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UNREMITTING ACTIVITY: HERODOTUS' MYCERINUS AND ZENON'S
CORRESPONDENTS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 123 (1998) 31–34

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Writing to Zenon in 252/1 Apollonius emphasised the need for expedition in fulfilling the king's orders (*PSI* 514): ὁ βασιλεὺς περὶ τῶν εἰς τὰ στεφανηφόρια ξενίων πλεονάκεις προστέταχεν ἐπιμελέστερον. νύκτα οὖν ἡμέραν ποιούμενος κατὰπεμψον τὰ διαγραφέντα ἐκ Φιλαδελφείας. The editor commented on the lively conversational tone of the phrase νύκτα ἡμέραν ποιούμενος. A further example from Zenon's correspondence appears in a letter from the oecnome Aristandros, dated to November 250 (*P.Cair.Zen.* 59314): τὸν δὲ Ἡρακλείδην νύκτα ἡμέραν ποιούμενος ἀπόστειλον, ἵνα μὴ ἐπιτιμηθῶμεν.² It may seem surprising that this useful phrase does not occur more often.

In his study of the Ptolemaic adaptation of the Egyptian ideology of kingship Ludwig Koenen cited the first of these letters to illustrate his argument that there was more common ground between Greeks and Egyptians than is usually supposed,³ comparing the report made by the architect Haremsaf to Sheshonq I (c. 945–24) on the progress of the “works of eternity” under construction at Karnak: “All that thou hast said is being accomplished, O good lord, there is neither sleeping by night nor indeed slumbering by day, but they build the everlasting works unflaggingly.”⁴ To our minds such continuous activity in the ruler's service, without regard to the division of time, belongs to heaven (*Apoc.* 4.8; 7.15); impractical as uninterrupted construction work might be, Haremsaf's high-flown phraseology reflects belief in the Pharaoh's divine status.

Between Haremsaf and Apollonius Herodotus provides a further example of the obliteration of this fundamental dichotomy at the conclusion of his account of the reign of Mycerinus, the third, and last, of the pyramid-builders (2.129–33).⁵ If the similar phraseology of the Pharaonic and Ptolemaic officials is to be regarded as more than a coincidence, αἱ νύκτες ἡμέραι ποιούμεναι (133.5) in the context of royal activity ought not to be overlooked.

I am not concerned with the discrepancies, more substantial than the correspondences, between what we know from other sources and Herodotus' narrative; but we need to set the latter in its context. Herodotus presents his history of Egypt before the coming of the Greeks (99–142) as a unitary and continuous narrative which he heard from the priests of Hephaestus⁶ at Memphis,⁷ supplemented in this

¹ I am indebted to Professor J. R. Baines and Dr D. Obbink, who saved me from various wild goose chases in the preparation of this article, and to Dr Robert Rollinger, who supplied me with a xerox of Peter Froschauer's unpublished doctoral thesis, *Herodots ägyptischer Logos: die Glaubwürdigkeitsdiskussion in kritischer Sicht: Forschungsgeschichte – Ausgewählte Argumentationen – Archäologischer Befund* (Innsbruck, 1991). Dr Römer's criticisms of an earlier version have done much to improve this note.

² “Par ricochet chacun bouscule son monde. A l'instar du dioecète, l'économe Aristandros veut que Zénon fasse de la nuit le jour (*PSI* 514; *PCZ* 59314)” (Claude Orrieux, *Zénon de Caunos, parépidèmos, et le destin grec*, (Paris, 1985), 174.

³ Die Adaptation ägyptischer Königsideologie am Ptolemäerhof, *Studia Hellenistica* 27, 1985, 143–90 (151 f.).

⁴ R. A. Caminos, *JEA* 38, 1952, 51.

⁵ In subsequent references to Herodotus, Book 2 is to be understood where no book number is given.

⁶ i.e. Ptah. It is rather surprising that though, as we know from the new Photius (α 3352), Hecataeus give the Egyptian name in his *Periegesis* (F 327 bis (H. J. Mette, *Lustrum* 27, 1985, 34)), in the form Ἀφθός, we do not find it in Herodotus, though he gives several other Egyptian divine names (Osiris, Isis, Horus, Bubastis 156.5, Amun 42.5).

