

## ARIMASPI AND ISSEDONIANS RECONSIDERED

by

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**ABSTRACT:** This study critically reassesses the mythical figures of the Arimaspi and Issedonians within the framework of ancient Greek ethnographic traditions and literary representations. Originating in Aristeas of Prokonnesos' now-lost *Arimaspea*, the Arimaspi were described as one-eyed warriors engaged in perpetual conflict with gold-guarding griffins, located at the northernmost edges of the Greek worldview. Drawing on Herodotus and other Classical sources, the paper examines the evolving depictions of these enigmatic tribes, tracing their transformation from poetic invention to components of broader ethnographic and geographical discourse. Particular emphasis is placed on the textual and cultural contexts that influenced their portrayal, including their intersection with the Scythian narrative, their role as mediators of northern liminality, and their connection to the economic and symbolic significance of gold in the Greek imagination. Through a comparative analysis of literary texts, iconographic evidence, and modern interpretations, the article aims to reconstruct the layered significance of the Arimaspi and Issedonians, shedding light on their enduring legacy within ancient Greek intellectual history and their contribution to conceptualizing the northern frontier.

The Arimaspi were in the Greek imagination one of the most important peoples of the northern *oikumene*. They are first mentioned by Aristeas of Prokonnesos, in whose epic poem their fundamental role is reflected in its very title, *Arimaspea*<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, this work is lost and our entire knowledge of the Arimaspi must be gleaned from later fragments of *Arimaspea*, testimonia on this work and tradition concerning this people<sup>2</sup>. Apart from literary sources, iconographical relics are also helpful, since in some eras the battle between the Arimaspi and griffins was a frequently-used motif in vase- and wall-paintings, sculptures, bas-reliefs, etc.<sup>3</sup> In scholarly literature, many researchers have sought

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<sup>1</sup> J.D.P. BOLTON, *Aristeas of Prokonnesos*, Oxford 1962. The scholarship on Aristeas is abundant, cf. A. BONDZHEV, *Aristeas' Journey to Hyperborea*, Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy VII 2023, pp. 1–8.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetarum epicorum Graecorum testimonia et fragmenta*, A. BERNABÉ (ed.), Leipzig 1987. *Epicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, M. DAVIES (ed.), Gröningen 1988. K. DOWDEN, *Aristeas* (35), in: I. WORTHINGTON (ed.), *Brill's New Jacoby*, Leiden 2009 [referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-jacoby/aristeas-35-a35]; second edition 2021.

<sup>3</sup> M. LEVENTOPOULOU, *Gryps*, in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. VIII: *Thespiades–Zodiacus et Supplementum: Abta–Thersites*, Zürich–Düsseldorf 1997, pp. 609–611.