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Abaris and the Extraordinary Abilities of the Hyperboreans

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Abstract

Hyperborea was an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which was both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature. The Hyperboreans brought innovations to ancient Greeks culture and help in time of need. This study presents some of their extraordinary abilities and focuses on the most famous Hyperborean – Abaris. He came to Greece as an ambassador led by Apollo's arrow, and some claimed that he could fly on it. Abaris seems always to have been regarded as a spiritual or magical authority. Later we hear of him as a possible founder of sanctuaries and as a seer and prophet – he foretold and cured epidemics, wrote oracles. Whether he was legendary or historical (but even then, heavily overlaid by legend), he is an example of archaic wise man who possessed special knowledge of rituals, divination, and healing.

Keywords: Hyperborea, mythology, Abaris, Ancient Greece, history of religion.

1. Hyperborea

The mythology of Hyperborea, compared with other legendary places in Antiquity, had a significant specificity for the Greeks. If the Elysian Fields, the final resting place of the souls, belonged to an unearthly world, and the once rich and powerful Atlantis had long ago sunk into the ocean, Hyperborea, on the contrary, was a completely real, although extremely difficult to reach territory – “neither by ships nor on foot” (Pind. *Pyth.* 10.29).¹ Hyperborea was an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which was both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature (Bridgman, 2005: 3). Pliny (4.26) describes this utopia and its inhabitants:

A happy race, known as the Hyperborei, a race that lives to an extreme old age, and which has been the subject of many marvelous stories. Here we find light for six months together, given by the sun in one continuous day, who does not, however, as some ignorant persons have asserted, conceal himself from the vernal equinox to autumn. On the contrary, to these people there is but one rising of the sun for the year, and that at the summer solstice, and but one setting, at the winter solstice. The gods receive their worship singly and in groups, while all discord and every kind of sickness are things utterly unknown. Death comes upon them only when satiated

¹ For a full overview on the Hyperborean myth and its further development refer to my forthcoming paper *Hyperborea on Maps – Always to the North* (2023).

with life; after a career of feasting, in an old age sated with every luxury, they leap from a certain rock there into the sea.

- Pausanias regarded Abaris as a possible founder of the temple of Saviour Kore.
- According to Suda Abaris wrote Marriage of the river Hebrus and Purifications and a Theogony in prose and Arrival of Apollo among the Hyperboreans in meter.
- Iamblichus thought Abaris could predict earthquakes, and perform rapid expulsions of pestilences, and hurricanes, instantaneous cessations of hail, tranquilizations of the waves of rivers and seas.

Diodorus (2.47) claims that the goddess Leto was born in Hyperborea, and for that reason the Hyperboreans worshipped her son Apollo more than any other god. They were looked upon as priests of Apollo, players on the cithara, which play on this instrument in the temple and sing hymns of praise to the god, glorifying his deeds. Perhaps it was for this reason that the god of oracles, healing, music and arts, sunlight, knowledge, every winter left the Delphic oracle and flew to rest in the lands of the Hyperboreans – he wanted to be among the best poets, singers, philosophers. The godlike Hyperboreans seem to outshine the Greeks at every turn (Romm, 1992: 61).

Preserved inscriptions from the 4th century BC record that the temple of Apollo on the island of Delos received gifts, apparently symbolical sacrificial offerings, from somebody referred to as the Hyperboreans (Sandin, 2018: 14; see Coupry, 1972). Herodotus (4.32-36) also depicts individual Hyperboreans in ancient times bearing gifts to the temple of Apollo – the Hyperborean maidens. The historical reality of the gifts of the Hyperboreans was thus confirmed. But the debate about their homeland was by no means over.

2. Extraordinary abilities of the Hyperboreans

The Hyperboreans brought innovations to ancient Greeks culture, revealing the mysteries of the universe and helping in time of need. We learn about their extraordinary abilities during the most crucial and tense moments in Greek history – e.g., the defense of Delphi against the Gauls who intended to plunder the treasures of Apollo. According to Pausanias (1.4.4), in the midst of the battle, thunderbolts and rocks broken off from Parnassus were hurled against the Gauls and suddenly “terrible shapes as armed warriors haunted the foreigners” – two of them, Hyperochus and Amadocus, “came from the Hyperboreans”, while the third was Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, the killer of Priam.²

We hear about the extraordinary abilities of the Hyperboreans even in Late Antiquity. One of the tall tales in Lucian’s *Lover of Lies* (13) concerns a nameless Hyperborean sorcerer who is able to fly, walk on water, and cast spells of different kinds:

...I thought that there was no way they could happen, yet when I first saw the foreign visitor fly – he came from the Hyperborean people, as he said – I came to believe and I was overcome, despite having held out for so long. For what was I supposed to do when I saw him travelling through the air in the middle of the day, walking on water and strolling through fire at a leisurely pace?... He had on brogue shoes of the sort that those people wear. Is there any need to recite his minor miracles, sending Erosdolls to get people, bringing demons up from the underworld, reanimating mouldy corpses, summoning Hecate herself before him to assist him, large as life, and calling down the moon? (Ogden 2007: 50).

