HECATAEUS OF MILETUS
AND THE GREEK ENCOUNTER WITH EGYPT

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Abstract
Interaction between Greece and Egypt began in the 2nd millennium BC and extended until
the late 4th century BC when Alexander Macedonian rule in Egypt. Relations were partic-
ularly close during the 7th and 6th centuries BC when trade between Egypt and the Aegean
revived and significant numbers of Greeks not only visited but also settled in Egypt for the
first time. Scholarship has mostly focused on possible Egyptian influence on Archaic Greek
culture rather Greek reactions to Egypt. This paper will examine the views of Hecataeus of
Miletus, the author of the first Greek account of Egypt, concerning Egypt and its relation
to Greece.

A milestone passed in late 2006 with almost no comment. The third and final vol-
ume of M. Bernal’s monumental Black Athena1 was published. This is not the place
to consider again his claims for the decisive nature of Egyptian influence on the
formation of Greek culture or the controversy they generated a decade ago.2 I would
only note that central to Bernal’s thesis is the claim that Greek saga and historiog-
raphy agreed that Egyptian invaders in the 2nd millennium BC were the true
founders of Greek civilisation. Curiously, however, in the roughly two thousand
pages of his monumental opus there is hardly any mention of the Greek writer
who began the ancient discussion of the relationship between Greece and Egypt:
Hecataeus of Miletus.3

Hecataeus of Miletus
Hecataeus of Miletus is, in fact, a figure to conjure with. S. West4 observed that:

The shadow of Hecataeus, magni nominis umbra if ever there was one, constantly
obstructs our attempts to assess and understand Herodotus’ principles, objectives and
achievements. Perplexing and elusive as the details of Hecataeus’ work may be, no-one

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1 Bernal 2006.
2 For a brief overview of the controversy, see Burstein 1996a. The fullest review is Berlinerblau
1999. For a selection of important articles, see Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996.
3 Only four passing references in the indexes to volumes 2 and 3.
disputes his importance as an intermediary between catalogue-poetry such as we associate with Hesiod, with its clear subordination of geography to genealogy, and the more sophisticated method of synthesizing knowledge about the *oikoumene* demonstrated by Herodotus; some have even argued that the great Milesian has a better claim than Herodotus to the title of *pater historiae*.

West is a charter member of what the late W.K. Pritchett angrily dubbed ‘The Liar School of Herodotus’, and, indeed, her article attempts to show that Herodotus invented the most famous event in Hecataeus’ life: his momentous meeting with Egyptian priests in the temple of Zeus – Karnak – in Thebes. While no scholar has fully followed her lead, she is certainly right that Herodotus’ account has serious problems and, more important, that speculative theories about Hecataeus’ works have obscured more than they have clarified our understanding of the development of Greek historiography. Reconsidering Hecataeus’ place in Greek historiography would require a book. This paper has more modest goals: to place Hecataeus’ account of Egypt in the context of Greek knowledge of Egypt in the Late Archaic period and to examine the evidence for his view of the relationship of Greece and Egypt.

Unfortunately, about all that can be said about Hecataeus’ life is that he was a prominent Milesian aristocrat and intellectual who may have visited Egypt during the reign of Darius I. The first question to be answered, therefore, is: what could Hecataeus know about Egypt and how could he know it? One thing is clear: by the time Hecataeus wrote in the last decades of the 6th century BC or the early years of the 5th century BC, Greeks knew a considerable amount about Egypt. There is, however, less agreement about the sources of that knowledge. Bernal is one of a number of scholars who believe that a substantial portion of that knowledge dated back to the 2nd millennium BC and that such information was transmitted to historical Greece via Greek legend. One part of this thesis is not in dispute: there was significant Greek contact with and knowledge of Egypt in the Bronze Age.

