

# Ethnicity and Identity in Herodotus

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## 9 Herodotus' Memphite sources

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## 9 Herodotus' Memphite sources

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### Introduction

Herodotus' accounts on Egypt provided medieval and modern scholars with a heterogeneous picture of the Nile valley and pharaonic civilization. Although Herodotus certainly aims at celebrating the 'remembrance of actions of men' (from the proem) the way he looks at this foreign land and people lies well beyond the historical scope of his work *in stricto sensu* and is greatly shaped by scientific reasoning. The history of Egypt is introduced through geographical and 'ethnographical' observation, and is interspersed with zoological and botanical comments, providing a vivid background on the life in the Nile valley. Herodotus' inquiry is deeply influenced by scientific, philosophical, and rhetorical developments.

This integrative view of the land and its people has deeply shaped the Western vision of Egypt. Nearly 2,300 years after Herodotus' journey, when Bonaparte led his expedition to Egypt, a similar way of looking at this land reemerged. The *Description de l'Égypte* unveils before our eyes the geography, botany, zoology, ethnography, and archaeology of the land of the pharaohs,<sup>1</sup> providing the first integrated scientific publication of an entire ecosystem. Curiously enough, the first scientific expedition to Egypt would provide a wealth of illustrations of landscapes, animals and plants, cities and monuments revealing to Western eyes the same mental images narrated by Herodotus more than 2,000 years ago.

Only in the aftermath of Napoleon's campaign, with Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphic writing, could Egyptian sources start to be studied directly by contemporary scholars, revealing for the first time the enormous inconsistencies of the picture provided by Herodotus on the history of Egypt. In this respect, it is notable that the surviving fragments of the work of Manetho, who lived under the rule of Ptolemy II (246–221 BC), are far more consistent with the Egyptian sources. Indeed, his division into 30 dynasties is still in use by Egyptologists and provides the backbone of pharaonic historiography.<sup>2</sup> This fact alone reveals a paradox. The Hellenized Egyptian priest Manetho wrote the *History of Egypt* in Greek, and he was certainly knowledgeable in the writings of Herodotus. However, in terms of the historical account, he greatly surpassed his master both in the consistency of his methodology and in the reliability of his sources.

## The Greek sources of Herodotus

Manetho was knowledgeable in hieroglyphic texts, and, unlike Herodotus, he had the advantage of undertaking a direct inquiry of the Egyptian written sources. He did have access to the Royal Lists and to other records concerning the main achievements of each reign.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Herodotus noticed, the Egyptians had developed highly sophisticated methods for the reckoning of time (Hdt. 2.4).<sup>4</sup> Chronology and kingship had always been a matter of the highest importance in Egyptian royal ideology and the precision of pharaonic records largely explains the outstanding results achieved by Manetho. Not surprisingly, using the historiographical method borrowed from Herodotus, Manetho synthesized the Egyptian sources in a way never achieved before.

Herodotus used three methods in his historical approach: observation (autopsy), surmise on the basis of considered opinion, and inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Although he relied on oral accounts (2.99.1), he clearly enjoyed access to Greek written sources as well. He used direct observation to describe the monumental sites,<sup>6</sup> the land,<sup>7</sup> and the life on the river banks.<sup>8</sup> In general terms, the corpus of his observations provides a reliable account of life in the Nile valley. Moreover, Herodotus also undertakes a personal inquiry (2.99.1). It is clear that his privileged sources were the Greeks settled in Egypt, but these were only useful for the recent past (2.154.4):<sup>9</sup>

From the date of the original settlement of these persons in Egypt (Carian and Ionian mercenaries), we Greeks, through our intercourse with them, have acquired an accurate knowledge of the several events in Egyptian history, from the reign of Psammetikhos onwards.<sup>10</sup>

Herodotus also mentions Egyptian sources, and he is keen in showing that he consulted with the priests from the most important temples of Egypt (in Thebes, Memphis, and Heliopolis), which in Book II are quoted on several occasions (2.2.5, 3.1, 10.1, 13.1, 19.1; 28; 54–5, 73.1, 99–143). However, the ultimate soundness of the information provided by these sources is highly questionable, to say the least.

In fact, in terms of the historical account itself two major sequences are clearly distinguishable in terms of historical accuracy and merit. The first account going back to the origins of Egypt continues down to the Kushite dominion (2.99–142), while the second part deals with the Dodecarchy (Libyan Period) and the Late Period down to Amasis (2.147–82).<sup>11</sup> Herodotus' recent history of Egypt stands out as one of the most important historical sources for the period,<sup>12</sup> but the historical account provided for the more distant past of Egypt is imprecise and filled with distorted and confused statements. This situation has been interpreted as resulting from an insufficient knowledge of the Egyptian sources themselves concerning their own traditions:

The general opinion of older scholars that they were low-grade members of the hierarchy has little to be said for it. It is far from improbable that

Herodotus had access to high-ranking priests, and the distorted and confused information which he obtained from them, particularly on history, is by no means inconsistent with that view. Egyptian priests were certainly not as well informed as we are inclined to think.<sup>13</sup>

However, this view of the Egyptian priesthood is not consistent with the breadth and scope of the works achieved by Manetho, nor with the prevailing dynamism and vitality of Demotic culture.<sup>14</sup> Behind the sharp contrast between the two historical accounts provided by Herodotus we may certainly find a far more complex situation.

