VII. Egyptian Elements in Greek Mythology

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I

Within the heterogeneous body of Greek mythology, incorporating myths, legends, and folk tales, there are elements which seem to be non-Greek. These are derived from Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, or Egypt. In some cases a myth connected with oriental ritual has become attached to a Greek deity. Sometimes a god or goddess originating in one of the countries of the Near East has migrated to Greece where he (or she) has become Hellenized and changed in the new environment. A folk tale often traveled a long route before reaching the Aegean world. There was also migration of art motifs, often accompanied by a story but often merely serving as decoration on some object. The Greeks then invented a tale to fit the design.[1]

By what channels and through what agents did these non-Hellenic elements reach Greece? Some followed the trade routes and came at periods in which Greece was in close contact with her neighbors. Some were brought back by travelers or soldiers. Often the synthesis of Greek and Oriental religious rites of artistic motifs occurred not in Greece, but rather in areas of the Near East in which Greeks had settled. These Greeks would be familiar, to some degree at least, with the religion and art of the people among whom they lived. Occasionally the initiative seems to have been taken by the eastern peoples and not by the Greeks.

Those stories which are classed as legends and saga have a

[1] Fabulous beasts as the chimaera and sphinx are of Near Eastern origin. The prototype of hero-fighting monster is Gilgamesh, whose exploits are portrayed in Sumerian epics and on Sumerian seal cylinders. J. E. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley 1959), has classified many mythological motifs. For an interesting but not convincing thesis of the Egyptian origin of the Oedipus legend, see I. Velikovsky, *Oedipus and Akhnaton* (Garden City 1960). T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London 1958) 62, discusses the possibility of Greek inventions of stories to explain art motifs. For a discussion of Greece's relations with Syria and Mesopotamia, see T. J. Dunbabin, *The Greeks and Their Eastern Neighbors* (London 1957). He does not, however, include Egypt.

historical kernel and are poetic and traditional versions of real events, the memory of which became distorted in the passage of time. To the Greeks these legends were accounts of movements of peoples and battles which really happened. Students of ancient history have also at times tried to use them as historical evidence. This is often a hazardous undertaking; but since archaeological discoveries have supported the historicity of many legends, the search for the reality behind the tale has become the task not only of the romantic but also of the scholar.

Although Greek mythology was influenced by literary and artistic motifs as well as religious rites from several areas of the Near East, I plan here to discuss only those elements which were derived from Egypt. It is my intent to concentrate upon those "myths" which have an Egyptian locale, to consider especially those features which reflect Egyptian influence and to attempt to ascertain the historical context in which they developed. Therefore I will focus my attention on the following tales: (1) the metamorphosis and wanderings of Io, (2) the migration of the Danaides to Greece, (3) the sojourn of Helen and Menelaus in Egypt, and (4) the killing of King Busiris by Heracles.

First, it is necessary to determine, on the basis of archaeological evidence, the periods in which direct contact and free interchange existed between Greece and Egypt. Prior to the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 B.C.,[2] there were two eras during which there were close relations between the two countries. The first was the period directly following the collapse of Minoan Crete, about 1400 B.C. to approximately 1340 B.C.[3] Mycenae and other mainland cities took over the Aegean trade with Egypt, as is attested by the presence of Mycenaean objects at Tell-el-Amarna[4] and of Egyptian ones in Greece.[5] There may even have been a settlement of Mycenaean traders at Tell-el Amarna.[6] At this

[2] After this time Egypt was open to the Greeks, and travelers like Hecataeus and Herodotus were not subject to any restrictions.

[3] H. L. Lorrimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (London 1950) 85.

[4] For Mycenaean pottery found at Tell-el-Amarna, cf. J. D. S. Pendlebury, *City of Akhenaten* (London 1933) and *Tell-el-Amarna* (Toronto 1935).

[5] J. D. S. Pendlebury, *Aegyptica* (Cambridge 1930) has catalogued Egyptian material found in Greece. See R. D. Barnett, "Ancient Oriental Influences on Archaic Greece," *Aegean and Near East* (Locust Valley [N.Y.]1956) 214: "already in Linear B script we find oriental words for oriental products implying trade, incorporated into the language."

[6] Lorrimer (above, note 3) 86.

time there were free intercourse and movement between Egypt and the Aegean world.

From about 1340 B.C. to approximately 1230 there was a decline in Greek importations, postulating a diminution of contact.[7] In the reign of Merneptah (1224–1214 B.C.) the Delta was invaded by marauding bands in search of booty. An inscription at Karnak lists among others a people called by the Egyptians Aquaiwasha,[8] who have been identified by many scholars with the Achaeans.[9] If this equation is justified, one can easily account for the Egyptian attitude of exclusiveness and hostility between the end of the thirteenth century and the rise of the Saite dynasty in the first half of the seventh century.

