, would play tourist a century and a half later, visiting foreigners so sophisticated that they seem to have invented the profession of Tour Guide. However, the Halicarnassian expatriate also inquired and learned, from the civilized (and Greek-speaking) persons he interviewed and maybe from "adventure tours" beyond their territories, about remoter primitive peoples.

Later in Solon's century yet well before the half-hearted rationalist Herodotus a fellow Ionian who rejected the Homeric theology and value-system, the poet-philosopher

Xenophanes, indicated acquaintance with cultural practices and artifacts of barbarous Thracians and “Aethiopians.” By this time, as vase paintings of Memnon’s troops make clear, these were negroid, as were the evil Egyptian king Busiris and his minions. Xenophanes’ sarcastic statement is well known about how Negroes make images of gods with black skin and snub noses like theirs, how “Celtic” Thracians made gods with red hair and pale eyes—and how, if cows, horses, and lions had the dexterity to make idols, they would make them bovine, equine, and leonine.

To the extent that we mark a dichotomy between physical and cultural anthropology, we have so far encountered nearly equal amounts of both. The former consists not only of passing along reports—concocted and sensationalized, or merely garbled?—of weird hominid creatures, side-show freaks like the one-eyed Arimaspeans of the Steppes who still figure in the Aeschylean or pseudo-Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*. The poet-playwright placed them, however, not in the more anthropological *European* stretch of the poor cow-girl Io’s predicted wanderings (where Scythians, Chalybes, and Amazons are enumerated, and the Cimmerians: *PB* 709-731) but in a subsequent thoroughly *mythological* Asian zone (including among other monstrosities, Gorgons!: 790-806) to which the Aethiop river, a “dark-race,” and valley of the Nile finally succeed. Accounts of some Asiatic races are no more scientific than myths of Centaurs or satyrs.

One brilliant early thinker, the mid-6<sup>th</sup>-century astronomer and proto-physicist Anaximander, made an early map that was as much ethnographic as geographic, so far as we know according to our scanty evidence. (One testimonium says he drew *tēn*

*oikoumenēn*, “the *inhabited* [earth].”) This paved the way for a more detailed world-map that Anaximander’s fellow Milesian, Herodotus’ predecessor and sometime rival in proto-history Hecataeus devised. Ca. 500 BCE the latter also compiled a work variously named *Periēgēsis*, “Guiding Around,” or *Periodos gēs*, “Journey Around the Earth”—where “earth” lay all around the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and even into the Atlantic. Hecataeus seems to have been a well-traveled man himself, who could move freely between the free Greek city-states and the Persian Empire before the Ionian Revolt of 494 (which he prudently opposed). He was also something of a myth-buster, who rejected what he called “absurd tales of the Greeks”—which would, of course, have been less about physical topography or climate than about human types and customs.

Some other ancient thinkers conceived a notion of social evolution, which is developed by intellectual iconoclasts in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. (Havelock again has a chapter, his long Chapter 2 on “History as Progress.”) Athens’ more democratic-minded tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides take an optimistic view of history that moved from original beast-like life to civilization. We see this most strikingly in Prometheus’ proud history of human material technology and intellectual culture (*PB* 441-468 and 476-506), for which his gift of “fire” is only a dynamic symbol. Euripides a generation later, in his *Suppliants*, puts a manifesto of human advancement into the mouth of the Athenian hero Theseus (*Suppl.* 96-218), who attributes our improved lives to divine providence and blessing. (This looks like a response to the materialist Anaxagoras, who denied gods’ concern for the human race—if in fact “gods” exist—but may have entertained a theory of evolution by chance like that presumed for the older Atomists Leucippus and Democritus.) Even the more pessimistic

Sophocles, with clear doubts about the political developments in his native land—no democrat, he!—in the famous “Ode on Man” from the *Antigone*, which is as often misunderstood as that stasimon, acknowledges that mortal humans have made long strides in subduing nature, inanimate and animate, though they remain mortal—subject to death (and thus to the immortal gods). The tragedians’ young contemporary the scientifically ambitious historiographer Thucydides followed their lead, famously stating in an early chapter on “archaeology” that by examining the life-ways of certain primitives, backwoods Greeks and barbarians alike, one might see how Greeks had lived in their own past (Book I, chapter. 6).