The precision of the account on the recent history of Egypt is largely related to the close association of the Greek settlers with the pharaonic establishment during the Late Period. In fact, Greek merchants and soldiers are detected in Egypt long before the sixth century BC.<sup>15</sup> Greek mercenaries are identifiable in the early years of the reign of Psammetikhos I and played an important political role in winning Egyptian independence from Assyrian domination and in the re-establishment of a unified government in the country by 656 BC.<sup>16</sup> Greek and Carian mercenaries, as well as Jews and Phoenicians, guaranteed its security from external attack and provided a counterweight within the country to the power of the *makhimoi*, the native Egyptian warrior class, who were in fact Libyans in origin, and posed a significant threat to royal authority.<sup>17</sup>

These foreign troops were settled in permanent camps on the northeastern frontier, providing a barrier against Asian invaders.<sup>18</sup> Herodotus himself informs us that *stratopeda* ('camps') were established between Bubastis and the sea on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile. He claims that these camps were occupied without a break for over a century. The preference shown to these foreign troops was far from welcome to the *makhimoi* and tensions between the native Egyptian warrior class and the Greek mercenaries eventually occurred.<sup>19</sup> According to Herodotus, during the reign of Psammetikhos I a large contingent of *makhimoi* mutinied and withdrew from Egypt to a site that may well have lain somewhere in the vicinity of the Blue Nile and Gezira area near Omdurman (2.30). By the time of Apries (589–570 BC), the situation eventually reached a disastrous level when the king was swept from the throne by a backlash from the *makhimoi* against the privileged position of Greeks and Carians in the military establishment.<sup>20</sup> This revolt cost Apries the crown and ultimately his life (2.161.3–4, 163, 169). His successor, Ahmose I, Amasis to the Greeks (570–526 BC), prudently withdrew the Greek mercenaries from their camps on the northeastern frontier and stationed them in the city of Memphis, with this redeployment creating in that city the half-castes called Karomemphitai and Hellenomemphitai, resulting from Greek and Egyptian marriages (2.154.3).<sup>21</sup>

Greek merchants were also encouraged to settle in Egypt early in the reign of Psammetikhos I (664–610 BC). By the end of the seventh century the Milesians had established a major commercial centre at Naukratis.<sup>22</sup> This well-documented trading centre was established on the Canopic branch of the Nile not far from the capital of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, Sais, and possessed excellent communications for internal and external trade. Excavation there has revealed a series of

sacred enclosures dedicated to Greek cults, a scarab factory producing material for export, and a Late Period platform that may have been military in purpose but could equally well have had civilian, administrative functions.<sup>23</sup>

Closely related to the political strategy of the Saite kings, these Greek communities certainly provided Herodotus with sound historical sources for this period, most of them available in written record.<sup>24</sup>

### **Herodotus' tour of Egypt**

The economic growth fostered by the Saite kings would not have been possible without an easy circulation of goods and people. This concern was extended far beyond the borders of Egypt. Herodotus mentions that Nekau (Nekho) constructed a fleet of war galleys with rams, some of which were used in the Mediterranean and others in the Red Sea. Indeed, it may be that the abortive Red Sea canal was intended, in part, to facilitate the transfer of naval forces from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean as circumstances required.<sup>25</sup>

Under the Persian occupation this policy was kept and when Herodotus visited Egypt, under Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC),<sup>26</sup> he found excellent conditions for travelling. Moreover, Greek merchants and mercenaries settled in the country certainly provided Herodotus with an important network of contacts that would make his journey easier.

Herodotus explicitly mentions several localities from the Delta down to the First Cataract and, at first sight, we are tempted to accept that Herodotus sojourned all over the country and visited all the main sites. We may easily assume that he went to every place that he mentions, but the actual extent of his visits is highly debatable to say the least.

In fact, when examined in detail, his observations reveal a sharp contrast between the vivid description of certain places and the lacunose, not to say evasive, references to others. Generally speaking, his observations about Egyptian territory are correct from the geographical standpoint. He points to the geographical particularities of the Nile Delta – to which he refers correctly as an alluvial land (2.5) – and those of the territory of the Nile Valley up to the First Cataract (2.9). He also makes accurate descriptions of the temples he visited. Regarding the description of the monuments, in particular, it is clear that Herodotus enjoys providing as much detail as possible. The Temple of Bastet at Boubastis – referred to by him as the Temple of Artemis – is perhaps the best example in this respect, as it provoked in Herodotus a strong aesthetic admiration. Not only did Herodotus consider it the most beautiful of the temples that he had seen but its description is actually quite helpful in terms of reconstruction of an archaeological site of which little has survived (2.137.5). Despite the thorough description of the site, it is clear that his account focusses on the exterior impressions of the sacred island, and no important feature of the inner precinct is mentioned, suggesting that Herodotus could do no more than see it from outside.

However, an insider view is provided of the temple precinct at Sais, where Herodotus was able to enter the sacred precinct. There he saw the royal tombs of

the Saite kings (2.169)<sup>27</sup> and wooden colossal statues that he interpreted as depicting the servants of Mykerinos' daughter. Most importantly, he was able to see the venerated image of the cow, which he was told was the coffin of Mykerinos' daughter (2.130).

According to his own account, Herodotus was initiated into the Osirian mysteries in the Temple of Sais (2.170–1). Those rituals were performed in the sacred precinct of the Goddess Neith, today almost completely lost. Herodotus provides an important description of the site (170–1):

Here too, in this same precinct [of Athena at Sais], is the burial-place of one whom I think it not right to mention in such a connection. It stands behind the temple, against the backwall, which it entirely covers. There are also some large stone obelisks in the enclosure, and there is a lake near them, adorned with an edging of stone. In form it is circular, and in size/ . . . On this lake it is said that the Egyptians present by night his sufferings whose name I refrain from mentioning, and this representation they call their Mysteries. I know well the whole course of the proceedings in these ceremonies, but they shall not pass my lips.