Under Psammetichus I and Amasis, pharaohs of the twenty-sixth dynasty (Saite) the Egyptian feeling toward foreigners was mollified. Perhaps the common people still looked at them with suspicion; but since Psammetichus obtained the throne with the help of Carian and Ionian mercenaries, he and his successors realized the advantages of a more liberal policy.[10] The Greek mercenary soldier was a common sight in Egypt.[11] Following the soldiers came the traders, for Egypt was again open to trade with Greece but on a more restricted basis than in the Mycenaean period. Increased trade relations resulted in the founding of Naucratis in course of the seventh century.[12] We can assume then that the Egyptian elements in Greek mythology were introduced either in the Mycenaean period or during the twenty-sixth dynasty (664–525 B.C.) and not during the intervening period, when Egypt was virtually closed to the inhabitants of the Aegean world. Although the majority of extant literary and graphic

[7] *Ibid.*; cf. S. Davis, *Race Relations in Ancient Egypt* (New York 1952) 18.

[8] J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago 1906) 3.238–64.

[9] Cf. Lorrimer (above, note 3) 87.

[10] Herod. 2.152–54; 178–79. A Greek inscription on the leg of one of the colossal statues at Abu Simbel has names of some of the mercenaries of either Psammetichus I or II. See Hicks and Hill, *Greek Inscriptions* (Oxford 1901) 4. There was a graveyard of mercenaries at Nebesheh.

[11] Camps for mercenary soldiers, *stratopeda*, were established by Psammetichus I on opposite sides of the Nile. See Herod. 2.154.

[12] There is some difference of opinion as to the date of the founding of Naucratis. C. Roebuck, "Organization of Naucratis," *CP* 46 (1951) 212, believes it to have been in the last quarter of the seventh century, as does Cook, "Amasis and the Greeks in Egypt," *JHS* 57 (1937) 230–31; while E. M. Smith, *Naucratis* (Bryn Mawr dissertation, 1924), thinks it was in the early part of the century, and Barnett (above, note 5) 237 believes it was in the middle.

representations of the stories with an Egyptian locale are not earlier than the sixth century, the "myths" themselves seem to be older. Details and elaborations were added in the fifth century by travelers to Egypt like Hecataeus and Herodotus.

II. The Metamorphosis and Wandering of Io

Among the tales with Egyptian overtones, the oldest seems to be that of Io, the priestess of Hera. She is usually said to be the daughter of Inachus, founder of the first dynasty in Argos. Zeus' love for her, Hera's jealousy, the metamorphosis of the girl into a heifer by either Zeus or Hera are described by many Greek and Latin writers. As a heifer she is portrayed as watched by the hundred-eyed Argus, and then, after his death at the hands of Hermes, as maddened by a gadfly. In her frenzy she then wandered by a long route from Greece to Egypt via the Bosphorus, Caucasus, and Syria. In Egypt, impregnated by the touch or breath of Zeus, she gave birth to a son called Epaphus. Later the child at the instigation of Hera was stolen by the Curetes, and Io set forth on another long journey in search of him.[13]

The essential points of the story are her position as priestess of Hera in Argos, her transformation into a heifer, her journey to Egypt and the birth there of a son, fathered by Zeus in an abnormal manner. The fact that the cult of Hera in Argos seemingly dates from Mycenaean times[14] lends support to the supposition that Io was contemporary with the eighteenth dynasty, when there was direct contact between Egypt and this section of Greece. The discovery at the Argive Heraeum of votive offerings of cows is significant,[15] as is the fact that Hera herself is called *βοῶπις* by Homer (*Iliad* 1.551). It is possible that in Io we have Hera by another name.

If we turn our attention to Egypt, we find that the cow was held in reverence from early times. The most prominent cow-goddess was Hathor, whose cult was of great antiquity. In the

[13] The major Greek and Latin sources of the myth are Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 561–886, the *Suppliant Maidens* 291–315, 531–94; Diodorus 5.60.4; Apollodorus 2.1.3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.588–750; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 145.

[14] R. Carpenter, "Argeiphontes, A Suggestion," *AJA* 54 (1950) 182; M. Nilsson, *Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley 1932) 63.

[15] C. Waldstein, *The Argive Heraeum* (Boston 1905) *passim*. See also W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston 1955) 70.

form of a cow she came to represent the heavens and thus was associated with the sun god, Ra, as his wife.[16] In her character as goddess of women and their activities, she was a mother-goddess and was identified with several goddesses of similar function, Isis in particular.[17] In Egyptian art she is represented as a cow,[18] a cow-headed woman,[19] or a woman with two horns on her head, sometimes with a disc between them.[20] Because of the fusion of Hathor and Isis, the combined deity Hathor-Isis is customarily portrayed in the late art of Egypt with horns and disc.[21]

These representations of Hathor or Hathor-Isis may well have played a part in the development of the myth of Io. Egyptian iconography seems to have exerted an influence on Greek mythology.[22] In this connection it is well to remember that in the *Prometheus Bound* (588) Io is called the horned maiden (*βούκερος παρθένος*). Either the myth arose under the stimulation of the cult and iconography of Hathor-Isis or the Greeks, already conceiving Hera as a cow goddess, later introduced Egyptian details into the story. In my opinion there is a strong probability that at the Argive Heraeum in the Mycenaean age Hera was associated with cows and that the detailed story of the cow-maiden (who is possibly another form of Hera) arose when the Greeks had seen the half-animal, half-human Egyptian statues and learned of the cult of Hathor.

