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THE SOVEREIGN’S FOREIGNERS: CLASSIFYING THE NATIVE PEOPLES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SIBERIA

The cossacks who followed the sables to the Pacific in the seventeenth century did not chance upon a terra incognita, did not find a forgotten Christian king, and did not “discover Siberia.” They knew that the “Eastern land” was rich in furs and that they could obtain those furs from “the people called Samoeds.” They had probably also heard that the Samoeds ate each other as well as fish and reindeer meat; died every winter when water came out of their noses and froze them to the ground; had mouths between their shoulders and eyes in their chests, and drank human “and other kinds of blood.” The fifteenth-century tale that contained this intelligence was a compilation of Russian travelers’ accounts and translated literary sources, particularly the famous Alexander Romance known in Russia as Aleksandriia. Most of these “Samoeds”—as well as the ever-popular Dogheads and other creatures frequently mentioned as denizens of the midnight country—had long been commonplaces in Eurasian oral traditions and the stock-in-trade of ancient and medieval cosmographies. Herodotus (who placed the men who slept six months a year beyond the impassable mountains north of bald-headed Argippaei), Pliny, Pomponius Mela, Solinus, Isidore of Seville and their students and imitators peopled the edges of the known world with headless Blemmyae, one-eyed Arimaspi (also frequently found in northern Scythia), and countless other monsters whose presence demarcated wilderness


4. He strongly doubted their existence, however. See Herodotus, 4:25-27.
from civilization.5 In the thirteenth century, traders, missionaries, and spies who passed through "Tartary" on their way to the Great Khan confirmed the existence of such people by talking to native informants. Plano Carpini learned about a people beyond the Samoed who had dog faces and whose every third word was a bark, while Marco Polo, who placed the Cynocephali on the Andaman Islands, referred to the fur trappers of the "Land of Darkness" as people who live "like brute beasts in subjection to none."6 Sixteenth-century ambassadors to Muscovy gave further—though not always eager—support to this theory by incorporating the local lore (much of it derivative of the same written tradition) into their travelogues. Herberstein cited a Russian source about the northern dog-heads, chest-heads, fish-men, and people who die each winter; Richard Johnson quoted verbatim the passage from Skazanie o che-
lovetsekh neznaimykh v vostochnoi strane about Samoed cannibalism; Raffaello Barberini attributed the sightings of fish-men, frozen snot, and human hibernation to two Tatar witnesses; and Daniel Printz summed up the prevailing view by calling all inhabitants of "Permia," "Sibiria," and "Ustyusia" "wild men and even total barbarians."

Not all barbarians were brutes and not all wildness was an abomination. Ever since the Fall—however construed—humans had yearned for the lost innocence of the Golden Age and envied those who were untouched by civilization (or at least better equipped to deal with its burdens). After most nymphs and satyrs had been confined to specific geographical locations, the universe beyond the oikumene came to consist of peoples who were in some way the antipodes of "real" (orthodox) humanity. They could be defined according to their association with the woods and the beasts (savages, from silva, forest); their inability to speak, or muteness (barbaroi, or "babblers," the Russian nemtsy); their irrationality (the two definitions of logos being closely related); or their paganism (which signified "rustic" before it came to mean "unbeliever").5 Invariably, however, they manifested their otherness by breaking the dietary and sexual taboos that bound human societies together

7. Sigismund Herberstein, Zapiski o maskovitskikh dielakh (St. Petersburg: Izdanie A. S. Suvorina, 1908), 129-33; Aleksseev, Sibir', 105-06, 127, 134-35, 150.