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On the Meteorite of Aigospotamoi

ABSTRACT: The meteorite of the year 467/466 BC whose fall was observed near Aigospotamoi cannot be identical with the object described by Pliny in NH 2, 149.

Keywords: Meteorites, comets, Anaxagoras, Pliny the Elder, Pausanias

While I am a notorious sceptic when it comes to the history of ancient astronomy, I do not doubt that Anaxagoras explained the meteorite which fell at Aigospotamoi, on the Northern side of the Dardanelles, in the year 467 or 466 BC; the latter date being the more likely one if said meteorite was indeed a fragment of Halley's comet, but this, while it sounds plausible, is not nearly as probable as RICHARD JANKO assumes.¹ Most meteorites are fragments of asteroids or other interplanetary objects, not of comets. But, as MARTIN WEST pointed out, the appearance of a great comet might easily have prompted Anaxagoras to conclude that „some of the furniture of heaven was slipping“ (see Plut.Lys.12,2 = DK 59 A 12) and therefore predict the fall of a large stone from heaven; so even if he could not possibly have predicted the fall of this particular meteorite he may be supposed to have predicted the fall of a meteorite.² But one problem remains: if this meteorite was as big as a cartload (*qui lapis etiam nunc ostenditur magnitudine vehis*), as the Elder Pliny claims in NH 2, 149 (DK 59 A 83), why has no trace of its impact, e. g. a crater, been discovered to date? Even RICHARD JANKO confesses himself puzzled.³

There is a simple explanation: the object shown at Aigospotamoi was not the meteorite of 467/466, i. e. it was either not a meteorite at all or, if it was, it must have been considerably older. The locals probably made an honest mistake; indeed, even today only experts using sophisticated techniques can identify meteorites, particularly stony meteorites, i. e. the more frequent type, with any certainty. Alternatively, the locals may have decided to show their neighbours (and possibly sightseers as well) an impressive looking stone lying in the vicinity. In this case the locals may or may not have found the actual meteorite shortly after it fell (they would have seen a fireball and

1 R. JANKO, Eclipse and plague: Themistocles, Pericles, Anaxagoras and the Athenians' war on science, JHS 140 (2020), 213–237; on the meteorite p. 216–219. I must stress, however, that I do not endorse JANKO'S „War on Science“ narrative but the sceptical position of, among others, K. DOVER, The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society, Talanta 7 (1976), 24–54, repr. in id., The Greeks and their Legacy II, Oxford 1988, 135–158, and K. RAAFLAUB, Den Olympier herausfordern? In: L. BURCKHARDT / J. VON UNGERN-STERNBERG (eds.), Große Prozesse im antiken Athen, Munich 2000, 96–113 and 266–270.

2 M. L. WEST, Anaxagoras and the meteorite of 467 B. C., The Journal of the British Astronomical Association 70 (1960), 368–369.

3 As in my note 1, 217 n. 37

probably heard a bang or rumble and gone to investigate), but if they did find and correctly identify said object it would not have been much bigger than the smallish object shown at Abydos (mentioned by Pliny in the following paragraph: *modicus quidem*). I suspect, however, that the inhabitants of Aigospotamoi never found the object they were looking for. This often happens even today: metallic meteorites, while easier to identify than stony ones, are notoriously short-lived because most of them are rich in iron (or, to be more precise, ferronickel). Many metallic meteorites simply rust and crumble away before they can be found. Cometary meteorites (bear in mind comets are mainly “dirty snowballs” consisting of water, ammonia and methane) tend to leave even less, if any, substantial traces. In other words: particularly if the Aigospotamoi meteorite was indeed part of the debris from Halley’s comet, the locals may have decided, whether in good faith or not, to show sightseers another stone, chosen because of its colour which suggested it had been burnt (*colore adusto*) and because of its size – a cartload. This was not the only sizeable mislabeled object shown to travellers in the classical world – a cartload is also the size of each of the two stones which, according to the citizens of Panopeus, were what was left over from the clay Prometheus had used to create the first humans and which, according to Pausanias 10, 4, 4, smelled rather like human skin: μέγεθος μὲν ἑκάτερος ὡς φόρτον ἀποχρῶντα ἀμάξης εἶναι [...] παρέχονται δὲ καὶ ὁσμὴν ἐγγύτατα χρωτὶ ἀνθρώπου· ταῦτα ἔτι λείπεσθαι τοῦ πηλοῦ λέγουσιν ἐξ οὗ καὶ ἅπαν ὑπὸ τοῦ Προμηθέως τὸ γένος πλάσθῃναι τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Note that those are only two of the many misidentified objects listed by Pausanias.

Addendum:

According to the introductory showcase of the meteorite collection in the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, stony meteorites are even more short-lived than ferrous ones.

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