[16] E. A. W. Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford 1934) 228; A. Erman, *A Handbook of Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York 1907) 12.

[17] This was especially true at Canopus. This is of interest in view of the fact that, according to Greek sources, it was here that Io gave birth to Epaphus. This section of Egypt is prominent in Greek myths.

[18] As cow of heaven: H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York 1948) plate 9, relief from the tomb of Seti I at Thebes; as cow with disc between her horns protecting Psammetichus: plate 12, statue in Cairo.

[19] Bronze statuette of a cow-headed woman and disc in the Brooklyn Museum: Frankfort (above, note 18) plate 14.

[20] Painted relief of Seti I and Hathor in the Louvre: *Art of Ancient Egypt* (Vienna 1936) plate 237; slate triad of Mycerinus, Hathor, and the goddess of the Hare Nome in Boston: W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting of the Old Kingdom* (Boston 1946) plate 13 c. Sometimes Hathor is represented with two locks of hair and cow-like ears, known as the Hathor headdress. See Erman (above, note 18) 13, Fig. 11; J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton 1954) No. 547.

[21] Perrot and Chipiez, *A History of Art in Ancient Egypt* (London 1883) Fig. 55; Pritchard (above, note 20) No. 544; G. Steindorf, *Catalogue of Egyptian Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore 1946) No. 411, plate 71.

[22] Mallet, "Les premiers établissements des Grecs en Égypte," *Mission archéologique française du Caire, Memoires* (Paris 1893) 394.

Further support for the Egyptian character of Io comes from her name itself. It seems to be a Hellenization of an Egyptian word, either "moon" or "ox" (feminine "cow").[23] Scholars differ as to their preference for one or the other.[24] The Egyptian word for moon is masculine, so that its application to a maiden seems unsuitable. Adherents, however, of the theory of solar mythology have equated the "horned maiden" to the crescent moon, hundred-eyed Argus to the starry sky and have seen in her wanderings the course of the moon through the starry heavens.[25] Others prefer the derivation from the word for ox. A difficulty exists here also, for the Greek name is closer to the Egyptian word for ox than to the one for cow. Thus neither derivation is entirely satisfactory. Since the Egyptians represented the heavens as a cow and portrayed Hathor-Isis with a moon disc between her horns, both ideas may be present in the name. The similarity of the two words in Egyptian possibly connotes some linguistic connection.

Certain aspects of the myth seem to be Greek and not Egyptian. The love of Zeus for Io and the resultant jealousy of Hera can be paralleled in many other myths. It appears to be the usual way to explain the supplanting of local, often non-Greek goddesses by the incoming male god of the Greeks. The metamorphosis of Io is not unique, for there are many examples of the transformation of maidens into trees, animals, and birds. An unusual feature here is that in many of the versions, both in literature and art, Io was changed not into a real cow but rather into a cow-maiden who retained some human physical and mental characteristics.

Two distinctive Egyptian features are the conception of Epaphus and the wanderings of Io. Her child, born at Canopus on the Nile, was said to have been engendered by Zeus either by his breath or a touch of his hand or by a combination of the two.[26] Impregnation by the breath of a god is an Egyptian motif.[27]

[23] These words are given in the vocabulary at the end of A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford 1927).

[24] Carpenter (above note 14) believes that Io is derived from the word for "moon," while Mallet (above, note 22) prefers a derivation from the word for "cow."

[25] Daremberg et Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités*, s.v. "Io"; Baumeister, *Denkmäler des klassischen Altertums*, s.v. "Io."

[26] Aeschylus, the *Suppliant Maidens* 15–18, 35–39; *Prometheus Bound* 846–52.

[27] H. Bacon, *Barbarians in Greek Tragedy* (New Haven 1961) 31.

This child, born of Io, was in time, perhaps by Greeks living in Egypt, identified with Apis (Hapi) the bull god of Memphis. The identification was due, in my opinion, to the connection between Io and Isis and to the resemblance between the names. Herodotus (2.138) and Aelian (*On Animals* 11.10) give some information on the methods of choosing the Apis bull. Cemeteries of sacred bulls[28] and representations in art[29] attest to the popularity of the cult. The second Egyptian feature is the wandering of Io in search of her child after he had been stolen by the Curetes. After a long journey she found him in Syria (Apollod. 2.1.3). This part of the story seems a reminiscence of Isis' travels in order to find the body of Osiris.[30]

If the classical myth of Io was influenced in some details by the religion and art of Egypt, it is now necessary to attempt to determine the time and the manner of the contact with Egypt. The myth itself seems to have arisen in the Mycenaean period, and the first Egyptian influence probably occurred at that time. The antiquity of the cult of Hera at Argos and the known relations between the two countries support such a hypothesis. Although it was apparently treated in the Hesiodic poem *Aegimius* and in the lost epic poem *Danaides*, the earliest detailed treatment is in the *Suppliant Maidens* and the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. In the Egyptian coloring and atmosphere which he gave to the tale, Aeschylus owed a debt to the *Periodos gês* of Hecataeus. The metamorphosis was known to artists of the sixth century, for Io was represented in her cow form on the throne at Amyclae (Paus. 3.18.3).

