

# Finding Truths among the “Lies”: Fact-Checking Herodotus’s Egypt in the Long Eighteenth Century

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## ABSTRACT

This article treats the reception history of Herodotus—reputed to be both “the father of history” and “the father of lies”—between about 1670 and 1850. It focuses attention on book 2 of *The Histories*, in which Herodotus offers an extensive, and ostensibly firsthand, account of the monuments, geography, customs, flora, and fauna of Egypt. Most arrestingly for modern European readers, book 2 also contains descriptions of Egyptian religious practices and a chronology of Egyptian kings. Crucially, however, much of what Herodotus reports on these two subjects he learned not directly, but by listening to accounts of men whom he labeled “Egyptian priests.” In the eighteenth century in particular, I argue, these “priests” and their indirect testimony began to pose a serious historiographical problem: had Herodotus, naively, trusted them too much? If so, was his credibility with respect to the other contents of the “oriental” prelude to *The Histories* (books 1–4) impugned? The essay shows that, while some skeptics, and especially philhellenes, favored relegating books 1–4 entirely to the status of myth, “orientalists,” and especially those eager to save the credibility of the Old Testament, defended Herodotus. Their faith in him, I conclude, kept alive belief in the possibility of reconstructing Near Eastern antiquity before the great age of decipherments and archaeological finds began.

What does it tell those of us who count ourselves practitioners of history that the universally acclaimed “father of history,” Herodotus, has never been considered entirely trustworthy? Even Herodotus’s great admirers, including his near-contemporary Thucydides, thought him all too willing to please by reporting improbable or salacious stories, and those who have wanted to defend him

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have often resorted to fancy footwork to explain how he knew about the intimate relations of Persian kings or the gigantic gold-digging ants of India. Plutarch's famous denunciation *On the Malice of Herodotus* (ca. 100 CE) had a different aim in view: revealing the roguish and perhaps venal character of the historian, who was all too willing to accept the accounts of the "barbarians"—and to offer scurrilous portrayals of some of the Greeks, including Plutarch's fellow Boeotians. Although almost universally praised, after Aristotle, for his simple and engaging literary style, Herodotus's truthfulness was maligned not only by Plutarch but also by a series of envious Near Eastern writers. J. A. S. Evans once wonderfully dubbed "inside dopesters."<sup>1</sup> And yet, eager to gain insight into a period of ancient history nowhere else told in such detail and with such panache, European readers have generally agreed that it would be foolhardy to throw out the Herodotean baby with his pseudo-Homeric, digressive, and sensationalizing bathwater. We have thus been stuck with a "father of history" who is also, as Juan Vives first put it, "the father of lies."<sup>2</sup>

Among ancient authors, and most especially Plutarch and the "inside dopesters," the key problem was Herodotus's deliberate desire to mislead, either from his "malicious" philobarbarism or his wish to entertain his readers. For post-Renaissance scholars, the subject of this essay, the problem was a somewhat different one; even most critics agreed that his intentions were honorable, but assaulted his methods as naive or flawed. This was a different sort of "lying": the naive or garbled reportage of "wonderful" and ill-sourced information. Worries of this sort related particularly to the first four of the nine books of Herodotus's *Histories*, the so-called oriental prelude, which contain precise descriptions of lost monuments as well as timeless zoological and geographic information about the flying snakes of Arabia and the flooding patterns of the Nile. By Herodotus's own admission (e.g., 2.99), while he had confirmed some wonders with his own eyes, in other matters he had depended on oral accounts given to him by local informants, persons he referred to collectively as "the Persians," "the Phoenicians," and the most voluble and dodgy, "the Egyptian priests." As books 5–9 treat the wars proper, their credibility was better assured by Herodotus's proximity in time and space to the events narrated and by the increasingly emphasized fact that he was a native Greek speaker (there is no sign he learned other languages) and, although too young to have experienced the Persian wars directly, could have interviewed those who did. When early modern and modern scholars debated the credibility of Herodotus,

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1. J. A. S. Evans, "Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus," *Classical Journal* 64 (1968): 11, 13–14.

2. Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography," *History* 43, no. 147 (1958): 1.

the key question has generally not been whether to trust books 5–9, but whether or not to treat books 1–4 as “real” history, or myth, or lies.

And debate the credibility of these books scholars did, never so widely as in the period between about 1670 and 1850, the period covered by this essay. In the era before hieroglyphic and cuneiform decipherments and extensive archaeological excavation in the Near East, and before classical and “oriental” philologies parted disciplinary ways, the credibility of these four books was no minor question. The history of the ancient Near East was of great interest not only to biblical exegetes and universal historians (often one and the same) but also to geographers and travelers (often one and the same), and even to historicizing painters and playwrights.

Herodotus was of course not the only secular source with which to reconstruct the history of the ancient Near East; writers could also consult Diodoros Siculus, Xenophon (for the Alexandrian period), the “dopesters,” and other Hellenistic sources. But Herodotus was the earliest author and the most detailed on many matters, and, crucially, books 1 and 2 in particular contain material that could, in some way, be linked to the world of the Old Testament, for example, his detailing of the great temple of Belus in Babylon and his mentions of Sennacerib and Cyrus. Many authors wanted to use his information, but knew they had to navigate around “wondrous” aspects (such as the enormous sizes of Babylon and Gelonus) and contradictions with other texts (such as the radically different biography of Cyrus given by Xenophon, and the Old Testament’s much more miraculous account of Sennacerib’s defeat). And then there was the problem—articulated by Herodotus himself—of the trustworthiness of oral informants. This, as we shall see, became a more clearly articulated methodological problem, culminating in Voltaire’s famous statement that Herodotus could only be trusted for what he saw, and not for what he heard, a principle that conforms to Enlightened notions of science and critical strictures against the admission of hearsay, but then, as now, threatens to condemn the whole of the “prelude” to the mythical dustbin.<sup>3</sup>

In Momigliano’s essay, the sixteenth century marks the starting point of Herodotus’s newfound respectability, and I agree that the discovery of the New World and the Reformation gave Herodotus new purchase, in the first case for his sophisticated travel reportage, and in the second for his detailed information about the Near East in biblical times. I am inclined, however, to think the latter a more important impetus to the scholarly reading and use of *The Histories*; especially from the later seventeenth

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3. As we are able to read and understand more and more Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian sources, it has become more common to treat Herodotus’s tales as purely Greek and imaginary or even “orientalizing”; but this avoids the tough questions of how much accurate information his narrative does contain. See, here, Thomas Harrison, *Writing Ancient Persia* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2011).

century forward, Herodotus seems to have become a favorite archive to be used in the great interconfessional scholarly competitions of the age so beautifully dissected by Dmitri Levitin and Scott Mandelbrote.<sup>4</sup> His upgrading, I argue, owed a great deal to the need for specific facts to be deployed in response to the spread of Pyrrhonist thought, which Anton Matytsin's brilliant work brought into focus.<sup>5</sup> What this essay shows is a rather uncomfortable pattern that Momigliano did not thematize: especially by the mid-eighteenth century, many of Herodotus's greatest champions had another, larger goal in mind, that of elaborating and saving the historical truth of the Hebrew Bible.

