

Herakles in Egypt: A Greek View of the Egyptians

The 5th-century Greek historian Herodotos records that the Egyptians were difficult to define from the outside. The Greeks generally considered "Egypt" to comprise the Nile Delta alone -- what the Egyptians called Lower Egypt -- while anything on the east bank of the river was Arabia and anything to the west was Libya. He devotes more than a chapter of his History to ethnographic description of Egyptians, defining them culturally and linguistically. He is a keen observer and open-minded, if somewhat credulous. Herodotos was not the first Hellene to have opinions about the Egyptians. Since the reign of Psammetikhos I (Psamtik, 663-609), large numbers of East Greek and other mercenaries had served in the armies of the 26th Dynasty pharaohs. Around 620, a body of merchants from Asia Minor and the Islands was permitted to open a closely-regulated entrepot at Naukratis in the Delta, which became a permanent Greek colony. Even under the Persian overlords who ruled Egypt in Herodotos' day, the Greek merchants and mercenaries there were numerous and apparently eager to talk.

Nevertheless it is difficult to locate Egyptians in Hellenic iconography. Egyptians themselves had a very clear self-image and left innumerable records of their own appearance. But one searches almost in vain for recognizably pharaonic-looking figures in Greek art of the archaic and early classical periods, despite a fascination with exotica that peopled their vases with Persians, Scythians and other "barbarians." Representations of negroid blacks occur. But the Egyptians themselves distinguished between their own physical appearance and that of the black Nubians, or Sudanese. The Greeks, too, distinguished by name the "Ethiopians" (i.e., Nubians) from the "Egyptians." But to what extent they distinguished visually between Nubian nationals, ethnic Nubians in the service of the Egyptian pharaoh, and ethnic Egyptians is by no means obvious.

The only sure pictures of Egyptians are those representing a mythological event known to involve Egyptians. The most popular was the conflict between Herakles and Bousiris king of Egypt -- a clash of Greek and the "barbarous" customs of Egypt. Extant graphic representation began in the final third of the 6th century and peaked in Athens in the first half of the 5th century. It seems to have been limited to vase painting, to the exclusion of the major arts. Literary testimonial supplements the imagery.

The oldest written retelling of the Bousiris myth comes from the first half of the fifth century. Bousiris, king of Egypt, had wrested his kingdom from the good king Proteus. A nine years' drought having fallen upon the country and plunged the citizens into extreme famine, Bousiris sent for the Cypriot seer Phrasios to learn how to win relief. He was told to sacrifice to Zeus each year the first stranger who happened into the country -- which, of course meant in the first place Phrasios himself. The following year the luckless traveler was Herakles, himself descended from Egyptians on both sides. The king's men garland the hero and lead him in procession to the place of sacrifice, Herakles thinking he is a guest at the rite. When the officiants sprinkle him as the sacrificial victim is sprinkled, he realizes his role is not that of honored onlooker; tearing loose like the animal he has been adjudged, the hero kills the king and routs his priests.

Comedies featuring Egyptians were popular in classical times and later, and "Egyptian jokes" a sure way to get laughs in plays on unrelated themes. The exact nature of the humor directed at the

Egyptians seems no more malicious than that at the expense of Greeks and their institutions, although some of its punch lies precisely in the ironic distinctions between Greek and Egyptian usages, e.g., Egyptian worship of animals that the Greeks condemn or offer in sacrifice to the gods. The commonest humorous stereotype was of Egyptians as merchants, who were, like the Phoenicians, avaricious, too clever for their own good.

Among more serious writers, Plato (428-347) mentions the Egyptians in at least five of his dialogues as guardians of age-old wisdom, whose tribal memory goes back to the primal ages of the earth. They had preserved their culture from decadence by forbidding novelty in, for example, art and music. But the Greeks, perpetual youth to the Egyptians' old age, were fuller of vitality and invention: "Whenever the Greeks borrow anything from non-Greeks, they finally carry it to a higher perfection."