Herodotus accurately describes a ritual tomb of Osiris, and this account is consistent with the widespread use of Osirian temples in almost every sacred precinct during the Late Period. These crypts were usually shaped as a sacred hill and built next to a sacred lake.<sup>28</sup> However, Herodotus seems to think that the structure which existed at Sais was the actual tomb of Osiris, apparently unaware that many other such 'Osirian tombs' existed in Egyptian territory.<sup>29</sup>

Another Egyptian monument that Herodotus classifies as a wonder "greater than the Pyramids" is the Labyrinth (2.148.3), the funerary complex of the Pharaoh Moeris (Amenemhat III) in the Fayum oasis. His descriptions are again extremely valuable not only to reconstruct the original splendor of the site, but also for understanding that such an immense structure was still easily accessible for tourists more than a thousand years after its construction (2.148–9). Also fascinating is the description of the two enthroned *colossi* of Moeris facing the lake, which Herodotus classifies as a wonder greater than the Labyrinth itself. He states that nearly in the centre of the lake stood two high platforms, each crowned with a colossal quartzite statue of the king sitting upon a throne. Today the statues are lost but the platforms where they stood have been located, giving credit to the description of Herodotus (2.149.2):

It is manifestly an artificial excavation, for nearly in the center there stand two pyramids, rising to the height of fifty fathoms above the surface of the water, and extending as far beneath, crowned each of them with a colossal statue sitting upon a throne. Thus, these pyramids are one hundred fathoms high, which is exactly a furlong [*stadion*] of six hundred feet: the fathom being six feet in length, or four cubits, which is the same thing, since a cubit measures six, and a foot four palms.

It is worth noting that the Labyrinth itself was described by six classical writers, including Manetho (*BNJ* 609 F 3b), Diodorus Siculus (1.61), Strabo (17.1.3, 37, 42 C787, 811, 813), Pliny (*NH* 36.13), and Pomponius Mela (1.9.56) revealing that the Fayum area was not only easily accessible, but was in fact a favourite destination for visitors touring Egypt, possibly as important as the Giza pyramid field, of which Herodotus also has much to say (2.8.3, 10.1; 12.1, 15.2; 125.6; 127.1). The Great Pyramid itself is described as “built entirely of polished stone, fitted together with the utmost care”, which in fact corresponds to the archaeological evidence. In Giza, Herodotus reveals a great deal of interest in the gigantic causeway that linked the pyramid on the plateau downward to the valley temple. This once impressive structure was still standing at that time (2.124):

It took ten years’ oppression of the people to make the causeway for the conveyance of the stones, a work not much inferior, in my judgment, to the pyramid itself. This causeway is five furlongs in length, ten fathoms wide, and in height, at the highest part, eight fathoms. It is built of polished stone and is covered with carvings of animals.

Such description is fully consistent with the archaeological evidence too.<sup>30</sup> A sacred crypt is reported to have been built in Giza, which Kheops intended as vaults for his own use; these last were built on a sort of island, surrounded by water introduced from the Nile by a canal (2.124).

This description clearly reminds us of the *Osireion* of the Temple of Seti I in Abydos, also designed as an underground crypt. During the Nile flood, it was partially filled with phreatic water recreating the primordial hill in its midst. Although not thoroughly published, evidence of such a structure was found near the causeway of Kafre at Giza, comprising three successive shafts and two chambers, the lower one carved 25 metres underground.<sup>31</sup> The central sarcophagus was surrounded by infiltrating water, reminiscent of the *Osireion* of Seti I.<sup>32</sup> This symbolic tomb of Osiris could not have been built before the Late Period.

The vivid accounts that Herodotus gives of these monuments are highly contrasting with his parsimonious words regarding well-known monuments of Thebes, such as the Temple of Amun-Re in Karnak, the avenue of sphinxes, the Temple of Luxor, or the *Colossi* of Memnon that stood on the Theban West Bank. In fact, the only reference to the Temple of Karnak is misleading, making reference to the “inner sanctuary, which is a spacious chamber with a multitude of colossal statues in wood” (2.143). According to Herodotus, these statues depicted the complete genealogy of the priests of Amun. Although statues of high dignitaries were common in temple precincts,<sup>33</sup> they were not exactly colossal. Moreover, while genealogy played an important role in priestly communities from the Third Intermediate Period onwards,<sup>34</sup> there is no archaeological record of such galleries, except for the kings themselves. In fact, in the precinct of Karnak, the Chamber of the Ancestors – now kept in the Louvre Museum – lists the lineage of 61 pharaohs from Djoser (2667–2648 BC) to the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550–1295 BC).<sup>35</sup> During the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 BC), this part of the temple – the

Festival Hall of Thutmose III – was used for the initiation of the priests and it is a possibility that statues of the royal ancestors were displayed there too.<sup>36</sup> It is thus likely that somehow the information regarding this Chamber of the Ancestors was ‘lost in translation’, and Herodotus perceived it as representing the lineage of high priests of Thebes. This mistake also shows that he overlooked here one of the most important historical records regarding the history of Egypt. In contrast, references to the High Priestesses, the famous god’s wives of Amun – some of them daughters of the Saite pharaohs – are not mentioned at all.<sup>37</sup>

Given the erroneous or parsimonious commentaries on the Theban temples and sites, it is rather likely that Herodotus was not received with open arms by the Theban priests. Despite that, Herodotus locates in Thebes some of the sources referring to the origins of the oracles of Zeus at Siwa and Dodona, as well as the genealogy of Hecataeus (2.3.1, 55, 143). These statements seem decorative, or rather like narrational embroidery, and in fact they could well have been obtained somewhere else as they do not seem to have any relevant relationship with the core of the Theban theological tradition. The cold reception from the Theban priests is better understood in light of the traumatic events suffered under the invasion of Assurbanipal, who plundered the Temple of Amun-Re and took the sacred images as booty to Assyria.<sup>38</sup> This inconceivable profanation of one of the most revered holy places of the ancient world was decisive in triggering a cultural response to trauma in the form of xenophobia, which remained particularly intense under Persian occupation. Demotic literature shows abundant signs of this reaction in the form of oracles, such as the *Oracle of the Lamb* or the *Potter's Oracle*, where foreign occupation is clearly seen as resulting from a weak adherence to divine laws. After the traumatic experience of witnessing the profanation and estrangement of their divine images, which have always been the core of the Egyptian experience of sanctity, temples intensified religious taboos to avoid contamination and pollution.

