



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 3 EGYPT, THE GIFT OF THE RIVER

Chapters 9-12

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 9: THE COUNTRY THE RIVER GIVES

After Cyrus died, the kingship passed to his son **Cambyses**. Herodotus does not follow him yet. Cambyses is about to invade Egypt, and Egypt, in this book, is not a preface. It is a world. Book Two is the longest pause in the Histories, and the most famous. Herodotus says he will lengthen the story because Egypt has more wonders than any other land, and works beyond telling.

He begins with the water. The **Nile** floods in summer, when other rivers fall, and no one he has met can explain it to his satisfaction. The Greek theories annoy him. One says the etesian winds dam the current. He objects that the flood happens in years when the winds fail, and that other rivers under the same winds do not rise. Another says the Nile flows from Ocean, the river that runs around the world. He calls this less an explanation than a retreat into the unknown, and says he knows of no river Ocean. A third says the flood is meltwater from snow. He laughs. The Nile comes from the hottest part of the world. That is where snow is least likely.

His own guess (and he marks it as a guess) is that the sun, driven from its course in winter, passes closer to the upper Nile and dries it, and that in summer the river returns to its full size. He is wrong. The flood is the rainy season on the Ethiopian highlands, far to the south, which he has not seen. What matters is the method. He sets out the rival accounts, says why he rejects them, and then offers his own with a lower voice.

WHO IS OLDER

He holds, with what he has seen, that the Egyptians were the first people to exist, except in the Thebaid, where the soil is a later gift of the river. He has **Psammetichus** (*sam-MET-ih-kus*) as a witness of a peculiar kind. The king wanted to know who were the oldest people, and devised a test a modern reader will find cruel. He gave two newborn children of ordinary parents to a shepherd, with orders that no one speak in their hearing. They were to be kept in a hut alone, goats brought in to give them milk, and the shepherd was to listen for the first word. In the second year, when he opened the door, both children reached out and said *bekos*. He reported it. Psammetichus asked and learned that *bekos* was the Phrygian word for bread. The Egyptians, the story goes, accepted that the Phrygians were older than themselves, and claimed the second place. Herodotus had this from the priests of Hephaestus at Memphis. The Greeks tell a foolish version, he says, in which the children's nurse was a woman with her tongue cut out.

Historian's Note: The experiment

This is not science, and it is not kind. It assumes that an untaught child will speak the original language of humankind, as if language were planted rather than learned. What it shows is an Egyptian king, in a Greek telling, using bodies to settle a question of prestige. Herodotus reports it because both sides cared who was first. The flood theory is the fairer sample of his mind: he can be magnificently wrong in the open.

The priests also gave him a list of kings, three hundred and thirty names from Min to Sethos, and showed him the statues. They said that in all that time the sun had twice risen where it now sets, without the Egyptian way of life changing. He does not press the astronomy. He takes the point they want him to take. Egypt thinks in a longer time than Greece.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus rejects three explanations of the Nile and offers a fourth that is also wrong. Why is that still a more useful chapter than a chapter that only repeats a marvel?
2. The Psammetichus experiment treats children as instruments. What question was the king really asking, and what did he fail to ask?
3. Egypt claims a past so long that the sky itself has reversed. Why would a Greek visitor, from a younger world of stories, be hungry for that claim?

CHAPTER 10: A PEOPLE WHO DO THINGS THE OTHER WAY

Herodotus's Egypt is a mirror held up to Greece, and he enjoys the reversals. Women go to market and trade. Men weave, at home. Other people push the woof upward; Egyptians push it down. Women carry loads on their shoulders, men on their heads. Sons are not required to support their parents; daughters are. They knead dough with their feet and clay with their hands. They relieve themselves indoors and eat outdoors. Priests shave their whole bodies instead of letting their hair grow. They write from right to left. In all this he is collecting difference, and sometimes inventing a neatness the country did not have. He is also, more quietly, telling a Greek reader that nature is not the same thing as habit.

They are, he says, the most religious people he knows. They drink from bronze cups, scoured daily, and wear linen, always freshly washed, because wool is unclean for a sanctuary. Priests bathe in cold water twice a day and twice a night. The name of almost every Greek god, he reports the priests as saying, came to Greece from Egypt. He is not in a position to prove it, and he sometimes forces a match, Egyptian Amun with Zeus, Horus with Apollo, Isis with Demeter. The impulse is serious. He does not think Greece invented the gods.

