Putting up Pyramids, Characterizing Kings

> The Egyptians hate the memory of these two kings so much that they do not much wish to name them, and call the pyramids after the shepherd Philitis, who then pastured his flocks in this place. (2.128)

Not exactly a glowing reference for two neglected characters in Herodotus' *Histories*. But the story of the Egyptian king Cheops and of his less colourful brother, Chephren, whom Herodotus himself *does* choose to name, deserves at least a brief spotlight.[1] It encompasses themes of man's relationship with nature, the fine line between admirable achievement and abuse, the nature, depiction, and reception of kingly power, and the complex and subtle way in which Herodotus modulates our reading of such characters by constantly shifting the focalizing lens through which we view them.

The start of their successive reigns is introduced as marking a sharp contrast from the good governance and prosperity of Egypt that lasted until the reign of Rhampsinitus.[2] The accession of Cheops drove the people into complete misery (2.124.1). Not only did Cheops close down the temples and prevent the Egyptians from worshipping the gods,[3] but he put the population to hard labour on the task of building the first of the

* I should like to thank Chris Burnand, Tim Rood, Stephanie West and the editors of this volume for their criticisms, suggestions, textual parallels, and bibliographical help. All remaining errors are, of course, my own.

[1] The name Cheops appears in the index of barely any recent book on Herodotus. Many older treatments focus on the chronological problem of Herodotus' late dating for the pyramid-builders, resulting in arguments about interpolation, confusion of sources, and papyrus transmission, but no questioning of Herodotus' 'negative' opinion of these kings. See Africa (1963) 257, Wallinga (1959), Powell (1935).

[2] The framing of the Cheops and Chephren episode between those of two 'good' Egyptian rulers, Rhampsinitus and Mycerinus, serves to highlight both the depths to which Cheops sank, and the fact that Egyptian despotic rule was not uniform.

[3] It is this irreligious behaviour which stands out in Manetho's account (see *FGrH* 609 F3b: ὃς καὶ ὑπερόπτης εἰς θεοὺς γέγονεν: 'He became contemptuous towards the gods'). This should not surprise, since it is a recurrent theme in the account given by Herodotus' informants, suggesting that it formed a strong part of the local memory, although see below (*) for the difficulty in distinguishing priestly informants from local folklore. See Gray (2007) 222, for the prevention of worship as a classic mark of a bad ruler in Herodotus, in this case Cleisthenes of Sicyon. But note that Gray asserts this connection on the basis of the Cheops episode, so there is a danger of circularity here. The deduction of Cambyses' madness (3.38.1) from his interference with images of Hephaestus establishes a connection between insanity and profanity, but insanity is

great pyramids.[4] The scale of this enterprise is brought home starkly. It took ten years simply to build the road that was needed to transport the stones from the quarries, a work which Herodotus describes as being 'as great as that pyramid itself' (2.124.3) and in constructing underground burial chambers, surrounded by water channelled in from the Nile.[5] The pyramid itself took twenty years to construct, a process which Herodotus describes in detail. Cheops reached such a point of wickedness that he sent his own daughter to a brothel in order to finance his projects, and her response was to ask each man who visited her to contribute a stone, from which a further pyramid was built in front of that of Cheops himself (2.126.2).[6]

How are we to read these few chapters of Herodotus' narrative? What clues are we given as to the intended reception of this king and his impact on the landscape? Can we use the relationship of Cheops with his surroundings as a mode of characterization?

The first point to make is a contextual one: altering landscapes on a monumental scale is broadly speaking a trait of 'bad' characters in Herodotus' narrative. Cheops' project to build the Great pyramid falls into a pattern of despotic manipulation of the natural world that recurs throughout the Herodotean narrative. In the words of Vasunia, 'The pyramids are ways for kings to mark the Egyptian landscape… The description of the

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not equivalent to, although it may be a cause of, bad rule.

[4] See Diodorus Siculus 1.64.4-5 for the fact that the hardships endured by the labourers were such that the pyramids could not actually be used as tombs for the kings, since their bodies would have been ripped apart by the people. The burial of the kings instead in unmarked locations further reinforces the *damnatio memoriae* evoked at Herodotus 2.128.

[5] In fact, according to How and Wells (1928), a connection with the Nile for Cheops' pyramid is impossible and they suggest that Herodotus might here be confused with other pyramids. See Lloyd (2007) *ad* 2.124.4, for the suggestion that the island and canal are reminiscent of the Egyptian mortuary concept of the Osiris-grave, which consisted of an island surrounded by water.

