

Xenophanes DK 21 B 18, a Testimony of the Rising Philosophy*

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Besides being an extraordinary masterpiece in itself, Anaximander's map is the indirect testimony of a cultural phenomenon, whose dimension we are very recently beginning to understand.¹ Possibly, this new understanding starts with a criticism of the notion of a supposedly Greek nation in antiquity. In fact, clear words of criticism are found in many scholars already in the first half of 20th century: if by nation we mean "a large body of people united by common descent, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular state or territory" (Oxford Dictionary), then there was no Greek nation.² In the still standard

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¹ About Anaximander's map, see two important works: Rossetti (2013) and Rossetti (2020).

² See the development of this topic in Burkert (2004). Here is an example: "New interest in historical research in the nineteenth century established the isolation of classical Greece all the more. The Napoleonic wars had ended with a surge of nationalism, especially in Germany. Subsequently it was taken for granted that culture had to be national culture. Just at that time Indo-European linguistics were discovered and elaborated, bringing Greeks, Romans, and Germanic tribes together and building up a barrier between them and the Semites, the Hebrews of the Old Testament. Homer, who had been declared an »original genius« in the eighteenth century, now became the genius of Hellenic origins; for Germany, this meant an alliance of German, Greek, and Protestant, which was largely to dominate the school system, the »gymnasium« of the nineteenth century" (Burkert 2004: 2).

description, when we think Ancient Greece, we think of a ‘nation’ comparable to the current Greek nation, as we can see in widespread didactic maps, as those that can be found on Wikipedia (for example, at the entry Ancient Greece).

However, the historical facts are different, as we can see in Malkin’s words:

In contrast to this quasi-historical *imaginaire*, the historical Greek networks during the Archaic period indicate the reverse: Greeks set out not to converge on a “Troy” but to diverge by spreading far and wide. Their common action was dispersal to new foundations, followed by more dispersal and more foundations. (Malkin 2003: 61)

In other words, the idea of a Greek nation is the creative invention of a modern mind-set that projected its own image on a very different ancient historical reality. Now, let me spend a word on another misleading notion that comes from the same frame of a Greek nation: colonization. The idea of a Greek colonization is misleading too, because ‘colony’ means a territory ruled by another country, occupied by settlers of that country. However, the so called “Greek colonies” were autonomous and independent foundations. Then neither the fatherland nor the “colonies” were a unified territory under one and same political control. The real Greece was first of all a large number of independent cities scattered all over the Mediterranean Sea, and second, dense networks of communication spread through the same Mediterranean Sea.

This real Greece was ‘photographed’ by Anaximander. Let us leave aside the huge intuition of an abstract sight from a 4.000 km above de Mediterranean Sea virtual eye. Let us just focus on the information within the map. For this end, I will apply Rossetti’s method that I described in the Eleatica 8’s book called there “scene reconstruction” (Galgano, Giombini, Maracci 2020: 17). Trying to reconstruct the scene, we might ask: how did Anaximander collect all necessary data for the craft of the map? The answer is: he necessarily interviewed a large number of sailors and travelling traders. However, all information and data given by those eye witnesses could have not been those of a fantastic and imaginary kind, because they were technical data for navigation; moreover, those data should have been gathered in the last four or five centuries, if we include the experience of Phoenician seafaring, which was even older (before 10th century BC). In other words, among seafarers and traders and along the whole Mediterranean Sea, was established a network of reliable information that allowed safe seafaring for all of them. Rossetti does not hesitate to call it “cultura dell’attendibilità” (Rossetti *et al.* 2020: 60–61), culture of reliability, which was an enormous data collection circulating in and through the Mediterranean Sea. Anaximander just recollected these data and gave them a visual form, a sort of visual prose in opposition to the poetic forms of religious paintings and sculptures: the *pinax*, the map.

This huge quantity of reliable data lived together with another large amount of information, that from the traditional and religious thought. A summary of what the academic knowledge thought (and still thinks) about the Greek culture can be find in Havelock’s famous *Preface to Plato*:

The answer to diaspora and decentralization was to invent the *polis*, an adaptation and enlargement of the Mycenaean palace complex (...). But the tradition, the continuity of law, custom and usage must be maintained, or the scattered groups would disintegrate and their common tongue be lost. The essential vehicle of continuity was supplied by a fresh and elaborate development of the oral style (...) The fact that this task was more urgent at the circumference than at the center may explain the prevailing Ionic colour which the epic technique acquired. But it was developed in this period essentially as the encyclopedic and moral instruction of Greece. Its purpose was pan-Hellenic. Homer's style represents therefore the Greek international style just as his content provides the tribal encyclopedia for all the Hellenes (Havelock 1963: 119).

