

EGYPT AND THE LIMITS OF HELLENISM



Ian S. Moyer

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In a series of studies, Ian Moyer explores the ancient history and modern historiography of relations between Egypt and Greece from the fifth century BCE to the early Roman empire. Beginning with Herodotus, he analyzes key encounters between Greeks and Egyptian priests, the bearers of Egypt's ancient traditions. Four moments unfold as rich micro-histories of cross-cultural interaction: Herodotus' interviews with priests at Thebes; Manetho's composition of an Egyptian history in Greek; the struggles of Egyptian priests on Delos; and a Greek physician's quest for magic in Egypt. In writing these histories, the author moves beyond Orientalizing representations of the Other and colonial metanarratives of the civilizing process to reveal interactions between Greeks and Egyptians as transactional processes in which the traditions, discourses, and pragmatic interests of both sides shaped the outcome. The result is a dialogical history of cultural and intellectual exchanges between the great civilizations of Greece and Egypt.

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Introduction

The absence of Egypt

Dialectic-history: the past is more than just one other country.
Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides*

In his classic study, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, Arnaldo Momigliano explored what he called “an intellectual event of the first order, the confrontation of the Greeks with four other civilizations” in the Hellenistic period: Romans, Celts, Jews, and Iranians.¹ Remarkable for its absence from his account is the ancient civilization of the Egyptians, which had long fascinated the Greeks, and, after the conquests of Alexander, confronted them more directly than ever before.² Momigliano’s argument for excluding Egypt from his lectures was twofold. First, “there was no dramatic change in the Greek evaluation of Egypt during the Hellenistic period.” Egypt from Homer through Herodotus had been a fantastical land of “strange customs” and “unusual knowledge” and remained so into the Hellenistic period.³ Secondly,

Native Egyptian culture declined during the Hellenistic period because it was under the direct control of the Greeks and came to represent an inferior stratum of the population. Moreover, the “hermetic character of the language and of the script” . . . made the Egyptian-speaking priest – not to mention the peasant – singularly unable to communicate with the Greeks.

Momigliano went on to state that “the Hellenistic Greeks preferred the fanciful images of an eternal Egypt to the Egyptian thought of their time.”⁴

In excluding Egypt from his study over thirty years ago, Momigliano revealed a gap in contemporary histories of interaction between ancient Greeks and Egyptians – a gap that continues to the present. Egypt and

¹ Momigliano 1975a: 2.

² I am certainly not the first to notice the absence of Egypt in these lectures. See, for example, the review by Will 1977 and the critique by Ritner 1992: 283–84.

³ Cf. Préaux 1978: 2.548. ⁴ Momigliano 1975a: 3–4.

Egyptians have not been historical subjects, but absent objects of representation. In the terms of Momigliano's *praeteritio*, Egypt is subordinated to Hellenism – first, through an intellectual imperialism that exoticized and dominated Egypt, its customs, and its wisdom through representations that served Greek needs or desires; and then through the actual conquest of Alexander, who brought Hellenistic rule and Greek civilization to Egypt. When it comes to imagining these encounters with Hellenism, Egyptian civilization has had no part to play, no voice of its own. In this book, I address the absence of Egypt that Momigliano articulated. I explore a long history of cultural interactions through four transactional moments – moments when Egyptian as well as Greek discourses, actions, and representations produced the historical outcome. This book is an attempt to write dialectic and even dialogic histories, rather than a monological “tradition-history” of the West.⁵ The particular moments I have chosen to focus on are all rich stories in themselves: Herodotus' meeting with Egyptian priests in Thebes, Manetho's composition of an Egyptian history in Greek, the arrival of Egyptian gods on the Greek island of Delos, and a Greek doctor's magical revelation in Egypt. But they have also been important in various ways to modern histories of Hellenism and the encounter between Greeks and Egyptians. These are moments through which it is possible to explore both the cultural and intellectual histories of Egyptians at the boundaries of Hellenism, and also the conceptual limits of Hellenism as drawn in Momigliano's *praeteritio* and other gestures of exclusion. It is these latter, modern limits that I shall explore in this introductory chapter.

REPRESENTING EGYPT: ETHNOGRAPHY AND ORIENTALISM

Egypt, in the history of Hellenism, is “other” twice over: an Other not only to ancient Greeks, but also to modern historians, classicists, and other students of Hellenism. This double alterity is the product of scholarly analogies and cultural affiliations that have identified Greek civilization as the Western subject at the center of narratives, discourses, and theories of modern European and American historiography. Even when Momigliano and others have examined the limits that constrained Greek knowledge of Egypt, their often acute analyses get caught up in the problem of representing the other, since Egypt, by analogy with the West's other “others” is imagined as illusory, repressed, or irretrievable. In such accounts, Egypt is not the subject of an historical narrative or the central referent of discourse

⁵ Sahlins 2004: 8–9.

or theory, but an object of representations which appropriate and incorporate an Egyptian “other” into the “same” of Western knowledge.⁶ Similarly, Egyptians in Momigliano’s brief sketch of the Hellenistic encounter with Egypt are historical actors either not at all, or only within a metanarrative of isolation and decline derived from a Eurocentric historiography. These two parts of Momigliano’s *praeteritio* frame a fundamental conceptual problem in representing Egypt in the history of Hellenism.

