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Non-Eratosthenic Astral Myths in the *Catasterisms*

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Abstract Two astral myths are studied in order to show that a catasterismic tradition ran parallel to the Eratosthenic one in Antiquity. Eratosthenes absorbed these interpretations into his mythographical handbook by cancelling those elements that contained a religious or a philosophical significance.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The *Ursae* and the ‘hands of Rhea’. – 3 Orpheus, Apollo, Dionysus, and the Sun.

Keywords Eratosthenes. Castasterism. Pythagoreanism. Astral Mythology.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I shall address a particular, even marginal, aspect of astral mythology. Eratosthenes’ *Catasterisms* have long been instrumental in defining and interpreting astral lore concerning constellations. I myself have emphasized the role played by Eratosthenes of Cyrene in the shaping of this peculiar subgenre of mythography. In my view, catasterismic accounts are a literary product that needs to be explained within the history of Greek literature. Although a few catasterisms are attested well before the Hellenistic Age, Eratosthenes is credited with producing a majority of them. To do so, Eratosthenes drew on a number of accounts from the Greek mythical heritage, to which he appended an astral dénouement. I have struggled to prove that Eratosthenes’ handbook has to be seen as an intertextual crossroads typical for its place of production – the Library of Alexandria.¹ As stated in the introduction of our Budé edition of the *Catastérismes*, written together with Arnaud Zucker,

le récit de métamorphose que nous connaissons sous le nom de catastérisme, ne s’inscrit pas dans une tradition de type religieux ou culturel et constitue simplement l’aboutissement d’une tradition littéraire. (Pàmias, Zucker, 2013, xcv)

¹ See, in this regard, Pàmias 2014.

By the same token, it can be assumed that interpretations of Eratosthenic myths based on allegorical or symbolic readings of the *Catasterisms* are not germane to the pragmatic and raw presentation of these mythical accounts. The influence of the Eratosthenic tradition – as it is to be found in Hyginus’ *Astronomia*, for instance – has pervaded so intensively the reception of Greek astral mythology that it has obscured other traditions dealing with the same subject.

It is my contention that these traditions run parallel to, and independent from, the Eratosthenic one. But they may also eventually cross with it. In that case, it would seem that Eratosthenes has absorbed these interpretations into his literary artifact by filtering out those elements that contain a religious or a philosophical significance. Accordingly, Eratosthenes normally points to external authorities when referring to these traditions. I will focus on two episodes.

2 The *Ursae* and the ‘hands of Rhea’

As I will argue, one of these ancient traditions is the Pythagorean one. Under the type of the so-called *akoúsmata* or *symbola* ‘oral sayings’ fall some Pythagorean identifications of constellations with mythical figures:

ἔλεγε δέ τινα καὶ μυστικῶ τρόπῳ συμβολικῶς, ἃ δὴ ἐπὶ πλέον Ἀριστοτέλης ἀνέγραψεν· οἷον ὅτι τὴν θάλατταν μὲν ἐκάλει εἶναι δάκρυον, τὰς δ’ ἄρκτους Ῥέας χεῖρας, τὴν δὲ πλειάδα μουσῶν λύραν, τοὺς δὲ πλανήτας κύνας τῆς Φερσεφόνης (Arist. fr. 159 Gigon = Porph. VP 41)

But he [Pythagoras, sc.] also said certain things in a mysterious way symbolically, which Aristotle has recorded in greater detail. For instance, he called the sea “the tears [of Kronos]”, and [the constellations] *Ursae* [Major and Minor] he called “the hands of Rhea”, the Pleiades “the Muses’ lyre”, and the planets “Persephone’s dogs”.

