CHAPTER 1

Herodotus’ Nubia in Modern Scholarship

1 Images of Nubia in Herodotean Scholarship

While the larger ethnographical logoi or excursuses had a well-defined place in the scope of [Herodotus’] great history (...) the fringes were just appendices. They were not necessary, but certainly entertaining. The fringes were different, completely different, which fascinated Herodotus and probably his readers, too.1

[D]arkness is not a subject for history.2

The little attention students of the work of the Father of History3 generally pay to the Aithiopian passages is proportionate to the small volume—hardly more than two thousand words—that these occupy in the Histories.4 Their cavalier treatment is also influenced by the traditional belief that they reflect “the tendency of Greek writers to treat Nubia as essentially an appendage of Egypt, all the more so since most Greek accounts of Nubia took the form of appendices to digressions on Egypt”.5

Be they conservative Quellenforscher or modern narratologists,6 students of Herodotus do not feel obliged to inquire into the history and culture of ancient Nubia because students of ancient Egypt encourage them to maintain that modern Egyptology’s view of the Middle Nile Region does not greatly differ

1 Karttunen 2002 459.
3 Herodotus was called pater historiae first by Cicero, De legibus 1.1.5.
4 The standard Greek text of the Histories is to be found in C. Hude: Herodoti Historiae I–II. Oxford3 1927 and H.B. Rosén: Herodoti Historiae I–II. Stuttgart-Leipzig 1987, 1995. In this study I quote Tormod Eide’s English translation of the Aithiopian passages from Vol. I of the Fontes Historiae Nubiorum (FHN); some passages are cited from the translation of de Sélincourt–Marincola 2003.—Herodotus’ work came to be called History or Histories in late antiquity. Herodotus uses ἱστορίη in the meaning “enquiries”, “researches”, “studies”. The Greek term was restricted to the human past from the fourth century BC, see Asheri 2007a 8.
5 Burstein 1995 31.
from that of the ancient Greek writers. Alan Lloyd’s comment on *Histories* 2.30, a frequently quoted passage conveying Herodotus’ view that Aithiopian culture had Egyptian origins (see here Chapter 2, Text 6; Chapter 4.7), presents a pertinent summary of the twentieth-century Egyptological consensus:7

That the civilization of Ethiopia was an off-shoot of that of Pharaonic Egypt is true (...). Egyptians were settled in the country as early as the Old Kingdom and during the New Kingdom the whole country as far as the Fourth Cataract became an Egyptian province and was thoroughly Egyptianized. Even after the collapse of Egyptian authority at the end of the 2nd Millennium her cultural influence continued and formed the basis of the Meroitic Civilization which flourished during Herodotus’ lifetime.8

In Herodotean scholarship the interpretation of the Aithiopian passages remains dependent on out-dated images of ancient Nubia presented in the Egyptological literature published before the UNESCO International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia (1959–1969).9 While the discoveries made during the Campaign brought forth the unfolding of Nubian Studies, a special historical, archaeological, and culture-historical discipline,10 students of

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8 Lloyd 1976 132. See also Asheri 2007c 416, 420.—Lloyd’s extension of the Meroitic period over the fifth century BC does not correspond with the Nubiological terminology, see Political and Geographical Terms.