

**László Török. *Herodotus in Nubia*.** Mnemosyne Supplements: History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity 368. Leiden: Brill, 2014. Pp. xiv +163. ISBN 978-90-04-26913-2.

The fortunes of Herodotus have perhaps never been higher in modern scholarship than in the last three decades. Buoyed by a steady series of innovative readings of the *Histories*, Herodotus has emerged as a canny, subtle and profound literary artist, rather than the indiscriminate collector or fabulist he once seemed to many scholars. The literary and cultural turn in Herodotean studies was not always good for the image of Herodotus as a reliable historian or ethnographer,<sup>1</sup> especially when it intersected with older styles of *Quellenforschung*.<sup>2</sup> Yet in some cases, earlier debates over “reliability” and “accuracy” have undergone a salutary reframing by more careful and historically contextualized examination of the dynamics of knowledge production, of oral and literary transmission, and of cross-cultural communication. L. Török’s *Herodotus in Nubia* is very much part of this positive and productive intersection of *Quellenforschung* and more nuanced approaches to Herodotus’ literary and scientific craft. Add to this the fact that T. is one of the very few scholars so well equipped to bring up-to-date research on ancient Nubia into dialogue with the Aithiopian passages in the *Histories*, and the result is a significant and welcome contribution to Herodotean studies.

In the first chapter of the book, T. surveys the above scholarly issues as they have played out in relation to Herodotus’ Aithiopian passages, but also raises problems particular to the subject of his inquiry. Perhaps the most significant is that there has been no thorough treatment of the Aithiopian passages subsequent to the publication of results of the UNESCO archaeological rescue mission conducted in anticipation of the flooding of Lower Nubia by the Aswan dam project in the 1960s. Even relatively recent commentaries that have treated the Aithiopian passages (e.g. Lloyd and Asheri) have relied too heavily on scholarship that predated the UNESCO campaign. A more subtle issue is an Egyptological perspective on Herodotus’ Aithiopia, which has at times encouraged scholars to view ancient Nubia as an appendage to Egyptian civilization, obscuring some historical distinctions that are relevant to the analysis of Herodotus’ work. T. provides a corrective to these issues by including in the first chapter a convenient and well-documented historical overview of the Kingdom of Kush from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

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<sup>1</sup> The fundamental study is F. Hartog, *Le Miroir d’Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l’autre* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1980); idem, *The mirror of Herodotus: an essay on the representation of the other*, translated by J. Lloyd Berkeley (University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> D. Fehling, *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot. Studien zur Erzählkunst Herodots* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971); idem, *Herodotus and his “Sources”: Citation, Invention, and Narrative Art*, translated by J. G. Howie. (Leeds: Cairns, 1989); O. Kimball Armayor, 1978. “Did Herodotus Ever Go to Egypt?” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 15 (1978): 59–73; idem, *Herodotus’ Autopsy of the Fayoum: Lake Moeris and the Labyrinth of Egypt* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1985).

In the opening chapter, T. also articulates his overall approach: a source criticism of Herodotus' Aithiopian passages primarily against the background of current research on ancient Nubia, but also bearing in mind the qualities of Herodotus' *Histories* as a literary text. In that vein, he is careful to distinguish between the two Aithiopias that appear in the *Histories*. One is a representation of an existing land: primarily Lower Nubia under Saïte Egyptian and then Achaemenid Persian rule. The other is a fabulous land at the farthest edges of the known world, the dwelling place of the long-lived Aithiopians. In the second chapter, T. reproduces all the major passages on these two Aithiopias in T. Eide's English translations as they appear in the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, with a few additions and changes from other sources. In the third chapter, T. raises the question of whether the Aithiopian passages constituted an "Aithiopian *Logos*" or were drawn from such a composition, now lost. The answer to the question of a *Logos* is "no," but several important points emerge from this exercise about the relationship of the Aithiopian passages to their various contexts. From a literary perspective, the majority of the Aithiopian elements are inserted into contexts where they support other narratives or ethnographic discussions, and serve to articulate central concepts of the *Histories*. They are also subordinated to other structures, namely the narrative and chronological frames of Herodotus' Egyptian and Persian histories. Aithiopia comes into view through the invasions, successful and failed, of Sesostris and Cambyses, and even the Aithiopian Sabacos is connected only to Herodotus' Egyptian chronology and his string of royal narratives.

