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# The Sarmatians: Some Thoughts on the Historiographical Invention of a West Iranian Migration

## Summary

The continuous migration of the Sarmatians from East to West is still considered an historical fact. The fundamentals of this theory, however, are tricky: the Iranian tie of all the populations on the north-eastern edge of the ancient world is too weak to support the existence of one ancient *ethnos*; our current image of the Sarmatians is the result of loose readings of texts and archaeological evidence, nourished by nationalistic convictions. This paper de-constructs the currently accepted Sarmatian migrations and proposes a new history of the invention of the Sarmatians, through the critical re-examination of the linguistic and archaeological data as well as of the historiographical theses of the last 500 years.

Keywords: Steppe people; Sarmatism; ethnicity.

Die Wanderung der Sarmaten von Ost nach West gilt bis heute als historische Tatsache. Dabei sind die Grundlagen dieser These kompliziert: Die iranische Verbindung all jener Bevölkerungen am Nordostrand der antiken Welt ist zu schwach ausgeprägt, um daraus auf die Existenz eines antiken *ethnos* zu schließen. Unser heutiges Bild der Sarmaten ist vielmehr das Resultat einer freien Lektüre antiker Texte und vager archäologischer Hinweise, genährt von nationalistischen Überzeugungen. Dieser Aufsatz dekonstruiert die bis heute akzeptierte These sarmatischer Wanderungen und erzählt die Geschichte der Erfindung der Sarmaten aufgrund einer kritischen Neulektüre der linguistischen und archäologischen Daten und der Historiographie der letzten 500 Jahre.

Keywords: Steppenvölker; Sarmatismus; Ethnizität.

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helped me to improve the draft of this paper; all views expressed here and remaining errors are mine.

## 1 Introductory remarks: The Sarmatian problem

Wahrscheinlich kann ich guten Gewissens sagen – ich bin ein typischer Bürger Sarmatiens. Vielleicht fließt in meinen Adern das Blut aller Völkerschaften, die hier gelebt haben. Lustige und eitle Menschen, die in ihrer Genealogie große reinblütige Persönlichkeiten suchen, Helden oder Genies [...]. Außerdem sind Menschen, die als einziges Argument für ihre Bedeutung ihre Nationalität anführen, langweilig. Sie pochen darauf, als hätten sie diese Nationalität selber erschaffen.<sup>1</sup>

No one would believe today that the story of the Goths, as compiled by Jordanes in the middle of the sixth century AD, is real: in order to compose an ideal itinerary including the major *lieux de mémoire* of classical antiquity and to prove the superiority of his own people, Jordanes invented a migration story. The *Getae*-Goths are supposed to have moved from Scandinavia to Pomerania, through Scythia and the shores of the Black Sea towards Egypt. Following in the footsteps of the greatest conquerors of the past, they were to have subjugated the whole of Asia before arriving at Ilium-Troy; after crossing through southern Europe, they took Rome and attacked Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> The literary compilation of these itineraries was based on pseudo-etymologies, artificial identifications and synchronizations of mythical and historical chronologies, reinterpretations of tales. Jordanes' narrative methods were commonly used during late Roman and medieval times, when the origins of the new European peoples were sung in *chansons de geste*.<sup>3</sup> Modern reconstructions of these origins, however, elaborated in nationalistic contexts from the eighteenth century onward, are not very different: rough connections are made between different historical and archaeological data in order to recreate coherent itineraries. The homonymy is taken as proof of ethnic identity, and the spread of technological innovation as an effect of mass immigration.

1 Parulskis 2006, 232.

2 Christensen 2002; Teillet 1984.

3 See Geary 2002. A similar example, which interests us directly in the context of a discussion about the

Sarmatians, is the pseudo-genealogy of the Alans in the sixth to seventh century, who were seen as descendants of the Romans: Kurth 1893, 517–523; Bachrach 1973, 85.

This is also the case of the Sarmatians, represented by Greek authors from the fifth century BC onwards as a people of the steppe between the Ural Mountains and the Don River.<sup>4</sup> As northern Eurasian nomads, the Sarmatians have been credited by modern historians with the invention of the full saddle; they are also supposed to have been speakers of an Eastern Iranian language and to have continuously advanced west in search of pastures for the horses of their heavy cavalry. Proofs of these successive migrations have been seen in the stylistic evolution of the Sarmatians' horse trappings (*phalerae*) and golden jewelry in animal style, richly decorated with polychrome precious stones, or even in the diffusion of the "tamgas", the mysterious signs inscribed on different objects of the steppe.<sup>5</sup> Such generalities – whose sources are usually not questioned critically<sup>6</sup> – are still conveyed by the national schools from the regions said to have been occupied by the Sarmatians during their migrations. As surprising as this may seem, people who speak a Slavic language (like the Poles and Ukrainians) or a Finno-Ugric language (like the Hungarians) claim Sarmatian roots, even if they generally accept that the Sarmatians should have spoken an Iranian language (or at least a language with Iranian components).<sup>7</sup> The Romanians, in contrast, who consider the sedentary Thracian populations conquered by the Romans as their ancestors, are taught to see the migratory populations as the *other*, in opposition to which the Latin-speaking groups from the Carpathians and the Balkans asserted their collective, peaceful, and moral identity.<sup>8</sup> The thesis of autochthony became the basis of the Romanian collective identity: this is why it is sometimes defended even despite the Carpathian and Balkan transhumance practices, which definitely shaped the Latin-speaking groups of Eastern Europe, until the twentieth century. This nationalistic reaction was mainly a response to the claims

4 For inventories of ancient sources and modern bibliography, among others, see Kretschmer 1920; Граков 1947; Harmatta 1950; Harmatta 1970; Sulimirski 1970; Максименко 1983; Dittrich 1984; Скрипкин 1990; Genito and Moškova 1995; Alemany 2000; Туаллагов 2001; Brezinski and Mariusz 2002; von Carnap-Bornheim 2003; Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 1997; Lebedynsky 2002; Lebedynsky 2009a; Lebedynsky 2009b; Lebedynsky 2010; Тохтасьев 2005a; Берлизов 2011. For various "Sarmatian" artifacts, see Schiltz 1994, 310–320; Aruz et al. 2000; Anisimova et al. 2005.

5 Rostovtzeff 1922; Rostovtzeff 1929; Rostovtzeff 1931; Rostovtzeff 1936 (for his methodological evolution see Bowersock 1993); Смирнов 1964; Смирнов 1984; Sulimirski 1970; Максименко 1983; Mordvintseva 2001; A. V. Simonenko, Marčenko, and Limberis 2008; Voroniatov 2014.

6 Some exceptions: Браунд 1994; for a more modern Russian point of view, see Стрижак 2008. One significant case in sarmatology is Valentina Mordvintseva, whose recent articles open a much more appropriate way of dealing with Sarmatian data: Мордвинцева 2008; Mordvintseva 2009; Mordvintseva 2012; Mordvintseva 2013; Мордвинцева 2013a; Мордвинцева 2013b; Мордвинцева 2015. For the Sarmatians outside the ancient Sovietic space, see now the rightly critical approach of Eckardt 2014.

7 See p. 101.

8 In the time of the communist-nationalistic regimes of the twentieth century, such assumptions were repeated in school handbooks, media, and research papers. Only recently have the historiographical trends changed, through seminal publications such as Djuvara 1999. The first examples of a critical attitude towards such nationalistic approaches are now being published, for example by Popa and Ó Ríagáin 2012.

of the neighbors, who took the legendary bravery of the ancient migratory peoples and their control over wide spaces as support for pretending and defending their own ethnic preeminence and rights over territories which now belong to the Romanian state. All these historical constructions are made possible by the weaknesses of our scientific inquiries, generally influenced by nationalistic ideologies that threatened the political and military balance of Europe after World War II.

The aim of this paper is to identify the main steps in the historiographical process of inventing the Sarmatian migrations and the spread of Sarmatianism. No ancient text tells the story of a contemporary Sarmatian mass resettlement: this makes deconstructing the imaginary itineraries of the Sarmatian movements a useful exercise in observing the invention of ethnic and national collective identities. The first part of this paper is a critical analysis of the main data put together in the reconstruction of Sarmatian history as it is generally accepted today: a number of uncertainties are pointed out, such as the Sarmatian iranicity, tribal identification, and scenarios of migrations. The second part gives a brief explanation of how ancient literary information has been misused in the interpretation of archaeological data: transforming the ancient series of ethnic Sauromatians-Syrmatians-Sarmatians into a migration narrative is similar to accepting the historicity of the migration of the Amazons from the far North to the far South, by identifying their fictitious traces in different *lieux de mémoire*. Defining an archaeological culture and its scientific utility is a matter of methodological discussion that remains open. Combining these categories of modern research with the categories of ancient authors cannot result in an appropriate reconstruction of the past. Such a forceful approach is usually intended to offer a story coherent with modern, nationalistic expectations. Its origins go back to early modern times, when national identities were reconstructed on the basis of literary and, later on, of archaeological interpretations.

The final goal of this paper is to draw attention to the oversights in the modern reconstruction of migrations and to suggest a different way of writing the Sarmatian history in the light of recent definitions of *ethnos* and ethnicity.

