

## Irresistibly Alluring: Heliodorus' Nilotic Digression and Herodotus

No reader of Heliodorus can fail to notice his use of the scientific digression. Earlier critics, notably J. R. Morgan (1982), have seen this use of a general historiographic technique as a means of creating plausibility for a fictional narrative. In this paper I examine one such passage, Calasiris' digression on the Nile (2.27-28). This digression, I argue, is not just a nod to historiographic convention, but a direct allusion to Herodotus. By means of this reference, Heliodorus positions his own work as a creative refashioning that rivals and exceeds his predecessor.

In *Aethiopica* 2.27-28, Calasiris has a conversation with Cnemon detailing his life at Delphi. Calasiris tells how he spent his time participating in religious practices and conversing with philosophers, and he proceeds to enumerate a catalogue of questions that people at Delphi asked (2.27.3). The catalogue consists entirely of topics broached by Herodotus (2.37-148) and follows the same order. Additionally, the vocabulary choice Calasiris uses to describe the activity of the inquiring men, ἱστοροῦντες, points to Herodotus. Heliodorus only uses the ἱστορ- root twice: once in the aforementioned passage, 2.27.3, and then again at 2.29.5, at the conclusion of this scene. The episode is therefore bookended by the word (or root of the word) Herodotus uses to describe his own work in his programmatic prologue. We may also see the word that closes the catalogue, ἐπαγωγότατον ("irresistibly alluring"), as a nod to Herodotus' fondness for the superlative. And of course Calasiris' role as an Egyptian priest in Heliodorus' narrative aligns him with the Egyptian priests mentioned in Book 2 of Herodotus' *Histories*.

After the catalogue of inquiries (2.27.3), Calasiris appears to have ended his discussion of Greek curiosities about Egypt, and we assume he will move on to a new topic. Instead, he thwarts expectation and introduces a new questioner who asks about the nature of the Nile, its

sources, and the reason for its flooding (2.28). The continuation of the catalogue, and the topic of the Nile's flooding again allude to Herodotus. Because the cause of the Nile's flooding was a common historiographical inquiry, critics may argue that the mere mention of the subject does not conclusively allude to a single author. It is clear from Diodorus Siculus, however, that Herodotus was not just one of many historians to discuss the subject, but rather that his treatment formed a famous and influential part of the debate (1.37-41). In combination with the surrounding references to Herodotus, readers could not fail to think of Herodotus' familiar text.

Heliodorus' passage is not just meant to evoke Herodotus', but also to correct and improve on it. Herodotus' digression on the causes of the Nile's flooding begins with an insistence that he could not ascertain anything about the nature of the river from any of the priests in Egypt (2.19). His investigation thus begins with a Greek (Herodotus himself) asking Egyptian priests about the Nile, with no success. In Heliodorus' text, an Egyptian priest (Calasiris) is similarly asked about the Nile by Greeks (the Delphians). But here the questioners are successful.

Indeed, Heliodorus seems to narrate the very process by which Herodotus researched and formulated his history. At 1.20 Herodotus explicitly refers to conversations with the Delphians as one of his sources. Modern scholarship attributes a great deal of Herodotus' information to conversations from Delphi (Hornblower 2002). It is reasonable to suggest ancient readers might have had similar suspicions. At least one ancient source, Diodorus Siculus, denies that Herodotus even visited Egypt (1.37). Thus the setting and situation of the passage represent a kind of duplicate of Herodotus' investigation. But Heliodorus refashions the outcome so that his readers are granted access denied to Herodotus.

If we envision a reference to Herodotus in particular here, we gain a more interesting and potentially ironic reading of the Nilotic digression. Questions that had occupied Herodotus for an entire book are enumerated briefly and in passing, while a problem that had stumped Herodotus receives a lengthy and authoritative answer. By making his Egyptian priest divulge information, Heliodorus succeeds where Herodotus could not. Heliodorus thus positions himself as surpassing his predecessor in his reimagining of Herodotus' ἱστορία, both his process of inquiry and the written work itself.

### Bibliography

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