

ETHNOHISTORY: THE ANCIENT AUTHORS' REPORTS ON SOUTHWEST
IBERIA -- AN EXAMPLE

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The use of ethnographic parallels became quite common under the influence of the American anthropology of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This borrowing from anthropology to explain archaeological data, was largely used in studies of the rise of complex social systems, and became a fruitful and widely discussed topic, questioning the validity of the use of analogy between past and present behavioural patterns (see, e.g. Gould 1978; Binford 1981). It has also been applied to archaeological studies of more recent periods (e.g. South 1977). Recent studies based on ethnohistory are generally well accepted (Clarke 1968; Ordner 1972; Crumley 1974; O'Shea 1981; Carmack and Weeks 1981; Leone 1984; Hodder 1984).

Historical documents have become a sound basis for studies of the ideology and organisation of past societies and for checking traces of their economic and spatial organisation, and hierarchical development (Clarke 1968; Crumley 1974). However, such information must be filtered since these documents reflect the personal points of view of their authors, and the socio-cultural context in which they lived. Thus the historical ethnographic evidence cannot compete with the scope and accuracy of recent ethnographic data, but, as recently emphasised, it completes and sometimes even plays a central part in the understanding of the material culture of the peoples under study (Hodder 1984, 62).

The ancient authors' reports, although providing somewhat biased information, are the only available evidence for those past societies comparable to modern ethnographic reports. The ancient authors refer to contemporary societies, as well as those already past at the time of the writing, from many of which we only have the archaeological remains. (Thus, for example, Herodotus is a 'source' for the history of Saïte Egypt [Snodgrass 1983, 139]). Ideology, social organisation and behaviour can arguably only be inferred through ethnographic parallels or with the support of historical documentation. Therefore, in this respect, the classical authors are invaluable. They report the distinctive dress, behaviour, linguistic characteristics, tribal and place names, of their 'barbarian' neighbours, which they felt were so different in contrast to their own. Some points (such as, for example, the impressive Roman victories over Iberians, Gauls or Britons, where thousands of defeated adversaries are reported dead) should not be taken at face value, but in the context in which they were written. We can suspect that the figures presented were intentionally exaggerated to emphasise the glory of Rome. For example, Strabo, a Greek scholar in the service of a Roman governor in Egypt, was very much influenced by his own convictions of the role Rome should play as a universal ruling state. Nevertheless, the impressive military evidence

of those campaigns attest the terrible battles that may have taken place. This problem was recently considered by Gabba when evaluating the ancient authors as sources: "Historiography in antiquity dealt with important and noteworthy events, or at any rate those regarded as such, according to principles, interests, aims and tastes of great diversity." (Gabba 1983, 3). The underlying intentions of each author and the public he intended to reach in writing his reports, are most important factors: Polybius wrote for men of affairs, as he himself states (Polybius IX, 1-7); Herodotus wrote to record the remarkable achievements of mankind with special emphasis on the deeds of the Greeks (Herodotus I, 1); Livy wrote as an historian concerned with moral education, and Sallust attempted to analyse the social, economic and moral causes of decline and corruption of the Roman political milieu. These authors enable us to build a more accurate picture of peoples whose material culture is recoverable from archaeological contexts, but whose social, ideological and even economic features cannot always be reached through the archaeological data alone. In this sense, Snodgrass' recent study highlights the two different approaches to the historical evidence:

It is often, and in my opinion rightly, argued that archaeology has the same ultimate aims as history. But the two disciplines use different techniques and different data. It is also true that, as there are aspects of history for which archaeology cannot be used, so there are fields of archaeology which lie beyond the reach of historical evidence. (Snodgrass 1983, 139)

Historical studies, on the other hand, are starting to use the approaches developed by the 'New Archaeology', especially on social and economic aspects of their subject matter (Snodgrass 1983, 168-172).

The Case of Tartessos -- Herodotus and the Archaeological Evidence

As Southwest Iberia was, in antiquity, one of the richest areas in silver, gold, copper and even tin and iron (Allan 1970; Healy 1978), it is often mentioned by classical authors and was well known all over the ancient world, being already referred to in the Homeric poems. Tartessos was located in the region covering the middle and lower Guadalquivir and Guadiana basins, by 800/600 BC probably reaching as far as the Atlantic façade of Iberia. As a result of Greek and Phoenician trading activities the kingdom of Tartessos became renowned in antiquity for its rich sources of silver, gold and other metals of the Mediterranean (Strabo, Geography, III, 2, 4-8). Complementary to this, Iberia was also famous for its cattle, horse, sheep and fish resources.

