



Review

IAN S. MOYER
EGYPT AND THE LIMITS OF HELLENISM

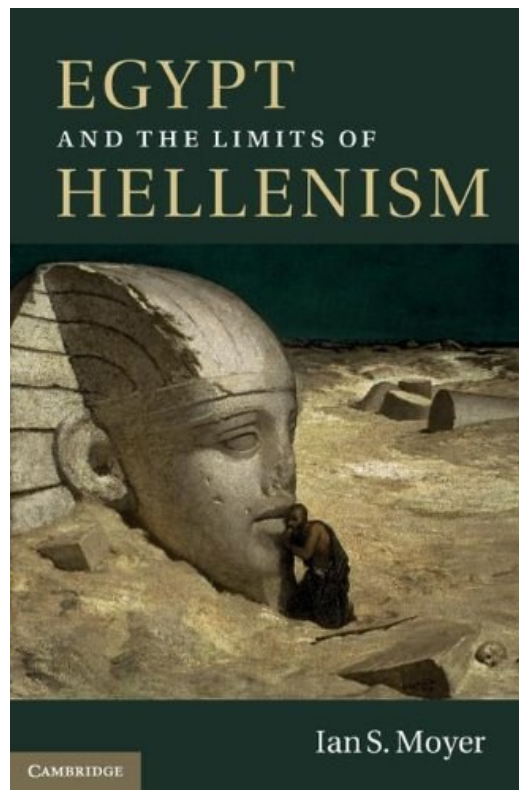
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011
ISBN-10: 052176551X, ISBN-13: 978-0521765510. 358 pp.

Reviewed by Nikolaos Lazaridis
California State University Sacramento

ABSTRACT

Ian Moyer's book reexamines four well-known instances of interaction between the cultures of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece: Herodotus' famous encounter with the Egyptian priests who became his main source for the information he presented in his Histories' second book, Manetho's historiographical attempt to outline Egyptian history for a Greek-speaking audience, the Delian Sarapis aretology which related the story of a family of Egyptian priests living on the Greek island of Delos, and Thessalos' use of Egyptian magical traditions and attempt to promote his exotic magical spells and practices to the Roman Palace and the Empire's market. Through these case studies, Moyer looks at Greco-Egyptian encounters from an Egyptian perspective, arguing for Egyptian culture's important, yet often disregarded by Classicists, contributions to the final products of these interactions.

The book *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism* is based upon Ian Moyer's doctoral dissertation, which was submitted to the University of Chicago in 2004. This book is the product of substantial interdisciplinary research that not only combined Classical and Egyptological work on primary sources from the Ancient Mediterranean but also examined this work in the light of colonial and post-colonial studies. The outcome of such a remarkably balanced interdisciplinary work, combined with a rare mastery of both classical and ancient Egyptian languages, is a well-rounded reexamination of three unique and well-recorded moments of interaction between members of the ancient Egyptian and Greek literate classes. This intriguing work, which argues for an important, but frequently disregarded, influence exercised by the



Egyptian side over the Greek one, benefits students and scholars of both Egyptology and Classics. From an Egyptological perspective, this work illustrates the possible contribution Egyptian traditions had to the growth of other, equally influential ancient cultures, such as the Greek one, and investigates the different ways in which such Egyptian traditions were perceived and developed by their non-Egyptian audiences. From a Classical perspective, this work offers an opportunity to test and redefine the rusty notion and value of Hellenism, which in the 19th century, dipped in the ever-present worldviews of colonial mentality, was often depicted as a superior cultural force shaping every foreign culture it encountered on its way to becoming an empire.¹ In essence, Moyer proves that the by-products of such moments of dynamic interaction can never be mere

results of one-sided influence, as was often argued in older Classical studies.

The book is divided into four main chapters, preceded by an extensive introduction and succeeded by a short epilogue.

In the Introduction, in addition to outlining the book's analysis and main arguments, the author explores ancient and modern non-Egyptian approaches to ancient Egypt through the lens of theories and studies derived from colonial and post-colonial History, as well as Ethnography. Specifically, the discussion drives the readers through major scholarly works, such as Said's studies of Orientalism and Bernal's comparative approaches, dwelling on early analyses of the history of Greco-Roman Egypt, such as Fraser's *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, most of which are justly criticized as "...not histories of Egypt, but histories of Hellenism in Egypt...speaking with what H. Bhabha has called the 'forked tongue' of colonial discourse on the West's civilizing mission in Asia and Africa" (pp. 24-25).