[6] See Flory (1987) 41, for the 'ironic pleasure' of the contrast between the awe-inspiring monument and the manner of its construction. This less morally-outraged, more light-hearted reading sits well with the emphasis of the current paper. The link between pyramids and prostitutes is continued at 2.134.1-2 with the story of Rhodopis. Herodotus rejects the possibility that a prostitute could have been wealthy enough to construct such an edifice, but Pliny, *Natural History* 36.82, believes it. Thanks are owed to Rhiannon Ash for this parallel and for other illuminating references to Pliny.

pyramid of Cheops, for example, raises issues of power, despotism, servility, and geometrization'.[7] We may think of Cyrus' aggressive encounter with the river Gyndes (1.189),[8] or the iconic crossings made by Darius and Xerxes of the Bosporus and Hellespont respectively, turning water into land (4.83-9; 7.33-7, 54-6), or indeed Xerxes' transformation of land into water, by cutting a channel through the isthmus linking Mount Athos to the mainland (7.22-4).[9]

The manner and spirit in which these actions are undertaken is undeniably negative, and the force of the negative connotations increases with each repetition.[10] The aggressive subjugation of the landscape is most notoriously associated with Xerxes, who has a yoke of fetters lowered into the Hellespont as one part of his multi-faceted punishment of that sea for destroying his bridges with a storm (7.35), the physical fetters acting here as symbols for Xerxes' vain assertion of mastery.[11] If fetters represent the attempted enslavement of the water, the three hundred lashes which are administered to the Hellespont are clearly symbolic of its chastisement (7.35). Herodotus claims to have heard that men were also sent to brand the sea, an

[7] Vasunia (2001) 81-2. Later reception of the pyramids encompassed scorn as well as admiration for such a futile outlay of both money and effort. See Pliny, *Natural History* 36.75, who describes the pyramids as *regum pecuniae otiosa ac stulta ostentatio* and refers to those who conceived Cheops' pyramid (36.79) as *tantae uanitatis auctores*, cold comfort for the 360, 000 labourers over 20 years of effort. Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu urbis Romae* 16, contrasts his aqueducts with the pointless pyramids of Egypt (evoking Pliny through his *pyramidas uidelicet otiosas*).

[8] It should be noted, though, that this particular encounter is *mutually* aggressive – the river is described as ὑβρίσαντι (1.189.2), though Cyrus responds with considerable anger (ἐχαλέπαινε), threats (ἐπηπείλησε), and the application of military force (1.189.3: διατάξας τὸν στρατόν) to reduce the river's might by diverting it into 360 channels.

[9] My thanks to Judith Mossman for the telling parallel in Plutarch, *Alexander* 72.4, with the proposal to fashion a statue of Alexander from Mount Athos; surely a direct evocation of one egomaniac through another. *On the Fortune and Virtue of Alexander* 335C-E confirms the link to Xerxes, but has Alexander rejecting the association: 'It is enough that it [sc. Athos] be the memorial of the arrogance of one king'. Alexander does not, however, reject the idea of imprinting himself on a landscape: 'my imprint the Caucasus shall show and the Emodian range and the Tanaïs and the Caspian Sea', only the idea of occupying the same space as a predecessor.

[10] The idea of 'progressive iteration', discussed by Rutherford (2012) especially at 20, is very relevant here.

[11] One wonders whether the onlookers were as bewildered by Xerxes' behaviour as were the Roman troops ordered to pick up sea-shells by Gaius (Suetonius, *Gaius* 46).

act that would combine the concepts of punishment and enslavement.[12] But punitive actions and words directed at the natural world are not confined to the Persians. Pheros, king of Egypt, the son of Sesostris, foreshadows much behaviour that will come to seem in Herodotus' narrative stereotypically Persian, but should perhaps rather be seen as stereotypically despotic. His anger at the Nile's flooding drives him to hurl his spear into the water in another physical and symbolic act of punishment (2.111). Anger lies behind all of these actions – Xerxes is furious (δεινὰ ποιεύμενος), so too is Cyrus (κάρτα... ἐχαλέπαινε τῷ ποταμῷ), and Pheros is enraged (ἀτασθαλίῃ χρησάμενον). These are not calculated responses, but irrational reactions. This is a world of despotic subjugation of nature and of people; a world characterized by *hybris*, or arrogant self-confidence.[13]

