



Toxaris

Summary :

"Philosopher" and "foreign medical hero". He was born in Scythia in the 7th century B.C. He abandoned his people and family and died in Athens in the first half of the 6th century B.C. Because of his miracle-working role during the great plague of 429 BC he was honored as a hero.

Date and Place of Birth

Scythia-7th c. B.C.

Date and Place of Death

Athens-6th c. B.C.

Main Role

"Philosopher", "foreign medical hero"

1. Life and Work

The only occurrences of this name associated with a Scythian personage¹ appear in the Scythian fictional dialogues (*Scythia siue proxenus* and *Toxaris siue de amicitia*) of the 2nd century AD by the Syro-Hellenophone sophist [Lucian of Samosata](#). We discover (cf. *Scythia* 1) that "Anacharsis was not the first who arrived from Scythia to Athens induced by the passion of Greek culture: before him was Toxaris, a wise man, loving beauty, eager student of the best manners of living". In contrast to his much more famous compatriot of royal blood, Toxaris is said to belonged neither to a royal or an aristocratic house but to the Scythian class of the "eight-hoofed men"; this could reasonably be considered as Lucian's humorous invention² of an intermediary social class of those who possessed a wagon and two oxen, mutatis mutandis something like the Roman [equites](#).³

By the first decade of the 6th century BC, when [Anacharsis](#) arrived to Piraeus,⁴ Toxaris was already a "hellenized" character who was "dressed in the Greek fashion, bearing no beard, no sword or belt", and who by "his fluency of speech might have been an Athenian born; so completely had time changed him". A passion for Greece and residence in Solon's Athens was the only two common points between those two Scythians. Unlike Anacharsis, Toxaris abandoned his people and family permanently, never to return to Scythia and passed the rest of his life in Athens.⁵

His tomb, "not far from Dipylon, on your left as you leave Dipylon for the Academy", preserved on its funerary stele, until Lucian's times, the mark of his native identity in the figure "of a Scythian, with a bow, ready strung, in his left hand, and in the right what appeared to be a book". This strange relief (which would have been partly visible in Lucian's times), associated with an inscription (referred by the sophist as illegible), permitted the identification of the tomb and its transformation into a cult place for Toxaris, a "son of [Asclepius](#)", the "Foreign physician".

During the great plague (429 BC), a certain Deimainete, wife of Architeles the Areopagite,⁶ had seen Toxaris who "stood over that place and commanded her to tell the Athenians that the plague would cease if they would sprinkle their back-streets with wine". For the efficiency of his remedy, the Athenians were offering him every year the sacrifice of a white horse; and even if his tomb was not easily recognizable any more, the medical hero continued to cure the patients who were honoring his funerary stele with garlands.⁷

From a sophistic point of view, in Lucian's *Scythia*, Toxaris, the northern foreigner, perfectly integrated into the archaic Athenian society and was the ideal antithetic partner of Anacharsis, the famous barbarian wise man, always asking critical questions about Greek civilization. Toxaris became the cultural bridge between Anacharsis and Solon, the representative of the Athenian civilization, just like, in the final monologue of *Scythia*, the Macedonians are the bridge between the Syrian Lucian (comparing himself with Anacharsis) and his two influent patrons (one of them being explicitly compared to Solon).



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In the *Dialogue on Friendship*, the character named Toxaris is the symbol of the ideal barbarian, the "bon sauvage", excellent archer/soldier and orator, who honors the exploits of Orestes and Pylades and their friendship; the best friendship. The rhetoric competition for example, between five famous Greeks and five Scythians, concludes with the establishment of an (ideal) friendship and hospitality between the Greek and the Scythians.⁸

2. Interpretations

Astonished by these mentions of the "famous" Scythian, modern philologists have tried to identify Lucian's personage(s)⁹ with paronyms as Taxakis, the king mentioned by [Herodotus](#) (4.120) as one of the opponents of [Darius the Great](#), or with the archer Toxamis, represented on the François Vase.¹⁰ It is, however, preferable to consider this name as a *hapax legomenon*, an intellectual invention (probably to be attributed to Lucian),¹¹ issued from the idealizing "barbarian imaginary" of a 2nd century AD sophist, originally inspired by Herodotus' book 4,¹² and developed by a rich ethnographical literature of the Classical, Hellenistic and early Roman times. The loss of this literature and of the artistic works which could inspire Lucian's personage is a great obstacle for our historical comprehension of Toxaris.

