

THE ROOTS OF THE *ASTOMI* AND THE *MONOCOLI* IN CTESIAS AND MEGASTHENES

In a well-known section depicting the different tribes of India, inhabited by fabulous human races, Pliny preserves the reports of Ctesias (FGrHist 688 F 45 $\rho\alpha$,t) and Megasthenes (FGrHist 715 F 29) describing two singular races, the *Monocoli* (“one-legged humans”) and the *Astomi* (“mouthless humans”):

Ctesias scribit ... idem hominum genus qui Monocoli vocentur singulis cruribus mirae pernecitatis ad saltum, eosdem Sciapodas vocari, quod in maiori aestu humi iacentes resupini umbra se pedum protegant; ... Megasthenes ... ad extremos fines Indiae ab oriente circa fontem Gangis Astomorum gentem sine ore, corpore toto hirtam, vestiri frondium lanugine, halitu tantum viventem et odore quem naribus trahant; nullum illis cibum nullumque potum, radicum tantum florumque varios odores et silvestrium malorum, quae secum portant longiore itinere ne desit olfactus; graviore paulo odore haut difficulter exanimari (NH 7.23–25).

This piece of *mirabilia* is repeated again in different ways in Strabo 15,711C, Plutarch, De fac. 24,938C, Gellius 9,4,9, Solin 52,29–32, and Augustine, CD 16,8. While the *Monocoli* and/or *Sciapodes* have received considerable attention over the years, the “mouthless humans” or *Astomi* have remained a relatively neglected topic of study. Schwanbeck contrasted them with the Ἀμύκκηρας ... παμφάγους, ὀμοφάγους, ὀλιγοφρονίους, which are mentioned by Strabo next to the *Astomi* and other races.¹ More recently Filliozat has suggested they could be identified with the “prêta” प्रेत, supernatural beings suffering from hunger present in Indian mythology.² In what follows, I will firstly focus on the “mouthless humans” and, based on the elucidation of their position in Indian texts and Western *mirabilia*, I will attempt to answer questions raised about the relation between the *Monocoli* and the *Sciapodes*.

According to Megasthenes (via Pliny), near the source of the Ganges there was a people called *Astomi*, who were speechless for they had no mouths (*sine ore*). Hence, they could only live inhaling air or scents through their nostrils. This explanation is, as Filliozat suggests, similar to the hungry ghosts described in Buddhist mythology (“prêta” प्रेत), who live off the scents of offerings. However, it should be pointed out that Megasthenes is talking about *gens*, a race or clan, and not about supernatural beings. In fact, as Parpola noted, both the Sanskrit “an-ās-” अनास् and the Greek ἄστομος can mean either “without mouth” or “speechless”, “silent”.³ There was certainly a practice in India of subsisting on air only, called “vāyu-bhojanah” वायुभोजनः or “air swallowing”, consisting of holding a “vita” वीट or piece of

1) E. A. Schwanbeck (ed.), Megasthenes. Indica, Bonn 1846, 69.

2) J. Filliozat / J. André, L'Inde vue de Rome. Textes latins de l'Antiquité relatifs à l'Inde, Paris 1986, 356 n. 121.

3) A. Parpola, The coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the cultural and ethnic identity of the Dāsas, Studia Orientalia 64 (1988) 219.

wood, stone or even gravels in the mouth (“*vīṛāṃ mukhe samādhāya*” वीरं मुद्दे समाधाय in Mahābhārata 15.45.12c) in order to avoid ingestion of food and speech, and which was considered a form of penance.⁴ The *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata Purāna* record some examples of this yogic mortification conducted by people dwelling also *circa fontem Gangis*, without clothes and covered by flowers, who survived only by breathing air, since their mouths were sealed by gravels:

“O son, Vidura is well. He is performing austere penances, subsisting on air alone, for he abstains from all other food. He is emaciated and his arteries and nerves have become visible. Sometimes he is seen in this empty forest by Brahamanas.” While Dhritarashtra was saying this Vidura was seen at a distance. He had matted locks on his head, and gravels in his mouth, and was exceedingly emaciated. He was perfectly naked. His body was besmeared all over with filth, and with the dust of various wild flowers.⁵

Yudhishtira said, “People dwelling on the banks of Ganga report that the high-souled Dhritarashtra is practising the austerest of penances. Hast thou seen him there? Is that perpetuator of Kuru’s race in peace? . . . Possessed of wealth of penances, thy sire set himself to the practice of severe austerities. He held pebbles of stone in his mouth and had air alone for his subsistence, and abstained altogether from speech.⁶

Having thus controlled their minds and meditating over the Lord with concentrated attention, they shed off their sins. Foregoing their sleep and subsisting on air only, they prayed Lord Viṣṇu.⁷

If we are to assume that this identification of the “mouthless / silent humans” with yogic penance is correct, and if we also accept that Megasthenes could have witnessed them in Pataliputra, India, we have to consider the possibility that his *sine ore* is, in fact, an ad hoc addition from Pliny or his source to explain the Greek *Astomorum*.

