

TWO PONTIC RIVERS

İKİ PONTOS IRMAĞI

TØNNES BEKKER-NIELSEN* MARIT JENSEN**

Abstract: The accounts of the landscape around the Iris (Yeşilirmak) and the Thermodon (Terme) given by ancient authors are diverse and often contradictory. *The Periegesis of the World* by Dionysius of Alexandria, a didactic poem written in the early IInd c. A.D., established an image of the two rivers that does not correspond to their actual characteristics. A closer study reveals that Dionysius, or possibly his source, has confused the two: the river which he describes as the Thermodon is in fact the Iris, and *vice versa*. This mistake was not realized by later translators (Avienus, late IVth c. A.D.; Priscianus, VIth c. A.D.) or commentators (Eustathius of Thessaloniki, XIIth c. A.D.) who had no first-hand knowledge of the Pontic landscape and geography.

Keywords: Pontos • Iris • Thermodon • Amazons

Öz: Iris (Yeşilirmak) ve Thermodon (Terme) nehirlerinin civarına ilişkin peyzaj hesapları antik yazarlarda çelişkili ve birbirinden farklıdır. İskenderiyeli Dionysios'un *Dünyanın Tasviri* adlı eserinde M.S. II. yüzyılın başlarında yazılmış olan didaktik bir şiirde her iki nehir için oluşturulan tablo onların gerçek karakteristiklerini yansıtmamaktadır. Daha yakın bir çalışma ise, Dionysios'un ya da muhtemelen onun kaynağının iki nehri karıştırdığını ortaya çıkarmıştır: onun Thermodon olarak tanımladığı nehir aslında Iris, diğeri de tam tersidir. Bu hata diğer çevirmenler tarafından (Avienus [M.S. IV. yüzyılın sonları]; Priscianus [M.S. VI. yüzyıl]) ya da eleştirmenler (Tessalonikeli Eustathius [M.S. XII. yüzyıl]) tarafından farkedilmemiştir ve Pontos coğrafyasına ilişkin ilk elden kaynak değildir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pontos • Iris • Thermodon • Amazonlar

Introduction

The Iris River (Yeşilirmak) and its tributaries the Lykos (Kelkit) and Skylaks (Çekerek) draw their waters from a large inland area of c. 36,100 km²,¹ stretching from the old Pontic capital of Amaseia (Amasya) in the west, to Nikopolis (Yeşilyayla) in the eastern Pontos and to Sebastopolis (Sulusaray) to the south. From the confluence of the Iris and the Lykos in the plain of Phanaröia, near the ancient city of Eupatoria/Magnopolis², the waters find their way through the Pontic range to the coast through a series of narrow mountain gorges and emerge onto the Çarşamba Plain (the Themiskyra Plain of antiquity) some 10 km. inland from the modern town of the same name. The upper Iris and the Lykos may have been used for navigation in antiquity – a coin of Amaseia shows

* University of Southern Denmark, DK-5230 Odense M. tonnes@sdu.dk

** University of Southern Denmark, DK-5230 Odense M. marit.privat@hotmail.com

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¹ Akbulut *et al.* 2009, 647.

² Various locations have been proposed for the site of ancient Eupatoria (Olshausen 1984, 27-44; Erciyas 2006, 46) but recent discoveries by S. Lund Sørensen and the 'Where East meets West' project team, indicate a location in or near to the village of Çevresu, Tokat province.

the personified Iris sitting beside a boat³ – but the gorges of the Pontic range effectively barred boats from making the passage from the Phanaroia to the coast⁴, and no ancient text identifies the Iris or its tributaries as being navigable.

Because it receives much of its water from the melting snows of the high mountains, the flow of the Iris shows marked seasonal variation, peaking in late April⁵. From the sedimentary bedrock through which they flow, the Iris and its tributaries collect massive amounts of light-coloured silt which remains suspended and which combines with phytoplankton to give the waters their characteristic opaque, pale green appearance (whence the modern name Yeşilirmak, “green river”)⁶. Much of this material was formerly deposited in the estuary of the river, extending the alluvial plain seawards⁷. Since the direction of the coastal current is eastward, alluvial deposition was more pronounced to the east of Çarşamba. Due to the construction of hydroelectric dams, the amount of silt carried to the coast has been reduced by as much as 98%⁸ and it is possible that in the near future, we shall see a regression of the coastline of the Yeşilirmak Delta comparable to that which has already been observed at the mouth of the Kızılırmak⁹.