After the introduction of the cult of Isis into Athens by Egyptian traders living in the Piraeus, the fusion of Io and Isis was firmly established. Isis had of course been known to the Greeks at Naucratis for a long time. The great popularity of the cult of Isis in the Ptolemaic period and the Roman imperial age accounts for the number of literary and art representations of Io-Isis. Interest is sometimes focused upon the details of the myth: the love of Zeus, the transformation, the frenzied wandering as in the *Metamorphoses* (1.583–750) of Ovid. At other times references

[28] Brooklyn Museum possesses a number of mummified bulls.

[29] Pritchard (above, note 20) No. 570. They show the disc and uraeus.

[30] The account of Isis and Osiris in the work of Plutarch entitled *De Iside et Osiride* is the only complete account. There is no one Egyptian account of the whole story. Plutarch, however, is in agreement with the various Egyptian sources (hymns, etc.).

are not to myth but to cult, not to the Greek heroine but rather to the Egyptian goddess, as in the sixth satire of Juvenal (526–31). Although Io is probably to be recognized in the representations of Isis with horns and disc, on occasion she appears as the Greek maiden. On several wall paintings from Pompeii[31] her arrival in Egypt is portrayed. The Greek character of Io is emphasized by her dress, and only the small horns serve to distinguish her from any normal maiden. A painting, however, from the temple of Isis at Pompeii has an Egyptian setting: figure of the Nile, the Sphinx, and lotus flowers.

We have traveled a long distance in time and space from Egypt to Rome via Greece, and from the reigns of the pharaohs of the 18th dynasty to those of the Roman emperors of the first centuries of the Christian era. We have seen that the myth of Io is composite in nature, owing much to the genius of Greek poets, much to the observations of Greek travelers and much to the syncretistic cults of the Roman empire. Io appears now as a Greek princess, now as the priestess of Hera, now as the maddened "horned maiden," and now as the dread goddess Isis herself.

III. The Migration of the Danaides

The flight of Danaus and his fifty daughters from Egypt to Argos to escape marriage with the fifty sons of Aegyptus, the pursuit of them by the prospective bridegrooms, the forced marriages, and the killing of the husbands on the wedding night by all the Danaides save one is another tale with Egyptian coloring and setting. Since the brothers, Danaus and Aegyptus, are usually described as the great-grandsons of Epaphus, this tale represents the return of the descendants of Io to their native Argos.

Some scholars, searching for a historical basis for this legend, have seen in it a reflection of a historical migration and attempted conquest of Argos by Egyptians.[32] The killing of their husbands would then be interpreted as the outcome of reluctance of Greek women to being forcibly married to foreign husbands. There seems, however, no archaeological or historical proof which can

[31] W. Wolfgang, *Untersuchungen über die campanische Wandmalerei* (Leipzig 1873) Nos. 131–38.

[32] For example, J. N. L. Myres, *Who Were the Greeks?* (Berkeley 1930) 324.

be cited to substantiate a theory of Egyptian conquest or attempted conquest of the plain of Argos in the Mycenaean period. There is proof of trade but not of Egyptian sovereignty.[33] To use this legend to support such an hypothesis seems unwarranted. Nor does it seem feasible to use the story to postulate race mixture or Greek hostility to marriage with barbarians.[34]

While we are dealing here with legend and not history and must be careful to distinguish the two, there are some historical observations which can be made. Danaus and Aegyptus are clearly eponymous heroes, as their names attest. The name Danaus calls to mind the Danauna who, in company of other tribes, raided the Delta in the reign of Ramses III (1182–1151 B.C.),[35] as well as Homer's use of the name *Danaoi* for the Greeks (*Iliad* 1.42 *et al.*). "It is however possible that the Danaan name which had its birth from within the Egyptian empire might be used in Egypt to describe the Greeks even at a time when they called themselves Achaioi."[36]

The case for Aegyptus as an eponym is stronger than that for Danaus. It has been suggested to be of Egyptian origin, adopted by foreigners from an epithet of Memphis, Hikuptah. In the Homeric poems, Aegyptus is the name both of the country (*Od.* 3.300 *et al.*) and the river Nile (*Od.* 4.477, 14.257 *et al.*). Also in the *Odyssey* (2.15) a man in Ithaca is called Aegyptius, a name which must have been handed down from the Mycenaean period in poetic tradition or family inheritance. It would not be likely for anyone to obtain the name in the period between the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the seventh, a time when Egypt was closed to Greeks. The name also appears on a Linear B tablet from Cnossus dating from the fifteenth century.[37]

In the Ptolemaic period, Manetho, an Egyptian priest who wrote in Greek, divided the Egyptian pharaohs into dynasties. Since he had access to Egyptian material, his account is accurate

[33] The gold cup of the period of Thutmosis III bearing the inscription "governor of the islands," cited by Myres, does not seem to me to be sufficient proof.