**Greece and Egypt in the Bronze Age**

A significant and growing body of archaeological and textual evidence – both Greek and Egyptian – documents relations between Egypt and the Aegean in the Bronze Age, indicating that they reached a peak during the reign of Amenhotep III in the late 15th and early 14th centuries BC and declined thereafter. Pride of place among this evidence belongs to the Aegean toponym list from the funerary temple of Amenhotep III at Kom el-Hetan and various Egyptian objects inscribed with the

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5 Pritchett 1993.
6 The evidence is collected in Cline 1994.
cartouches of Amenhotep III and his chief queen, Tiye, discovered at Mycenae and other sites, which have been plausibly connected with a diplomatic embassy dispatched by that Egyptian king to the Aegean. Furthermore, portrayals of Mycenaean ‘tribute bearers’ in 18th-Dynasty tombs and the recent publication of a papyrus from Armarna apparently containing illustrations of Aegean soldiers\(^8\) point to at least the occasional presence of Greeks in Egypt at about the same time. Moreover, a number of mythical themes and figures seem to have originated in the Bronze Age including Danaus, the sphinx and the bow test in the *Odyssey*. Finally, onomastic evidence in Linear B – specifically the personal name \(\text{A}^\wedge\text{ku-pi-ti-jo} (\text{-Aigyptios-the Memphite})\(^9\) – implies the existence that the later Greek term for Egypt, *Aigyptos*, already existed in the 2nd millennium BC.

The same evidence, however, also indicates that Mycenaean ideas about Egypt did not survive the collapse of the Bronze Age kingdoms in a coherent form. Danaus, for example, seems to be a late reflex of the Egyptian term for the Aegean area, *Tanaja*. Similarly, the female sphinx and the bow test in the *Odyssey*,\(^10\) both of which originated in Egyptian royal ideology, survived but in radically reinterpreted forms, the former being transformed from its origin as a protective manifestation of the Egyptian king\(^11\) to the familiar cruel and treacherous female monster of Archaic Greek myth while the latter lost all trace of its origin in royal ceremonial display. Finally, the existence in Linear B of the personal name *Mi-si-ra-jo* (*Misraio*-the Egyptian) indicates that, unlike later Greek, Mycenaean Greek differentiated between the city of Memphis and its Lower Egyptian hinterland and Egypt as a whole, using Aigyptos for the former and a form of the common West Semitic name for Egypt, *Misr* (Hebrew *Mizraim*), for the latter.\(^12\)

None of this is surprising. Relations between the Aegean and Egypt in the mid-2nd millennium BC were relatively close, but all the evidence indicates that they occurred primarily at the state level and involved relatively few people. The collapse of Mycenaean civilisation at the end of the 2nd millennium BC, therefore, severed both relations between Greece and Egypt and the memory of those relations. Thereafter, except for possible allusions to Aegean groups among the so-called Sea Peoples, who attacked Egypt in the early 1100s BC, Egyptian sources are silent about the Aegean for almost five centuries. Likewise, on the Greek side the evidence for

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11 Egyptian queens were occasionally also portrayed as sphinxes, beginning in the Middle Kingdom (Stadelmann 2001, 3, 310).
12 Cline 1994, 128.
contact with Egypt during the Dark Age is limited to a thin scatter of portable faience objects such as beads, scarabs, Bes figurines and small vases, many of which are Phoenician ‘knock-offs’, suggesting that relations with Egypt was limited to trade conducted through Near Eastern intermediaries such as the Phoenicians.13

Greece and Egypt in the Archaic Period

The first hint of renewed Greek contact with and knowledge of Egypt comes in the 8th century BC, specifically in Hesiod, who knew of a great Egyptian river, but not its name, since he mistook an Egyptian descriptive term for the river, Neilos, that is, $n$-$jrw$-$c3$. ‘the great Streams’,14 for its name. In the course of the next century, however, Greek contact with and knowledge of Egypt expanded significantly. The clearest indication of the change is the Odyssey’s account of the open sea route from Crete to the Western Delta in Odysseus’ lying tale of an unsuccessful pirate raid on the Delta (Odyssey 14, ll. 252–258; trans. Lattimore):

> On the seventh day we went aboard and from wide Crete sailed on a North Wind that was favorable and fair. It was easy, like sailing downstream, so that never a single one of my ships was hurt, and we, unharmed, without sickness, sat still, and let the wind and the steersmen hold them steady. On the fifth day we reached the abundant stream Aigyptos and I stayed my oar-swept ships inside the Aigyptos river.

While the singer of the Odyssey apparently did not know Hesiod’s new name for Egypt’s great river, Egypt itself was clearly familiar to him and his audience. As he said, getting there ‘was easy, like sailing downstream’. The wretched fate of the hapless Cretan raiders of Odysseus’ tale, however, and the later popularity of the story of the evil king Busiris – significantly a ruler in the Western Delta – who sacrificed all foreigners who entered his territory, suggest that Greek visitors to Egypt could not always expect a warm welcome. By the mid-7th century BC, however, Egyptian attitudes toward Greeks and their presence in Egypt had changed dramatically thanks to the political upheavals of the 660s and 650s BC.