Because Herodotus's *Histories* are so all-encompassing, to tell the story of his early modern reception I have chosen to focus in particular on the reception of book 2, which contains his main discussions of Egyptian history, religion, geography, and zoology, and which, for early modern scholars, provided eagerly sought after contextual data for the region where Moses became "learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22).<sup>6</sup> Even within book 2, there are dozens of critical passages one could survey, from Herodotus's discussion of the transmigration of souls (2.123) to his entertaining account of the field mice who chewed up the sandals and bows of Sennacerib's invading army (2.141). Thus I have selected two key passages that were of particular interest to the two kinds of scholars I want to profile here, the chronologists and the mythographers, 2.142 and 2.52, respectively. The content of those passages will be further explicated below, as will the periods in which they were, sequentially, most central to the debate about Herodotus's trustworthiness. While the essay deals with the European "republic of letters" generally, the focus shifts from Italy, England, and France in the earlier period to the German states in the post-Enlightenment era, and it is there we will see the full impact of the institutionalization of historicist philology and the splitting off of classical and oriental philologies on the reputation of the "oriental prelude" in general and of book 2 in particular. As the conclusion indicates, those who remained willing to trust in Herodotus and his informants—often for apologetic reasons—would

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4. See, e.g., Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Dmitri Levitin and Scott Mandelbrote, "Becoming Heterodox in 17th-Century Cambridge: The Case of Isaac Newton," in *Confessionalisation and Erudition in Early Modern Europe: An Episode in the History of the Humanities*, ed. Nicholas Hardy and Dmitri Levitin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 301–71.

5. Anton Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), esp. chap. 10.

6. Jan Assmann pointed to the importance of this passage in *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 55. Recently, Mordechai Feingold has shown that by no means was its invocation new in the Enlightenment; see "The Wisdom of the Egyptians': Revisiting Jan Assmann's Reading of the Early Modern Reception of Moses," *Aegyptiaca: Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt* 4 (2019): 99–124.

be richly rewarded by a cascade of philological and archaeological discoveries in the decades after this story ends.

As every close reader of *The Histories* knows, Herodotus himself did not always trust his native informants, including those critically important Egyptian priests; nor did his readers trust them, for a variety of reasons. Some were squeamish about trusting self-aggrandizing pagans, others about trusting devious or ignorant priests. Toward the end of this story, a new reason for distrust emerges: that they were Egyptians and, therefore, “orientals.” But even so, quite a few Europeans did not want to dispense with their testimony entirely, and sought eagerly for pragmatic means to test, and if possible, verify Herodotus’s facts. Their struggles have much to tell us about the evolution of modern humanistic practices, and the debts we owe, perhaps uncomfortably, not only to skeptics but also to those who have wanted to shore up their beliefs.

### THE CHRONOLOGERS AND THE EGYPTIAN KINGS

It might be useful to begin with a brief survey of Herodotus’s status from the late medieval to the early modern period. Passages from *The Histories* seem to have circulated in the West even before the first known full Greek version was produced in 1318 by Nikolaos Triklines, possibly working in Thessaloniki.<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo Valla was commissioned to do a Latin translation in 1452 and seems to have finished it by 1457 (Alberti already knew at least some passages by 1462); it was printed in 1474; an Italian translation (by Matteo Maria Boiardo) could be consulted by 1491.<sup>8</sup> One of the things Renaissance readers loved most in Herodotus was his celebration of Egypt as the land of wonders, which dovetailed nicely with Hermetic fascinations and with Roman enthusiasm for obelisks and hieroglyphs. His accounts of Egypt’s exotic geography, animals, and customs offered a fine model for travelers, such as Francisco López de Gómara, the mid-sixteenth-century chronicler of Cortés’s exploits.<sup>9</sup> Books 1 and 2, claimed their first English translator in 1584, not only were diverting but offered scintillating bits

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7. Pascal Payen, “Hérodote et la modélisation de l’histoire à la Renaissance (XVe-XVIe siècles),” in *Hérodote à la Renaissance: Études réunies*, ed. Susanna Gambino Longo (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 129; on Byzantine copies, see Anthony Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2014), 259.

8. On Renaissance uses of Herodotus, see Anthony Grafton, “Herodotus,” in *The Classical Tradition*, ed. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010), 434–35, and *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 120–21.

9. Anthony Grafton, April Shelford, and Nancy Sirasi, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 138.

of “newes,” “which I confesse are in many poyntes straunge, but for the most parte true.”<sup>10</sup>

From the Renaissance forward, Herodotus’s *Histories*—and books 1 and 2 in particular—would amuse generations of European readers; painters and playwrights too repeatedly turned to his work for exemplary stories. But this sort of reading could go on without much concern for the accuracy of Herodotus’s information. Our English reader, above, had to be satisfied with the statement that Herodotus’s “newes” was “for the most parte true.” Even general debates about Herodotus’s trustworthiness did not necessarily involve his facts. The Genevan polemicist Henri Estienne’s *Apologie pour Hérodote* (1566) might have been very popular, but its claims that Herodotus’s Egyptian wonders were no less incredible than the miracles claimed for Catholic saints hardly convinced many to trust the Greek’s data. Estienne did invoke the Egyptian priests but only to claim that their silly rituals were far less bizarre than those of “the superstitious Masse-priests” of his own day.<sup>11</sup> What brought Herodotus’s dependability as a provider of information into the limelight, I would argue, was not the Reformation or even expanding travel per se, but the Greek historians’ enrollment in erudite debates about biblical chronology, and most particularly his use by the great chronologer Joseph Scaliger.

As Anthony Grafton showed long ago, Scaliger took aim at the widely used forgeries of Anniius of Viterbo that formed Europeans’ only extra-biblical “documents” for the early history of the Near East. Deploying his remarkable philological and critical skills, Scaliger returned to a much earlier source, recovering excerpts from Eusebius’s *Chronicle*, which contained a list of thirty-one dynasties compiled from the lost accounts of the Egyptian priest Manetho (third century BCE). Not only did this list differ from those of Julius Africanus and the Alexandrian scholar Eratosthenes, it also made Egyptian history start in 5285 BCE, long before the Creation, even in the longer chronology derived from the Septuagint.<sup>12</sup> Although, as Grafton noted, Scaliger was unable to reconcile this long chronology with scriptural dates, his work posed a key question of trust: could Christian scholars ignore pagan “documents” and rely on scripture alone? Believing that

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10. *The Famous Hystory of Herodotus: Conteyning the Discourse of dyuers Countreys, the succession of theyr kyngs; the actes and exploytes atchieued by them; the Lavves and customes of euery Nation with the true Description and Antiquitie of the same* (London: Thomas Marthe, 1584). I am quoting here from the dedication to Robert Dormer, and the further “To the Gentleman Readers,” from “your very friende B.R.”

11. I quote from the English translation of 1608: Henri Estienne, *A World of Wonders or An Introduction to a Treatise Touching the Conformite of Ancient and Moderne Wonders; or A Preparative Treatise to the Apologie for Herodotus*, trans. Henry Stephen (Edinburgh: Andrew Hart & Richard Lawson, 1608), 4.

12. Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 157.

