
Ethnographic Falsification in the Lost Histories of Alexander: The Case of the ‘Arimaspi’

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ABSTRACT This study draws some links between the tendency of Alexander’s first historians to falsify geographic and ethnographic data and the renaming of the Iranian Ariaspans to Arimaspi. The paper is organized into two sections. First, it explains the reasons why this change of name should reasonably be attributed to the first historians of Alexander and not to later authors. Second, it is argued that the renaming was possibly orchestrated by Alexander himself during the army’s stay in the Ariaspans’ territory in the winter of 330/329 BC. In support of this view, I present the similarities these authors must have discerned between the mythical Arimaspi and the Iranian Ariaspans, similarities which should have inspired them to proceed with this identification between the two peoples.

KEYWORDS Alexander the Great, Ariaspans, Arimaspi, first historians of Alexander, ethnography, geography, myth and historiography, propaganda.

Since antiquity, it has been a *communis opinio* that the accounts of the so-called first historians of Alexander were marked by a high degree of unreliability¹. The few surviving fragments of these histories, along with later authors’ testimonies, suffice for us to conclude that some from among those who participated in the Macedonians’ expedition in Asia and wrote about it very often offered distortive –and mostly flattering– accounts of the Macedonian king’s *res gestae*². Among their other artifices,

¹ STADTER 1980, 67; BOSWORTH 1988a, 1-15; ZAMBRINI 2007, 196-197 on Onesicritus and Nearchus, 198 on Medius, 198-199 on Clitarchus, 199-200 on Ptolemy, 201-202 on Callisthenes. On Callisthenes, see also POWNALL 2014. On Ptolemy and Aristobulus, see POWNALL 2024. On Clitarchus, see PRANDI 2024. On Callisthenes, Chares of Mytilene, Nearchus and Onesicritus, see DJURSLEV 2024. A similar line of thought is followed by PEARSON 1960; PÉDECH 1984; PRANDI 1985 (Callisthenes) and 1996 (Clitarchus). BICHLER 2018 on Onesicritus.

² To mention only a few examples, Polybius was frustrated by what he found to be descriptive inaccuracies, with which Callisthenes, assigned by Alexander the duty of recording the feats of the Macedonian army, had endeavored to exaggerate the king’s military skills (Plb. 12.17-22 = *FGrHist* 124 F 35). Callisthenes is also accused of even trying to deify Alexander, while the few surviving fragments from his history verify Polybius’ complaints (see PEARSON 1960; PÉDECH 1984; PRANDI 1985). On the other hand, even those who wrote after Alexander’s death about their experiences during the enterprise sometimes adopt an equally laudatory perspective as that of Callisthenes. One of them, Ptolemy I Soter, at a ripe old age, wrote his own history on the expedition and, although his account was considered by Arrian as one of the most reliable sources about Alexander, admittedly embellished or even silenced many dark moments of Alexander, such as his decision to destroy Thebes or Clitus’ murder (*FGrHist*

these first historians of Alexander, in their effort to impress their readerships or/and merely being unable to understand what they had really seen in Asia, falsified geographical data and distorted ethnological details, thus offering kaleidoscopic descriptions of the conquered areas' geomorphologies, floras and faunas. Later authors, such as Eratosthenes, Strabo and Arrian, often express their criticisms of the marvelous flavor of the ethnographic and geographic descriptions found in these first accounts³, while modern scholars are today even more cautious towards these 'first histories' of Alexander for one further reason: these works survive in a handful of fragments, with the result that we cannot know exactly when (during or after the expedition) they were composed, to what degree flattering exaggerations marked these accounts and, most importantly, if the falsifications we find in them had already been encouraged by Alexander himself or were fabricated after his death⁴.

In this study, I would like to draw some links between this tendency of Alexander's first historians to falsify geographic and ethnographic information and the renaming of the Iranian Ariaspans to 'Arimaspi'. The paper is organized into two sections. First, I explain the reasons why I find it reasonable to attribute this change of name to the first historians of Alexander and not to later authors. Second, I argue that the renaming was possibly encouraged by Alexander himself during the army's stay in the Ariaspans' territory in the winter of 330/329 BC. In support of this view, I present the similarities these authors must have discerned between the mythical Arimaspi and the Iranian Ariaspans, similarities which should have inspired them to proceed with this identification between the two peoples.

THE RENAMING OF THE ARIASPIANS TO 'ARIMASPI' AND THE FIRST HISTORIANS OF ALEXANDER

In early winter (October/November) of 330 BC, Alexander left Farah, where Philotas was tried and executed on the accusation that he was involved in the conspiracy against the king. Alexander led his men southwards to Drangiana and, specifically, into the land of the Ariaspans, who inhabited some part of the basin of the River Helmand close to the lake Seistan in modern Afghanistan, at the southwest foot of the Hindu Kush⁵. Alexander visited this nation at a pivotal point in the expedition. One year earlier, he had defeated the Persian army in the battle of Gaugamela, after which all central capitals of the Persian Empire surrendered to him. Moreover, in the summer of the same year Darius was murdered by his own people. Alexander was now the ruler of the Persian Empire, the new king, and it was under this mask that he visited the Iranian people of

³ 138 F 3 with BOSWORTH 1980, 80-81; SISTI-ZAMBRINI 2001, 326-327). For the phenomenon of anachronistic geography as a literary device in Curtius, see WULFRAM 2016.

⁴ Str. 2.1.9, p. 70C.16-32 (Radt); 11.7.4, p. 509C.26-510C.14; 15.1.28, p. 698C.8-23; Arr. *An.* 5.3.1-4; 5.4.4.

