

REVIEW

A CRITICAL UPDATE ON HERODOTUS' AITHIOPIA

László Török, *Herodotus in Nubia. Mnemosyne Supplements. History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity*, 368. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. Pp. xiv + 163. Hardback, \$136.00. ISBN 978-90-04-26913-2.

In this brief monograph on Herodotus' presentation of Nubian society and culture, László Török sets out to investigate how far Herodotus' picture of ancient Nubia, what Herodotus terms Aithiopia, corresponds with the extant archaeological and textual evidence (albeit Török assiduously avoids a Fehling-esque study of the Aithiopian passages in order to assess Herodotus' reliability).¹ Setting out from the beginning the tendency of Herodotean scholars to place uncritical faith in outdated Egyptological works when addressing Nubian matters, Török proposes that Nubian studies have moved on substantially in the last few decades, now recognising the complexity of the ancient Egyptian-Nubian interface. For Egypt's expansion into Nubian territory during the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1543–1292 BC) did not precipitate a conqueror-conquered relationship; 'Egyptianization remained selective in all segments of Nubian society' (5; cf. 100–1). And yet, while studies have continued to abound in the field of Nubiology (Török himself a leading figure in the discipline), Herodotus' most significant recent readers of the Egyptian-Nubian material have largely failed to take into account this current literature (17).

In Chapter 1, Török sets the stage for the reader, illustrating the extent to which approaches to reading Herodotus have fundamentally changed over the last few decades, with a much greater appreciation of his work as a *text*—a literary enterprise that must be read in its own cultural context. In the final section of the first chapter, he provides a helpful overview of the Kingdom of Kush from the eighth to the fifth century BC, against which Herodotus' work is assessed in the subsequent chapters.

¹ D. Fehling, *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot: Studien zur Erzählkunst Herodots* (Berlin and New York, 1971). For a useful critique, see J. Cobet, 'review of D. Fehling, *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot. Studien zur Erzählkunst Herodots* (Berlin, 1971)', *Gnomon* 46 (1974): 737–46.

Chapter 2 assembles all passages that refer to Aithiopia, dispersed throughout the *Histories* (though chiefly in Books I and III), and provides English translations, mostly taken from Eide's *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*,² as well as the Marincola edition of de Sélincourt's celebrated 1954 translation.³ Chapter 3 then sets out to illustrate that Herodotus presents not one but two Aithiopias: one that relates to the lower Nubian kingdom during the time of the Saite Twenty-Sixth Dynasty and Egypt's Persian rulers, and one that is utopian, a land of extremes lying at the edges of the known worlds. In addition to this, Török shows convincingly that Herodotus never intended to compose a holistic Aithiopian *logos* in the manner of other ethnographic *logoi* in his work, such as those on the Egyptians, Persians, *inter alia*. The passages that he does include are too disparate and insubstantial to form the impression that an intentional, coherent *logos* on the Aithiopians was ever planned.

In Chapter 4, "Fiction" and "Reality", Török contests the idea that it was Herodotus' sources of information, namely the Egyptian priests, that were to blame for his inaccuracies. Rather, it was 'the special limitations of Herodotus' own curiosity and the natural limitations of his perception' (59) of Egyptian kingship and religion. Török proceeds to show how each of the accounts on the Aithiopians works within its particular narrative context. For instance, the Egyptian king Psammis and his march on Nubia (Hdt. 2.161) are examined as part of Herodotus' wider excursus on Egypt during the time of the Saite Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. Not only this, but Török shows the definite impact that utopian *topoi* had on Herodotus' conception of numerous aspects of the Aithiopians and their kings, such as the influence of oracular guidance in regal successions and royal decision-making in the Kingdom of Kush (86-9) and the election of the Long-Lived Aithiopians' kings (103-4).

The final section of the book reinforces one of the major contentions of the book, that much of Herodotus' information concerning Aithiopia was derived from the Memphite priests at the Ptah sanctuary, along with other Egyptian and/or unidentifiable sources, a view that might well fail to persuade some of Herodotus' more sceptical readers. While Török's final conclusions are by no means optimistic (he speaks of 'the limited Nubiological *Quellenwert* of the *Histories*', 120), he does at least accept that Herodotus interacted with the Memphite priests (cf. Hdt. 2.99) and that further sources of information derived from these priests can be discerned in various other accounts, not least in Herodotus' excurses on the two Aithiopias. Equally, Török contributes meaningfully to our understanding of the *Histories* as a sophisticated *literary* text, repeat-

² T. Eide et al., *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum, Vol. I: From the Eighth to the Mid-Fifth Century BC* (Bergen, 1994).

³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, tr. by A de Sélincourt. Revised with Introduction and Notes by J. Marincola (London, 2003).

edly showing how individual passages betray a uniquely Herodotean voice-print. For example, the Aithiopian king who condemns Cambysean expansionism in 3.21 ('the gods ... have not put it in the minds of the children of the Aithiopians to acquire other land than their own') clearly not only reinforces the anti-expansionist motif that recurs elsewhere in the *Histories*, but also, more interestingly, accentuates Herodotus' perception that monarchies are insatiably territorial (125, cf. 110–11).

One of the specially pleasing aspects of Török's survey is his unwillingness to apply the sort of negative conclusions that bedevilled Fehling's classic study on Herodotus' fictional source citations. While of course recognising Herodotus' own contributions to many of the passages under scrutiny, Török frequently unearths likely sources of information for individual passages (sources that, encouragingly, do not correspond with Fehling's system of Herodotus 'citing the obvious source'). For example, Herodotus' account of the Egyptian king Sesostri (the only Egyptian king to rule over Aithiopia', Hdt. 2.110), who is clearly a composite of different Egyptian kings, well captures the realities of Egyptian historical memory on ideal regency, insomuch that the glories of the Middle Kingdom were centred on Senusret I and his third successor Senusret III (65). But, in addition to this, not losing sight of Herodotus' central role in the preservation of these accounts (cf. the opening line of his *Histories*: 'This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus ...'), Török illustrates how this account of the concentrated achievements of Sesostri also enables Herodotus to create a pointed contrast with the Persian king Cambyses (66), who quite failed to conquer Nubia (Hdt. 3.25–6). It is precisely this admixture of competing agencies and voices that are at work in so many of Herodotus' *logoi*.

In sum, this is a valuable contribution to Herodotean studies, and one that should not be dismissed by those who are more interested in the literary qualities of the *Histories*. While Török indubitably sets out to correct overly simplifying accounts on Herodotus' Aithiopian passages, ill-informed bibliographically on current Nubian research, in the end his work has just as much to say on the way Herodotus weaves different traditions into a complex work that aims to present the multiplicity of perspectives concerning the historical past. Herodotus' variant accounts might prove cold comfort to those who would prefer a history that merely 'states the facts', but this book provides further rich evidence of Herodotus' continued renaissance as a literary genius in contemporary scholarship.