### 1.1 The deconstruction of the Sarmatian migration story

One of the most recent encyclopedias of the ancient world offers a fine abstract of today's common opinion about the Sarmatian presence in Europe:

Iranian nomadic tribes who include, among others, the Alani, Aorsi, Iazyges, Rhoxolani and Sirachi. They lived until the mid 3rd cent. BC east of the Tanais (modern Don), regarded as the border between Scythae and Sarmatians (Hdt. 4.21), in the steppes north of the Caucasus (Str. 11.2.15). [...] From the mid 3rd cent. BC on, the Sarmatians' warlike undertakings are attested: they in-

vaded the territory of the Scythians (Diod. Sic. 2.43.7; Lucian, *Toxaris* 42) and demanded tributes from the cities on the Bosphorus. They also spread out on the Hypanis (modern Kuban) and in the Caucasus as well as westwards to the Istros (modern Danube). Str. 7.3.17 knew of four Sarmatian tribes between the Borysthenes (Dniepr) and the Istros: Iazyges in the south, Oûrgoi in the north, Rhoxolani in the east and in the centre the “royal Sarmatians” who led the alliance of the four tribes. In the 1st half of the 1st cent. AD, some of the royal S. moved to the lower Istros, probably in connection with the collapse of the Dacian kingdom under Byrebista. Afterwards, the Iazyges migrated across the rivers Alutus and Pathissus to the Hungarian lowland plain, as archaeological investigations have shown. Rome must have agreed to this migration since the S. could serve as a buffer state against the Daci. Together with Germanic tribes, the other S. repeatedly attacked the Roman empire from the 3rd cent. AD on. The Rhoxolani probably migrated to Pannonia at the beginning of the 3rd cent. [...] The Sarmatian tribes dissolved under the pressure of the Hunni.<sup>9</sup>

Several points deserve critical comments.

## 1.2 Sarmatian iranicity into question

The definition of the Sarmatians as “Iranian nomadic tribes” calls for a number of observations: it assumes that not only do we know the original language of the Sarmatians, but also that they shared a common place of ethnogenesis with other Iranian peoples.<sup>10</sup> In fact, ancient texts register only one Sarmatian word: *marba*, a warrior cry mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>11</sup> More linguistic evidence exists in the name of the Sarmatians themselves, whose plausible etymology is Iranian;<sup>12</sup> there are also some anthroponyms and toponyms from regions and periods for which some texts or questionable interpretations of the archaeological evidence attest the presence of tribes sometimes designated as Sarmatians.<sup>13</sup> However, even the linguists who have tried to give the most advanced and coherent reconstructions of the Sarmatian language or languages have had to admit that no certain distinction can be made today between the different languages of the ancient Eurasian steppe; we can only guess the mixture of Iranian and other Indo-European, Finno-Ugric, or Turkic elements in the linguistic haze of northern

9 Von Bredow 2006d. Analogous definitions in Harmatta 1970, 39; Lebedynsky 2010, 8–9; implicitly, in the most recent encyclopedia, Zahariade 2013.

10 Cf. Parpola 1998.

11 Ammianus Marcellinus 19.11.10. Cf. Huyse 2002.

12 See infra n. 504.

13 See Harmatta 1970, 76–97; Bielmeier 1989; Thordarson 1989; Трубачев 1999. Cf. Тохтасъев 2005b; Иванчик 2009. The linguistic material is available in the etymological dictionary of the Ossetian language (Абаев 1958–1989), and in the corpora of proper names from the northern Black Sea area: Zgusta 1955; Schramm 1973; Cojocar 2004; Cojocar 2007.

Eurasia during the first millennium BC and the first millennium AD. In fact, beyond the methodological difficulties of judging a language on the basis of scattered proper names, all these words put together are too poor to offer more than a scarce catalogue for phonetic and morphologic observations: such meager remarks are too scant to define tribes or linguistic areas, much less “peoples” – i.e., groups who were conscious of their linguistic unity and seen from the outside as such. Moreover, we know very little about the origin of the documents through which we have received these “Sarmatian” data: Who gathered the information, and how precise was the transcription of these “foreign” names in Greek and Latin contexts? Who presumed that those who would have given the names were Sarmatians? Direct correlations between etymological or archaeological observations and the ethnicities conveyed by Greek and Roman authors for “barbarian” peoples are often problematic, because they involve an artificial correspondence between modern scientific and ancient common-sense criteria for identifying a foreign *ethnos*. *Mutatis mutandis*: it is as if one were to say that Berlin is a Slavic city, judging by the toponymy registered during the last centuries, or, by extending linguistic observation to material evidence, that the territory of the former German Democratic Republic was occupied by the eastern populations of a Slavic bloc, opposed to the German populations situated to the west or south.

### 1.3 Sarmatian tribes

Any reconstruction of a Sarmatian past assumes that different tribes made up a coherent history. In fact, the Alani (Alans), Aorsi, Iazyges, Rhoxolani, and Sirachi have never been mentioned together in an ancient narrative as having a common Sarmatian origin: their association is entirely modern. Strabo himself, who inspired this definition, does not mention these tribes as Sarmatians at all.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, none of the ancient lists of Sarmatian peoples can be considered historical: Sarmatia is only an artificial, geometrical, and finally geopolitical construct, and exhaustive catalogues of Sarmatian tribes conflate historical, mythical and more or less legendary communities (like the Hamaxobioi or the Hyperboreans, and the Agathyrses).<sup>15</sup> Yet ancient authors often contradict each other, by qualifying the same ethnic or space-related group as Sarmatian but also as Scythian, Massagetan, or simply nomad. In reality, the current list of Sarmatian tribes was based on a mixture of modern linguistic and historical judgments: the “Sarmatian” kinship of the Alans and Rhoxolani, only partially attested in ancient texts, seem to be confirmed by modern etymologies: the Rhoxolani – identified as one of the main tribes of the Sarmatians – are the *\*Rôxš-Alan* < *\*Rauxša-Aryana*, “white, bright or luminous

14 Str. 7.3.17, quoted p. 109.

15 Kretschmer 1921.

Alans”;<sup>16</sup> this involves the identification as Sarmatians of the Alans, whose name was derived from \**Aryana*, (“Arian/Iranian people” by way of a dialectal lambdacism, “r” being pronounced as “l”).<sup>17</sup> This identification is controversial, however – and not only from a methodological point of view – because it mixes different etic and possibly also emic perspectives on collective identities (if any of these names are endonyms): we do not know if various Roxolani saw themselves as Sarmatians and related to the Alans. It also depends on weak and discordant linguistic evidence.<sup>18</sup> One should rather interpret the rough “sarmatisation” of the northern Black Sea area, in the first centuries of our era, as the hesitation of the ancient authors between the ancient frames of the Greek ethnography (which defined northeastern Europe as Scythia) and the newer Roman frames (which called this border space *Sarmatia*), instead of imagining that the ancient authors used accurate data and methods in order to establish the “Sarmatian” identity of these peoples.<sup>19</sup>

The Aorsi and the Sirachi have been added to the list for other reasons: they are two fairly minor tribes, attested in the region of the Cimmerian Bosphorus around 40 AD as being involved in struggles for the king’s throne.<sup>20</sup> They were quite insignificant in the balance of what historians would call the “Sarmatian world” – this nebula of peoples in the Eurasian steppe to whom the Romans have attributed a name and a fuzzy area on the edges of their *orbis terrarum*. In any case, we have no ancient historical evidence to suggest that the Aorsoi / *A(u)orsi* became Alans and migrated to the west after their victory over the Sirachi: this reconstruction is only a historiographical theory, unfortunately still taken for granted in the historical, archaeological, and even linguistic studies from the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>21</sup>

16 See Diehl 1940; von Bredow 2006a.

17 Tomaschek 1894a; Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 1997; von Bredow 2006b. Strabo attests the Roxolans as nomads (7.2.4, 7.3.17) beyond the known Scythians (2.5.7), never explicitly as Sarmatians: this is also the case for Pliny the Elder (4.80) and the *Historia Augusta* (e.g., *Life of Aurelianus* 33.4); Tacitus (*Histories* 1.79) is the first to mention them as *Sarmatica gens*. For Flavius Josephus (*Jewish War* 7.244), Arrian (*Array against the Alans* 26, 31), and Ptolemy (*Geography* 3.5.7 Müller, 6.14.9 Nobbe), the Alans are Scythians; Lucian (*Toxaris* 51, 55) says that hair length was what made the difference between Alans and Scythians, but he still presents the Alans as Sarmatians. Indirect evidence about the Sarmatian character of the Alans has been found in comparing Flavius Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.97.4), who speaks about the Alans in a war between the Iberians and Parthians in 35 AD, to Tacitus (*Annals*

6.33, 35), who mentions the Sarmatians in the same situation.

18 Cf. the bibliography mentioned supra, n. 13.

19 For the geopolitical frames of the Roman world, see Nicolet 1988.

20 Tacitus, *Annals* 12.15–19, and Pliny the Elder 6.39. Cf. Strabo 11.2.1, 11.5.8; and Ptolemy, *Geography* 6.14.10 Nobbe, who mention them in the northern Caucasus, while in *Geography* 3.5.10 Müller they are in northern Europe. In the light of Pliny the Elder’s mention of the *Abzoe* (6.39) in northern Asia, it is not impossible to have here arbitrary (and purely literary) assimilations and dissimilations between different tribal names known from sources of different epochs, whose ethnic identity or divergence could not have been known to the Romans. See Nicolai 1984; Olbrycht 2001b; more generally, Olbrycht 2001a; Olbrycht 2004.

