Luke Pitcher

Death on the Nile: The Myth of Osiris and the Utility of History in Diodorus

Egypt In Greco-Roman Historiography

For the student of wandering myths, the reception of Egyptian theology in Greece and Rome will always have unique attractions. There is no dearth of relevant material. The ancient world itself commented on Greek enthusiasm for information about Egyptian cult. So, for example, we find that the affable, if rather shady, Egyptian high priest Kalasiris, who is one of the central characters of Heliodorus' novel *Aethiopika*, explicitly remarks on this enthusiasm amongst the Greeks for the theological lore of his homeland, when talking about how he was received at Delphi:

> To begin with, our inquiries ranged over a variety of topics: one would ask me how we worship our native gods in Egypt, while another might ask me to explain why different races venerate different animals and what myth is attached to each case; and a third might enquire about the construction of the pyramids, and a fourth about the underground maze. In short, their questions covered everything there is in Egypt, for Greeks find all Egyptian lore and legend irresistibly attractive. (Heliod. *Aeth.* 2.27)

However, despite the wealth of coverage in such genres as the ancient novel,[1] extant Greco-Roman historiography offers, by and large, less than one might expect on the subject of Egypt and its religious practices. Herodotus announces his unwillingness to talk about divine matters as they pertain to Egypt beyond simply going through the names, except insofar as his narrative will constrain him to do so, justifying this policy with his conviction that "all men understand about them equally".[2] In the account of Egypt that follows, this policy holds. Herodotus comments in passing upon the Egyptian custom of not sacrificing heifers, since they are sacred to Isis;[3] upon a horned depiction of Isis that resembles the Greek Io;[4] upon the fact that Isis and Osiris (whom they say to be Dionysus) are the only gods that all the Egyptians revere alike;[5] upon the great temple of Isis at Busiris, and the fact that the goddess is to be identified with

1 Apart from Heliodorus, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is obviously a key text in this regard, especially the controversial Book Eleven. Fr. 19 of Petronius seems to allude to the rites of Isis observed at Memphis.

2 Hdt. 2.3.2. For Herodotus' tendency to suppose that Greek and foreign gods can be translated into one another, see Parker 1996, 159. Harrison 2000, 210–11, tabulates the equivalencies that Herodotus claims between Egyptian and Greek deities.

3 Hdt. 2.41.1. Hdt. 4.186.2 observes that the inhabitants of Cyrene share this reverence.

4 Hdt. 2.41.2.

5 Hdt. 2.42.2.

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Demeter;[6] upon various alleged identities between the gods Horus, Isis, and Bubastis, and their Greek counterparts;[7] and upon the remarkable temple of Isis that Amasis built at Memphis.[8] He does not make any effort to handle the tales of the Egyptian deities as discrete stories.

Thucydides, in line with the usual tenor of his interests,[9] mentions the Egyptians rarely and Egyptian religion not at all. Xenophon's historiographical works are much the same. This lack of coverage was noted in antiquity.[10] Polybius' political narrative entails substantial coverage of Egypt, but Polybius displays little interest in matters of mythology or religion beyond the latter's usefulness as an instrument of social control.[11] He has, in general, a low opinion of what he sees as Egyptian national characteristics, although he is prepared to admit the possibility of individual exceptions: a grim narrative of deposition illustrates the savagery of Egyptians when roused to anger,[12] while Ptolemaios, a commander in Cyprus, is characterised as sensible and capable and "not at all Egyptian".[13] It is therefore unsurprising that Polybius shows no disposition to dwell on the country's mythological lore. The later extant narrative histories of Greece and Rome are perfectly happy to admit Egypt for the purposes of political coverage (notably, but not exclusively, in the treatment of Alexander the Great,[14] or of Roman politics during the period between Julius Caesar's almost fatal sojourn there after Pharsalus and the Battle of Actium).[15] They do not, however, usually discourse upon the nation's myths and early history in doing so, although Tacitus' account of Germanicus' tour in AD 18, which does speak a little about the monuments, is a partial and momentary exception.[16] Even Appian, who was himself from Alexandria and constructs the first half of his *Roman History* in such a way as to culminate with the Roman capture of Egypt, does not give his land's mythology an extended treatment

6 Hdt. 2.59.2 (with a glance back to this treatment at 2.61.1).

7 Hdt. 2.156.4–6. Cf. also Hdt. 2.144.2.

8 Hdt. 2.176.2.

9 Hornblower 1992.

10 Diod. Sic. 1.37.4: "Xenophon and Thucydides, who are praised for the accuracy of their histories, completely refrained in their writings from any mention of the regions about Egypt". This is an exaggeration – Thucydides, for example, covers an Athenian expedition to Egypt during the *pentekontaetia* (Thuc. 1.104, with Westlake, 1950) – but not unduly so (*pace* Hornblower 1991, 163).

11 Pol. 6.56.6–12 and 16.12.9–11.

12 Pol. 15.33.10.

13 Pol. 27.13.1.

14 The most notable extant treatment of Alexander's expedition to Egypt is that at Arr. *Anab.* 3.1–5. Arrian does mention in passing Alexander's sacrifices to Apis (3.1.4), the plans for the temple of Isis at Alexandria (3.1.5), and, at rather greater length, his visit to the oracle of Ammon at Siwah (3.3.1–4.5, with Brunt 1976, Appendix V).