[34] A. Diller, *Race Mixture Among the Greeks Before Alexander* (Urbana 1937) 49. It has sometimes also been used to point out that, among primitive peoples, marriage between cousins is considered incest.

[35] Breasted (above note 8) 4.18–67.

[36] W. E. Gladstone, *Homeric Synchronism* (New York 1876) 148.

[37] M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Cambridge 1956) 136. Cf. Lorrimer (above, note 3) 89 (note).

on most points. In his list of the pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty he mentions one, Armais, saying: "also called Danaus for five years thereafter he was banished from Egypt fleeing from his brother Aegyptus he arrived in Greece (where) he ruled over the Argives." (Frag. 53). A little later he lists Ramses, also called Aegyptus. Armais or Harmais, is identified by Gardiner[38] with Haremhab (1335–1308 B.C.). While basically correct concerning Harmais, he incorrectly puts Ramses (Ramses II, 1290–1224 B.C.) into the eighteenth rather than the nineteenth dynasty. Since he equated Danaus with Harmais he would have to make Ramses (Aegyptus) his contemporary. The desire to equate Egyptian pharaohs with Greek legendary characters possibly accounts for his mistake. Of course such an equation is historically invalid. It is of interest, however, in showing the desire of an Egyptian of the Ptolemaic period to prove that Danaus and Aegyptus were real people and that the migration and conquest of Argos really took place. If Aegyptus stands for Egyptian, it was natural that the great Egyptian pharaoh, Ramses II, the Egyptian pharaoh *par excellence*, should be chosen by Manetho. This would appeal to the Greeks in Egypt, who would want to connect their history with that of Egypt.

Whatever may have been the real or imagined historical basis of the legend of Danaus and his daughters, as a literary theme it gained a measure of popularity, especially in the fifth century when dichotomy between Greek and barbarian had been given greater impetus by the events of the Persian Wars. There seems to have been an epic, the *Danaides*, which undoubtedly served as the basis for later treatments of the story. Hecataeus, however, from his personal acquaintance with Egypt was responsible for the Egyptian coloring which we find in the most extensive treatment of the theme, namely, the *Suppliant Maidens* of Aeschylus. This play was part of a trilogy, the other two being non-extant dramas, the *Egyptians* and the *Danaides*. Since the *Suppliant Maidens* has as its theme the flight of Danaus and his daughters to seek asylum in Argos, the *Egyptians* probably dealt with the pursuit by the sons of Aegyptus and the enforced marriages, while the third was concerned with the killing of the bridegrooms and the punishment of the brides in the underworld.

If the whole trilogy were extant, a more accurate and detailed

[38] *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford 1961) 444–45.

analysis of the Egyptian motifs and details employed by Aeschylus could be made. The Danaides are referred to as strangers ξέναι (277), as wearing non-Hellenic garb (234), as having dark coloring, μελανθὲς ἡλιόκτυπον γένος (154). Here we see that the Danaides, although of Greek ancestry, are thought to have become Egyptianized through the long sojourn of the family in Egypt. The sons of Aegyptus are more definitely designated as Egyptian (719–20): "the men on board are plainly seen, their swart limbs showing from out their *white* attire," and again the chorus sings (743–45): "in ships stout timbered and dark prowed have they sailed hither, attended by a swarthy host." Other references to Egyptian customs might be made, but these are sufficient to show that Aeschylus is endeavoring to delineate the Egyptian character of *both* the Danaides and the sons of Aegyptus. By the fifth century, the writers had a considerable amount of information concerning that exotic country. The contrast of Greek = Danaus and Egyptian = Aegyptus, while still existing in the plot, has lost much of its force through the Egyptianizing of the Danaides.

There seems to be no influence of Egyptian iconography or cult on either the story of the flight or of the punishment of the Danaides in the underworld. Its origin seems to be historical rather than religious or artistic, a reflection of the Greek belief that Io had gone to Egypt and that, in the fourth generation, her descendants had returned to their native land. Perhaps this was a vague remembrance of Greeks who had settled there and whose descendants later returned to Greece. This is mere conjecture, but the presence of Greek settlers in Egypt lends it some support. Whatever its origin and basis, by the fifth century it had obtained an Egyptian coloring from the increased contact between the two countries. Although there was greater knowledge, there was probably less sympathy and *rapport*; so a plot of enforced marriages with barbarians and of brides who would suffer punishment for homicide rather than submit to non-Greek husbands had more appeal than in earlier times.

IV. The Sojourn of Helen and Menelaus in Egypt

Two well-known personalities of Greek mythology, Helen and Menelaus, are also associated with Egypt. On his homeward journey from Troy, Menelaus was driven by contrary winds off

his course to Egypt (*Od.* 3.300). To this *nostos* of Menelaus, which may be a reflection of buccaneering raids in the reigns of Merneptah and Ramses III, was added the story of Helen's sojourn in Egypt.