A similar situation seems to have occurred in Heliopolis, by far the largest religious centre in Egypt. Again, Herodotus quotes Heliopolitan priests on the antiquity of Egypt (2.3.1) but no description is provided of the sacred city itself, which must have been truly impressive.<sup>39</sup> As in Thebes, important pieces of information seem to arise from his supposed Heliopolitan sources, but intermediation may be suspected. The openness towards an interaction with the Greek element will only take form under Ptolemaic rule, with Ptolemaic rulers restoring to Egypt the stolen images of the gods and thereby establishing their reign as the promised age of salvation.<sup>40</sup>

The doubts concerning the real extent of Herodotus' contacts with Egyptian priests increase when we examine the ‘explanations’ offered by the author regarding the meaning of the sites he visited. Here, Herodotus describes the sacred cow in the Temple of Sais (Hdt. 2.130–2):

[It lies in] a chamber richly adorned. Every day there are burnt before it aromatics of every kind; and all night long a lamp is kept burning in the apartment. . . . As for the cow, the greater portion of it is hidden by a scarlet



coverture; the head and neck, however, which are visible, are coated very thickly with gold, and between the horns there is a representation in gold of the orb of the sun. The figure is not erect, but lying down, with the limbs under the body; the dimensions being fully those of a large animal of the kind. Every year it is taken from the apartment where it is kept and exposed to the light of day.

While the description of the sacred image fully corresponds to the depiction of the goddess Mehet Ueret, the embodiment of Neith as the Great Flood, the primordial Ocean, Herodotus then explains that the statue is used as a coffin for the corpse of the daughter of Mykerinos who committed suicide (Hdt. 2.132). Herodotus then adds: “They say that the daughter of Mykerinos requested her father in her dying moments to allow her once a year to see the sun.” This piece of information is extremely important since ritual images of deities were effectively brought to the daylight during the Festival of the New Year. These rituals became especially important from the Late Period onwards. In this episode, Herodotus faithfully describes the iconography of the sacred image of Neith, as well as the ritual of the New Year but fails completely in his exploration of their meaning. Accounts like these clearly show that the Herodotus’ indigenous sources are able to lead him to certain places but were badly informed on essential matters.

From the Egyptological standpoint, how can we interpret Herodotus’ erroneous information? Should we see it as resulting from the low levels of cultural literacy among the Egyptian priests as is usually advanced? Could the priests of the Late Period be so badly informed about their own traditions? Every piece of evidence that we possess attests that the Egyptian priesthood was extremely knowledgeable and – perhaps more than ever before – they were extremely cultivated in their own traditions.

In this scenario it is much more likely that, despite Herodotus claims, he probably failed to gain contact with Egyptian priests. In the same way that we cannot simply assume that he visited every place he mentions,<sup>41</sup> we should also consider that Egyptian priests might not have always been as open to Herodotus as he wants his readers to believe.

On most of the relevant occasions, he used interpreters who – as Herodotus himself explains – descended from Egyptian children raised by the Greek mercenaries.<sup>42</sup> Most of Herodotus’ accounts regarding the distant past of Egypt had been probably reported by these Egyptian interpreters, who certainly felt compelled to form a corpus of curiosities and stories to entertain and impress Greek visitors.<sup>43</sup>

It is no matter of chance that many of the Greek anecdotic tales, passed down about the pharaohs of old, revolve around prostitutes or cheating wives. With no funds to finish his pyramid Kheops could find no better source of income than making his daughter a prostitute (2.126.1). Moreover, as legend had it and Herodotus retold it, one of the small pyramids in Giza was a product of the enterprise of one of the same Khufu’s daughters. In addition to payment, the princess had also asked each of her clients for a block of stone, which she used to build her own pyramid (2.126.1).<sup>44</sup> The same expedient was used by Rhampsinitos (Ramses II),

who sent his daughter to the brothel to find out the thief of his treasure (2.121.1). The blinded Pharaoh Pheron could hardly find “a woman who had been faithful to her husband” in order to recover his sight (2.111). Besides these risqué legendary accounts, Herodotus is particularly keen in providing stories of the most celebrated Greek courtesans based in Egypt (Hdt. 2.135):

Naucratis seems somehow to be the place where such women are most attractive. First there was this Rhodopis of whom we have been speaking, so celebrated a person that her name came to be familiar to all the Greeks; and, afterwards, there was another, called Archidike, notorious throughout Greece, though not so much talked of as her predecessor.

These are, in fact, the kind of stories that would be expected to be told in the renowned brothels of Naukratis. His interpreters and guides, serving the Greeks mercenaries and merchants living in Egypt for several generations, certainly provided him with most of these entertaining stories, and it is possible that they become part of oral tradition in the Greek communities. These stories reveal ‘othering’ in which Greek intermediaries projected onto the Egyptians sexual practices that transgressed their own norms.

Aware of this fact, when describing the third pyramid at Giza, Herodotus is clear about the stories made up by the Greeks on the history of Egypt (Hdt. 2.134):

Some of the Greeks call it the work of Rhodopis the courtesan, but they report falsely. It seems to me that these persons cannot have any real knowledge who Rhodopis was; otherwise they would scarcely have ascribed to her a work on which uncounted treasures, so to speak, must have been expended. Rhodopis also lived during the reign of Amasis, not of Mykerinos, and was thus very many years later than the time of the kings who built the pyramids.

In another occasion he says (Hdt. 2.3): “The Greeks, among other foolish tales, relate that Psammetikhos had the children brought up by women whose tongues he had previously cut out.” One senses that Herodotus might have appreciated this difficulty as a serious obstacle to overcome, but it is certain that he failed in getting more reliable authorities. Egyptian xenophobia in the fifth century BCE would explain this difficulty.<sup>45</sup> This attitude towards foreigners had nothing to do with racism or nationalism *per se*; rather, it reflected their concern that foreigners might act in a blasphemous way toward the gods, who, offended, might then turn away from Egypt,<sup>46</sup> which had itself suffered many indignities at the hands of Asian overlords. A book of rituals from the Late Period, the House of Life, with its fourfold function of library, scriptorium, school for the priests, and sanctuary,<sup>47</sup> reflects this attitude:

It shall be very, very concealed.  
No one shall know it, no one see it  
Except the disk of the sun, that looks into its secret.