Due to limits of time and space, I shall only deal with Tartessos as it was referred to by Herodotus. Much more ethnohistoric, and in its true sense, ethnographic, are the works written by Diodorus, Strabo,

Appian and Sallust, although some other important information on the sociocultural features of the Iberian peoples can also be detected in Pliny and Frontinus.¹

By the time of the expansion to the Atlantic coast, Tartessos had reached the complex social organisational level of a state. This was due to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age development of the communities living there, and to the different influences that by that time had reached Iberia (Júdice Gamito n.d.). The archaeological evidence suggests the existence of a highly ranked and complex state, recognised as a kingdom by all the ancient historians. Well organised inter- and intra-regional trade networks seem to have been at work in the Bronze Age (Schubart 1975; Savory 1968; Coles and Harding 1979). Distant areas were also occasionally reached. This activity increased with the demands of Greek and Phoenician traders, whose impact is reflected in the great wealth of burials and hoards. Rich graves are then found at Huelva (La Joya necropolis), possibly the main settlement site of Tartessos, and in the peripheral areas, exactly where, from 500 BC onwards, are located other small states, recognised as kingdoms by later classic historians. This is certainly so in the case of the Oretanians, the Carpetanians, the Vettones, the Cempsii, the Konii (who, were formerly called, by the Greeks, the Cynesii: Strabo, *Geography*, III, 2, 4-8). An explanatory model presented by Frankenstein (1979) was mainly based on the assumption of an exclusive Phoenician intervention in the social and economic development of Iberia, and is not consistent with the archaeological evidence which shows the importance of local Late Bronze Age development as well as that of other influences reaching southwest Iberia by the time the Phoenicians arrived there.

Herodotus is one of the first ancient historians to refer to Tartessos:

These Phocaeans were the earliest of the Greeks to make long sea-voyages: it was they who discovered the Adriatic Sea, and Tyrrhenia, and Iberia and Tartessos not sailing in round freightships but in fifty-oared vessels. When they came to Tartessos they made friends with the king of the Tartessians, whose name was Arganthonius; he ruled Tartessos for eighty years and lived an hundred and twenty. The Phocaeans so won this man's friendship that he first entreated them to leave Ionia and settle in his country where they would; and then, when he could not persuade them to that, and learnt from them how the Median power was increasing, he gave them money to build a wall round their city therewith

(Herodotus, 1, 163)

Arganthonius seems to have failed in persuading these first Eastern Greeks to settle in his territory, but probably some others

later accepted the offer, as the archaeological evidence seems to suggest (Judice Gamito n.d.). Careful scrutiny of Herodotus' writing leads us to conclude that other visits may have taken place. As a conscious historian he must have followed a chronological sequence in his narrative. Thus, after the events described above (Book I, 163), the Phocaeans still had to flee from the Medes and sail off with their families and possessions to settle in Cynrus (Corsega), where twenty years before they had founded Alalia. Herodotus states precisely that "Arganthonius was by this time dead" (Herodotus I,165), probably implying that they did not go to Tartessos, since the conditions there were not as they had been under Arganthonius. His knowledge of Arganthonius' death suggests that further contacts were made. Only in Book IV (ch. 152), does Herodotus mention the visit of Colaeus of Samos to Tartessos, not referring to Arganthonius, no doubt because it was already much later. Even so, the king of Tartessos of that time welcomed the Samians in a very friendly way. These details confirm the archaeological evidence that some Eastern Greeks must have visited Iberia by 700 BC, settled, and mixed with the Iberian peoples, bringing with them their beliefs and burial rites, as the archaeological data suggests (Júdice Gamito n.d.).

Discussion

The study presented not long ago by Fischer (1972) on Herodotus' reliability remains a most complete one. Although Fischer is in this case evaluating the soundness of Herodotus' knowledge about the Celts, his study and conclusions are valid also for Tartessos. Fischer emphasises the fact that Herodotus was very precise concerning those aspects he actually knew or had seen, namely the case of the Celts in Iberia and their relative position in relation to the other Iberian peoples then known: Iberians, Tartessians and Cynesii.

The model suggested by Polanyi (1975) for archaic times, in which only a king and his entourage were entitled to trade, has been widely criticized on the grounds of its empiricist approach (e.g. Gledhill and Larsen 1982; Hodder 1982); however, it was considered acceptable for Classical Greece. The situation found in Southwest Iberia does not seem very different from that in Athens, referred to by Polanyi. The 'king' received the traders and dealt with them, but in practice, he himself may have employed a large number of traders or factors. They probably were also high ranking members of that society, probably the masters of other sites, or common court individuals, enjoying the privilege of participating in the 'king's trade' and donations. This is the kind of trade we find in the Homeric poems and again in Herodotus' narrative.

The main trade of Tartessos was in metals, especially silver. The mining areas are all situated far inland. The closest ones are about 60 km (Rio Tinto) or 80-100 km (S. Domingos and Aljustrel), being those from the area of Castulo (behind Cordoba). Archaeological evidence shows that metals were processed both in the settlements of the mining areas and also at Huelva (Blanco and Luzon 1969; Rothenberg

and Blanco Freijeiro 1981; Ruiz Mata et al. 1982; Jurado 1984).