Stesichorus in his *Palinode* stated that Helen remained in Egypt with King Proteus, while a phantom went to Troy with Paris. This version of the story was adopted by Herodotus and Euripides. In the *Odyssey* (4.120) reference is made to the gifts which Helen received from Alcandre, wife of Polybus of Thebes, and to the silver bowls, tripods and gold which the king gave to Menelaus. These objects have been compared to vessels mentioned on a tablet from Pylos. Helen is also said to have obtained a healing drug to cause forgetfulness from Polydamna, wife of Thôn (*Od.* 4.220). The impression which these passages gives is that the real Helen did go to Troy and that she accompanied her husband on his return voyage.

These references to a sojourn in Egypt by characters connected with the Trojan War must be early and antedate the Homeric account as we have it today. It must be part of the Mycenaean residue that survived through poetic tradition. Polybus, king of Thebes, is equated by Manetho (Frag. 55) with Thuoris (Twosre in Egyptian), the last ruler of the nineteenth dynasty (1212–1194 B.C.). Since he has mistaken the sex of Twosre, we cannot put very much trust in his identification. The date, however, fits approximately the traditional as well as the archaeological date for the Trojan War. Since Thebes was destroyed in 663 B.C., Homeric references to its wealth and size must antedate that year. Thôn, whose wife gave Helen the drug which caused forgetfulness, cannot be identified. The name is probably Egyptian, and his status that of an official and not a pharaoh.

Homer does not know the version which makes the real Helen stay in Egypt, while a phantom goes to Troy. This seems to be one among a multiplicity of legends in which she plays an important role. This episode in the life of Helen has relevance for the subject under discussion. The most significant character is Proteus. To Herodotus (2.119) he is a king (pharaoh), whereas to Homer he is a sea god capable of changing his form and prophesying the future (*Od.* 4.365–570). It is possible that Herodotus has confused the word *proutê* ("official" in Egyptian) with the well known sea god, Proteus, for Manetho lists no king

of that name. His place of habitation is given by both Herodotus and Homer as Pharos, an island off the coast of Egypt, the site of later city, Alexandria. Although Proteus is not an historical personage, a similar figure, a king of seals, may have existed in Egyptian folk-lore.[39] In the *Odyssey* (4.385) he is called an Egyptian, and the paradise promised to Menelaos has been compared to Egyptian portrayals of the afterlife.

Euripides in his play, *Helen*, has drawn heavily upon Herodotus' account, but he has not made as great an attempt to reproduce the Egyptian setting and tone. Proteus, however, here also is a king, and his tyrannical son bears the name Thônis. This must be derived from the Thôn of Homer. Proteus in his attitude and treatment of Helen reflects the earlier friendliness and hospitality, whereas the hostility of Thôn shows the later Egyptian feeling of unfriendliness to Greeks. Thus the old woman says of him (468): "Grim foe to Greeks is he." This episode in the life of Helen never became very popular, and the conventional picture of Helen is that of the beautiful woman who was carried off to Troy by Paris.

v. The Killing of Busiris by Heracles

The most interesting of the Greek legends dealing with Egypt is that of the killing of King Busiris by Heracles. If one may make a judgment on the basis of the number of representations in art and literature, this adventure had a greater appeal to the Greeks than did the other three tales we have been discussing. The great popularity of the hero Heracles is no doubt one of the most telling reasons. The plot runs as follows: Heracles, after his wrestling bout with Antaeus, arrived in Egypt, which was then ruled by a king named Busiris. This king was accustomed to sacrifice strangers (or a stranger) yearly. Thus the king's slaves seized Heracles and led him bound to the altar. When he was about to be slaughtered, the Greek hero broke away from his captors and slew the king at his own altar.

Apparently this episode was invented in the sixth century, for the earliest representation of it is on a Caeretan hydria (East Ionic) dating from about 550 B.C., antedating the earliest literary accounts. A fragment of Pherecydes, quoted by the scholiast on

[39] See Webster (above, note 1) 88 and the commentary of How and Wells (Oxford 1928) on Herod. 2.112.

Apollonius Rhodius (4.1396), is the oldest literary version which has come down to us. Epicharmus used it as the theme of a lost comedy, as did Euripides for a satyr play. It is interesting to note that in the beginning it was treated by vase painters and writers in a humorous manner.

Not the humorous points but the serious ones, the tyrannical conduct of the king and the human sacrifice, engaged the attention of later Greek and Latin writers. By Lucian (*A True Story* 2.23; *The Double Indictment* 8) he is classed with other tyrants, real and mythical: Phalaris of Acragas, Diomedes of Thrace, Sinis, and Sciron. Some Greek writers found it impossible to believe that there had ever been an Egyptian king who killed strangers and thus tried to disprove and disparage the traditions concerning him. Herodotus (2.45), from his experience and knowledge of Egypt, found the story especially unbelievable, saying: "Now it seems to me that by this story the Greeks show themselves wholly ignorant of the nature and the customs of the Egyptians, for how could they sacrifice men, who are forbidden to sacrifice even the lower animals, save only swine and bulls and bull calves if they be unblemished and geese." Furthermore he feels that an incongruity exists in the story (2.59): "Heracles being alone and a man too, as they say, how is it natural that he should slay a countless multitude?" A rationalizing attitude is expressed by Strabo (17.1.9) who, following Eratosthenes, asserts firmly that no tyrant named Busiris ever lived and that later writers in circulating such stories desire to malign the inhospitality of Egypt with its lack of harbors.