Oral sayings or *akoúsmata*, also known as *symbola*, are the oldest forms of transmission of Pythagoras’ doctrines. As long as these orally transmitted maxims follow the question-answer mode (for instance, “what are the tears of Kronos? The sea. What are Rhea’s hands? *Ursae* Major and Minor”), they look like early forms of allegories. They decode the true, real meaning in a (figurative) mythical mode of expression.² I shall address the second of these interpretations – the *Ursae* being identified with the hands of Rhea – as it can be taken as a particular primitive form of a *catasterismic*

2 See Riedweg 2005, 74. On Pythagorean *akoúsmata*, see Burkert 1972, 166-92.

myth that, as it would appear at first sight, has not found a place within the Eratosthenic collection.

To start with, this interpretation does not remain isolated within the boundaries of Pythagorean religious secrecy. Like other contemporary σοφοί, Pythagoras collected sayings and precepts from diverse sources, which were subsequently reworked and adapted.³ The Pythagorean ‘hands of Rhea’ can be put in relation to a Cretan tradition (κρητικὸς μῦθος) that accounted for Zeus infant being nourished in Crete by two nurses whom the god transformed into bears in order to conceal them from Cronus. As long as the nurses took care of Zeus, they can be seen as replacing Zeus’ mother and hence the bears can be described symbolically (or mystically, as Aristotle would put it) as her hands.

Let us examine the textual evidence for this Cretan myth. We can reconstruct it from late and marginal literature of scholiographic nature. One of these testimonia is to be found in a Marcianus manuscript of Aratus:

Ι) ὁ γὰρ ἀρκτικὸς κύκλος περιέχει τὰς Ἄρκτους καὶ τὸν Δράκοντα, περὶ ὧν φέρεται ἱστορία ἥδε· τὸν Δία ἐν Κρήτῃ τεχθέντα δύο νύμφαι ἐκεῖσε ἀνέτρεφον. καὶ ἡ μὲν Ἑλίκη ὠνομάζετο, ἡ δὲ Κυνόσουρα. Κρόνου δὲ ἐπελθόντος ποτὲ ὁ Ζεὺς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ πατέρα παραλογισάμενος τὰς μὲν νύμφας μετέβαλεν εἰς ἄρκτους, αὐτὸς δὲ εἰς δράκοντα μετεβλήθη. εἶτα τῆς βασιλείας ἀντιλαβόμενος τὸ σχῆμα ἀνεστήριξε, φημὶ δὴ τὰς νύμφας καὶ ἑαυτόν. (Sch. Arat. [*Excerpta Varia*], 543-4 Martin)⁴

The Arctic Circle contains the constellations of Ursae and Draco. Their story runs as follows. When Zeus was born in Crete, two nymphs attended him there. One of them was called Helike; the other, Kynosoura. But when Cronus came suddenly upon him, Zeus transformed the nymphs into bears, in order to delude his father. And he transformed himself into a snake. Later on, when he came to power, he set up their figure in the sky, i.e., the two nurses and himself.

The story, with some variants, is also attested by other supplementary texts belonging to the Aratean corpus, that is to say, those auxiliary texts that were transmitted along with the *Phaenomena* as part of the exegetic material that facilitated the reading of this poem from the Hellenistic age onwards:

3 Cf. Thom 2013, 97-98.

4 This text (preserved by the manuscripts *Marcianus* gr. 476, *Matritensis* 4629, *Vaticanus* gr. 1910, *Parisinus* gr. 2403, and *Estensis* α.T.9.14) has also reached the tradition of the Homeric scholia (cf. Sch. Hom. *Od.* 5.273, 79 ed. Pontani), as Filippomaria Pontani points to me. Cf. Sch. Arat. [*Prolegomena*], 30 Martin (from the *Parisinus* Suppl. gr. 607a).