⁵ For careful, although hypothetical, attempts to define the periods in which the major first histories of Alexander were composed, see PRANDI 1985 and ZAMBRINI 2007.

⁵ Alexander's visit to the Ariaspans' territory is recorded by the majority of ancient sources. See Str. 15.2.10, p. 724C.32; D.S. 17.81.1-2; Curt. 7.3.1-3; Arr. *An.* 3.27.4-5; Justin 12.5.9; *Metz Epit.* 4. On this event, its dating and the exact location of the Ariaspans, see JONES 1934, 125; FISCHER 1967, 195-199; GNOLI 1967, 50; SEIBERT 1972, 139-140; HAMILTON 1973, 96; BOSWORTH 1980, 365-366; 1988a, 104-105; HECKEL 2008, 92 (that he did not stay two months in the territory of the Ariaspans, but moved up the valley of the Helmand and founded Alexandria in Arachosia before crossing the Hindu Kush).

Afghanistan, including the Ariaspans. He did not harm them, but he showed them that he was coming as their new king, who would reward those supporting him⁶.

Most surviving sources record that Cyrus had long ago renamed the Ariaspans ‘Benefactors’ because, at some point in the 530’s, they had saved his army from starvation by providing them with supplies. Alexander is said to have praised them for having helped Cyrus and spent two months in their land, during which the Ariaspans, similarly to what they had done with Cyrus, offered the Macedonian troops supplies necessary for their survival⁷. Two centuries after they had allegedly been offered by a conqueror the name ‘Benefactors’, the Ariaspans would now receive one further name, which this time sounded much more similar to their own: Arimaspi. This appellation survives in the accounts of Diodorus of Sicily, Curtius, Justin’s epitome of Trogus’ history and the *Metz* epitome, with Arrian’s *Anabasis* being the sole fully preserved source that offers the original name ‘Ariaspans’⁸.

Scholars agree that the ancient sources confused the Iranian Ariaspans of Afghanistan visited by Alexander with the name of the mythical Arimaspi. Brian Bosworth writes that “the vulgate sources term the people Ἀριμασποί, *perhaps through confusion* [my italics] with the fabulous Scythians said to have been discovered by Aristeas of Proconnesus”.⁹ In his monograph on Diodorus’ *Bibliothēkē*, Jan Stronk writes:

“In spite of the form Ἀριμασπούς in all of the Diodorus MSS, the correct name appears to have been ‘Ἀριάσπους’ or ‘Ἀριάσπας’, as Arr. *An.* 3.27.4 observes. I think it feasible that the form ‘Arimaspans’ was inspired by the reference to a one-eyed Scythian people, made known by Aristeas of Proconnesus in the ‘Arimaspian Epic’ (see Str. 1.2.10, p. 21C.26-28; see also Hdt. 4.13-15)”¹⁰.

Modern scholarship has focused mainly on how Alexander took advantage of the Ariaspans’ prehistory with Cyrus in order to fashion himself to the Iranians as the continuator of Cyrus and legal successor of Darius on the Persian throne¹¹. However, the logic by which this people was renamed ‘Arimaspi’ has generally been neglected¹². In particular, the following questions arise. First, who was responsible for falsifying the Ariaspans into Arimaspi? Was it Ctesias, as Bichler maintains¹³? Was it the first historians of Alexander, those who followed him on the expedition, or early historians who wrote shortly after his death without having followed him in Asia? Or was it later historians, such as Diodorus and Curtius? Second, what were the motives of the falsifiers? Was it a mere ‘confusion’, as Bosworth seems to suggest? Or was it an ‘inspired’ choice, as Stronk presumes? And if it was intended, what was the exact purpose of such a falsification? In this paper it will be argued that this change of name, even if it was borrowed by Ctesias, very possibly reflects Alexander’s communicative propaganda, which targeted not the Asians but his own men.

⁶ NAWOTKA 2010, 268; BICHLER 2013, 52.

⁷ D.S. 17.81.1-2; Curt. 7.3.1-3; Arr. *An.* 3.27.4-5.

⁸ D.S. 17.81.1: Ἀριμασπούς and Ἀριμασπῶν; Curt. 7.3.1: *Arimaspos*; Justin 12.5.9: *Arimaspos*; *Metz* Epitome 3-4: *Arimaspi*; Arr. *An.* 3.27.4: Ἀριάσπας.

⁹ BOSWORTH 1988a, 365.

¹⁰ STRONK 2017, 342 n. 17.

¹¹ HAMILTON 1973, 96; NAWOTKA 2010, 268; MÜLLER 2011, 114-120; BICHLER 2013, 52-56.

¹² As far as I know, we have only the aforementioned statements of BOSWORTH 1988, 365 and KRONK 2017, 342 n. 17, along with the assumptions made by BICHLER 2013, 53-58, which I discuss below.

¹³ BICHLER 2013, 53-58.

The distortion of the name should neither be attributed to Diodorus nor to Curtius¹⁴. Both of them refer to the Ariaspans in a rather fleeting way¹⁵. Although they lay emphasis on the byname ‘Benefactors’ and on the circumstances under which it emerged, neither of them bothers to explain that the name ‘Arimaspi’ is identified with that of the mythical nation, to which Aristeas of Proconnesus had dedicated the epic poem that we read of in Herodotus. Had they come up themselves with the idea of identifying the Ariaspans with the Arimaspi, they should have used this falsification to highlight the fact that Alexander met one further mythical group, the Arimaspi, like so many others he had allegedly met (e.g., the Amazons or Dionysus’ descendants, about whom see below). Both authors must have found the ‘Arimaspi’ in their sources or in their common source, which, according to the *communis opinio*, must have shaped the so-called *vulgate* narrative tradition about Alexander which they follow and from which Arrian, as in so many other cases, deviates, either being incognizant of or skeptical about it¹⁶.