21 Tomaschek 1894b.

The Iazyges – clearly identified as Sarmatians – are attested in early Roman times on the Cimmerian Bosphorus, but also between the Dnepr and the Danube; they are supposed to have progressively occupied Pannonia during the first centuries of the Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> These Iazyges offer a clear example of a reconstructed migration, deduced by modern researchers from the changes of locations in different texts. This reconstruction, however, is based on problematic narratives: we know nothing about the sources of Polyaeus, the second century AD compiler of *Stratagems of War*, when he deals with Athens' trade partners or with Rome's most northeastern client kingdom,<sup>23</sup> nor are we aware of how he and his sources would assign an ethnicity to a group. There is no certainty, even from an etic perspective, that two ethnicities did not in fact correspond to one and the same people at different moments of its history or from two different points of view: the same name – in this case with an obscure etymology – or names perceived by ancient or modern historians as similar could have been used by several groups or given by Greek and Roman sources to different groups. As long as no explicit connection between the two groups exists in ancient texts, the hypothesis of a migration remains a construction based on arguments *e silentio*.

#### 1.4 The invention of Sarmatian migrations

Positivistic and often unsystematic readings of the ancient texts brought to the invention of a progressive movement of the Sarmatians from east to west between Greek and Roman times. The problematic articulations of different sources (abusive assimilations of geographic and ethnic names, imaginary transformation of one vague group into another group, or groundless associations between literary names and archaeological data that are supposed to illustrate one culture) are sometimes reinforced by simple misinterpretations of the evidence. One example is the assumption that the river Tanais would have functioned as a border between the two main groups of northern nomads, on Herodotus' mental map of Europe and Asia: the Scythians and the Sauromatians (rightly or wrongly identified with the Sarmatians and with the Syrmatians, respectively).<sup>24</sup> First, although this assumption seems generally accepted in historical and

22 Ovid, *Tristia* 2.191, *Pontica* 1.2.75–80; 4.7.9–10 (eventually for the Iazyges). For the Sarmatians, cf. 3.10.31–34; 3.12.29–30; *Pontica* 1.2.45–46, 58, 112; 1.3.59–60; 1.5.49–50; 2.7.72; 3.8.7–8; 4.10.37–38, with the commentary of Podossinov 1987; cf. Batty 1994. See also Strabo 7.2.4 and 7.3.17; Tacitus, *Histories* 3.5, *Annals* 12.29; Pliny the Elder 4.80; Ptolemy, *Geography* 3.5.7 and 3.7.1 Müller, 8.29.9 Nobbe; Appian, *Mithridatica* 293; Cassius Dio 71.7.2, 71.13.1, 71.17.1, etc.; Ammianus Marcellinus 22.8.31. See

more exhaustive inventories of sources in Vulić 1914; Harmatta 1950; von Bredow 2006. Historical interpretations commonly accepted today are given by Bichir 1977; Bichir 1993, and Bichir 1996.

23 Polyaeus, *Stratagems* 8.56: cf. also 8.55, with Braund 2007. Any identification between Iazyges and Iazabatai/laxamatai is, in the absence of explicit sources, abusive: see Dan 2009, 2.2.b.

24 For this identification, see p. 114.

archaeological studies, it has no archaeological basis: west of the Don, archaeologists find sixth- to fifth-century BC tombs with “Sauromatian” features, just like on the Asiatic side (“rightly” assigned by Herodotus [4.21, 110sq.] to the Sauromatians). This is no surprise for the archaeologists who, interpreting their data on a regional basis, have observed that many rivers are axes as much as they are frontiers. Moreover, even from a narrow philological perspective, taking the Tanais river for a real geopolitical limit is already misleading, especially if one compares Herodotus’ text with that of Hippocrates and tries to understand how both authors could have mentally constructed the main course of the river (by identifying it with the Donets or with the Don) and how they have built their rational images of the inhabited world in the second half of the fifth century BC. Herodotus writes:

When one crosses the Tanais, one is no longer in Scythia; the first region on crossing is that of the Sauromatae, who, beginning at the upper end of the Palus Maeotis, stretch northward a distance of fifteen days’ journey, inhabiting a country which is entirely bare of trees, whether wild or cultivated. Above them, possessing the second region, dwell the Budini, whose territory is thickly wooded with trees of every kind.<sup>25</sup>

And Hippocrates:

In Europe there is a Scythian race, called Sauromatae, which inhabits the confines of the Palus Maeotis, and is different from all other races. Their women mount on horseback, use the bow, and throw the javelin from their horses, and fight with their enemies as long as they are virgins; and they do not lay aside their virginity until they kill three of their enemies, nor have any connection with men until they perform the sacrifices according to law. Whoever takes to herself a husband, gives up riding on horseback unless the necessity of a general expedition obliges her. They have no right breast; for while still of a tender age their mothers heat strongly a copper instrument constructed for this very purpose, and apply it to the right breast, which is burnt up, and its development being arrested, all the strength and fullness are determined to the right shoulder and arm.<sup>26</sup>

25 Τάναϊν δὲ ποταμὸν διαβάντι οὐκέτι Σκυθική, ἀλλ’ ἡ μὲν πρώτη τῶν λαξίων Σαυροματέων ἐστί, οἱ ἕκ τοῦ μυχοῦ ἀρξάμενοι τῆς Μαίητιδος λίμνης νέμονται τὸ πρὸς βορρῆν ἄνεμον, ἡμερέων πεντεκαίδεκα ὁδόν, πάσαν εὐόσαν ψιλὴν καὶ ἀγρίων καὶ ἡμέρων δενδρέων. Ὑπεροικέουσι δὲ τούτων δευτέρην λάξιον ἔχοντες Βουδίνοι, γῆν νεμόμενοι πάσαν δασέαν ὕλην παντοίη. (Herodotus 4.21; translation Rawlinson 1858–1860).

26 ἐν δὲ τῇ Εὐρώπῃ ἐστὶν ἔθνος Σκυθικόν, ὃ περὶ τὴν λίμνην οἰκείει τὴν Μαίωτιν, διαφέρων τῶν ἐθνέων τῶν ἄλλων, Σαυρομάται καλεῦνται. τούτων αἱ γυναῖκες ἰππάζονται τε καὶ τοξεύουσι, καὶ ἀκοντίζουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἵππων, καὶ μάχονται τοῖσι πολεμίοισιν, ἕως ἂν παρθένου ἔωσιν. οὐκ ἀποπαρθεύονται δὲ μέχρις ἂν τῶν πολεμίων τρεῖς ἀποκτείνωσι, καὶ οὐ πρότερον ξυνοικέουσιν ἢ περ

Some explanation is necessary to understand the relationship between these two texts – usually quoted together as testimonies about the Sauromatian east-west passing over the Eurasian frontier at the end of the Classical period. In the fourth book of his *Histories*, Herodotus offers a personal and rational organization of the inhabited world, including the lands of the nomads who could have defied geometry because of their wanderings on the edges of the world.<sup>27</sup> Herodotus (or his sources) invented a theoretical, squared Scythia of 4000 stadia long, by taking the main rivers of the northern steppe as ethnic landmarks; he also put order among the different Scythian tribes whose names were known to the Greeks established on the shores of the Black Sea. In order to be more or less parallel to the Istros, coming from the (north)west, Herodotus' Tanais must be identified with the Donets. It is impossible to say to what point this scheme corresponded to the geopolitical reality of the northern Black Sea area in Classical times: we have no other testimony about the eventual organization of these tribes except Herodotus'. But we may be sure that this mental frame had a narrative function in the *Histories* and served the spatial and chronological coherence of Herodotus' tale about Darius' invasion into European and then Asiatic Scythian lands. In fact, rather than an opposition between Greeks and Barbarians, Herodotus' world can be seen as a series of concentric but interconnected circles in a spider's web: the first, Aegean circle is that of the Greeks and their immediate neighbors; the second is the periphery inhabited by Scythians, Egyptians, Libyans, and Persians. The third ripple is that of the faraway populations that are not in direct contact with the Greeks, like the Sauromatians and the Massagetae (or Sakai), presented by Herodotus as more barbarian than the Scythians, but still belonging to the inhabited world, unlike the monsters of the edges. The principle of direct proportionality between distance from the Greek sea and barbarity comes together with another principle in the construction of Herodotus' world: the interdetermination between space and time. Following the geographical and chronological coherence of his narratives, Herodotus located the Sauromatians and their mythical women, the Amazons, to the northeast, beyond the Tanais and the twenty-days-long Scythia (Herodotus 4.116–117). The Sauromatian – thus Scytho-Amazonian – country extended for 15 walking days beyond the Tanais (4.21), but the geographic center of its ethnogenesis was identified by the symbolic number of 3 walking days to the east and 3 walking days to

τὰ ἱερὰ θύουσαι τὰ ἐν νόμῳ. ἦ δ' ἄν ἄνδρα ἐωσπῆ ἄρηται, παύεται ἰππαζομένη, ἕως ἂν μὴ ἀνάγκη καταλάβῃ παγκοίνου στρατείας. τὸν δεξιὸν δὲ μαζὸν οὐκ ἔχουσιν. παιδίῳσι γὰρ εὐοῖσιν ἔτι νηπίοισιν αἱ μητέρες χαλκεῖον τετεχνημένον ἐπ' αὐτέῳ τούτῳ διάπυρον ποίεουσιν, πρὸς τὸν μαζὸν τιθέασιν τὸν δεξιὸν, καὶ ἐπικαίεται, ὥστε τὴν αἰξίῃσιν φθειρέσθαι, ἐς δὲ τὸν δεξιὸν ὤμον καὶ βραχίονα πάσαν τὴν ἰσχὺν καὶ τὸ πλῆθος ἐκδι-

δόναι. (Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, and Places* 17; translation Adams 1849).