Herodotus (c.446), lacking some of the Athenian cultural arrogance as an Ionian (from Greek-speaking Asia Minor) and an exile, is a cultural relativist: "So does each group consider its own customs much the finest. Therefore it is reasonable that nobody but a madman would make mock of such things." For him, the Egyptians not only merited the respect due all alien cultures, but were also in some ways the religious philosophical progenitors of the Greeks. According to him, their character was uniquely civilized and mild-mannered by nature, due to the uniquely benevolent geography of the country. He claims the Bousiris story was the invidious concoction of the Greeks, for the Egyptians were so scrupulous about the purity of their sacrificial victims that they would never have offered the gods a human being -- let alone a Greek, he implies".

We cannot know how typical Herodotus' enthusiasm for the Egyptians was in 5th-century Athens. In the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus (c.463), the attitude reels between sympathy and odium. While their foreignness makes the daughters of Danaos helpless and isolated, their pursuers, also Egyptians, are described in terms stereotypical of the barbarian: "mad with lust and recklessness" (739); "these men know no reason;/ They are madmen and blasphemers" (751-2); "They are arrogant, lustful; Swift with the force of frenzy" (759-60); "They have the very temper of wild lawless beasts" (765). In sum, the attitudes reflected by literary sources are inconsistent, ranging from respect and admiration, through irreverent but good-natured amusement, to contempt.

Now the vase paintings. By the time most of these vessels are produced, Athenians have seen Egyptians in the armies of the Persian invaders, as merchants in Athens or even in Naukratis. Since artists are picking and choosing how they will depict their subjects and not simply portraying them as they are, the final result all the more significantly reveals their own attitudes, for we see not what Egyptians actually looked like but how they appeared in the eyes of the Greeks, what they represented or symbolized to the Greeks.

Seventeen recognizable Bousiris scenes appear on Attic vessels from mid-6th-century to late 5th, with variation in style but with remarkably consistent conventions of representation. Three moments of the story appear: the peaceable approach of the procession to the altar, with a cooperative Herakles (2 examples); the battle at the altar (16); and ancillary scenes of Egyptians fleeing or coming to the rescue, which occur only in subsidiary places on vessels featuring the rout scene. The rout scenes have many features in common: Herakles is the center of interest and generally the physical center as well. The scene shows an interrupted blood sacrifice of the Greek style. (13 representations include an altar.) In addition almost every implement of the sacrificial ritual or its accompanying banquet appears; only one depicts no attribute at all to identify the scene as sacrificial. In 8 cases someone is being pulled bodily from the altar; in all, figures are falling to the ground, being clubbed by Herakles or hacked with a sword. Only once does any Egyptian offer resistance; chiefly they register helpless dismay or flee the battle. Blood is much in evidence. Herakles is dressed in his lion-skin in every example. The Egyptians wear a limited variety of garments: 6 vessels show a sheer, sleeveless, pleated short tunic, sometimes unbelted, sometimes belted at the waist. Two are dressed in apron-like kilts. The others show a long chiton or robe,

sometimes sleeved, other times not, belted and flounced. One scene shows the Egyptians wearing earrings.

As to racial types, in two cases the foreigners have Greek-style hair and beards (and clothes in contemporary Athenian style). Eight examples show features clearly negroid or "mulatto," i.e., a platyrrhine nose and sometimes a protruding forehead, but with caucasoid lips and chin. In only one case is this type bearded. The black type varies from rather schematic to a very observant and accurate portrayal. Five more examples show a face distinctly non-Greek by comparison with Herakles', yet not black in type, with a large aquiline nose. The hair is cut close, curly or woolly, in 6 cases; 5 are stubbly-looking as if shaved, 3 more completely bald. Almost all show clean-shaven chins or a mixture of shaven & bearded ones; where the heads are stubbly, the face is, too.