15 Notable accounts include, but are not limited to, Caesar's own account of his arrival in Alexandria (Caes. *B Civ.* 3.106–12) and the *Bellum Alexandrinum* that is possibly the work of Hirtius (especially 1–33). Neither of these has anything to say about Egyptian mythology.

16 Tac. *Ann.* 2.59–60, with Pelling 2012 and Woodman 2015, 256–62.

in the extant stretches of his work. It is interesting to speculate as to what might have been found in the four books of his lost *Aegyptiaca*, although Appian, for all his conventional piety, is not especially interested in details of cult in the stretches of his work that remain to us.

Surviving historiography is, of course, an unreliable guide to the emphases of works no longer extant. Apart from the conjectural example of Appian, whom we have just mentioned, one has to consider the possibility of coverage in the historians whose oeuvres time has more comprehensively obliterated. In some cases, even the names of these individuals have perished. Jacoby, in his great collection of the fragmentary Greek historians, reserved a heading for anonymous writers on Egypt,[17] while some named historians, the titles of whose works suggest Egyptian preoccupations, remain, for us, little more than names: Ptolemaios the son of Agesarchos, who seems to have written a work about Ptolemaios IV Philopator in the early second century BC, is representative of the general dearth of information.[18] The incomplete attestation of these works makes it hard to derive from them a sense of their take (if any) on Egyptian mythology.

On the other hand, there is a beacon in the more general historiographical gloom. The topic of this article is a notable exception to the general tendency of (more or less) extant historiography not to discourse upon the mythology and early history of Egypt. In the first book of his work, Diodorus of Sicily, who wrote a universal history towards the end of the first century BC, sets out such a treatment on a lavish scale.

What led Diodorus to open his history in such a fashion? On this topic, as on many others, his narrator is more than happy to explain his reasoning:

> The first peoples which we shall discuss will be the barbarians, not that we consider them to be earlier than the Greeks, as Ephorus has said,[19] but because we wish to set forth most of the facts about them at the outset, in order that we may not, by beginning with the various accounts given by the Greeks, have to interpolate in the different narrations of their early history any event connected with another people. And since Egypt is the country where mythology places the origin of the gods, where the earliest observations of the stars are said to have been made, and where, furthermore, many noteworthy deeds of great men are recorded, we shall begin our history with the events connected with Egypt. (Diod. Sic. 1.9.5–6)

In the book that follows, Diodorus does indeed present a mythography and early history of Egypt. He includes an account of the geography of the land itself, its monuments and customs, its kings, and, most pertinent to our present theme, the gods and

17 *FGrHist*. 665. For a brief examination of Jacoby's methodology with regard to such geographically themed entries, see *BNJ* 83 Biographical Essay.

18 For Ptolemaios and his scanty fragments, see *BNJ* 161. For Agatharchides of Cnidus and Hecataeus of Abdera, two other lost Hellenistic historians whose works contained Egyptian material, see below.

19 *BNJ* 70 F 109, where the commentary is rightly cautious about Jacoby's wilder speculations as to the context in which Ephorus made this claim.

first men that arose there. Indeed, Diodorus addresses each of the topics about which Kalasiris' fictional audience consulted him at Delphi: the gods of Egypt;[20] the consecration of animals;[21] the construction of the pyramids;[22] and the labyrinth of Thebes.[23]

Looking at Diodorus

The question of what one does with this extensive material admits of various different answers. Until the last few decades, the dominant mode of Diodoran criticism was that of *Quellenforschung*. Diodorus was customarily analysed with an eye to retrieving his lost sources. Book One was no exception.

As is often the case with *Quellenforschung*, however, the labour was not straightforward. Diodorus does occasionally make explicit allusion, in the course of Book One, to various predecessors. In discussing the royal tombs at Egyptian Thebes, he notes that "Not only do the priests of Egypt give these facts from their records, but many also of the Greeks who visited Thebes in the time of Ptolemy son of Lagus and composed histories of Egypt, one of whom was Hecataeus, agree with what we have said".[24] In discussing the vexed question of the flooding of the Nile, he quotes, with qualified approval, the explanation given by Agatharchides of Cnidus,[25] having rejected, with varying degrees of detail, explanations by a variety of other authors.[26] Schwartz extrapolated from the reference to Hecataeus of Abdera in the passage about the royal tombs the theory that Hecataeus was the source for most of Book One;[27] the most recent Anglophone commentary on the book contends that it is "generally believed that

20 Diod. Sic. 1.11–12.

21 Diod. Sic. 1.83.

22 Diod. Sic. 1.63.2–64.14.

23 See n.32 below. Diodorus also addresses the perennial question, which Kalasiris' Delphic audience goes on to ask (Heliod. *Aeth.* 2.28), of the Nile's sources (Diod. Sic. 1.37) and why it floods as it does (Diod. Sic. 1.38–41).

24 Diod. Sic. 1.46.8. Note that Diodorus does not actually state outright in this passage that Hecataeus of Abdera is his source for the description of the tomb of Osymandyas in chapters 47–9, *pace* Burton 1972, 3 ("the single passage which is attributed to Hecataeus by Diodorus himself") and 7 ("The most obvious passage is the description of the tomb of Osymandyas, which Diodorus explicitly says is drawn from Hecataeus"), although the hypothesis that the passage is so derived is a very probable one. This sort of glissade is, as we shall see, rather too common in the source-criticism of Diodorus.