The crippling task forcibly undertaken by Cheops' Egyptians is to alter the landscape, with some dragging stones from the quarries in the Arabian mountains to the Nile; others hauling them from the Nile to the Libyan hills (2.124). Whereas travel through the Herodotean landscape is often carried out for economic, recreational, and touristic reasons,[14] or for military purposes,[15] here the reader travels a dramatic and unforgiving route at the side of the wretched Egyptian labourers. The pyramid itself not only constituted a mighty addition to the landscape, built on a massive scale, but it also involved the diversion of a channel of the Nile to create a kind of man-made island (ἑωυτῷ ἐν νήσῳ) on which stood the underground burial chambers (2.124.4).[16]

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[12] See Vasunia (2001) 79-80, for the allocation of space in Egypt as a form of branding by its kingly masters: 'the king marks the space of Egypt in the way that a master brands a slave with stigmata' (79).

[13] See Cyrus' belief that he was more than human, which encouraged him to attack the Massagetae and their land (1.204) or Xerxes' assault on Athos, undertaken out of self-importance (7.24: μεγαλοφροσύνη), although note Baragwanath's reading of the Athos episode (2008) 254-65, interpreting μεγαλοφροσύνη in terms of display rather than arrogance.

[14] Travel for trade and colonization, see 1.29-30 (Solon), 1.163 (Phocaeans), 2.44 (Phoenicians); for recreation, enlightenment, and tourism, see 3.135-6 (Democedes), 4.33 (Hyperboreans from Scythia to Delos), 4.42-3 (Necos), 4.44 (Darius and the Indus), 4.76 (Anacharsis the Scythian). On travel as a route to knowledge, see Redfield (1985); also Mossman (2006).

[15] Particularly vivid descriptions of military journeys are to be found at 7.30-1 (Phrygia and Lydia), 7.58 (Chersonese), 7.109-13 (Thrace).

[16] The details about underground chambers and the diverted channel are repeated at 2.127.2, where Herodotus contrasts these features of Cheops' pyramid with their absence from that of Chephren. But see Powell (1935) 77, for this detail as a badly absorbed insertion.

Creating islands is itself a recurring theme in the *Histories*, and one with strongly negative connotations. Notoriously Xerxes, with his scheme to cut through the isthmus linking Mount Athos to the mainland, is credited with wanting to turn mainland cities into island ones.[17] This action is placed within a context of authorial disapprobation, since the scheme is portrayed as gratuitous and motivated largely by Xerxes' wish to display his power and to secure an immortal record for himself (ἐθέλων τε δύναμιν ἀποδείκνυσθαι καὶ μνημόσονα λιπέσθαι: 7.24), much indeed as the pyramid-builders achieved. The megalomaniac behaviour of the tyrannical figure is here, as so often, reflected in control over the landscape. In the context of Herodotus' description of Egypt in Book 2, where the landscape is already littered with naturally amazing islands,[18] perhaps the man-made gesture is all the more jarring. Later in the pyramid-builder narrative the temple of Bubastis (Artemis) is described as being in an 'island', created by two separate channels of the Nile flowing around it, and lined with trees on each side.[19] But this is a naturally occurring phenomenon, as is the floating island of Chemmis, noted as 'the next most wonderful thing' after the temple in the sanctuary of Leto at Buto (2.156.1).[20]

Perhaps a closer and more ominous link should be drawn in the realm of river-diversion. Altering the course of rivers is an activity characteristic of tyrannical figures in general, notably Xerxes' proposal to divert the river Peneus (7.128), but also of Egyptian rulers in particular. Min, the first king of Egypt, dammed off Memphis from the Nile (2.99). The whole river flowed by the sandy mountain towards Libya, but Min dammed up the southern bend, around one hundred furlongs south of Memphis, dried up the ancient river-bed and channelled the river through the

[17] 7.22.3: τὰς τότε ὁ Πέρσης νησιώτιδας ἀντὶ ἠπειρωτίδων ὥρμητο ποιέειν.
[18] Including those created every time the Nile floods and 'only the towns stand high and dry above the water, very like the islands in the Aegean sea' (2.97). The phenomenon of sailing past the pyramids was one of the wonders of Egypt, just as conversely the Scythians could miraculously drive their wagons across the frozen sea (4.28.1).
[19] 2.138. Lloyd (2007) *ad loc.* notes that the enveloping of the temple on three sides was a common element in the shrines of Egyptian goddesses.
[20] As is noted by West (1991) 158, the passage clearly echoes F305 of Hecataeus, raising the wider of question of how much direct use Herodotus made of his predecessor. Lloyd (2007) *ad loc*. suggest that Chemmis was mistakenly identified as a floating island in the Greek tradition by confusion with the floating island of Ortygia/Delos on which Leto was believed to have given birth to Artemis and Apollo. In fact, this need not be a misidentification, since floating islands were a common feature of ancient conceptual geography, as noted by J. Nishimura-Jensen (2000).