² Sandin (2014: 216) notes the story is later repeated by Pausanias (10.23.2), but Amadocus is called Laodocus instead. The warriors have been conjectured to originate in the poem of Boeo (Paus. 10.5.7), but the names may also connect them with the maidens Hyperoche and Laodice mentioned by Herodotus (4.33). The names are indeed absolutely consonant: Hyperochus/Hyperoche and Laodocus/Laodice.

According to Kindstrand (1981: 18), “it is notable that when barbarians, known for their wisdom, arrive in Greece, they always come from the North and their wisdom is displayed in the religious sphere, connected in most cases with the cult of Apollo. We may here recall Orpheus who came to Greece from Thrace”. Orpheus is much more than a talented singer and poet. He is a religious reformer, a priest and a teacher, who transmits valuable knowledge to humanity (Bondzhev 2022). His education in the secret mysteries grant him healing abilities. According to Pausanias (9.30.4), Orpheus “reached a high level of power because he was believed to have discovered . . . cures for diseases.” Pliny (30.7) writes that Orpheus “made progress in superstitious healing.” Orpheus’ life had immense influence on Pythagoras and Plato. The roots of his teachings were so deep, that some missionaries of the new Christian faith had to use the image of Orpheus in their desire to baptize pagans.

Among the other teachers who came to Greece were Abaris and Anacharsis, who “were in fair repute among the Greeks, because they displayed a nature characterized by complacency, frugality, and justice” (Strabo 7.3.8).³ But while he was reckoned by some ancient authors (Diogenes Laërtius, 1.41) as one of the Seven Sages of Greece, who preached a simple and modest life, Abaris is more famous for the miracles he performed.

3. Abaris

Pär Sandin (2014) published the most detailed catalog of the Hyperboreans, mentioned in ancient literature from Pindar and Herodotus to Byzantine grammarians and historians: each part begins with a list of sources regarding the corresponding Hyperborean character and continues with a biographical summary and comments on philological problems. This catalog will be an extraordinary help in the work of philologists, historians and philosophers interested in Hyperborea. There we learn, that to the Greeks, Abaris was the most famous Hyperborean. He visited Greece to renew the good-will and kinship of his people to the Delians (Diod. 2.47) carrying (in later versions riding on) a mystical arrow, associated with Apollo. His legend developed throughout the centuries, but he seems always to have been regarded as a spiritual or magical authority (Plat. *Charm.* 158b; Heraclid. *Pont.* 73-5) and an ascetic (Hdt. 4.36); soon we hear of him as a seer and prophet (Lycurg. 14.5, Iambl. *VP* 138, 221) and possible founder of sanctuaries (Paus. 3.13.2). As a priest of Apollo in Hyperborea, Abaris organizes a worldwide collection of gold for the temple of the god in his country (Iambl. *VP* 91). But he also brings his own offerings. He notably goes to Delos itself and reinstates the tribute.

According to Hippostratos (Harpocration, s.v. Abaris), Abaris came to Athens in the fifty third Olympiad (568 BC). Others (Harp., s.v. Ab.) dated Abaris in the twenty first Olympiad (696 BC). But Pindar (fr. 270), he adds, makes Abaris a contemporary of king Croesus of Lydia (585-546 BC). Which is more in harmony with 568 BC. If the lexicographer cites accurately, Abaris is then the Hyperborean individual mentioned first in known Greek sources, while at the same time being one of the youngest of the known Hyperboreans, belonging in the historical rather than mythical age. Herodotus (4.36) is the first to reveal concrete details of the legend, dismissing it as unworthy of his attention (cf. Gagné, 2020: 243):

³ According to Zhmud (2016: 9), in Strabo’s account Abaris figures as Scythian and this is the first attestation of a tendency to transform Abaris from Hyperborean into a Scythian, in which capacity he was predominantly known in Late Antiquity. See also Himer. *Oratio* 23.4; Greg. Naz. *Carm. Mor.* 684.10; Procop. *Soph. Ep.* 58.15; Ps.-Nonnus, *Schol. mythol.*, or. 43, hist. 7.10; Suda, s.v. Abaris; Phot. *Bibl.* 374a5-20. Cf. Meuli 1935.