In these words, we can see the currently geographical concept of Greece with a center in the continent and a periphery in Ionia applied to the archaic period. It is easy to see that the huge culture coming from seafaring, trade and cities foundations is not considered at all. Homer and Hesiod are described as the encyclopedists of the Greek culture. But we can ask: is it possible to navigate through a sea filled with monsters, as Scylla and Charibdys, and sirens, with gods of the sea and the winds blowing according to divine subjective desires, as those of Poseidon and Aeolus, or rivers suddenly attacking people, as the Scamander is supposed to have done with Achilles? The answer is clearly no. Then, in the Archaic period, since a great Greek seafaring occurred, we must conclude that the traditional culture lived together with another very different one, i.e. the technical and reliable seafaring culture: the first was full of monsters and subjectivism, the second was built on a structure of reliability, rationality and objectivity.

A doubt could arise: since there are written testimonies of the traditional and religious culture, as those of Homer and Hesiod, why do not we have written testimonies of such a parallel culture? The answer runs along three good reasons: 1) the writing in Greece likely comes from seafaring, by the Phoenician influence, then seafaring itself was developed in the absence of writing habits;³ 2) seafaring and trade culture are activities restricted to few people, and for this reason the most part of the common men were pragmatically not interested in the huge culture on the background of a trade, as much as I am not even aware of the route that my cellular telephone followed from China to Brazil; 3) sources, routes, deals and the other elements of the trade were (as much as they are now) unknown features; many times they were secrets carefully hidden, fearing competitors and pirates.⁴

However, the most technical and abstract part of this culture, the less directly related to the concrete trade, achieved the core of the *polis* and generated figures like Thales,

³ In fact, the oldest written testimonies of the Greek language, inscribed on ceramic artifacts, date back to the 8th century – a period when seafaring was reaching its peak expansion, and the written language was just taking its first steps.

⁴ Marcel Griaule reports this story: “Quando si tratta di informare gli stranieri sulle loro comunicazioni, i Fenici tacciono o mentiscono. (...) Prima della spedizione di Crasso contro i Veneti della Loira, i Romani ignoravano le Cassiteridi e si fornivano di stagno a Cadice, porto di transito. Un giorno che essi seguivano una nave

Anaximander and Anaximenes. More than this, an open school, likely from Anaximander onwards, – not in an institutional meaning but in that of social available knowledge – gave origin to a huge scientific revolution, maybe the greatest in the human history that determined the Western destiny (Rovelli 2011). In fact, soon after Anaximander, the improvement of geographical and historical data organization brought the new problem, a problem that will qualify philosophy forever: the problem of the truth. We see it in Hecataeus (fr. 1, Jacoby):

Hecataeus of Miletus thus speaks: I write what I deem true; for the stories of the Greeks are manifold and seem to me ridiculous (Shotwell 1939: 172).

Many scholars believe that the term Greeks (Ἑλλήνων) is here referred to Homer and Hesiod. Anyway, even if this is not the case, it is surely referred to the common culture, which is very similar or coincident to the Homeric and Hesiodic culture. We can see in these words the first appearance of the opposition of two kind of knowledge, one narrated by the eye witness author, the other widespread among regular people. This same theme will be treated with mastery by Parmenides (Galgano 2017). In his poem the opposition between beliefs of the mortals and the knowledge taught by the goddess will concretely describe two worlds even divided in two different speeches of the goddess.

In order to understand this passage from Ionia to Italy we must return there, very close to Miletus, in Ephesus, when we meet one of the most important philosophers of all times, Heraclitus, who also criticized the traditional thought. Both the common sense of the people and the most famous poets, Homer, Hesiod and Archilochus are strongly censored, even making equivalence of them (DK 22 B 56).⁵ In a reference to Pythagoras he says:

Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchus, trained himself to the highest degree of all mankind in (the art of) investigation (ἱστορίην), and having selected these writings constructed a wisdom of his own – a lot of learning, a disreputable (piece of) craftsmanship (DK 22 B 129, transl. Robinson 1987).

Leaving aside Heraclitus' criticism to Pythagoras, what is important to us is the term "investigation" (ἱστορίη) which is clearly referred to writings, most likely technical prose, as convincingly demonstrated Zhmud (2017). From Heraclitus we know that the activity of intellectual investigation was already occurring in the 6th century. This represents a very different approach to knowledge in comparison with traditional thought. In fact, Homer and Hesiod appealed to the gods and goddesses for getting inspiration, which

di questa città per scoprirne la meta, il fenicio preferì ripiegare verso la costa, piuttosto di mostrare quale fosse la sua rotta" (Griaule 1956: 7, *apud* Moscarelli 2005: 164).