middle of the mountains. Min made the cut-off part into dry land and built Memphis there. Outside it, he dug a lake from the river to the north and west. Herodotus interestingly introduces the tale with the note that what follows will be the account of the Egyptians, but that he will supplement what he himself has seen (2.99.1). Two sets of eyes, then, through which to view Min's changes to the landscape, but no indication of Herodotus' expressed opinion. Perhaps a grimmer and indeed closer precedent for Cheops of river-diversion in Egypt is that performed by Queen Nitocris. According to Herodotus' sources, Nitocris avenged her brother's death by building an underground chamber and inviting the Egyptians responsible for his murder there, before turning the river in on them through a secret channel: a very clever, but chillingly destructive use to which to put a diverted river (2.100). The story ends badly for all concerned, since Nitocris was said to have thrown herself into a chamber of hot ashes to escape vengeance (2.100.4: ὅκως ἀτιμῶρητος γένηται). But yet again, Herodotus' own voice does not emerge at any point in this story to endorse or comment on what his sources have told him.

Beyond entailing the creation of his own island and the diversion of a river, Cheops' own pyramid blazes a trail for other pyramid-builders, including indirectly through his callous behaviour towards his daughter. But was building pyramids always a bad thing to do? The accession of Mycerinus, Cheops' son, heralded a change for the better. He is said to have opened up the temples again, freed the Egyptians from their labours, and been the fairest of judges. The pyramid he left was 'much smaller than that of his father' (2.134.1); maybe that diminishes the sense of outrage?[21] Indeed, there does seem to be a sliding scale of moral approbation and disapprobation in Herodotus' narrative; a scale of more or less acceptable tyranny over the landscape. The Persians, from Cyrus, through Darius, and on to Xerxes, appear at one of this scale, carrying their abuse of the natural world to extremes.[22] This is true in general and also of the way in which they behave in Egypt itself. As

[21] The smaller size is also noted by Diodorus 1.64.8, but it is unclear whether there is any causal connection between this and the moral approbation shown by Diodorus for Mycerinus' rejection of the cruelty of his predecessors at 1.64.9.

[22] Even within the Persian ranks, as Judith Mossman kindly points out to me, there are gradations of sacrilege and abuse. At 1.183.3, while Darius *wanted* to take the statue of Zeus from Babylon, Xerxes actually carried out the act. On this episode as illustrative of the relationship with statuary being used by Herodotus as a mode of differentiation and characterization, see Mossman (1991) 102-3; perhaps a complementary scale to that of the abuse of nature.

Vasunia observes, 'when his [sc. Herodotus'] Persian kings go to Egypt, they attempt to surpass even the pharaohs in transgressing the natural order of things in Egypt', as exemplified by Cambyses' childhood promise that when he was grown up he would turn Egypt upside down (3.3.3: Αἰγύπτου τὰ μὲν ἄνω κάτω θήσω, τὰ δὲ κάτω ἄνω).[23]

At the other end of the spectrum we have another landscape-altering kingdom, that of the Babylonians. Herodotus links Egypt and Babylon both implicitly through his accounts of their exploitation of great rivers, the Nile and Euphrates respectively, and explicitly through the onomastic coincidence that both had a queen called Nitocris (2.100). But whereas Nitocris of Egypt put her river-diversion to grim use, her namesake in Babylon had dug an elaborate system of canals above the city, as well as having a great lake excavated and using the earth to build an embankment along the river. This was described as worthy for its scale and height of not just seeing but wonder (1.185.3: ἄξιον θώματος), fulfilling Herodotus' own criteria for inclusion in his history as expressed at 1.1.1. Although Herodotus does not offer a direct evaluation of the projects, his opinion of the Babylonian Nitocris herself is undeniably positive. She is introduced as being 'clever', indeed cleverer than Semiramis (συνετωτέρη: 1.185.1).[24] Perhaps most relevantly here, she had drained the river entirely in order to build a bridge from one part of Babylon to the other, before diverting the river back into its original course (1.186). This carefully planned manipulation of the river is presented as being clearly in the interests of the citizens: the previous situation is described as 'annoying' (ὀχληρός: 1.186.1 and the bridge is set up explicitly 'for the citizens' (τοῖσι πολιήτῃσι: 1.186.4).[25]

Where should we place Cheops on this scale? What are the connotations of his actions that might help us to evaluate his pyramid-building activity as a reflection of a positive or negative character? In terms of the broader context, the assertion that despots behave badly towards nature, enslaving the landscape, branding it with their

[23] Vasunia (2001) 85.