Anticipated by the author's remark on pp. 40-41 that his study is not a continuous narrative but a series of snapshots,² this book's core analysis begins its journey through the case studies in Chapter One with Herodotus' work on Egypt, where the author emphasizes the contributions of the Egyptian priests who allegedly interacted with the Greek historian. Most importantly, in this chapter the author refutes the Classicists' popular treatment of Herodotus' account of Egypt as a mere Hellenocentric use of "barbarian" material to help Greek audience rethink about their past and overall identity. According to the author, the Egyptian priests Herodotus met in his travels actively participated in the making of his history.³ They were present in it not as members of a frozen in time civilization, resembling, that is, representatives of "primitive" cultures studied by early European ethnographers, but as historical entities whose views and knowledge can, to a great extent, be traced back to the specific spatiotemporal context of Late Period Egypt. Thus for example, the author presents evidence that proves that Hecataeus and Herodotus' accounts of Egyptian history were very possibly based on the Egyptian priests' knowledge of, and manner of relating, their national past in the form of genealogical lists, often backed up by monumental evidence, such as the storing of priestly statues in major temples like Karnak (discussed on pp. 63-68).

In Chapter Two, where the author discusses the case of Manetho's Egyptian history written in Greek, the aforementioned discussion of Classical bias towards one-sided Greek influence at these moments of Greco-Egyptian interaction becomes even more apparent, since most of the earlier Classical works on Manetho's history disregarded the somewhat obvious dependence of his work on Egyptian king-lists, whose form clashed with the popular running narrative style of Greek

historiography. Moreover, the author carefully examines in Manetho's work possible cases of synchronism between Egyptian chronology and Greek history, which may suggest that Manetho was, to some extent, responding to (if not actually correcting) earlier Greek accounts of Egyptian history, such as Herodotus' second book. Finally, Manetho's work is scrutinized in this chapter not only in terms of its relationship with contemporary demotic texts, such as the *Demotic Chronicle* and the *Prophecy of the Lamb*,⁴ whose importance as valuable sources for the history of interaction between the Egyptian and Greek cultures is stressed.

In the following chapter the author turns his attention to the third case study, which concerns the copy of a Sarapis aretalogy that was discovered on the island of Delos in 1912 and that includes the story of the Egyptian priest Apollonius relating his efforts to found a Sarapis sanctuary on that island. In this case, the Greek text offers a priceless glimpse at the 3rd century BC struggles of a family of Egyptian priests to promote the cult of Sarapis in Greece, a Ptolemaic State cult that epitomized Greco-Egyptian religious syncretism in the Hellenistic world.⁵ The text of the aretalogy, and especially the narrative part composed by Apollonius, is thoroughly examined here resulting in a series of insightful linguistic and literary observations that suggest Egyptian influence on the text's structure, vocabulary, and contents.⁶ As opposed to the narrative part, Maiistas' poetic hymn included numerous allusions to Homer's *Odyssey*, pointed out by the author and used as evidence to show that Maiistas' portion of the aretalogy attested to a "literary and mythological syncretism" of Greco-Egyptian traditions (p. 194).

Chapter Four discusses the case of *De virtutibus herbarum* whose writer, Thessalos, attempted to promote Egyptian magical knowledge to the Roman Palace and the vast market of the Roman Empire. After examining the various possibilities for identifying Thessalos and for setting a date for his work on pp. 211-219, the author argues convincingly that by connecting his status and work with earlier or contemporary traditions of exoticized Egyptian achievements in magic and astronomy, Thessalos, especially in his autobiographical prologue, was trying to sell his knowledge and skills as a commodity to the Roman market. Specifically, the analysis of the work's style and contents indicates that there were deliberate links to the Nechepso-Petosiris literary legacies, as well as to the corpus of Hermetica, both being Egyptian traditions that emerged "...as a result of creative interactions and exchanges between an indigenous bilingual literate elite and the wider world of Hellenistic culture" (pp. 267-268). In fact, the author points out that Thessalos wished to present himself as a member of the Egyptian priesthood, who possibly due to economic and social constraints in the Roman era chose to sustain the popular positive

stereotypes about them and use them for their own financial benefit.