⁵ "People are deceived, [he says], in the recognition of things that are obvious in much the same way. Homer, who was wiser than all the Greeks, was deceived" (transl. Robinson 1987: 39).

is a direct heritage of the shamanic approach to knowledge.⁶ However, with the *historie*, knowledge was not coming to men from above anymore. Rather the contrary, it is the humankind that elevates to the gods. In this meaning, even considering Pythagoras a mystic figure, we should surely add this inversion of direction for attaining knowledge to his features. The multiple books, evoked in the fragment, are the result of a selection. Selection is exactly the activity of picking up what is convenient after comparison, and as we know, it is the basis of human rational behaviour. In other words, the difference between the traditional and the new knowledge is exactly this activity of comparison. In the traditional thought, knowledge is received and inherited from the gods; there cannot be any opposition or doubts to the words and willing of the gods. In the new culture, facts are compared and analyzed by the criterium of non-contradiction, first spontaneously, as the laughs of Hecataeus, then with a solid intellectual method, as it will appear in Parmenides. Reports of facts and interpretations are not accepted anymore without analysis, reflection, selection and coherent conclusions.

This process – and this profound historical change – is clearly reflected in some of Xenophanes' sentences. Let us look at them, with the translation of André Laks and Glenn Most:

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things
That among men are sources of blame and censure:
Thieving, committing adultery, and deceiving each other.

(DK 21 B 11 – LM D8)

But mortals think that gods are born
And have clothing, voice, and bodily frame just like theirs.

(DK 21 B 14 – LM D12)

The Ethiopians <say that their gods are> snubnosed and dark-skinned,
And the Thracians that they have blue eyes and red hair.

(DK 21 B 16 – LM D13)

But if oxen, <horses> or lions had hands
Or could draw with their hands and create works like men,
Then horses would draw the shapes of gods like horses, and oxen like oxen,
And they would make the same kinds of bodies
As each one possessed its own bodily frame.

(DK 21 B 15 – LM D14)

After all we have said since the beginning, these words of Xenophanes are entitled to be taken for very indicative of the great process of changing that was occurring within the Mediterranean Sea before and during the Archaic Era of Greek history. Let us connect

⁶ Hesiod clearly says that the Muses taught him: "One time, they taught Hesiod beautiful song" (αἶνυ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδίδαξαν αἰοιδίην – Hes. *Th.* 22, transl. Most).

the dots. In DK 21 B 16 (LM D13), first, for knowing and talking about Thracians and Ethiopians (Egyptians) it necessary to cross the Mediterranean Sea in a mid-range seafaring, which means anyway a very technical and advanced seafaring knowledge. Then, there is a comparison about the same fact, let us say, the shining sun, accompanying the vessel from Thrace to Egypt, the same sun that belongs to two different gods, one dark-skinned, the other red haired. Well, this is not possible; just one of them would be correct, just one would be the god of the sun, or maybe neither of them. This last possibility was that preferred by Xenophanes, who finally criticized all superstitions and beliefs, not only attributing them to the people's simple mind (DK 21 B 14–15 – LM D12–14), but also to the “encyclopedists of the Greeks”, in the words of Havelock, i.e. Homer and Hesiod (DK 21 B11 – LM D8).⁷

However, the best testimony of this complex cultural passage is fr. DK 21 B 18 (LM D53), where Xenophanes in two sentences summarizes the prehistoric past, his contemporary present and the future of knowledge:

οὔτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖσ' ὑπέδειξαν,
ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον.
The gods have not indicated all things to mortals from the beginning,
But in time, by searching (ζητοῦντες), they find something more that is better.⁸

In the beginning, there was that kind of direct relationship between men and gods through a special priest of the primitive tribe, who had direct contact with one or more gods. He brought the messages of the gods to his tribe. In a broad meaning, we can call this kind of figure a shaman, since it is not a common religious priest, but someone with many powers, namely those of control on divine powers (today we call them ‘natural forces’), since he can intercede with the gods. A good example of this primitive shamanic priest still present in the archaic Greek culture is the figure of Calchas, in the opening scene of the Iliad.⁹ Xenophanes says that this old form of knowledge did not reveal all things to mortals.¹⁰

⁷ Xenophanes goes further and says that men do not know the truth about the gods and never will. They can only have opinioins (DK 21 B 34 – LM D49). About this fragment, see Pulpito's article in this volume.

⁸ The translation and interpretation of this fragment is disputed. Among the many interpretations, that of Leshner is one of the most interesting although unconventional. For a criticism, see below, notes 11 and 12. Here we follow LM.

