

THE ROLE OF THE HYPERBOREANS

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I will begin by summarising the conclusion reached by L. about the Hyperboreans, and then review the steps that have led him to this conclusion. For L. the historical reality that gives rise to the creation of this mythical people is found in the Pelasgians of Dodona, specifically in their religious beliefs and practices, which L. comes to define as ‘mysticism pélasgique’ (p. 106). The relationship established between Dodona and Delos, through the periodical arrival of sacred objects from Dodona, came to be understood as a shipment of an idealised people that, according to L., would have been considered ‘hyper-mortals’, since the author accepts the etymology of Hyperborean not as ‘beyond the Boreas’ (that is, of a distant north), but as a compound of ὑπέρ and *μῆρο -τός, from *μῆρο -τός, with full vocalism, that is, ‘super-mortals’ (although L. acknowledges that the epenthetic -β- implies a problem). That is, the Hyperboreans were ‘les hommes, idéalisés, d’un passé où l’on aurait vécu dans une sorte de paradis terrestre’ (p. 103), but the starting point of this idealisation would be in the Pelasgians of Dodona.

The steps taken by L. to reach this conclusion begin with a review of the various etymologies that the ancients provided for the name of the Hyperboreans (pp. 8–14). He then analyses the various testimonies about these people, through a complete review of the literary mentions, from early epic poetry to Virgil (pp. 14–58), in which the main characteristics, concordances and discrepancies are underlined, with special attention to the references to the Delian route and the nature of the offerings transported to the island. Next, L. comments on the mentions that correspond to the Hyperboreans cited by the sources with proper names and with references to their specific role (pp. 59–81), with special attention to the Hyperborean/Delian young women, such as Arge and Opis, Hyperoche and Laodice or Arge, Hekaerge and Loxo. Here we find a detailed analysis of all the variants, with various hypotheses about these stories, which concludes with a proposal about the connection of these female characters with Delos. Then L. comments on archaeological data (pp. 81–3), limited to the island of Delos and the alleged location of the remains of Hyperborean virgins. According to L., the Opis/Oupis cult would reflect the cult of an old deity. To support L.’s thesis noted at the beginning of this review, the next two sections are essential. The first summarises the data that L. qualifies as historical (pp. 83–93) and refers to Hyperborean offerings. Mystery surrounds the nature of these sacred objects, which reached the island wrapped in straw, but whose nature was not revealed. They were transported by the so-called *Perpherees*, they are described as first fruits, but we do not know exactly what they consisted of. For L. the hypothesis that the offerings were wheat and amber, which some have proposed, must be excluded. L. suggests that we could be facing a rite of fertility in which small phallic statues could have played a role, a proposal based substantially on the Pindaric passage (*Pyth.* 1.36) in which the sacrifice of donkeys and its excitement is mentioned. On the other hand, L. summarises the data on the route followed for the offerings, in which Dodona’s mention stands out as the first Greek territory reached from the Hyperboreans (although it is not the only version). The other key section of the book regards the route of movement and the nature of the Hyperboreans, entitled ‘De Dodone à Délos (et retour)’ (pp. 93–7). According to L., the Pelasgians of Dodona decided to establish ties with Delos, due to the fact that both places shared a religion with similar features. L. believes that

'un même archaïsme semble en effet avoir caractérisé la religion de Délos et celle de Dodone' (p. 94); so we would be facing an example of how the 'antique religion préhellénique' (p. 95) had a paradoxical temporal extension. For L. Hyperborean processions, accompanied by songs, dance and music of various instruments, point to the 'plus vieille religion grecque' (p. 96). Finally, L. summarises what, from his point of view, we must understand when our sources talk about Hyperboreans. L. makes it clear that there was never a country that could be called Hyperborean and that we are facing a way of talking about a people conceived as extraordinary, to whom different localisations were given. L. emphasises that Dodona is the place mentioned as the location of the Hyperboreans of Thesprotia. Dodona would have been the dwelling-place of the Pelasgians and also of the Hyperboreans, yet understood as a way of mentioning the predecessors of the second millennium, 'où la population de la vieille Grèce dut côtoyer ce ceux que nous appelons les Indo-Européens ou subir leur domination, avant de connaître l'influence des Minoens et de quelques autres' (p. 101). To summarise, the Hyperboreans would embody the oldest religious tradition – maintained by the Pelasgians – that would have found its specific materialisation in Dodona (and Delos). These arguments support L.'s conclusion (pp. 105–12) summarised at the beginning.

This study demonstrates a notable effort of harmonisation of the diverse (and sometimes contradictory) information that is transmitted to us in the ancient sources. However, despite the effort to give historicity to the Hyperboreans, the methodology used for this aim has some weak points that creates problems for accepting the proposed solution.

To begin with, a Dodone–Delos relationship should be assigned to a very early date, prior to the arrival of Indo-Europeans and, in any case, prior to the expansion of Mycenaean culture (surprisingly, there seems to be some confusion in the study between Minoans and Mycenaeans and their relative chronology). The oldest archaeological remains of Dodona and, above all, of Delos, point to Mycenaean culture. The fact that ancient poetic testimonies relate Dodona with the Pelasgians is not a sufficient basis to see in the ritual practices of this territory (or of Delos) a recovery of 'barbaric' practices (cf. p. 111). Specific references to the alleged older religion are lacking. In particular, the use of adequate archaeological information regarding Dodona is missed. As for Delos, the alleged connection with a pre-Greek religious stratum of a cult of a goddess (which thereafter would be Opis/Oupis) collapses with the problem of the dating of the *theke* and other findings, dated to Mycenaean time. Finally, the proposal of a fertility cult based on the Pindaric testimony is unacceptable. In my opinion, the data and references provided by L. do not justify the hypothesis that the alleged oldest Greek religious tradition had been integrated 'dans une famille divine considérablement élargie par la superposition d'une tradition indo-européenne et d'une autre, minoenne, à celle des plus anciens habitants du pays – les Pélasges –, sans oublier l'influence de l'Orient' (p. 81). On the other hand, and taking into account the title of the book, it is important to underline that there is no clear literary reference to the Hyperboreans before the seventh century BCE and that the relationship with Apollo was well consolidated in an early period. The role of Delphi must be taken into account; it would have deserved a more detailed reference than that given on p. 95: for instance, there is no mention of the winter stay of Apollo among the Hyperboreans.

L.'s synthesis and explanation of the literary sources is accurate and useful, but the hypothesis about the nature of the Hyperboreans regarding Dodona and Delos is far from convincing.

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