Herodotus, as “a foreigner,” had been tricked by the priests or perhaps, like other Greeks, “thought it was comic to mix falsehoods with the truth,” Scaliger believed Manetho, “an Egyptian by descent and dwelling, and a priest,” more likely to have seen and understood ancient records.<sup>13</sup>

Scaliger may have preferred Manetho, but he had not resolved the problem of an Egyptian chronology that stretched long beyond the biblical dates for Creation. As Grafton explains, the impetus for widened debate on the matter began with Gerhard Vossius’s 1641 foreshortening of Egyptian chronologies by proposing that some kings had reigned in different parts of Egypt at the same time. John Marsham’s 1672 *Chronica canon Aegypticus, Ebraicus, Graecus et disquisitiones* furthered this condensation project and sought to widen his understanding of what it might mean for Jewish culture and religion to have been derived from that of the Egyptians, an endeavor shared by his contemporary John Spencer.<sup>14</sup> Already in his 1645 French translation of *The Histories*, Pierre du Ryer had made a plea for wider reading of Herodotus, as “we have no other book which allows us to reconcile the sacred chronology with profane histories with such certainty.”<sup>15</sup> But it was probably Marsham’s attempt to reconcile Egyptian information with scriptural detail that pushed Herodotus’s more concrete Egyptian “facts” to the fore. Central among these was Hdt. 2.142, in which Herodotus dated the first Egyptian king to roughly 11,790 BCE (11,340 plus about 450, the approximate date of the Greek historian’s visit to Egypt). This passage would go on to be one of the most frequently discussed of the century to come, though it was not, of course, the only text involved in the fierce debate about the Egyptian dynasties and their dates.<sup>16</sup>

Herodotus’s passage put the first king long even before the date Bishop Ussher had calculated for Creation (4004 BCE) and was further complicated by the fact that it counted generations rather than kings, estimating (roughly) that every generation lasted 33.33 years, a point of major controversy. Moreover, Herodotus also noted here the priests’ report that during this period, the sun had twice risen where it was supposed to set, and set where it normally rises, an improbability that put readers on their

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13. Anthony Grafton, “Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline,” *History and Theory* 14, no. 2 (May 1975): 171–72.

14. Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 156, 160–71.

15. Pierre Du Ryer, preface to *Les Histoires d’Hérodote, mises en françois* (Paris: Antoine Somma-ville, 1645).

16. For some lists of post-Scaliger interlocutors, see A. J. Saint-Martin, “Considérations sur l’histoire d’Égypte en générale et sur les systèmes d’Hérodote et de Diodore en particulier” (1823), in *Mémoires de l’Institut Royal de France: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1837), 76, 78–79; and J. A. Letronne, “Observations sur un passage de Diodore de Sicile relative à la durée de l’empire égyptien et sur le passage d’Hérodote relative aux changements survenus dans le cours du soleil en Égypte selon le récit des prêtres” (1823), *ibid.*, 104.

guard. The trickiness of the passage meant that early commentators collatorized the kings, as had Vossius and Marsham, or simply ignored it, as did Ussher, who in 1658 deployed Herodotus for safer Assyrian, Persian, and Greek dates but omitted mention of 2.142 and most references to book 2 itself.<sup>17</sup> But increasingly authors felt they had to explain why one should or should not trust the Egyptians—or Herodotus and other Greeks—on their facts. In his *Ductor historicus: A Short System of Universal History* (first edition, 1698), Thomas Hearne blamed the Egyptians for spreading misinformation. Their own historical knowledge was so imperfect, Hearne argued, “that even in the Days of Herodotus they could give no certain Account of the Building of the Pyramids, or the Time of their great Monarch Sesostris.” Plato had been right about the priests, he maintained: they were “miserably ignorant of antiquity.”<sup>18</sup>

Writing just a little later, the French excerpter of ancient historians Louis Ellies Du Pin, abbot of Claraval, began to put some clear water between the priests and their Greek interlocutor, whose work, he argued “agrees much better with sacred history (which is the touchstone) than those of Ctesias, Xenophon, and many other authors.”<sup>19</sup> Herodotus himself had not trusted the priests, Du Pin claimed, giving him further reason to discount the 11,340 years reported in 2.142: “this is what he was told by the Egyptian priests, and which is not less fabulous than the genealogies and statues of priests and kings that they showed him at Thebes, or indeed all that they say of their gods.”<sup>20</sup> Herodotus, whose “character of sincerity” Du Pin admired, was off the hook.<sup>21</sup> If his informants could be blamed, perhaps the rest of his wide-ranging testimony—and the scriptural “touchstone”—could be saved.<sup>22</sup>

As the seventeenth century closed, scholars of many confessional stripes entered the fray, defending one or another form of allegorical reading, ritual practice, or relationship between reason and revelation. Sources of all sorts were invoked to widen the ancient oriental historians’ ambit. Travelers, missionaries, and unorthodox scholars began to ponder the disturbingly deep antiquity of Indian and Chinese civilizations and to speculate about the relationship of these cultures to the descendants of Adam,

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17. See the opening chapters of James Ussher, *The Annals of the World* (London: E. Tyler, 1658).

18. Thomas Hearne, *Ductor Historicus; or, A Short System of Universal History, and an Introduction to the Study of It*, 3rd ed. (London: Tim. Childe, 1714), 15–16.

19. Dupin, *Bibliothèque universelle des historiens* (Paris: Pierre Giffart, 1707), 290.

20. *Ibid.*, 329–30.

21. On Herodotus’s character, see *ibid.*, 288–89.

22. When other authors came closer to scriptural details, they were also preferred. So, for example, with respect to the life of Cyrus, the English universal history preferred Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, for this text, “from its conformity to holy writ, appears evidently to be a true history, and not a *military romance*”; see William Guthrie and John Gray, et al., *A General History of the World from the Creation to the Present Time*, vol. 2 (London: J. Newberry et al. 1764), 128.



provoking new competitions to locate and date the world’s earliest “scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> Universal histories, sticking mostly to ancient events, proliferated. In this atmosphere, some of the Renaissance’s wonder wore off, and Herodotus’s Egyptian “facts” gradually became more appealing than worrying to scriptural defenders, who also liked the fact that the Greek historian was at least respectful of religion and the gods.

Herodotus’s readership and popularity rose as vernacular translations began to multiply. Pierre Du Ryer’s French translation (1645; fourth edition, 1713), was followed in 1707 by du Pin’s excerpts (121 pages from Herodotus, compared to only 74 for Thucydides).<sup>24</sup> A first full English translation, by Isaac Littlebury, appeared in 1709, making Herodotus’s data more easily accessible for historians like Charles Rollin, seeking to flesh out the manners and customs of the Egyptians, and for theologians like Humphrey Prideaux, dean of Norwich, who found in book 2 what he described as “disguised account” of the Babylonian Captivity.<sup>25</sup> Prideaux drew extensively on Herodotean detail in *The Old and New Testament Connected to the History of the Jews and the Neighbouring Nations* (2 vols., 1715–17), whose sales were voluminous; a German translation appeared in 1721, and a French one in 1728. For Prideaux, Herodotus was an invaluable bridge between sacred and profane histories. But he was well aware that Herodotus was neither explicit nor fully reliable enough to use to *correct* the scriptures. With respect to his Egyptian history, he worried that the traveling ethnographer “did as travelers used to do, that is put down all Relations upon trust, as he met with them, and no doubt he was imposed on in many of them.”<sup>26</sup> Prideaux thereby exposed a key problem: even a sincere Herodotus could not be trusted where his sources were untrustworthy; one would have to fix the source problem if one wanted to use his data for a convincing apologetics.

