

# THE CREDIBILITY OF HERODOTUS' ACCOUNT OF THE SOURCES OF THE NILE

By

KHALID EL-DISSOUKY, Ph.D.

*History Department, College of Girls, Ein-Shams University*

---

Herodotus informs us that the scribe of the sacred treasures of Athene ( i.e., Neith ) at Sais told him that the springs of the Nile flow out from between two mountains, Crophi and Mophi located between Syene and Elephantine. <sup>(1)</sup> This was a statement conveyed verbally, presumably by a bilingual priest, but it is pictorially expressed in a depiction on Hadrian's Gateway on the island of Philae. On this gateway is represented a high mountain on the top of which stand a vulture and a falcon while at its foot the Inundation-God is seen hidden in a cavern and encircled by a serpent while pouring water from two libation vases in his hands. The legend accompanying this representation reads : « Hidden, hidden is the priest of the high mountain of Smwt ( i.e., Biggab ) ». <sup>(2)</sup> Here the text shows clearly that the high mountain associated with the Nile is on the island of Biggab and not on or near Elephantine. But to what extent was this conception about the sources of the Nile believed ?

It seems that Herodotus was skeptical about what the scribe in Sais told him, particularly, since he himself traveled up to Elephantine and saw immediately that the Nile south of the city also flowed north, and learned a good deal about the further stretches of the river up to the Sudan where the Ethiopians lived. <sup>(3)</sup> Then what had the Herodotus' scribe meant ? Had he really not known the facts or was he simply trying to foist a tall tale on a stranger ? Many suggestions have been put forward in explanation, primarily to the effect that the story represents a very ancient tradition dating from earliest times when the First Cataract was the Ultima

---

(1) Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Séincourt ( Baltimore, 1965 ), p. 112.

(2) P. Montet, *Géographie de l'Égypte ancienne* ( Paris, 1961 ), 11, 20, fig. 1. The serpent shown in this representation is probably the same as the serpent in the two carvings of Elephantine which goes out with the flood ( E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Dead* ( London, 1910 ), 11, chap. CXLIX, No. 144 ).

(3) Herodotus, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113.

Thule of Egypt, a tradition, however, which was still artificially maintained in ecclesiastical circles. (4) But the flaw in such an explanation is that from earliest times the Nile's course south the Cataract had been well known to the Egyptians. Cemeteries have been found in Nubia of Egyptian predynastic and early dynastic times, and certainly from the O.K. onwards armies and trading expeditions were commonly accustomed to go far up to the south. It was, therefore, well known to the Egyptians throughout history that the Nile did not rise at the First Cataract but came from much farther south. (5) The other explanation is that the story is theological, connected with the religious conception of the Nile gushing forth from the life-giving ocean which existed everywhere under the earth's crust and from which the ordered world had once been created. From time immemorial the Egyptians had retained this concept that the Nile rose from the Underworld ocean just at the First Cataract on the Egyptian border and this had become an article of religious faith which was not to be changed even though one knew perfectly well that it did not accord with reality. (6)

Actually, the most ancient texts illustrate the close relationship between the Nile waters and Elephantine. In the Pyramid Texts the king is addressed thus : ssp n.k mw.k ipn w 'b prw m ;bw « take to thyself this pure water which is come forth out of Elephantine » (7) or simply pr mw.k m ;bw « thy water comes forth out of Elephantine ». (8) In another spell it was said about the king that « Satis ( i.e., the goddess of Elephantine ) purified him with her 4 ;bt- vases from Elephantine ». (9) This pure water mentioned in these spells in connection with Elephantine as used in the purification of the deceased king before his entronement (10) is in

---

(4) W. Spiegelberg, *The Credibility of Herodotus' Account of Egypt*, trans. A.M. Blackman ( Oxford, 1927 ), pp. 17-18.

(5) G.A. Wainwright, « Herodotus II, 28 on the Sources of the Nile », *JHS*, LXXIII (1953), 104.

(6) Sève-Söderbergh, *Pharaoh and Mortals*, trans. R.E. Oldenburg (New York, 1961), p. 189.

(7) *Pyr.* 864 b.

(8) *Ibid.*, 1908 C.