25 Diod. Sic. 1.41.4–9.

26 "The early school" of Hellanicus, Cadmus, Hecataeus of Miletus (not to be confused with Hecataeus of Abdera) , and others (Diod. Sic. 1.37.3); Herodotus (1.37.4, 38.8–12); Ephorus (1.37.4, 39.7–130); Theopompus (1.37.4); Thales (1.38.2–3); Anaxagoras and Euripides (1.38.4–6); Democritus (1.39.1–6). It is unlikely that all, or even most, of these citations came at first-hand.

27 Schwartz 1885, although, as Burton 1972, 3, notes, the first person to attribute Book One to Hecataeus of Abdera was, in fact, G. J. Schneider (Schneider 1880).

Diodorus, employing the same technique here as in his later books, drew primarily upon Agatharchides of Cnidus for his geographical information, and upon Hecataeus of Abdera for the remainder of the book",[28] but goes on to demonstrate that the likely situation is much more complicated, and that much of the reasoning on which earlier investigations based themselves is rather tenuous.[29]

More recently, Diodoran criticism has focused to a greater extent on Diodorus' interests as a historiographer in his own right. Diodorus can, indeed, often be confused in his handling of his sources. So much is clear from his later narrative. On the other hand, over-eagerness to convict Diodorus of incompetence can also lead his interpreters into error.

Book One, in fact, is a case in point. Burton gives as a demonstration that Diodorus is "an inaccurate and uncritical excerptor using his sources without judgement, and occasionally duplicating events and information" and that he is "inept at selecting and collating his material", the assertion that "ch. 15.1 contradicts ch. 45.4".[30] In fact, a comparison of the two passages shows that in the first Diodorus notes that "they say" that Osiris was the founder of the Egyptian Thebes while explicitly acknowledging that there was no agreement about this and that some attributed the city's foundation to "a certain king". The second (again, with the addition of a cautious "they say") identifies that king as Busiris. Acknowledgement that different traditions exist would, in the case of, say, Herodotus, be adduced as evidence of methodological sophistication rather than ineptitude.[31] It is reasonable enough to note that Diodorus, in Book One, as later in his opus, is indeed fully capable of including two contradictory accounts of a matter without showing any awareness that he has done so. Burton is on surer ground when, for example, she observes the contradiction whereby the creator of the Egyptian labyrinth is named as Mendes or Marrus in one passage and Menas in a later one, with no acknowledgment of the variant tradition in either place.[32] But the assumption that variance or textual interest is *always* to be explained in terms of haphazard cutting and pasting on the part of Diodorus needs to be resisted, despite the occasions on which such an explanation is clearly correct.

The changing face of Diodoran criticism, from *Quellenforschung* to the inherent interest of Diodorus himself as an historiographer, can potentially affect how we handle his treatment of Egyptian mythology and history in Book One. Older treatments of

28 Burton 1972, 1–2.

29 Burton 1972, 2: "Unfortunately, comparatively little of the writing of either Agatharchides or Hecataeus has survived. Agatharchides is represented only by a few fragments and excerpts; while of the large portions of Book I generally assumed to have been borrowed by Diodorus from Hecataeus, much cannot be proved to have been so borrowed, and for the rest such proof as is possible depends upon a tenuous chain of reasoning with little or no means of verifying each step".

30 Burton 1972, 2.

31 Cf. also Rubincam 1989, 55, which notes 1.45.4 as one of a network of Diodoran cross-references.

32 Diod. Sic. 1.61.1–4 (Mendes or Marrus); 1.89.3 (Menas).

what the material in the book is aimed to achieve tend to focus on the ideologies of Diodorus' probable sources. So, for example, Oswyn Murray uses the book extensively in a study of Hecataeus of Abdera and pharaonic kingship.[33] With the upsurge of interest in Diodorus himself as a historian, albeit an occasionally haphazard one, other paths of investigation become viable. It is interesting to consider what the Egyptian material meant to Hecataeus of Abdera, or to Agatharchides. But the question of what it meant to Diodorus can be equally rewarding.

This becomes all the more apparent when one considers the exact location of Diodorus' guide to Egyptian myth within the economy of his work. Kenneth Sacks, in his recuperation of Diodorus as an organising (or, sometimes, disorganising) intelligence in his own right, correctly insists upon the importance for this operation of the preface to Book One.[34] This, however much it may owe to earlier historiography (and there are few historiographical prefaces which do not show evidence of some indebtedness to the tradition), illuminates what Diodorus is trying to achieve in the course of his history. The fact that Diodorus' treatment of Egyptian myth follows so hard upon the heels of this preface suggests that it is a reasonable strategy to interpret one in terms of the other. Historiographical precedent also indicates that this may possibly be a profitable pursuit. It is a recurring characteristic in the ancient historians that important and charismatic individuals described by the text echo, in their words, deeds, and motivations, the interests and preoccupations which the historian has already enunciated in the preface.

