



Aristeas of Proconnesus

Summary :

The poet and philosopher Aristeas was born in Proconnesus. The chronology of his life is uncertain. He probably lived in the 6th c. BC as the Suda lexicon informs us. The only poem associated with Aristeas is *Arimaspea*, divided into three books.

Date and Place of Birth

Proconnesus (Propontis/Sea of Marmara), 6th c. BC

Date and Place of Death

Proconnesus (Propontis/Sea of Marmara), 6th c. BC

Main Role

Poet, philosopher

1. Life, chronology and identification

Aristeas, son of Caÿstrobios or of Democharis,¹ was born in [Proconnesus](#) (or, if we follow G. Huxley, in Old Proconnesus [modern Halone])², one of the earliest Milesian foundations in the Propontis (the modern name, Sea of Marmara, is derived from its famous marble sources). The chronology of his life (if we agree that Aristeas was not an entirely fictional personality) is much debated: the name of his father, evoking the river Caÿster (modern Küçük Menderes, flowing near [Ephesus](#)), suggests that he was born or conceived in [Ionia](#); if he was among the first colonists in the Propontis (ca. 680 BC), Aristeas lived and composed his poem(s) in the 7th c. BC. This date is in accordance with the suggestion of [Herodotus](#):³ combining information obtained in Proconnesus, in [Cyzicus](#), and in Metapontion, the historian estimated an interval of 240 years⁴ (240: 40 = 6 generations, 240: 30 = 8 generations or, even more ingeniously, 7 generations and 7 years, considering 3 generations for one century)⁵ between the final disappearance of Aristeas at Proconnesus and his supernatural appearance (or Herodotus' own visit?)⁶ in southern Italy. We cannot be sure about the date of this revelation, because there is no other chronological clue either for the subsequent consultation of the Delphic oracle by the Metapontines, or for Apollo's altar and Aristeas' statue erected in the Agora of Metapontion, both mentioned in the Herodotean passage (and, in part, in Plin. *HN* 7.174).

1.1 Herodotus

As Herodotus probably visited Metapontion in the last part of his life, after his participation at the foundation of Thurioi (443 BC), certain scholars (in particular J.D.P. Bolton)⁷ place the activity of Aristeas between ca. 680-620 BC. Nevertheless, there is a strong possibility that Herodotus or other (Pythagorean) authorities of the 5th c. BC have composed a synthesis of two different persons:⁸ one was Aristeas, the epic poet who proclaimed in his verses that Apollo bestowed upon him an extraordinary knowledge, transporting him to the fringes of the world, next to the sacred Hyperboreans; the second was an envoy of the god, who established (anew?) the Apollonian (possibly Hyperborean) cult at Metapontion, the city which was certainly proud to be "honoured alone of the Italiotes with Apollo's presence", in the words of Herodotus. This was maybe Aristaios (a name that can easily be confused with "Aristeas"), son of Apollo and Cyrene, connected with the founding of colonies (in particular with one in Libya), thus presumably honoured as a heroic founder even in Southern Italy.⁹

He could also be Aristaios, son of Damophon, of Croton,¹⁰ a disciple of Pythagoras (Iamb. *VP* 23.104; 36.265) or an even more mysterious Pythagorean, Aristeas of Metapontion (Iamb. *VP* 36.267): the biographical traditions concerning the Pythagorean School are much too complicated to be explained here, especially with regard to a problem which seems unsolvable.

We must maintain that the possible synthesis between the epic poet and a hero of the Pythagorean city or a Pythagorean figure, under



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the auspices of Hyperborean Apollo, appeared before Herodotus. In the Hellenistic period, in connection with other Pythagorean figures (Abaris and Zalmoxis, to mention only the Scythians/Hyperboreans)¹¹ the story of Aristeas became more complex (e.g. by adding to his later Sicilian contacts, Apollon. *Mir.* 2) but also clearer (e.g. with supplementary explanations about the metaphysical side of his travel to the fringes of the world, Plin. *HN* 7.174, Max. Tyr. 10.2, 38.3c-f, and Suda, s.v.).¹²

1.2 Strabo

Thus, if the Herodotean 7th c. B.C. date is to be rejected, two other later testimonies need to be discussed: the Stoic historian/geographer Strabo of Amaseia, arguing about the similarity in physiognomy between the Arimaspians and the Cyclopes (1.2.10), holds that Aristeas, according to some, is the teacher of Homer (14.1.18), in a series of early poets like Orpheus. Tatianus (*Orations to the Greeks* 41) and Eusebios of Caesarea (*PE* 10.11.27) followed a similar tradition, perhaps inspired by the work of Heraclides Ponticus on early Pythagoreans. This is, of course, to be excluded because of the comparatively late foundation date of Proconnesus.