[24] Or does the middle προεφυλάξατο ὅσα ἐδύνατο μάλιστα at 1.185.1 imply that the work was done only in her own self-interest? The fact that she is described as having taken measures not only due to the greatness and restlessness of Media, but also in response to the fall of Ninos and other cities, suggests that her concern might be for the entirety of Babylon rather than just her own supremacy.

[25] For a more negative reading of these actions, see Munson (2001) 12, where she notes that the Babylonian queens manipulate the river Euphrates more benignly than does Cyrus in his assault on the city (1.189), but claims that 'these acts also represent, however, monarchic imperialism over the environment'.

power, and abusing it no less than their subjects seems robust. But we have already seen that in the Egyptian narrative, diverting rivers, which might appear self-evidently unnatural, is not directly condemned by Herodotus *in propria persona*. Furthermore, since Herodotus' pre-Saite history of Egypt is almost entirely linked to monuments, the notion that magnificent memorials might be traditional rather than purely egotistical is already well established. In order to pin down more precisely how Herodotus himself is encouraging us to 'read' the Cheops episode, it is necessary to focus more closely on exact modes of expression used to relate this and other landscape-changing episodes.

If we consider issues of focalization, looking at through whose eyes and in whose voice particular judgements are cast, the whole question of positive and negative characterizations becomes considerably more complex. At first glance, the negative presentation of Cheops and his brother Chephren in our passage seems incontrovertible. The language is very clear. Cheops drove his people into complete misery (ἐς πᾶσαν κακότητα: 2.124.1); he was so evil (ἐς τοῦτο δὲ ἐλθεῖν Χέοπα κακότητος: 2.126.2) that he put his daughter into a brothel; and the episode culminates in the damning judgement that the brothers presided over one hundred and six years of great misery (πᾶσαν εἶναι κακότητα: 2.128.1) and lack of worship due to the closure of the temples. As our opening passage notes, the Egyptians did not even want to name these kings through hatred (ὑπὸ μίσεος), but called the pyramids after the shepherd Philitis, who used to graze flocks there.

It is, however, worth examining more closely through whose eyes this negative portrayal of Cheops and Chephren is viewed. The whole episode is introduced as what 'they said' (ἔλεγον: 2.124.1), 'they' being the Egyptians, priests presumably,[26] who have been informing Herodotus about the longer history of Egypt and its religious and philosophical milieu. If we look at the oscillation between *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* in the whole episode, a pattern emerges.[27] It is the Egyptian

[26] On the question of what Herodotus really means by 'the Xs say', see Luraghi (2001). It might be that a wider constituency is intended. West (1987) 262, makes typically astute observations on the complexity of Herodotus' Egyptian sources: 'Herodotus would have us believe that his ancient history of Egypt rests on what he was told by the priests of Memphis, but it is impossible to take at face-value his claim to draw directly on the uncontaminated well-springs of a unitary and continuous native tradition.'

[27] Syntactically, the oscillation is hard to trace accurately, since Herodotus seems to shift almost imperceptibly between *oratio obliqua* and *oratio recta* at times. Here,

informants who claim that Cheops drove his people into misery (2.124.1),[28] closed the temples and made the Egyptians work for him; they who designate Cheops as sufficiently evil to put his daughter into a brothel (2.126.2); they who comment on the reign of Chephren as characterized by similar behaviour to that shown by his brother (2.127); and they who hold the kings in hatred and sum up the one hundred and six years of their successive reigns as a period of great misery (2.128.1) during which the worship of the gods was neglected. Every single negative judgement is presented in *oratio obliqua*, put in the mouths of Herodotus' informants, and not explicitly endorsed by the author himself. It might make us additionally concerned about Herodotus' endorsement of this information, that only a couple of chapters earlier (2.123.1), he has made an ambiguous comment on Egyptian *logoi*: 'let whoever finds such things credible (πιθανά) use these stories told by the Egyptians: but for me the underlying principle throughout this whole narrative is that I write down whatever has been said by each informant as I heard it'. Does this deliberate detachment of Herodotus the historian from the tales of his informants and those who believe them,[29] cast doubt on what precedes and follows?[30] Does Herodotus himself *not* believe what his informants say?[31]

If we consider the few elements in this episode to which Herodotus lays claim in his own authorial voice, in *oratio recta*, we find a rather different reception of the reigns of Cheops and Chephren and consequently a different characterization of the kings emerges. Where Herodotus inserts his own comments into the account which

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some apparently old-fashioned discussions of Herodotean language, textual interpolation, and problems of translation take on new relevance alongside more recent questions of Herodotean *Quellenforschung* and still more modern narratological approaches, in the common quest to discover what Herodotus is saying in his own voice.