- 27 As an answer to the imaginary Scythians of Hartog 1980 (cf. Romm 1992; Skinner 2012), see Рыбаков 1979; Доватур et al. 1982; Нейхардт 1982; Ильинская and Тереножкин 1983; Скржинская 1991; Ivantchik 1999b; Ivantchik 1999c; Bichler 2001; Bichler 2007; Tsetskhladze 2014; Dan 2009, 4.1; Dan 2011 (on the geometry of Scythia, p. 45–51).

the north (4.116). The two estimations are not contradictory, but their full thoroughness cannot be checked on the edges of Herodotus' third circle. All we can be sure of is that, from Herodotus' point of view, the Sauromatians are a centrifugal derivation, identified by their corruption of the language (4.117) and wilder social practices than the Scythians (4.116). They marked an extreme point on the mental map and timing of Darius' expedition.

The Hippocratic treaty *On Airs, Waters, Places* does not follow the same geometrical patterns: on a more traditional representation of the north, indistinctly occupied by nomad peoples, Hippocrates' Sauromatians are not separated from the Scythians; they are a Scythian tribe situated north of the Maeotis, in Europe. Besides this obvious difference of meaning assigned to the Sauromatian *ethnos* (as an *ethnos* distinct from the Scythians in Herodotus and as a part of the Scythian *ethnos* in Hippocrates), there are two possible justifications for this apparent contradiction between Herodotus' Asiatic Sauromatians and the European Sauromatians of Hippocrates (confirmed several decades later by Pseudo-Scylax §70): the first is the different identification of the frontier between Europe and Asia, which corresponded to the Tanais for Herodotus, but which for other Ionian writers, like Hecataeus and eventually Hippocrates, must have been situated either on a different course of the Tanais than the one meant by Herodotus – thus the Don and maybe one of its eastern tributaries, rather than the Donets – or on another river flowing into the Maeotis.<sup>28</sup> If Herodotus and Hippocrates had different perceptions of Europe's extension to the east, the same Sauromatians living between the Donets and the Don would have been Asiatic, outside of Scythia, for Herodotus and European Scythians for Hippocrates. This hypothesis could be reinforced by a second explanation: the late-classical authors had various definitions for the geo-ethnographic group of the Maeotians and for that of the Scytho-Sarmatians living on the Maeotis. Such an inconsistency is attested in the case of the Iazamatai, considered by Ephorus (70 F 160 a–b) as a Sarmatian people, and by Demetrios of Kallatis (85 F 1, *apud* Pseudo-Scymnos v. 880sq. Müller = fr. 16 Marcotte) as a Maeotian people (*cf.* *Anonymus Periplus of the Black Sea* §45 Müller = 1115–20 Diller).<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, one group occupying the same area of nomadism could have been considered as belonging to different parts of the world and genealogical lines and could have contributed to various definition of the Sarmatian *ethnos*. Eventually, not only were the geographical frames fluctuant, but also their ethnic contents.

Whatever the reason for the difference between the two most ancient attestations of the Sauromatians, there is no need to imagine that Herodotus and Hippocrates attest two stages of a migration between Asia and Europe in the fifth century BC. In fact, the

28 See Dan 2009, 2.2.b and 4.2.c, on the basis of Jouanna 1996.

29 See Dan 2009, 2.2.b; cf. Каменецкий 1971, and Виноградов 1974; Gardiner-Garden 1986.

historians who infer such an east-west movement from the comparison of the two texts and who take archaeological materials as proof of their assumption are forced to recognize that the changes in the material culture they associate with the so-called Sarmatian migration date back only to the fourth century BC and cannot support such an interpretation of Hippocrates' fifth century BC testimony: the error in the methodology of such analogies between soft ethnic identities and archaeological interpretations is obvious.

Yet it is important to remind that in this region of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, the prestige of the Sauromatian-Sarmatian identity was so strong throughout antiquity, that the ethnic is attested not only in etic, remote sources, but also in emic contexts: the Barbarian footprint on the Spartocid and Aspurgian dynasties is illustrated by the name "Sauromates" given to different kings between the second and third century AD, along with other Iranian, Thracian, Greek, and Latin names.<sup>30</sup> But the only possible conclusion is that the contact zone observed in the excavations of the nomadic tombs on both shores of the Don and its tributaries corresponded to what the Greeks, Hellenes, and Romans, from the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, would have called "Sarmatian", for various historical and historiographical reasons that remain substantially unknown to this day.

The assumptions about the spreading of the Sarmatians between the Hypanis (modern Kuban) and the Ister (modern Danube) are all modern theories inspired by the comparison of ancient texts with sparse linguistic and archaeological assumptions. The historical replacement of the Scythians by the Sarmatians in the northern Pontic area is generally reconstructed on the basis of Polybius' mention of a Sarmatian Gatalos, impossible to locate (25.2.12–13), corroborated by Diodorus' reference to the Sauromatians (2.43.6–7), a colony of the Scythians, who would have turned the old Scythia into a desert. One forgets, however, not only Diodorus' taste for synthesis and generalizations of legendary and historical facts in order to tell a coherent story, but also the opposite literary and epigraphic attestations of the Scythians in the region of Neapolis in the Taurid and in Olbia as far to the west as Scythia Minor, in late Hellenistic times.<sup>31</sup>

Strabo's description of the main Sarmatian tribes between the Borysthenes (modern Dniepr) and the Ister (modern Danube) has been taken as an accurate snapshot of the ethnographic picture of the northern Black Sea region by the end of the first century BC, and accordingly as the final proof of the Sarmatian migration to the Danube and the Carpathians:

30 See Gajdukevič 1971, *passim*. In later sources (e.g., Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *On the Administration of the Empire* 53) the Bosphorians, whose king's name was Sauromates, could be seen as "Sarmatians."

31 For the "Scythian" history of these regions, see: Zajcev 2004; Vinogradov and Kryžickij 1995; Pippidi 1971, and the introductory essay of Avram 2000, 22–60.

Now the whole country that lies above the said seaboard between the Borysthenes and the Ister consists, first, of the Desert of the Getae; then the country of the Tyregetans; and after it the country of the Iazygian Sarmatians and that of the people called the Basileians and that of the Urgi, who in general are nomads, though a few are interested also in farming; these people, it is said, dwell also along the Ister, often on both sides. In the interior dwell, first, those Bastarnians whose country borders on that of the Tyregetans and Germans ... whereas the Rhoxolani (the most northerly of them all) roam the plains between the Tanaïs and the Borysthenes. In fact, the whole country towards the north from Germany as far as the Caspian Sea is, so far as we know it, a plain, but whether any people dwell beyond the Rhoxolani we do not know. Now the Rhoxolani, under the leadership of Tasius, carried on war even with the generals of Mithridates Eupator; they came for the purpose of assisting Palacus, the son of Scilurus, as his allies, and they had the reputation of being warlike; yet all barbarian races and light-armed peoples are weak when matched against a well-ordered and well-armed phalanx. At any rate, those people, about fifty thousand strong, could not hold out against the six thousand men arrayed with Diophantus, the general of Mithridates, and most of them were destroyed. They use helmets and corselets made of raw ox-hides, carry wicker shields, and have for weapons spears, bow, and sword; and most of the other barbarians are armed in this way. As for the Nomads, their tents, made of felt, are fastened on the wagons in which they spend their lives; and round about the tents are the herds which afford the milk, cheese, and meat on which they live; and they follow the grazing herds, from time to time moving to other places that have grass, living only in the marsh-meadows about Lake Maeotis in winter, but also in the plains in summer.<sup>32</sup>

32 ἡ δὲ ὑπερκειμένη πᾶσα χώρα τοῦ λεχθέντος μεταξὺ Βορυσθένους καὶ Ἰστρου πρώτη μὲν ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν Γετῶν ἐρημία, ἔπειτα οἱ Τυρεγῆται, μεθ' οὗς οἱ Ἰάζυγες Σαρμάται καὶ οἱ Βασίλειοι λεγόμενοι καὶ Οὐργοί, τὸ μὲν πλεον νομάδες, ὀλίγοι δὲ καὶ γεωργίας ἐπιμελούμενοι· τούτους φασὶ καὶ παρὰ τὸν Ἰστρον οἰκεῖν, ἐφ' ἑκότερα πολλάκις. ἐν δὲ τῇ μεσογαίᾳ Βαστάρται μὲν τοῖς Τυρεγῆταις ὄμοροι καὶ Γερμανοῖς... Ῥωξολανοὶ δ' ἀρκτικώτατοι τὰ μεταξὺ τοῦ Ταναΐδος καὶ Βορυσθένους νεμόμενοι πεδία. ἡ γὰρ προσάρκτιος πᾶσα ἀπὸ Γερμανίας μέχρι τῆς Κασπίας πεδιάς ἐστὶν, ἣν ἴσμεν· ὑπὲρ δὲ τῶν Ῥωξολανῶν εἴ τινας οἰκοῦσιν οὐκ ἴσμεν. οἱ δὲ Ῥωξολανοὶ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς Μιθριδάτου τοῦ Εὐπάτορος στρατηγούς ἐπολέμουν ἔχοντες ἡγεμόνα Τάσιον· ἦκον δὲ Παλάκω συμ-