Busiris and his deeds became a fitting subject for exercises in rhetoric. Polycrates wrote an apology about which we know little except what can be gleaned from the epideictic essay of Isocrates on the same subject. He condemns Polycrates in that, while professing to defend Busiris, he has failed to clear his name and has accused him not merely of sacrificing strangers but of devouring them as well (*Busiris* 4). Isocrates then goes on to treat him as a real king, attributing to him the introduction of the caste system and religious regulations (§10).

These citations will suffice to show that the classical writers vary in their attitude toward Busiris. Some tell the legend uncritically, emphasizing the role of Heracles; others condemn his actions, while others refute the conventional characterization

of him on the grounds of improbability or malignity of the tradition. To some he is a real king, to others a fictitious character of legend. Greek vase painters, too, found him of interest. They concentrated on the climax of the episode, the killing at the altar of Busiris by Heracles. This lent itself well to graphic and dramatic portrayal.[40]

Who was Busiris? At what time and under what circumstances was the legend formulated by the Greeks? To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to Egypt. Manetho mentions no pharaoh of this name, thus substantiating the comment of Strabo that there never had been a King Busiris. There were, however, several cities in Egypt so named by the Greeks, of which the most prominent was located in the Delta area, south of Sais near the Photnic mouth of the Nile. It was the capital of the ninth nome. As there was here an important seat of worship of the god Osiris, the Egyptian name of the city was Per-Asar Neb Ṭeṭu (House of Osiris at Tetu).[41] Busiris is thus a Grecizing of "house of Osiris." Diodorus (1.85, 88) realized that Busiris meant "house of Osiris" (tomb) and was not the name of a king. He gives, however, a false etymology of the name on the vague authority of "some say," explaining that Isis threw the limbs of Osiris into an ox (boûs) made of wood and covered with hides.

In the historical period Osiris was certainly the god of Ṭeṭu (Djedu) but was not its original deity. This was Anjeti, the tree or pole god. Very early Osiris absorbed him, and his name became one of the epithets of Osiris.[42] It is possible that Osiris was first a living king who, when deified, became the local god of that area. This city came to be considered the birthplace of Osiris, the place where the reconstruction of his dismembered body took place and the site of his tomb. A few Greeks realized that "tomb of Osiris" was the real meaning of Busiris, but others considered him a king.

Why did the Greeks consider him a tyrannical king, one who

[40] The most up-to-date list of vases illustrating this legend is that of F. Brommer, *Vasenlisten zur griechischen Heldensage* (Marburg 1960) 26–29. This is more complete than that of G. Richter in "A New Euphronius Cylix in the Metropolitan Museum," *AJA* 20 (1916) 131–32.

[41] Scholars vary in the manner in which they transliterate Egyptian words. Here I follow E. A. W. Budge, *The Gods of The Egyptians* (London 1904) 2.122. J. Černý, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London 1952) gives Per-Usire, which is nearer to Busiris.

[42] Černý (above, note 41) 35.

sacrificed strangers? Human sacrifice, except of war captives on occasion, did not exist in Egypt in the historical period but seems to have been connected with the cult of Osiris in prehistoric times. The victims sacrificed to him had to have red color or red hair. Frazer[43] considers Osiris a corn spirit and believes that at harvest he was represented by a stranger with red hair, a proper representative of ripe corn. He was then slain to promote the harvest. According to Diodorus (6.88), "only a few Egyptians are now found red in color (hair) but the majority of such are non-Egyptians and this is why the story spread among the Greeks of the slaying of foreigners by Busiris, although Busiris was not the name of the king but of the tomb of Osiris which is called that in the language of the land." Perhaps a dim knowledge of this sacrifice was possessed by the Greeks in Egypt. If Busiris was believed to be a king who sacrificed strangers, the delineation of him as a tyrant is understandable.

As Egyptian religious beliefs and practices played a part in the formation of the Busiris legend, so Egyptian art affected its portrayal by Greek vase painters. All the representations on vases conform to a type. Heracles, often of heroic size, is seen seizing a cowering king at the altar and striking him with his club. In a few examples Busiris is already dead, and Heracles is grasping the Ethiopian slaves of the king. This reminds one of Egyptian portrayals of a larger than life size pharaoh grasping small enemies. An example is the relief at Karnak on which Seti I is hitting frightened prisoners with his mace.[44]

By many vase painters a conscious effort was made to delineate the persons as non-Greeks, Egyptians or Ethiopians. On some vases, as on the Caeretan hydria, a distinction is made between Egyptian priests and Ethiopian slaves. On black-figured vases the flesh of the slaves is black, but this was not possible to do in the red-figured technique. The fifth century vase painters, therefore, endeavored to show difference of race by emphasizing the short nose, thick lips, woolly hair, and prominent jaw. One may compare the Greek portrayal of Ethiopians with the representation of Nubians in Egyptian painting and relief.[45]

[43] *The New Golden Bough* (New York 1959) 440.