The Thermodon (Terme) is a much shorter river than the Iris, draining a small watershed stretching no more than 50 km. inland from the Black Sea shore, and its discharge is correspondingly less¹⁰. The river is fed by summer rainfall as well as snowmelt from the northern face of the Pontic range. At the mouth of the Thermodon, the coastline has advanced, but this is mainly due to the vast quantity of sediment formerly discharged from the adjacent Iris river and carried eastward by the coastal current. The Thermodon itself does not transport major quantities of silt.

From any point of view, the Thermodon is less spectacular than the Iris, yet in the ancient literature, the Thermodon is by far the more prominent. Strabo’s *Geography* lists “the most famous rivers” flowing into the Black Sea as follows: Ister (Danube), Tanaïs (Don), Borysthenes (Dnepr), Hypanis (Bug), Phasis (Rioni), Thermodon (Terme), Halys (Kızılırmak)¹¹. In his *Chorographia*, Pomponius Mela (Ist c. A.D.) mentions the Thermodon, Parthenios (Bartın), Halys and Phasis, but the Iris is passed over in silence¹². A treatise entitled, *On rivers and mountains*, from the IInd c. A.D., formerly attributed to Plutarch, includes the Thermodon, Sangarios (Sakarya) and Phasis, along with the Ganges, Danube, Nile and others. An anonymous early East Roman (Byzantine) author lists the Phasis, Thermodon and Sangarios as the largest rivers of Asia draining into the Black Sea¹³.

The Amazons

What first drew the attention of ancient authors was not the Thermodon River as a geographical

³ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, 257 no. 210 = Dalaison 2008, 79 type 17 no. 100.

⁴ On the navigability of the Iris, also Lebreton 2014, with further references. On the obstacle posed by the steep gorge of the Iris downstream from Eupatoria-Magnopolis, Akbulut *et al.* 2009, 655; Roelens-Flouneau 2015.

⁵ Hay 1994, 280.

⁶ Soylu – Gönülöl 2003, 17.

⁷ Hay 1994, 279 and table 2.

⁸ Hay 1993, 280-81; Akbulut *et al.* 2009, 658-659.

⁹ Kökpınar *et al.* 2007, 446; Akbulut *et al.* 2009, 655.

¹⁰ Weimert 1984, 112-113; Güler 2013, fig. 4.

¹¹ Strab. VII. 3. 6.

¹² Mela I. 105-8.

¹³ *Geographiae expositio compendiaria*, I. 29 = Müllerus 1965, 501-502.

feature, which at the most would place it on a par with the Iris – Ksenophon states that the Thermodon and the Iris are each three plethra in width¹⁴ – but its association with the mythical female warriors, the Amazons. The Amazons appear in Greek literature as early as Homer, and Herodotus locates their homeland on the banks of the Thermodon¹⁵, a theme taken up by Apollonios of Rhodes (IIIrd c. B.C.) in his narrative of Jason’s and his companions’ voyage along the Black Sea coast to Kolchis in search of the Golden Fleece.

While still in the Propontis, Jason’s men encounter the seer Phineus, who describes the Black Sea and the voyage that awaits them: sailing along the coast and having passed the “*roaring waters of the Halys*” they will come to “*a smaller stream, the Iris, rolling white-eddied into the sea*”¹⁶. After the Iris there is a headland, then there is the mouth of the Thermodon, where the river meets the sea having “*traversed the mainland*” (διαεμμένος ἠπείροιο)¹⁷.

Later in the story, the Argonauts have entered the Black Sea and Phineus’ prophecy has become real. Now, the heroes have ...

λείπον Ἄλυν ποταμόν, λείπον δ’ ἀγχίρροον Ἴριν
 ἠδὲ καὶ Ἀσσυρίας πρόχυσις χθονός ἤματι δ’ αὐτῶ
 γνάμψαν Ἀμαζονίδων ἕκαθεν λιμενήοχον ἄκρην

“... passed by the river Halys, passed by the nearby river Iris and the alluvial plain of the Assyrian¹⁸ land and on the same day rounded the headland enclosing the harbour of the Amazons”¹⁹.