Those officiating . . . shall enter in silence, their bodies covered  
 So as to be protected against sudden death  
 The Asiatic must not enter, he must see nothing.<sup>48</sup>

In Egyptian temples from the Late Period, an ‘enclave’ culture had emerged in order to defend itself within a wall of ritual purity, taboos, and secrecy. These boundaries provide a context for the fantastic, but probably not inaccurate statements, made by Herodotus about the purity commandments observed by the Egyptians in their contact with the Greeks and probably with all foreigners (Hdt. 2.41):

This is the reason why no native of Egypt, whether man or woman, will give a Greek a kiss, or use the knife of a Greek, or his spit, or his cauldron, or taste the flesh of an ox, known to be pure, if it has been cut with a Greek knife.

Though categories of distinction and self-segregation had a long history in Egypt, their traditional function had been to divide sacred from profane, not indigenous from alien.<sup>49</sup> In the Late Period, the concept of ‘profane’ underwent a change. The sacred objects and rites were protected not so much from the impure and the uninitiated but from the foreigner. Foreigners symbolized the ultimate in impurity and also stood for the threat posed by Seth, the sacrilegious will to destruction, desecration, and plunder. Late Period cult texts also occasionally articulate the rule forbidding foreigners an entry to the sanctuary and attendance at the secret rites. The status of Herodotus as a Greek, and therefore as ‘foreign’, prevented him from being accepted in the Egyptian priestly circles. In this respect, one single and remarkable exception can be found.

### **Memphis and the temple of Ptah**

Memphis and the Temple of Ptah are frequently mentioned in Book II. The several gates of the temple are thoroughly described. Herodotus reports quite accurately that the western gateway of the temple was built by Rhampsinitos (Ramses II) as well as the two *colossi* that stood in front of this gateway. The eastern pylon, now lost, is described as such (Hdt. 2.136):

The eastern gateway was built by Asykhis – which in size and beauty far surpasses the other three. All the four gateways have figures graven on them, and a vast amount of architectural ornament, but the gateway of Asykhis is by far the most richly adorned.

The northern gateway of the Temple of Hephaestus (Ptah) is said to have been built by Moeris (Amenemhat III). Six statues stood in front of the temple, “two of which, representing Sesostris and his wife, are thirty cubits in height, while the remaining four, which represent his sons, are twenty cubits”. The southern gate of the temple was indeed built by Psammetikhos I after he had reunified Egypt, as Herodotus mentions, which seems likely in view of the political role of the temple

as the centre of the Two Lands. Next Psammetikhos built the “court for Apis, in which Apis is kept whenever he makes his appearance in Egypt. This court is opposite the gateway of Psammetikhos and is surrounded with a colonnade and adorned with a multitude of figures. Instead of pillars, the colonnade rests upon colossal statues, twelve cubits in height” (2.153).

This is an interesting piece of information since it reveals architectonic features of the temple that have completely disappeared and, thanks to this account, we have been made confident in our reconstruction.

To the southwest of the Temple of Ptah lay the Levantine quarter, mainly with a Syro-Persian population. The Phoenicians formed a long-established group in Memphis. Herodotus mentions that “Phoenicians from the city of Tyre dwell all round this precinct, and the whole place is known by the name of ‘the camp of the Tyrians’. Within the enclosure stands a temple, which is called that of Aphrodite the Stranger” (2.112). This temple is surely the temple of the goddess Astarte, which was associated with Hathor, the goddess of love, who also received cult observance in this area. North of the temple of Ptah was the Carian quarter – the *Hellenion* – forming a well-established settlement of Greeks. It originated, as we have already mentioned, when Greek soldiers were moved from their camps in the Delta to the city of Memphis (Hdt. 2.154):

The Ionians and Carians occupied for many years the places assigned them by Psammetikhos, which lay near the sea, a little below the city of Boubastis, on the Pelusiac mouth of the Nile. King Amasis long afterwards removed the Greeks hence, and settled them at Memphis to guard him against the native Egyptians.

This settlement grew up next to the Palace of Apries. It was probably to this palace that the story of the stolen treasure of the Pharaoh Rhampsinitos refers (2.121). One should not forget that the quarter continued to serve under Persian occupation as the seat of the imperial administration, and it was probably there that the treasury was kept.<sup>50</sup>

Contrasting with this vivid account of the city, the necropolis of Sakara is hardly mentioned at all. Furthermore, not even the burial ground of the Apis bulls, the famous Sarapeion, is mentioned, which differs from the detailed description provided by Herodotus of the sanctuary where they lived. This lacuna suggests that at this stage the necropolis was still a ‘forbidden’ territory, especially for foreigners. Even more striking is the absence of any reference to the burial ground of the Hellenomemphites in Abusir. The only structure of the necropolis mentioned is the temple of Isis at Memphis, “a vast structure, well worth seeing”, which was dedicated to the Mother-of-Apis cows. The temple was built on the edge of the eastern escarpment along with the entrances to various catacombs, and it was easily visible from the valley,<sup>51</sup> which might explain why they are mentioned by Herodotus.