Reinhold Bichler finds it possible that not only the renaming of the Ariaspans as Arimaspi but also the whole story about the Ariaspans helping Cyrus’ army was probably found in Ctesias’ account, which, according to Bichler, Callisthenes had access to¹⁷. This view can neither be proved nor refuted due to lack of evidence. However, even if we accept Bichler’s assumption that the first historians of Alexander read in Ctesias’ narrative a story about some Arimaspi’s assistance to Cyrus, this does not mean that the first historians did not hear the same story –with either the name Ariaspans or Arimaspi– also while being in the Ariaspans’ area and its neighboring territory. Bichler does not address the fact that stories about Cyrus’ expeditions and the Arimaspi and other nations fighting with marvelous creatures for gold were not fabricated exclusively by Ctesias but were instead also circulating around the Hindu Kush, which is why they must have been heard of by Alexander and his men, too. In other words, to say that the renaming of the Ariaspans and the story about their aiding Cyrus belong to a tradition initiated by Ctesias arbitrarily undervalues the degree to which this tradition was undeniably, in my view, defined by the interaction of the Macedonians with local peoples and their myths. After all, since the name the Greeks must have been hearing was Ariaspans and not Arimaspi, a question still remains: why did the Greeks choose to name this people ‘Arimaspi’ –either by following Ctesias or proceeding themselves with the renaming– and not ‘Ariaspans’? Did they have any motive in doing so?

We are for many reasons justified in arguing that this distortive falsification was willingly promoted by the first historians of Alexander. A claim that Alexander met the mythical Arimaspi, or at least a people who resembled them in name and cultural features, would no doubt fit well with the thematic agenda of the early narrative tradition about him. First, the Arimaspi could be included in the plethora of epic elements, with which the first historians bolstered Alexander’s image as an epic hero, a practice which was gradually established as a distinctive feature of his literary

¹⁴ Cf. BICHLER 2013, 54–58, although he traces the origins of the renaming in Ctesias.

¹⁵ Justin’s fleeting mention does not allow us to know whether or not Trogus had commented on the circumstances of the renaming.

¹⁶ On the *vulgate* tradition, probably disseminated by Clitarchus to Diodorus, Curtius and Plutarch and avoided by Arrian, see selectively ST. CROIX 1804²; SCHLOSSER 1827; DROYSEN 1833, 238; LAUDIEN 1874; BOSWORTH 1976; HAMMOND 1983.

¹⁷ BICHLER 2013, 55–58.

portraiture up to late antiquity¹⁸. One of the ways in which the first historians of Alexander associated him with Homer was by presenting him as visiting places and nations mentioned in the *Iliad*. Thanks to Strabo, we are in a position to know with certainty that this practice was employed –and probably introduced– by the official historian of the expedition, Callisthenes of Olynthus, Aristotle’s nephew. In his account of Halicarnassus’ occupation by Alexander, Callisthenes recorded that the Carian city emerged from the union of eight cities, which had been founded by the Leleges, and that this area received its name Pedassa from the Leleges’ Pedassus near Mount Ida¹⁹. Callisthenes must have foregrounded the epic origins of Halicarnassus in order to present Alexander as conquering a city of the Leleges, just as Achilles is said in the *Iliad* to have conquered them²⁰. Also, in his narrative about Alexander’s march through Pamphylia, Callisthenes mentions two cities, Thebes and Lyrnessus, and claims that it is the Trojan Cilicians who had founded them while abandoning the territory of Thebes²¹. In the *Iliad*, these people too are the Trojans’ allies and are also conquered by Achilles²². In Curtius’ history, we read that in Pamphylia Alexander was shown these two places²³. Callisthenes and others must have tried, probably with Alexander’s encouragement, to fashion him as Achilles’ incarnation, in the sense that he was conquering afresh peoples already defeated by the Homeric hero. Once again in his account of Alexander’s presence in Pamphylia, Callisthenes is interested in specifying the exact location of the Arimi’s territory, where, we read in Homer, the tomb of the giant Pytheus was. This was perhaps one further epic site, which was associated with Alexander²⁴. This practice seems to have been followed by other early historians of Alexander as well. Aristobulus of Cassandreia mentions a fountain at Miletus, in which Achilles is said to have purified his wound after killing Trambellus, a descendant of the Leleges²⁵.

It is in this spirit that some of these authors could also have decided to rename the Ariaspans into Arimaspi in their effort to associate Alexander with one further mythical people or figure, like the Trojan Cilicians, the Leleges, and Pytheus. Although the Arimaspi appear neither in the *Iliad* nor in the *Odyssey*, they were nonetheless connected in ancient Greek literature, mythical tradition and art with the heroic world of the Homeric epics, which the first generation of Alexander’s historians were prone, and sometimes encouraged by the king himself, to relate to him. First, the Arimaspi were the subject of epic poetry. In the Archaic Era, the epic poet Aristeas of Proconnesus composed, in dactylic hexameter, the epic *Arimaspea*, in which he described the one-eyed Arimaspi’s way of life and their battles at the northern boundaries of the world, north of the Caucasus, against the mythical griffins for the

¹⁸ On the Homeric and epic elements of Alexander’s portraiture in antiquity, see, most recently, LIOTSAKIS 2019, 163-225 and 2022, 194-201, especially 196 with nn. 6-8 with exhaustive lists of fragments from the sources of Alexander and bibliography.