Thus, much then, and no more, concerning the Hyperboreans. As for the tale of Abaris, who is said to have been a Hyperborean, and to have gone with his arrow all round the world without once eating, I shall pass it by in silence.⁴ (Rawlinson, 1910)

Probably the most speculated aspect of Abaris is his arrow. Himerius (*Oratio* 18.1) claims that:

Because of [Apollo's] arrow, the Scythian [Abaris] was transported about, not only across the Danube itself and the Tanaïs, but also to every land and sea; and, of course, Apollo's arrow is eloquence. (Penella 2007: 122)

Penella (2007: 122) makes a remarkable note that "Abaris rode the arrow, given to him by Apollo, like a witch on a broomstick."⁵ Others make an Asian connection – an arrow was held in great esteem by the Mongolians (Moravcsik, 1936).⁶ Origen (*Contra Celsium* 3.31) also found his own version, noting the ability of Abaris to run at the speed of a flying arrow. Which, according to him, is by no means a sign of divinity, as many would say:

For with what object did the deity who bestowed upon this Hyperborean Abaris the power of being carried along like an arrow, confer upon him such a gift? Was it that the human race might be benefited thereby, or did he himself obtain any advantage from the possession of such a power? – always supposing it to be conceded that these statements are not wholly inventions, but that the thing actually happened through the co-operation of some demon.

A more detailed description of Abaris we find in *Oratio* 23.4, 23.7-8 (Penella, 2007: 226):

23.4. They say that the wise Abaris was ethnically a Hyperborean, but a Greek in language, and a Scythian as far as his clothes and outer appearance were concerned. Whenever he opened his mouth to speak, one thought that his words were coming right from the Academy and from the Lyceum itself.

23.7. Abaris came to Athens carrying a bow, with a quiver on his shoulder, and wearing a tightly fastened cloak. He had a golden belt around his waist and was wearing pants that stretched from his buttocks right to the bottom of his feet. He had pleasing eyes and a charming face, which revealed to those who met him that he had a Hellenic disposition. But when he entered the city, the council welcomed this speaker {of Greek, and} they examined his thinking {as well as} his speech, to see if it too was thoroughly Hellenic (?)...

23.8. We find that, as with a lyre's harmony, everything one heard him say was completely in concord with what he thought. He was pleasant to meet; he could carry out a great deed quietly; he was sharp in seeing what lay before him, but also providently kept the future in mind. He always yielded to wisdom and was a lover of friendship. He entrusted few things to fortune, guaranteeing everything by his judgment.

⁴ Dodds (1973: 141) comments, that Abaris was so advanced in the art of fasting, that he had learned to dispense altogether with human food. Could we find a link with the orphic and later – ascetic practices? Macurdy (1920: 139) describes Abaris as a Sun-priest, like Orpheus. His magic arrow and his purity of life are the most striking points in the legend, and these may well bring him into connection with the Thracian Sun-worship, which produced Orpheus.

⁵ See Origen *Contra Cels.* 3.31; Iambl. *Vita Pyth.* 19[91], 28 [135-136]; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 43.21 [524b] Bernardi; Nonnus *Dionys.* 11.132–33; Suda A 18.

⁶ Graf (2008: 40) comments on the influence of shamanism: if one insists on the term, one could claim that Abaris was somewhat influenced by Northern Eurasian shamanism; but the probability of such an influence is low indeed.

According to the Athenian grammarian Harpocration (s.v. Abaris), during a plague that had arisen throughout the whole inhabited world, Apollo asked the Athenian people to make prayers on behalf of all; Abaris came as an ambassador from the Hyperboreans. Iamblichus (*VP* 92) informs us about the outcome: “Lacedemon, after having been by him purified, was no longer infected with pestilence, which formerly had been endemic, through the miasmatic nature of the ground, in the suffocating heat produced by the overhanging mountain Taygetus, just as happens with Cnossus in Crete. Many other similar circumstances were reported of Abaris.”

Joseph Fontenrose (1978: 162, 294) interprets the events of the epidemics as follows: an Apolline oracle in Delphi informed all men that their woes would end if the Athenians should offer pre-plowing sacrifices (*proērosia*) in their behalf. Abaris came from his northern land to Hellas in response to this oracle and made sacrifices to Apollo. It was then, according to the Scholiast on Aristophanes’ *Knights* (729) that Abaris wrote down the oracles called *chrēsmoi* of Abaris and sometimes *Chrēsmoi Skythinoi* (*Scythian Oracles*).⁷ Most of these were probably ritual prescriptions. Abaris was one of the *iatromanteis*, like Aristeas of Proconnesus; and he was said to have traveled over the earth carrying Apollo’s golden arrow, offering healing and purification.⁸ Hence Fontenrose supposes that the Delphic oracle came originally from the oracles of Abaris. Only an Aristophanic Scholiast and Libanios clearly attribute it to the Delphic Apollo. Lycurgus, our earliest authority, says only that Apollo was speaker; and this is consistent with the story that Abaris gathered Apolline oracles. The Apolline oracle in Delphi belongs to the foundation legend of the Athenian *Proērosia*, offered in behalf of all Hellenes.⁹ This sacrifice appears to be an ancient institution, which probably antedates the Delphic Oracle and Abaris (or the time when he is supposed to have lived).