Besides the description of the city and its sites, Herodotus often transmits knowledge provided by the priests of Ptah. However, unlike other contexts,

Memphite sources show a significant consistency with the core of their theological framework. Book II starts right with one of the most interesting of them on how the Pharaoh Psammetikhos I used children's speech to find out which was the oldest civilization (2.1). This story assumes more relevance in light of its theological framework, the temple of Ptah. This myth in fact formulates creation itself as an act of speech by that very primeval deity.<sup>52</sup> In this theological vision, speech is uttered according to what is conceived in the heart. Since all creatures are conceived after the same divine model, it is nothing but natural to expect that, if not contaminated by vicarious learning, children will eventually utter the speech imprinted in their own hearts by the creator god himself. The concern given to the first word uttered by the children is thus consistent with the Memphite myth of creation, and we can trust Herodotus when he states that "these were the real facts I learnt at Memphis from the priests of Hephaestus" (2.3). From the Egyptological point of view, this excerpt clearly shows that at Memphis, the local priests introduced Herodotus to central aspects of their wisdom. Herodotus continues by saying "I got much other information also from conversation with these priests while I was at Memphis" (2.3). Most of this material deals with the history of Egypt about which they seem to be Herodotus' only reliable source. Explicit reference is made to Egyptian written sources translated directly by Memphite priests who then read them to Herodotus (Hdt. 2.100):

They read to me from a papyrus the names of three hundred and thirty monarchs, who (they said) were his successors upon the throne. In this number of generations there were eighteen Ethiopian kings, and one queen who was a native; all the rest were kings and Egyptians.

These lists effectively existed in temple repositories, and, later on, they would be used by Manetho in his historiographical work. Some of them have even survived to our days, such as the Royal List of the Chamber of the Ancestors and the Royal List of the temple of Seti I in Abydos.<sup>53</sup> These monumental lists were based on historical documentation written on papyri, such as the Ramesside *Turin Canon*, the only document of its kind known so far.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it was a papyrus like the *Turin Canon* – handed down in hieratic or demotic – that was translated to Herodotus by a Memphite priest. The ability of these priests to translate his source material directly into Greek is a situation that in itself deserves more active consideration.

With access to these sources, Herodotus garnered information usually omitted in the monumental Royal Lists inscribed on temple walls, for example the reign of a queen who ruled as pharaoh (Hatshepsut). The wealth of material provided by these lists probably precluded Herodotus from an exhaustive account. It is, nevertheless, interesting to point out aspects of his account that are consistent with the Egyptian historical sources.

Min or Menes is described as the first king of the Two Lands and the founder of Memphis. Herodotus says that Menes dammed the Nile south of the future site of the city, diverting it so that he could build on the reclaimed land (2.99).<sup>55</sup> Not

surprisingly, during the First Persian Occupation, the most prominent of the pharaohs was Sesostris, about whom there is given a rich account of military conquests in Asia and Ethiopia, public works such as the irrigation system, administrative reforms, and building activity in temples. All these aspects are consistent with the Egyptian historical records with the exception of the treason of his brother. Senuseret III's exploits gathered renown over time and substantially contributed to the character of 'Sesostris' (becoming a kind of composite heroic ruler) as described by Herodotus.<sup>56</sup> Sesostris eventually became the quintessence of the Egyptian monarch and fully embodied the dream of military resistance towards foreign occupation.

The three builders of the Giza pyramids are correctly reported as belonging to the same dynasty, but their reigns are incorrectly dated. The description of Kheops in particular echoes the events of the Amarna period, and it is possible that some confusion has been created with Akhenaten, who indeed "closed the temples, and forbade the Egyptians to offer sacrifice" (2.124). Rulers of most of the major periods are mentioned: the Archaic Period (Min), the Old Kingdom (Nitokris, Kheops, Khephren, Mykerinos), the Middle Kingdom (Sesostris, Moeris), the New Kingdom (Rhampsinitos), the Libyan Period (Asykhis), the Ethiopian Period (Sabakos, Sethos), the Saite Period (Psammetikhos to Amasis).

Although clearly insufficient and filled with inconsistencies,<sup>57</sup> the inquiry carried out by Herodotus in Memphis provided him with the bulk of his historical knowledge regarding the memory of Egypt before the contacts with the Greeks. He did not have the linguistic tools or the time to cope with the enormous documentary corpus. But the idea to use these lists to reconstruct the lineages of the Egyptian pharaohs would prove to be decisive in Manetho's work.

## **Conclusion**

The country that Herodotus visited had been unified under Psammetikhos I, after nearly 500 years of political division. From the political standpoint, Egypt was unified and was highly receptive towards Greek settlers, who then lived in the country for several generations. Subsequently, the Persians maintained the Egyptian administrative system, with the addition of a satrap at the top of the administration. Although tension might have arisen in some areas, Persian occupation did not disturb the economic and cultural revival that took place during the Late Period. In this scenario, Herodotus had the perfect conditions both in terms of security and travel facilities to undertake his journey.

It is clear that Herodotus travelled all over Egypt. Greek communities in Egypt allowed him to travel and to have privileged access to historical sites. In the cities of the Delta he managed to visit the main temples, and he even participated in public festivals. Herodotus is well acquainted with the priestly mode of life. He lays great stress on their obligation to maintain a high level of ritual purity: they shaved their bodies every other day, had to be circumcised, wore only linen garments and sandals of papyrus, and washed twice a day and twice a night.<sup>58</sup>

With exception of the Osirian mysteries, about which, however, he does not reveal any important knowledge, the few religious references that he captured from

the autochthonous sources are misleading to say the least. In the south, his reception was even worse, and he probably could not visit any important site, not even in order to view it from the exterior. Herodotus' Greek affiliation and, perhaps more importantly, his inability to speak the Egyptian language surely raised serious obstacles in the most important Egyptian temples. Egyptians considered everyone a foreigner who did not speak Egyptian (2.18, 158.5). Moreover, culture was the key factor in defining ethnicity. Eating habits that did not conform to good Egyptian practice were considered disgraceful (2.36.2). It is evident that Herodotus found the Egyptian attitude to foreigners a mixture of cultural superiority and distaste, which was reinforced by religious taboos.<sup>59</sup> However, despite his cold reception from the Egyptian priests, Herodotus seems to hide his discomfiture as much as possible, weaving an elaborate narrative that suggests the opposite, perhaps looking to impress his Greek audience and to validate the status of his writings.<sup>60</sup>