[28] I thus disagree with Vasunia (2001) 84 n. 16 and with Kurke (1999) 222, who takes this passage as indicating Herodotus' *own* sense of depravity in an otherwise excellent discussion of the daughter's pyramid as a perverse accounting-sheet.

[29] Syntactically reinforced by μὲν.. δὲ.

[30] Stephanie West suggest to me that this might refers only very specifically to the preceding chapter (on Rhampsinitus' alleged descent to Hades to play dice with Demeter), which would indeed strain conventional Greek belief. But in my view the further-reaching interpretation is not precluded.

[31] See also 7.152.3 for a similar statement: 'I am bound to report what was said, but I am not bound to believe everything', or in a rather different vein, 2.147.1, distancing himself from an endorsement of the Egyptian narrative thus far and stating that 'so far, it is what the Egyptians themselves say that I have declared'.

his informants gave, it is to stress the scale of the projects through detailed description. Where the narrative is focalized directly through Herodotus' own eyes, the effect is twofold - to inspire wonder at what he describes, allowing the reader to share his astonishment at the impact of man on his environment,[32] and to instil confidence in Herodotus' knowledge and expertise.[33]

His first intervention *in propria persona* is to comment on the vast human resources engaged in the building of the road along which material were brought for constructing the pyramid of Cheops – they worked in gangs of 100, 000 men, we are told, for three months at a time. In Herodotus' explicitly expressed view (2.124.3: ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκέειν), the work was not much lighter at all than building the [Great] pyramid. He then goes into some detail on the dimensions and decoration of the road 'standing nearly a mile long and twenty yards wide, and elevated at its highest to a height of sixteen yards, and all of stone polished and carved with figures' (2.124.4) – a monument in its own right, which was not just massive and utilitarian, but also adorned to be beautiful.

The pyramid itself, built over an underground chamber and set in a quasi-island created by bringing in a channel of the Nile, was an extraordinary edifice and gains Herodotus' detailed description in his own voice: 'twenty years in the making, its base is square, each side eight hundred feet long, and its height the same; the whole was of stone polished and most exactly fitted (ἁρμασμένου τὰ μάλιστα); there was no block of less than thirty feet in length' (2.124.5). Herodotus then entertains, still in his own authorial voice, some detailed theories over the precise methods for constructing the massive, stepped sides of the pyramid.[34] The interweaving of information taken from his sources and Herodotus' own interpretation of those

[32] See Armstrong (2009) at 91, for the fine line between admiration and condemnation of man's attempts to control nature; also Hardie's comments in the same volume (2009) at 4, on the link between vision and wonder: 'Wonder and amazement are most immediately invoked through things seen'. For Herodotus' admiration for *some* monumental construction work, see 2.148 (the labyrinth), 3.60 (three structures on Samos). I thank Stephanie West for pointing out to me Herodotus' enthusiasm for a Scythian royal burial mound (4.71.5), with Rolle (1989) 19-36, on 'the pyramids of the steppe'.

[33] Here the notion of vicarious autopsy may be relevant, on which see Woodman and Martin (1996) 168-70. The ideal must be to see with one's own eyes, second best was to see through those of a reliable (often older) witness. Here Herodotus is clearly spicing up a piece of vicarious autopsy with some top-level viewing of his own.

[34] See Pliny, *Natural History* 36.81 for a similar fascination with the details of construction techniques.

traditions is clearly on display here.[35] After giving alternative versions of the stepped construction in *oratio recta*, Herodotus places himself and his management of the narrative even more determinedly at the centre by refusing to decide between the two versions: 'I have told both these accounts, since both were told to me' (2.125.4). Both accounts have been adopted sufficiently by Herodotus to be related in his own voice, but neither has won his complete approval.