Several other important scholars were eager to shore up biblical chronology by simply ignoring Indian and Chinese information and focusing instead on getting Egyptian and biblical chronologies on the same pages. Isaac Newton belongs to this camp, though the great mathematician also sought to reconcile sacred and classical chronologies with his own astronomical calculations. The result was his *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended*, an unauthorized copy of which made it to France—and the Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres—in 1725. There has been excellent work published on

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23. Here see Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

24. Dupin’s collection was also heavily weighted toward books 1–4.

25. Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and the New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations from the Declension of the Nations of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, 9th ed. (London: R. Knaplock, 1725), 35.

26. *Ibid.*, 156.

Newton's project, its intentions, and the controversies it spawned.<sup>27</sup> What has not been noted about Newton's *Chronology* is just how much it depended on a particular reading of Herodotus—one that solved the problem of his deep chronology not simply by blaming the Egyptian priests but by explaining their errors and emending their testimony.

Here Newton depended heavily, almost exclusively, on Hdt. 2.142, but in a move exemplary of the triumph of the “moderns” over the “ancients,” he confidently corrected Herodotus's account. Newton actually opened his work with an attack on the vanity of the Egyptian priests, “who had so exaggerated their history before the days of Herodotus as to tell him that from Menes to Moeris . . . there were 330 kings, whose reigns took up . . . eleven thousand years. They had filled up that interval with imaginary kings, who had done nothing!”<sup>28</sup> Taking his cue from 2.100–102, where Herodotus skipped the many rulers between Queen Nitocris and Sesostris (excepting only Moeris), Newton winnowed Herodotus's number of kings to thirty, some of whom might also have ruled parts of Egypt concurrently. Sesostris, according to Newton, was the earliest of these, and had reigned from 998 to 951 BCE, comfortably long after the Creation and the time of Moses.<sup>29</sup> Newton threw out later accounts too—most especially the even deeper chronology of Manetho—on the grounds that the writers of these texts had lived “after the priests of Egypt had corrupted their antiquities much more than they had done in the days of Herodotus.”<sup>30</sup> Putting the blame on the priests made it possible both to *trust* Herodotus and to *correct* him.

Newton's physics may have won general consent, but by no means was that the case with his chronology. The great French scholar Nicolas Fréret faulted Newton for not believing the priests, the civil and religious “magistrates” of the time, who had access to temple archives and monuments; why should one trust an eighteenth-century mathematician instead of the Egyptians themselves? he asked.<sup>31</sup> The learned English clergyman William Warburton noted that Newton's “low antiquity of Egypt” could just as

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27. See Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Sir Isaac Newton, *Newton's Revised History of Ancient Kingdoms: A Complete Chronology*, ed. Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 12; and J. Z. Buchwald and Mordechai Feingold, *Newton and the Origins of Civilization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

28. See *Newton's Revised History of Ancient Kingdoms*, 12.

29. *Ibid.*, 85–91, quotation at 85.

30. *Ibid.*, 91.

31. For a discussion of this controversy, see Anton Matytsin, “The Quarrel over Chronology at the *Académie des Inscriptions*: Ancient History, Modern Methods, and the Autonomy of the Historical Discipline,” in *The Long Quarrel: Past and Present in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Jacques Bos and Jan Rotmans (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

easily be set against the scriptures as the “high antiquity” of the freethinkers.<sup>32</sup> But in the absence of readable Egyptian “documents,” the question was irresolvable, and combatants increasingly seemed to choose their dates and sources arbitrarily. Already by the 1740s, the divergence of their claims made room for the spread of a widening band of historical Pyrrhonism that threatened to engulf Herodotus along with all of ancient prehistory.<sup>33</sup>

The hoary science of chronology—on which, of course, historical reasoning had perforce to rest—was especially at risk. By the time of his death in 1746, Jean Bouhier, president of the Parlement of Bourgogne and a member of the Académie française, had concluded that the attempts to synthesize dates made by Ussher, Marsham, Newton, and others were senseless; as each ancient author had his own aims and conceptions, he argued, one had to fix each of their systems separately rather than cherry-pick data that seemed to harmonize. “If we have no sure foundation at all to prefer one chronology over another, there is no other resource than plausibility [*vraisemblance*].”<sup>34</sup> The road to achieving plausibility, Bouhier argued in his *Recherches et dissertations sur Hérodote* (1746), had to be carefully constructed, by choosing the “surest guide” (Herodotus, of course), as well as “the testimony which accords best with Holy Scripture, which is the foundational principle of all sound chronology.”<sup>35</sup> But Herodotus’s chronology then had to be understood in its own terms, and his errors not just corrected but explained. Bouhier also lamented the vanity and deliberate secretiveness of the priests—who, for example, had concealed the fact that Egypt had been rescued from Sennacerib’s armies not by field mice but by the intervention of the king of Ethiopia. But he believed the careful reconstruction of Herodotus’s chronology would bring order and stability to ancient history, a history that was needed for another critical task in which Herodotus was useful beyond all others: the reconstruction of the origins of the world’s peoples.<sup>36</sup>

We begin to see a fascinating historiographical pivot here, from the attempt to synthesize and harmonize sacred and profane authors to something more like a historicized critique, in which the errors and particularities of ancient authors are not simply dismissed but become a subject of attention and analysis in their own right. This

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32. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, vol. 2 (London: A. Thomas Tegg & Son, 1837), 91.

33. See Matytsin, *Specter of Skepticism*, 233–63. With respect to Herodotus, in 1729, Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy posed the radical question, why even bother trusting Herodotus at all? See *Méthode pour étudier l’histoire*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Pierre Gandouin, 1739), 250, 301.

34. Jean Bouhier, *Recherches et dissertations sur Hérodote* (Dijon: Pierre de Saint, 1746), i–ii, quotation at 14.

35. *Ibid.*, 60.

36. *Ibid.*, *Recherches*, 71–72, i.

was the case in François Geinoz's vindication of Herodotus in the Académie des Inscriptions, in which the Swiss Jesuit blamed the historian's premodern mindset for what were not lies but rather the results of naive reportage or a Homeric and religious approach to storytelling. A mistake or a misinterpretation in *The Histories* should not impugn Herodotus's character but tell us instead about his narratological intentions or what his age thought history should be.<sup>37</sup> Geinoz's defense, interestingly, strongly parallels the Neologist reading of the scriptures being developed at German Protestant universities in the 1740s and 1750s. Here, Moses too would be considered a writer (albeit inspired) of his own time, able only to think and speak in its more primitive language.<sup>38</sup> And just as this move would shift the defense of the Old Testament to a different plane, decoupling it from full literalism and sparing exegetes from the need to resolve all contradictions, so too would Geinoz's method of defense help to save the "father of lies" from the Pyrrhonist dustbin.

