CHAPTER TWO
THE LOCAL GODDESSES

1.2.1 *Herodotus on the Goddesses of the Scythian Pantheon*

Herodotus (4.59) listed the Scythian gods and identified them with the Greek ones:

Θέους μὲν μούνους τούσδε ἰδάσκονται, Ἰστίην μὲν μάλιστα, ἐπὶ δὲ Δία τε καὶ Γῆν, νομίζοντες τὴν Γῆν τοῦ Δίου εἶναι γυναῖκα, μετὰ δὲ τούτους 'Ἀπόλλωνα τε καὶ οὐρανίαν Ἀφροδίτην καὶ Ἡρακλέα’1 καὶ Ἀρεα. τούτους μὲν πάντες Σκύθαι νεομοίας, οἱ δὲ καλεόμενοι βασιλεῖς Σκύθαι καὶ τῷ Ποσειδέων θόουσι. ὄνομάζονται δὲ Σκυθιστὶ Ἰστίη μὲν Ταβιτί, Ζεὺς δὲ ὀρθότατα κατὰ γνώμην γε τὴν ἐμὴν καλεόμενον Ποσειδόν, Γῆ δὲ Ἀπί (variant: Ἀπίω), Ἀπόλλων δὲ Γοιτόσωρος (variant: Οἰτόσωρος),2 οὐρανίῃ δὲ Ἀφροδίτη Ἀργίμπασα (variant: Ἀρτίμπασα, Ἀρτίμπασα),3 Ποσειδέων δὲ Θαγιμασάδας (variant: Θαγμασάδα).

The only gods whom they propitiate [by worship] are these: Hestia most of all, and next Zeus and Ge, whom they deem to be the wife of Zeus, after these, Apollo, and Aphrodite Ourania, and Heracles and Ares. All the Scythians worship these as gods, but the Scythians called Royal sacrifice also to Poseidon. In the Scythian language, Hestia is called Tabiti, Zeus (in my judgment most rightly so called) Papaios, Ge is Api, Apollo Goitosyros, Aphrodite Ourania Argimpasa, and Poseidon Thagimasades. (Translation by A. D. Godley, slightly modified)

This fragment aroused a number of questions, some of which are still debated. The majority of scholars agrees about the basic authenticity of the Scythian names (Bessonova 1983: 25), notwithstanding their variants in different manuscripts, which render the linguistic interpretation somewhat unsafe (Zhebelyov 1953: 30). The question is who is responsible for the interpretatio Graeca of the Scythian gods,

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1 The words καὶ Ἡρακλέα are omitted in the text of Kallenberg's edition of the *Historia*, but retained by other editors.
2 Orig. *Contra Cels.* 6.39: Γωγόσωρος; Hesych. s.v. Γοιτόσωρον· τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα· Σκύθαι.
3 Orig. *Contra Cels.* 6.39: Ἀργίμπασα; Hesych. s.v. Ἀρτίμπασαν· οὐρανίαν Ἀφροδίτην, ὑπὸ Σκυθῶν.
Herodotus himself (Zhebelyov 1953: 31; Rayevskiy 1977b: 57) or the Black Sea Greeks (Bessonova 1983: 26). It is impossible to imagine that after two centuries of contacts with the local population, Greek colonists did not equate the Scythian deities with their own, as they always did wherever they settled. Moreover, Herodotus himself said that to identify Papaios as Zeus was, in his opinion, absolutely right (4.59), thus emphasizing that there was a common opinion that he accepted. The correspondence between the Scythian and the Greek gods must have been more or less established when Herodotus toured the Black Sea coast, and he had only to record the information and arrange it for his Greek readers.

Furthermore, the wholesale use of Greek objects of art with representations of Greek gods, alone or together with indigenous cultic symbols and images, in Scythian complexes of an indisputable cultic nature, such as tombs, proves that Greek cult images, in their turn, were submitted to interpretatio Scythica. This influenced the iconography of emerging Scythian anthropomorphic art and most probably also Scythian religious conceptions, despite the professed hostility of the Scythians towards foreign rituals (Her. 4.76).

The cult of seven main gods is characteristic of the pantheons of the Iranian peoples, beginning with the Persians of the Achaemenian period (Marinovich and Koshelenko 1977: 120), through the Scythians and the Alans to the present-day Ossetians (Abayev 1962), notwithstanding the difference in composition of these pantheons. The order of gods in Herodotus' list might be based on some cultic formulae, used in oaths and other ceremonies, which were naturally very archaic, reminiscences of bygone beliefs, rather than reflections of the actual situation (Bessonova 1983: 54; Rayevskiy 1985: 37). The hierarchy of the seven Scythian gods is ostensibly divided into three levels (Marinovich and Koshelenko 1977: 119):

| Tabiti-Hestia                |  |
| Papaios-Zeus                | Api-Gaia               |
| Goitosyros-Apollo           | Argimpasa-Aphrodite   |
| Ourania                     | Heracles               | Ares               |

The gods of the first and the second level, presumably the most ancient and less individualized, are opposed to the “younger” gods,

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4 In his later book Rayevskiy (1985: 36) however claims just the opposite, that Herodotus copied a Scythian liturgical formula.