The sea is rough, so the Argonauts “*there put to shore in the gulf, at the mouths of the Thermodon*” (τῆς οἴγ’ ἐν κόλπῳ, προχοαῖς ἐπι Θερμῶδοντος/κέλσαν)²⁰. The author goes on to describe the river in greater detail: from its spring in the lofty mountains “*which are called the Amazonian mounts*” the Thermodon flows into a country of hills and valleys where its stream divides into no less than ninety-four branches, some of which drain away into the sands, while others eventually reach the Black Sea²¹. Among these rivers and valleys live the Amazons, “*dwelling not together in one city, but throughout the land, divided into three tribes*” (οὐ γὰρ ὁμηγερέες μίαν ἄμ πόλιν, ἀλλ’ ἀνὰ γαῖαν/κεκριμένοι κατὰ φύλα διάτριχα ναιετάασκον)²² separated by two other groups of female warriors, the Lykastai and the “*javelin-throwing Chadesiai*”²³.

Strabon and Arrian

Strabon of Amaseia wrote his *Geography* shortly after the beginning of our era. As a native of Pontos, he is the first to provide an eyewitness account of the two rivers. (Ksenophon passed

¹⁴ Ksen. *Anab.* V. 6. 9.

¹⁵ Hdt. IV. 110.

¹⁶ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 366-368.

¹⁷ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 372.

¹⁸ Several ancient authors mention tribes of northern Anatolia known variously as Assyrians, Syrians or Leukosyrians (“white Syrians”), e.g., Hdt. II. 104. 3; Strab. XII. 3. 9; Plin. *nat.* VI. 3.

¹⁹ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 964.

²⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 970-71.

²¹ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 974-984.

²² Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 996-97.

²³ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* II. 999-1000.

through the region²⁴, but never saw the rivers for himself). Loath, perhaps, to ignore a myth that had made his Pontic homeland famous, Strabon throws a passing reference refers to “*Themiskyra, the home of the Amazons*”, then goes on to describe the rivers flowing through it:

ἐκ μὲν οὖν τούτων πληρούμενος ἀπάντων εἰς ποταμὸς διέξεισι τὸ πεδῖον Θερμῶδων καλούμενος· ἄλλος δὲ τούτῳ πάρισος, ῥέων ἐκ τῆς καλουμένης Φαναροίας τὸ αὐτὸ διέξεισι πεδῖον, καλεῖται δὲ Ἴρις. ἔχει δὲ τὰς πηγὰς ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ Πόντῳ, ῥυεῖς δὲ διὰ πόλεως μέσης Κομάνων τῶν Ποντικῶν καὶ διὰ τῆς Δαζιμωνίτιδος εὐδαίμονος πεδίου, πρὸς δύσιν εἴτ’ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς τὰς ἄρκτους παρ’ αὐτὰ τὰ Γαζιουρα, παλαιὸν βασιλεῖον, νῦν δ’ ἔρημον· εἴτ’ ἀνακάμπτει πάλιν πρὸς ἕω παραλαβὼν τὸν τε Σκύλακα καὶ ἄλλους ποταμούς, καὶ παρ’ αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς Ἀμασειας ἐνεχθεῖς τεῖχος – τῆς ἡμετέρας πατρίδος, πόλεως ἐρυμνοτάτης – εἰς τὴν Φαναροίαν πρόεισιν· ἐνταῦθα δὲ συμβαλὼν ὁ Λύκος αὐτῷ, τὰς ἀρχὰς ἐξ Ἀρμενίας ἔχων, γίνεται καὶ αὐτὸς Ἴρις· εἴθ’ ἢ Θεμισκυρα ὑποδέχεται τὸ ῥεῦμα καὶ τὸ Ποντικὸν πέλαγος.

“So one river, called the Thermodon, being supplied by all these streams, flows out through the plain; and another river similar to this, which flows out of Phanaroia, as it is called, flows out through the same plain, and is called the Iris. It has its sources in Pontos itself, and, after flowing through the middle of the city Komana in Pontos and through Dazimonitis, a fertile plain, towards the west, then turns towards the north past Gazioura itself, an ancient royal residence, though now deserted, and then bends back again towards the east, after receiving the waters of the Skylaks and other rivers, and after flowing past the very wall of Amaseia, my fatherland, a very strongly fortified city, flows on into Phanaroia. Here the Lykos River, which has its beginnings in Armenia, joins it, and itself also becomes the Iris. Then the stream is received by Themiskyra and by the Black Sea”²⁵.