ANIMALS, DOCTORS, AND THE DEAD

Animals have law around them. To kill an ibis or a hawk, even by accident, is death. Cats who die are taken to sacred buildings and buried, often at Bubastis. Dogs go to their own towns of burial. Field mice and hawks go to Buto. He tells of a fire in which the Egyptians stood in a line grieving for the cats, and did not fight the flames, and of cats hurling themselves into the burning. He tells of the crocodile, feared in some places and kept as a sacred creature in others, with earrings and bracelets on its forefeet and food appointed it. He tells of the phoenix as a story he does not quite believe: a bird from Arabia once every five hundred years, carrying its father packed in myrrh, to bury him at the temple of the sun.

Medicine is specialised to a degree that startles him. One doctor for the eyes, one for the head, one for the teeth, one for the belly, one for hidden diseases. Embalming he describes in three grades, by price. The dearest draws out the brain with an iron hook, makes a cut in the flank with a sharp Ethiopian stone, removes the organs except the heart and kidneys, rinses with palm wine and pounded spices, sews the body up, and packs it seventy days in natron. The middle grade injects oil and lets it dissolve what it can. The cheapest purges the body and returns it. He has been shown the workshops. This is one of the places where he is closest to a reporter.

Historian's Note: Sacred animals and a Greek gaze

Egyptian religion did treat certain animals as manifestations of gods, and animal cemeteries are real. The details (earrings on crocodiles, cats throwing themselves into fires) are where spectacle enters. Read the embalming passage as the best of him: a practice, three prices, a tool named, a number of days. Read the reversals as a method that can harden into a cartoon. Both are in the same book.

He adds customs that are not Egyptian alone, so that the mirror does not become a cage. The Persians will not pollute a river. The Massagetae have their own rites of the dead. Difference is the

subject, not a verdict that Egypt is upside down and Greece is upright.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus lists Egyptian habits as the reverse of Greek ones. When does a list of differences become a way of not seeing the people described?
2. He is most believable when he describes a workshop, and least when he describes a wonder. How can you tell, inside his own sentences, which mood he is in?
3. Specialist doctors and graded embalming suggest a society with institutions, not only marvels. What else in this chapter is an institution rather than a curiosity?

CHAPTER 11: KINGS, A THIEF, AND THE PYRAMID BUILDERS

The priests gave him kings in a chain, and he keeps the ones with a story. **Min** first, who dammed the Nile and founded Memphis. Queen **Nitocris**, who avenged her brother by inviting his killers to a banquet in an underground chamber and letting the river in on them, and who then, the Egyptians say, threw herself into a room of ashes so that no further vengeance could find her. **Sesostris**, the conquering king, who set pillars in the lands he subdued, marked with the female sign if the people had not fought, and who came home to find his brother had plotted against him and escaped a burning house because his wife told him to lay two of their six sons across the flames as a bridge. Herodotus admires the escape and does not soften the price.

THE BUILDER AND THE THIEF

King **Rhampsinitus**, rich beyond the kings before him, built a stone treasury and left one stone so that it could be removed by two men and by no one else. The builder, dying, told his two sons the secret. They opened the wall, and took. The king set traps. One brother was caught. He told the other to cut off his head, so the corpse could not be recognised and the family ruined. The king hung the headless body on the wall and set guards, expecting grief to betray someone. The mother demanded the body. The surviving son got the guards drunk, shaved the right cheek of each of them as an insult, and brought his brother home.

The king, astonished more than angry, offered his daughter to whoever could tell the cleverest crime, meaning to catch the man in the telling. The thief came, and escaped a grab by leaving a severed arm (his dead brother's) in her hand. Then the king pardoned him and gave him the daughter, judging Egypt richer in such a man than in money. Herodotus says he does not believe the Egyptians here. He tells the story anyway. That sentence is almost a method all by itself.

CHEOPS AND THE YEARS OF THE STONE

Until **Rhampsinitus**, they said, Egypt was well governed. **Cheops** closed the temples, forbade sacrifice, and set the people to labour. Some dragged stone from the Arabian hills to the Nile. Others received it and hauled it to the Libyan hills. A hundred thousand men at a time, changed every three months, for ten years on the road alone, and twenty on the pyramid. Herodotus gives the measurements, the machines that lifted the stones course by course, and a legend he marks as distasteful: that Cheops, running out of money, sent his daughter to a chamber to collect a fee, and that she asked each man for a stone, and built the middle pyramid of the three in front of the great one from what she was paid. He has been into the pyramid, he says, as far as the chamber, up a narrow passage.

Chephren succeeded, and ruled in the same manner, and built the second pyramid, forty feet lower, with no chambers beneath, and the first course of Ethiopian stone. The Egyptians do not like to name these two. They call the pyramids after a shepherd, Philitis, who pastured there. **Mycerinus**, son of Cheops, opened the temples and judged justly, and came to grief for it. An oracle gave him six years to live, because Egypt was fated to be afflicted for a hundred and fifty years and he had not understood. He stayed awake at night, they say, to double what he had left. He built the third pyramid, smaller, and fairer, of Ethiopian stone to half its height.