This is not the place to recount in detail the story of relations between Greece and Egypt during the 26th Dynasty, especially since our general understanding of the history of this period has not changed materially, and that was to be expected.15 The principal features of that history – the decisive contribution made by Greek and Carian mercenaries to the liberation of Egypt from Assyrian rule in the 650s BC, the establishment of a Greek diaspora in Egypt in the 7th and

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6th centuries BC, the important role played by the city of Naucratis as the centre of Greek life in Egypt, and the development of a virtual Egyptomania in Late Archaic Greece – were all well known from Greek literature. Nevertheless, while the main outlines of the story have remained largely unchanged, it has received some unexpected nuances.

Until recently, historians have assumed that the Greeks who settled in Egypt during this period lived in virtual ghettos with little contact with Egyptian society or culture. One scholar even asserted that ‘we have no Egyptian evidence that a pre-Ptolemaic priest of any description every met a Greek’, despite the fact that Greek mercenaries and their officers such as the flotilla commander, Psammetichos, son of Theokles, settled in Saite Egypt and served under the command of Egyptian officers who were also priests, such as Potasimto who commanded the foreign troops in Psamtek II’s Nubian expedition in 593 BC. Two recently published documents suggest a more expansive view of the possibilities open to ambitious Greeks in 7th- and 6th-century BC Egypt.

The first is a Demotic papyrus from Hermopolis dated to the year 507 BC and containing a petition from a priest of Thoth to an Egyptian district official named Ariston, that is, a Greek in Egyptian service, requesting that the latter assist a group of priests who were bringing a dead sacred Ibis to the Fayum for burial. The second is an Egyptian block statue discovered at Priene in western Turkey and published by Olivier Masson and Jean Yoyotte, and containing the following inscription:

Pedon, the son of Amphinoos, dedicated me, having brought me from Egypt. The Egyptian king Psammetichus gave him a gold arm-band as a reward for bravery and a city because of his excellence.

Ariston and Pedon clearly were not marginalised individuals but government officials, who were fully integrated into Egyptian society and culture. Ariston, at least, was presumably literate in Egyptian while Pedon was sufficiently Egyptianised to choose for his monument in his home town a block statue, the sculptural form traditionally used in Egypt to commemorate the achievements of a successful government official.

21 Zaghloul 1985. For the date, see Thissen 1991, 112.
23 For a similar statue found at Camirus on Rhodes, see Boardman 1999, 142.
Similarly, Egyptian style funerary paraphernalia for Carians\textsuperscript{24} and Greeks\textsuperscript{25} found in Egypt and the many fine Egyptian objects discovered in the precinct of Hera on Samos\textsuperscript{26} and other Greek sanctuaries together with the \textit{Book of the Dead} the Arke-silas painter used as a model for the painting on his name cup\textsuperscript{27} allow no doubt that Ariston and Pedon were not isolated figures, but typical of many east Greeks who made their fortunes in Egypt. Further, the appropriateness to the honoured deities of many of the dedicated Egyptian objects,\textsuperscript{28} the soundness of the identifications of Greek and Egyptian gods in classical literature,\textsuperscript{29} and the ethnographic accuracy of representations of Egyptian themes in Archaic Greek art\textsuperscript{30} together indicate that Greeks, who had lived in Egypt and then returned to Greece ‘to retire’ like Pedon, had more than a superficial understanding of Egyptian religion and culture. For his account of Late Archaic Egypt, therefore, Hecataeus potentially could draw on a wealth of well-informed informants, who – unlike those available to Herodotus later in the 5th century BC – could have had direct experience of Pharaonic Egypt and how it worked. The question is: how did Hecataeus use this opportunity? The answer is not simple.