The primal example of this characteristic is Herodotus. Herodotus states at the beginning of his work the proposition that the fortunes of cities are ceaselessly mutable. He draws therefrom a moral for his own narrative strategy: "For the towns that were great of old have mostly become small, while those which were great in my time were formerly small. As I understand that human prosperity in no way abides in the same place, I shall make mention of both equally."[35] Later in Book One, the wandering statesman and sage Solon warns Croesus of Lydia that no man should be called prosperous until he is dead,[36] because the god has torn up by the roots many to whom he has formerly vouchsafed prosperity.[37] Sure enough, Croesus thereafter loses first his son,[38] and then his kingdom,[39] remembering Solon by name once he is strapped to a pyre.[40] While the kings who appear later in Herodotus do not play out the preoc-

33 Murray 1970.
34 Sacks 1990, 10–1.
35 Hdt. 1.5.4.
36 Hdt. 1.32.7.
37 Hdt. 1.32.9.
38 Hdt. 1.43.2.
39 Hdt. 1.86.1.
40 Hdt. 1.86.3.

cupations of the preface quite so blatantly, some of them do demonstrate an interest in travel and enquiry which can remind the reader of the Herodotean narrator.[41]

The historiographical tradition also warns us, however, that the interplay between the concerns enunciated by a history's prefatory material and the narrative that follows is not necessarily straightforward. Again, the case of Herodotus is instructive. Croesus does seem to learn a salutary lesson from Solon about the mutability of human fortune, and so becomes an advisor figure for Cyrus the Great once he is delivered from his pyre. On the other hand, Cyrus is killed and decapitated when he follows a later instance of Croesus' advice, as his son Cambyses is quick to point out when Croesus later attempts to rebuke him for unregal behaviour.[42] The exact interpretation of this sequence of events remains contested,[43] but certainly indicates a complex relationship between the generalities of the prologue and the playing-out of the actual history.

Comparable instances of such complexity may be multiplied from subsequent historiography as well. Sallust is a particularly instructive example. The narrator of the *Bellum Catilinae* is preoccupied with *gloria*, renown, and notes that this may be attained by deeds or by writing about the deeds of others, though the latter initially occupies a subsidiary position:

> both those who have achieved things and those who have written about the deeds of others are praised, and to me at least, although in no way does an equal glory attend upon the writer of deeds and the doer of deeds, however it seems to me surpassingly difficult to write history. (Sall. *Catil.* 3.1–2)

As the monograph progresses, however, the picture becomes more complicated: it is true that the glory of the agent outstrips the glory of the writer, but the example of Athens shows that a writer of sufficient talent can control the perception of a polity's valour. Athens was not, in fact, so very notable for achievements, but was sufficiently fortunate to have talented writers to celebrate its accomplishments.[44]

Is such a pattern detectable in Book One of Diodorus? Do we see the early narrative of Egyptian myth pick up the preoccupations of the preface, and do the generalities of the prefatory material remain as simple once the stories actually begin? The key figure, for such an investigation, is Osiris. In Diodorus's treatment of him, the Egyptian god-king takes on a central significance, as the individual most responsible for bringing the fruits of civilisation to his people. It will therefore be expedient to look at Diodorus' avowed intentions in his prologue, and then how, if at all, the narrative emphases in the historian's account of Osiris map on to those intentions.

41 Christ 1994.

42 Hdt. 3.36.3.

43 For treatments of Croesus as adviser, see for example Stahl 1975 and Grethlein 2010, 190–2.

44 Sall. *Catil.* 8.1–4, with Feeney 1994.

Diodorus on History

> For this reason one may hold that the acquisition of a knowledge of history is of the greatest utility for every conceivable circumstance of life. For (i) it endows (a) the young with the wisdom of the aged, while for (b) the old it multiplies the experience which they already possess; (ii) (a) citizens in private station it qualifies for leadership, and (b) the leaders it incites, through the immortality of the glory which it confers, to undertake the noblest deeds; (iii) (a) soldiers, again, it makes more ready to face dangers in defence of their country because of the public encomiums which they will receive after death, and (b) wicked men it turns aside from their impulse towards evil through the everlasting opprobrium to which it will condemn them. (Diod. Sic. 1.1.4–5)[45]

As the passage above demonstrates, Diodorus holds to a utilitarian view of history. History, for Diodorus, is directly profitable, in two ways. Firstly, it gives one the benefit of the experiences of others without obliging one to go to the trouble and effort of experiencing similar things directly oneself. This is what Diodorus means by saying that the young gain the wisdom of the old, while the experience of the old is multiplied. Secondly, history is an incitement to virtuous action. It carries the promise of immortal glory for those who achieve great things, through the memorialisation of their actions.

As noted above, the general tenor of this preface can readily be paralleled elsewhere in the classical historians or other ancient literature. The idea that the promise of eternal glory provided by literature is itself a spur to virtuous action appears in Cicero and others.[46] Nor is it unusual for writers of history in the ancient world to insist upon the profit that the reader can derive from engaging with it. Herodotus, to be sure, does not do so; the passages of Thucydides which might suggest such a possibility are still much debated;[47] and Xenophon is close-mouthed about what he thinks that historiography accomplishes. Polybius, however, is an exponent of history's utility, "since men have no readier corrective of conduct than knowledge of the past".[48] This shared utilitarian streak has made it traditional to stress the affinities between Polybius' proem and that of Diodorus.

More recent scholarship has pointed out that Diodorus and Polybius do not seem to view history as useful in exactly the same ways. Sacks argues that, whereas Polybius addresses himself to the improvement of the efficacy of statesmen and politicians through his *pragmatikē historia*, Diodorus is concerned only with what Sacks dubs "moral utility".[49] Diodorus, in Sacks' view, does not aim to demonstrate, by multiply-

45 The articulation here with parenthetical Roman numerals and letters is my insertion, to assist the examination of the articulation of Diodorus' argument which I undertake in the following paragraphs.

46 Cic. *Arch.* 29.

47 Raaflaub 2013, especially 6–7, and Stahl 2013, especially 314, are the latest contributions to this much-discussed question.