He then moves on to a different form of evidence – the Egyptian inscription, which gave details of the expenditure on radishes, onions, and garlic for the workmen (2.125.6). 'As far as I remember (ὡς ἐμὲ εὖ μεμνῆσθαι),' says Herodotus, 'the interpreter, reading the inscription for me (μοί), said that sixteen hundred talents of silver had been spent'. Further testimony to the mighty scale of the undertaking, but also another reminder of the interplay between Herodotus and his sources, vulnerable as the whole process is not only to poor information but also, here, the vagaries of the human memory, even that of Herodotus. But Herodotus maintains his authoritative voice. If the radishes, onions, and garlic cost so much, then how much more was spent on iron, food, and clothing considering the time spent on the project. This is Herodotus' own contribution to estimating the overall cost, based on reasoned hypothesis (οἰκὸς... ἐστὶ) and supposition (ὡς ἐγὼ δοκέω) (2.125.7). Herodotus returns to *oratio obliqua*, as we have seen, for the tale of Cheops prostituting his daughter and also to introduce the reign and pyramid-building of Chephren. But he yet again breaks in with his own authorial voice to corroborate the reported scale of Chephren's pyramid with his own measurement (2.127.2: ταῦτα γὰρ ὦν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐμετρήσαμεν) and then proceeds to give a detailed description of this second pyramid.[36]

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[35] The constant re-emergence of whispered viewpoints from the Egyptians themselves suggests to me a different interpretation from that of Vasunia (2001) 102-3, where he stresses the anonymity of ordinary Egyptians and the panoptic view of the author over much of the description of Egypt as reflections of the despotic tyranny which suppresses this population both politically and narratologically. The Egyptians do not seem to me as quiet as this.

[36] See, however, Verrall (1898), attempting to rehabilitate Herodotus' reputation in the face of criticism over his inaccurate description of the scale and relative size of the pyramids. Verrall argues, rather unpersuasively, that Herodotus not only distances himself from the information given by relating most 'in the form of quotation' (198), but also introduces the point about his own measuring in an oddly detached way. But the practice of giving numbers and measurements as a route to authority is well

It seems that Herodotus' authorial interventions in the relation of an episode in Egyptian history steer avowedly clear of making judgements, especially negative ones, about Cheops and his brother. Instead, all such expressions of disapproval are left to the voice of 'the Egyptians', whose focus seems to be primarily the misery of the workers rather than explicitly the erection of a megalomaniac monument. 'The people' may for this reason 'hate the kings', but it is not self-evident that Herodotus joins in that evaluation. Indeed, although the Egyptians have chosen to elide the names of Cheops and Chephren from their nomenclature of the monuments, Herodotus uses his authorial voice to override their wishes and not only names the kings, but gives them considerable space in his text,[37] perhaps going even beyond the level of memorialization desired by the kings themselves, since we are not explicitly told of any self-commemorative intent. Rather than condemning the pyramid-builders, instead Herodotus uses his own voice to stress the extraordinary nature of these projects through his detailed descriptions of their scale and adornment, personalized even to the degree of his claiming to have taken his own measurements. The focus of Herodotus' own authorial voice on man's amazing achievement in putting up the pyramids is in keeping with his expressed intention at the start of the *Histories* to prevent the 'great and wonderful (μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά) deeds of Greeks and non-Greeks' from being forgotten (1.1.1). Indeed, he explicitly characterizes Egypt's status as a land of marvels, both natural and man-made, as his reason for devoting such extensive attention to it.[38] The monumental and marvellous features of Egypt clearly dictate Herodotus' choice of subject matter, especially his interest in buildings.[39]

The complex focalization of the Cheops episode makes it difficult to see it as straightforwardly illustrative of a Herodotean disapproval of monumental building works expressing despotic power. Those associations are present, but they are

established in ancient literature. See Ash (2007) 7-8, for the parallel of Vespasian's aide and author of a work on *Mirabilia*, Gaius Licinius Mucianus.

[37] In a sense this is more in line with the Egyptians' customarily exceptional record-keeping behaviour, as celebrated at 2.77.1. Their refusal to commemorate the pyramid-builders is thus all the more striking.

[38] See 2.35.1: 'I shall speak at some length about Egypt because more than any other land it possesses very many wonders (πλεῖστα θωμάσια) and offers works (ἔργα) which go beyond the power of description'.

