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**THE ROCK-HURLING MONKEYS
OF INDIA**

The paper discusses the connections of Megasthenes F 27b with Greek histories of Alexander the Great and with Indian epic traditions.

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According to my own words (in Karttunen 1997, 177): “A fragment of Megasthenes¹ mentions monkeys which climb precipices and roll stones upon their pursuers. Tailed hairy satyrs rolling stones are also found in Aelianus *N. An.* 16, 21 (where a reference to the Prasii perhaps shows the Megasthenian origin²). They are found in the country of Colunda (Κόλουνδα)³ near the mountains bordering on India.” What I did then not understand is that this idea of monkeys rolling or hurling stones against enemies seems to be well known also in Indian sources.

In both epics monkeys are often presented as warriors. In the *Mahābhārata* 5, 128, 41f. we read how at the gate of Saubha the chief of monkeys (*vānarendra*) named Dvidida buried Keśava under a mighty avalanche of rocks.⁴ But however valiantly he did his best to capture Mādhava, he could not hold him there.

In the Yuddhakāṇḍa of the *Rāmāyaṇa* we meet the whole monkey army besieging Laṅkā. Already in the *Rāmāyaṇa* 1, 16, 13 it was mentioned that all Rāma’s monkeys used stones as weapons (*śilapraharaṇāḥ sarve*). Of course such a thing is not really remarkable with monkeys who also have a competent bridge engineer among them. However, although in Bālakāṇḍa they are even said to be capable of using divine missiles, in the Yuddhakāṇḍa they only use uprooted trees and boulders beside their hands, feet and teeth.⁵ Clearly, these two were thought to be “monkeyish” kinds of weapons. I have traced five passages in the Yuddha mentioning boulders used by monkeys as weapons, often with trees.⁶

The same idea is also found in later Rāma literature. Bhāsa has stone-hurling monkeys in the *Abhiṣekanāṭaka*.⁷ In the *Agnipurāṇa* 10,

¹ Megasthenes F 27b in Strabo 15, 1, 56. On monkeys and apes in Western classical literature see McDermott 1937 (p. 72ff. on Indian monkeys).

² Long-tailed monkeys in the country of Prasii briefly in Megasthenes F 21a in Strabo 15, 1, 37. But they are tame and not mischievous, not rolling stones. But a better parallel to this is Aelianus 16, 10 and in 17, 39 he directly refers to Megasthenes (F 21b).

³ A possible parallel is Pliny *N.h.* 7, 2, 24 about satyrs in *Catarcludorum regio* in the mountains of eastern India, although stones are not mentioned and these satyrs are mentioned among fabulous peoples.

⁴ *Mbh* 5, 128, 41 *saubhadvāre vānarendro dvidido nāma nāmataḥ / śilāvarṣeṇa mahatā chādayām āsa keśavam //... Cf. Mbh* 3, 23, 10.

⁵ *R* 6, introduction to Princeton translation p. 20.

⁶ *R* 6, 32, 7 *sālatālaśilāyudhāḥ*; 6, 42, 7.9ff.22; 6, 44, 5f.; 6, 57, 42.44ff.; mountain peaks in 6, 44, 11. Possibly also 6, 40, 62. Further in 5, 60, 20. The same also in the Rāma story of the *Mbh* 3, 264, 30–32.

⁷ *AṢN* 6, 4+ *śailā kṣipyante vānarair nairṛteṣu*.

7 the monkeys allied with Rāma killed demons with nails, teeth and stones.⁸ Bhavabhūti, with poetic exaggeration, made the monkey king Vālin claim that the monkeys have mountains as their weapons.⁹ These they also later use in battle, hurling them against the gates of Lañkā (*MVC* 6, 24). This is also depicted in art.¹⁰

In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 10, 67, 2–28 we meet again the powerful monkey Dvidida. To avenge the death of Naraka, he set fire on towns, uprooted hills, caused floods, etc. He climbed a tree, challenged Balarāma and fought with him with uprooted trees and (verse 23) dispatching a shower of rocks, but was finally killed by the hero.

It is in fact claimed that Indian macaques really have the custom of hurling stones against peoples.¹¹ It is true that monkeys (and especially apes) are better in using tools than earlier was believed, but some very good zoological source is needed here, before we are inclined to believe it (Prater 1980, 27, at least, is skeptic, but his book was first published in 1948). In my own experience, the langurs seem to be much more aggressive than macaques, but even they use no weapons. Perhaps Megasthenes had rather heard some Indian stories of the monkey warriors of the Rāma legend. Here it is not necessary to discuss the theory, in my opinion unnecessary, of the monkeys in the *Rāmāyaṇa* being in fact some human tribe of foresters.¹²

In the *Arabian Nights* (Sindbad's fifth adventure, p. 611 in Lane's translation) we meet monkeys who are hurling coconuts instead of stones.

Finally, let us return briefly to Megasthenes. Immediately before his stone-rolling satyrs the fragment mentions a people in the Caucasus openly practicing sex. Stein (1932, 242) thinks that the account must come from Alexander's histories. There are indeed accounts of Indian monkeys there. In the subhills of the Himalaya (Emodi) the Macedonians saw numerous long-tailed monkeys, which they first thought to be

⁸ *AP* 10, 7 *vānarā rākṣasāñ jaghnur nakhadantaśīlādibhiḥ*.

⁹ *MVC* 5, 51 *girayo yair vānarāḥ śastriṇaḥ*, in 5, 32 they also hurl mountain tops (*śikhara*). See further 6, 51 on Hanumat.

¹⁰ According to Geer 2008, 388f. Hanumat is often depicted running after Rāvaṇa with a mountain in his hand.

¹¹ McDermott 1937, 78 refers to Valentin Ball who claims to have himself observed such behaviour with Bengal macaque (rhesus monkey). The same reference is given with more detail by McCrindle 1901, 59 quoting Ball's own words. According to this, it happened in the Western Himalayas, near Nainital.

¹² Cf. R. Lefeber in her introduction to the Princeton *Rāmāyaṇa* 4, 37ff.

hostile soldiers (Strabo 15, 1, 29 and Diodorus 17, 90). They were said to be strong and clever, eager to imitate, but not hostile. In any case, our fragment 27b rapidly lists some Megasthenian curiosities and it is by no means clear that the stone-rolling satyrs belong to the Caucasus (Hindukush) and even if they do, the Caucasus can also be a somewhat inexact reference to the Himalaya.

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