¹⁹ Str. 13.1.59, p. 611C.10-18 = *FGrH* 124 F 25. Jacoby’s suggestion that the first lines of the fragment should be attributed to Callisthenes’ *Hellenica* has correctly been abandoned by modern scholarship. See DROYSEN 1833 I, 225-226; PEARSON 1960, 45; BOSWORTH 1980, 151; PÉDECH 1984, 47 n. 20; PRANDI 1985, 77-78. GILHAUS 2017, 373 cannot decide.

²⁰ Hom. *Il.* 21.86-91.

²¹ Str. 14.4.1, p. 667C.19-21 = *FGrH* 124 F 32.

²² Both cities as the Trojans’ allies: Hom. *Il.* 6.396-398; Thebe conquered by Achilles: 1.366-367; 6.414-416. Lyrnessus sacked by Achilles: 2.690-691; 19.60; 20.92; 20.191-192.

²³ Curt. 3.4.10.

²⁴ Str. 13.4.6, p. 627C.10-14 = *FGrH* 124 F 33. Cf. *Il* 2.781-783.

²⁵ Ath. 43d-e = *FGrH* 139 F 6.

area's gold²⁶. This epic is mentioned by Herodotus already more than a century before the Macedonians' expedition in Asia, while other sources, too, offer further strong testimony to the view that both the Arimaspi and Aristeas' epic about them were well known in the period when Alexander lived²⁷.

Strabo directly links Aristeas with the Homeric epics when he says that Aristeas is taken by many to have been Homer's teacher²⁸. Elsewhere, Strabo assumes that Homer, in referring to the one-eyed nature of the Cyclopes, was inspired by the Scythian stories about the one-eyed Arimaspi, about whom Strabo states that he is aware that Aristeas had written an epic poem²⁹. The Arimaspi also appear in the work of one further epic poet, Choerilus of Samos, who seems to have stayed for an unspecified amount of time at the court of Archelaus of Macedon and to have been well known in Macedonian intellectual circles up to Alexander's time, as is testified by Aristotle's mentions of him³⁰.

Besides, the Arimaspi were well-known mythical figures in the ancient Greek world, including the period of Alexander, as is testified by their frequent appearance in both the literature and representational arts of the Classical and Hellenistic Eras. An abundance of pots survive, on which the Arimaspi are depicted as fighting with the griffins, while, apart from their aforementioned presence in Choerilus' epic, Aeschylus also mentions them³¹. Last, especially interesting is the anecdote we read in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* that Demosthenes mocked Philip's loss of his eye by calling him Arimaspus. If this anecdote stems from the Classical Period and can be taken to carry any grains of truth, it is worth noting that in that case we would have at our disposal an immediate connection between the Arimaspi and Alexander's environment³².

One further reason why we are justified in believing that the first historians of Alexander would be willing to include the mythical Arimaspi in their accounts lies in the fact that the Arimaspi are mentioned by Herodotus, who served for many of these authors as a literary model. Faced with the challenge of describing the Asian territory with all its peoples and its geomorphology, these writers not only used Herodotus as the sole source for these places but also identified with him and must have treated him as the forefather of the narrative tradition about the marvelous sites of the world. To include a theme or an element which was found in Herodotus' work was for them a way to enhance the prestige of their authorial *personae* as continuators of the

²⁶ On the dating of the *Arimaspea*, its author and reception in antiquity, the introduction by BOLTON 1962, 1-206 is always an invaluable resource.

²⁷ For the Arimaspi and Aristeas in the Classical and Hellenistic Eras, see, e.g., Hdt. 3.116, 4.13, 4.27-28; Aesch. *PV* 803-809; Damastes of Sigeion *FGrH* 5 F 1; Hellanicus *FGrH* 4 F 185; Choerilus of Samos fr. 13a ll. 5-8 (BERNABÉ 1996 *PEG*); Pherenicus of Heraclea (the epic poet probably of the Hellenistic Period) LLOYD-JONES-PARSONS *Suppl.* fr. 671; Call. fr. 186 ll. 8-15 (PFEIFFER); Call. *Del.* 284-294; Str. 1.2.10, p. 21C.26-28; D.S. 2.43.1-44.2. Cf. BOLTON 1962, 20-73.

²⁸ Str. 14.1.18, p. 639C.1-2.

²⁹ Str. 1.2.10, p. 21C.26-28.

³⁰ Choerilus *PEG* TT 1-9. The subject of one of his epics was the Persian War. A poet who had stayed in the Macedonian palace, was known to Alexander's teacher Aristotle, initiated him in the epic values of war, and glorified with his poetry the Greeks' victory over the Persians, the continuator of which Alexander claimed to be, can hardly have been unknown to Alexander. On Choerilus' stay at Archelaus' court, see KUCH 2013.

³¹ See, e.g., Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1917.61; British Museum, London 1931.1-13.1; Musée du Louvre G529; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston 01.8092. Aesch. *PV* 802-809.

³² Philostr. *VS* 2.585.

historiographical tradition inaugurated by Herodotus³³. One of these elements, which some or one of them must have chosen to include in their accounts, was the Arimaspi.