II) φέρεται δὲ περὶ τοῦ Δράκοντος κρητικὸς μῦθος· ἐπιόντος ποτὲ τοῦ Κρόνου, ὁ Ζεὺς εὐλαβηθεὶς ἑαυτὸν μὲν εἰς δράκοντα μετεμόρφωσε, τὰς δὲ τροφούς εἰς ἄρκτους, καὶ ἀπατήσας τὸν πατέρα, μετὰ τὸ παραλαβεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν, τὸ συμβὰν ἑαυτῷ τε καὶ ταῖς τροφοῖς τῷ ἀρκτικῷ ἐνεστήριξε κύκλῳ (Sch. Arat. 46 [MQDΔKVUA], 92 Martin)

III) φασὶν ὅτι ὁ Ζεὺς ἐν Κρήτῃ τιθηνούμενος, εἶτα φοβηθεὶς τὸν Κρόνον μετεσηματίσθη αὐτὸς μὲν εἰς δράκοντα, τὰς δὲ μαῖας μετεποίησεν εἰς ἄρκτους. (Sch. Arat. 46 [Vat. gr. 1087], 93 Martin)

This mythical chapter has aroused some controversy over its origins. According to some scholars, this story goes back to Epimenides' Κρητικά (fr. 36 Bernabé = FVS 3B23). It was Ernst Maass who attributed the κρητικὸς μῦθος of the Aratean scholium (cf. text II) to Epimenides of Crete. This attribution has found the support of Diels, Gundel, and Colli. Also Fowler considers this ascription "non sine specie veri".⁵ The story was also developed by Aratus in his *Phaenomena*.

Εἰ ἐτεδὸν δῆ,
 Κρήτηθεν κεῖναί γε Διὸς μεγάλου ἰότητι
 οὐρανὸν εἰσανέβησαν, ὃ μιν τότε κουρίζοντα
 Λύκτῳ ἐν εὐώδει, ὄρεος σχεδὸν Ἰδαίῳ,
 ἄντρῳ ἔνι κατέθεντο καὶ ἔτρεφον εἰς ἐνιαυτόν,
 Δικταῖοι Κούρητες ὅτε Κρόνον ἐψεύδοντο.
 (30-35 Epimenid. fr. 49 Bernabé = FVS 3B22).

If the tale is true, these Bears ascended to the sky from Crete by the will of great Zeus, because when he was a child then in fragrant Lyctus near Mount Ida, they deposited him in a cave and tended him for a year, while the Curetes of Dicte kept Cronus deceived. (Trans. by Kidd 1997)

On the other hand, the Aratean scholar Jean Martin argues that this 'Cre-tan' myth is nothing else than a late elaboration based on a misconception of the Aratean lines just quoted. In other words, the catasterismic myth of Zeus being turned into a snake, and his nurses into bears, was assembled to complete the *Phaenomena*, which does mention the catasterism of the two Bears but not the *aition* for the constellation Dragon.⁶

5 Maass 1892, 342; Gundel (1912, 2858) assumes that "Epimenides hat zuerst den kretischen Mythos von der Ernährung des Zeus durch die Nymphen H[elike] und Kynosoura mit dem großen und kleinen Bären in Verbindung gebracht"; Colli 1978, 270; Fowler 2000, 101.

6 Cf. Martin 1998, 162-66. See also Schwabl 1978, 1212.

However, the emphasis of ἔτεόν with δή, immediately followed by Κρήτηθεν in Aratus' line 31, may well point to Epimenides' well known motto Κρήτες ἀεὶ ψεύσται (fr. 41 Bernabé = Call. *Iou.* 8).⁷ Besides, it is not altogether unreasonable to find a bear nurturing Zeus infant. Other animals took care of him according to diverse traditions (a goat, a pig, a bitch, a bee).⁸ And ancient writers emphasize the strong maternal instincts of mother bears.⁹ Since Bachofen, at least, we are well aware of the strong conceptual link connecting bear and motherhood.¹⁰ All this encourages not to reject the antiquity and originality of this myth. Rather, there is a strong possibility that, in fact, this story goes back to Epimenides and hence to a Pythagorean tradition, as stated before.