48 Pol. 1.1.1, with Walbank 1972, 28 and McGing 2010, 66–8.

49 Sacks 1990, 25.

ing the reader's acquaintance with how possible lines of behaviour have panned out in the past, how the reader might increase his own success in the game of life. Rather, Diodorus aims to mould his readers, who do not necessarily have to be statesmen or generals, to an ideal of civic service by praising the goodly actions of men of old and blaming the bad actions of the reprobates.

Sacks posits rather too stark a dichotomy between the aims of Polybius and Diodorus. These aims are a little less monolithic than he implies. It is certainly true to say that Polybius envisages politicians and statesmen as his principal audience. At the outset of his work, he asserts that all historians "have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics [*pros tas politikas praxeis*] is the study of history".[50] Likewise, he is an overt advocate, as Diodorus is not, of the idea that being able to recognise repeating patterns in events can give one a competitive edge,[51] and goes to some trouble to include in his history practical and applicable information on topics which a budding general might find helpful, such as communication via fires,[52] calculating the areas of cities[53] and practical siege trigonometry.[54] On the other hand, Polybius does at least acknowledge that some aspects of his history might have different sorts of application to different people, even if the improvement of future statesmen remains the primary agendum. Immediately after he stresses history's utility for those who envisage a life in active politics, he observes that history is also "the surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune', in that it enables one 'to recall the calamities of others",[55] which is obviously not a consideration that need apply only to statesmen.[56] Later in his work, he is also prepared to concede that pleasure, as well as utility, might be derived from consideration of the career of Scipio Aemilianus.[57]

Diodorus does not, in the main body of his history, provide anything that really resembles the wealth of practical information which Polybius lavishes upon his readership. There is no radical system of fire-signalling for him, or disquisitions upon the appropriate length of siege-ladders. But it must be conceded that the preface to Book One of the *Bibliothēkē sounds* as though the reader is going to derive a personal advantage from reading the Diodoran opus that is rather different from a simple incitement to civic virtue. While the first sentence of the history does claim that writers of universal history have helped the life of all (*ton koinon bion*), which would seem to bear out Sacks' point about Diodorus' interest in promoting the common weal, it goes on to say

50 Pol. 1.1.2.
51 Walbank 1972, 58.
52 Pol. 10.43–7.
53 Pol. 9.26a.
54 Pol. 9.18.5–9.
55 Pol. 1.1.2.
56 A point well made at Walbank 1972, 58 and McGing 2010, 67.
57 Pol. 31.30.1, with Walbank 1972, 40.

that such writers have achieved this happy result by providing readers with "a schooling, which entails no danger, in what is advantageous (*tou sumpherontos*)". The language of advantage and profit, of *to sumpheron*, seems to promise something more immediately beneficial to the individual reader than the second-order profit that would accrue to all through the exercise of civic virtue, even if the latter would be rather more true to the spirit of what Diodorus actually sets out to do later in his oeuvre. Moreover, Diodorus' emphasis in the preface to Book One on how reading history can *multiply* the experience of the reader does seem to suggest the promise of an augmentation to available and practical knowledge rather than reiterated insistence on what makes for a model citizen.[58] History is also described as "most excellent experience" (*kallistēn empeirian*) in that first sentence, and we may recall that "experience" is key to the benefits which it offers to young and old alike in the later passage quoted at the beginning of this section. Polybius and Diodorus are not quite so starkly differentiated in the promises they make for the utility of their respective histories after all.

All the same, Sacks' emphasis that Diodorus, simply by beginning his history with an appeal to the utility of historiography, is not necessarily just parroting Polybius when he does so, is salutary. In general, reading Diodorus as a *reaction* to Polybius and his ilk, rather than just an echo, proves to be a potentially interesting strategy.[59] Moreover, as we examine Diodorus' opening remarks, we continue to find up-endings of the emphases which we might incautiously expect: Diodorus' syntax is capable of springing surprises. One notes, for example, the sting in the tail of the tri-colon which concludes the passage cited above, veering off in a direction which the pattern Diodorus seems to be establishing does not lead us to expect. In each of the first two example-groups of history's utility - the audience of different ages which he mentions in clause (i), and the audience of citizens and leaders which he mentions in clause (ii) – Diodorus moves from an assertion of history's utility to the less well-endowed in a particular quality, to an assertion that history is equally helpful to those who already enjoy a measure of that quality. In clause (i), this is a movement from the young (who lack experience) to the old (who have experience) – both profiting from the vicarious experience that history brings. In clause (ii), the movement is from those private citizens who lack experience of leadership to those who already have such experience of leadership in their own right. When Diodorus begins his final pair of examples with the case of soldiers, one might reasonably expect, on the basis of how the relationship between (a) and (b) has worked in each of the two preceding clauses, that Diodorus' last target population will be those who already have the experience in which the soldiers are lacking (seasoned veterans, for example), but who can nevertheless find his-

58 Marincola 2007, 26 nicely speaks of "vicarious instruction".

59 For more on the likenesses and disparities between the proems to Diodorus and Polybius, see Marincola 2007, 27 (on the differing ways in which they use the figure of Odysseus) and Sheridan 2010, 44–6 (on the differences between their conceptions of universal history). For a more general comparison of Diodorus and Polybius, see Sulimani 2011, 46–9.

tory profitable as well. In fact, Diodorus' last item supplies not escalation, but contrast. Whereas soldiers can be spurred on by the promise of glory, villains can be deterred by the possibility of everlasting opprobrium. After waving carrots consistently for several sentences, Diodorus disrupts the reader's complacency with a final flourish of the stick, all the more effective for its unexpectedness.[60] The flow of the argument is not, after all, as straightforward as one might suppose.