This personal name derives from the Greek word "τόξον" (bow)¹³, the typical weapon of the barbarians and especially the [Scythians](#).¹⁴ Although the classical and post-classical Hellenic imagery perceived the bow as a non heroic weapon for men refusing direct, body to body combat,¹⁵ the ancient and mythical image of the bow as Apollo's and [Heracles](#)' weapon persisted over time. Therefore, Lucian's Toxaris would belong to the same category of idealized barbarian heroes as Abaris the Hyperborean/the Scythian, who has travelled on Apollo's arrow (Herodotus 4.36).¹⁶

Moreover, D. Braund's approach of Lucian's text and a 4th century BC pair of statues representing "kneeling archers, dressed after the manner of Scythians, sculpted with their bows at the ready and drawing arrows from their quivers",¹⁷ probably with an apotropaic function, are particularly interesting. In the 2nd century A.D., Lucian could have seen these statues, confusing their quiver with a codex case, and transposing their representation on a more archaic carving form, the funerary stele.

So, for all these literary and historical reasons, we prefer to consider *Scytha's* and *Toxaris'* Toxaris as one or two sophistic personages, invented by Lucian in conformity with the ideas and ideals of the intellectual circles of his time; an exceptional barbarian, in love with Greek culture, living in archaic Athens with Anacharsis and Solon, becoming himself (despite his barbarian origin) a Greek hero for his miracle-working role during the worse plague in ancient history.

1. An Amazon with this name is represented on Euphronios' fragmentary cup from Tarquinia (*LIMC* 1.1 [1981], cols. 586-653, n° 66, s.v. Amazones [P. Devambez, A. Kauffmann-Samaras]).

2. Otherwise, ancient Greek "Ὀκτώποδες" suits better a cephalopod or a crustaceous and only in Lucian's statement a human class.

3. Braund, D., "Scythians in the Cerameicus : Lucian's *Toxaris*", in C.J. Tuplin (ed.), *Pontus and the Outside World. Studies in the Black Sea History, Historiography, and Archaeology* (Leiden-Boston 2004) p. 17-23, correctly assumes that the low social status attributed to Toxaris "is explained in terms which bear no relation to extant Scythian ethnographies".

4. Kindstrand, J.F., *Anacharsis. The Legend and the Apophthegmata* (Uppsala 1981) p. 7.

5. For travel as a way to earn knowledge, see lately Montiglio, S., "Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece", *JHS* 120 (2000) p. 86-105.