The very place the Arimaspi were said to possess on the global map must have constituted one of the strongest lures for the first historians of Alexander to associate him with them. Already since Aristeas’ age, but also thereafter during the 5th and 4th centuries BC, tales located the Arimaspi at the northern edges of the inhabited world. No fragments of Aristeas’ *Arimaspiae* survive about this subject, but it is almost certain that Aristeas must have offered information about the Arimaspi’s location. It is this information that Herodotus and another historian of the 5th century, Damastes of Sigeum, must have drawn on. Herodotus informs us that, according to Aristeas, the Arimaspi inhabited the northern extremes of the world, north of the Issedones and south of the Hyperboreans. What is more, Herodotus identifies them with the Scythians, claiming that their name is also Scythian and means ‘one-eyed’³⁴. Damastes offers us one further detail about the Arimaspi’s territory, i.e. that they inhabited the southern foothills of the Riphean Mountains. This tradition is maintained up to late antiquity and the Byzantine Era, but, as far as the period in question is concerned, Strabo’s and Callimachus’ testimonies prove that this information was circulating and thus remained well known throughout the Classical and Hellenistic Eras. What is more, Callimachus identifies the Arimaspi with the Hyperboreans³⁵.

The Scythians and Hyperboreans, with whom the Arimaspi were occasionally identified, and of course the Arimaspi themselves, were all related in the Greeks’ minds with the unconquered and unexplored northern districts of the world. Strabo complains that the first historians of Alexander repeatedly proceeded with distortions and falsifications of geographical, mythical and ethnological data in their efforts to convince their readers that Alexander conquered segments and nations of the unexplored North³⁶. The change of the Ariaspans’ name to Arimaspi may reasonably be contextualized within the framework of these exaggerations. In this way, these first historians could boast that Alexander once encountered a nation at the edges of the world, a nation which no one had yet seen and which everyone had heard about only in epic narratives and historical accounts.

This scenario becomes even more plausible especially if we consider the similar practices adopted by the historians in question with regard to other peoples of the North, who were neighbors of the Arimaspi and were related with them in mythical traditions. To begin with, some companions of Alexander wrote that, when he crossed the area south of the Caspian Sea, the queen of the Amazons visited him in his camp. The purpose of her visit was, as she confessed to him, to have a child with him. Later authors criticize those first historians of Alexander who fabricated the story, and explicitly question its content³⁷.

³³ Sundry fragments offer strong pieces of evidence that these historians were prone to reproduce themes introduced by Herodotus. Simultaneously, on an ethico-didactic level, the Persian monarchs, in the way they were delineated by Herodotus, have traditionally served as foils or parallels to Alexander not only in these early but also in the later sources about him. The fragments from the first historians of Alexander which indicate Herodotus’ strong influence on them are gathered and meticulously discussed by MOLINA MARÍN 2022 and 2024. On the Herodotean Anatolian rulers as foils to Alexander in the literary tradition about him, see LEON 2021 and TAIETTI 2022 (on Arrian); 2016 (in general).

³⁴ Hdt. 3.116; 4.13.1-2; 4.27-28.

³⁵ Damastes *FGrHist* 5 F 1; Callim. *Aet.* fr. 186 ll. 8-15 (PFEIFFER) and *Hymn* 4 ll. 284-294; Dionys. Per. *Orbis descr.* 29-32; Ael. Herod. *Περὶ καθολικῆς προσῳδίας* 3.1.114-115 and 3.188.

³⁶ See above, n. 3.

³⁷ See Str. 11.5.4, p. 505C.7-18; Plutarch, who (*Alex.* 46.1-3) generously offers the names of both those who reiterated this story (Clitarchus, Polyclitus, Onesicritus, Antigenes, Istrus) and those who refuted it

Other anecdotes aimed at connecting Alexander with the Argonauts, who were, according to the myth, the only Greeks to have visited the aforementioned northern territories. The Thessalians Cyrsilus of Pharssala and Medius of Larissa addressed alleged ethnographical affinities between the Armenians and their country, in their effort to argue that the Armenians were descended from Jason's Thessalian companions³⁸. On the other hand, Strabo's and Justin's statements that Alexander's officers destroyed Jason's monuments betray Alexander's aspiration to surpass the Argonauts' exploratory achievements³⁹.

Alexander never entered Armenia, the mythical territory of the Argonauts and the Amazons⁴⁰, and neither did he visit the Caucasus, where the Amazons were said to originate from. However, from a geographical point of view, this was not a real problem for the flatterers of Alexander. It was not impossible for the Amazons to move many miles southwards from their territory in Armenia in order to visit Alexander in Hyrcania. This was actually what other nations also did during the Greeks' march in Europe and Asia⁴¹. Neither was it difficult for someone to claim that Alexander was informed about the Argonauts' activities in the Hellespont. And at this point it could be objected that this was definitely not the case with the Arimaspi. To 'transfer' the Amazons from Armenia to Hyrcania was a piece of cake for Alexander and his men. However, to claim that they moved to the Hyperborean Arimaspi, beyond the Caucasus, might seem today to have been too much even for those flatterers.

However, they did dare to falsify even the location of the Caucasus by identifying it with the Hindu Kush. The falsification of geography did not stop at the Caucasus but also included an area much closer to the mythical Arimaspi. Above the Caucasus was the river Tanais (the modern Don), which was treated by the Greeks as the natural border between Europe and Asia. Although Alexander and his Macedonians, including some of his first historians, never reached Tanais, they gave its name to the river Jaxartes (the modern Syr Darya), where Alexander defeated the Scythians in a battle in 329 BC, a year after his visit to the Ariaspis. In this way, these first historians tried to convey to their readers the impression that Alexander, by defeating the Scythians of the Jaxartes, defeated the Scythians of the Tanais and conquered the northern boundaries of the world⁴². In such accounts, the presence of the Arimaspi must have seemed very plausible.

