Herodotus’ Egyptian Paradox

Herodotus’ account of Egypt is paradoxical in that, in Lloyd’s formulation, he imposes a “Greek moral universe” on Egyptian historical figures and events (Lloyd 426). This helps to illustrate that Herodotus shows a profound lack of insight into Egyptian culture beyond a superficial level. In telling Egyptian history, he establishes a narrative mode of expression which a Greek audience would understand. This understanding provides Herodotus with the means to incorporate his otherwise tangential discourse on Egypt into his Histories. The paradox thus contributes to the Herodotus’ ability to retain a unified narrative structure which would have appealed to Greek readers.

The most striking example of Herodotus’ paradoxical account on Egypt is the binary opposition he creates between two kings, Psammethicus and Amasis. The accounts of these kings frame Book II with Psammetichus as the first Egyptian king mentioned by name and Amasis as the final king treated in the book. Their comparative treatment has a “μὲν . . . δὲ” quality to it in that Psammethicus unifies Egypt from its division under the twelve kings, including himself, who jointly ruled the nation (II.152); whereas Amasis ascends the throne of a unified Egypt only to provoke its fall to Cambyses (II.169, III.1). The greatest contrast between the two is their obedience or hybris towards the gods. Psammetichus relies upon an oracle from Buto to secure his reign through the arrival of the Ionians and Carians whom he treats favorably (II.152, 154). In contrast to this, Amasis let shrines fall into neglect whose oracles had not found him guilty of crimes he had committed against
other Egyptians, but he gave more than any of the Greek states to the temple at Delphi (II.174, 180). Thus, Psammetichus uses the gods as the foundation of his reign, while Amasis uses his royal power to elevate and denigrate the gods as he sees fit.

In describing the actions of these kings, Herodotus evaluates them as archetypes of discipline and licentiousness, which, despite other pertinent policy matters, shapes the final result of each reign. This construction stems from a particularly Greek worldview and should not be taken to reflect Egyptian conceptions of proper government or moral law. It is a story of piety leading to success while *hybris*, trickery, and irreverence lead to ultimate destruction.

Accordingly, what Herodotus gives us is a Greek story about Egyptian kings which plays out as a Greek audience would expect. He hints at this when he says the mercenaries of Psammethicus are the reason the Greeks know of Egyptian history from his reign and after (II.154), establishing the expectation of a Greek account for these events. In this way, Herodotus is able to take a large excursus on a nation of peripheral value to the Persian wars and integrate it into his broader narrative. Concurrently, he creates a paradigm of moral action by which readers can assess other rulers mentioned in the *Histories*.
Work Cited