[39] See Lloyd (2007) 235, for this point and for the view that Herodotus' perception of Egypt as a place of wonders is not confined to cases where specific vocabulary (such as θῶμα and cognates) is used.

ascribed to other sources, not explicitly endorsed by Herodotus himself, and actually stress human suffering more than outrage at the ostentatiously constructed landscape. When the question of focalization is applied to other landscape-changing episodes in the narrative, a similar complexity emerges. Many expressions of disapproval for Xerxes' war against nature are presented by Herodotus in *oratio recta*, leading to the tentative conclusion that Herodotus is constructing a moral frame in which the interaction between rulers and the natural world can indeed be used as a barometer of their tyranny. But what are we to make of Nitocris of Babylon, whose exploits are also described by Herodotus *in propria persona* and in broadly complimentary terms? Does this mean that diverting rivers and changing the landscape is not necessarily behaviour characteristic of despots? Or that it is, but that not all holders of despotic power are bad? The case of Cambyses, cited above, seems at first to confirm the idea that Herodotus routinely makes his tyrannical figures abuse the natural world. However, although Vasunia uses Cambyses' turning Egypt upside down to exemplify Herodotus' characterization of despotic behaviour, in fact, the whole episode in which Cambyses makes this threat is related in *oratio obliqua* and it is part of a story which Herodotus explicitly distrusts (3.3.1: λέγεται δὲ καὶ ὅδε λόγος, ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιθανός).

We may still argue that the cumulative weight of the narrative encourages us to think of pyramid-builders and others who lord it over nature as bad characters.[40] The idea that Herodotus presents landscape-changing as a manifestation of despotic behaviour would accommodate the metaphor of conquest, slavery, and punishment that is regularly applied to the natural world.[41] It would also sit well alongside the real enslavement of peoples in the service of altering landscapes,[42] and possibly Munson's contrast between the ultimately despotic queen of Babylon as opposed to her productive subjects.[43] Could Herodotus even be giving a voice to the ordinary citizen through allowing this sense of subjugation to come through? But before we adopt too quickly the conclusion that Herodotus has decided to 'talk like an Egyptian', it is worth recalling who wanted to obliterate even the names of the mighty pyramid

[40] Thus offering a further prism through which to draw stark characterizations in Herodotus alongside Steiner (1994) on forms of writing, and Rollinger (2004) on forms of violence.
[41] See Clarke (in preparation).
[42] See not only the use by Cheops of forced-labourers, but also that by Xerxes of subject peoples to carry out his monumental projects (7.22; 7.34).
[43] Munson (2001) 12.

builders - 'the Egyptians' (2.128.1: Αἰγύπτιοι) - while Herodotus focuses on the miraculous monuments and reinstates the names of their creators.[44] It is almost as though, in spite of his acknowledgement of the human suffering entailed by the construction of the pyramids, by extending the axis of time and using that as part of his evaluative framework, he is acknowledging the achievement of building the pyramids when detached from their immediate historical circumstances.[45]

It is a commonplace to find Herodotus listed among the ancient authors who join in creating a hostile tradition for Cheops and Chephren.[46]. Yet more blight on the landscape must surely entail a negative judgement in the unambiguous moral framework which Herodotus develops; a clear-cut case of 'bad characters', reflected in their abuse of nature and its resources. But I find myself moving ever further from that position to one more closely in line with Chris Pelling's insistence on complication and blurred boundaries,[47] simply replacing his East-West blurring with subtle gradations within an overarching frame of tyrannical relationships with the landscape and constant interplay between different narrative voices. Both teasing out the connotations of putting up pyramids, and analysing the language and focalization used to tell the tale, make a more complex reading not only inevitable, but also one to be embraced.

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[44] *Pace* Vasunia (2001) 108, who comments that 'although Herodotus presents the kings as transgressing space and as doing violence to the natural symmetry of things, the Egyptian representations of the Pharoahs' building activities point not to transgression and violation, but rather to extension and replication'. This seems if anything to be the reverse of what the text yields. I prefer Harrison's stress (2003) 148, on the uninhibited nature of Herodotus' wonder at Egypt, *even in the case of* [my emphasis] the pyramids built by forced labour, which Herodotus compares favourably with the works of the free Greeks (2.148).

[45] My thanks to Rhiannon Ash for her help in articulating this idea.

[46] Africa (1963) 257, uncomplicatedly notes Herodotus' account of 'two despots, Cheops and Chephren, who harassed the temples and built pyramids'. Kelly (2010) in his excellent article on the connotations of Germanicus' visit to Egypt, nevertheless accepts as a premise Vasunia's view that Egyptian kings are transgressive of the natural order, without questioning that this represents Herodotus' own take: 'Tacitus takes up a motif that goes back to Herodotus' description of Egypt, according to which ancient Egypt was a place in which tyrannical kings constantly engaged in projects involving monumental building and the manipulation of the landscape' (222).

[47] Pelling (1997) in focusing on the instability of categories, does of course require their existence: 'a renuancing of categories is not a cancelling'.

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