(9) *Ibid.*, 1116 a, b ; cf. Budge, *op. cit.*, III, chap. CLXXIII. 30 where the deceased is addressed : « I have come and brought for you fresh water from Elephantine that your heart may be cool therewith ».

(10) Cf. Kees, *Der Opfertanz des ägyptischen Königs* ( Leipzig, 1912 ), p. 68.

fact p; mw w' b h' py<sup>(11)</sup> « the pure water of the inundation »<sup>(12)</sup> It is H'py « the Inundation » that is always mentioned in connection with the two caverns of Elephantine. This is quite clear from a text dating from the Ptolemaic Period which runs as follows : « The inundation comes out of the two caverns in its time and rises at Elephantine 24 cubits and 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> palms. »<sup>(13)</sup> Apart from Elephantine H'py « the inundation » is also mentioned as coming forth from its two caverns in connection with Gebel Silsilah<sup>(14)</sup> to the north and the island of Biggah<sup>(15)</sup> to the south, both of which were once considered the southern limit of Egypt.<sup>(16)</sup> It is for this reason that the water at Gehel Silsilah was called p; mw w' b n hny « the pure water of Silsilah ». <sup>(17)</sup> In the Ramesside period sacrifices to H'py, certainly dating from primitive times, were offered up anew at Gebel Silsilah in the 3rd month of summer before the beginning of the inundation and again two months later « so that there should not be a lack of water ». <sup>(18)</sup> Similar sacrifices were also made at Elephantine<sup>(19)</sup> and certainly at other places where the coming of the inundation was first watched. <sup>(20)</sup> What was of greater importance to Egyptians was the observation of the rising of the inundation and the noting down of the maximum levels registered by the nilometers in order to calculate how much harm or good would

---

(11) C. Palanque, *Le Nile a l'époque pharaonique, son rôle et son culte en Egypte* ( Paris, 1903 ), p. 10 Cf. Barguet, BIFAO, L, 62, n. 1.

(12) On the term h'py which A. de Buck argues never means anything else but inundation ( see his article « On the Meaning of the Name H'py, » *Orientalia Neerlandica, A Volume of Oriental Studies* (1948), 1-22 ). The water of the inundation is described as pure or fresh simply because it is mw m'w « new water » ( *ibid.*, 10, no. 47 ). The purity of the inundation waters might also be attributed to the identification of the inundation with Nun ( *ibid.*, pp. 7, No. 14 ; 9, No. 38 ; 10, No. 48 ; 11, No. 50 ), the water of which was believed to be pure ( LD, III, 175c ).

(13) Brugsch, ZAS, III (1865), 44. For further examples showing the connection between the two caverns of Elephantine and H'py, see Piehl, *Rec. trav.*, III (1882), 30 ; Budge, *op. cit.*, II, chap. CXLIX, No. 144.

(14) Barguet, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-55.

(15) H. Kees, *Ancient Egypt*, ed. T.G.H. James, trans. F.D. Morrow ( Chicago, 1961 ), p. 48. Biggah was also considered the place where the Abaton, the mythical grave of Osiris, was located ( *ibid.*, p. 251 ). Probably it is the association of Osiris with the inundation that led the belief that the sources of the Nile were at Biggah.

(16) Kees, *Ägypten*, p. 340 ; Blackman, *Middle-Egyptian Stories*, 1, 42.8-10.

(17) Barguet, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

(18) Barguet, *op. cit.*, pp. 56 f.

(19) E.g., BAR, IV, § 925.

(20) Even in modern times at the point near modern Cairo where the important canal to Heliopolis branches off, the arrival of the inundation and the opening of the dams were officially celebrated ( Kees, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 48 ).

be done to the land by its waters. From the time of the unification of the two kingdoms, royal annals recorded these measurements.<sup>(21)</sup> These nilometers were erected at the places where the Egyptians first saw the waters of the inundation. The best known of them is the one at the « House of the Inundation » near Old Cairo which furnished the official readings for use by the government in Memphis.<sup>(22)</sup> The other important nilometer was established on the east side of the island of Elephantine about the time when pushing of the frontier southwards afforded the opportunity of observing the approaching flood higher up the river and therefore earlier.<sup>(23)</sup> Even when the political frontier was pushed to the Second Cataract in the Twelfth Dynasty, the Egyptians did not fail to record the risings of the inundation on the rocks of Semneh-Kummeh.<sup>(24)</sup> From pictures and texts we know that the Nile was often localized. There was a « Nile of Elephantine » and a « Nile of Babylon »<sup>(25)</sup> as well as the « Nile of Upper Egypt which dwells in Biggah » and the « Nile of Lower Egypt which comes out of Heliopolis ». <sup>(26)</sup> Such names are in all probability the names of the inundation as it was first watched and recorded at the corresponding places.