History for Diodorus, then, has utility through the provision of vicarious and applicable experience, and because it offers the spur of immortal glory (or infamy). Is it possible to detect such themes in his subsequent account of early Egypt? Above all, does it emerge in his treatment of Egyptian mythography?

Diodorus on Osiris

Diodorus' main account of the career of Osiris occupies chapters 13 to 22 of Book One. In this version, Osiris, although a son of Zeus, spends his time on earth like a successful mortal monarch. He is the first to convince mankind to desist from cannibalism by popularising the cultivation of wheat and barley.[61] He founds cities and temples,[62] and rewards innovators and technologists.[63] He gathers an army to share these improvements to the human lot with the remainder of mankind,[64] and curbs the Nile with dykes.[65] In fact, he "visited all the inhabited world and advanced community life by the introduction of the fruits which are most easily cultivated".[66]

By any standards, this is an impressive résumé, and one that has already attracted scholarly attention. Iris Sulimani, for example, has recently read the Diodoran Osiris as a "culture-hero", the first of several individuals whose careers the historian describes in thematically similar ways.[67] Osiris, with his own agricultural discoveries and support of other innovators, certainly fits into the pattern of Diodorus' on-going interest in the first discoverers of particular things, the theme of the *prōtos heuretēs*.[68]

For our present purposes, however, it is more germane to note that Osiris' career, as described in the first book of Diodorus' history, seems to fall in line with the historiographical pattern which we have already seen in operation in the text of Herodotus.

60 For history as a means to deter the wicked from bad behaviour through the promise of future infamy, compare Tac. *Ann.* 3.65.

61 Diod. Sic. 1.14.1, and cf. Sulimani 2011, 230–2.

62 Diod. Sic. 1.15.1–4 and Sulimani 2011, 265 (cities) and 280 (temples).

63 Diod. Sic. 1.15.5.

64 Diod. Sic. 1.17.1.

65 Diod Sic. 1.19.5, and Sulimani 2011, 246.

66 Diod. Sic. 1.20.3.

67 Sulimani 2011, especially 64–5, and cf. Sacks 1990, 61.

68 On this, see also Ambaglio 1995, 90–2.

Once again, we find an exemplification of the emphases of the historian's proem in the behaviour of one of his important characters. In the preface, Diodorus gives examples of the sorts of achievements that history has spurred men on to make: "some of them have been induced to become the founders of cities... others have been led to introduce laws which encompass man's social life with security... many have aspired to discover new sciences and arts in order to benefit the race of mankind".[69]

One notes at once that these are the very deeds which Osiris and his wife Isis are depicted as achieving in the narrative that follows. We have already noted the descriptions of Osiris as a founder of cities and the account of the invention of agriculture. We might add Diodorus' portrait of Isis as a law-giver: "Isis also established laws, they say, in accordance with which the people regularly dispense justice to one another and are led to refrain through fear of punishment from illegal violence and insolence".[70] Not only do the preoccupations of the preface seem to play out in the story of Osiris' mortal life, but Osiris himself displays a self-conscious awareness of these preoccupations in his behaviour. Diodorus explicitly claims that a key motivation for the king in organising his campaign to civilise the world is not just his naturally beneficent cast of mind (*euergetikon*), but also his love of glory (*philodoxon*): "for he supposed that if he made men give up their savagery and adopt a gentle manner of life he would receive immortal honours [*timōn athanatōn*]".[71]

Osiris, then, shows himself to be the kind of self-reflexive protagonist to whom the prior tradition of historiography has accustomed us. Herodotus' Solon apprehends the importance which his author attributes to the inconstancy of human felicity, and instructs Croesus accordingly. Diodorus' Osiris seems to know that, if he plays by the rules that Diodorus' narrator has already set out in his preface, he can achieve his desire for eternal fame through conspicuous civic virtue.[72] Philanthropic achievement will be recognised by immortal glory. Sure enough, the narrative almost immediately seems to bear this theory out: "This did in fact take place, since not only the men of his time who received this gift, but all succeeding generations as well, because of the delight which they take in the foods which were discovered, have honoured those who introduced them as gods most illustrious".[73] Osiris, one of the most important figures in Book One, seems fittingly to demonstrate the principle of "moral utility" and how it works in action.

So far, the story of Osiris is reassuringly straightforward. We recall, however, that, in other historiography, the relationship between the claims of a preface and the sto-

69 Diod Sic. 1.2.1.

70 Diod. Sic. 1.14.3.

71 Diod. Sic. 1.17.2.

72 For later explorations of this theme in Diodorus, see Sulimani 2011, 72. For the continuance of ethical judgments upon the agents in the narrative throughout the account of early Eastern history in the opening books of Diodorus, see Sartori 1984, 505 n. 70.

73 Diod. Sic. 1.17.2.

ries which might be taken to exemplify them sometimes turns out to be a little more complicated. Croesus, with his moment of revelation but, equally, his patchy subsequent record as an advisor, is as much a part of Herodotus as Solon. Does the Osiris of Diodorus show any similar tendency to complicate the broad claims of the preface?