Indeed, in ancient literature Pythagoras is often found in connection with the purification priest Epimenides, in whose company Pythagoras is supposed to have descended into the cave on Mount Ida in Crete.¹¹ Ancient (secondary) sources identify Epimenides as a pupil or the teacher of Pythagoras.¹² The connection of the Epimenidean myth with the Pythagorean Ursae as the 'hands of Rhea' becomes even more glaring if we take into consideration the fact that Epimenides was a priest of Zeus and Rhea.¹³

If we now turn to the Eratosthenic *Catasterisms*, differences emerge. On the one hand, analysis of the vocabulary found in the extant texts suggests that the Cretan myth is independent from the Eratosthenic tradition. The verbs μεταβάλλω 'transform' (text I), μετασχηματίζω, and μεταποιέω (text III) are absent in the transformation stories of the *Catasterisms*. And the verbs ἀναστηρίζω (text I) and ἐνστηρίζω (text II) are not used by Eratosthenes to describe the process of bringing the constellation into the sky. One could be tempted to think that the Cretan tradition has run parallel to Eratosthenes.

However, if we read chapter 2 of the *Catasterisms*, besides the 'canonical' Eratosthenic interpretation of the Little Bear as Callisto, the maiden transformed into a bear and subsequently into a constellation (a version that is presented straightforward by Eratosthenes without any reference to a literary authority), we find two further mythical *interpretationes*. Contrary to the first one (i.e. Callisto), these other two are attributed

7 Cf. Kidd 1997, 185.

8 Hadzistelious Price 1978, 73.

9 Arist. *HA* 579a; Ael. *NA* 2.19; Plu. 494c (cf. Cole 1984, 241; Bodson 1978, 143-44).

10 Bachofen 1863. Finally there is a parallel myth in Cyzicus in the Propontis, which is unrelated to the Aratean tradition (Sch. A.R. 1.936).

11 D.L. 8.3; Riedweg 2005, 32.

12 See, for instance, Iambl. *VP* 104 and 122. Cf. Burkert 1972, 152.

13 Strataridaki 1991, 218.

to a particular author. On the one hand, the Aratean interpretation is mentioned, and Eratosthenes alludes in passing to the passage of the *Phaenomena* quoted above. On the other hand, a reference is made to an obscure local historian of Naxos, Aglaosthenes, who provides a story of Zeus' nurse that must go back to the same tradition we have been discussing:

Ἀγλαοσθένης δὲ ἐν τοῖς Ναξικοῖς φησὶ τροφὸν γεγονέναι τοῦ Διὸς Κυνόσουραν, εἶναι <μία> τῶν Ἰδαίων νυμφῶν· ἀφ' ἧς ἐν μὲν τῇ πόλει τῇ καλουμένῃ Ἴστοις, ἣν οἱ περὶ Νικόστρατον ἔκτισαν, [δὲ] καὶ τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ λιμένα καὶ τὸν περὶ αὐτὴν τόπον Κυνόσουραν [τὸν τόπον] κληθῆναι· ἐλθεῖν δὲ μετὰ τῶν Τελχίνων, οὓς εἶναι τῆς Ἑρέας παραστάτας, ὡσπερ Κουρητᾶς καὶ Ἰδαίου Δακτύλους. (Eratosth. *Cat.* 2 [*Fragmenta Vaticana*]. Cf. Aglaosthenes, *FGH* 499F1)

Aglaosthenes claims, in the *History of Naxos*, that it was a nurse of Zeus, Kynosura, and that she was one of the nymphs on Mount Ida, after whom, in the city called Histoï, which Nicostratus' people had founded, both the port there and the surrounding area were named Kynosoura. She came with the Telchines, who are the assistants of Rhea, as the Couretes and the Ideaen Dactyloi.