We can see, here, the move toward a sort of historiographical pragmatism, in which apologetics—and readings of Herodotus—moved to a new plane, one in which scholars settled for indirect forms of profane proof when they found it too difficult or controversial to provide direct confirmation of biblical passages.<sup>39</sup> This seems to have become an ever more ardently pursued endeavor, by both Catholics and Protestants, as disappointment mounted that ancient testimonies, and a growing volume of "oriental" material, offered so few direct points of contact between profane and sacred histories. Voltaire's provocations, in his *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756) and *Philosophie d'histoire* (1765), stung: the Old Testament, he asserted, was no more than a collection of "oriental fables," and the Israelites clearly a trivial people, as the ancient classical authors had scarcely written a word about them. That was a claim—prefiguring even more explosive nineteenth-century battles over the scanty extra-biblical evidence for life of Jesus—that scholarly believers could not let stand.

We have not yet appreciated the extent of the apologetic response to Voltaire, one that involved the outpouring of numerous data-rich treatises such as Jesuit priest Pierre Marie Stanislaus Guérin de Rocher's *Histoire véritable des temps fabuleux* (1776–78). In this three-volume tome, the learned author reiterated the anti-Pyrrhonist mantra that the obscurity of chronology and the difficulties of establishing which sources were

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37. François Geinoz, "Défense d'Hérodote contre des accusations de Plutarque: Premier mémoire" (1744), in *Mémoires de littérature tirés des registres de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, vol. 19 (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1753), 115–45.

38. On neology and those who drew from it, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 90–115, 181–217.

39. The development of this sort of pragmatism is central to Matytsin's *Specter of Skepticism*; early drafts of my essay, written before I encountered this work, arrived at similar observations.

credible could not be used as excuses to dismiss the whole pre-Greek era as mythical, for, after all, this was the period most interesting for the whole of the human race.<sup>40</sup> Without thinking all truth was allegorical, Guérin de Rocher wrote, one could still believe that the ancient Orient had provided, sometimes in fabulous forms, precious testimonies and *vestiges*—a word already in wide hermetic and apologetic use—of the true faith.<sup>41</sup> One did not have to see—as had Pierre Daniel Huet—all of antiquity as a distorted form of sacred history to see that there was still “constant and continuous rapport” between the two systems,<sup>42</sup> if one just looked to the right sources—chief among which would be, as readers have surely guessed by now, Herodotus. In fact, over his three volumes, Guérin de Rocher cited Herodotus more than 650 times, relying on him to provide secure facts about such things as the Egyptian diet, climate, and, of course, the sequence of kings. In 1779, a fellow Jesuit compiled a synthetic volume delivering Guérin’s main findings, giving the book a title that perfectly sums up the author’s apologetic intent: *Herodotus, Historian of the People of Israel without Knowing It*.<sup>43</sup> Republication of this edition continued long into the nineteenth century, given extra pathos by Guérin de Rocher’s martyrdom—as Marie Antoinette’s confessor—in 1792.

Battles over Herodotean chronology continued, even as it became clear that the Greek author’s dates would provide only “rapport” between sacred and profane systems. But rapport—and most authors agreed Herodotus offered the best chance for this—was important. Contributors to the subject late in the century included Pierre-Henri Larcher, who took over Bouhier’s project to create a modern edition of Herodotus, and ended up with a nine-volume work. In most of his first volumes (1786–90), Larcher took a moderately critical attitude toward biblical chronology, but proclaimed the chronology in 2.142 ridiculously long, and part of the priests’ attempt to prove the great antiquity of their nation.<sup>44</sup> But as he aged (and the Revolution ran its course), Larcher retreated into a more ardent Catholicism; by the time his ninth volume, entirely devoted to chronology, appeared in 1802, he had massaged numerous passages to facilitate correspondence with the scriptures.<sup>45</sup> He was challenged in his own day by more radical chronologers, including the Comte de Volney and the atheist astronomer

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40. Stanislaus Guérin de Rocher, *Vrai histoire des tems fabuleux*, vol. 1 (Paris: Charles-Pierre Berton, 1776), xi–xiii, 6–7.

41. See, e.g., App, *Birth of Orientalism*, 29, 269, 284.

42. Guérin de Rocher, *Vrai histoire*, 1:xvii–xviii.

43. Abbé Chappell, *Hérodote, historien du peuple hébreu sans le savoir* (The Hague: Jean Mossy, 1785).

44. Pierre-Henri Larcher, *Histoire d’Hérodote, traduite du grec*, vol. 2 (Paris: Musier, 1786), 458.

45. José-Michel Moreaux, “Introduction,” in *La Défense de mon oncle, À Warburton*, ed. José-Michel Moureaux, *Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 64 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation 1984), 119; Jean François Boissonade, “Notice sur la vie et des écrits de feu M. Larcher,” in *Catalogue des livres rares et précieux de la Bibliothèque de Feu M. Pierre-Henri Larcher* (Paris: De Bures, Frères, 1814), xxix.

Joseph de Lalande, and bitter fights ensued.<sup>46</sup> Volney, at last, succeeded in cutting the Gordian knot, describing the differing Egyptian political contexts in which Herodotus's short and Manetho's long chronologies were composed. Unwilling to accept Herodotus's calculations as anything but improbable hypotheses, Volney hoped instead that the newly discovered zodiac of Denderah would offer scientifically dependable, impartial, dates.<sup>47</sup> Soon thereafter, the classical scholar Jean-Antoine Letronne advised that 2.142 had for much too long been "the cause for despair among all chronologists;" hereafter, he argued, it should simply be considered an elaborate Egyptian fiction.<sup>48</sup> One didn't need to trust the priests at all anymore.

### THE MYTHOGRAPHERS AND THE PRIESTS

In the wake of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition and Champollion's decipherment, the question of Egyptian chronology shifted away from battles over 2.142 toward calculations based on monuments, and Manetho gradually emerged as the more trustworthy ancient source. But increasingly there were other battles to be fought about Herodotus's Egypt, having to do less with biblical history than with universal mythography. As Frank Manuel demonstrated long ago, mythography was a major pursuit of the Enlightenment, one that also played out as a battle between skeptics—of various sorts—and those Matytsin calls antiskeptics, again with many different axes to grind.<sup>49</sup>

There is a long European tradition, in art and in scholarship, of deploying the classical pantheon for symbolic purposes—or supposedly symbolic purposes that also made room for a great deal more nudity and reveling than permitted for Christian artists and scholars. But these largely allegorical or typological readings—reading Adonis as divine, unobtainable beauty or Zarathustra and Plato as misunderstood versions of Moses—began to wear thin as the eighteenth century dawned. Moreover, as detailed information about non-western gods and rituals piled up—much of it compiled by missionaries seeking means of understanding and converting foreign peoples—questions increasingly arose about similarities between different cultures' gods. One response to this was a wave of Euhemerist "unveilings," in which writers exposed the real-world heroes or natural forces lying behind the gods, portraying their worshippers, whether foreign or ancient, as superstitious or confounded children. Another means to explain similarities, after the

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46. Jed Z. Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz, *The Zodiac of Paris: How an Improbable Controversy over an Ancient Egyptian Artifact Provoked a Modern Debate between Religion and Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 163.

47. Constantin François de Chasseboeuf, Comte de Volney, *Recherches nouvelles sur l'histoire ancienne*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Volney* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1860), 515, 523–24, 557.