1.3 Suda

Closer to a possible historical truth, the Byzantine author of the Suda (s.v. *Aristeas*) proposes the 6th c. B.C., under the flourishing reign of Croesus and Cyrus (or, as it was ingeniously proposed by E. Rohde, at the end of the 19th c.,¹³ when Cyrus defeated Croesus and conquered the Lydian capital, Sardis), in the fifty-eighth Olympiad (548/545 BC).¹⁴ This lower date was defended, among others, by E. Bethe¹⁵ and W. Burkert.¹⁶ However, A. Ivantchik has argued lately for an even later date:¹⁷ the Russian scholar took as *terminus ante quem* the (possible) mention of Aristeas by Pindar (*apud* Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.26) and the (eventual) allusion of Xenophanes to one of his verses, of Homeric inspiration (fr. 3, 5 Gentili-Prato *apud* Athenaios, *The Deipnosophists* 12.526a), which he dated before 470 BC.

At the same time, Ivantchik rightly rejected the assumption that Aristeas must be earlier than Alcman, who knew of the Issedones in the 7th c. BC: of Lydian origin, the poet learnt about the existence of this people from other sources (in and through other languages), as he was also aware of other elements of Scythian folklore (e.g. Kolaxaios).¹⁸ The *terminus ante quem* of the Kelermes' mirror (575 BC according to J.D.P. Bolton, more probably about 650 B.C. considering the results of new archaeological excavations recorded by Ivantchik), with its decoration considered as inspired by Aristeas, must also be rejected: nothing indicates that Aristeas was the first and only to know about certain north-eastern mythical creatures which could have inspired artists through other literary creations (not necessarily Greek) in this remote north-Caucasian region.¹⁹ However, pace Ivantchik, the detailed philological analysis of the extant fragments attributed to Aristeas' *Arimaspea* could not, in our opinion, assign a precise date to the poem: innumerable works on orality and oral poetics have shown that the epic language cannot be associated with specific authors, nor attributed to specific dates and, in the final analysis, nor identified with pure orality. The absence of regular and accurate written records of such "archaic" Greek works suggests that any attempt to date (archaic) verses exclusively on a linguistic basis should be exercised with utmost caution, especially when dealing with fragments of ambiguous authenticity.

1.4 Conclusion

Thus, even if we cannot explain why the Suda has associated Aristeas chronologically with the fall of Sardis, we have no definitive argument to reject this statement; for now, we consider that Aristeas of Proconnesos, author of *Arimaspea*, belonged to the same series of ambiguous literary/mythical/religious figures of the 6th c. BC, as Pythagoras, Zalmoxis, Epimenides, and especially Abaris.

2. Work

With the exception of the *Theogony* mentioned by the Suda, entirely lost probably already in antiquity and generally considered as apocryphal by modern scholars, the only poem connected with the Proconnesian is *Arimaspea* (Ἀριμασπέα): divided in three books (Suda, s.v.) in Hellenistic times, this poem in hexameters is mentioned as still in existence in the 2nd c. AD (Gell. *Attic Nights* 9.4.1-



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4, if we reject J.D.P. Bolton's exaggerated scepticism); two (probably original) excerpts are still preserved, the first in the anonymous treaty *On the Sublime* (10.4), the second in the 12th century *Chiliades* of Tzetzes (7.676-679; 686-692). The indirect tradition inspired by the original *Arimaspea* (known directly - in its entirety or in fragments - but especially indirectly, through the Pythagoreans, perhaps even through the works of Heraclitus Ponticus) suggests that the poems narrated the story of Aristeas who, possessed by Apollo (“Φοιβόλαμπτος γενόμενος”), reached the Issedonians, a righteous, north oriental people living beyond the Black Sea, between the known Scythians and the mysterious one-eyed [Arimasps](#), who were fighting the Griffins, guardians of gold and neighbours of the Hyperboreans.²⁰ Thus, Aristeas' travel from a literary point of view could be compared with the mythical voyages of [Apollo](#) to and from the Hyperboreans, with the advent in Mediterranean regions of Abaris the Hyperborean and of Hyperborean virgins, mentioned by Herodotus as bringing offerings to the Greek god, and, finally, with the descent to the south of Pythagoras as Apollo Hyperboreus.