⁷ Suda (s.v. Abaris): he also wrote *Marriage of the river Hebros* and *Purifications* and a *Theogony* in prose and *Arrival of Apollo among the Hyperboreans* in meter.

⁸ Peter Kingsley (1999) claims that an *iatromantis* could experience a fourth state of consciousness different from sleeping, dreaming, or ordinary waking: likens to the *turiya* or *samādhi* of the Indian yogic traditions.

⁹ According to Bridgman (2005: 50), the implication here is that Athens is the center of the world. Moreover, the Hyperborean legend seems to have taken on more of an Athenian slant, or perhaps had been appropriated by Athens as propaganda comprising a mythical prehistory of the city and how the Hyperboreans helped Athens in its hour of need. One should not forget the Athenian goal to control the two major religious sanctuaries in the Greek world – Delos and Delphi (Bridgman, 2005: 44, 72). By the end of the 6th century, evidence for two strands of the Hyperborean myth had already appeared: the Delian one and the Delphic one. The Delian one portrays the Hyperboreans as individuals arriving at Delos from a distant land in the service of a local god, Apollo. It has no knowledge of the Hyperboreans as a people or community, and no interest in their origins or way of life. Delphic tradition, on the other hand, knows nothing of the individual Hyperboreans until a much later era, when certain named Hyperboreans are alleged to have founded the oracle at Delphi (Paus. 10.5.7). These two traditions do not seem conflicting, but rather relate how two different cult centers, among the most important in Greece, were founded under the auspices of the Hyperboreans. These two traditions could have evolved over time to explain the development of two cult centers using an invented mythical past perhaps from Mycenaean or Dark Age times, as the two were potentially rival oracle sites and both would be particularly coveted by the different political powers, especially Athens, during the history of ancient Greece (Bridgman 2005: 26-27). Cf. West 2003: 9-12 for the differences in the *Hymn of Apollo* – a combination of two originally separate poems: a Delian hymn, performed at Delos and concerned with Apollo’s birth there; and a Pythian hymn, concerned with his arrival and establishment at Delphi. Strauss Clay 2006: 93 concludes that in the *Hymn to Apollo*, the tension between the local and universal manifestations of Apollo is resolved on the side of Panhellenism not only through the avoidance of local traditions and cults. The poet adopts a peculiar strategy that precludes all local exclusivity, by singling out not one, but two cult places: Delos and Delphi. Moreover, both sites are emphatically characterized as having no local traditions at all but being purely Apolline and Panhellenic.

As priest of Apollo, the god of oracles, Abaris could also predict earthquakes and perform rapid expulsions of pestilences, and hurricanes, instantaneous cessations of hail, tranquilization of the waves of rivers and seas (Iambl. *VP* 135).

4. Conclusion

One of the most interesting and mysterious aspects in the history of the ancient world is Hyperborea, and after millennia of research, academia has more to add on the Hyperborean topic. Hyperborea has remained a legitimate subject of scientific interest in historiography, archeology and linguistics, despite all speculations and attempts to be appropriated by various racial and nationalist theories, ideologies and pseudoscientific doctrines (Palavestra, 2016: 121).¹⁰ Sandin (2018: 30) concludes that “the myth of Abaris could originate in authentic memories of remarkable pilgrims from the north”. Abaris was Hyperborean and a priest of Apollo, who regularly spent his winters in the north. He came to Greece led by Apollo’s arrow, and some claimed that he could fly on it. He foretold epidemics, and in Sparta he performed sacrifices that kept them away for good. Classical Greece knew him as a writer of oracles and spells; later, there were epical poems under his name, including Purifications and Apollo’s Coming to the Hyperboreans, as well as a prose theogony. Whether he was legendary or historical (but even then, heavily overlaid by legend), he is an example of archaic wise man who possessed special knowledge of rituals, divination, and healing and who has gained this knowledge through ecstatic experience (Graf, 2008: 39-40).

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¹⁰ For an overview of pseudoscientific doctrines see Edelstein (2006), Arnold (2018), Mosionjnic (2012: 81-86), Matveychev (2018), and Roling (2019).

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