μαχῆσυντες τῷ Σκιλοῦρου, καὶ ἐδόκουν μὲν εἶναι μάχιμοι, πρὸς μέντοι συντεταγμένην φάλαγγα καὶ ὠπλισμένην καλῶς τὸ βάρβαρον φύλον ἀσθενὲς πᾶν ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ γυμνητικόν. ἐκεῖνοι γοῦν περὶ πέντε μυριάδας πρὸς ἑξακισχιλίου τοὺς Διοφάντῳ, τῷ τοῦ Μιθριδάτου στρατηγῷ, συμπαραταξαμένους οὐκ ἀντέσχον, ἀλλ' οἱ πλείστοι διεφθάρησαν. χρώνται δὲ ὡμοβοίοις κρᾶνεσι καὶ θώραξι, γερροφόροι, ἀμυντήρια δ' ἔχοντες καὶ λόγχα καὶ τόξα καὶ ξίφος· τοιοῦτοι δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων οἱ πλείους. τῶν δὲ νομάδων αἱ σκηναὶ πλωταὶ πεπήγασιν ἐπὶ ταῖς ἀμάξαις, ἐν αἷς διαιτῶνται· περὶ δὲ τὰς σκηνὰς τὰ βοσκήματα, ἀφ' ὧν τρέφονται καὶ γάλακτι καὶ τυρῷ καὶ κρέσιν· ἀκολουθοῦσι δὲ ταῖς νομαῖς μεταλαμβάνοντες τόπους αἰεὶ τοὺς ἔχοντας πόναν, χειμῶνος μὲν ἐν

Despite the assumptions of modern historians, Strabo's picture is neither totally secure nor consistent with the positions of other authors of early Roman times.<sup>33</sup> The name as well as the geographical position of Strabo's Basileians, the "Royal Sarmatians," recall the "Royal Scythians" of the classical Greek ethnographic tradition. The historical reality of Iranian tribes who called themselves "royal" – and thus could be recognized by others as such – is confirmed by the Iranian name of the "Saioi," mentioned in a Greek inscription of Olbia that dates back to the second half of the third century BC.<sup>34</sup> This does not mean, however, that the Saioi were ever considered as Royal Scythians or Royal Sarmatians. The continuity of the "royal" ethnicity on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea, however, could be proof of the artificial replacement of the Scythians by the Sarmatians in late Hellenistic sources. This hypothesis is not supported only by such translations of names: a parallel could be the religious customs attributed by Herodotus to the Scythians, customs which are mentioned by Ammianus as being those of the Alans.<sup>35</sup> This shows, beyond any doubt, the community and continuity of cultures in the Eurasian steppe over one millennium. It may also suggest, however, that following the tradition, some authors could have reused some bits of ethnographic information while referring to the same space, without any real awareness of the local ethnic dynamics.

Strabo's other two Sarmatian tribes are even more difficult to grasp: the Ougroi remain a *hapax* in the Greek inventory of ethnic names. Some suggest that the name was formed from the Iranian root *"\*ugra-*," "force";<sup>36</sup> one could also think it a corruption or a transformation of Herodotus' Scythians, γεωργοί, this last name being itself the Greek adaptation of a local ethnic.<sup>37</sup> All this remains hypothetical, and we have to accept that we know nothing of the realities these names were supposed to cover. Yet more surprising is the situation of the Rhoxolani in Strabo. The etymology of their name is Iranian, and they are sometimes explicitly qualified as being "Sarmatians." Some etymological connection with the bearers of another Iranian exonym, the Rheuxinales (mentioned in Diophantus' decree from Chersonesus Taurica), confirms their local setting. Why, then, does Strabo the Pontian, the author of the most precise and complete description of the Black Sea in Roman times, associate them with the Germanic Bastarni without recording their Scythian or Sarmatian kinship?<sup>38</sup> Ethnic and geographic elements are

τοῖς ἔλεσι τοῖς περὶ τὴν Μαιώτιν, θέρους δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς πεδίοις. (Strabo 7.3.17; translation H. L. Jones 1917–1932).

- 33 Cf. Tacitus, *Annales* 12.29, *Historiae* 1.79; Pliny the Elder 4.80–81; Ptolemy, *Geography* 3.5.1, 3.8.1 Müller, etc.  
34 *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup>.32 A.34; cf. Kullanda 2014; Tomaschek 1888; also Harmatta 1970, 94–95; more recently Mayrhofer 2006.

35 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.12–25 echoes Herodotus' book 4 (see also 17.12.2 for an ethnographic description of the Sarmatians).

36 Holzer 1988, 200.

37 Абаев 1981: "γεωργοί < \*gau-uarga, oxen worshippers"; cf. Holzer 1988, 197–198, 213; Corcella 1992.

38 Cf. Strabo 2.5.7 (where they appear as Scythians, as in Pliny the Elder 4.80), 7.2.4 (nomadic people between lazyges and Bastarni); Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.79 (explicitly attested as Sarmatians, see p. 102.); *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup> 352 = *Syll*<sup>3</sup> 709 "τὸ τῶν Ῥεϋξιναλῶν ἔθνος" but *Rhoxolanorum* in *ILS* 986.

mixed together in his description – and in all the ancient descriptions of the area. The modern historian can only note the lack of scientific coherence in this “common sense” method<sup>39</sup> and refuse to build other (hi)stories on such weak grounds.

This is exactly what was done by those previous historians who attempted to explain the progressive movements of the Sarmatians on the Danube, in the Carpathians, and beyond. They used fragmentary historical data and the logic of the power vacuum to relate each supposed step west by the Sarmatians to an historical moment. Accordingly, the main impulses for the Sarmatian migration have variously been posited as the collapse of the so-called Scythian kingdom of Ateas under the attack of Philipp II of Macedonia in 339 BC, the fall of the Achaemenid Empire under Alexander the Great, the conquest of Bactria by the Yüeh-chih of Chinese origin, the dissolution of Byrebista’s Dacian kingdom under the pressure of Rome and, from the third century AD onwards, the weakness of the Roman power itself.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, there is no certainty about the historical relevance of these events for the north of the Black Sea and central Europe: the kingdom of Ateas must have been a small state in modern Dobruja rather than a huge empire of the steppe;<sup>41</sup> the Achaemenid Empire never held territories north of the Caucasus;<sup>42</sup> we have no information about Byrebista’s frontiers or of any migratory attacks against it.<sup>43</sup>

The Sarmatians are said to have disappeared as a military power under the pressure of the Huns during the crisis of the Roman Empire.<sup>44</sup> In the latest texts, they are enemies of the emperors honored by the title of *Sarmaticus* when fighting on the Danubian *limes*,<sup>45</sup> or soldiers in Roman cavalry units (*alae*) in Gaul, Britain, Italy, and Egypt.<sup>46</sup> Of course, not much can be said about the criteria used in these ethnic identifications: Were these Sarmatians speakers of Iranian languages? Did they keep any connection with their *ethnos* or with their ancestral way of life? Or, more probably, were they identified as Sarmatians by their military tactics?<sup>47</sup> Do the ethnic names of the auxiliary forma-

39 For “common sense,” see the contributions in Geus and Thiering 2014.

40 E.g. Harmatta 1970.

41 See especially Alexandrescu 1967; Pippidi 1971, 90sq.; Avram 2000, 20–21.

42 For the Achaemenids in the Caucasus region, see the studies in Ivantchik and Licheli 2007, and Nieling and Rehm 2010.

43 See Vulpe 2001; cf. Strobel 1998 (1999).

44 See Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 1997 125–140; Lebedynsky 2002, 63–72.

45 See Stein 1921; Dittrich 1984; more recently, Eder 2006.

46 After Bachrach 1973, see Kazanski 1991; Kazanski and Périn 2011. Cf. the syntheses of Lebedynsky 2001; Lebedynsky 2010; Lebedynsky 2011.

47 Cf. Tacitus, *Histories* 1.79: “For it is a strange fact that the whole courage of the Sarmatians is, so to speak, outside themselves. No people is so cowardly when it comes to fighting on foot, but when they attack the foe on horseback, hardly any line can resist them. On this occasion, however, the day was wet and the snow melting: they could not use their pikes or the long swords which they wield with both hands, for their horses fell and they were weighted down by their coats of mail. This armour is the defence of their princes and all the nobility: it is made of scales of iron or hard hide, and though impenetrable to blows, nevertheless it makes it difficult for the wearer to get up when overthrown by the enemy’s charge; at the same time they were continually sinking deep in the soft and heavy snow /

tions reflect the consolidation of a Sarmatian or Alan collective identity in the west on military grounds, as in the case of the Batavians?<sup>48</sup> None of these questions have clear answers. All we know is that Roman literary and iconographic sources identified the warrior populations north of Moesia, Dacia, and Pannonia by names continuously used for centuries to refer to the nomadic groups of the northern Caucasus and the Black Sea area. From the second century AD onward, Sarmatians and Alans were allowed to settle inside the empire and represented an important recruitment source for auxiliary detachments of *gentiles*.<sup>49</sup> Even if groups and individuals had shifted from the northeast towards the extreme west or southwest of the empire, the movement probably had nothing to do with the modern stereotype of a Barbarian invasion. The phenomenon must be reset in the context of Roman demographic policies. Moreover, even if some researchers had been tempted to presume that personal adornments or weapons indicated links with the civilizations of the steppe, no archaeological traces can be taken as an unambiguous sign of Sarmatian ethnicity: even practices supposed to reveal keen group identities – like cranial deformation<sup>50</sup> – were never specific to one community but generally shared by several *ethne*.