On the whole, the career of Osiris does bear out the proposition that historiography serves a useful societal function by memorialising great achievements, making them available to subsequent generations, and so promoting good behaviour amongst those with an eye on their future glory. On the other hand, it also illustrates that such future fame may not necessarily be a straightforward transcription of achievement. The Osiris of Diodorus is admirable. But, because of Diodorus' tendency to stack up variant versions, his qualities are less a steady light than a kaleidoscope. This becomes clear once we appreciate the full complexity of the picture of Osiris (or Osirises) which the historian paints for us.

The *first* version of Osiris with which the Diodoran narrator presents us is not the human figure whose career we have examined above.[74] Rather, it is an Egyptian rationalisation of the sun:

> Now the men of Egypt, they say, when ages ago they came into existence, as they looked up at the firmament and were struck with both awe and wonder at the nature of the universe, conceived that two gods were both eternal and first, namely, the sun and the moon, whom they called respectively Osiris and Isis, these appellations having in each case been based upon a certain meaning in them. (Diod. Sic. 1.11.1)

Diodorus does not get on to the version of Osiris adumbrated earlier in this article until several paragraphs later, when he starts to deal with other gods "who, by reason of their sagacity and the good services which they rendered to all men, attained immortality, some of them having even been kings in Egypt. Their names, when translated, are in some cases the same as those of the celestial gods… "[75] This (originally) mortal Osiris has the lion's share of Diodorus' attention in the early stretches of Book One.

Quite apart from the possibility of conflation with a primaeval sun-god, however, the career of Osiris the king illustrates that posthumous reverence can also include elements of suppression and deception. According to Diodorus, the priests of Osiris originally resisted divulging the circumstances of the god-king's mortal end.[76] Once Isis has avenged the death of her husband at the hands of his impious brother Typhon, she ensures the robustness of his future cult through systematic deception:

74 Sulimani 2011, 159, notes that "the structure of the story of Osiris is exceptional" in comparison to that of the stories of the other culture-heroes with whom she is concerned, although she is inclined to minimise the significance of this difference.

75 Diod. Sic. 1.13.1.

76 Diod. Sic. 1.21.1.

> summoning the priests group by group, she required of all of them an oath that they would reveal to no one the trust which she was going to confide to them, and taking each group on them apart privately she said that she was consigning to them alone the burial of the body… . (Diod. Sic. 1.21.6)

Isis ensures immortal honours for her husband via the multiplication of Osirises. Even though Diodorus can reveal the story of the deception, he obviously cannot undo its consequences, and notes its ramifications for present-day practice amongst the Egyptians.[77]

Osiris remains, then, a testament to the immortal glory which can be the meed of the successful philanthropist, and which history can help to mediate. But, in the creation and sustenance of his cult, he is also a testament to the obfuscation and chicanery which can attend upon the transmission of the past. His cult takes root to the extent it does thanks to Isis' deceptions. This instructional narrative, placed so close to the beginning of Diodorus' history, does not by any means undermine the themes set out in the proem. But it does show that memorialisation and its fruits are not necessarily straightforward in the winning. It can take care, attention, and (occasionally) lies to keep posterity on the right track.

If Diodorus is, indeed, using the story of Osiris to explore how the pursuit of an immortal reputation through great deeds can have its complexities and its hazards of reception as well as its straightforwardly laudable aspect, we may reasonably expect such themes to re-emerge later in his history. So, in fact, proves to be the case. In Book Two, for example, we meet the Assyrian king Ninus. One of Ninus' great ambitions is "to found a city of such magnitude, that not only would it be the largest of any which then existed in the whole inhabited world, but also that no other ruler of a later time should, if he undertook such a task, find it easy to surpass him".[78]

Ninus, then, is another man with his gaze trained firmly on posterity. The careful reader of Diodorus will already be aware, however, that architecture can potentially be an ambiguous way of memorialising one's reputation. It is true enough that (as we have already seen in the case of Osiris himself) founding cities can be good for one's reputation. But extravagant building projects run the risk of bad publicity. Diodorus' narrator records the popular notion that the architects of the pyramids were more deserving of admiration than the kings who commissioned them,[79] and notes the care taken by the later Egyptian king Sesoösis to ensure that his temples were built only with captive labour: "for this reason he placed an inscription on every temple that no native had toiled upon it".[80] Book Two, as well, gives indications for the diligent student that buildings, even if they endure, are not necessarily a reliable index of past

77 Diod. Sic. 1.21.9.
78 Diod. Sic. 2.3.1.
79 Diod. Sic. 1.64.12.
80 Diod. Sic. 1.56.2.

glory. Diodorus' narrator feels the need explicitly to argue against those who doubt the big numbers attached to accounts of bygone campaigns:

> Let these facts, then [i. e., Diodorus' comparative figures drawn from more recent military history] be a sufficient reply on our part to those who try to estimate the populations of the nations of Asia in ancient times on the strength of inferences *drawn from the desolation which at the present time prevails in its cities*. (Diod. 2.5.7)[81]

Surviving architecture, then, may well end up highlighting (to the foolish) the dismal present rather than the glorious past.