Like Strabon, Arrian (IInd c. A.D.) was a native of the region, born in Nikomedia and the author of a *History of Bithynia* which is now lost. His *Periplus of the Euxine* is dedicated to the Emperor Hadrian and its style is matter-of-fact, almost laconic. From the text it is evident that much of what Arrian has to say is based on autopsy, though occasionally he also draws on the literary tradition. Although he mentions the Amazons, he takes care to distance himself one step further than Mela from the stories of the female warriors, which are presented as not only in the past, but based on hearsay:

ἀπὸ δὲ Ἀμισοῦ εἰς Ἀγκῶνα λιμένα, ἴναπερ καὶ ὁ Ἴρις εἰσβάλλει εἰς τὸν Πόντον, στάδιοι ἐξήκοντα καὶ ἑκατόν. ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ Ἰριος τῶν ἐκβολῶν ἐς Ἡράκλειον ἐξήκοντα καὶ τριακόσιοι ὄρμος ναυσίν. ἐνθένδε ἐπὶ τὸν Θερμῶδοντα ποταμὸν τεσσαράκοντα. οὗτος ὁ Θερμῶδων ἐστίν, ἴναπερ αἱ Ἀμαζόνες οἰκῆσαι λέγονται.

“From Amisos to the port of Ankon, where the river Iris flows into the Black Sea, 160 stadia. From the mouths of the Iris to the Herakleion, a port, 360 stadia. From here to the river Thermodon, 40 stadia. This is the Thermodon by which the Amazons are said to

²⁴ Ksenophon (*Anab.* V. 6. 9) reproduces the words of his informant Hekatomnimos; he himself never saw the Thermodon or the Iris at close hand.

²⁵ Strab. XII. 3. 15.

*have dwelt*²⁶.

Another *Periplus of the Black Sea* purports to be from the hand of Arrian, but in reality it is a patchwork of quotations from Arrian himself and other authors, probably compiled in the second half of the VIth c. A.D. The Thermodon is said to be πλωτός, navigable, a piece of information that is found in no other extant source²⁷. (Quintus of Smyrna, writing in the IVth c. A.D., describes the Thermodon as εὐρύπορος, “wide-flowing”²⁸, but this is surely derived from Apollonios).

The Early Latin Tradition

The Latin geographical writers of the Ist c. A.D., Pomponius Mela and the elder Pliny, both describe the landscape around the Thermodon. Mela’s description is clearly dependent on Apollonios and includes the Amazons – to which, however, he refers in the past tense (*fuere*):

Secundum Halyn urbs est Lycasto, ad Thermodonta campus. In eo fuit Themiscurum oppidum, fuere et Amazonum castra, ideo Amazonium vocant.

*“After the Halys comes the city Lykastos (and) on the Thermodon a plain. In this were formerly the town Themiskyra and a fortress of the Amazons; for this reason they call it Amazonion”*²⁹.

Writing a generation after Mela, the elder Pliny prefaced the sixth book of his *Natural History*, on the geography of Asia, with a long list of sources which includes Mela, but neither Apollonios nor Strabon. Pliny’s description covers not only the Pontic coast, but also the interior:

Cappadocia intus habet coloniam Claudii Caesaris Archelaidem quam praefluit amnis Halys, oppida Comana, quod (sc. praefluit) Salius, Neocaesaream, quod Lycus, Amasiam, quod Iris ... A Neocaesarea supra dicta Minorem Armeniam Lycus amnis disternat. Est et Coeranus intus clarus., in ora autem ab Amiso oppidum et flumen Chadisia, Lycastum, a quo Themiscyrena region, Iris flumen deferens Lycum. Civitas Ziela intus, nobilis clade Triarii et victoria C. Caesaris. In ora amnis Thermodon ortus ad castellum quod vocant Phanorian, praeterque radices Amazoni montis lapsus. Fuit oppidum eodem nomine et alia quinque, Amazonium, Themiscyra, Sotira, Amasia, Comana, nunc Matium.