\textbf{Hecataeus’ Account of Egypt}

The evidence for reconstructing Hecataeus’ ideas concerning Egypt is meagre. Although fragments dealing with Egypt survive from both his major works – the \textit{Periodos Ges} and \textit{Genealogiai} – the majority are bare names of peoples and places quoted without any indication of their original context in the \textit{Ethnika} of the 6th-century AD grammarian Stephanus of Byzantium (Hecataeus, \textit{FGH} I Ff 19–20, 300–328). At best, therefore, the fragments afford only an incomplete idea of Hecataeus’ account of Egypt. For a fuller picture, their evidence must be supplemented with the indirect evidence of Herodotus, whose extensive use of the \textit{Periodos Ges} in

\textsuperscript{24} Boardman 1999, 135–37; Vittmann 2003, 154–79, 281.
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Boardman 1999, 136–37; Vittmann 2003, 203–04, 229–31. Particularly noteworthy is a late 7th-century BC coffin in Leiden for a Greek with the Egyptian name Wahibre-em-achet, but whose parents bore the Greek names Alexikles and Zenodote. A canopic chest in Stockholm has also been ascribed to this same individual and suggests that he was a royal official like Ariston and Pedon (Vittmann 2003, 203).
\textsuperscript{26} They are published in Jantzen 1972.
\textsuperscript{27} Miller 2000, 419 n. 26.
\textsuperscript{28} Particularly interesting are the Egyptian statuettes of cats dedicated at Samos (Jantzen 1972, 21–22) since the cat was the sacred animal of Bastet who was identified with Hera.
\textsuperscript{29} For example, the identification of Zeus with Amon in the Archaic period is implied by a 6th-century BC dedication to Theban Zeus (Vittmann 2003, 230–31). The knowledge of Egyptian religion behind such identifications is particularly clear in the case of that of the Memphite creator god Ptah with Hephaestus (cf. Morenz 1954).
\textsuperscript{30} Miller 2000, 417–30.
his Egyptian *logos* was already recognised in antiquity. The method for doing so was clearly and succinctly described by W.A. Heidel: ‘read Herodotus and ask yourself, What does this presuppose?’

The method is simple in concept but difficult to apply. The arbitrariness of Heidel’s own analysis in which large sections of Herodotus’ second book were assigned to Hecataeus on the flimsiest of grounds well illustrates the pitfalls, especially when a moment’s reflection makes clear that Hecataeus’ description of Egypt, which formed part of the second book of the *Periodos Ges*, can have been only a fraction of the size of Herodotus’ Egyptian *logos*. Still, three facts clearly emerge concerning the character of Hecataeus’ description of Egypt in the *Periodos Ges* when all the evidence is considered.

First, the organisation of the *Periodos Ges* itself indicates that the description of Egypt occupied a place in the overall economy of the *Periodos Ges* comparable in prominence, if not scale, to that of Herodotus’ Egyptian *logos*. Hellenistic scholars divided the *Periodos Ges* into two books, *Europe* and *Asia*. Stephanus of Byzantium preserves, however, traces of another organisation of the work that most likely derives from Hecataeus himself. *Lemmata* in his quotations of Hecataeus’ work suggest that originally the *Periodos Ges* was not divided into books but into descriptions of major land-masses called *Periegeses*. Four *Periegeses* are attested in the fragments. Three dealt with the continents recognised by Ionian geographers: Europe, Asia and Libya. The fourth, however, was the description of Egypt, a ‘*Periegesis Aigyptou*’ (*FGH* 1 Ff 305, 321, 327). Herodotus was not far wrong, therefore, when he claimed that Ionian geographers such as Hecataeus treated Egypt as though it were a fourth continent (Herodotus 2.16).

Second, despite its limited size, the *Periegesis Aigyptou* contained an account of Egypt that was both detailed and wide-ranging. The clearest evidence of this is the fact that the names of 24 Egyptian towns can still be identified in the fragments of the *Periegesis Aigyptou* as compared with only 44 city names in the whole of Herodotus’ Egyptian *logos*. Moreover, since the names of only two major Egyptian cities, Buto and Thebes, occur in the fragments (*Hecataeus, FGH* 1 Ff 300, 305), the preserved names can only represent only a small fraction of the names that were to be found in Hecataeus’ complete text.