48. Letronne, "Observations sur un passage," 111, 95.

49. Manuel, *Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*.

demise of allegorical readings, was to trace the diffusion of the gods, either by inventing etymological relationships or by revisiting well-known ancient passages such as 2.42–44, where Herodotus identifies Osiris with Dionysos and Ammon with Zeus and traces the deeply ancient origins of Hercules to Egypt or Phoenicia, and 2.50, where he expresses his conviction that “the names of the gods came to Hellas from barbarians.”<sup>50</sup> That the Egyptian priests remained key to the diffusionary process was perhaps most obvious in the radical works that combined Euhemerism with diffusionary conspiracy theories such as C. R. Dupuis’s anticlerical classic *L’Origine de tous les cultes*, in which the author charged the priests with turning mystified natural phenomena into portable divine abstractions.

Diffusionary mythography, however, did not make for trustworthy history; in the absence of decipherments and datable borrowings or interactions, the dependence of one culture on another was impossible to prove. Many etymologies turned out to be specious, and classical scholars began to question just how much they really could say for certain about ancient Egypt and Greek debts to Egyptian culture, a skeptical attitude that dovetailed nicely with an emerging philhellenism. J. J. Winckelmann, for example, adroitly avoided the question of Greece’s artistic debts to Egypt by treating Near Eastern art as an irrelevant prelude to the history of Greek art.<sup>51</sup> And Voltaire, in an essay titled “Le Pyrrhonisme dans l’histoire,” mounted a direct attack on Herodotus’s Egyptian and Persian material, arguing that “almost all that [Herodotus] relates on the authority of strangers is mythical [*fabuleux*], but all that he saw himself is true.” The implications of this principle were that most of the material in books 1–4 constituted only “a few vague accounts, enveloped in historical stories.”<sup>52</sup> For Voltaire, Herodotus’s history—and reliable history in general—then, only really began with Xerxes’s preparations for invading Greece. The reason for reading his work was certainly not to help the reader contextualize the Old Testament but rather to recognize “the superiority of a small but generous people, free while all of Asia was enslaved, is one of the most glorious [stories] among men,” an event that paralleled the Battle of Lepanto.<sup>53</sup> Voltaire had not

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50. The widely read English mythographer Jacob Bryant drew on Herodotus to establish “that almost the whole of the mythology of Greece is borrowed from Egypt” (*A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, vol. 1 [London: T. Payne, 1776], 185; see also 298–303).

51. His omissions did not escape Herder’s notice; see J. G. Herder, “Stücke aus einem älteren ‘Critischen Wäldchen’ (1767), in *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1858), 212–15, quotation at 215. Thanks to Elisabeth Décultot for this reference.

52. Voltaire, “Le Pyrrhonisme dans l’histoire,” in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 14 (Stuttgart: Frères Hartmann à la Haye, 1829), 25.

53. *Ibid.*, 26.

articulated directly the “clash of civilizations” thesis but stands as one of the eighteenth-century forerunners who pioneered this line of thought.

Simply discounting the Egyptians’ tales was acceptable to those whose real interest lay in Greek history and culture. But by no means were all scholars of the day willing to concede that all they thought they knew about Near Eastern history was fable. Nor were they willing to give up long-accepted claims that the Greeks had borrowed heavily from the Egyptians. In attempts to refurbish, with stronger scholarly timbers, the foundations of diffusionary mythography perhaps no passage was so widely invoked as Hdt. 2.52, where Herodotus said that the Pelasgians—the mysterious first settlers of the Greek mainland—had prayed to the gods but had not known the names of these gods until they learned the names from Egypt. The oracle at Dodona had subsequently confirmed that they should use the barbarians’ names. Not only did this and surrounding passages confirm the Greeks’ borrowings; Herodotus’s account also came with an implicit diffusionary map, from Egypt to the coast of Asia Minor (where the Pelasgians were thought to have originated), possibly by way of the Phoenicians, into Samothrace and then the Greek mainland. For those committed to the Near East’s centrality as an incubator of humankind’s religious sensibilities, this passage promised a means by which a prelinguistic history could be traced and, perhaps, verified.

It was to 2.52, Marianne Heidenreich testifies, that Göttingen professor C. G. Heyne returned more often than to any other in his explorations of myths—Greek, Egyptian, Nordic, and others—as primitive forms of philosophizing. In response to criticism from exacting philologists and Egyptophobes such as Christoph Meiners and Michael Hissmann, who called the Egyptians “a splenetic, superstitious, lazy people, who neglected the arts and sciences and surrendered to priestly tyranny,”<sup>54</sup> Heyne further historicized Egyptian (and Greek) testimonies, treating myths, like the hieroglyphs, as a defective, primitive form of communication that nonetheless contained kernels of universal truths.<sup>55</sup> Strains of this mythographic approach would find their way into the work of the Romantic Catholic Joseph Görres and into Friedrich Schlegel’s discussion of the language and wisdom of ancient India. By no means did all of Heyne’s contemporaries buy into it; his erstwhile students Friedrich Wolf and Johann Voss, for example, despised Heyne’s universalizing and diffusionary tendencies.<sup>56</sup> But the “symbolic” interpretations of myth before the eighteenth century’s end already made Hdt. 2.52 a passage of particular import, both for skeptics and for their antagonists.

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54. Marianne Heidenreich, *Christian Gottlob Heyne und die Alte Geschichte* (Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2006), 449, quotation at 536.

55. *Ibid.*, 537–88.

56. Michel L’Espanne, “Voss, Wolf, Heyne und ihre Homerverständnis,” in *Transformationen antiker Wissenschaften*, ed. Georg Toperfer and Hartmut Böhme (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 141–47.



But the most vehement and consequential battles involving Hdt 2.52 would be fought a few years after Heyne's death (1812), in response to the work of Heidelberg professor Friedrich Creuzer, not incidentally one of the most ardent Herodoteans of his age. From early in his career, Creuzer was deeply interested in and sympathetic toward Herodotus. He began a commentary even as Larcher was completing his edition, and before the century's turn Creuzer published a study of Thucydides and Herodotus that historicized their modes of writing and research. His pathbreaking study of the origins of Greek historical writing (1803) offered a Herderian interpretation of the mythopoetic origins of history writing, one that opens by citing Hdt. 2.52.<sup>57</sup> In this work, the transformation of symbols into names and stories was only the backdrop. In his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1810–12), however, Hdt. 2.52 would offer Creuzer his point of departure in his grand effort to trace the eastern origins of Greek myths and ideas.<sup>58</sup>

Drawing together neo-Platonic Egyptophilia with some of the most recent British Indology and German Romantic philosophy, Creuzer's *Symbolik* revived earlier discussions of the double nature of mystery cults, in which the higher priests perceived the deeper, usually monotheistic truths, while the masses are diverted and controlled by rituals and rules.<sup>59</sup> But Creuzer now put his priestly initiates into transcontinental motion, and claimed it philology's higher calling to find “the key to ancient belief and myth.” Where Dupuis's *Origine* was irreverent and wildly speculative, Creuzer's *Symbolik* was serious and studded with immense erudition. The sources, he claimed, were now all at hand to document this grand historical and theological endeavor. Topping the list was Herodotus, as the most ancient of historians, followed by the Neoplatonic philosophers, who were in a position “to bring to light many remarkable and forgotten details [*Datum*] about earlier religions.”<sup>60</sup>

The first reactions to the *Symbolik* were either positive or mildly critical, and Hdt. 2.52 featured in many of them, including F. W. J. Schelling's 1815 book on the gods of Samothrace, in which the philosopher claimed that the early Greek cults actually represented a purer form of primeval revelation.<sup>61</sup> A second edition of the *Symbolik* appeared

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57. Friedrich Creuzer, *Die historische Kunst der Griechen in ihrer Entstehung und Fortbildung* (Leipzig: George Joachim Göschen, 1803), 3–4. And see Stephen Larsen, “Friedrich Creuzer and the Study of Antiquity” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2008), 67–84.