These observations set the stage for the fourth and most substantial chapter of the book, a passage-by-passage analysis of Herodotus' Aithiopian references, which is preceded by an important discussion of his sources of information. T. builds a convincing case that those elements of Herodotus' two Aithiopias that bear a relationship to modern knowledge of ancient Lower Nubia and the kingdom of Kush were mediated by Egyptian priests at Memphis and their written records. Indeed, Herodotus never claimed to have indigenous Aithiopian informants, and several details in Herodotus' account of Sabacos and Aithiopian kingship point to this Memphite milieu. The rulers of the Nubian 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in Egypt chose Memphis as their capital, and its libraries appear to have remained intact despite invasions from Nubian, Assyria and Persia and the revolt of Inaros. The "Memphite Theology" of the Shabaka Stone attests to Nubian archaism and efforts at pharaonic legitimation, and T. argues that Memphite priests would also have had access to other records that gave an idealizing portrait of Kushite kingship. The close connection Herodotus makes between Sesostris and Nubia (2.110), and his reference to Sabacos' continuation of Sesostris' dike-building program (2.137), also points to traces of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in Egypt, since Nubian pharaohs cultivated connections with the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in their titulary, and also revived a cult of Senusret III that had been established during 12<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty Egyptian rule over Nubia. In a more general sense, T. also argues that Herodotus' statements about the election of Aithiopian kings and the importance of oracles in their decision-making suggest some knowledge of the process of oracular selection in Kushite royal investiture

ceremonies. This discussion is also supported by an important discussion of passages of Agatharcides on the selection and retirement of Aithiopian kings.

These observations on some of the *realia* behind Herodotus' account of Aithiopia, and the historical and cultural contexts of their transmission are perhaps the most important contributions of the book, and I have highlighted them in particular, but I hasten to add that in his analyses of individual passages in chapter 4, T. is very even-handed in sifting out the many layers of sources and concepts, Greek, Persian, Egyptian and Nubian, that Herodotus has deployed in constructing his two Aithiopias. It is beyond the scope of this review to engage with every one of these, but in general they follow the very sensible principles outlined in the earlier sections of the book. There is one surprising oversight that merits attention: Egyptian narrative literature is underappreciated as a comparandum for the tales of Herodotus. In discussing the dream of Sabacos, in which the king is instructed to assemble all the priests of Egypt and cut them in half, T. suggests that such an ominous oracle was unlikely to have an Egyptian or Nubian origin. Perhaps not in official documents, but there were certainly Egyptian tales that included deceptive visions. The Tabubu episode in the Demotic tale of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah* comes to mind. And the idea of royal atrocity lurks in the tale from the *Westcar Papyrus* of the magician Dedi and the pharaoh Khufu, who at first proposed testing Dedi's power to re-attach severed heads on a condemned criminal. More to the point, direct parallels to some of Herodotus' Egyptian narratives have been found. For example, the Pheros story, (2.111), is attested in a Demotic papyrus, and, as S. Burstein has pointed out in his review of this book, there is good evidence of an Egyptian narrative source for Herodotus' story of the Deserters (the Asmach, or "they who stand at the king's left hand") who settled in Aithiopia (2.30).<sup>3</sup>

This does not, however, detract from the central arguments of this book, nor from its value as a careful and historically contextualized analysis of the Aithiopian passages in Herodotus and the sources on which he was able to draw in composing them. Those sources are shown to be complex, multi-layered, and mediated by very specific historical circumstances, as well as the author's own creative role. T.'s work in teasing out these different strands confirms the limitations of the *Histories* as an historical source on Nubia, and yet adds to the rich and appealing texture of Herodotus' pluralist, multi-vocal historiography.

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<sup>3</sup> K. S. B. Ryholt, *The Petese Stories II* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2006): 31-58; idem, "A Demotic Narrative in Berlin and Brooklyn concerning the Assyrian Invasion of Egypt (*Pap. Berlin P. 15682 + Pap. Brooklyn 47.218.21-B*) in V. M. Lepper (ed.), *Forschung in der Papyrussammlung: Eine Festgabe für das Neue Museum* (Berlin: Oldenburg Akademie Verlag, 2012): 337-353, esp. p. 348. S. Burstein's review: *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2015.01.14.