THE PROPAGANDISTIC ORIGINS OF THE FALSIFICATION

As we have seen, Strabo notes that fictive accounts such as those about the Amazons, the Caucasus and the Tanais aimed at glorifying Alexander by claiming that he visited

(Aristobulus, Chares of Mytilene, Hecataeus of Eretria, Ptolemy I Soter, Anticlides, and Philon of Thebes); and Arr. *An.* 7.13.4-6. By contrast, this tradition was followed by Diodorus (17.77.1-3), Curtius (6.5.24-32), and Trogus (Justin 12.3.5-7).

³⁸ Medius of Larissa *FGrHist* 129 F 1; Cyrsilus of Pharssala *FGrHist* 130.

³⁹ Str. 11.14.12-14; Justin 42.3.5.

⁴⁰ Although Alexander never entered Armenia (shortly after his victory at Gaugamela the area was surrendered to him and he merely sent a new satrap there), an ethnological digression on the Thessalian origins of Armenia and the Argonauts might have been an excellent way for those flatterers of Alexander to introduce their readers to the king's occupation of Armenia.

⁴¹ E.g. Arr. *An.* 1.4.6; 1.24.5-6; 4.1.1; 4.5.1; 4.8.3; 5.20.5-6.

⁴² On the Caucasus and the Hindu Kush, see Str. 11.8.1, p. 511C.6-8; Arr. *An.* 5.3.1-4; *Ind.* 2.1-4. On the Tanais and the Jaxartes, see Str. 11.7.4, p. 509C.26-510C.14. For this type of geographical distortions by the earliest historians and their underlying motives, cf. DEGEN 2022, 32-44.

even those places that he never did. This statement does not suffice to clarify whether the distortion of the Ariaspans’ name into Arimaspi, as well as other falsifications of this kind, were fabricated by the writers after the expedition or were encouraged by Alexander himself during the expedition. Some stories must certainly have been made up after the enterprise, when writers had all the time they needed to decide what to include in their accounts. On the other hand, we are in a position to know that many other distortions of the truth, although surviving in works written after the expedition, stem from propagandistic practices with which Alexander endeavored to uplift his men’s morale and persuade them to follow him in places they did not wish to, and during periods of crisis in his relationship with them. In this section, it is argued that the falsification of the Ariaspans’ appellation into ‘Arimaspi’ can reasonably be included in this last category of Alexander’s propagandistic maneuvers.

Alexander’s visit to the Ariaspans occurred in a period of time when he had to convince his army, principally the Macedonians, to continue the expedition eastwards. Already since the battle of Gaugamela, Alexander had been faced with the pressure of some of his officers, who were urging him to end the enterprise and content himself with what he had obtained so far. The terms, which Darius was at that time repeatedly proposing to Alexander, seemed particularly tempting to the Macedonian aristocrats. All surviving sources record that, when Alexander summoned his officers to discuss what his response to Darius’ offer should be, Parmenio advised him to accept the offer. Even if we accept that the minutiae of this anecdote about the disagreement between Alexander and Parmenio were fabricated, the story undoubtedly mirrors the dissatisfaction of Macedonians of Parmenio’s generation with Alexander’s decision to continue the war⁴³.

When, one year later, Darius was murdered by his satraps, the Pan-Hellenic enterprise of the Corinthian League essentially fulfilled its goal, a fact which Alexander seems to have realized, as he ordered Parmenio to dissolve the Greek forces and to offer them a reward of 2,000 talents. It was exactly this decision that enraged the Macedonians, who, watching the rest of the Greeks returning home, expressed their displeasure to Alexander in a way which has occasionally been interpreted by modern scholars as some kind of mutiny⁴⁴. Alexander had to proceed with clear-cut explanations about the reasons why the expedition to the Eastern satrapies of the Persian (and now Macedonian) Empire was necessary: the Macedonians would risk losing the conquered territories unless they subdued the inhabitants of these Eastern lands. What is more, the army’s dissatisfaction was further enhanced by Alexander’s decision to adopt certain facets of Persian royal etiquette, such as the king’s clothing and the institution of *proskynesis*. The tension of this situation certainly culminated in the Philotas affair, which led to the death of both Philotas and his father Parmenio. Alexander may have thought that he had done away with two dangerous men of great influence upon his troops; nonetheless, their execution caused further resentment in the

⁴³ On Darius’ offer, see D.S. 17.54.1-5, before the battle; Plu. *Alex.* 29.7-8, at Tyre in late spring/midsummer of 331 BC; Curt. 4.11.1-22; Justin 11.12.9-15. For discussion of the sources, see BELOCH 1922, 637-638 n. 1; TARN 1948 I, 40; SCHACHERMEYR 1949, 191-192; BURY 1951³, 768; MARSDEN 1964, 7-10; SEIBERT 1972, 102; HAMILTON 1973, 70-71; BOSWORTH 1980, 228-229; ATKINSON 1980, 320-323; BERNHARDT 1988; BOSWORTH 1988b, 76; GREEN 1991; RHODES 2006, 353-354; HECKEL 2008, 73-75. On the episode of Alexander’s debate with Parmenio about this offer, see D.S. 17.54.4-5; Plu. *Alex.* 29.8 and *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 180a; Curt. 4.11.10-16; Arr. *An.* 2.25.2. On the view that this episode reflects a tension between Alexander and his officers, see BADIAN 1964, 195; BOSWORTH 1988b, 76; MÜLLER 2003, 66-68; 2014, 212-214; LEHMANN 2015, 124-125.

⁴⁴ D.S. 17.74.3; Plu. *Alex.* 42.5; Curt. 6.2.17; Arr. *An.* 3.19.5-6; Justin 12.1.1-3. TARN 1948 I, 54; BOSWORTH 1976b, 133-134; 1988b, 97.

soldiers, some of whom, due to their decision to show their anger, were stigmatized as ‘outcasts’ and marginalized from the rest of the army⁴⁵.