“Cappadocia includes Archelaïs, a colony of Claudius Caesar, by which the Halys flows, and the towns Komana, by which the Salius flows, Neokaisareia, by which the Lykos, Amaseia, by which the Iris ... From Neokaisareia, previously mentioned, the Lykos forms the boundary of Armenia Minor. In the interior, the Koiranos is also well known and on the coast from (i.e. east of) Amisos the town and river Khadisia, and Lykastos where the territory of Themiskyra begins. The river Iris of which the Lykos is a tributary. The city of Zela in the interior, famous for the defeat of Triarius and the victory of C. Caesar. On the coast, the Thermodon river which originates at the fortress which they call Phanoria and falls at the foot of mount Amazonios. There was formerly a town of the same name and

²⁶ Arr. *Periplus* 15.

²⁷ Bekker-Nielsen 2016.

²⁸ Q. Smyrn. *Posthom.* I. 18.

²⁹ Mela I. 105.

*five others: Amazonion, Themiskyra, Sotira, Amaseia and Komana, now known as Mation*³⁰.

Although part of his description resembles that of Mela, Pliny takes no interest in the Amazons. The information on the hydrology of the region may originate from Eratosthenes, who is listed among Pliny's sources. Eratosthenes' *Geographika* has not been preserved, but is known through quotations in other authors, notably Strabon, who did not think highly of Eratosthenes and rarely misses a chance to point out an error in his work. Thus in book XI, Strabon describes the rivers of Armenia, γνωριμώτατοι δὲ Φᾶσις μὲν καὶ Λύκος εἰς τὴν Ποντικὴν ἐκπίπτοντες θάλατταν (Ερατοσθένης δ' ἀντὶ τοῦ Λύκου τίθησι Θερμώδοντα οὐκ εὖ): "*the best known being the Phasis and the Lykos which flow into the Pontic Sea; but Eratosthenes wrongly has Thermodon instead of Lykos*"³¹.

The similarity in name between 'the fortress which they call *Phanoria*' is suggestive. If both refer to the same place, i.e. if *Phanoria* was located in the plain of the Lykos³², then Pliny has misplaced the source of the Thermodon, as did Eratosthenes. As we shall see below, other writers also have had difficulty distinguishing the Thermodon from the Iris/Lykos.

Mistaken Identities

The short treatise *On rivers and mountains* belongs to an entirely different genre: paradoxography, the description of natural wonders and phenomena. The text is not, as was once believed, from the hand of Plutarch, but is of his period, i.e., the Ist or IInd c. A.D. It is preserved in a single manuscript and most of the description of the Thermodon has been lost. What remains is, however, intriguing enough. Our author, evidently less concerned with reality than with creating a credible geographical background, places the river on the *northern* shore of the Black Sea³³:

Θερμώδων ποταμὸς ἐστὶ [τῆς] Σκυθίας, τὴν προσηγορίαν εἰληφὼς ἀπὸ τοῦ συγκυρήματος· ἐκαλεῖτο δὲ πρότερον Κρύσταλλος· ἐκεῖνος γὰρ καὶ θέρους πησσεταί, τῆς τοποθεσίας τὴν τοιαύτην ἰδέαν διεξαγοῦσης· μετωνομάσθη δὲ δι' αἰτίαν τοιαύτην ...

*"Thermodon is a river of Skythia, formerly called Krystallos, taking its name from a peculiarity: it freezes in the summer, in consequence of its location. For this reason it was renamed ..."*³⁴.

Although a literary tradition, going back as far as Herodotus³⁵, connects the Amazons with the Sauromatai on the northern Black Sea shore, there is nothing to suggest that the Anatolian Thermodon had a Skythian doublet of the same name. Probably our author transposed the Thermodon across the Black Sea from Anatolia to Skythia – famous for its harsh climate – to support his claim that the waters of the river could freeze even in summer.

³⁰ Plin. *nat.* VI. 3-4.

³¹ Strab. XI. 14. 7.

³² Thus Herrmann 1938, 1759, but rejected by Olshausen – Biller 1984, 155.

³³ For the mythical connection between the river Thermodon, the Amazons and the Skythians, see Ilyushechkina 2010, 241-242.

³⁴ Ps.-Plut. *De fluviis* 15. The same author credits many other rivers with producing stones. According to Pliny (*nat.* XXXVII. 37), blue *iaspis* (probably chalcedony) was found on the banks of the Thermodon and other north Anatolian rivers; see also Ilyushechkina 2010, 291.

³⁵ Hdt. IV. 110-113.

