

What is ὁ ἵππος ποτάμιος?

This paper deals with the question often asked by students when reading Herodotus 2.71—what animal could he possibly be referring to? In *Histories*, Herodotus includes many digressions and side stories that are easily overlooked. In fact, the entirety of Book II is a digression on Egypt, filled with various stories about the land, culture, religion, and wildlife he gleaned by inquiry (Redford 2001). Based on his description of the hippopotamus, many scholars (Lloyd 1976, Romm 2006, Purvis 2007) question whether he saw one at all, although they were very common in Egypt during his lifetime. Even if Herodotus never had the chance to see them live in the Nile, the Egyptians depicted accurate hippopotami frequently in their artwork and therefore he would have had the opportunity to see them depicted (Arnold 1995 and Lloyd 1976). Herodotus gets nearly every element of a hippopotamus wrong. In fact, as Lloyd argues, it is “by far the most inaccurate piece of zoology in Book II.” (Lloyd 1976). Despite this, I disagree with the idea that Herodotus was merely making up a description of an animal and contend that there are two possible explanations for his unconvincing description.

The first and more easily believable explanation is that Herodotus saw hippopotami from far away or when they were partially submerged in water or hidden by reeds. The other possible explanation for this unusual description is that Herodotus was not describing what we today call a hippopotamus (Steier 1939, Chapman 1881), an explanation that has been ignored or dismissed (Lloyd 1976) in the recent scholarship. In my paper I revisit the theory proposed by Steier that Herodotus could be describing a white-bearded gnu (wildebeest) and not the animal we now call a hippopotamus. Herodotus’ description is actually reasonably accurate when looking at this animal.

Based on all the evidence, it seems reasonable to assume that Herodotus, upon hearing about a river-horse, described the animal he thought fit it best and included some other elements that he had previously heard. This paper includes custom illustrations by the author.

Bibliography

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