In such an atmosphere, Alexander was invited to announce to an already dissatisfied, worn and unwilling army that they had to cross the Hindu Kush, in order to enter Bactria and go after Bessus, the main instigator of Darius’ murder. One can easily imagine the unwillingness of Alexander’s men during their stay in the Ariaspans’ land to cross the mountain range, which loomed imposingly in the valley. The crossing of the Hindu Kush a few months later (early spring of 329 BC) would indeed prove to be an especially challenging task, as it caused significant losses of both men and baggage animals. Sources record that many horses were lost in the highs of the mountain range and that, when the men reached the Oxus river, many of them died from excessive consumption of water⁴⁶. Alexander and his men, when first visiting the Ariaspans’ territory, could very probably not have imagined the losses they would suffer. Nonetheless, during their two-month stay there, they must certainly have been informed about the difficulties lurking in both the plan of crossing the mountain range and in Bactria. Apart from the aforementioned practical argument that the occupation of the Eastern satrapies was a prerequisite for securing the already conquered lands, Alexander could reasonably have wished to comfort his men by saying to them that they were now visiting lands and peoples which the rest of the Greeks could hear of only in myths and literature. It is by this logic that Alexander must have orchestrated the change of the Ariaspans’ appellation into ‘Arimaspi’.

A series of similar examples indicate that Alexander did use such rhetoric of persuasion whenever he invited his army to make a crucial step into ‘uncharted waters’. To begin with, almost four years later, when the Macedonians had to be persuaded to make one further step and enter the Indian territory, Alexander tried to encourage them by invoking Heracles and Dionysus. During his efforts to conquer Aornus, rumors were spread that even Heracles failed in conquering this place. Diodorus, Arrian and Justin note that Alexander’s desire to occupy the rock was enhanced even further by these rumors. These authors do not explain whether or not it was Alexander who instigated the stories about Aornus and Heracles. However, Arrian presents Alexander as later on using the occupation of Aornus as a piece of evidence that he managed to lead the Macedonians to places which not even Heracles had conquered. It is thus reasonable to assume that Arrian implies that Alexander himself encouraged these rumors during the siege of Aornus⁴⁷. Such an assumption on Arrian’s part would be reasonable, as it is supported by the fact that Alexander must have promoted a similar kind of propaganda in Nysa. Shortly before crossing the Indus, Alexander and his men visited Nysa, a town the inhabitants of which claimed that they were descended from Dionysus. Arrian notes that Alexander was happy to hear these tales because he believed that he could use them in his effort to convince his men to follow him in India⁴⁸. Last but not least, in the last significant step the Macedonians were unsuccessfully asked to make, Alexander is presented by Arrian as urging them to follow him beyond the Hydaspes by arguing that

⁴⁵ D.S. 17.78.1. DROYSEN 1833, 269-270; BELOCH 1925, 19, 24-25; GREEN 1991, 296ff.; HECKEL 2009, 81. BICHLER 2013, 51, too, finds that Alexander’s visit to the Ariaspans’ territory took place in the context of a tense atmosphere between Alexander and his men.

⁴⁶ Arr. *An.* 3.30.6; Curt. 7.5.1-16.

⁴⁷ D.S. 17.85.2; Arr. *Anb* 4.28.1-4.30.4 and 5.26.5, with LIOTSAKIS 2019, 40-43 and 2024, 443-444; Justin 12.7.12-13. Cf. Curt. 8.11.2.

⁴⁸ Arr. *An.* 5.1-2. Cf. Curt. 8.10.13.

they had so far visited places and peoples which neither Heracles nor Dionysus had conquered⁴⁹.

A similar case of propaganda may be recognized in the identification of the Ariaspans with the mythical Arimaspi. As in the cases of Aornus, Nysa and the Hydaspes, in the autumn of 330 BC the Macedonians were invited to enter a new phase of the enterprise towards lands totally unknown to them. If in Aornus and Nysa the stories about the mythical peoples, Heracles and Dionysus aimed at preparing the soldiers for the crossing of the Indus and for entering India, the claims that they had met the Arimaspi could have prepared Alexander’s men for overcoming another natural boundary, the mountain range of the Hindu Kush, and for entering Bactria, which was just as unknown to them as India was. Alexander must have sugar-coated the situation for the Macedonians by telling them that they were entering areas related to the northern borders of the inhabited world. One of the pieces of evidence he could use in support of this view must have been the alleged presence of the Arimaspi in the valley of the Helmand, who were, as explained above, included among the principal representatives of this part of the world. A similar role can be attributed to the stories about Prometheus’ cave in the Hindu Kush⁵⁰.

Certain elements of the Ariaspans’ cultural profile and tales circulating in the wider geographical area of the Hindu Kush and Himalayas that could be associated with them may have served as fertile ground upon which Alexander and his flatterers could present them as descendants of Aristeas’ Arimaspi. First, the Ariaspans were in a position to provide an army with a rich amount of supplies. This ability could be characterized by many as wealth, an element which in its turn could be very easily paralleled with the Arimaspi’s access to gold. Alexander’s flatterers could claim that the Ariaspans had maintained their ancestors’ dexterity in gathering great amounts of wealth. If prosperity was in the myth identified with the possession of gold, in the Ariaspans’ case the very same element manifested itself as the ability to provide a decent amount of supplies.

