

## HERODOTUS AND THE EMERGENCE OF MEROE

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In 1926 Wilhelm Spiegelberg published a now classic monograph, *The Credibility of Herodotus' Account of Egypt in the Light of the Egyptian Monuments*.<sup>1</sup> Since then few Egyptologists or classicists have doubted the validity of his conclusion that "what Herodotus has to say about Egyptian history of his own and the immediately preceding age is in the highest degree trustworthy."<sup>2</sup> There is now little risk that Herodotus' evidence on first millennium Egyptian affairs will be neglected. Quite the contrary. The danger is that his authority will be accepted uncritically on subjects for which his own text reveals him to be poorly informed and that contradictory evidence will be either ignored or explained away. A particularly clear example of this problem is provided by the current state of two closely related questions, the nature of the relationship between late Napatan Nubia and Persia and the date of the emergence of Meroe as the chief residence of the late Napatan kings.

A variety of Old Persian epigraphical<sup>3</sup> and iconographic documents point to the recognition by the late Napatan kings of the Persian king as their suzerain. Kush is listed as one of the countries that provided ivory for the construction of the palace of Darius I at Susa (Dsf, 1, 43). Kush also appears in an inscription of that same king as the southernmost subject people of his empire (DSh, 11.5-6) and is regularly listed in the so-called peoples lists of Darius I and Xerxes which are explicitly stated to be lists of the peoples ruled by those kings (DNa, DSe, XPh).<sup>4</sup> Finally, Kushites are depicted on the throne bearer reliefs from Persepolis and elsewhere as one of the peoples who support the King,<sup>5</sup> and a Kushite delegation is included on the apadana reliefs from Persepolis which illustrate the various peoples of the empire who came to Persepolis during the reign of Xerxes bringing as gifts to him typical products and animals of their countries as part of the celebration of the New Year festival.<sup>6</sup> Any doubt as to the country

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1. *Die Glaubwürdigkeit von Herodots Bericht über Ägypten im Lichte der ägyptischen Denkmäler* (Heidelbergl, 1926).

2. The quotation is from the English translation, *The Credibility of Herodotus' Account of Egypt*, trans. A.M. Blackman (Oxford, 1927) 39. Among the few doubters are William Arthur Heidel, *Hecataeus and the Egyptian Priests in Herodotus, Book II*, *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 18.2 (Boston, 1935) 49-134; and O. Kimball Armayer, "The Homeric Influence on Herodotus' Story of the Labyrinth", *The Classical Bulletin*, 54 (1978) 68-72. For balanced assessments see Thomas W. Africa, "Herodotus and Diodorus on Egypt", *JNES*, 22 (1963) 254-258; and John

A. Wilson, *Herodotus in Egypt* (Leiden, 1970).

3. The Old Persian inscriptions are cited according to the edition of Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar Texts Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 1953).

4. Under the form *f'nhšj* it occurs on the Suez stela (G. Posener, *La première domination perse en Egypte* (Cairo, 1936) p. 70, 9. 1. 22 and p. 187) and the recently discovered statue of Darius I from Susa (Jean Yoyotte, "Une statue de Darius découverte à Suse: les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques Darius et l'Égypte," *Journal Asiatique*, 260 (1972) 259, 1. 22). For *f'nhšj* and *Kš* as general terms for Nubia in late Egyptian see Karola Zibelius, *Afrikanische Orts- und Völkernamen in hieroglyphischen und hieratischen Texten* (Wiesbaden, 1972) 141-142 and 165-169.

5. Gerold Walser, *Die Völkernamen auf den Reliefs von Persepolis* (Berlin, 1966) 51-67 *passim*. A?P, 1. 28.

6. Walser (*supra* n. 5) 100-102, plates 30, 81, and 82. For the connection of the reliefs with the New Year festival see Walser (*supra* n. 5) 20-26.

denoted by the term Kush in these texts is dispelled by the portrayal of the Kushite delegation on the apadana reliefs. Its members are shown as Negroid and they bring as gifts a box containing some unknown substance, elephant tusks, and, most importantly, an animal which has been identified as an okapi or a giraffe.<sup>7</sup> Which identification is correct is unimportant, since neither animal can have ranged much further north than Meroe in the first millennium B.C. and hence either would suffice to clearly identify Kush as the Napatan kingdom. The Old Persian evidence, therefore, would seem clearly to indicate that Persia exercised some sort of authority over that kingdom beginning at some indeterminate date during the reign of Darius I, that is, from sometime between 521 and 486 B.C.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless the Old Persian evidence is usually dismissed as irrelevant, and Persian influence in Nubia is regularly said to have been confined to the area immediately south of Aswan. Typical is the recent comment of Karl-Heinz-Priese that "the fact Darius and Xerxes list 'Kushiya' among the dependent peoples has nothing more than symbolic significance."<sup>9</sup>

