

ANCIENT SHAMANISM? THE SCYTHIAN ENAREES AS DIVINERS OF THE SERPENT GODDESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the *enarees*, a group of Scythian diviners described by ancient authors as „effeminate” or androgynous men afflicted by a „female disease” sent by Aphrodite-Argimpasa. Drawing on Herodotus, Pseudo-Hippocrates, and other classical sources, as well as comparative evidence from Near Eastern and Indo-Iranian cults, the study examines the religious and symbolic significance of this phenomenon. Rather than a physiological condition, the *enarees*’ feminization is interpreted as a form of sacred transformation – a divine punishment that simultaneously granted prophetic power. Their divinatory use of linden bark and their association with the Serpent Goddess reveal a ritualised inversion of gender and authority within Scythian religiosity. While earlier scholarship linked them to Siberian shamanism, this article argues that such parallels remain speculative: the *enarees* represent a distinct form of sacred androgyny rooted in the Scythian vision of divine retribution and ecstatic mediation. This paper argues that the *enarees* represent a distinct form of sacred androgyny rather than a manifestation of Scythian shamanism.

Keywords: Scythians, Serpent Goddess, *enarees*, shamanism, „the disease of effeminacy”, divination.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Scythians, famed in ancient sources for their skill in horsemanship and archery, also developed a distinct and largely overlooked spiritual system. Their pantheon of seven deities lacked temples or statues, reflecting a non-institutionalised yet deeply symbolic religiosity. Nevertheless, among them, the figure of the Serpent Goddess occupies a uniquely attested position in the surviving sources. Identified by Herodotus as Argimpasa, she represents a deity of complex symbolic nature and function. What is particularly intriguing is that Argimpasa gathered around her a circle of mysterious diviners – the *enarees* – men afflicted by a „female disease”, said to have been inflicted by Aphrodite as divine retribution for sacrilege. These *enarees*, who practised divination and adopted female dress and behaviour, provoked both fascination and controversy among ancient observers.

2. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the religious context of the *enarees*, it is necessary to understand the basic elements of Scythian religion. The term „Scythian religion” designates a body of myths, rituals, and beliefs associated with Iranian-speaking nomadic cultures such as the Cimmerians, Alans, Maeotians, and Massagetae, inhabiting the Pontic-Caspian steppes. The primary ancient sources addressing this religious dimension are Herodotus, along