The same theme is taken up, with variations, in the *Periegesis*, a description of the world in hexameters, composed during the reign of Hadrian by the author known as Dionysios the Periegete or Dionysios of Alexandria³⁶. Dionysios shared Pseudo-Plutarch's interest in stones and is credited with having written a *Λιθίακα* (now lost). Unlike Pseudo-Plutarch, however, he places the Thermodon and the Iris in their correct place on the southern shore of the Euxine.

The following is what Dionysios has to say about the two rivers:

τοὺς δὲ μετ' Ἀσσυρίης πρόχυσις χθονὸς ἐκτετάνυσται,
 ἔνθα δ' Ἀμαζονίδεσσιν ἀπ' οὐρεὸς Ἀρμενίου
 λευκὸν ὕδωρ προΐησιν ἐνυάλιος Θερμῶδων, ...

κείνου δ' ἄν ποταμοῖο περὶ κρυμώδεας ὄχθας
 τέμνοις κρυστάλλου καθαρὸν λίθον, οἶά τε πάχνην
 χειμερίην· δῆεις δὲ καὶ ὕδατόεσσαν ἴασπιν.
 Ἴρις δ' ἐξείησ καθαρὸν ῥόον εἰς ἅλα βάλλει.

*[772] Then stretch the Assyrian land's alluvial plains
 Where for the Amazons from the Armenian Mount
 The martial Thermodon sends its white water. ...*

*[780] Around that river's icy banks, you could
 Extract pure rock-crystal, like hoary frost
 In winter; and you'll find pellucid jasper.
 Next, Iris sends clear water to the sea"³⁷.*

The debt to Apollonios is obvious, but where the *Argonautica* placed the source of the Thermodon “in what is called the Amazonian Mount”³⁸, the *Periegesis* has “the Armenian Mount”. The two most recent commentators on this passage³⁹ both point to the parallel case of Eratosthenes who was criticized by Strabon for confusing the Armenian source of the Lykos and the ‘Amazonian’ source of the Thermodon. As a closer reading makes clear, Dionysios’ error is at once more banal and more serious: not only the sources, but the rivers themselves have been switched around.

The Iris of Apollonios flows ‘white-eddied’ into the sea⁴⁰ at the alluvial headland (πρόχυσις χθονός) of the Assyrians⁴¹; though Apollonios does not say so, its waters (those of the Lykos) come from Armenia. In the version of Dionysios, it is the waters of the Thermodon that are white, while

³⁶ On the date and identity of the author, see the discussion by Ilyuscheckkina 2010, 30-33 (with references); Lightfoot 2014, 4.

³⁷ Dion. *Perieg.* 772-74; 780-86; translation adapted from Lightfoot.

³⁸ Apoll. *Rhod. argon.* II. 977.

³⁹ Ilyuscheckkina 2010, 290; Lightfoot, *Dionysius ad loc.* (p. 434).

⁴⁰ Apoll. *Rhod. argon.* II. 368.

⁴¹ Apoll. *Rhod. argon.* II. 964.

those of the Iris are καθαρός, “clear”⁴², and the Thermodon, not the Iris, has its spring in Armenia. Dionysios associates the πρόχυσις χθονός, the alluvial plain stretching into the sea, with the Thermodon, not the Iris – against the account of Apollonios (and reality).

How did this inversion of the two rivers come about? Since the description of Apollonios runs from west to east, Dionysios, who worked in the opposite direction, may simply have made a mistake when excerpting the *Argonautica*. In any case the image of the turbid white water naturally came to mind itself when describing the “warlike Thermodon” (ἐνυάλιος Θερμώδων)⁴³. Dionysios had no first-hand knowledge of the Pontic rivers, while even in the case of those with which he or his readers might be familiar, he allows himself a good deal of poetic licence: the waters of the Tiber, for instance, are also qualified as καθαρός⁴⁴.

The *Periegesis* of Dionysios enjoyed enormous popularity throughout late Antiquity⁴⁵ and was twice translated into Latin, first by Avienus (IVth c. A.D.) and again by Priscian (VIth c. A.D.). Eustathius, Bishop of Thessaloniki in the later XIIth c., devoted part of his working life to writing commentaries on four important literary works: the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the poems of Pindar – and the *Periegesis* of Dionysios⁴⁶. As late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Greek text or its Latin versions were being published and studied throughout Europe⁴⁷. Thus Dionysios’ inverted description of the two Pontic rivers came to be received wisdom for close to 1,500 years.