58. Jan de Vries, *Perspectives in the History of Religion*, trans. Kees W. Bolle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 49.

59. See Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2014).

60. Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1810), x–xiv.

61. F. W. J. Schelling, *Ueber die Gottheiten von Samothrace* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1815), 31–33.

in 1819–21, and in France, Joseph-Daniel Guigniault began a translation in 1825 and found a host of fascinated readers stretching from Chateaubriand and Michelet to Flaubert. But for another group of scholars, Creuzer's work was more irritant than inspiration. In 1821, Creuzer was vehemently attacked by Johann Voss, the great translator of Homer and, as we have seen, already hostile to the symbolic interpretation of Greek myths. A confirmed rationalist and philhellene, Voss hated Romanticism, Catholicism, and Orientophilia with a passion, and saw Creuzer's work—and his fame—as an indication of the retrenchment of clerical and especially Catholic power.<sup>62</sup> He accused the Protestant professor of crypto-Catholicism and “obscurantist pseudo-mysticism” (*blindwühlende Atermystik*) and then went for Creuzer's evidentiary jugular: Herodotus. Evidence for Creuzer's theories could not be found in Homer or Hesiod, Voss argued; “No, in fact. . . . For the most direct influences of the most primeval symbols and age-old myths his witness is Herodotus, who, with others who are equally or more reprehensible, the Egyptian Priests [*Pfaffen*] made their acolytes.”<sup>63</sup>

Thus began a different sort of assault on Herodotus and the Egyptian priests, not for falsifying their nation's antiquity, but for claiming religious and cultural priority over the Greeks. Central in this affair was the milder but in the long run more influential critic of Creuzer, K. O. Müller, who also pilloried Herodotus, disputing, in particular the credibility of the priests. Herodotus, Müller argued, had not realized that there had been Ionians in Egypt for 200 years already, and the priests had already seized upon Greek wisdom and myths; “even in the physical description of their own country the Priests earlier or later offered Hellenic suppositions as if it were their own ancient wisdom.”<sup>64</sup> Herodotus was such an Egyptophile, and dupe of the priests, Müller argued, that he might just as well have claimed that the Spartans learned to value war from the Egyptians.<sup>65</sup> Eager to escape from Creuzerian diffusionism and speculation, Müller put his efforts into devising a “scientific” method by which to study Greek mythology and prehistory; his *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftliche Mythologie* (1825), was in fact, a sort of anti-*Symbolik*, arguing for an approach to myth that did without diffusionary explanations, without Herodotus's book 2, and especially without information that came from Egyptian priests. Tackling the problem of the origins of Dionysos

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62. On the Creuzer “Affair,” see George Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 137–50.

63. Johann Voss, *Anti-Symbolik*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1824), 14; “blindwühlende Atermystik” at 6.

64. K. O. Müller, *Geschichten hellenischer Stämme und Städte*, vol. 1, *Orchomenos und die Minyer* (Breslau: Josef Mar, 1820), 105.

65. *Ibid.*, 106.

and Heracles, Müller argued that it might be the case that a very few of Greece’s gods came from Egypt, but that information was so vague that it should be dismissed. Rather than trusting Herodotus, it was better for scientific classicists to trust Pausanias and to confine their attentions to Greece. Successive generations of classicists would do just that, discounting Greek borrowing and often taking potshots at the priests for, in the words of Jean-Antoine Letronne, “giv[ing] themselves an air of profundity by enveloping themselves in obscurity and refusing to tell us half of their thoughts, which would appear to us insignificant or false if they dared to speak more clearly.”<sup>66</sup>

The last incidents I have just described cover roughly the same ground as does the account in volume 1 of Martin Bernal’s infamous *Black Athena*, in which the author claims that an “ancient theory” of the origins of Greek culture in Egypt and the Semitic Near East was, in the 1820s, replaced by an “Aryan theory,” born of racist desires to give the Greeks an Indoeuropean pedigree.<sup>67</sup> Although Bernal had the time frame and some of the participants—notably K. O. Müller—right, I would argue that there is much more going on here than just racism, though surely there is some of that too. The critique of Herodotus, and the priests, was also a critique of unstable speculation, symbolic mythography, and above all, of oral information and hearsay. Classicists in the wake of the Creuzer Affair typically championed Greek autochthony rather than seeking the Greeks’ Aryan origins, and were probably motivated more by the desire to escape “oriental” history’s scholarly or clerical perils than to create a racially pure Greece.

We have seen, too, that discounting the Egyptians’ accounts, in the 1820s, was nothing new, though tendencies to add “orientalizing” insults certainly increased. But what Bernal—who himself trusted Herodotus almost implicitly—did not see is that if classicists like Müller after about 1825 dismissed the reliability of book 2, Herodotus did have his champions after that time, not among the classicists, but among the now much-reviled creatures that formed the ranks of the nineteenth-century orientalists.

### HERODOTUS AND THE PRIESTS REDEEMED?

It was, above all, scholarly Old Testament exegetes, orientalists, and geographers who defended the plausibility of books 1 and 2 through the positivist nineteenth century. For them, it was not enough for the first four books to tell one something about Greek mentalities; until they had sufficient direct testimony from Assyria, Egypt, and Persia,

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66. J. A. Letronne, quoted in A. F. Miot, *Histoire d’Hérodote*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1858), 16–17.

67. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

they still needed the ability to read those cultures through the remaining classical and biblical texts. To do so they often attacked or altered the testimony of the Egyptian priests. John Kendrick, for example, argued that they were lower, rather than higher, priests and were hence less knowledgeable; Richard Lepsius thought that Herodotus had confused ciceroni with priests.<sup>68</sup> But these “orientalists,” along with Old Testament theologians and ardent scholarly believers in scriptural truth, would keep alive the possibility that real knowledge was preserved in Herodotus’s first books; in many ways, it is to them that we must be grateful for upholding faith in Herodotus’s veracity and in that of his “oriental informants” through the years of high philhellenism and European imperialist hubris.<sup>69</sup>

A leading example of those who defended Herodotus’s Egyptian information, in spite of priestly distortions, was the Oxford divine and later Camden Professor of Ancient History George Rawlinson. It is no accident that it was Rawlinson, a committed Anglican and the author of numerous volumes on biblical and Near Eastern ancient history, who undertook a new English translation of Herodotus in the mid-1850s. Rawlinson’s scarcely concealed aim was to recement those “pegs” that supported the truth of the Old Testament; but to do so, he folded into his footnotes the latest orientalist researches of his brother Henry and his Egyptologist friend Gardiner Wilkinson, as well as many other recent archaeological and linguistic “moderns. We might see him as the natural successor of Prideaux and Guérin de Rocher, and like them he used the latest scholarly weapons, including corrected versions of Herodotus’s book 2, to launch his own assault on Pyrrhonism and unbelief.