In Aglaosthenes' account, as preserved by Eratosthenes, the nurse Kynosoura is said to have come to Crete to tend Zeus among other assistants of Zeus infant. In my opinion, the fact that Aglaosthenes calls the nurse and Rhea's assistant Kynosoura (an ancient name of the constellation that was secondarily transferred to the nurse) suggests that this historian had in mind the same Pythagorean tradition of the bears as Rhea's hands.¹⁴ Therefore, it is by the intermediary of this Naxian *Lokalhistoriker*, Aglaosthenes, that the Pythagorean lore has found its place within Eratosthenes' *Catasterisms*. As a result, the ancient, sacred Pythagorean oral saying has been stripped of its religious or philosophical meaning and reduced to a mythographical, purely factual narrative.

14 Cf. Scherer 1953, 177: "Das [Kynosoura, sc.] ist ein „natürlicher“ Sternbildname".

3 Orpheus, Apollo, Dionysus, and the Sun

The second passage to be discussed is a fragment concerning the constellation Lyre. On this occasion, Eratosthenes provides a mythical account dealing with the origins of the lyre and its transfer from Hermes to Apollo and from Apollo to Orpheus. A reference is made to Orpheus' *katabasis* and at this point Aeschylus is mentioned as the source:

διὰ δὲ τὴν γυναῖκα εἰς Ἄιδου καταβάς καὶ ἰδὼν τὰ ἐκεῖ οἷα ἦν τὸν μὲν Διόνυσον οὐκ ἐτίμα, ὑφ' οὗ ἦν δεδοξασμένος, τὸν δὲ Ἥλιον μέγιστον τῶν θεῶν ἐνόμισεν, ὃν καὶ Ἀπόλλωνα προσηγόρευσεν· ἐπεχειρόμενός τε τὴν νύκτα [κατὰ] ἔωθεν κατὰ τὸ ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον Πάγγαιον προσέμενε τὰς ἀνατολάς, ἵνα ἴδῃ <τὸν Ἥλιον> πρῶτος· ὅθεν ὁ Διόνυσος ὀργισθεὶς αὐτῷ ἔπεμψε τὰς Βάσσαρας, ὡς φησιν Αἰσχύλος ὁ τῶν τραγωδιῶν ποιητής, αἱ διέσπασαν αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ μέλη ἔρριψαν χωρὶς ἕκαστον. (Eratosth. *Cat.* 24, *Fragmenta Vaticana* = A. fr. 59 Radt)

Since he descended into Hades for his spouse and saw what was there, Orpheus stopped honouring Dionysus, to whom he owed his fame, and believed that the greatest god was the Sun, whom he named also Apollo. Waking up, at night, towards dawn, he would climb the mount called Pangaion and wait for the sunrise, so that he would be the first to see it. Therefore Dionysus, enraged, sent against him the Bassarids, as the tragediographer Aeschylus says. The Bassarides tore him into pieces and scattered his limbs here and there.

This Eratosthenic chapter attributed to Aeschylus has also raised some controversy. It is not altogether clear whether the whole passage quoted above goes back to the tragedian, as some scholars have pointed. More particularly, the reference to a solar worship and the identification of Apollo with the sun have been considered suspicious.¹⁵

As a matter of fact, astral cults seem to be rather uncommon in Greece. Heliolatriy is often labelled as barbaric by Classical authors.¹⁶ At the same time, however, a divinized sun enjoys esteem among some 'philosophers' or 'intellectuals'. Sophocles, for instance, attests for heliolatriy among the σοφοί.¹⁷ A public recognition to the divine nature of the sun can also be deduced from the process against Anaxagoras for his impious views on

15 Sceptical: Garzya 2000, 170-71.

16 Barbaric: Ar. *Pax* 406-07; Pl. *Cra.* 397d; specifically Thracian: S. fr. 582 Radt (on the context of this Sophoclean fragment see Fitzpatrick 2001, 93).

