

The Golden Arrow of Abaris

Connecting Ancient Greek and Central Asian Shamanic Traditions

Who Was Abaris?

In ancient Greek literature, there appears a mysterious figure called Abaris the Hyperborean—a traveler and seer who supposedly journeyed to Greece carrying a golden arrow. According to the stories, this arrow was no ordinary weapon. It served as his passport, his means of transport, and his instrument for healing and prophecy.

For centuries, scholars dismissed Abaris as pure mythology. But in recent decades, historians like Peter Kingsley have challenged this view, proposing that the golden arrow actually represents real cultural exchange between Greece and the shamanic traditions of Central Asia. This essay explores that intriguing possibility.

What the Ancient Sources Tell Us

The earliest mention of Abaris appears in Herodotus, the fifth-century Greek historian. In his *Histories*, Herodotus notes that Abaris was a Hyperborean who "carried the arrow around the whole world without eating anything." Though Herodotus himself seems doubtful about these tales, he confirms that the arrow was central to the legend.

Later Greek writers—Plato, Strabo, and others—also mention Abaris, often connecting him to Pythagoreanism and Apollo. The most detailed accounts come from writers who lived centuries later. Porphyry describes how Abaris came from the far north, carried an arrow as a symbol of Apollo, and traveled through lands healing plagues and purifying regions. According to some accounts, he didn't just carry the arrow—he flew upon it through the air, as if it were a magical vehicle.

Iamblichus adds another detail: Abaris eventually gave his golden arrow to Pythagoras as a sign of friendship and recognition, suggesting the transfer of sacred knowledge between them.

Interpreting the Arrow

What did this golden arrow actually represent?

In Greek terms, the answer seems obvious. Arrows belonged to Apollo, god of prophecy, healing, and archery. Apollo's arrows could bring both plague and cure. As a priest or messenger of Apollo, Abaris would naturally carry an arrow as a symbol of his divine authority.

But Peter Kingsley argues there's more to it than that. The arrow's specific functions—as a vehicle for flight, a healing tool, and an object carried in circular journeys—suggest something beyond Greek religion. These features point toward shamanic practices, where the arrow becomes an instrument for ecstatic spiritual travel and transformation.

Central Asian Shamanism: The Missing Link

Here's where the comparison becomes striking. In the shamanic traditions of Mongolia, Tibet, and Siberia, arrows hold central importance.

Among Mongolian peoples, special envoys carried golden arrows as credentials—proof of their authority. In Siberian and Central Asian shamanism, arrows served as "instruments of magical flight" and "soul-carriers." Shamans would use them to journey to the spirit world, communicate with spiritual beings, and combat malevolent forces. Because arrows fly, they became natural symbols for spiritual travel.

In Tibetan practices, ritual arrows remain important ceremonial objects, used to invoke protective deities and establish sacred space. Shamans would enter trance states while "riding" arrows in healing rituals.

Kingsley notes something particularly intriguing: the Avars, a Central Asian people, had shamans who served as ambassadors and carried golden arrows as tokens of their authority. The similarity between "Abaris" and "Avar" may be more than coincidental—it might indicate a real historical connection between these traditions.

Kingsley's Case: The Shaman-Ambassador

In his book *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*, Kingsley makes a detailed argument. He points out that Abaris appears in Greek literature as an envoy from the far north and east—and that he exhibits all the recognizable features of a shaman familiar to anyone who knows Asian traditions.

The parallels are precise and numerous:

- He carries a special golden arrow as a token of his mission
- He carries it in a great circle around the land
- The arrow doesn't just carry him—it carries him as he flies through the air
- He communicates with the arrow as if it were alive

- It steers itself, sustains him in ecstasy, clears paths through impossible terrain, and overcomes every obstacle
- With its help, he heals people, heals the land, controls the weather, and banishes plagues

Now compare this to Central Asian practice: arrows routinely carried by ambassadors as mission credentials; golden arrows; arrows carried in circles by "arrow-circulators"; shamans who rode arrows through the sky while the arrows seemed to steer themselves; shamans speaking to their arrows as the arrows removed obstacles and cleared paths.

For Kingsley, these specific parallels cannot be accidental. They suggest a shared cultural system spanning Eurasia, linking the Greek world with Central Asia through trade routes and human migration.

The Academic Debate

Not everyone agrees with Kingsley. Classical scholar Jan Bremmer has criticized his work, arguing that Kingsley selects evidence selectively and makes anachronistic comparisons. Bremmer points out that the Avars appear in historical records roughly a thousand years after Abaris lived, making a direct connection problematic. He insists that the Greek sources are better understood within their own cultural context, not through Central Asian parallels.

Bremmer is harsh in his assessment, calling Kingsley's arguments based on "non-evidence" and describing the idea of Greek shamanism as "a modern myth."

Leonid Zhmud makes a similar point, warning against projecting ethnographic data from one culture onto another. While superficial similarities might exist, he argues, the underlying religious systems are fundamentally different.

However, other respected scholars defend Kingsley's approach. Walter Burkert, a leading figure in the study of Greek religion, praised Kingsley's "worldwide scope" and "overwhelming expertise." Burkert himself has suggested that shamanic elements may have influenced Greek religion, particularly in ecstatic practices.

The real debate comes down to methodology: How should we responsibly compare cultures across time and space? What counts as genuine evidence for cultural transmission? Kingsley's work challenges conventional classical scholarship, pushing for a more interdisciplinary and integrated perspective.

What the Arrow Really Means

The golden arrow of Abaris is more than a curious detail from ancient mythology. It's a symbol that reveals something important: the ancient world was deeply interconnected.

Ideas and practices flowed across continents along trade routes. Greek civilization had deeper, more diverse roots than we often acknowledge. The figure of Abaris—whether we view him as historical or legendary—embodies these connections.

Kingsley's parallels are compelling and provoke genuine thought. They remind us that the boundaries we draw between cultures and traditions are often artificial. The shamanic arrow practices of Central Asia and the mysterious golden arrow carried by Abaris may indeed represent a shared heritage that stretched across the ancient Eurasian world.

The debate will continue. But the golden arrow stands as a symbol of connection—proof that the ancient world was far more integrated, far more complex, and far more fascinating than we sometimes recognize.

Key Sources

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