As for the nature of the *Monocoli* or *Sciapodes*, which Aristophanes placed near the lake where the unwashed Socrates won over the souls of men (Birds 1553–1555), Lassen was the first to relate them to the ascetic activity of one-legged posture, “*ekapāda*” एकपाद (or “*eka-pādena*” एकपादेन, lit. “on one foot”).⁸ We have a good candidate for the identification of this practice in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, where we also find breath control together with this well-known yogic position on one leg:

On that mountain, the sage controlled his mind by means of Prāṇāyāma (breath-control) and stood for one hundred years on one leg, defying hot and cold (and such other pairs of opposites), and subsisted on air.⁹

4) M. Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Corrected Edition, New Delhi 2002, 1005.

5) Mahābhārata 15.33.16a–17a. For the translation by K. M. Ganguli, The Mahābhārata of Krishna–Dwaipayana Vyasa, New Delhi 1991, 15.26.

6) 15.45.6a–12c (as n. 5, 15.37).

7) Bhāgavata Purāna 7.4.23. For the translation by G. V. Tagare, The Bhāgavata-Purāna, New Delhi 1976.

8) Chr. Lassen, Indische Altertumskunde, Leipzig 1874, II 656 n. 1.

9) Bh.P. 4.1.19 (as n. 7).

Lassen was followed by Filliozat and Lenfant.¹⁰ Filliozat went one step further in trying to identify the origins of the name *Sciapodes* in the Indian race of men and demons called *Tālajangha* तालजङ्घ,¹¹ from the Sanskrit “*tāla*” ताल, “palm-shaped”,¹² while Lenfant made a clear distinction between the *Monocoli* and the *Sciapodes*, neglecting Pliny’s *Monocoli ... eosdem Sciapodas vocari*: the former being the *Ekapāda* एकपाद people,¹³ the later the *Tālajangha* तालजङ्घ.¹⁴ In order to relieve ourselves of this incubus of interpretations, we will take two complementary approaches to clarify the relation between the *Monocoli* and the *Sciapodes*.

Firstly, let us turn our attention to the Greek word Σκιάποδες and its equivalent *Monocoli* in Ctesias. Karttunen thus wisely remarks: “If the word were not attested in several sources and did not make such good sense in Greek, it would be tempting to see it as a corruption of *Εικάποδες < ekapāda.”¹⁵ However, because the fragments of Scylax (FGrHist 709 F 7b) and Hecataeus (FGrHist 1 F 327) are only attested in later sources (Tzetzes, Chil. 7,629, and Stephanus of Byzantium, s. v. Σκιάποδες), the only materials earlier than Pliny are those found in Aristophanes’ *Birds* (1553–1555) and his imitator, the poet Archippus (fr. 60 K.-A.). It is plausible to consider that, indeed, *Εικ- could have been emended by later editors to *Σκι- because the original Sanskrit word did not make any sense in Greek. If this actually happened, Scylax’s *Εικάποδες should have been ‘corrected’ before Aristophanes composed his play c. 414 a. C., one century after the visit of Scylax to Gandara. Once the *Sciapodes* became popular in Athens, the name surely penetrated western *mirabilia* literature and a description based on his name was added to the original fragment, i. e., *in maiori aestu humi iacentes resupini umbra se pedum protegant* received in Pliny; τούς τε πόδας ὡσπερ οἱ χῆνες ἔχουσι κάρτα πλατέας, καὶ ὅταν θέρμη ᾖ, ὑπτίῳ ἀναπεσόντες, ἄραντες τὰ σκέλη σκιάζονται τοῖς ποσίν, in Harpokration, following Pliny (see Ctesias, FGrHist 688 F 60, cf. Suda s. v. Σκιάποδες).

10) J. Filliozat, *La Valeur des connaissances gréco-romaines sur l’Inde*, *Journal des Savants* 2 (1981) 103; D. Lenfant, *Ctésias de Cnide. La Perse; L’Inde; autres fragments*, Paris 2004, 330. Also R. G. Wasson, *The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It?*, *JAOS* 91/2 (1971) 184, who explained *Sciapodes* or *Monocoli* relating them to the Vedic personification of Soma in *Rig Veda X 65*, the “Mainstay of the Sky” or “a parasol mushroom” that later would have become confused with a fabulous folk.

