19. THE SCYTHIAN 'RULE OVER ASIA':
THE CLASSICAL TRADITION AND THE
HISTORICAL REALITY

Askold Ivantchik

The 'Scythian rule over Asia' which plays an important role in the
classical tradition on Asian history of the second half of the 7th cen-
tury B.C. has provoked many discussions in the literature. Some
scholars accept the reliability of the classical tradition and especially
of Herodotus' account, including his chronological data, and use
them as a base for the reconstruction of early Median history. Others
deny completely the reliability of this tradition.

This problem comprises two different but connected questions.
First, what is the character of the classical tradition on the Scythian
domination, how did it develop, what are its sources and what histori-
cal events, if any, did it reflect. Secondly, what would be the
date of these events.

We know some different and partly independent versions of the
history of the Scythian domination in Asia. These versions were
sometimes conflated. For example, Pompeius Trogus talks about three
Scythian invasions in Asia and three periods of Scythian domina-
tion; he borrowed the information about these invasions from different
sources. The first invasion is connected to the war of the Scyths
with the legendary Egyptian king Sesostris. Sesostris was defeated by
the Scythian king Idanthrysos or Iandyos, who became the ruler of

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1 This paper was prepared in the Center for Hellenic Studies (Washington, D.C.)
in 1996–1997, within a very stimulating scholarly community directed by Kurt
Raaflaub and Deborah Boedeker. I presented several aspects of the problem dis-
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rected my English.

2 Cf. for example: Millard 1979, 119–120; Sulimirski and Taylor 1991, 565–567
(positive assessment); Brown 1988, 82; Na’aman 1991, 36–37 (negative assessment).
See the history of the study and the bibliography: Grantovskii 1994, 25–37.
all of Asia (Pomp. Trog. fr. 36 a–b Seel = Iord. Get. 6; Iust. 1. 1. 6; 2. 3. 8–18). The date of these events depends on the date of Sesostris and they were therefore attributed to very ancient times: Pompeius Trogus dates them 1500 years before the reign of the first Assyrian king Ninus and 3000 years before the first Olympiad. I have discussed this tradition in a separate article (Ivantchik, forthcoming), and confine myself here to saying, that this account is completely fictitious and goes probably back to Ephorus, who created the whole history in order to corroborate his statement that the Scythians are invincible. This statement was a part of Ephorus’ more general idealisation of the Scythians. He constructed his story from details borrowed from two accounts of Herodotus, about the campaign of Darius against the Scythians and about their invasion of Asia at the time of Cyaxares.

Laying aside the tradition on Sesostris’ war, the account of the Scythian domination in Asia is known in three main versions. Two of them are found in Pompeius Trogus, the third in Herodotus. The Scythian rule over Asia is also mentioned by other authors, for example by Diodorus and Curtius Rufus (Diod. 2. 43. 4–6; Curt. Ruf. 7. 8. 18), but these accounts are much shorter. The version of Herodotus (1. 103–106, 130; 4. 1–12) is perhaps best known. According to him, the Scythians, led by Madyes, son of Protothyes, invaded Asia, defeated the Medes and installed their rule over Asia. Then they made for Egypt, but did not reach it, because the Egyptian king Psammetichos managed to persuade them to turn back in exchange for abundant gifts. The returning Scythians plundered the temple of Aphrodite Urania in Ashkelon. Then the Scythians ruled over Asia for 28 years until the Median king Cyaxares invited the majority of them to a feast, made them drunk and slaughtered them. The surviving Scythians returned to their own land. But their wives, when they were away, had formed connections with their slaves and had borne children by them. These children tried to prevent the return of the Scythians. The returning Scythians were unable to prevail against them in battles, but finally remembered that they were fighting with their own slaves. The Scythians laid aside their arms and attacked their adversaries with whips in hands. The stupefied sons of the slaves fled.

Pompeius Trogus relates a different version of the same story as the “third domination of the Scythians in Asia”. The summary of Pompeius Trogus given by Justinus does not however retain any