Aristeas never visited the Arimasps, but knew about them through the stories of the Issedonians who, pushed by the Arimasps, pushed consequently the Scythians and, through them, the Cimmerians, toward western lands, in the Pontic area. In any case, this is the context of Herodotus' digression about Aristeas and about the information he could get on the poet in Proconnesus, Cyzicus and Metapontion (4.13). If the quasi-historical and mythological reconstruction of migrations in the northeastern part of the world derives from Aristeas, from another Herodotean source or from Herodotus himself, it is quite impossible to say. Looking beyond the rationalising tone of such a poem in Herodotus, we could say, siding with S. West,²¹ that “it is probably fairer to envisage a poetic periegesis in which Apollo validated information drawn from a variety of sources, this heterogeneous material being unified by a visionary framework”. The Pontic and Near-eastern peregrinations of Io, beloved of Zeus and metamorphosed into a cow, in Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, could be inspired from Aristeas' *Arimaspea* (book I?), and can give us an idea of Aristeas' literary voyage to the NE, through Pontic and Asiatic wild regions.²² Passages of [Hecataeus of Miletus](#) (1F193, 194, etc.), the first author of a universal *periegesis*, at the end of the 6th c., could equally be related in same way with the poem of Aristeas, as were the works of Pindar, Damastes and Herodotus himself in the 5th c. BC.

Nevertheless, it was the battle of the one-eyed Arimasps (“numerous and very doughty warriors, rich in horses and possessing many flocks and many herds of cattle”, apud Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7.680 sq.) with their neighbours, the Griffins, from whom the former snatched the guarded gold produced by the earth, which attracted the attention of the ancient writers (Strabo 1.2.10, Pliny the Elder 7.10, [Pausanias](#) 1.24.6); from Aristeas or from other written and oral compositions (Greek or Iranian). The same battle inspired over the centuries innumerable vase paintings, terracotta reliefs, mosaics, and gems.²³ Modern scholars have seen in this mythical scene a variation of another well known oriental motif, also present in Herodotus (Herodotus 3.102): the gold-guarding ants, attested in Persian and later in Indian contexts (Megasthenes fr. 29, 39, 39b Müller).

3. Interpretation

3.1. The religious view

The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c. viewed Aristeas as a shaman who, like the original Siberian shamans, had the power and the knowledge of seeing the world from the sky, through his eyed spirit which was detached from his body. After Meuli, Dodds and Eliade's work,²⁴ more recent scholars endeavoured to consider Aristeas rather as a Mediterranean seer, a Greek ecstatic figure comparable but not identical with a shaman.²⁵

3.2. The historical view

J.D.P. Bolton was the first to reject this religious interpretation and to propose, instead of a Greek shaman of the 6th c. BC, a Greek traveller of the 7th c. BC, who would have narrated in his poem a real journey in Mongolia, following the Tanais and the Volga, through the territories of the Maeotians and [Sauromatae](#), in direction of the Dzungarian Gate (for him, the home of Boreas and thus limit of the land of the Hyperboreans). Recently, A. Alemany i Vilamajó has gone further and related the Cimmerian-Scythian migrations (to which Aristeas could be alluding) with the “rise of nomadic horsemanship in the Asiatic steppe”, at the downfall of the



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Chinese Western Zhou dynasty, after the storm of the Xianyun invasions attested in the Chinese Book of the *Odes*.²⁶

3.3. The literary view

Finally, S. West²⁷ has strongly (and, in our opinion, rightly) argued for a literary interpretation of Aristeas' voyage, continuing the tradition of the *Odyssey* and of the Argonautic myths/epics and prefiguring the genre of the utopian travel narrative.

In conclusion, we will say that even if a travel to Central Asiatic regions was not impossible in archaic times, this travel is only an unnecessary hypothesis for explaining Aristeas' *Arimaspea*. This hexametric poem, written in the language of the archaic Greek epic, belongs to a rich poetic tradition in which the knowledge comes from a divinity (in this case through the "possession" of Apollo), through imaginative travels at the fringes of the world which allow the poet to make a important synthesis of geographic, historic and mythic elements. The interest of the Pythagoreans in Aristeas has transformed his literary experience into a philosophical one, which might be compared, in other times, with Philostratus' (about [Apollonius of Tyana](#)) or with Antoninus Diogenes' fictional voyages.