11) See Filliozat (as n. 10) 355 n. 121. For the Indian texts, see Śiva-Purāṇa 38.24; Nārada-Purāṇa 7.23.31–32; Agni-Purāṇa 275.10–11; Brahmanḍa-Purāṇa 2.3.69.51–53a; Brahma-Purāṇa 6.29–34; Padma-Purāṇa 6.30.17–24. For a translation, see the collection *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, New Delhi, vols. 4, 15, 24, 29, 33, and 45.

12) O. von Böhtlingk / R. Roth, *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*, Saint Petersburg 1855–1875, s. v. tāla ताल, 315.

13) Skanda-Purāṇa I.2.147–148, with a translation by G. V. Tagare in: *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, New Delhi 1993, vol. 50.

14) This was anticipated by Charles Malammoud (in: J. Auberge, *Ctésias. Histoires de l’Orient*, Paris 1991, xiv), who in turn refers to J. C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India*, New Delhi 1973, fig. 6. The work in question reproduces an engraving from the early Collection of Travels from Tavernier (1684, ii.2.6, quoted in Oman, the engraving appears only in the London edition). But this engraving does not show any posture of hanging foot, only the *ekapāda*, in fig. 9, and cf. the commentary in p. 95.

15) K. Karttunen, *India in early Greek literature*, Finnish Oriental Society, Helsinki 1989, 132 n. 74.

With this in mind, we should return for a moment to the Roman naturalist's words in the passage: *Ctesias scribit . . . Monocoli vocentur singulis cruribus mirae pernicitatis ad saltum, eosdem Sciapodas vocari, quod in maiori aestu humi iacentes resupini umbra se pedum protegant*. The most suitable position here would be, as all commentators had read, that Pliny is, in fact, willingly accepting that the *Sciapodes* and the *Monocoli* are the same people, that is to say, that the *Sciapodes* have only one foot and use it either to move in jumps, or to protect themselves from the sun. It is possible to read this passage in a different way, as expressing suspicion towards Ctesias' testimony about the *Monocoli*: it was Ctesias who wrote about "one-legged humans", who were in fact the *Sciapodes* of Scylax. This was indeed suggested by Nichols in his Ph.D. dissertation, on the basis that there is no evidence about the *Sciapodes* having one leg, for if we take our sources ad pedem litterae, neither Pliny nor Harpokration, and not even Tzetzes, speak of any of those peculiar characteristics present in the *Monocoli*, but simply of "feet" in plural (*pedum*, πόδας).¹⁶ Nichols has a valid point here, and it is difficult to disagree with his acute observation. However, the fact that Pliny writes *singulis cruribus* for the *Monocoli* shows that *Sciapodas . . . umbra se pedum protegant* can also be translated the way, that "the *Sciapodes* . . . protect themselves with the shadow of their feet", referring therefore to the single foot of each one of the *Sciapodes* (and thus using a plural form). But this nuance is important to us for a different reason: the word *Monocoli* is a direct translation of the Sanskrit "ekapāda" एकपाद (both meaning "one foot"), and if we assume that the Greek Σκιάποδες is a corruption of the later, the only way Pliny could have identified both races was assuming that his source defined both the *Monocoli* and the *Sciapodes* as "one-legged humans". This being the case, and since there is no trace of "shadow foot" people in Indian sources,¹⁷ the most plausible explanation would be to regard Pliny's *umbra se pedum protegant* as representing a later addition to his source.

From this brief comparative inquiry into the close relationship between these ethnonyms we conclude that the *Monocoli* and the *Astomi* represent ancient Indian practices of penance, the "ekapāda" एकपाद (one foot) and the "vāyu-bhojanah" वायुभोजनः (subsisting on air only). Likewise, we accept Pliny's identification of *Monocoli* with *Sciapodes*, for which there are reasons if we follow Karttunen's tempting reconstruction of the Greek word *Εικάποδες < ekapāda एकपाद, thus dismissing the commentary received by Pliny (*quod in maiori aestu humi iacentes resupini umbra se pedum protegant*) as a later gloss.

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16) A. Nichols, The complete fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus: translation and commentary with an introduction, Diss. University of Florida 2008, 225 (now published in Ctesias: On India. Translation and Commentary, Duckworth 2011, 125). Most medieval representations of the *Sciapodes* present them as "one-legged humans". Nevertheless, there is a figure carved on the bench of the St. Mary Church in Dennington, Suffolk, showing a two-legged *sciapod*.

17) According to R. Thapar (Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations, New Delhi 2004, 223), the Tālajangha तालजङ्घ took its name from the palm tree totem which they worshipped. In any case, the correct meaning of Tālajangha तालजङ्घ would be "having legs like tala-trees" (i. e., palm-trees, see the note of the editor in Le Monde Oriental 28 [1934] 199), that is to say, "strong" or "long" legs, since the reference is to the tree and not to its leaves.