In fact, the modern historian must take into account the plasticity of ancient ethnic and geographic concepts. When drawing his European and Asian Sarmatia, Ptolemy (eighth table of Europe – *Geography* 3.5 Müller; second table of Asia – *Geography* 5.9 Nobbe) did not represent modern states or historical provinces; he simply gave a geographical frame to the known world. When using ethnicities, ancient historians – and presumably also political and military chiefs as well as their public – were expressing rough identities, and they were aware of this. Ammianus Marcellinus clearly explained the process of naming peoples, in the context of the Roman imperial manipulation of military and political information:

The Hister, filled to overflowing by a great number of tributaries, flows past the Sauromatians, and these extend as far as the river Tanaïs, which separates Asia from Europe. On the other side of this river the Halani, so called from the

*namque mirum dictu ut sit omnis Sarmatarum virtus velut extra ipsos. nihil ad pedestrem pugnam tam ignavum: ubi per turmas advenere vix ulla acies obstiterit. sed tum umido die et soluto gelu neque conti neque gladii, quos praelongos utraque manu regunt, usui, lapsantibus equis et catafractarum pondere. id principibus et nobilissimo cuique tegimen, ferreis lamminis aut praeduro corio consertum, ut adversus ictus impenetrabile ita impetu hostium provolutis inhabile ad resurgendum; simul altitudine et mollitia nivis hauriebantur?* (translation Moore 1925). For the weapons that archaeologists have associated with the Sarmatians, see A. V. Simonenko 2001.

48 Cf. Roymans 2004.

49 E.g., the 300,000 Sarmatians moved inside the empire by Constantine in 334: *Anonymous Valesianus* I.6.32.

50 This praxis was a characteristic of the Huns and Burgundians as well as the Sarmatians. Accordingly, one cannot assume that it was meant to be an unique ethnic signature: it can also be seen as a fashionable sign of distinction in different geographic and social contexts, such as tattoos or other permanent modifications of the body. Cf. Buchet 1988.

mountain range of the same name, inhabit the measureless wastes of Scythia; and by repeated victories they gradually wore down the peoples whom they met and like the Persians incorporated them under their own national name. [...] In another part of the country, near the abodes of the Amazons, the Halani mount to the eastward, divided into populous and extensive nations; these reach as far as Asia, and, as I have heard, stretch all the way to the river Ganges, which flows through the territories of India and empties into the southern Ocean. Thus the Halani (whose various people it is unnecessary now to enumerate) are divided between the two parts of the earth, but although widely separated from each other and roaming over vast tracts, as Nomads do, yet in the course of time they have united under one name, and are, for short, all called Alani because of the similarity in their customs, their savage mode of life, and their weapons.<sup>51</sup>

What remains after giving up these groundless scaffoldings of migrations? Data must be analyzed in their contexts, through the methods specific to their fields; any critical confrontation of interpretations must remain explicit. The deconstruction of the Sarmatian migration, of its artificial chronology and positivistic stereotypes, is not necessarily meant to leave an empty space: the history of the Sarmatians may be rewritten as a critical analysis of the idea of Sarmatianism in antiquity and modern times, as seen through parallel studies of the literary, linguistic, and archaeological data.

## 2 The reconstruction of the historiographical models: elements for a new Sarmatian history

The Sarmatian identity is an etic construct of the Greeks and Romans, who assigned certain geographic and ethnic particularities to certain nomadic groups located on the northern edges of the ancient *oikoumene*; in the countries concerned by this history, the Sarmatian identity is a modern recreation, from the Renaissance onwards, of this etic, ancient, imaginary type. Therefore, the Sarmatians are a Greek ethnographic entity, elaborated in Classical times and reshaped through centuries-old literary traditions. The

51 *Abundans Hister advenarum magnitudine fluenti Sauro-matas praetermeat ad usque amnem Tanaim pertinentes, qui Asiam terminat ab Europa. Hoc transitu in inmensum extentas Scythiae solitudines Halani inhabitant, ex montium appellatione cognominati, paulatimque nationes conterminas crebritate victoriarum adritas ad gentilitatem sui vocabuli traxerunt, ut Persae. [...] Parte alia prope Amazonum sedes Halani sunt orienti adclines, diffusi per populosas gentes et amplas, Asiaticos vergentes in tractus, quas dilatari ad usque Gangem accepi fluium*

*intersecantem terras Indorum, mareque inundantem australe. Bipertiti per utramque mundi plagam Halani quorum gentes varias nunc recensere non refert licet dirempti spatiis longis, per pagos ut Nomades vagantur inmensos, aevi tamen progressu ad unum concessere vocabulum et summatim omnes Halani cognominantur ob mores et modum efferatum vivendi eandemque armaturam.* (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.13, 16–17; translation Rolfe 1939).

approximate knowledge about nomadic tribes from north of the Azov Sea, farther away from Greek civilization than the Scythians, must have been the basis of this invention. However, the sources that survive to the present day refer to only two specificities of the Sarmatians, in contrast with the other nomads of the steppe: their name and the status of women in their society.

## 2.1 Sauromatians / Sarmatians / Syrmatians: What's in a name?

Modern historians usually mix together the names “Sauromatians,” “Sarmatians,” and “Syrmatians,” claiming that no clear historical distinction can be established between them.<sup>52</sup> This could be true for the Iranian origin of the name<sup>53</sup> and was sometimes suspected in Roman times, when compilers like Pliny the Elder affirmed that there was only one stylistic distinction between the more erudite Greek name of “Sauromatians” and the banal “Sarmatians.”<sup>54</sup> Greek authors, however, never mixed these names, nor were they familiar with all three of them at once: the “Sauromatians” were known to Herodotus and Hippocrates in the fifth century BC in the region of the Azov Sea;<sup>55</sup> the “Sarmatians” may have been mentioned as early as the fifth and fourth centuries BC by historians like Hellanicus, Theophrastus, and Timaeus, but the name did not become frequent until Hellenistic times;<sup>56</sup> the “Syrmatians” appear in the descriptions of the European shores of the periplous of Eudoxus and Pseudo-Scylax, possibly as a corruption or hypercorrection of the name “Sauromatians.”<sup>57</sup> In the earliest texts there is no explicit statement about the historical relationships between these names; as a consequence, we are ignorant of how they became known to the Greeks. We can only suppose that they were derived in all likelihood from one or several local tribal names, which could be connected with an Iranian composed name meaning “wearers of black (clothes).” If so, they could be compared or assimilated to the ΣΑΥΔΑΡΑΤΑΙ (< *šau-dar-*, cf. osset. *sau-dar[oeġ]*) of the Olbian decree for Prôtogènès.<sup>58</sup> Hecataeus, however,

52 Old hypotheses that tried to oppose Sarmatians to Sauromatians (who would have been autochthonous for Michael Rostovtzeff) or Syrmatians (who would have been a distinct Ugro-Finnic group for Либеров 1969, 27-37) have finally been abandoned. See the references supra n. 7.

53 See infra n. 54.

54 Pliny the Elder 4.80, despite 6.17 where *Sauromatae* and *Sarmatae* are neighbors in northern Caucasus, 6.19, where the *Sauromatae* are one of the *genera* of the *Sarmatae*, while in 6.38 the *Sauromatae* are *multis nominibus*.

55 Herodotus 4.21, 57, 102, 110sq.; cf. Очир-Горяева 1993; Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, and Places* 17; cf.

Ephorus 70 F 160a Jacoby (*apud* Ps.-Scymnos 865sq. *apud Periplus Ponti Euxini FGrHist* 2037 F 74) and 160b (*apud* Stephanus Byzantius s.u. “Ἰαζαβάρται”).

56 Hellanicus 4F 185 (*apud* Strabo 11.6.2) has both forms, “Sauromatians” and “Sarmatians”; Theophrastus fr. 172 Wimmer; Timaeus 566 F 57 Jacoby (*apud* Antigonus of Carystus, *Mirabilia* 152).

57 Eudoxus fr. 277 Lasserre (*apud* Stephanus Byzantius s.u. “Συρμάται”); Pseudo-Scylax 68 and 70 has both forms.

58 *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup>.32, B 10. For the etymology, see Абаев 1958–1989, 345–347 s.u. “Дартун: dard”, т. III, p. 42–43 s.u. “saw”. Cf. Smirnov 1980; Очир-Горяева 1992; Ocir-Gorjaeva 1993; Тохтасъев 2005a. The

and all the ethnographic tradition that follows him, attest the existence of a Black Sea people of Μελάγχλαυοι (whose name can be translated in Greek as meaning “dressed in black”); they are sometimes situated in the European Scythia, sometimes in Colchis, and sometimes in the region of the river Rhâ (modern Volga).<sup>59</sup> It is impossible to say whether these tribal groups of “wearers of black” had any connection between them – other than the homonymy of their names – and whether they can be identified with the Sauromatians/Sarmatians/Syrmatians or the Olbian Saudaratai. The modern historian can only observe the original variety of ethnicities, which were directly borrowed or translated from local languages and which have no identical forms between literary and epigraphic sources,<sup>60</sup> while the ancient authors, aware of different traditions, tended to reduce this variety by identifying one name with another.

## 2.2 A precedent for the Sarmatian migrations: The Amazons

The search for simple, coherent narrative patterns in the ancient historiography must have determined the invention of migration stories. In order to explain resemblances between populations from northeastern Anatolia and the northern Black Sea region, as well as to conciliate different localizations of the Warrior Women, Herodotus (or his sources) imagined a migration of the Amazons from southern Pontus to the north, followed by a secession in the Scythian *ethnos* and a secondary migration further to the northeast. This led to the ethnogenesis of the Sauromatians.<sup>61</sup> The connection between the two opposite sides of the Black Sea may be explained by some Greek knowledge about the existence of woman-warrior practices in the two regions.<sup>62</sup> Hellanicus, for his part, had already connected this tradition with a great circuit of the Amazons: from the northeastern Black Sea region, through the Bosphorus, to Greece proper.<sup>63</sup> Strabo attested Amazons in the Caucasus and the Caspian region – where they were probably situated by Hellenistic authors who had some information about the shocking social

name of the Scythians could have an analogous history: \*skuta- (connected to the Germanic \*skutja, “shooter”) was at the origin of the endonyme Skolotoi (\*skudu-ta), attested by Herodotus (4.6): see Szemerényi 1980; Mayrhofer 2006. More generally, cf. Dan 2009, 2.2.g.