The unsoundness of information drawn from Herodotus thus gives us an important testimony about Egyptian 'xenophobia', so intensely experienced under Assyrian and Persian domination. During the Late Period, Egyptian temples became aware of their role in the preservation of the local tradition and, after the Persian invasion, they were the focus of Egyptian identity. Self-segregation was the cultural response towards foreign occupation and, in this scenario, we can understand why Herodotus would not have been welcomed. Herodotus' writings have to be examined in the light of the Egyptian reaction towards foreign occupation, and the distorted information that we find in these accounts actually provides an important and unique historical testimony concerning the Egyptian mindset during this period. On the basis of the picture that we have today regarding the priestly culture of the Late Period, it is hard to imagine that Egyptian priests would openly speak with foreigners about matters at the core of their knowledge and belief system.

Only in Memphis, where a multicultural community was gaining shape, was Herodotus able to have direct access to a mass of priestly knowledge. This Memphite connection was absolutely crucial to Herodotus. At that time, Memphis had gained an unprecedented political and religious status. During the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, Kushite kings had launched a vast programme of cultural renewal of Egypt, and Memphis regained its status as the religious capital of the Two Lands. With the reunification of Egypt under the power of Psammetikhos I, this role gained further political significance. The exceptional status of Memphis was expressed in theological terms by reaffirming the temple of Ptah as the centre of creation, the holiest place of the Two Lands. Since the mercenaries (Greeks, Jews, and Phoenicians) played a significant role in the military unification of the country, when they moved to Memphis during the reign of Ahmose (Amasis: 570–526 BC), not only did they contribute to reshape the cultural climate of the capital of Egypt, but they also became invested in the cosmic role they played. The impact of these ideological representations on the Greek community is detected in the Greek word used to name Egypt, *Aiguptos*, which derives from the Egyptian name of the Temple of Ptah, Hutkaptah, i.e., the 'The House of the Ka of Ptah'. In other words, the Temple of Ptah in Memphis was seen by the Greeks as the seat of Egypt's quintessential identity.



The writings of Herodotus thus reflect these circumstances. Although Naukratis certainly played the role of the gateway of Egypt, Memphis was the place to go in order to gain access to the core of Egypt's wisdom and self-knowledge.

Book II reveals that Memphite priests conveyed important knowledge and provided priceless information based on their own historical records. It is also possible that these priests were able to speak Greek themselves. Since Herodotus does not reveal any knowledge of the cult, ritual, or even the sanctuaries of the temple, his contact with the priests could only have taken place in the priestly community of the House of Life, which was the academy of the temple, with scholars involved not only in the administration and management of temple properties, but also in the study and preservation of the local tradition. The writings of Herodotus are thus revealing about the contact established between autochthonous temples and foreign travellers during the Persian occupation. In the Delta, some of the temples were open to foreigners, such as the Temple of Neith in Sais, but, as far as we know, their priests hardly conveyed any important knowledge of their own traditions. The situation in Upper Egypt was even worse, and, particularly in Thebes, the priests were not receptive to foreigners.<sup>61</sup>

Only in Memphis, Herodotus found the openness to carry out his historical inquiry. This is explained by the multicultural status of the city. Greek settlers had lived there long enough to engage themselves in the intellectual tradition of the House of Life of the Temple of Ptah. The burial ground of the Hellenomemphites, in Abusir, has given us the earliest extant Greek book, a private fourth-century copy on papyrus of a poem by Timotheus of Miletus,<sup>62</sup> which shows the cultural status of this community. It is, therefore, possible that the members of this community got involved with the local intellectual elite, in the context of the House of Life, where the priests were learned both in Egyptian and Greek tradition, as Herodotus clearly shows. The importance of the Memphite House of Life also echoes in the Demotic tradition, and tales such as *Setne I* (written in *Cairo Papyrus* #30646) make clear allusion to the role played by the House of Life in the education of youngsters.<sup>63</sup> Documents such as the *Book of Thoth*, the *Papyrus Salt* #825, and the *Book of the Fayum*, although dating from the Graeco-Roman Period, show the vigour and richness of the Demotic tradition that flourished in the Egyptian Houses of Life.<sup>64</sup> In Memphis, the House of Life was the only one that, by the time of Herodotus' journey, gathered Egyptian and Greek sages. This unexpected interaction probably triggered the cultural phenomenon that would shape Graeco-Roman Egypt: the Hellenization of the Egyptian tradition.<sup>65</sup> The writings of Herodotus are thus crucial to document the beginning of the cultural trend that would become prevalent in Greco-Roman Egypt and, in this perspective, Herodotus offers an unrivalled historical document.

## Notes

1 Néret 2002.

2 Araújo 2013: 171–95.

3 Monumental Royal Lists can be found in the cenotaph temple of Seti I in Abydos and in the Chamber of the Ancestors in Karnak. The Palermo Stone (containing royal