But as Elephantine was the southern frontier of Egypt during most of its history, the observing of the inundation was a matter of great importance there. Satis, the goddess of Elephantine, whose name means the « archer » in Egyptian, that is to say, she who strikes the current of the water and directs it towards Egypt, later became a form of Isis — Sothis about whom it was said that she brings the inundation.<sup>(27)</sup> In the Ptolemaic Period the astronomer of Elephantine was the one who observed the heliacal rising of the Sothis and declared the time at which the feasts of celebrating the inundation took place,<sup>(28)</sup> a practice which probably extended to earlier times. Moreover, in later times the inhabitants at Elephantine abstained from eating the maiotès because it announces the coming of the inundation.<sup>(29)</sup>

---

(21) Urk. I, 236 ff.

(22) Kees, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 49.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 310 ; K. Baedeker, *Egypt and the Sudan* ( 8th ed. rev ; Leipzig, 1929 ), p. 382-383.

(24) Kees, *Ägypten*, p. 28.

(25) H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* ( Berlin, 1952 ), p. 525.

(26) Sethe, *ZÄS*, XLIV (1907), 17.

(27) Palanque, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 ; 117.

(28) D. Bonneau, *La crue de Nil, divinité égyptienne* ( Paris, 1964 ), p. 384.

(29) *Ibid.*, p. 295.

But to return to Herodotus. After recording what he understood from the scribe of the sacred treasures of Athene, Herodotus gives it as his opinion that there must have been powerful whirlpools and eddies in the water at the First Cataract caused by its impact upon the mountains.<sup>(30)</sup> But he did not realize that the scribe was voicing the religious belief of the inundation rising from the underground ocean on which the earth rested and which was called by the Egyptians Nun.<sup>(31)</sup> *ind-hr.k h'py pr m t?* « Hail to thee, Inundation which comes forth from the earth », <sup>(32)</sup> says the hymn to the Nile which is really a hymn to the Inundation. In fact, H'py was often identified with Nun and the parallelism between them is common in most of the texts dealing with the inundation.<sup>(33)</sup> The identification of H'py with Nun seems to have emerged from the fact that both Nun, the primordial waters, and the waters of the inundation possessed an immense potential of life. Nun according to one continuing concept, was the primordial waters out of which life first issued and still continued to issue.<sup>(34)</sup> In a like manner, the water of the inundation is sometimes represented in connection with the sign of life, or replaced by that sign pouring out of a vase which is itself sometimes represented in the form of the sign of life.<sup>(35)</sup> In other words, it is H'py « the inundation » that *s'nh km.t* « makes Egypt live ». <sup>(36)</sup> Furthermore, in a relief dating from the Ptolemaic Period in the temple of Khnum at Elephantine, Khnum is described as « possessor of the water of life ..... who brings the inundation out of its caverns ». <sup>(37)</sup> But since Elephantine which mostly formed the southernmost point of Egypt, was the place where the inundation was first seen and recorded by the Egyptians at an early period, it became associated with Nun. The four jars with which Satis, the lady of Elephantine, purifies the deceased king <sup>(38)</sup> probably refer to the four springs of Nun.<sup>(39)</sup> On the so-called Famine Stele the island of Elephantine is pictured as the primeval hillock of earth and the throne of Ra <sup>(40)</sup>, an illustra-

(30) Herodotus, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

(31) Cf. H. Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* ( Baltimore, 1963 ), p. 54.

(32) De Buck, *op. cit.*, p. 9, No. 36.

(33) De Buck, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, No. 4 ; 9, No. 38 ; 10, No. 48 ; 11, No. 50.

(34) Frankfort et al., *op. cit.*, p. 54.

(35) Bonneau, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-276.

(36) De Buck, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, No. 21 ; 9, No. 33, 36.

(37) H. Ricke, *Die Tempel Nektanebos' II in Elephantine*, p. 18, pl. 15, B.