1. Suda, s.v. Ἀριστέας (and Eudocia *Violarium* 157); Herodotus (4.13) mentions only the name of Caÿstrobios (as Tzetzes *Chiliades* 7.679).
2. Huxley, G., "Aristeas and the Cyzicene", *GRBS* 27.2 (1986) p. 151-155; for the presentation of the city, see also A. Avram, "Proconnesus", in M.H. Hansen, Th.H. Nielsen (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* no. 759 (Oxford 2004) p. 993-994.
3. Hdt. 4.14-15.
4. This is the variant attested by the best manuscripts and by the indirect tradition (e.g. Origen *Against Celsum* 3.26; Tzetzes *Chiliades* 2.733); the "340" value, given by several inferior manuscripts of Herodotus, is now generally rejected, as being too early for the foundation of Proconnesos.
5. West, S., "Herodotus on Aristeas", in C.J. Tuplin (ed.) *Pontus and the Outside World. Studies in Black Sea History, Historiography, and Archaeology* (Leiden-Boston 2004) p. 52, who indicates (with bibliography) the importance of the number 7 in Apollonian religious practices. This implies that we do not necessary seek here a foreign source of information, as Herodotus' own chronological system (2.142) preferred 3 generations for one hundred years (33 1/3 years/generation) to 30-year generations.
6. This was E. Schwyzer's ingenious emendation (*PhilWoch* [1922] col. 528, s.v. Herodotea) of the Herodotean text (4.15): the traditional form indicating Aristeas' arrival at Metapontion (συγκυρήσαντα) was replaced by "συγκυρήσας", corresponding to Herodotus' arrival. This was generally rejected, in particular by Bolton, J.D.P., *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford 1962) p. 130-131, and by West, S., "Herodotus on Aristeas", in C.J. Tuplin (ed.) *Pontus and the Outside World. Studies in Black Sea History, Historiography, and Archaeology* (Leiden-Boston 2004) p. 46 n. 11; it was accepted (in our opinion on good reasons) by A. Ivantchik, "La Datation du poème l'Arimaspee d'Aristéas de Proconnèse", *AntCl* 62 (1993) p. 35-67 (p. 60).
7. But also Phillips, E.D., "The Legend of Aristeas: Fact and Fancy in Early Greek Notions of East Russia, Siberia, and Inner Asia", *Artibus Asiae* 18.2 (1955) p. 161-177 (p. 163); Bowra, C.M., "A Fragment of the Arimaspea", *CQ* n.s. 6.1/2 (1956) p. 1-10 (p. 1, n. 2); Forrest, W.G., in his review on J.D.P. Bolton, *JHS* 84 (1964) p. 208-209; Dowden, K., "Deux notes sur les Scythes et les Arimaspes", *REG* 93 (1980) p. 486-492; Huxley, G., "Aristeas and the Cyzicene", *GRBS* 27.2 (1986) p. 151-155.
8. As it has been argued recently (with bibliography) by Ivantchik, A., "La Datation du poème l'Arimaspee d'Aristéas de Proconnèse", *AntCl* 62 (1993) p. 35-67 (p. 60).
9. *RE* 2.1 (1896) col. 852-859, s.v. Aristaios 1 (H. von Gärtringen).
10. *RE* 2.1 (1896) col. 859, s.v. Aristaios 7 (E. Wellmann).
11. Clem. Alex. *Stromata* 1.21 and Proclus *In Plat.* 2.113, explicitly associate them with Epimenides of Creta, Hermotimos of Clazomene, etc. For all



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	Arimaspées et Aristéas de Proconnèse
http://bcs.fltr.ucl.ac.be/FE/11/Aristeas.pdf	

Quotations

1. Anonymous poem inspired by Aristeas' *Arimaspea*.

θαῦμ' ἡμῖν και τοῦτο μέγα φρεσίν ἡμετέρησιν.
ἄνδρες ὕδωρ ναίουσιν ἀπό χθονός ἐν πελάγεσσι



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δύστηνοί τινές εισιν, ἔχουσι γάρ ἔργα πονηρά
ὄμματ' ἐν ἄστροισι, ψυχὴν δ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ ἔχουσιν.
ἢ που πολλά θεοῖσι φίλας ἀνά χειρᾶς ἔχοντες
εὐχονται σπλάγχνοισι κακῶς ἀναβαλλομένοισι.

Ps. Longinus, *On the Sublime* 10.4

2. Extract from a 12th c. poem by Tzetzes.

Ἴσσηδοὶ χαίτησιν ἀγαλλόμενοι ταναῆσι
καὶ σφᾶς ἀνθρώπους εἶναι καθυπερθέν
όμοῦρους
πρὸς Βορέω, πολλοὺς τε καὶ ἐσθλοὺς κάρτα
μαχητάς,
ἀφνειοὺς ἵπποισι, πολύρρηνας, πολυβούτας.
Ὀφθαλμόν δ' ἐν ἑκάστος ἔχει χαρίεντι μετώπῳ,
χαίτησι λάσιοι, πάντων στιβαρώτατοι ἀνδρῶν.

Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7.679-684

3. Extract from Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* inspired by Aristeas' *Arimaspean*.

As when a gryphon through the wilderness
Pursues the Arimaspean, who by stealth
Had from his wakeful custody purloined
The guarded gold.

J. Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2.943-947.