In lines 780-783, we were told that the Iris has a “clear stream” (καθαρὸν ῥόον). whereas the Thermodon produces a “clear stone” (καθαρὸν λίθον). If the inherent contradiction was not apparent to Dionysios himself, it was evidently noticed by Avienus, who chose to omit lines 780 to 782 from his Latin version of the *Periegesis*⁴⁸. While Avienus readily accepts Dionysios’ characterization of the Iris as clear (*purus*)⁴⁹ he does not share his description of the Thermodon as ‘warlike’; instead, he refers once to the ‘broadly rising’ (*late surgens*)⁵⁰ Thermodon and on another occasion to the “streams of the wide Thermodon”, vasti ... flumina Thermodontis⁵¹, recalling Apollonios and the “wide-flowing” river described by Quintus of Smyrna.

In the Latin version of the VIth c. translator, Priscian, the descriptions are reversed. Priscian’s Thermodon is every bit as warlike as that of Dionysios:

.. qua gurgite vasto
inter Amazonidas Thermodon, Martius amnis

⁴² Dion. *Perieg.* 783.

⁴³ Dion. *Perieg.* 774 (Ilyushechkina 2010: ‘mörderisch’). For a rather more complex interpretation of this passage, see Lightfoot 2014, 434: “pouring forth its white Indo-Aryan waters, the river follows a cartographic route from the Armenian mountains to the sea”.

⁴⁴ Dion. *Perieg.* 352.

⁴⁵ Ilyushechkina 2010, 304-309.

⁴⁶ Kazhdan 1984, 132-133.

⁴⁷ Amato 2005, 54; 180-181.

⁴⁸ Av. *Or. Ter.* 955-56. The anonymous scholiast on Dionysios also notes the problem of the ‘white’ Thermodon producing a clear stone; he briefly considers the emendation “warm water” (θερμὸν ὕδωρ) but rejects it: *Scholia in Dionysium* ad 774.

⁴⁹ Av. *Or. Ter.* 956.

⁵⁰ Av. *Or. Ter.* 950.

⁵¹ Av. *Or. Ter.* 856.

Armenium linquens montem descendit in aequor.

”... where, whirling wildly,
the Thermodon, river of Mars, coming from the Armenian mount
flows down to the plain among the Amazons”⁵².

Despite its violent nature, Priscian’s Thermodon was able to produce rock crystal “along its icy banks”: *rigidas prope frigore ripas*⁵³. On the other hand, the Iris, though flowing “in a steady stream from the hills to the sea”: *Iris continuo liquidus decurrit in aequor*⁵⁴, is not said to be *purus*.

The story of the Thermodon’s crystal-producing qualities is repeated by Eustathius of Thessaloniki in his commentary on Diogenes’ *Periegesis*, adding that the Thermodon was formerly called *Krystallos* because it “freezes in summer, in consequence of its location” – a word-for-word quotation from pseudo-Plutarch which Eustathius prudently qualifies with the reservation *ὡς οἱ παλαιοὶ φασί*, “as was formerly told”⁵⁵.

Concluding Remarks

While early descriptions of the Iris and the Thermodon were based, albeit in most cases indirectly, on actual experience, later writers from Pseudo-Dionysios onwards viewed the Pontic shore more as a literary landscape (like the worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien or Harry Potter) than as a real space, and geography more as a literary form than as a branch of science. Factual geography, as Mela laments in the introduction to his *Chorography*, was “laborious work with little opportunity for eloquence”: *impeditum opus et facundiae minime capax*⁵⁶ and the result was not in great demand among the educated public, which much preferred the elegant poetry of Dionysios. Apparently no one found it worth their while to compare the text of the geographical writers with the actual landscape, and despite its inconsistencies, the description of Dionysios remained unchallenged for more than 1,500 years⁵⁷.

⁵² Prisc. *Perieg.* 747-749.

⁵³ Prisc. *Perieg.* 752-755.

⁵⁴ Prisc. *Perieg.* 749.

⁵⁵ Eust. 782. The Greek κρύσταλλος can signify both “ice” and “rock crystal”.

⁵⁶ Mela I. 1.

⁵⁷ The first modern researcher to draw attention to the discrepancy between the waters of the Iris as described by Dionysios and its actual appearance was W. Hamilton (1842, I, 283), who describes the river as “muddy and yellow”. The problem was dismissed by E. Delage (1930, 170) as “une invention poétique”.

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