(38) Pyr. 1116 a, b.

(39) F. Ll. Griffith, *The Inscriptions of Sait and Dêr Rifeh* ( London, 1889 ), pl. 17, 42.

(40) Baret, *La stèle de la famine à Sebel*, p. 18 ; pl. III, 7.

tion which likens Elephantine to the mound that arose out of Nun and on which creation took place.<sup>(41)</sup> Thus the identification of the inundation with Nun might have stimulated the idea of the « two caverns » out of which the inundation comes forth. And these « two caverns », which correspond to Herodotus' two mountains Crophî and Mophî<sup>(42)</sup> and which gave their name to the water in the region of Elephantine,<sup>(43)</sup> were placed at Elephantine in the First Cataract because that is where the inundation made its first appearance and where its risings were recorded.

As a matter of fact, H'py, to the Egyptian mind, was a phenomenon more or less independent of the river.<sup>(44)</sup> It was the waters of the inundation for which the ancient Egyptian waited each year, because it was « the water of life ». While, of course, it is entirely untrue to say that the sources of the Nile are at Elephantine it is, on the other hand, perfectly correct to say that the inundation appeared and was first watched at Elephantine, the southern frontier. Like other Egyptians the scribe of Sais would, of course, have thought in these terms. But what happened when Herodotus asked him about the sources of the Nile. Influenced by the religious beliefs about the origin of the inundation, the scribe might have told him that mw H'py ( the water of the inundation ) gushes out of krtÿ H'py ( the two caverns of the inundation ) located at Elephantine ». Since Greeks had no separate word for the inundation of the Nile,<sup>(45)</sup> Herodotus seemed to have thought of the Nile in general and that is why he took the answer of the scribe for a bad joke, for he was quite aware that the source of the Nile was to be looked for much farther south than the First Cataract. Herodotus, like the other Greeks visiting Egypt, although he could not speak or read Egyptian, was able to look at reliefs, statues and paintings and attempt to interpret them, sometimes with the help of not fully informed Egyptian guides.<sup>(46)</sup> Unconvinced by the scribe's statement he traveled upstream until he reached Elephantine and the region of the First Cataract where he saw the cliffs of the eastern and

---

(41) Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* ( 2d ed. rev. ; New Jersey, 1955 ), p. 31, n. 10.

(42) The most convincing view about the origin of these two names was that crophî is derived from Krtÿ H'py « the caverns of the inundation » and Mophî from mw H'py « the water of the inundation », see A. Wiedemann, *Herodots zweites buch mit sachlichen Erläuterungen* ( Leipzig, 1890 ), p. 116.