There is no parody of real Egyptian art or customs. This is a Greek depiction of the Greek ritual of blood sacrifice, chaotically upended. Inherent in the Greek idea of sacrifice is order, symmetry, kosmos, preserving the balance between the human and divine orders; but even more, as ritualized murder, it defuses the brute force in man which would threaten the cohesion of society, kosmos, by breaking out against other men. Only domesticated animals are used for sacrificial victims, and a certain "comedy of innocence" must cloak the violence of the act. The order of the sacrificial rite states in microcosm the hierarchical order of human society: each participant has his right role, his right share. Violating this rightness courts chaos: family curses, assassinations and wars.

We should see at the altar of sacrifice the following sequence: celebrants and acolytes, leading the victim, bring ritual accoutrements to the place of sacrifice in procession, circling the altar, with music, archetypal image of harmony, at every step, to preserve the veneer of innocence. All wear garlands as participants in an action outside the ordinary human realm. Water furthers separation as purifier.(and remember the drought) Water poured over the hands of the priest into a shallow basin initiates the rite. Next the victim, well-fed and, ideally, peaceable, sprinkled with water, lifts its head in the "nod" of ratification. After a dramatic invocation, celebrants throw handfuls of salted barley from a basket at victim altar. At this point Herakles decided he had had enough. The slaughtering knife is removed from its hiding place in the basket but is kept concealed to maintain the illusion of innocence. Hairs cut from the victim are thrown on the fire, violating its purity. Then the victim is stunned by a blow from the ax and its throat is slit, the blood caught in a basin, for blood is the gods' and the meat will become the food of man. The death blow is accompanied by a shrill ritual scream by all present, the sole acknowledgement that a horrible murder has been enacted. Afterwards the blood is splashed about the altar; the victim is skinned and butchered by officiants in a butcher's short apron-like garment: their ordinary clothes must be preserved from defilement by touching the blood, not man's lawful portion. The organs, roasted on long spits, are eaten by the celebrants, while the inedible portions of the beast are whole-burnt for the gods. The remaining meat is divided up, skewered on spits, boiled in cauldrons and usually roasted as well, and distributed in prescribed shares for those present to eat. The sharing of this cultic meal fulfills the function of Greek sacrifice: death has been rendered "tame" by making it a source of life. This ritualization of meat-eating sets man's behavior apart from that of the animals (the Greeks rarely had meat outside of religious feast days), with consequences for man's behavior: once the knife was used on the victim it must not be turned against a man; inter-human aggression has to stop. There is a sacred brotherhood of those who share the blood guilt and the atoning meal. By this token the civic sacrifice becomes the most intense expression of community for the Greek.

Chaos, akosmia, an inversion of this right order, most describes the Bousiris scenes, with their flailing limbs and scattered paraphernalia. As representations of Greek sacrificial rites show a peaceful symmetry, centripetally organized around the all-important altar, so these scenes explode in a centrifugal symmetry of flight. Along with the baskets, basins & flutes of civilizing ritual, expectations have been overturned by the seemingly docile Herakles, himself a liminal and chaotic figure. As man, a fiction of his consent to die is not enough; but his reaction is that of a wild animal,

which may not lawfully be offered. Wherever this ultimate hero enters the mythological picture, heroism tends to become super-heroism, mock heroism. As Greek he is not only youth and vitality to the stolid antiquity of Egypt, but an excess of primitive energies. The Hellenes saw the Egyptians as the originators of their own religion, its pantheon and civilizing rites; not to be acquainted with this "Egyptian" cult is not only to be prior to civilization but outside the human community, other, like an animal, its meat mere prey unconsecrated by altar, invocation or sharing. So in a strange way both the Egyptians and Herakles (as Greek and as beast) are simultaneously both the norm of civilization, the we -- and the other. If the inhospitable Bousiris has offended Zeus Patron of Guests by betraying a guest in order to sacrifice to Zeus Bringer of Rain, so Herakles offends Zeus Protector of Suppliants by attempting to drag from his altar a suppliant, as many of the vases choose to describe the scene, compounding the moral confusion. The "comedy of innocence" has fallen to the ground with the overturned basket, and the murderous knife is bared; the full implications of blood sacrifice lie before us: slaughter.