[44] Perrot and Chipiez (above, note 21) Fig. 85. For other examples of a pharaoh smiting foreigners, see Pritchard (above, note 20) Nos. 293, 296, 312, and Frankfort (above, note 18) No. 15.

[45] There are numerous examples of realistic rendering of racial traits of Ethiopians

Not only did the Greek artists strive to distinguish the racial characteristics of Egyptians and Ethiopians, but they also tried accurately to reproduce the dress and accessories. The elaborate apron-like loin cloth is truly Egyptian.[46] On the Caeretan hydria the long white dress of the Egyptian priest is correctly reproduced. Busiris himself wears an uraeus crown. The accuracy of the representation shows real knowledge, direct or indirect, of Egypt and its customs. The maker of the Caeretan hydria, undoubtedly an Ionian, may well have visited Naucratis. While Athenian vase painters may possibly have seen this vase or other like it, by the fifth century negro slaves from Naucratis could be seen in Athens.[47] It is possible, but not likely, that Athenians could have seen in Greece Egyptians wearing their native dress. More likely, information came from travelers who had seen contemporary Egyptians and also had seen monuments on which Egyptians of an earlier day were pictured.

This tale of an Egyptian king who killed strangers and was himself killed by a stranger had an appeal to the Greeks through its very strangeness and exotic character. Heracles' position in it is intrusive; it could have been any Greek. The far-traveling Heracles, however, was the mythical hero most likely to be in a foreign land. Its popularity was due to several factors. The Greeks who had been victims of the Egyptian policy of exclusiveness and xenophobia could see in it the Greek victory over the Egyptian, a victory which heralded a change of attitude, an attitude which had in reality changed by the time of the Saite dynasty. Secondly, the Greek feeling of superiority over the barbarian could vent itself. This is seen particularly on vase paintings where the contrast between the large strong Greek hero and the small cowardly Egyptian king is strongly marked. Finally, it gave an opportunity for humorous treatment. Unfortunately foreigners seem humorous to many people.

This legend, then, with its Egyptian coloring must have first developed among the Greeks in Egypt, for there are too many

(Negroes) in Egyptian art. Negro tributaries are seen with thick lips and wearing earrings (often seen on Greek vases; cf. *Egyptian Painting* (New York 1954) 121, and *Art of Ancient Egypt* (above, note 20) 266.

[46] Representations in Egyptian painting and sculpture show that this was typical male costume.

[47] For consideration of Greek knowledge of Negroes, see G. Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek Art* (Baltimore 1929).

Egyptian elements in it to have come into existence among people who had only a hearsay knowledge of that country. It does not seem to be early. Although Heracles is an early hero (Mycenaean), this does not belong among his oldest labors. Rather it seems to have come into being in the sixth century, perhaps at Naucratis, and was carried to Greece by traders or travelers. As contact with Egypt increased, more details were added. Its tone is that of the period between the Mycenaean age and the Saite dynasty rather than of the sixth century.

VI

Because of their exotic setting, these four "myths" stand out among the whole body of Greek myths and legends. From them it can be seen that the Greeks possessed a vague store of information concerning Egypt which was derived from the Mycenaean period and was reinforced in the sixth and fifth centuries by the more accurate observations of travelers. Upon the Greeks, this country so different from their own cast a spell. The Greek tourists were impressed by its antiquity, wealth, and the splendor of its monuments. They gained a superficial knowledge of its gods and religious rites from guides and lesser priests but seemingly had little opportunity to meet the more important priests.

The Greeks who dwelt in Naucratis had, of course, ample opportunity to acquire a real knowledge of the country: its religion, art and history. Unlike the casual traveler or merchant on a short visit, they had time to learn the language, read the literature, visit monuments, and observe the processions and festivals. To what extent they made use of their advantages we do not know. It is difficult to tell how much intercourse there was at any given time between Greek and Egyptian. At some periods strong feelings of nationalism on the part of the Egyptians caused them to look upon the Greeks with suspicion, while at other times they welcomed them. Of course the situation changed after the conquest of Alexander and the consequent rule of the Ptolemies. On their part, the Greeks, although feeling superior in general to barbarians, were impressed by the antiquity of Egypt, if not by the Egyptians they knew personally.

Although Egypt and Greece were very different in culture, natural environment, and national customs, there was some

contact between them and interacting influence. The most tangible proof of this is the objects of trade. There is proof, however, of a less material nature. Egyptian influence on the architecture and art of Greece has often been noted. The Greeks believed that they owed a debt to the country of the Nile in the fields of mathematics and philosophy. Mythology is another realm in which there are Egyptian elements, as the stories of Io, Helen, the Danaides, and Busiris show. These reveal in their plot and visual form features drawn from the religion, art, and history of Egypt. The myths, however, are Greek in spirit despite these borrowings and influences.

"And let us note that whatever the Greeks acquire from foreigners is finally turned by them into something finer" (Pseudo-Plato, *Epinomis* 987D).[48]

[48] This translation and the others used in this paper are from the Loeb Classical Library.