Third, although the fragments indicate that the *Periegesis Aigyptou* dealt with the whole Nile valley from ‘Aithiopia’ to the Mediterranean as well as the oases in the western desert, Hecataeus followed East Greek tradition and restricted the term ‘Egypt’ itself to the Delta. This is clear both from Hecataeus’ famous characterisation

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31 Quoted by Pearson 1987, vii.
32 Heidel 1935.
of Egypt as ‘the gift of the Nile’ and his practice of describing places in Middle and Upper Egypt as being in Libya or Arabia depending on whether they were located west or east of the Nile, nor is the reason in doubt. Hecataeus’ geography was based on the division of the oecumene into three continents, Europe, Asia and Libya, bounded by two great rivers, the Tanais and the Nile – a scheme in which the Nile valley south of the Delta had to be divided between the two continents of Libya and Asia. Inevitably, however, as Herodotus recognised, it also meant that there was an unresolved tension in the Periodos Geis between Hecataeus’ narrow definition of Egypt and the reality that Egyptian civilisation extended far beyond the confines of the Delta. While these general aspects of the Periegesis Aigyptou are clear, the fragments reveal little of its detail, although they do contain significant hints.

The Periodos Geis as a whole was organised as a coastal description of the Mediterranean with the account of its hinterlands being structured around the ascent of great rivers. Traces of such a procedure exist in the fragments of the Periegesis Aigyptou. Thus, the phrase ‘Atharambite nomos and Atharambe polis’ in F 304, the references to temples at Buto and Neilos in Ff 305 and 319 and a god in a recently discovered fragment – Aphthos: a god among the Egyptians like Isis and Typhon – indicates that Hecataeus noted each nome and its principal city together with the city’s most prominent religious monuments and gods as his description reached it in the course of following the Nile into the interior of Egypt. Similarly, treatment of Egyptian daily life is implied by the allusion to barley beer in F 323a, the characterisation of the Egyptians as eaters of wheaten bread in F 323b, and description of crocodile hunting in F 324. Finally, fragments dealing with the hippopotamus and the Phoenix (Hecataeus, FGH 1 F 324) indicate that Hecataeus also dealt with both the fauna of Egypt and its marvels. The Periegesis Aigyptou, therefore, contained a full description of Egypt during the late 6th century BC in which four of the five standard topics of later Greek ethnographies of Egypt – geography, religion, customs and natural history – were treated. But what about the fifth topic: the history of Egypt?

Most scholars believe that Hecataeus ignored Egyptian history entirely on the ground that none of the fragments of his works deals with Egyptian history. What is clear, however, is that Hecataeus could have written an account of Egyptian history based on well-informed sources – Egyptians or Greeks with Egyptian experience – if he had wished. The numerous Egyptian toponyms and the general soundness of the equations of Greek and Egyptian gods in the fragments indicate

33 Thomson 1948, 59, 66.
35 For example FGH 1a, 366 note ad Hecataeus F 300; and Drews 1973, 13–14.
that he had access to good sources, while a possible reference to the identification of Hittite sculptures in Anatolia in a fragment of Hipponax raises the possibility that early versions of the Sesostris story may have been already in circulation in Ionia (Hipponax F 7 Degani).³⁶ The real question, therefore, is not whether Hecataeus could have written an account of Egyptian history similar to that of Herodotus, but did he? The answer, I believe, is that he did not, or, rather, that Hecataeus wrote about Egyptian history, but that the Egyptian history that interested him was not the history of Pharaonic Egypt, but the history of Greek heroes and their adventures in Egypt as recorded in works such as the Ps.-Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* and the *Heraclea* of Panyassis.³⁷

The establishment of a sharp division between history and myth and the consequent devaluation of legends as historical sources is one of the defining characteristics of modern Greek historiography. Indeed, it is precisely the question of the historical value of legends that forms the core of Bernal’s critique of contemporary classical scholarship in *Black Athena*. The distinction between history and myth was much less clear, however, in antiquity. Historians and chronographers such as Ephorus and Eratosthenes might express doubts about the possibility of attaining exact knowledge about the history of the heroic age, but they did not question the historicity of the Greek heroes themselves or the existence of a kernel of truth in the legends concerning them.³⁸ Hecataeus, as the preface of the *Genealogiae* – ‘Hecataeus the Milesian writes these things as seem to me to be true. For the tales of Greeks are many and ridiculous in my opinion’ (Hecataeus, *FGH* 1 F 1a) – and his practice make clear, shared this view and attempted to recover that ‘kernel of truth’ by eliminating the ‘ridiculous’ in the multitude of conflicting Greek stories concerning the heroes.