Rawlinson’s was to be a fully fact-checked Herodotus, and the editor-translator was not soft on the Egyptians priests. They “magnified their antiquity beyond even their own notions of it,” he argued:

They concealed from him altogether the dark period in their history. . . . They knowingly falsified their monuments. . . . They succeeded in concealing all other invasions of their territory by the kings of Assyria and Babylon . . . they were

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68. O. Kimball Armayor, “Did Herodotus Ever Go to Egypt?,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 15 (1978): 64.

69. For more on this story, see Suzanne Marchand, “Herodotus as Anti-Classical Toolbox,” in *Herodotus in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Thomas Harrison and Joseph Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 71–99. Of course there were orientalist critics of Herodotus too, no more notorious than the Assyriologist A. H. Sayce, who in 1883 argued: “The net result of Oriental research in its bearing upon Herodotus is to show that the greater part of what he professes to tell us of the history of Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia, is really a collection of *Märchen*, or popular stories, current among the Greek loungers and half-caste dragomen on the skirts of the Persian empire” (*The Ancient Empires of the East: Herodotus 1–3* [London: FB & C, 1883], xi–xii).

willing to flatter their Greek allies, to bend their history into accordance with the mythology of the Hellenic race. . . . Thus in spite of the abundance of monumental records from which the Egyptian informants of our author had it in their power to draw, his Egyptian history is full of error, because they intentionally garbled and falsified their own annals, while he, from his ignorance of their language, was unable to detect the imposture.

But then Rawlinson made a radical turn: “Still,” he averred, “where national vanity or other special causes did not interfere, the history will be found to be fairly authentic.”<sup>70</sup> A few pages later, Rawlinson expanded this into a wider call for trusting at least the outlines of “oriental” history:

the accounts of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persian and the various states of Greece, having been derived in part from monuments and otherwise from those who possessed access to monuments, deserve attentive consideration. They may from various causes often be incorrect in particulars; but they may be expected to be true in outline; and in their details they may not unfrequently embody the contents of authentic documents existing at the time when Herodotus wrote, and now irrecoverably lost to us. Critical judgment must separate in them the probable from the improbable; but whatever comes under the former head, and is not contradicted by better authority, may well be received as historical, at least until fresh discoveries shall at once disprove their truth, and supply us with more authentic details to put in their place.<sup>71</sup>

What Rawlinson was doing was in essence overturning the skepticism of Letronne and Müller in favor of a more Orient-friendly doctrine. His historiographical method called for the acceptance of a *probable* deep history and a *probable* set of linkages between Orient and Occident, in the absence of absolute documentary material. Of course this was also a useful means to defend the historicity of the Old Testament, something that did not escape the notice of E. A. Freeman, who wrote a savage review of Rawlinson’s edition of *The Histories* in 1862.<sup>72</sup>

It was this sort of pragmatic (as well as self-serving) doctrine that continued to guide researches in the ancient Orient through the nineteenth century. Scholars had endlessly to readjust their readings of Herodotus, and of his informants, especially once hieroglyphic texts and archaeological materials became available. Debates about

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70. George Rawlinson, “Introduction,” in *History of Herodotus*, trans. and ed. George Rawlinson, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1858), 63–64.

71. *Ibid.*, 73.

72. [Edward Freeman], “Herodotus and His Commentators,” *National Review* (1862): 282–309.

Herodotus's reliability continued among those who, like Heinrich Matzat and W. R. Ramsay, made careful studies of the Near Eastern routes the historian was purported to travel, and archaeologists such as Flinders Petrie and Auguste Mariette, who scrutinized Herodotus's descriptions in the search for Egyptian monuments. When in the 1840s, the discovery of the one of the supposed stelae of Sesostris Herodotus described in 2.106 near Smyrna seemed to ratify the historians' findings, critics quickly recognized that the rock carvings did not fit Herodotus's description very well and were located on the wrong roads; they have subsequently been recognized as not Egyptian at all but Luwian.<sup>73</sup> Flinders Petrie's unearthing of a labyrinth at Hawarra led to similar discussions. By no means have defenders of the scriptures been absent in these discussions, and indeed a whole body of what one might call "archaeological apologetics" arose in the attempt to use the new findings to prove scriptural truth. Here Herodotus is frequently invoked, as a means to flesh out details not available from the monuments or inscriptions.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the difficulties in trusting Herodotus, no one interested in Near Eastern history—most especially the Christian apologists—wanted to give up Herodotus's "oriental prelude" entirely, and their attachment to him has made for remarkable results, whether or not one accepts such "confirmations" of his veracity as recent revelations about gold-digging Indian marmots.<sup>75</sup> As Momigliano remarked, "Trust in Herodotus has been the first condition for the fruitful exploration of our remote past. The people who went to excavate Egypt and Mesopotamia had primarily Herodotus as their guide."<sup>76</sup> Their eagerness to test his credibility forms the prehistory that lies behind the work of more contemporary scholars such as Ian Moyer, Robert Rollinger, or Walter Burkert, who in *Der Griechen und der Orient* insisted on the need to assume the existence of an interconnected Mediterranean oecumene, even if we lack a documentary "smoking gun."<sup>77</sup> In our post-deconstructionist age, we are all a lot more comfortable

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73. O. Kimball Armayor, "Sesostris and Herodotus' Autopsy of Thrace, Colchis, Inland Asia Minor, and the Levant," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 84 (1980): 65–74.

74. An excellent illustration of this genre is Fulcran Vigouroux's *La Bible et les découvertes modernes en Palestine, en Égypte et en Assyrie*, vol. 2, 6th ed. (Paris: Berche et Tralin, 1896). Vigouroux was a French priest and biblical scholar who in 1903 was tapped to head the newly founded Pontifical Biblical Commission.

75. See Marlise Simons, "Himalayas Offer Clue to Legend of Gold-Digging 'Ants,'" *New York Times*, November 25, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/25/world/himalayas-offer-clue-to-legend-of-gold-digging-ants.html>.

76. Momigliano, "Place of Herodotus," 13.

77. Walter Burkert, *Die Griechen und der Orient: Von Homer bis zu den Magiern* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003), 35, 53; also see Ian Moyer, "Herotous and an Egyptian Mirage: The Genealogies of the Theban Priests," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 122 (2002): 70–90; Robert Rollinger and Christoph Ulf, eds., *Griechische Archaik: Interne Entwicklungen—externe Impulse* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004).

with thinking of all of history as probable rather than certain, with thinking of historians as creators of stories that have, at best, *vraisemblance* to the past; we have recently become more attuned to the need to accommodate non-Western historiographical traditions, including oral testimonies, in our histories. Perhaps we can, in the end, acknowledge that it has been a good thing for us not to have entirely discounted the Egyptian priests and to have grappled with a patron saint widely reputed to be “the father of lies.”

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