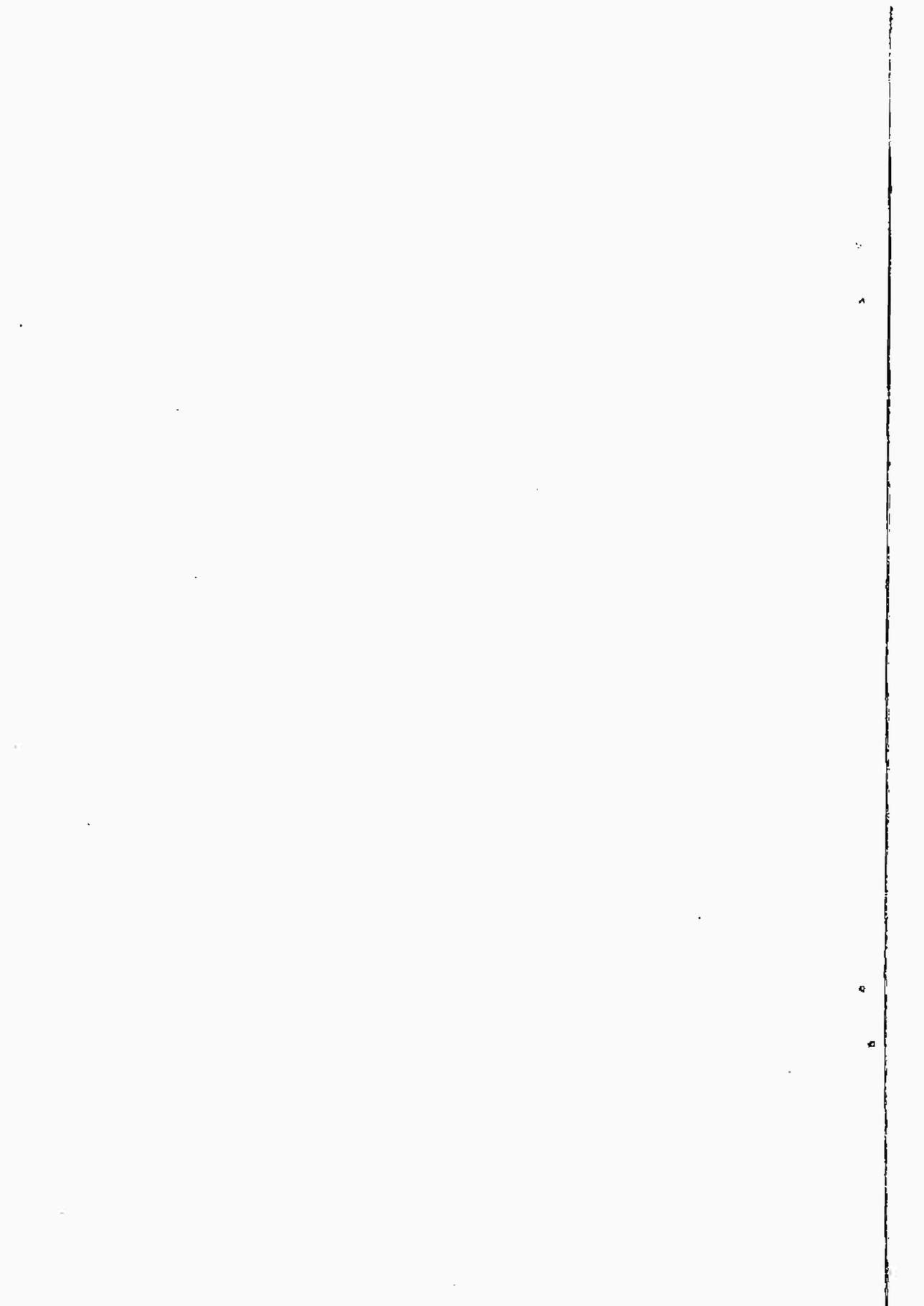
(43) Barguet, loc. cit.

(44) De Buck, op. cit., p. 13.

(45) De Buck, op. cit., p. 4.

(46) J.G. Griffiths, « Hecataeus and Herodotus on ' A Gift of the River ' », *JNES*, XXV (1966), 60.

western deserts through which the water of the Nile has to flow as though in the bottom of a deep canal. He also saw the course of the Nile full of conical islands formed by their age-long splitting up into piles of great granite boulders just as shown in the picture at Philae of Roman date in which the Inundation-god is hidden in a cavern at the foot of a mountain. Seeing such pictures and natural rocks, Herodotus misinterpreted what the scribe told him, taking the two parallel phrases *kry h'py* and *mw h'py* for the name of his two mountains Crophi and Mophi between which he wanted the springs of the Nile to flow out. The scribe of Sais knew well what he was saying while Herodotus misinterpreted what he said.



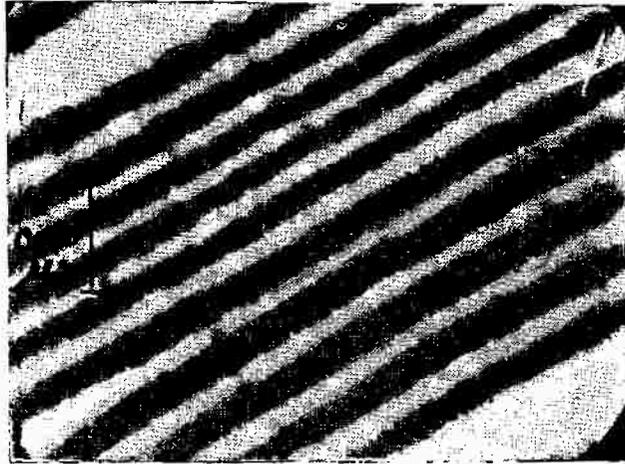


Fig. 1 — Electron micrograph of the granum in *Phascolus vulgaris* chloroplast. (x 150,000).