Archaeological evidence suggests that the access to these rich mineral areas of the hinterland was totally under the control of Tartessos, this being probably one of the reasons why the Phoenician colonists could not settle further west than Gades, but chose the more distant, backward places of the southern coast of Iberia (Figure 1).

Both archaeological evidence and the historical reports suggest the existence of a main settlement, probably located at Huelva. At a recent conference (published in Huelva Arqueologica 6 [1982]) it was concluded that this site probably represented the principal settlement of Tartessos. Exchange transactions between secondary settlement sites and the principal one are most important. In this case, the peripheral rich mining areas, poor in subsistence resources and general commodities, would exchange their products with their near richer neighbour, which, at the same time, controlled the coastal access to the hinterland. The power of Tartessos, developed and established since the Bronze Age, was certainly considered substantial by the long distance traders sailing there (Greeks, Phoenicians, Cypriots) who came in search of metals and eventually other commodities. It is in those inland areas, situated at a distance of more than 100-150 km from the coast, beyond the direct control of Tartessos, that rich graves occur (Castulo, Medellin, Aliseda) and where, later, the 'new' states or kingdoms are located. Referred to by the ancient authors, these 'new' states present signs of very developed craftsmanship. This is exemplified by the locally made ivory combs (Freyer-Schauenburg 1966; Bisi 1971; Aubet Semmler 1982), bronze bowls and jars (Garcia y Bellido 1956; Cuadrado 1956; Matth#us 1983), gold jewels (Aubet Semmler 1982) and fine painted pottery (Aubet Semmler 1982), which greatly influenced the Iberian culture from then on.

These developments are also substantiated by the linguistic characteristics of the several 'Southwest Iberian' inscriptions and other documents, which are ascribed to the area of former Tartessos (Untermann 1984). Herodotus tells us: "...the Celtae dwell beyond the pillars of Heracles, being neighbours of the Cynesii, who are the westernmost of all nations inhabiting Europe" (Herodotus II, 33). This situation is confirmed by Strabo, Pliny and Avienus.

The choice of Tartessos for discussion was not only determined by time, and space available for this article, but because I think that the definition of the spatial location of a culture is essential and should be the basis of any further steps. (Somewhat related to this problem is the recent work of Merriman on the Celts [Merriman n.d.]).

Herodotus' information is mainly geographical, but gives some detail of the social hierarchisation of Tartessos and its main economic activities: trade and mining exploitation. The problem raised by David Clarke (1979, 176), of the identity of archaeological and socio-cultural entities is here crucial. He summarises thus:

...assuming that the context in question is pre-historic.

Whatever one may think of the adequacy of this particular classificatory scheme and its hierarchical model (fig. 3), it is clear that archaeology requires some such means of reconstructing the range of probable social, linguistic and racial structures that relate to peculiar situations, the archaeological entities -- together with the processes appropriate to each category of entity. In the analysis of particular situations, the archaeologist needs to be able to isolate, identify and relate the operational taxonomic units to the appropriate operational socio-cultural units acting within the field space.... (Clarke 1979, 177)

The achievement of this goal is the aim of a review of the problem currently in progress (Júdice Gamito n.d.). In Southwest Iberia well localised archaeological entity seems to cover the same area as the Tartessos referred to by Herodotus and other ancient authors. To this archaeological entity there seems to correspond a sociocultural unit, reinforced by linguistic identities, for which quite a large number of written documents have survived. It seems, therefore, that we can accept the name of Tartessos, with all its sociocultural implications, when referring to Southwest Iberia and the peoples inhabiting this area between 800/700 to 600/500 BC.

The other Iberian kingdoms, like the Oretanians, the Carpetanians, the Vettones, the Cempsii and the Konii or Cynesii only mentioned from 500 BC onwards in the ancient authors' reports, appear as surrounding the former kingdom of the Tartessians, certainly due to the fact that they only rose and were recognised as states, after the development they enjoyed as a result of the intensive trade with Tartessos, the consequences of which is reflected in their material culture. These peoples, because of their involvement with the history of Rome, became a frequent subject for ancient historians, thus enabling us to have some more or less objective reports on their behaviour, ideology and social organisation.

Conclusion

Three main difficulties accompany the ancient authors' reports:

1. the imprecise location of most of the towns, place-names and geographical locations they mention are frequently based on sailors' and traders' narratives, not on the actual experience of the author;
2. distortions which arise from the authors' motives in writing their historical accounts;

3. the establishment of a sound correspondence between the archaeologically based sociocultural entities and the areas mentioned by the ancient authors and the peoples inhabiting them.

In spite of these difficulties, it is worth using the ancient authors' reports as a basis for the establishment of models about the ideology and socio-economic organisation of the social groups they mention. Such accounts should be confronted with the archaeological data. In this way, better progress can be made than by merely imposing our own views about the societies of the period and area under study onto the archaeological data. Distorted as the ancient authors' views were, they were certainly closer to their contemporaries, than we are.

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Note

1. A broader study considering all these classical authors is in preparation.

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Figure 1: Southwest Iberia.