Sure enough, Ninus' bid for posthumous memorialisation turns out to be rather more haphazard than he envisages. Like Osiris, he owes one element of this memorialisation to a wife, Semiramis, who survives and reigns after him. Unlike Isis, Semiramis does not engage in active deception to assure her deceased husband's legacy, but her behaviour does set up a certain architectural irony. Diodorus is careful to record that, by his own day, the city on which Ninus spent so much effort has long been razed to the ground by the Medes. All that is now visible is the enormous mound which Semiramis raised to inter Ninus.[82]

Ironies of memorialisation accrete. Semiramis, it then transpires, is eager to surpass her husband's fame – something which Ninus did not anticipate (in the Greek, the terms in which Diodorus describes Ninus' vision of a ruler who might try to surpass him, *tōn metagenesterōn heteron epibalomenon*,[83] suggest that Ninus did not expect such a ruler to be female). To achieve this, Semiramis founds Babylon. Diodorus spends the next three chapters describing Babylon, a not inconsiderable investment of narrative time. Diodorus, to be sure, is freer with this sort of large-scale topographical description than some other Greek and Roman historians,[84] but the depth of coverage is still notable, even for him. Eventually, however, Diodorus reveals that, "as for the palaces and the other buildings, time has either entirely effaced them or left them in ruins; and in fact of Babylon itself but a small part is inhabited at this time, and most of the area within its walls is given over to agriculture".[85] Semiramis' crown jewel has ultimately fallen prey to time and depredation to almost as great an extent as that of her husband did.

81 To others, of course, depopulated ruins might suggest not that the wars of old were small but that they were especially vicious and destructive. Contrast Lucan 1.24–32, where the purportedly semi-abandoned state of Neronian Italy is seen as testimony to the magnitude of the Roman Civil Wars.

82 Diod. Sic. 2.7.2.

83 Diod. Sic. 2.3.1.

84 Compare, for example, the lavish description of Memphis at Diod. Sic. 1.50.3–51.2. By contrast, Appian's only such topographical set-piece of comparable length is the description of Carthage at App. *Pun.* 95–6.

85 Diod. Sic. 2.9.9.

Such observations do not invalidate the fact that, overall, Osiris and Isis, Ninus and Semiramis do all get the results they wanted. Even if their buildings have fallen down, and if some initial deception may have guaranteed the robustness of their posthumous adoration, Diodorus' history remembers their great deeds, and gives them the immortality for which they were hoping. All the same, we can see that Osiris establishes a pattern that repeats in the history that follows. Immortal glory is not necessarily assured by the particular actions that an historical agent thinks will bring it about.

Conclusion

The theme of this volume is "Wandering Myths". Amongst other things, it examines what factors determine the local interpretation of myths that have travelled some distance from their original homes. "Local" as it applies to Diodorus is, of course, a complex matter in and of itself. Writing in Greek, he acknowledges in his proem the status of Rome and his lengthy sojourn there – "for the supremacy of this city, a supremacy so powerful that it extends to the bounds of the inhabited world, has provided us in the course of our long residence there with copious resources in the most accessible form",[86] while also, at various points, emphasising his own Sicilian birthplace.[87] These multiple contexts are elegantly displayed in Book One, where Diodorus explains the shape of the Egyptian delta in terms of the shape of Sicily.[88]

As we have now seen, though, another valid context against which to read Diodorus' treatment of Egyptian myth in Book One of his history is prior historiography. In particular, it is helpful to recall the ways in which the Greek and Roman historians can use key stories in their works to bring into focus the claims which they make in their prologues and elsewhere. Diodorus argues that history is useful because it grants access to the past experiences of others and, in particular, because it is a spur to great achievements in that it offers the promise that such achievements will be remembered. The story of Osiris, the first extended narrative within the history, shows this process in operation. Osiris intelligently anticipates that philanthropic endeavour will enable him to achieve his ambition of eternal glory, and this turns out to be the case.

However, historiography also tends to use such paradigmatic narratives in a way which demonstrates the tensions and limitations of the broad claims made in the prefaces that precede them. Once again, Diodorus behaves as one might expect. Osiris does achieve his immortal fame, but the maintenance of his cult is due, at least

86 Diod. Sic. 1.4.4. For Diodorus and Rome, see Sacks 1990, 117–59.

87 For Diodorus and Sicily, see in particular Yarrow 2006, 116–8 and 152–6.

88 Diod. Sic. 1.34.1.

in part, to the prudent obfuscation and deceit of his wife. Not all of the god-king's subsequent reception turns out to be the fruit of his own unassisted achievements. Diodorus' deployment of Egyptian mythology, unusual though the subject is in extant Greco-Roman historiography, turns out to employ a rather familiar set of strategies. It explores the sweeping claims made by the preceding proem, and suggests the factors that might complicate their actual implementation.

The myth of Osiris is only a tiny portion of Diodorus' massive history. On the other hand, the prominent position which it occupies at the beginning of the work suggests the applicability of its themes to what comes later. Recent scholarship has increasingly uncovered the deep patterns in Diodorus' work, where themes from one part of the history may re-emerge later. Errietta Bissa, for example, has examined how the preoccupation with fiscal rectitude which first appears in the Egyptian narrative turns up again at subsequent points in the history.[89] In this article, we have seen how the pursuit of posthumous glory and its potentially surprising results, appearing first in the story of Osiris and Isis, soon re-emerges with interesting variations in the story of Ninus and Semiramis. It is not altogether unreasonable to suggest, then, that Diodorus' Osiris, and the narrative which he enacts concerning the potent and admirable but sometimes less than straightforward possibilities of memorialisation, has lessons for our reading of the rest of the *Bibliothēkē*.

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89 Bissa 2010, 61.

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