17 οἱ σοφοί: S. fr. 752 Radt.

the sun.¹⁸ And sun worship is attested in some Greek cities, notably in Rhodes, where the solar god has an anthropomorphic aspect.¹⁹

On the other hand, in the Archaic period Helios and Apollo appear as separate figures both in the mythical accounts and in early art.²⁰ Indeed, the 19th-century theory which claimed that Apollo was originally a sun-god has been henceforth abandoned.²¹ However, the links connecting Apollo and Helios are solid, notably from the 5th century BCE onwards. This connection was manifest in the context of mystery religion as well as in popular traditions, according to the author of the *Homeric Allegories*:

Ὅτι μὲν τοίνυν ὁ αὐτὸς Ἀπόλλων ἡλίω, καὶ θεὸς εἷς δυσὶν ὀνόμασι κοσμεῖται, σαφὲς ἡμῖν ἔκ τε τῶν μυστικῶν λόγων, οὓς αἱ ἀπόρρητοι τελεταὶ θεολογοῦσι, καὶ τὸ δημῶδες ἄνω καὶ κάτω θρυλούμενον· “ἡλιος Ἀπόλλων, ὁ δέ γε Ἀπόλλων ἡλιος”. (Heraclit. *All.* 6.6)

That Apollo is identical with the Sun, and that one god is honored under two names, is confirmed both by mystical doctrines taught by secret initiations and by the popular and widely quoted line, “the sun is Apollo, and Apollo is the sun”.

Notwithstanding this text, a cultic identity between both entities is controversial. But an equation between the sun and Apollo is well attested as early as the Archaic Age among the Pre-Socratic philosophers. This identification finds a continuation from Stoicism (Cleanthes: *SVF* 1.542) up to Neo-Platonism. Indeed Theagenes of Rhegion equated Helios and Apollo (*FVS*, frag. 2) through their relationship to fire. Other Pre-Socratic philosophers rationalize the figure of Apollo by identifying him with the sun.²² Quite interestingly for our purposes, this connection was originally established by the Pythagoreans, according to some scholars like Boyancé.²³ This notion may also have influenced Plato and Euripides. And the Orphic account preserved by Eratosthenes shows that Aeschylus might have been already familiar with it, which can be put in relation with Aeschylus’ contact with Pythagoreanism during his stay in Sicily.²⁴

18 X. *Mem.* 4.7.7; see also S. *OT* 660.

19 See Hamdorf 1964, 18; Burkert 1985, 175. The Colossus of Rhodes represents the Sun. On the solar cult in Corinth see Paus. 2.1.6.

20 See Gantz 1993, 88.

21 On Roscher’s Apollo as a solar god, see Versnel 1993, 289-92.

22 Parmenides (*FVS* 28A20) and Empedocles (*FVS* 31A23).

23 See notably Boyancé 1966.

24 See Herington 1967, 81.

In this context, another fact should be mentioned: solar cults can be found among the so-called Orphic texts.²⁵ An excellent example is the inscription (ca. 300 BCE) on an Attic black-figure vase from the 5th century BCE, coming from Pontic Olbia. A sequence of words is inscribed on it, including the terms Helios and Apollo:

Βίος-Βίος, Ἀπόλλων-Ἀπόλλων, Ἥλιο[ς]-Ἥλιος, Κόσμος-Κ[όσ]μος, Φῶς-Φῶς (fr. 537 Bernabé)

If Riedweg is right, the Pythagorean theories of nature developed through the interpretation of ‘sacral’ Orphic poetry.²⁶ And the identification of the sun as Apollo by Orpheus in the catasterismic account can be seen as an indirect reflection of such an operation. As in the case of the Little Bear Kynosoura taken as the nurse of Zeus above, Eratosthenes is making use of a *Mittelquelle* (first Aglaosthenes, now Aeschylus) to disseminate earlier, most probably Pythagorean, astral doctrines through his mythographical narratives. And again, as in the case above, the mythographical form given by Eratosthenes may be seen as a literary strategy to filter out those elements containing a religious or a philosophical significance.

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25 Tortorelli Ghidini 2013, 152.

26 Riedweg 2005, 74. Kahn (2001, 21-22), on the other hand, emphasizes the differences between Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines.

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