No other example of a "symbolically significant" entry in the peoples lists has been identified, but the reason for so cavalier a treatment of an important body of primary evidence is not far to seek. Book three of Herodotus contains a vivid account of an allegedly disastrous invasion of Nubia by Cambyses directed at a people

Herodotus calls the Long-lived Ethiopians. His description of them is openly utopian. They are just, without imperial ambitions, possess great amounts of gold, are the handsomest and longest lived of men, eat only meat and milk, and have near their city a marvelous meadow called the "Table of the Sun" which spontaneously produces an abundance of food each day (3.17-25).<sup>10</sup> Despite its utopian character, scholars are almost unanimous in their belief that in Herodotus' account of the city of the Long-lived Ethiopians is to be found, garbled to be sure, the earliest surviving description of Meroe.<sup>11</sup> Herodotus does not make the identification explicitly<sup>12</sup> — some even concede that he was ignorant of it!<sup>13</sup> — but archaeological evidence is adduced as proof of its correctness. Specifically, the Table of the Sun is identified with the so-called Sun Temple excavated near Meroe by Garstang in 1910,<sup>14</sup> while the victory stela of Nastasen celebrating his defeat of a ruler whose name, it was claimed, was a possible rendering of Cambyses has been cited as proof that the Persian monarch suffered a major defeat in Nubia while attacking Meroe.<sup>15</sup> Implicit in this hypothesis is the denial of all credibility to the Old Persian documents and the assumption that Meroe had replaced Napata as the chief residence of the Napatan kings by the 520's, a full century before it is attested as such.<sup>16</sup> A century ago so daring a hypothesis would have been greeted with scepticism and with reason.<sup>17</sup>

7. Okapi. L. Sprague de Camp, "Xerxes' Okapi and Greek Geography", *Isis*, 54 (1963) 123-125. Giraffe: Walser (*supra* n. 5) 101-102.

8. The Suez stelae were dated to ca. 513 B.C. by George G. Cameron, "Darius, Egypt, and the 'Lands Beyond the Sea'", *JNES*, 2 (1943) 307-313; but recent study of them suggests a date after 500 B.C. (Yoyotte *supra* n. 4 265-266) as does the style of the new Darius statue from Susa (David Stromach, "Une statue: Description and Comment" (*supra* n. 4) 246).

9. Karl Heinz-Priese, "The Kingdom of Kush: The Napatan Period", *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan*, 2 vols. (New York, 1978) 1, 80. Cf. the similar dismissal of them as conventional by Jehan Desanges, *Recherches sur l'activité des méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique (VI<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. -IV<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.)* (Paris, 1978) 235. A notable exception is Fritz and Ursula Hintze, *Civilizations of the Old Sudan* (Chicago, 1969) 19-20.

10. The statement in 3.18 that officials put the food out every night is Herodotus' rationalization of his sources' utopian report.

11. E.g. M. Cary and E.H. Warmington, *The Ancient Explorers*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, 1963) 206; A.J. Arkell, *A History of the Sudan to 1821*, 2nd ed. (London, 1961) 150; P.L. Shinnie, *Meroe: A Civilization*

*of the Sudan* (London, 1967) 15-16; William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, 1977) 294.

12. The only explicit example of the identification known to me from antiquity is Pausanias 1.33.4. A second possible example is Pomponius Mela 3.9.85-88.

13. Cary and Warmington (*supra* n. 11) 285, n. 11.

14. John A. Garstang, A.H. Sayce, and F.L.I. Griffith, *Meroe: The City of the Ethiopians* (Oxford, 1911) 25-27. Cf. Alan B. Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II Commentary 1-98* (Leiden, 1978) 124 for a recent example.

15. For the fullest statement of this view see R. Hennig, "Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zu Herodot: III. Der äthiopische Feldzug des Kambyses", *RhM*, 83 (1934) 201-206.

16. Most clearly stated by G.A. Wainwright, "The Date of the Rise of Meroe", *JEA*, 38 (1952) 75-77; and Inge Hofmann, *Studien zum merottischen Königtum* (Brussels, 1971) 72-73. For a thorough review of the evidence as a whole see H.F.C. Smith, "The Transfer of the Capital of Kush from Napata to Meroe", *Kush*, 3 (1955) 20-25.

