

CLASSICS TO GO



AN ACCOUNT OF EGYPT

HERODOTUS

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NOTE

HERODOTUS was born at Halicarnassus, on the southwest coast of Asia Minor, in the early part of the fifth century, B. C. Of his life we know almost nothing, except that he spent much of it traveling, to collect the material for his writings, and that he finally settled down at Thurii, in southern Italy, where his great work was composed. He died in 424 B. C.

The subject of the history of Herodotus is the struggle between the Greeks and the barbarians, which he brings down to the battle of Mycale in 479 B. C. The work, as we have it, is divided into nine books, named after the nine Muses, but this division is probably due to the Alexandrine grammarians. His information he gathered mainly from oral sources, as he traveled through Asia Minor, down into Egypt, round the Black Sea, and into various parts of Greece and the neighboring countries. The chronological narrative halts from time to time to give opportunity for descriptions of the country, the people, and their customs and previous history; and the political account is constantly varied by rare tales and wonders.

Among these descriptions of countries the most fascinating to the modern, as it was to the ancient, reader is his account of the marvels of the land of Egypt. From the priests at Memphis, Heliopolis, and the Egyptian Thebes he learned what he reports of the size of the country, the wonders of the Nile, the ceremonies of their religion, the sacredness of their animals. He tells also of the strange ways of the crocodile and of that marvelous bird, the Phoenix; of dress and funerals and embalming; of the eating of lotos and papyrus; of the pyramids and the great labyrinth; of their kings and queens and courtesans.

Yet Herodotus is not a mere teller of strange tales. However credulous he may appear to a modern judgment, he takes care to keep separate what he knows by his own observation from what he has merely inferred and from what he has been told. He is candid about acknowledging ignorance, and when versions differ he gives both. Thus the modern scientific historian, with other means of corroboration, can sometimes learn from Herodotus more than Herodotus himself knew.

There is abundant evidence, too, that Herodotus had a philosophy of history. The unity which marks his work is due not only to the strong Greek national feeling running through it, the feeling that rises to a height in such passages as the descriptions of the battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis, but also to his profound belief in Fate and in Nemesis. To his belief in Fate is due the frequent quoting of oracles and their fulfilment, the frequent references to things foreordained by Providence. The working of Nemesis he finds in the disasters that befall men and nations whose towering prosperity awakens the jealousy of the gods. The final overthrow of the Persians, which forms his main theme, is only one specially conspicuous example of the operation of this force from which human life can never free itself.

But, above all, he is the father of story-tellers. "Herodotus is such simple and delightful reading," says Jevons; "he is so unaffected and entertaining, his story flows so naturally and with such ease that we have a difficulty in bearing in mind that, over and above the hard writing which goes to make easy reading there is a perpetual marvel in the work of Herodotus. It is the first artistic work in prose that Greek literature produced. This prose work, which for pure literary merit no subsequent work has surpassed, than which later generations, after using the pen for centuries, have

produced no prose more easy or more readable, this was the first of histories and of literary prose."

BEING THE SECOND BOOK OF HIS HISTORIES CALLED EUTERPE

When Cyrus had brought his life to an end, Cambyzes received the royal power in succession, being the son of Cyrus and of Cassandane the daughter of Pharnaspes, for whose death, which came about before his own, Cyrus had made great mourning himself and also had proclaimed to all those over whom he bore rule that they should make mourning for her: Cambyzes, I say, being the son of this woman and of Cyrus, regarded the Ionians and Aiolians as slaves inherited from his father; and he proceeded to march an army against Egypt, taking with him as helpers not only other nations of which he was ruler, but also those of the Hellenes over whom he had power besides.

Now the Egyptians, before the time when Psammetichos became king over them, were wont to suppose that they had come into being first of all men; but since the time when Psammetichos having become king desired to know what men had come into being first, they suppose that the Phrygians came into being before themselves, but they themselves before all other men. Now Psammetichos, when he was not able by inquiry to find out any means of knowing who had come into being first of all men, contrived a device of the following kind:—Taking two newborn children belonging to persons of the common sort he gave them to a shepherd to bring up at the place where his flocks were, with a manner of bringing up such as I shall say, charging him namely that no man should utter any word in their presence, and that they should be placed by themselves in a room where none might come, and at the proper time he should bring them she-goats, and when he had satisfied

them with milk he should do for them whatever else was needed. These things Psammetichos did and gave him this charge wishing to hear what word the children would let break forth first after they had ceased from wailings without sense. And accordingly it came to pass; for after a space of two years had gone by, during which the shepherd went on acting so, at length, when he opened the door and entered, both children fell before him in entreaty and uttered the word *bekos*, stretching forth their hands. At first when he heard this the shepherd kept silence; but since this word was often repeated, as he visited them constantly and attended to them, at last he declared the matter to his master, and at his command he brought the children before his face. Then Psammetichos having himself also heard it, began to inquire what nation of men named anything *bekos*, and inquiring he found that the Phrygians had this name for bread. In this manner and guided by an indication such as this, the Egyptians were brought to allow that the Phrygians were a more ancient people than themselves. That so it came to pass I heard from the priests of that Hephaistos who dwells at Memphis; but the Hellenes relate, besides many other idle tales, that Psammetichos cut out the tongues of certain women and then caused the children to live with these women.