6. Weber, L., "ὁ ξένος ἰατρός", *MDAI(A)* 46 (1921) p. 76-80 (especially p. 78).



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7. For the status of this hero among the Athenian heroes, see Kearns, E., *The Heroes of Attica* (London 1989) p. 189.
8. For commentary, see Jones, C., *Culture and Society in Lucian*, (Cambridge Mass. - London 1986) p 56-58, and lately Lizcano Rejano, S.M., "El 'Tóxaris' de Luciano de Samósata : un paradigma de la amistad dentre griegos y bárbaros", *Cuadernos de Filología clásica. Estudios griegos e indoeuropeos* 10 (2000) p. 229-252; for an interpretation as a parody, Pervo, R.I. , "With Lucian: Who Needs Friends? Friendship in the *Toxaris*", in J.T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship* (Atlanta 1997) p. 163-180. For the discussion concerning a possible relationship between one of the examples in Lucian and a (Scythian) novel, see Zimmermann, E., "Lucians Toxaris und das Kairener Romanfragment", *Philologische Wochenschrift* 55 (1935) p. 1211-1215 (with bibliography).
9. Some commentators consider that the two dialogues represent two different Toxaris and that only the personage from the *Scytha* dialogue deserves attention, as being the "medical hero".
10. Minto, L., *Il vaso François* (Firenze 1960) p. 35: "...Toxamis, rappresentato di profilo, inginocchiato, con il busto visto di dorso, mentre tiene con la sinistra l'arco proteso e, con la destra, sta per far scoccare il dardo. Ha il capo ricoperto dalla solita alopekis tracia; veste una exomis a corte maniche...". Against the identification of this personage with Lucian's characters, see (with bibliography), Ivantchik, A., "Who were the 'Scythian' Archers on Archaic Attic Vases?", *Vestnik drevnej istorii* 3 (2002) p. 33-55 (in Russian, with English summary, p. 45-46).
11. Gorrini, M.E., "Toxaris, ὁ ξένοϋ ἰατρός", *Athenaeum* 91.2 (2003) p. 435-443 : "Luciano ha sapientemente creato 'un tipo' di eroe salutare, ma se è inevitabile riconoscere la sua abilità di narratore... Nessuna fonte, letteraria o epigrafica, fa menzione di questo Toxaris al di fuori di lui". Also Braund, D., "Scythians in the Cerameicus : Lucian's *Toxaris*", in C.J. Tuplin (ed.), *Pontus and the Outside World. Studies in the Black Sea History, Historiography, and Archaeology* (Leiden-Boston 2004) p. 17-23.
12. Especially 4.70, for the Scythian oath, often represented in Scythian art.
13. See also Mayrhofer, M., *Einiges zu den Skythen, Ihrer Sprache, ihrem Nachleben* (Wien 2006) p. 19-20, following Schmitt, R., "Die skythischen Personennamen bei Herodot", *Annali, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"* 63 (2003) p. 1-31.
14. See Vos, M.F., *Scythian Archers in Archaic Attic Vase-Painting* (Gröningen 1963) whose connection between artistic representation of archers and a supposed Scythian presence in Athens in 530-490 B.C. was rightfully completely rejected; see lately Ivantchik, A., "Who were the 'Scythian' Archers on Archaic Attic Vases?", *Vestnik drevnej istorii* 3 (2002) p. 33-55, (in Russian, with English summary) and 4 (2002) p. 23-42, who denies all connection between real north Pontic Scythians and the Athenian vase representations.
15. Vidal-Naquet, P., *Le Chasseur noir* (Paris 1983) p. 193, quoting Dumézil, G., *Mythe et épopée I* (Paris 1968) p. 63-65; Reboreda Morillo, S., "L'arc et les flèches en Grèce : à la fin de l'Âge du bronze et au début de l'Âge du fer", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 22.2 (1996) p. 9-24.
16. *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques I*, p. 44-46, s.v. "Abaris l'Hyperboréen" (B. Centrone).
17. National Museum 823 and 824; see Bäbler, B., *Fleissige Thrakerinnen und wehrhafte Skythen. Nichtgriechen im klassischen Athen und ihre archäologische Hinterlassenschaft* (Stuttgart - Leipzig 1998) p. 174, and lately Scholl, A., "Der 'Perser' und die 'Skythischen Bogenschützen' aus dem Kerameikos", *Jdl, Athens* 115 (2000) p. 79-112.

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Glossary :

	equestrians, the (equites)
The lowest class of Roman aristocracy, whose economic wealth derived mainly from civil professions (bankers, publicans, merchants), yet without political privileges. The Roman Republican period was marked by their strives against the senators. The equestrians were were won over mainly by leaders who desired to promote a monarchic type of government pushing aside the Senate.	

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