In the short epilogue following Chapter Four the author reiterates some of his main arguments that constitute the backbone of his preceding analysis, stating among other things that he has intended “...to write a dialogical and transactional history of encounters in which Egyptian as well as Greeks were historical subjects...” (p. 281). Once again here the author reasserts that he has not been interested in building an attractive, flowing narrative of cultural interaction between Greeks and Egyptians, but has rather chosen to focus on exploring the “historicity” of these encounters, the way, that is, in which the Egyptian participants of these interactions tried to situate themselves within a cultural and historical continuum while exchanging ideas with the Greeks they interacted with.⁷

The epilogue is followed by three appendices in which the author presents his own translations of the Sarapis aretology and

Thessalos’s work, along with a short interesting essay on dating the latter on the basis of its references to astronomical information and calculations. These appendices seem somehow detached from the core study, since they have not been much referred to in it. Finally, the book ends with the bibliography and a thorough index of terms, themes, and proper names.

Overall, Moyer’s book is a significant contribution to the study of historical interactions between ancient Egypt and Greece. His well-balanced and unbiased interdisciplinary work on ancient Egyptian and Greek primary sources, uniquely examined against the theoretical background of colonial and post-colonial discussions, succeeds in effectively situating the examined four case studies within their historical contexts, a rather challenging task, given that it requires substantial knowledge of both the ancient Egyptian and Greek historical narratives and native cultural and social practices.

NOTES

- ¹ This old-fashioned and clearly biased use of the notion of Hellenism is best illustrated in Droysen’s work discussed in detail on pp. 11-14.
- ² The snapshot-like structure of this book’s analysis, although it may be frustrating to readers of historical narratives, is rather realistic and represents best the fragmentary nature of the available historical evidence for reconstructing cultural interaction between Egypt and Greece.
- ³ One wishes the Greek accounts were more specific about what type of priests Herodotus and Hecataeus met during their visits of the Egyptian temples. This would have been particularly interesting for this study, since Egyptian sources referring to Egyptian priesthood are often perplexing to the modern scholar, not clearly distinguishing between the status and duties of priests of different ranks. Given the temporary status of some of these priests, as is the case of the *wab* priests, one wonders about the reliability of these accounts’ sources and the degrees to which the distinction between different types of priesthood was clear to non-Egyptian visitors. After all, Herodotus’ information about the Egyptian society and culture is sometimes far from accurate (possibly due to a wrong use of his sources and/or his sources’ unreliable nature), as shown in numerous occasions in Loyd’s three-volume commentary of Herodotus’ second book (Leiden 1975, 1976, and 1988).
- ⁴ One must observe here that the author manages in most cases to avoid the common stylistic problems often observed in comparative studies that include renderings of ancient text in more than one script. However, I have noted three noteworthy editorial slips: (a) in note 95 on p. 68, the translation of the passage from Herodotus includes an

incorrect rendering of οἱ ἱερεῖς τοῦ Διὸς as ‘the Egyptian priests’, instead of the correct ‘the priests of Zeus’, (b) on p. 129 punctuation should not be used in the transliterated Egyptian text, and (c) there is an inconsistency in rendering the Greek text: sometimes it is omitted, as on p. 123, and other times it is fully reproduced, as, for instance, on pp. 73 and 74.

- ⁵ The author in more than occasion shows that he is rightly aware of potential colonial connotations lurking behind the usage of common historical terms, such as *Hellenism* and *syncretism*. However, in the case of the latter I believe his warnings sound somewhat extreme, especially when the term’s potential implications of cultural domination are being compared to sexual penetration (p. 151 and n. 33)!
- ⁶ From these noted parallels, the only one that seems to me doubtful is the connection of the trial described in the text with the common theme of trials among gods in Egyptian mythology (pp. 175-179). In general, the insightful linguistic observations attest to the author’s praiseworthy mastery of both Greek and Egyptian languages.
- ⁷ This reiteration of the main arguments and strategies of this book in the epilogue confirms, I believe, that the hardest task of this study is to tie the four case studies together and to transform them into a coherently linked historical analysis. These case studies remain, and rightly so, snapshots rather than connectable points of an overarching narrative. What brings all these snapshots together is the author’s uniform approach and methodology, which should be considered this book’s most original contribution to the study of Greco-Egyptian interactions.