17. E.g. E.H. Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1883) 271-274; and A.H. Sayce, *The Ancient Empires of the East Herodotus I-III*, (London, 1883) 241, n. 1.

Particularly insecure is the archaeological evidence on which the theory is based. Further study has made it clear that the Sun Temple is actually a structure of the first century A.D. not the sixth century B.C. and its dedication to a solar divinity is now open to serious doubt.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Nastasen stela has had to be dissociated from Cambyses since study of the chronology of the Meroitic kings has brought with it recognition that he ruled in the second half of the fourth century B.C., a full two centuries after Cambyses' invasion of Nubia.<sup>19</sup> Deprived of its archaeological support, the theory must stand on its own merits, and classical evidence telling against it and pointing to the essential reliability of the Old Persian sources is not hard to find.

The most striking but least important piece of such evidence is the widespread post-Herodotean tradition that Cambyses conquered Meroe and gave the city its name.<sup>20</sup> At most these texts may reflect, as Herodotus does himself on one occasion,<sup>21</sup> the knowledge that the Persians claimed authority in upper Nubia since examination of them indicates that they had no source of information independent of Herodotus for the basic facts of Cambyses' campaign. Far more important is the evidence provided by Herodotus himself. Supporters of the identification have by and large ignored or tried to argue away the contradictions between Herodotus' account of the Long-lived Ethiopians and its supposed implications and his explicit statements about Nubia and its relations with Persia. Emphasis has been placed on the possibly Nubian features of the account of the Long-

lived Ethiopians, the abundance of gold, the practice of a kind of mummification, albeit one with no similarity to either Nubian or Egyptian customs, the election of their king, again in a non-Egyptian or Nubian manner, and their use of the bow and arrow.<sup>22</sup> Ignored, however, have been the two specific characteristics ascribed to them by Herodotus which directly contradict his remarks on Napatan history and culture in book two, namely, their lack of any imperial ambitions (3.21.3) and their use of customs different from those of all other peoples (3.20.2). In book two, however, Herodotus refers to the rule of the twenty-fifth dynasty in Egypt (2.137;139)<sup>23</sup> and asserts that the Napatan kingdom itself adopted Egyptian customs after the settlement in its territory of the Asmach, soldiers who had deserted their stations during the reign of Psammetichus I (2.30). Herodotus' conception of fifth century Nubia as dominated by an Egyptianized kingdom centered at Meroe with a recent history of conflict with Egypt corresponds broadly with historical truth, and the fact that he dates the Egyptianization of Nubia to the reign of Psammetichus I, literally millenia too late but still a century before the reign of Cambyses, makes it difficult to believe that the utopian city of the Long-lived Ethiopians, so unlike Egypt or historical Meroe, can represent his idea of sixth century Meroe.

This conclusion is strengthened by the contradictions between Herodotus' comments on the geography of Nubia in book two and the location he ascribes to the Long-lived Ethiopians. Herodotus claims to have obtained his information about Nubia

18. Inge Hofmann, "Notizien zu den Kampfszenen am sogenannten Sonnentempel von Meroe", *Anthropos*, 70 (1975) 513-536. The temple has been tentatively connected with the god Apedemek by P.L. Shinnie, "The Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, c. 660 B.C. to c. A.D. 600", *CAH*, 2 (Cambridge, 1978) 223.

19. Fritz Hintze, *Studien zur merotische Chronologie und zu dem Opfertafeln aus den Pyramiden von Meroe*, *AbhBerlin* (1959, Nr. 2) 17-20. Hintze's identification of Nastasen's opponent with Chabbash has recently been criticized by Anthony Spalinger, "The Reign of King Chabbash: An Interpretation", *ZAS*, 105 (1978) 147.

20. To the texts collected by Felix Jacoby (*FGrH*, 3C1, 673 F 63) should be added Lucius Ampellus, *Liber memorialis* 13, a text that is of particular importance in this connection since the inclusion of this tradition in a confessedly unoriginal summary of basic knowledge such as the *Liber memorialis* indicates that it was generally accepted.

21. 7.9.2. Cf. 7.69.1.

22. Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, "Zu den äthiopischen Episoden bei Herodot", *Eranos*, 44 (1946) 79; Shinnie, "Nilotic Sudan" (*supra* n. 18) 223. According to the Election Stela (*ANET* 447-448) Aspetta was selected by the oracle of Amon at Napata from the king's brothers, not by election by the whole people from the whole male population as implied by Herodotus. Cf. B.C. Haycock, "The Kingship of Cush in the Sudan", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 7 (1964-1965) 468-471.

23. Herodotus simplified the history of the twenty-fifth dynasty by assigning the whole of its fifty year rule (actually forty-nine: 712-663; cf. Anthony Spalinger, "The Year 712 B.C. and its Implications for Egyptian History", *JARCE*, 10 (1973) 95-101) in Egypt to Shabaka, the first king of the dynasty to rule as King of Egypt. Herodotus' emphasis on his piety agrees with the Memphite tradition reflected in the Shabaka stone (*ANET* 4).

at Elephantine (2.29.1) and his account of the region's geography is generally correct. His locating Meroe about two months journey south of Aswan is approximately correct (2.29),<sup>24</sup> as are his comments about the navigational problems caused by the second cataract (2.29.5), but most important is the fact that in agreement with recent archaeological work in Nubia,<sup>25</sup> he recognized only one significant center of settled Nubian population south of the immediate vicinity of Aswan, that centered at Meroe, which he called the *metropolis* of the other Ethiopians, and to which he assigned a territory extending to the country of the Asmach (2.30), another two months journey upriver from Meroe. At this point, however, his knowledge stopped and he merely noted that beyond the Asmach there was only uninhabited wasteland (2.31). There is no place within this generally accurate picture of Nubia for the utopian city of the Long-lived Ethiopians, and Herodotus did not locate it there but on the shores of the southern sea at the extreme southwestern point of the inhabited world (3.17.1; 3.114). In other words, Herodotus conceived of Cambyses' goal as a third center of Ethiopian population located outside the Nile valley as emerges clearly from the Ethiopian entry in the list of peoples who brought gifts instead of tribute to the Great King which concludes his list of the strapies of the Persian empire. Although marred by both a lacuna and an interpolation, the sense of the passage can be restored as follows (3.97.2-3):<sup>26</sup>

The Ethiopians, those who are neighbors of Egypt, whom Cambyses subdued while marching against the Long-lived Ethiopians and... (sc. those) who dwell near holy Nysa and conduct festivals in honor of Dionysus. Both

these bring as presents every third year, and they continue to do so up to my time, two choinices of unrefined gold, two hundred logs of ebony, five hundred Ethiopian boys and twenty elephant tusks.

The reference to three Ethiopian groups south of Egypt, the Long-lived Ethiopians and two populations subject to Persia is here clear. The former of these, which Herodotus says Cambyses conquered, can be identified with those he says in book two lived near Aswan while the latter, presumably induced to recognize Persian suzerainty later, can only be the Napatan kingdom itself, a conclusion that is made certain by his other statements about the location of Nysa<sup>27</sup> and, as Max Dunker pointed out a century ago, by the nature of the gifts the Ethiopians are said to bring to the Great King.<sup>28</sup>

It is not surprising that historians have been reluctant to accept this conclusion since it means that Herodotus described in book three a campaign against a non-existent people, but this is to forget that his conception of the world was not ours. Several scholars have noted with good reason the close similarities between Herodotus' description of the Long-lived Ethiopians and Homer's references to the idyllic life of the blameless Ethiopians (*eschatoi andron* (*Od.* 1.23)) who also lived a life of plenty on the shores of Ocean.<sup>29</sup> For Herodotus the principle geographical problem involving "Ethiopia" was integrating information on historical Nubia into a geographical framework derived ultimately from the Homeric poems, a framework in which Ethiopians inhabited the southeastern and southwestern extremes (*ai eschatiai* (3.115.1)) of an

24. Claire Preaux, "Les Grecs à la découverte de l'Afrique par l'Égypte", *Chronique d'Égypte*, 32 (1952) 295-298, argued that Herodotus' Meroe should be identified with Napata, but Lloyd (*supra* n. 14) 115-124, has recently convincingly restated the case for the identification with Meroe.

25. William Y. Adams, *Meroitic North and South: A Study in Cultural Contrasts, Meroitica*, 2 (Berlin, 1976) 12-14. Adams' extreme position that Lower Nubia was totally abandoned in the first millennium B.C. should be modified in the light of the criticisms of Inge Hofmann in her review of *Meroitica 2* in *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 35 (1978) 106-108.