- annals of the Old Kingdom), dating from the Fifth Dynasty, also provided an historical account of the main events of each reign. The *Canon of Turin* was written in hieratic during the Nineteenth Dynasty. See Araújo 2013: 173–4.
- 4 See Canhão 2013: 292.
  - 5 Lloyd 2002: 419.
  - 6 Herodotus relied on observation to describe the monuments: pyramids at Giza: 2.125.6; Thebes: 2.143.3; the Labyrinth: 148; Lake Moeris: 150.2; Sais: 170.2).
  - 7 Remarks on geology and geography reveal a thorough observation of the country, with its fauna and flora (2.5.1, 8.3, 10.1, 12.1, 29.1).
  - 8 See the description of the phoenix (2.73.1) and the skeletons of the flying snakes (2.75.1).
  - 9 Lloyd 2002: 425.
  - 10 Translations are adapted from Rawlinson 1942 here and elsewhere.
  - 11 See Lloyd 1976: 237. See also Lloyd 2002: 423.
  - 12 Herodotus' writings provide the first and earliest account of the period in any language. Lloyd 1976: 238.
  - 13 Lloyd 1976: 231.
  - 14 Sousa 2013: 243–7.
  - 15 Lloyd 1976: 223.
  - 16 Lloyd 1976: 224.
  - 17 Lloyd 2000: 372. See also Lloyd 1983: 309–10.
  - 18 Greek mercenaries were employed in the invasion of Nubia in 593–592 BC during the campaign of Psammetikhos II, which took them as far as the Third Cataract. On their return, while passing by Abu Simbel, a contingent of Greek soldiers recorded their passing in inscriptions on one of the *colossi* of Ramses II. See Lloyd 1976: 224.
  - 19 Lloyd 2000: 373.
  - 20 Lloyd 1976: 225.
  - 21 Lloyd 1976: 225.
  - 22 Although the city was founded by Milesians, members of other east Greek cities were also firmly established there, as well as traders from the island state of Aigina in the Saronic Gulf south of Athens. See Lloyd 1976: 224.
  - 23 Lloyd 2000: 374.
  - 24 Famous figures in the history of Greek culture were alleged to have visited Egypt and acquired wisdom or knowledge there, such as Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, and Pythagoras. Although the historicity of such traditions is highly questionable (Lloyd 1976: 224) some of them were certainly made available in written works. Hecataeus of Miletus is surely the most important written source for Herodotus, especially on geography and geology, zoology, Egyptian food, botany, shipping.
  - 25 Lloyd 2000: 381.
  - 26 The precise date of Herodotus' visit to Egypt cannot be determined, but the probabilities favour a date between 449 and 430 BC. See Lloyd 1976: 226.
  - 27 Lloyd 1983: 321. The royal tombs stood in the courtyard preceding the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Neith and follow the temple-court burial practices found earlier at Medinet Habu and Tanis. See Wilson 2016: 86–7 and Dodson & Ikram 2008: 270–3.
  - 28 Sousa 2007: 279–302.
  - 29 Before the Graeco-Roman Period, there already existed many shrines dedicated to Osiris. From Abydos date the oldest known structures, such as the ritual tomb of Umm el Qaab dating from the Middle Kingdom (O'Connor 2009: 90) and the *Osireion* of the cenotaph temple of Seti I (O'Connor 2009: 50–1). In Karnak several Osirian shrines are attested, all of them built from the Third Intermediate period onwards, such as the *Osireion* of Taharka (see Sousa 2007).
  - 30 The foundations of Khufu's causeway rose to the height of more than 40 metres. See Lehner 1997: 109.

- 31 Dodson & Ikram 2008: 291.
- 32 O'Connor 2009: 50–1. This *Osireion* is probably the prototype of the later crypts of Osiris. Note the *Osireion* of Taharka in the Temple of Karnak (Sousa 2007). See also Cooney 2000.
- 33 Sauneron 2000: 83.
- 34 The importance of genealogy was so strong that that Herodotus had the impression that Egypt was a caste system: "The Egyptians are divided into seven classes: priests, warriors, cowherds, swineherds, merchants, interpreters, and pilots" (2.64). See Assmann 2002: 297.
- 35 Andreu, Rutschowscaya, & Ziegler 1997: 114.
- 36 Kruchten 1989.
- 37 See Lloyd 1983: 303.
- 38 Demotic literature, such as the *Prophecy of the Lamb*, reflects these events. See Bresciani 1969: 561–2.
- 39 Not even a brief description of the city is provided, which might have reported interchanges revealing whether Herodotus had truly spoken with Heliopolitan priests. Probably this sort of interaction had not in fact occurred in Heliopolis.
- 40 Assmann 2002: 383.
- 41 Lloyd 1976: 226.
- 42 Bagnall & Rathbone 2018: 47. See Brandwood pp. 18–19.
- 43 See for example the story of Sethon for which see Griffith 1900: 12.
- 44 Clayton 1994: 48.
- 45 Lloyd 2000: 385.
- 46 Assmann 2002: 396.
- 47 See Wilkinson 2000: 74.
- 48 *Book of the Dead*, ch. 148 (P. Nu), in Assmann 2002: 394–5.
- 49 See Assmann (2002: 394): "Taboos were valid for the priests, not for Egyptians in general. Priests had to prepare themselves for sacred duties by strict purity and abstinence rules; analogously – within the category of secrecy – priests were subjected to arcane discipline, which was designed to preserve the sacred rites from profanation, not necessarily by foreigners but by the uninitiated."
- 50 See Lloyd 1983: 322–3.
- 51 Nicholson 2016: 27. See also Lloyd 1983: 324.
- 52 Sousa 2011: 97–102.
- 53 Araújo 2013.
- 54 Demichelis 2015: 257.
- 55 Clayton 1994: 20.
- 56 Callender 2000: 166.
- 57 The chronology is often inadequate: the pyramid builders are badly displaced (2.124.1) and their reign-lengths are incorrect (127.1, 3; 133.1, 5) as is that of Sabakos (137.2; 139.3); the order of succession is sometimes wrong (127.1; 129.1); and attempts to locate rulers in terms of years can be erroneous (13.1; 10.2; 142.2–3). However, infelicities of this kind are concentrated in the first half of the historical section, and the chronology of the account of the Saite rulers from Psammetikhos onwards is much more accurate. See Lloyd 1976: 237.
- 58 Lloyd 1983: 308.
- 59 Lloyd 1983: 316.
- 60 It has been pointed out that Herodotus' writings aim at correcting or developing the statements previously reported by other authors. See Thomas 2006: 67.
- 61 See Sousa 2013: 240–1.
- 62 Bagnall & Rathbone 2018: 36.
- 63 Griffith 1900; Lichtheim 1980: 127–37.
- 64 Jasnow & Zauzich 2014: 48–9.
- 65 Sousa 2017.

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