Clear evidence of Hecataeus’ efforts to recover the history of Greek contact with Egypt in the Heroic Age survives in the fragments of both the *Periegesis Aigyotou* and the *Genealogiae* and Herodotus’ Egyptian logos. Thus, Egyptian toponyms allegedly named after members of Menelaus’ crew provided evidence of his visit to Egypt (Hecataeus, *FGH* 1 Ff 307, 308). Euthymenes of Massilia’s (*FGH* 647. 5) theory that the Nile originated in Ocean helped resolve the puzzle of how the Argonauts returned to the Mediterranean after escaping from Colchis by sailing up the Phasis river into Ocean and then back to the Mediterranean via the Nile.

The central thread of Egyptian history in Greek saga, however, was provided by the story of the Inachids, the legendary rulers of Argos, in which the origins of

³⁶ But the fragment is heavily emended (*cf.* the *apparatus ad loc*).
³⁷ I have discussed this more fully in Burstein 1995a.
³⁸ As indicated by their excluding the period before the Trojan War from their historical and chronographic works (*cf.* Forsdyke 1964, 28 and 144).
important aspects of Egyptian civilisation were credited to various heroes whose ultimate roots were in Argos: 39 the Egyptian monarchy and the foundation of numerous cities including Memphis to Epaphos, the son of Io; 40 the name Egypt to Aigyptos; and the laws of Egypt to Busiris (Isocrates Busiris 15–16). Connected accounts of the Inachids and their role as founders of Egypt survive only in late sources such as the Library of Ps. Apollodorus (Library 2. 1. 3–4). 41 References in Herodotus to Io’s connection to Egypt (Herodotus 1. 1. 3–22), Epaphos (Herodotus 2. 38, 153; 3. 27–28), Aigyptos (Herodotus 2. 182), Danaus (Herodotus 2. 91, 98, 171, 182; 7. 94), Busiris (Herodotus 2. 45), 42 and the Egyptian origin of the Dorian royal families (Herodotus 6. 53–54) combined with allusions to the sons of Aigyptos and to Danaus and his introduction of the alphabet to Greece in Fragments 20 and 21 leave no doubt that Hecataeus treated the story, most likely, in the Genealogiai. In other words, to the extent Hecataeus dealt with Egyptian history, he focused on Egyptian history as recorded in Greek saga and emphasised in his account the ultimately Greek roots of Egyptian civilisation, revealing that key figures in the foundation of Egypt were Greek heroes or the descendants of Greek heroes whose exploits were still commemorated in the names of various Egyptian cities. Even when an ‘Egyptian’ was credited with introducing some aspect of Greek culture such as Danaus who supposedly brought the alphabet to Greece, that ‘Egyptian’ turned out to be of ‘Greek decent’. Hecataeus, in short, sought in Egypt evidence of the Greek past and, of course, he found it.

Hecataeus Hellenised more than Egypt’s ancient history. So, besides citing legendary origins for Egyptian toponyms, Hecataeus also transferred contemporary Greek toponyms to Egypt, claiming that there were islands in the Nile with Greek names including Ephesos, Chios, Samos, Lesbos and Kypros (Hecataeus, FGH 1 F 310). 43 More subtle, however, because it was unconscious – he was probably reflecting the usage of his informants – was the Hellenisation of contemporary Egypt in the Periegesis Aigyptou caused by his application of Greek terms and concepts to Egyptian realities. Good examples are provided by Fragments 304 and 305.

Fragment 304 is one of the few in which Hecataeus’ original words are preserved: ‘Atharambites nomos and Atharambe polis’. Its implications for the organisation of the

39 For the heroic history of Argos, see Pierart 1985. For the oriental connections of the Inachids, see M. West 1985, 149–50.
40 Supposedly named after his wife Memphis (Ps. Apollodorus Library 2. 1. 4). Epaphos’ role as a founder of numerous cities in Egypt was already known to Pindar (Nemean Odes 10. 5, ll. 5–6) in the 5th century BC.
41 For convenient surveys of the tradition, cf: Linforth 1910, 83; M. West 1985, 144–54.
42 Without naming him explicitly.
43 The list is not exhaustive as Stephanus claims there were ‘others (allat)’. 
Periegesis Aigyptou have already been discussed. Important in the present connection, however, is the fact that it also reveals that Hecataeus not only knew of the millennia old division of Egypt into a number of administrative districts – usually 42 – called sepat (spaτ), but that knowledge was subtly distorted by the use of Greek terminology. While the choice of the word nomos ‘pasture’ to render Egyptian sepat implies recognition of the agricultural basis of the nome system, the use of an adjectival form of the name of the nome’s principal urban centre to designate the nome is a Greek innovation with no basis in Egyptian tradition in which nomes were named after their standards, and suggests that Hecataeus used the model of a Greek polis and its chor(a) as the framework for understanding the nome system, thereby, ascribing a political significance to Egyptian towns which they did not, in fact, possess.