In Herakles' defense, note what sacrifice the recalcitrant victim is protesting: the shared meal is cannibalism, the ultimate breakdown of social solidarity. The Egyptians are reduced by famine to eating human flesh -- but not like animals; their anthropophagy is hallowed by pious ritual. The emphatic presence of the implements not only of sacrifice, but of sacred banquet brings this reality continually to mind, in particular the omnipresent bundles of spits upon which the flesh of Herakles is intended to be skewered, roasted, and shared around, surely an ironic end for the notorious glutton.

The clothing of the Egyptians shows a definite pattern which has less to do with how Egyptians really dressed than how Athenians did not. In the sixth century, with its high-living tyrants, wealthy Attic men wore the voluminous linen chiton of the East Greeks, sometimes with a shawl or cloak. By the next century, with the coming of democracy, conspicuous consumption had lost its cachet, and the favored masculine garb became the classless short tunic or chitoniskos with a cloak, which may also have been worn alone. The finely-pleated, transparent, Eastern-style garment was reserved chiefly for women: the connotation of "Ionian" clothing was the sort of character ascribed to Ionians: loose-living, soft and effeminate. Athenians joked about this: questionable masculinity was always good for a laugh on the Greek stage. Depiction of oriental men by and for Greeks in full, pleated linen chitons, suggests effeminacy and opulence.

A womanly natural trait and not Asian custom is a beardless face. Fifth-century Greek men wore a full beard, as does the Herakles on every example of our vases. Beardless images of Greeks indicates youths whose beards have only begun to grow, "women" in a sense, transitional between child and man, and as such available for the passive role in a homosexual relationship. Athenians knew Egyptians shaved their faces for reasons of hygiene in a hot climate; but to Greeks eye conditioned to interpret a bare male chin as effeminate, the impact was nonetheless laughable.

Still more bizarre, the Semitic custom of circumcision. Only two of the Bousiris vases utilize this sign of otherness, but the Pan Painter calls it very forcibly to the viewer's attention, by various ruses exposing the crotch of all three of his Egyptians. The element of ethnic contrast is heightened by the composition, which poises the genitals of Herakles and Bousiris at opposite volutes of the same altar, as if to contrast the fashionably small penis of Herakles with the comparatively huge one of the king. To Greeks, outsized organs were generally associated with the half-animal satyrs, an obvious allusion to overgrown libido. Yet the popular word for castrated was the same as that for circumcised, which must have caused, or stemmed from, some confusion about the effects of each condition. The result is another ambiguity: are the Egyptians less "manly" than Herakles or less human? For the most part, our images show Bousiris and his men as cowards, fleeing the battle in comic disarray, the ultimate sign of effeminacy in Greek eyes.

The priests of Bousiris are depicted with shaven heads. For Greeks, shaving or cropping off the hair, indicating mourning, was akosmia, both a lack of proper grooming on the personal level, and chaos,

the overthrowing of the cosmic order. It is an Egyptianism which Herodotos specifically cites as utterly contrary to Hellenic custom. Like the sacrifice overthrown, it bespeaks chaos and otherness, even impiety, since in Greek usage the crop-headed mourner was considered defiled and was forbidden to take part in sacrifice.

As for physiognomy, Egyptians are interchangeably portrayed as blacks, "others" of a non-black stamp, or as Greeks. It seems not to matter, as long as the degree of foreignness which the artist has in mind is somehow communicated. Herodotos himself mentions only once, disinterestedly, in passing, that the people of the Nile were dark-skinned and woolly-haired -- and he admits that this is by no means unique to them. Whether darkness of complexion held any particular connotations for the Athenians is hard to tell; they admired a tanned look in their own men. On the other hand the snub nose and prominent forehead of many of these portrayals are reminiscent of satyrs. While the Greeks seem fascinated by the distinctive negroid facial features, which they sometimes portrayed with great care, race seems less important to them in defining a people than customs.

Egyptians are invisible as a people with a real identity. They were simply part of that world outside of popular Hellenism, part of that generic "other," beyond specific characteristics, by which the Greeks, like every other person or people, defined themselves.