With regard then to the rearing of the children they related so much as I have said; and I heard also other things at Memphis when I had speech with the priests of Hephaistos. Moreover I visited both Thebes and Heliopolis for this very cause, namely because I wished to know whether the priests at these places would agree in their accounts with those at Memphis; for the men of Heliopolis are said to be the most learned in records of the Egyptians. Those of their narrations which I heard with regard to the gods I am not earnest to relate in full, but I shall name them only because I consider that all men are equally ignorant of

these matters: and whatever things of them I may record I shall record only because I am compelled by the course of the story. But as to those matters which concern men, the priests agreed with one another in saying that the Egyptians were the first of all men on earth to find out the course of the year, having divided the seasons into twelve parts to make up the whole; and this they said they found out from the stars: and they reckon to this extent more wisely than the Hellenes, as it seems to me, inasmuch as the Hellenes throw in an intercalated month every other year, to make the seasons right, whereas the Egyptians, reckoning the twelve months at thirty days each, bring in also every year five days beyond number, and thus the circle of their season is completed and comes round to the same point whence it set out. They said moreover that the Egyptians were the first who brought into use appellations for the twelve gods and the Hellenes took up the use from them; and that they were the first who assigned altars and images and temples to the gods, and who engraved figures on stones; and with regard to the greater number of these things they showed me by actual facts that they had happened so. They said also that the first man who became king of Egypt was Min; and that in his time all Egypt except the district of Thebes was a swamp, and none of the regions were then above water which now lie below the lake of Moiris, to which lake it is a voyage of seven days up the river from the sea: and I thought that they said well about the land; for it is manifest in truth even to a person who has not heard it beforehand but has only seen, at least if he have understanding, that the Egypt to which the Hellenes come in ships is a land which has been won by the Egyptians as an addition, and that it is a gift of the river: moreover the regions which lie above this lake also for a distance of three days' sail, about which they did not go on to say anything of this kind, are nevertheless another instance of the same thing: for the nature of the land of Egypt is as follows:—First when you are

still approaching it in a ship and are distant a day's run from the land, if you let down a sounding-line you will bring up mud and you will find yourself in eleven fathoms. This then so far shows that there is a silting forward of the land. Then secondly, as to Egypt itself, the extent of it along the sea is sixty *schoines*, according to our definition of Egypt as extending from the Gulf of Plinthine to the Serbonian lake, along which stretches Mount Casion; from this lake then the sixty *schoines* are reckoned: for those of men who are poor in land have their country measured by fathoms, those who are less poor by furlongs, those who have much land by parasangs, and those who have land in very great abundance by *schoines*: now the parasang is equal to thirty furlongs, and each *schoine*, which is an Egyptian measure, is equal to sixty furlongs. So there would be an extent of three thousand six hundred furlongs for the coast-land of Egypt. From thence and as far as Heliopolis inland Egypt is broad, and the land is all flat and without springs of water and formed of mud: and the road as one goes inland from the sea to Heliopolis is about the same in length as that which leads from the altar of the twelve gods at Athens to Pisa and the temple of Olympian Zeus: reckoning up you would find the difference very small by which these roads fail of being equal in length, not more indeed than fifteen furlongs; for the road from Athens to Pisa wants fifteen furlongs of being fifteen hundred, while the road to Heliopolis from the sea reaches that number completely. From Heliopolis however, as you go up, Egypt is narrow; for on the one side a mountain-range belonging to Arabia stretches along by the side of it, going in a direction from the North towards the midday and the South Wind, tending upwards without a break to that which is called the Erythraian Sea, in which range are the stone-quarries which were used in cutting stone for the pyramids at Memphis. On this side then the mountain ends where I have said, and then takes a turn back; and where it is widest, as I was

informed, it is a journey of two months across from East to West; and the borders of it which turn towards the East are said to produce frankincense. Such then is the nature of this mountain-range; and on the side of Egypt towards Libya another range extends, rocky and enveloped in sand: in this are the pyramids, and it runs in the same direction as those parts of the Arabian mountains which go towards the midday. So then, I say, from Heliopolis the land has no longer a great extent so far as it belongs to Egypt, and for about four days' sail up the river Egypt properly so called is narrow: and the space between the mountain-ranges which have been mentioned is plain-land, but where it is narrowest it did not seem to me to exceed two hundred furlongs from the Arabian mountains to those which are called the Libyan. After this again Egypt is broad. Such is the nature of this land: and from Heliopolis to Thebes is a voyage up the river of nine days, and the distance of the journey in furlongs is four thousand eight hundred and sixty, the number of *schoines* being eighty-one. If these measures of Egypt in furlongs be put together, the result is as follows:—I have already before this shown that the distance along the sea amounts to three thousand six hundred furlongs, and I will now declare what the distance is inland from the sea to Thebes, namely six thousand one hundred and twenty furlongs: and again the distance from Thebes to the city called Elephantine is one thousand eight hundred furlongs.

Of this land then, concerning which I have spoken, it seemed to myself also, according as the priests said, that the greater part had been won as an addition by the Egyptians; for it was evident to me that the space between the aforesaid mountain-ranges, which lie above the city of Memphis, once was a gulf of the sea, like the regions about Ilion and Teuthrania and Ephesos and the plain of the Maiander, if it be permitted to compare small things with great; and small these are in comparison, for of the rivers