A difference between the Arimaspi and the Ariaspans pertained to the geomorphology of the territory inhabited by each of them. As already said, the Arimaspi were presented as inhabiting the area north of the Caucasus and at the foot of the Riphean Mountains. Differently, the Ariaspans inhabited the southwestern foothills of the Hindu Kush. Even if a reader were convinced that the Hindu Kush was the Caucasus, if they were familiar with the Arimaspi, while reading of Alexander’s visit to a people with this name, they might well think that the Arimaspi who were visited by Alexander were not the Arimaspi of Aristeas, Herodotus and Damastes. For those visited by Alexander were located south of the Caucasus, while the others were claimed to live north of it. Nonetheless, even this ‘problem’ was easy for the falsifiers to solve. First, in Alexander’s era, as well as much later, it was not clear *exactly* where all the aforementioned northern peoples (Scythians, Hyperboreans, Arimaspi, Issedones, etc.) lived. What is more, they were very often identified with each other by the Greeks. As we have seen, the Arimaspi were confused with the Hyperboreans and, most importantly, with the Scythians. The latter were taken by some of the first historians of Alexander to live in an area which extended from the Danube up to the east and specifically round the Hindu Kush up to the northwest side of the Himalayas. The first historians of Alexander could thus claim that some of the Arimaspi, just like so many other Scythian groups, had migrated to the southwestern foot of the Caucasus. Those readers who bought the idea that the Hindu Kush was the Armenian Caucasus might

⁴⁹ Arr. *An.* 5.26.

⁵⁰ Arr. *An.* 5.3.2.

find such a small-scale migration, from the Riphean Mountains to the Caucasus, very plausible. Besides, in this scenario, the Arimaspi would be presented as having naturally chosen a spot similar to their origins, i.e. the southern foot of a mountain range. This very last parallelism could strike as possible even those readers who knew that Alexander's Arimaspi were located at the Hindu Kush and not the Caucasus. Needless to say, all these comparisons could be made only by authors familiar with the detail preserved by Damastes that the Arimaspi inhabited an area south of the Riphean Mountains. Those writers who had merely –and vaguely– heard or read that the Arimaspi were found north of the Caucasus, ignorant as they were, must have felt more confident to proceed with the identification of the Ariaspans with the Arimaspi.

Most interestingly, the Ariaspans inhabited a territory around which a folk narrative tradition was flourishing, a tradition which could have led to associations between them and the Arimaspi's battles against the griffins for gold. In the Southeast, the Indians were telling stories about some local tribes' confrontations with gigantic ants, and the details of some of these tales resemble the battle between the Arimaspi and the griffins. In one particular case, Megasthenes records that there was a plateau at the foot of which the inhabitants were fighting with these ants for gold⁵¹. In these kinds of stories we may discern not only the motif of the battle but also geographic scenery similar to that in the Arimaspi myth, namely the foot of a mountain. Tales of this kind could also be told about the Iranian Ariaspans since, as we have seen, they too were located at the foot of the Hindu Kush. Other tales combined the griffins' features and those of the ants, as we read that in India some gold-mining ants were winged, just like the griffins⁵². Elsewhere we read of the locals' battles not with ants but with the griffins themselves⁵³. Also, Megasthenes, obviously inspired by tales he heard in India, transferred the Homeric battle between the Pygmies and the cranes to the Indian territory⁵⁴.

Even if we accept that some of these stories were fabricated by the aforementioned Greek authors, it is equally reasonable to believe that the Greeks were inspired by an already existing local mythical tradition. Ctesias himself verifies that tales of this kind were spread by both the Indians and the Bactrians⁵⁵. Also, Iranian inscriptions offer strong pieces of evidence in support of the view that the Bactrians were indeed familiar with these stories. Gold was very probably imported from the North (Siberia and perhaps Altai) and was distributed on Bactrian and Indian soils through trade-routes around the Oxus⁵⁶. One could assume that the Macedonians heard stories of battles between humans and mythical creatures for gold when they entered Bactria and India, namely much later than their stay in the Ariaspans' land. It is there that the Macedonians must have verified stories which some of them had already read in Ctesias' and Herodotus' accounts.

However, it is also safe to assume that the Macedonians must have first heard of these stories from the Ariaspans themselves, who knew well tales which were disseminated by their neighbors close to the aforementioned trade-routes. If the tales about the Scythian Arimaspi and the griffins had been transferred to the Bactrians from Siberia in the context of the gold's importation, it is hard to accept that the Ariaspans, hearing about a nation with a name similar to theirs and which fought with griffins for gold (as the Ariaspans' own neighbors were said to do), would not have drawn some

⁵¹ Megasthenes *FGrHist* 715 F 23b = Str. 15.1.44.

⁵² Str. 15.169.

⁵³ Ctesias *FGrHist* 688 F 45 = Aelian. *NA* 4.27.

⁵⁴ Megasthenes *FGrHist* 715 F 27 = Str. 2.1.9.

⁵⁵ Ctesias *FGrHist* 688 F 45 = Aelian. *NA* 4.27.

⁵⁶ DALTON 1964, 7-8.

links between themselves and the myth of the Arimaspi. The Macedonians who identified the names 'Ariaspans' and 'Arimaspi' must have asked the Ariaspans whether or not they descended from the Arimaspi and if they were aware of the story about the Arimaspi's battles with the griffins for the gold. The Ariaspans, having in mind the similar tales of their territory about people fighting extraordinary animals, must have responded that such a connection was not unreasonable. Either aspiring to be included in this local mythical tradition or because they, as the Nysaeans did, intended to tell Alexander and his men what they wanted to hear and spread, the Ariaspans may very probably have encouraged linkages between themselves and the Arimaspi.

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