⁷ 99.2, 100.1, 101.1, 102.2, 107.1, 109.1, 111.1, 112.1, 113.1, 116.1, 118.1, 119.3, 120.1, 121.1, 122.1, 123.1, 124.1, 126.1, 127.1, 129.1, 136.2. See further D. Fehling, *Herodotus and his “Sources”*: Citation, Invention and Narrative Art (Leeds, 1989), 72–4. On Herodotus' actual sources of information T. Säve-Söderbergh (*Eranos* 44, 1946, 80) well sums up: “Gewiss dürfen wir nicht bei allem, was Herodot über Ägypten und damit zusammenhängende Verhältnisse berichtet, nur mit griechischen Gewährsleuten rechnen. Wir dürfen Herodot glauben, dass er dem Prinzip τὰ λεγόμενα λέγειν gefolgt ist. Es wird aber kaum zu leugnen sein, dass seine eigenen Quellenangaben nicht zutreffen, sondern daß vieles, ja, vielleicht das meiste, was Ägyptern und ägyptischen Priestern zugeschrieben wird, tatsächlich auf literarische oder mündliche, den Inhalt stark färbende griechische Überlieferung zurückzuführen ist.”

section on the Pyramid-builders (124–33) by a few details for which other sources are cited (125.6 (an interpreter), 130.2 (the priests of Sais)). The drastic chronological displacement of these pharaohs of Dynasty IV to a period only a few generations before Psammetichus warns us against hoping for matter of historical value, but at least what is related of them does not consist of migratory motifs⁸ as easily attached to Ivan the Terrible or to any other personable autocrat.

Mycerinus did not, according to Herodotus' account, directly succeed his father Cheops, who, after a cruel and impious reign of fifty years,⁹ was followed by his brother Chephren (127.1)¹⁰, who ruled for 57 years (127.3), continuing his predecessor's deplorable policy. Mycerinus' accession brought the return of happier times (129.1), but the king's piety was not to be rewarded (129.3): ἐόντι δὲ ἠπίωι τῶι Μυκερίνωι κατὰ τοὺς πολιήτας καὶ ταῦτα ἐπιτηδεύοντι πρῶτον κακῶν ἄρξαι τὴν θυγατέρα ἀποθανοῦσαν αὐτοῦ, τὴν μόνον οἱ εἶναι ἐν τοῖσι οἰκίοισι τέκνον. Herodotus links this, the first of Mycerinus' misfortunes, with an annual ceremony at Sais, involving a wooden cow (130–32). This pathetic story (to which Herodotus appends a report, which he does not credit, of Mycerinus' incest with his daughter) should almost certainly be taken as a Greek attempt to interpret the representation of Isis as a cow goddess, in the context of an Osiris festival.¹¹

The second of Mycerinus' misfortunes began with the arrival of an oracle from Buto (μαντήιον Αἰγύπτιον ἀψευδέστατον, 152.3)¹² advising him that his days were numbered (133.1), ὡς μέλλοι ἔξ ἔτεια μόνον βιοῦς τῶι ἐβδόμωι τελευτήσειν.¹³ Mycerinus protested that this was a poor return for piety (133.2): τὸν δὲ δεινὸν ποιησάμενον πέμψαι ἐς τὸ μαντήιον τῶι θεῶι ὀνειδισμα ἀντιμεμφομένον, ὅτι ὁ μὲν αὐτοῦ πατὴρ καὶ πάτρως ἀποκλήσαντες τὰ ἱρὰ καὶ θεῶν οὐ μεμνημένοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους φθείροντες¹⁴, ἐβίωσαν χρόνον ἐπὶ πολλόν, αὐτὸς δ' εὐσεβέων μέλλοι ταχέως οὕτω τελευτήσειν. His reaction induces the oracle to elaborate, though the explanation given is not altogether satisfactory¹⁵ (133.3): ἐκ δὲ τοῦ χρηστηρίου αὐτῶι δεύτερα ἐλθεῖν λέγοντα τούτων εἵνεκα καὶ συνταχύνειν αὐτὸν¹⁶ τὸν βίον· οὐ γὰρ ποιῆσαι μιν, τὸ χρεὸν ἦν ποιεῖν· δεῖν γὰρ Αἰγύπτου κακοῦσθαι ἐπ' ἔτεια πεντήκοντά τε καὶ ἑκατόν, καὶ τοὺς μὲν δύο τοὺς πρὸ ἐκείνου γενομένους βασιλέας μαθεῖν τοῦτο, κείνον δὲ οὐ.