Similar distortion is evident in Hecataeus’ treatment of the Egyptian myth of Horus’ birth in Fragment 305:

In Buto, near the shrine of Leto there is an island named Chembis, sacred to Apollo. The island floats and sails around and moves upon the water.

The basis of the identifications in this fragment – Wadjet = Leto, Horus = Apollo and Chembis = Delos – was the similarity between the Greek myth of the birth of Apollo on the island of Delos and the ancient Egyptian story that Isis hid the newborn Horus from his uncle Seth in the marsh island, the šb bit(y) or Chemmis, at Buto. The close fit between the two myths is clear evidence that Hecataeus had access to sources that were well informed about Egyptian religion. The two myths were not, however, completely congruent, and in the process of equating the Greek and Egyptian myths the latter was altered under the influence of the Greek story. Those alterations were twofold. First, Wadjet, the chief deity of Buto, has displaced Isis as the mother of Horus-Apollo as a result of her identification with Leto; and second, the identification of Chembis with Delos has resulted in the idea, unattested in Egyptian sources, that the šb bit(y) could float.

Conclusion

Hecataeus, of course, was not the first nor would he be the last to write history this way. A little over half a century ago E.J. Bickerman wrote a classic article, ‘Origines Gentium’, in which he persuasively argued that what he called ‘the “pan-Hellenic” primeval theory’ – the idea that the founders of all peoples known to the

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44 For a full list of nomes and their Egyptian names, see Helck 1976.
45 Cf. Lloyd 1988, 143–46 ad Herodotus 2. 156.
46 Bickerman 1952.
Greeks were Greek heroes – dominated Greek accounts of the early history of non-Greek peoples and was ‘the necessary result of the belief in the historicity of the Greek saga’. Hecataeus’ account of the Egyptian past, in so far as we can reconstruct it, fits this pattern. Like the founder traditions studied by Bickerman, Hecataeus’ view of the Egyptian past was literally Hellenocentric in that it reflected a view of Egyptian history in which Greece and not Egypt occupied the centre or, to put it more succinctly, Egyptian history was Greek history. If Hecataeus’ interview with the Theban priests did take place, it only would have confirmed his belief in the rightness of his practice of removing the ‘ridiculous’ from stories of Greek heroes as, for example, his reducing the number of Danaus’ sons from 50 to less than 20 (Hecataus, FGH 1 F 19).

What did set Hecataeus apart was that he was the first and last Greek writer to produce a comprehensive account of the Egyptian past based on these principles. A little over a half century after he published his works, Herodotus offered in his Egyptian logos a radically different vision of the Egyptian past based to the extent possible on Egyptian sources and characterised by the erasure of almost all traces of Greek saga from the map of Egypt and the theory that the Greeks received much of their culture including their gods from Egypt instead of vice versa as Hecataeus believed.

Herodotus’ new vision of Egyptian history initially met fierce resistance. Plato even created in the Timaeus and Critias an alternative history in which he turned Herodotus’ theory on its head, citing bogus Egyptian documents to prove that pre-deluvian Athens saved Egypt and founded Sais; while the middle comedy playwright Anaxandrides had a character significantly named Demos rant that Athenians had nothing in common with Egyptians. Only in the late 4th century BC when Hecataeus of Abdera, writing at the court of Ptolemy I, provided a revised and greatly expanded version of Herodotus’s history of Egypt in his Aigyptiaka – a work that quickly became the standard Greek account of Egypt – did Herodotus’ new approach finally take hold. By the 2nd century AD when Plutarch accused Herodotus of being a philo-barbarian for his treatment of Egypt, it was too late; he was protesting against a fait accompli.

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47 Bickerman 1952, 71.
48 On Herodotus’ Egyptian sources, see Lloyd 1975, 89–97.
50 Burstein 1995b.
51 For an overview of the development of Greek historiography concerning Egypt, see Burstein 1996c.
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