Some of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century “Sophists” attempted both diachronic and synchronic descriptions of what the Greeks called *nomoi*, that is, positive laws and prescriptive customs, but also beliefs and manners. Objective cultural description was natural perhaps for men who experienced ethnic mingling on mainland Ionia (where Hellenes mixed freely with Phrygians, Lydians, Mysians, and Carians) and in the north and northeast Aegean region (abutting the cultural hybrid nations known as “Macedonia” and “Thrace”), and even beyond. They seem to have eschewed such an arrogant moral hierarchy of societies as sets one’s own at the top; indeed they invented cultural relativism, especially the religious agnostic Protagoras of Abdera, a city-state on the central Thracian coast. He would have known Macedonians and assorted Thracians at a personal level as well as from their rival kings’ meddling in Greek affairs; but he investigated—by what means we do not know, though he traveled extensively within and beyond the Athenian empire—what he called (in the reported title of a lost work) *peri tēs en arkhēi katastaseōs*, “On the Original State

of Man” as W. K. C. Guthrie translates it. His younger colleagues Hippias and Prodicus made studies in what we should call linguistics. Hippias treated comparative, interethnic onomastics, while Prodicus wrote a treatise “On the Nature of Man,” which must have been, like the man, meticulous in making distinctions of concept and word.

Respect for others, even bitter enemies characterizes anthropological thinking during the entire “Greek Enlightenment.” Euripides’ respect for many an abused “barbarian,” contrasted with morally hypocritical or outright amoral Greeks, is well known, whether he shows sympathy for an enslaved title character of the disturbing play *Andromache*, eloquent in her masters’ language, or a poor, terrified Phrygian eunuch, who can manage only broken Greek in *Orestes*. Granted, comic Aristophanes could make comical fun of a Triballian from the Danube in *Birds*; yet his Persian in the earlier *Acharnians* in his amusing pseudo- or hybrid “Iranian,” seems to feel proper exasperation with Athenian demagoguery. Most telling is Aeschylus’ presentation of the people whose chorus of elders give its name to his earliest surviving play, the prize-winning *Persians* of 472 BCE. Triumphant though the tragedy is, celebrating Athenian cleverness and bravery in the free Greeks’ improbable, divinely assisted victory over King Xerxes’ fleet, the play nevertheless presents a recent enemy, indeed the *current* enemy during the “War of Ionian Liberation” that Athens continued to wage well beyond the play’s performance date, with dignity, in the chorus, the queen mother, and the ghost of Darius the Great, if not the humiliated bedraggled young king.

Do I need to add anything now about Herodotus? His ethnography (as he himself proclaimed) was intended to correct and supersede that of old Hecataeus, to whom, in fact, he owed a debt now impossible to ascertain, since the Athens-guided transmission of texts has given us all of the shameless Athenophile Herodotus, but only tiny tidbits of the older logographer from Miletus. The young Halicarnassian's methods, for example in his extended treatment of the lives and mores of the so-called Scythians of east-central Europe in Book 4, are a humane *istoriē*, "investigation," quite comprehensive, and hardly the essentially political and often military narration to which the name "history" came to be almost exclusively reserved until recently. Despite Herodotus' occasional credulous naiveté and obvious misunderstandings or misinterpretations, his treatment of those "barbarians" as well as of Lydians, of Babylonians and of Medes and Persians, and above all of the Egyptians (in almost monographic Book 2) make edifying reading. A metic resident of Athens, Herodotus was, after all, a public lecturer and ultimately an entertainer, competing with dazzling visitors to the city like Gorgias, provocative scientists like Anaxagoras, and *social* scientists—like Protagoras. It may even say something about the cosmopolitanism, the openness to the Other, of his Athenian audiences and, later, his readers, that, although perfectly capable of writing in their Attic dialect and probably of speaking it as well, he chose a charming modified Ionian for his medium and introduced them to foreign words, strange institutions, and sensational worlds *and peoples* that he had indeed "investigated."

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