This development offends not merely our sense of poetic justice, which requires that the good should end happily, but our confidence in the divine governance of the world. “Es gibt keinen Bericht im Werke Herodots, dem wir mit unseren Vorstellungen von gerechter Weltordnung und von Schuld

⁸ I deliberately avoid the over-worked and equivocal term “folktale”.

⁹ Herodotus' presentation of Cheops is not confirmed by Egyptian evidence for his reputation; see further D. Wildung, *Die Rolle ägyptischer Könige im Bewußtsein ihrer Nachwelt* i (Münchener Ägyptologische Studien 17, Berlin, 1969) 161, 184 f., 188. The influence of Heine's Rhapsentit may lead us to suppose that Cheops, being Rhapsentitus' successor, is to be identified with the clever thief of 121 (“Rhapsentit hat Wort gehalten, / Nahm den Dieb zum Schwiegersonne, / Und nach seinem Tode erbte / Auch der Dieb Ägyptens Krone.”) But from 142f. we see that Herodotus imagined son regularly following father in the succession of kings and high priests.

¹⁰ Presumably we should infer that Mycerinus was too young to rule. Notwithstanding this example, Herodotus' calculations at 142 ignore the possibility that a pharaoh might be succeeded by anyone other than his son.

¹¹ See Wiedemann and Lloyd ad loc.

¹² τὸ γὰρ μάλιστα ἐν τιμῇ ἄγονται πάντων τῶν μαντήϊων, Λητοῦς ἐν Βουτοῦ πόλι ἐστὶ (83); cf. 111.2; 3.64.3. For a detailed description see 155 f. Froschauer, op. cit. (n. 1) 172 well stresses the lack of any Egyptian evidence for this oracle. This town should be distinguished from its namesake in the Eastern Delta (75), Herodotus' starting point for a remarkable excursion.

¹³ On seven as a rhetorical/symbolic number see W. H. Roscher, *Die Sieben- und Neunzahl im Kultus und Mythos der Griechen* (Leipzig, 1904); J. W. S. Blom, *De typische getallen bij Homeros en Herodotos* (Nijmegen, 1936), 202 f.; Fehling, op. cit. (n. 7) 225 f. Hippocrates, *De carnibus* 19, is dedicated to demonstrating that man's life is dominated by this number; see further R. Joly, *Hippocrate* xiii (Budé, Paris, 1978) 181–5.

¹⁴ I do not understand why Rosén prefers φθείροντες.

¹⁵ Contrast the result of Croesus' protest to the Delphic oracle over unfair treatment, as a result of which he learns that Apollo had in fact been active on his behalf (1.90 f.).

¹⁶ L. Weber, *SIFC* N.S. 17, 1941, 265, argues for fut. συνταχύνειν αὐτῶι: “etiam celerius vitam ei ad finem esse perventuram”.

und Verdienst der Menschen ratloser gegenüberstehen als dem vom Schicksal des Mykerinos."¹⁷ Matthew Arnold's *Mycerinus* well expresses its theological paradox: 'My father loved injustice, and lived long; / Crown'd with gray hairs he died, and full of sway. / I loved the good he scorn'd, and hated wrong – / The gods declare my recompense to-day. / I look'd for life more lasting, rule more high; / And when six years are measured, lo, I die! / Yet surely, O my people, did I deem / Man's justice from the all-just Gods was given.' It is hard to see what we are to make of priests who tell of such a recompense to a king who manifested the very qualities the gods are believed to favour. Moreover, no explanation is offered for the century and a half of tribulation decreed for Egypt. Rhampsinitus' reign had been characterized by *πάσα εὐνομίη*; there is no suggestion that Egyptian sinfulness had led to their sufferings under Cheops and Chephren or that such divine chastisement will have a purifying effect.¹⁸ Both the king and his people have reason to question the workings of divine justice. Herodotus had a high regard for Egyptian religion, to which he believed the Greeks were extensively indebted; it is strange that he seems insensible to the disturbing implications of this tale.