59 Hecataeus 1 F 185; Pseudo-Scylax 79; Ptolemy, *Geography* 3.5.10, 5.9.19. For the relationship between their name and that of the Sauromatians, see Procopius, *On Wars* 3.2.2 “πάλαι μέντοι Σαυρομάται καὶ Μελάγχλαυοι ὠνομάζοντο”, 8.5.6.

60 Cf. p. 110 the case of Rheuxinales-R(h)oxolani.

61 Herodotus 4.110–116. See Ivantchik 2013; Dan 2009, 1.1.3.b and 4.2.c.

62 Modern ethnographic inquiries observed analogous behaviors by women warriors among distinct populations. For example, women in mountainous zones of the Balkans (cf. Pseudo-Scylax 21) or southern Caucasus and eastern Anatolia could choose to fight for as long as they were single; this seems to be consistent with Herodotus (4.117) and Hippocrates (*On Airs, Waters and Places* 17), who stated that Sauromatian women – whose bravery was well known to the Greek public, cf. Plato, *Laws* 7 804e – had to kill one or several men before getting married, and that after marriage they could not kill.

63 Hellanicus 4 F 106–107 and 167a–b–c = 323a F17a–b–c *apud* Plutarch, *Theseus* 27, and Tzetzes, *Scholia ad Lycophronem* v. 1332; *Posthomerica* 75q. Jacobs.

role of women in nomadic societies and were willing to create a coherent image of the inhabited world explored and conquered by Alexander the Great.<sup>64</sup> The best illustration of how Amazons and ancient migrations of people were conceived by ancient writers is Diodorus Siculus (or even his source, Dionysios Skytobrachion): Diodorus' *Historical Library* includes a description of an Amazonian empire extending from Maeotis, Scythia, and Thrace to Libya, and a totally imaginary tale explaining this expansion.<sup>65</sup>

Through such geographical and historical rationalizations and combinations of the myths, legends, or just fictive stories about the Amazons, the ancient history of the Sarmatians looks like the history of the Cimmerians and Scythians: a more or less coherent synthesis of narratives connecting Barbarian realities on the circuit of the world, from extreme northeastern Asia to northwestern Europe and southern Libya.<sup>66</sup>

### 2.3 "Sarmatian" archaeological cultures: Problems of chronology and geography

As strange as it may seem, modern attempts to conciliate literary and archaeological data in one coherent history of the northernmost part of the ancient world are not very different in purpose and methodology. The purpose is always the creation of a coherent story from contradictory data, with modern and ancient scholars convinced of the genealogical, social, and cultural continuity between groups about whom they have scarce but apparently equivalent information. Written in the context of the modern nation-states that fought one another in the world wars of the twentieth century, the history of the Sarmatians places even more emphasis on the territorial continuity and historical progress that is presumed to have characterized the Sarmatian people. Accordingly, and with slight chronological variations from one archaeologist to another, archaeological cultures from different areas and times have been interpreted as illustrations of four hypothetical phases of the Sauromatian/Sarmatian society, as follows:

1. The Sauromatian culture ("Sauromatian," Blumenfeld culture), seventh/sixth to fifth/fourth centuries BC<sup>67</sup>

64 Strabo 11.5.1–2; cf. Pliny the Elder 6.35, 39; Pomponius Mela 1.12, 13, 109.

65 Diodorus 2.44–46, 3.52–55, 4.16, 4.28, 17.77; cf. Rusten 1982, 76sq, 104sq.

66 See the sources in Ivantchik 1993; Ivantchik 1999a; Ivantchik 1999b; Ivantchik 2001.

67 See the syntheses in Мелюкова 1989, 147–214; Genito and Moskova 1995. Attempts have been made to identify different archaeological cultures associated

with the Sauromatians or the Bronze Age predecessors of the Sauromatians, with ethnicities like the Ircae, Issedonians, Argippaei, and Arimaspians: see the synthesis in Sulimirski 1970, 23. Beyond any doubt, such mythical characters have no place on a modern map: they do not correspond directly to the archaeological finds of these areas and were not conceived by people aware of modern geography.

2. The Early Sarmatian culture (“Sauro-sarmatian,” Prokhorovka culture), fourth to second centuries BC<sup>68</sup>
3. The Middle Sarmatian culture (“Sarmatian,” Souslovo culture), late second century BC to second century AD<sup>69</sup>
4. The Late Sarmatian culture (“Alan,” Chipovka culture), late second century AD to fourth century AD.<sup>70</sup>

These phases are generally supposed to correspond to the Sarmatian migration from east to west, as attested by the Greek and Roman ethnographic tradition, and to the progressive sophistication of the military equipment of the steppe knights as revealed by archaeology.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, when analyzed in detail, these cultural phases are very problematic: the anteriority of the Sauromatians/Syrmatians when compared to the Sarmatians is hypothetical and could only be determined in part, because of the fragmentary status of our sources.<sup>72</sup> It would have been historically impossible for Herodotus to have recognized characteristics of archaeological material from the Volga region in the seventh to fifth/fourth centuries BC as “Sauromatian”. The only explicit distinction established by Herodotus between Scythians and Sauromatians is the place of women in each respective society: the Scythian women were to have lived in a chariot, whereas the Sarmatian women were to have been Amazons. This precise assumption is nonetheless contradicted by archaeological evidence: the percentage of tombs of women with weapons in the Scythian (and thus European) society is today estimated at about 60 percent, while only 20 percent of the “Sarmatian” (east of Tanais-Don) female graves discovered have weapons. Such statistics, however, cannot have any other aim than to defeat their partisans with their own weapons: from a methodological point of view, confronting texts about the Amazons and women’s graves with weapons has no meaning as long as there is no certainty that the weapons in the grave indicate that the person would really have used them in her lifetime. Only medical exams of skeletons and statistics showing a high percentage of wounded women could support such a parallel, which would still remain problematic for reasons of statistics.<sup>73</sup>

68 Voir Sulimirski 1970, 81–111; Wegener 2010, 25–33; Barbaruнова 1995, 121–132. Яценко and Вдовченко 2013, 78–90, prefer a different chronology, going as late as the first century BC for Early Sarmatian, the first century BC to second century AD for Middle Sarmatian, and the mid-second century AD to mid-third century AD for Late Sarmatians in the Don river basin.

69 Voir Sulimirski 1970, 112–141; Moshkova 1995b, 137–147; Wegener 2010, 34–39. For the northern Black Sea region, see A. V. Simonenko, Marčenko, and Limberis 2008; for the reconstruction of the mi-

gration beyond the Carpathians: Tănase and Mare 2000; Opreanu 1998; Nemeth 2007.

70 Voir Sulimirski 1970, 142–182; Moshkova 1995a; Wegener 2010, 11–14, 39–49. For the changes in the second century AD in the northern Black Sea: Внуков 2007.

71 See Lebedynsky 2002, 73–131; cf. A. Simonenko 1994; Клеников 2002, (online [http://window.edu.ru/window\\_catalog/files/r25879/volsu463.pdf](http://window.edu.ru/window_catalog/files/r25879/volsu463.pdf), seen on 10 Nov. 2014).

72 See p. 114.

73 Despite the interest in the topic, especially in the West, the approach remains traditional and emphasizes the synthesis between historical and

The chronology of the Middle and Late Sarmatian cultures is also tricky: specialists would like to connect the Chipovo culture with the name of the Alans, but the Alans appear in the texts as early as the first century AD, when no significant changes are visible in the archaeological material of their area. On the other hand, no historical movement is attested by the texts from the second century AD that would justify the intrusion of the new, oriental, so-called Altaic elements observed in tombs: the percentage of “Mongoloid” populations, with deformed crania, seems higher than before. But the Greek and Roman authors do not say that these peoples were speakers of Iranian languages, nor that they have been assimilated into the Sarmatian *ethnos*: these new *facies* are simply ignored by the historical sources. The historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence agrees on the Alanic character of the settlements in the northern Caucasus and on the continuity of the Iranian presence in the Ossetian regions: quite frustrating when we consider the fame of the Alanic migrations!<sup>74</sup> Problems arise when modern scholars look so much to make order in the ethnography of the northern steppe that they even go against the literary evidence: in the case of the Alans, there have been attempts to connect them with new fighting techniques, particularly with the Sarmatian spear, while Tacitus explicitly associated these techniques with the Sarmatians – Rhoxolani.<sup>75</sup>

#### 2.4 The “Sarmatian” ethnogenesis: A national question

Despite their disappearance from the literary sources after the installation of the Huns in the Pannonian plain, the Sarmatians in general and the Alans in particular were tentatively seen as the ancestors of the Slavs, who came from the forested northern steppe to the Carpathic, Danubian, Pontic, and Aegean regions during the sixth and seventh centuries AD.<sup>76</sup> This assumption, which goes back to medieval times, is not supported by ancient first-hand testimonies; moreover, it is not consistent with the modern conviction that the Sarmatians were speakers of Iranian languages distinct from the Balto-Slavic family. In fact, this theory has other, more recent historical reasons. Beginning in the fifteenth century, when Ptolemy’s *Geography* and its map of central Europe gained enormous importance in the humanist studies devoted to the antiquities of the modern nations, Polish scholars looked for arguments that would prove the Sarmatian roots of the first and second Polish state and of the Polish commonwealth with Lithuania (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). Johannes Longinus (by his Polish name Jan Długosz), in his *Historia Polonica usque ad annum 1480*, seems to have been the first modern historian

archaeological data: Davis-Kimball 1997; Davis-Kimball 1997/1998; Davis-Kimball and Behan 2002; Lebedynsky 2009b; Mayor 2014; more specialized historical studies are published in Schubert and Weiß 2013.