26. For this reconstruction of the text see H. Stein, ed., Herodotus, 4th. ed., vol. 2 (Berlin, 1893) note ad 3.97.5.

27. Cf. Desanges' attractive suggestion (*supra* n. 9) 233, n. 93) that behind the localization of Nysa in Nubia is the common Egyptian term for Nubia, *r'nhšj* on which see above note 4.

28. Max Dunker, *The History of Antiquity*, trans. Evelyn Abbott, vol. 6 (London, 1882) 161-163.

29. By Moses Hadas, "Utopian Sources in Herodotus", *CP*, 30 (1935) 115; and Albin Lesky, "Aithiopika", *Hermes*, 87 (1959) 27-38; and from a slightly different perspective, J.P. Vernant, "Les troupeaux du Soleil et la Table du Soleil (Odyssee XII, 260 sqq; Hérodote, III, 17-26)", *REG*, 85 (1972) XIV-XVII. Herodotus' belief (3.116.3) that the ends of the earth produce the most beautiful and rarest things, of course, would predispose him to belief in the Long-lived Ethiopians and their utopian life.

inhabited world bounded on the south by sea.<sup>30</sup> Herodotus did not doubt the validity of this scheme since the circumnavigation of Africa by Necho's Phoenician sailors established to his satisfaction the existence of the southern sea (4.43.2-4)<sup>31</sup> and he believed that he possessed information about "Ethiopians" in the south of India where the Homeric scheme indicated they should be (3.94.1;7.70.1). Careful reading of his text suggests that Herodotus' actual knowledge of Cambyses' Nubian expedition was limited to the single fact that the Persian king subdued part of lower Nubia before being forced to return to Egypt by a supply failure. The abortive character of the expedition deprived him and, therefore, modern scholars also, of any clear idea of its intended objective, but his geographical notions and his belief in the inherent tendency of empires to expand and in Cambyses' madness<sup>32</sup> made it easy for Herodotus to reconstruct the king's original plan in the manner we find in book three, namely, as a mad scheme to march to the end of the world (*es ta eschata ges* (3.251-2)) and conquer the western Ethiopians.

30. William Arthur Heidel, *The Frame of the Ancient Greek Maps* (New York, 1937) 11-22, 28-30; and Friedrich Gisinger, "Zur Geographie bei Hesiod", *RhM*, 78 (1929) 319-328.

31. The historicity of this event is open to the most serious doubts (see Desanges (*supra* n. 9) 7-16, for a thorough discussion of the problems) but Herodotus' own suspicions were confined only to the reported movements of the sun for reasons explained by Yvres Janvier, "Pour une meilleure lecture d'Hérodote à propos de l'Égypte et du 'Periple de Néchao'," *Les études classiques*, 46 (1978) 102-106.

32. Note the appearance of terms for madness and wrath in 3.25. For a clear account of the distortions in

The implications of this conclusion for the history of Nubia are clear. Beyond the bare fact of Cambyses' invasion of Nubia itself, Herodotus' account is a fantasy which, unlike his notes on Nubia in book two and in his satrapy list in book three, cannot be reconciled either with the Old Persian sources or the findings of modern archaeological work in the Sudan. It cannot, therefore, be used to deny the loose dependence of late Napatan Nubia on Persia suggested by those texts or to date the emergence of Meroe as the chief residence of the late Napatan kings to the sixth century B.C. Paradoxically, however, this negative conclusion has a positive corollary since it points as do the occasional discoveries of fifth century Greek pottery at Meroe and, perhaps, also Thucydides' aetiology of the great plague as coming from Ethiopia to Egypt (2.48.1), to the existence for much of the fifth century of at least a tenuous link between Nubia and the centers of Aegean and Near Eastern civilization.<sup>33</sup>

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Herodotus' account of Cambyses see Friedrich Karl Kienitz, *Die politische Geschichte Ägyptens vom 7. bis zum 4. Jahrhundert vor den Zeitwende* (Berlin, 1953) 55-60.

33. Cf. Manfred G. Raschke, "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", *ANRW*, 2.9.2 (Berlin, 1978) 945, n. 1184 for a summary of Greek objects found at Meroe. For a possible illustration of this link and its tenuousness, see a demotic papyrus published by Wilhelm Spiegelberg (*Die demotischen Papyri Loeb* (Munich, 1931)1) which he dates to the year 486/5 B.C. and interprets as being a report concerning an expedition to lower Nubia to collect grain and transport it to some place near Syene.