That Mycerinus' reign was significantly shorter than that of either of his two predecessors was no doubt suggested by the lesser bulk of his pyramid (cf. 134.1), but it should not have been hard to suggest theologically unproblematic explanations. Mycerinus might have been required to suffer for his father's crimes,¹⁹ or his early death might have been interpreted as punishment for the (alleged) incest with his daughter (131). Alternatively, a reminder that death may be regarded as a blessing even for the young and strong, the moral of Solon's story of Cleobis and Biton (1.31), would have avoided any problem.

'I look'd for life more lasting, rule more high;/And when six years are measured, lo, I die! / ... Six years – six little years – six drops of time!' complains Matthew Arnold's Mycerinus. Still, if we have paid attention to the chronology of his two predecessors, we shall have concluded that he could not have been under 56 at his accession, and might easily have been over 60; we are not told how many years he had reigned when he received the oracle, but by ancient standards he had already enjoyed a long life when he came to the throne,²⁰ and must face the increasing infirmities of old age; the psalmist's view that any extension of life beyond seventy is labour and sorrow (*Ps.* 90.10) could hardly be regarded as eccentric. For a man who has already outlived the normal life-expectancy of his time a clear forecast of the years still left to him might be regarded as a bonus. Mycerinus' piety is at least rewarded by exemption from the normal unpredictability of death.²¹

An oracular communication offered unsought might be expected to call for some action; we should not suppose that it was intended merely to create a sense of grievance in its recipient. If Mycerinus' high-minded administration was against the will of heaven, his best course was to resign.²² The lack of central control might well suffice to fulfil the divinely ordained quota of misery, but he would not be responsible for it. His decision to abandon the cares of office for six-year-long jollification, undertaken

¹⁷ Jutta Kirchberg, *Die Funktion der Orakel im Werke Herodots* (Göttingen, 1965), 45. For an illuminating discussion of another disturbing Herodotean oracle story (9.92–96) see W. Burkert, *Euenios der Seher von Apollonia und Apollon Lykeios: Mythos jenseits der Texte*, *Kernos* 10, 1997, 73–81.

¹⁸ This type of theodicy is in any case more in keeping with natural calamities or with oppression by a foreign invader.

¹⁹ For Herodotus' belief in hereditary guilt cf. 1.91, 7.134–37.

²⁰ Very few fifteen-year-olds in Roman Egypt could expect to reach 55; see further A. E. Samuel, W. K. Hastings, A. K. Bowman, and R. S. Bagnall, *Death and taxes: ostraka in the Royal Ontario Museum i* (*American Studies in Papyrology* 10, Toronto, 1971), 25. Alan Cameron entertainingly documents the surprisingly early age at which men might regard themselves as elderly in *Callimachus and his Critics* (Princeton, 1995), 174–84.

²¹ Plato (*Grg.* 523d5–8) rather offhandedly presents the idea that originally men knew in advance when they would die, a faculty which Prometheus removed, on Zeus' instructions, as part of a process for reforming the judgment of the dead; no explanation is given. The Aeschylean Prometheus (*PV* 248ff.) claims to have taken this step on his own initiative, to give men hope; this is not the only place where the poet takes it for granted that his audience is familiar with mythological details at which we can only guess.

²² The Nubian Pharaoh Sabacos similarly receives divine guidance in a rather perverse form when his reign has lasted for its destined 50 years, and correctly construing its message departs (140); see further West, *CQ* 37, 1987, 262–7.

in the same whole-hearted spirit in which he had previously upheld justice and religion, combines piety with good sense (133.4): ταῦτα ἀκούσαντα τὸν Μυκερῖνον ὡς κατακεκριμένων ἤδη οἱ τούτων λύχνα ποιησάμενον πολλά, ὅκως γίνοιτο νύξ, ἀνάψαντα αὐτὰ πίνειν τε καὶ εὐπαθέειν οὔτε ἡμέρης οὔτε νυκτὸς ἀνιέντα ἔς τε τὰ ἔλαια καὶ τὰ ἄλσεια πλανώμενον καὶ ἵνα πυνθάνοιτο εἶναι ἐνηθητήρια ἐπιτηδεότατα. The oracle has sanctioned his abdication, though, as is often the case with oracles, its message has not been expressed quite straightforwardly. Granted an official holiday, Mycerinus makes the most of it.²³ While we are no nearer to understanding why Egypt is destined to suffer misery for a century and a half, the king himself will be able to devote himself to pleasure for the rest of his days.