74 See Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 1997; cf. Abramova 2005.

75 E.g., Tacitus *History* 1.79.

76 Curta 2001; cf. Kazanski 1999; Lebedynsky 2009b.

to claim a Sarmatian origin for the Polish people. He relied on the medieval tradition that had ascribed the northern edge of the known world to the Sarmatians, an understanding that was confirmed and reinforced by the so-called rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography*.<sup>77</sup> But the success of this theory during the following centuries – including today's excellence of Polish scholars in Sarmatian matters – can be explained in the context of the birth of national and later of nationalistic ideas. Among Longinus' followers, Matthias of Miechów (Maciej Miechowita) wrote the *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis* (Kraków 1517, with several later editions 1518, 1521; translations: Italian 1561, 1584; German 1518, 1534; Polish 1535, 1541, 1545), the first modern accurate description of central and eastern Europe and the work which made famous the thesis of the Sarmatian origin of the Polish aristocracy. A few decades later, Marcin Kromer gives further arguments in favor of this thesis in his *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum* (published in Basel in 1558), proclaiming that the Sarmatians came to Poland when the lands were free, after the departure of the Vandali and the Burgundians. *Polonia caput ac Regina totius Sarmatiae* became the justification of Polish expansion to the east and of the growing influence of the Polish state, confirmed by the victory of Jan III Sobieski at Vienna in 1683 against the Turks. At this moment, Sarmatianism was the ideology that characterized the lifestyle of the Polish nobility: a symbol of warrior power but also of purity of the race, the Sarmatians being generally described in the texts of late antiquity as blond, beautiful, and powerful, *bons sauvages* of the north.<sup>78</sup>

After the Enlightenment period, during which Sarmatianism was regarded as obsolete, the claim of Sarmatian origins came back into style during nineteenth-century Romanticism. While the development of Indo-European linguistics put an end to Polish speculation about the connections between the language of the Sarmatians and the Slavs, other ethnic groups began to claim prestigious Sarmatian origins for their ancestors: the Hungarians have always assumed the heritage of the Huns, but the Sarmatian tribe of the Iazyges was sometimes associated with the historical province of Jászság, "Province of the Jász."<sup>79</sup> More recently, nationalistic voices have put a stronger emphasis on the Sarmatian and Alan elements in the Hungarian language, history, and archaeology.<sup>80</sup>

77 See the inventory of sources in Ulewicz 1950; cf. Daiber 2013.

78 E.g., Claudianus, *De nuptis Honorii* 4.15; Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.21; but Tacitus finds them ugly: *Germania* 46.

79 This justifies the importance of the research on the "Sarmatians" in the Hungarian archaeology of the last century: e.g. Párduz 1941–1950; Mócsy 1972; Horváth 1989.

80 Cf. the scientific basis offered by the studies of Sköld 1925; Harmatta 1970. Despite their problematic methodology (based on the assumption that the identity expressed through an archaeological object matches the identity assigned to a community of the region by a Greek or Roman text), studies on hybridization on the edges of the Roman world can be useful in this context: e.g. U. Müller 1998; von Carnap-Bornheim 2003.

Balkan peoples also claimed Sarmatian heritage: by the end of the eighteenth century, Josip Mikoczy-Blumenthal had written a thesis on the Sarmatian origin of the Croatians.<sup>81</sup> More recently, Bulgarian historians have tried to prove that the Bulgarian migratory people were not of Turkic but Iranian origin.<sup>82</sup> Why should one consider that a Sarmatian origin was better than a Hunic, Slavic, or Turkic one? Seen from the Romanocentric perspective, all these peoples share a common reputation as barbarians; the archaeological discoveries clearly illustrate low standards of living for all these civilizations in comparison with the Mediterranean world. There are, however, several possible reasons for preferring a Sarmatian origin, determined exclusively by modern anthropological and geopolitical principles: the Sarmatians were often idealized as excellent warriors with healthy bodies and ethic behaviors. They have been attested in Europe since the Classical Greek era, and their potential offspring are supposed to have pretended anteriority and even autochthony at the moment of the arrival of the other migratory groups. Moreover, the region called “European Sarmatia” in Ptolemy’s *Geography* (and on the maps derived from its books and widespread since the Renaissance), corresponded to the modern territories of Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and all parts of the ancient Polish, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian empires, whose heritages are still disputed by the modern national states.

Without any doubt, such modern theories – just like the ancient reconstructions of migrations – teach us nothing about the historicity of the Sarmatians. They are neither higher nor lower than the opinions prevalent today, which combine various literary and archaeological data and accept hypotheses as firmly established facts in order to confer historical coherence on the Sarmatian migration from Asia to Europe. All of the combinations of literary and archaeological data so far have eventually failed: chronologies do not match, cultural factors (such as language, artifacts, or rituals) do not correspond to precise *ethne* identified by the Greeks and Romans. Migrations attested in literary sources have no echo in archaeological discoveries; migrations reconstructed on the basis of linguistic elements, ceramics or metal, and funerary practices find no clear correspondence in texts.

### 3 Conclusion: What is a Barbarian *ethnos*? How to look at migrations?

There is no clear linguistic, archaeological, or anthropological solution for the identification and comprehension of collective migratory flows in antiquity or modern times. Ethnicity is a social process, not a material fact. When textual sources attesting one’s

81 Mikoczy-Blumenthal 1797.

82 Рашев 1992.

self-proclaimed or assigned ethnicity are lacking, the historian must accept the limits of inquiry: the impossibility of reconstructing the history of a group. Moreover, the phenomena of group identification depends on cultural contexts. Greek *ethne* are not equivalent to our modern nations; as a matter of fact, the concept of *ethnos* is much more flexible than that of nation, and for Greek antiquity includes communities linked together on historical, geographical, political, social, or only cultural bases.<sup>83</sup> When we analyze the Greek and Roman discourses about remote *ethne*, we ignore most of the criteria used by the ancient authors and their sources for inclusion into an *ethnos*. Greek and Roman descriptions of the northern steppe are not objective reproductions of factual realities or reflections of these realities as constructed by the indigenous peoples, but mental projections of a remote, often inaccessible space known through oral and written traditions. Thus, these descriptions cannot be related to any precise spiritual or material cultures or to anthropological characters revealed by the archaeological explorations of the steppes; they must be studied and understood in themselves, as cultural products of the Greek and Roman societies – societies that received only certain echoes from the periphery of their known world. Even if the reliability of these echoes differed from one author to another, they all shared one common feature: they went through the filter of Greek and Roman historiographic and ethnographic tradition.<sup>84</sup>

The ancient and modern narratives about migratory groups must be seen as historiographical models that teach us more about the scientific and national context in which they were invented than about the ancient people to which they pretend to refer. New scientific analysis will add nothing to what we may know about Sarmatian ethnicity: like the anthropological measures and descriptions of cranial shapes a century ago, DNA and isotope analyses are useless in matters of ethnicity, since ethnicity is a social phenomenon and not a biological fact.<sup>85</sup> Even if modern genetics and physics can indicate individual or group migrations and reconstruct the natural conditions of past lives, the relationship between these scientific reconstructions and ethnicity cannot be a direct one. This has also been the case for the conclusions of the anthropological studies, which cannot be conciliated with the ancient ethnographic evidence or the archaeological cultures assigned to the Sarmatians. Some Sarmatians had, indeed, “Europoid” features, while others, living in the region of Volga, Ural, and Kazakhstan, had “Asiatic” faces: this is a factual reality without definite impact on ancient descriptions and narratives about the Sarmatians.

83 Cf. Fraser 2009.

84 Cf. K. E. Müller 1972–1980 For especially exemplary studies, see Malkin 2001; cf. Hall 1997.

85 This principle became a banality in the theoretical literature: Barth 1969; Horowitz 1985; Smith 1998 (1st ed. 1986); Fabietti 2002; Tullio-Altan 1995;

Spencer 2006. For antiquity and archaeology in particular, see Shennan 1989; S. Jones 1997; Cribb 1991; most recently, Malkin 2014 (cf. C. Müller 2014). Rare studies successfully apply this principle to historical situations, like Pohl and Reimitz 1998; Härke 2007.

Biological and anthropological studies can be used to observe the effects of the environment on humans, migrations and, eventually, family relationships, but they cannot determine an *ethnos* or its historical definitions or development. As in the case of geographical studies, one must make a critical distinction between two disciplines that can be considered together only after having understood the specificity of their object: earth and life sciences specialists can reconstruct paleoenvironments and habitats, while philologist and historians can give clues about what ancient peoples would have thought about spaces and peoples. As shocking as this conclusion may seem, the modern historian who would still uncritically mix ancient literary and archaeological data with ancient and modern theories deserves no more credit than a doctor who would try to conciliate the Aristotelian theory of humors with modern anatomical observations. Aristotle's system, like the ancient claims of ethnic identifications or migrations, deserves to be studied for its own sake; it cannot directly explain connections among data obtained through modern methods.

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