However, even the most critical approach, that of James Leshner, cannot deny the two cultural stages presented in the fragment. For the first stage, Leshner believes that Xenophanes in, B18.1 is just denying the “the idea that gods communicated with mortals through various natural marvels or other special signs” (Leshner 1991: 243) and, being himself a fact-checker.

⁹ A ‘shaman’ in the broad meaning is a figure who is: “healer and therapist, diviner, psychopomp, wizard of hunting and lord of animals; priest of sacrifices; poet, musician, singer, mime, dancer, guardian of orla culture and literature; mystic, ecstatic traveler; sage of the nature, that who knows all.” (Costa 2008: 152–153; my translation).

¹⁰ Leshner does not take in account the direct revelation of the gods to their priests, although one might expect him to, given that he translates ὑπέδειξαν with ‘intimate’ (“Indeed not from the beginning did gods intimate

Then things changed, a new culture arose and became powerful, and even stronger than the shamanic one. In fact, this culture allows better findings and has the time as its best ally. Over time, the new research method uncovers better solutions, resulting in a brighter future if research leads the way. As I see, it is impossible to say clearer words for describing the activity of acquiring knowledge, the same activity we still follow today: science and philosophy. From now on, research is the best tool for gaining knowledge and continuously engaging with the unknown. No longer is there absolute knowledge from the gods, but rather the imperfect knowledge of those who seek to understand, i.e. the philosophers.¹¹

With this new method in mind, Xenophanes' generalization goes further and says that drawing and painting gods like oneself is a kind of natural naïve process, in fact, even oxen, horses and lions would do the same. The gods are not similar to oneself, because the world is something more than the own family, tribe or territory. The world is bigger and most important – as Anaximander for the first time showed us – the world is one. From Anaximander on, human thought starts the conquest of “the one” and its partner “the many”. Xenophanes awareness of this new conception is greatly expressed in his unique god (DK 21 B 23 – LM D16) as a correspondence to the unicity of the world. He foresees what is coming soon: the unity of the nature and the search for those laws that rule all things. This search will be the task of the *sophoi* of future generations.

all things to mortals, but as they search in time they discover better” – Leshner 1992: 27).

¹¹ Criticizing the most common interpretation of B 18 as ‘Hymn to Human Progress’, Leshner argues that “in Fr. 18.1 – »Truly, not from the outset did gods intimate all sorts of things to mortals« – Xenophanes rejected not the traditional view of the gods as mankind’s original benefactors but rather, in virtue of both his novel theology and scientific view of nature, the specific belief that gods communicated with mortals through special natural signs. In Fr. 18.2-’but, at length, by searching they discover better’-he voiced not his faith in continuing cultural, social, or scientific progress, but rather his regard for the recently developed *ιστορίη* as a superior approach to discovering the truth” (Leshner 1991: 247). He also agrees that Ionian *ιστορίη*, in which he includes Xenophanes, is a matter of travel and observation: “»At length, as they search they discover... « is all he said, but what he almost certainly meant by saying it was that ‘as mortals, at length, have begun to travel about the world and observe its features directly for themselves, they have begun to acquire information that enables them to identify, albeit with less than complete certainty, a number of the basic forces at work in nature’” (Leshner 1991: 245). Moreover, Leshner says: “But the many detailed explanations he already had in hand would have given him excellent reason to claim that *ιστορίη* provided explanations superior to those available from conventional sources of wisdom, and was therefore a better way of finding out the truth.” But, what are these conventional sources of wisdom, if not the shamanic method through which men communicated with the gods?

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Greek seafaring between the 10th and 6th centuries BCE gave rise to a technical culture centered around navigation, commerce, and international cultural exchange. The Greeks were not a unified nation in the modern sense, confined to a territory centralized in Attica or the Peloponnese. Instead, they were a collection of independent city-states (poleis) spread across the Mediterranean, from the Iberian Peninsula to the Black Sea. The intense commercial relationships among these Greek settlements and with other peoples wove a Mediterranean cultural web that fostered a genuine spirit of intercultural exchange, leading to a new cultural synthesis that gave the Greeks – and the world to this day – an extraordinary drive for originality. This technical culture, which Rossetti calls the “cultura dell’attendibilità,” was based on observation, objectivity, and rationality. Without these principles, and relying solely on myth, seafaring could never have flourished. This shift away from myths to a new culture is testified by Xenophanes, who, in DK B 18 (LM D53), contrasts the ancient method of gaining knowledge through communication with the gods with a new method of research that in time yields better results.

KEY WORDS

Xenophanes, DK 21 B18, ancient Greek seafaring, Anaximander, Rossetti