However, the reasoning which I have adumbrated is not to be found in Herodotus, who concentrates on Mycerinus' wish to give the oracle the lie: ταῦτα δὲ ἐμχανᾶτο θέλων τὸ μαντήιον ψευδόμενον ἀποδείξαι, ἵνα οἱ δωδέκα ἔτεα ἀντὶ ἕξ ἐτέων γένηται, αἱ νύκτες ἡμέραι ποιεύμεναι (133.5). This last sentence complicates the story, and, indeed, the purpose imputed to Mycerinus is frankly silly²⁴ (and particularly unlikely to appeal to a people renowned for the sophistication of their calendar).²⁵ Truly Stakhanovite exertions, cramming into six years what would take ordinary men twelve, would have a better chance of achieving the purpose than an unbroken holiday. Wiedemann (ad loc.) was surely right to diagnose a Greek attempt to explain the festival of the λυχνοκαίη (described earlier by Herodotus (62)), matching the connection made between the tale of Mycerinus' daughter and Osirian ritual (129–32).²⁶ αἱ νύκτες ἡμέραι ποιεύμεναι, clarifying the principle involved in Mycerinus' attempt to double his allotted span, has a marked closural effect;²⁷ the details of his pyramid given in the next sentence come almost as an afterthought.²⁸ Might the phraseology of Zenon's correspondents have been influenced by reminiscence of one of Herodotus' most memorable stories?

Mycerinus' history certainly provides food for thought. We might have expected the Greeks settled in Egypt under the Ptolemies to interest themselves in Herodotus' account of the country. Apollonius and Aristandros need not be supposed to have *intended* an allusion to Herodotus: they might simply be echoing a neat phrase which had caught on and was used without regard to its original context, rather as "A custom more honoured in the breach than the observance" has become a cliché for a practice too often neglected, a usage which grates on those who remember its origins.²⁹

"Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte Herodots bleibt noch zu schreiben."³⁰ Whether it would be a realistic aspiration I cannot say; perhaps progress in this area is best achieved serendipitously. In offering this speculation I hope to stimulate others to look for traces of unacknowledged Herodotean influence.

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²³ We might see a certain affinity with Pindar's story of Apollo's reward to the master-builders Agamedes and Trophonius (F2,3). They are granted six days of festivity before they die; in Egypt everything, including chronology (cf. 142 f.), is on a grand scale.

²⁴ His tactic might just as easily have halved the time allotted. Owen Lattimore, *Mongol Journeys* (London, 1941) 107 relates the story of Sokhor Liu-tzu Khan, whose "proper destiny was to reign as emperor for eighteen years, but he made of every day a New Year's Day . . . In this way his eighteen years were transformed into eighteen days and his reign ended."

²⁵ A quaint inversion of the exploitation of ambiguity in 'day' which Eustathius (on *Od* 19.396) adduces to illustrate an unscrupulous use of oaths, such as was characteristic of Autolycus: καὶ ὁ τῶν ὁμοσάντων τόσας ἡμέρας ἄγειν σπόνδας, ἐν δὲ τῷ μέσῳ νύκτωρ ἐπιθεμένων τοῖς ἐχθροῖς, ὡς δῆθεν τῆς συμβάσεως τῶν σπονδῶν ἡμέρων μεμνημένης, οὐ μὴν καὶ νυκτῶν.

²⁶ Similarly Stein, How and Wells ad loc.; see also S. Donadoni, *Acme* 12, 1959, 177–80. Lloyd (ad loc.) expresses scepticism. Libanius' eulogy of the street-lighting of Antioch (*Or.* 11. 267) rather suggests that he saw a connection. On Libanius' extensive allusions to Herodotus see Wilhelm Werner, *De Libanii studiis Herodoteis* (Breslau, 1910).

²⁷ At first reading this phrase looks anacoluthic, but it should be taken in apposition to ἔτεα; for further examples see Stein's n. on 1.52.

²⁸ We are not told how the outstanding period of tribulation for Egypt was completed, but the reign of Mycerinus' successor, Asychis, is not presented as a godless tyranny (136).

²⁹ *Hamlet* I iv 15 f.

³⁰ Johannes Kramer, *Henrici Stephani Apologia pro Herodoto* (*Henri Estienne, Apologie für Herodot, nach der Erstausgabe* (Genf 1566)) (Meisenheim am Glan, 1980), vii.