Historian's Note: Khufu, Khafre, Menkaure

Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus are the Greek forms of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, kings of the Fourth Dynasty, more than two thousand years before Herodotus. The pyramids are theirs. The closed temples, the daughter's chamber, and the oracle of six years are later talk, some of it hostile. He is honest about having measured and entered. He is not in a position to know the building accounts. The labour was real. The cartoon of a tyrant who prostituted his daughter is not how you should leave the Old Kingdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus says he does not believe the tale of Rhampsinitus, and tells it at length. What is the point of recording a story you reject?
2. The pyramids are described both as measurements and as moral judgements. Which description has aged better, and why?
3. Mycerinus is punished for ruling more gently than his father. What picture of fate does that oracle assume?

CHAPTER 12: FROM THE TWELVE KINGS TO AMASIS

Egypt broke, in his long backward look, into twelve kings, who ruled in friendship and built the labyrinth above Lake Moeris, which Herodotus says he saw and which outdid even the pyramids in labour. They were not to depose one another. An oracle said the one who poured a libation from a bronze helmet would rule alone. The twelve were sacrificing, and the priest came short of golden cups. **Psammetichus**, standing aside, took off his bronze helmet and used it. He did not do it as a claim. The others understood the oracle better than he wished, and drove him into the marshes. He came back with Ionian and Carian bronze-men, sea-raiders in armour, whom an oracle had told him to trust, and with them he became sole king. He gave the strangers land and a settlement, and from them the Greeks in Egypt learned the country, and he sent Egyptian boys to learn Greek. Herodotus thinks this is how his own sources began: a king who needed interpreters.

His son **Neco** tried a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea, and stopped when an oracle warned him he was working for the barbarian, meaning, in the end, the Persian. He turned to war, and sent Phoenicians, Herodotus reports, to sail around Libya, which is to say Africa. They went south from the Red Sea, and returned in the third year through the pillars of Heracles, and said that as they sailed west they had the sun on their right hand. Herodotus does not believe that detail. It is one of the details a modern navigator finds easiest to believe, because a ship going west around the Cape of Good Hope would indeed see the noon sun to the north.

APRIES AND AMASIS

Apries succeeded, and prospered for twenty-five years, and then sent an army against Cyrene that was nearly destroyed. The Egyptians revolted, thinking he had sent them to die so that he might rule the more securely. He sent **Amasis**, a man of the people he trusted, to talk them back. While Amasis was speaking, an Egyptian came behind him and put a helmet on his head, and hailed him king. He did not refuse. Apries sent Patarbemis to bring him, and when the man returned without him, and with a message too proud to bear, Apries cut off his nose and ears. The remaining Egyptians went over. Apries was defeated, taken, and later strangled, and buried among his fathers. Amasis ruled.

Amasis had been a private man who liked his drink and his joke, and in the morning, when he was short of money, he used to go about stealing. Those who said he had their property and whom the oracle condemned, he paid. Those whom the oracle cleared, he did not. When he was king he melted a gold foot-basin in which his guests had washed their feet, and made it into a divine image, and the Egyptians revered it. He told them they had washed their feet in it and worse. So it was with him. Once he was a man of the people. Now he was their king, and they should honour him. He also kept a terrifying schedule: the morning for business, the rest of the day for company, and when his friends said he should sit in state all day, he answered that a bow kept strung will break, and a man kept always serious will crack. He made a friendship with Polycrates of Samos, and with Cyrene, and married a woman of the place, and dedicated offerings in Greece, at Delphi and elsewhere, with his name on them. He is the king Cambyses will come to overthrow, and he will be dead when the Persian arrives, which will not save his body.

So Book Two ends where Book Three can begin: Egypt known, or as known as a travelling Greek can make it, and a new king in Persia who has inherited Cyrus's reach and none of Cyrus's willingness to stop.

EGYPTIANS HERODOTUS WANTS YOU TO REMEMBER

Name	What he is in the story	What to hold lightly
Psammetichus	The helmet, the interpreters, the children	The experiment
Neco	The canal, the African voyage	Herodotus doubts the sun, which may be the true part
Cheops	The great pyramid and forced labour	The story of his daughter
Amasis	The jester who became a capable king	The gossip from before the crown

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus does not believe the Phoenicians had the sun on their right, and that detail is now evidence they may have made the voyage. What does that do to the idea that a careful reporter is always the best judge of his own material?
2. Amasis turns a foot-basin into a god and tells the people to live with it. Is that a joke about religion, or a serious claim about office?
3. Book Two barely advances the war. Why might Herodotus think a history of the Persian Wars is unfinished without it?