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of this problem in classical scholarship of the last three decades is outlined in Momigliano’s first argument for excluding Egypt: the limitations of a Greek discourse on Egypt that took shape in the centuries before Alexander. Especially critical for reconstructing this discourse is the second book of Herodotus’ *Histories*. This is the classic formulation of Egyptian culture as exotic, topsy-turvy, and yet primordial. As Momigliano wrote, “Herodotus gave two ultimately contradictory reasons for spending so much of his time on [Egypt], first that ‘the Egyptians in most of their manners and customs reverse the common practice of mankind’ (2.35), and secondly that the Greeks derived so many of their religious and scientific notions from the Egyptians . . . (2.81 *et passim*).”⁷ Herodotus in his portrait of Egypt did present beliefs and practices that were marvelous for his Greek audience, and yet he also attributed Egyptian origins to Greek cultural forms and practices. In the *Histories*, Egypt is the land with the most natural and cultural wonders, but it is also a land of beginnings,⁸ of primeval culture. In creating this paradoxical portrait, Herodotus (it has been argued) epitomizes a Western gaze which surveys and creates order out of an imagined landscape of Egypt for its own cultural purposes.⁹ Herodotus has been approximated, in other words, to the early modern ethnographer, and a critique has developed in which his ethnocentric descriptions are understood as products of a Greek rhetoric of alterity that reveals Greek anxieties, prejudices and self-definitions.

This general approach to reading Herodotus’ ethnography has been most famously elaborated in the work of François Hartog, but a more comprehensive study of the Greek myth of Egypt was produced by Christian Froidefond a few years before Momigliano’s lectures.¹⁰ Froidefond

⁶ Young 1990: esp. 1–20 outlines this problematic, dominating dialectic of same and other in Western historiography, and analyzes several important postmodern and post-colonial approaches to escaping this impasse of historical representation.

⁷ Momigliano 1975a: 3. ⁸ Hdt. 2.35.1.

⁹ See the discussions of Froidefond 1971, Hartog 1980, 1986, 1996, and Vasunia 2001 below. A brief overview along these lines is also given by Harrison 2003.

¹⁰ Froidefond 1971.

explored the manifold ways in which Greek texts from Homer to Aristotle idealized the ancient and mysterious land of Egypt, and yet in this idealization confined Egypt to certain limits. In this work, he devoted a substantial discussion to Herodotus' second book, its background in Ionian natural and speculative philosophy, and its reception.¹¹ He argued that for Herodotus and other Ionian writers, Egypt was the privileged terrain for geographical and historical thought. Its natural features, especially the regular yet anomalous flooding of the Nile, were amenable to abstraction, idealization, and systematization. The great chronological depth of Egyptian civilization and the apparent antiquity of its customs made Egypt uniquely suited to the investigation of cultural origins. Egypt, Froidefond argued, became the primeval landscape in which ethnographers like Herodotus carried out the task of explaining cultural origins. The analogy between this literature and modern Western ethnography becomes especially clear in Froidefond's treatment of Herodotus' passages on Egyptian religion. In his view, Egyptian religion was Herodotus' "forest of symbols," a disordered agglomeration characterized by primitivism and superstition, which the Greek historian (mis)interpreted as a rational system. There is no disguising the implications: Greek thought was Western, advanced and rational, and it manipulated the passive matter of a "primitive" Egyptian mentality.¹² If Herodotus did indeed misrepresent Egyptian culture in this way, Froidefond's *mirage égyptien* is perhaps no less at fault.

Subsequent scholarship on the Greek representation of Egypt has continued to pursue the ethnographical analogy which aligns Herodotus with the early modern explorer or anthropologist in order to reveal further the fascinations and fabrications of the "Egyptian mirage," but it has also become much more critical of the implications of this relationship. This is part of a broader effort to analyze Greek constructions of the self as the other of an other: in particular, Greek self-definitions elaborated in

¹¹ On this intellectual background, see now Thomas 2000.

¹² Egypt's role as a primitive society in Froidefond's analysis is quite explicit: "Sur le plan intellectuel, et d'une façon plus générale, on peut dire que la religion manifestait . . . quelques-unes des tendances permanentes de la mentalité égyptienne, à savoir: admettre simultanément, et sans établir de hiérarchie, le plus évolué et le moins évolué, le plus concret et le plus abstrait; ou cette tendance encore, qui caractérise tous les 'primitifs': attribuer autant de pouvoir, de valeur, d'existence à la représentation d'un objet ou d'une entité qu'à cet objet, cette entité même." Froidefond 1971: 201. Egyptian thought is like the irrational "magical" thought studied by the early ethnographer, and it is Herodotus, according to Froidefond 1971: 201–3, who provides spurious rationalizations. Though not made explicit, the reference to Egypt as a "forêt de 'symboles'" (Froidefond 1971: 200) is perhaps an allusion to Victor Turner's classic study (*The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*).

opposition to the figure of the barbarian. Hartog's study of the Scythians in Herodotus and subsequent works by scholars such as Edith Hall and Paul Cartledge have analyzed the cultural poetics at work in Greek representations of other cultures, and have made important contributions to elucidating aspects of Greek thought and self-definition. Egypt was touched on only briefly in this work,¹³ but in the most recent and comprehensive application of this approach, Phiroze Vasunia has drawn on the work of Hartog, and also situated the Greek construction of the Egyptian "other" in the wider theoretical framework of post-colonial critiques of Orientalism.¹⁴ Vasunia did not limit himself to Herodotus' ethnography, but also examined images of Egypt in Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, and Isocrates, exploring, like Edward Said, a Western discourse which dominates, restructures, and has authority over "the Orient."¹⁵ In this sense, Vasunia's study explores the politics of knowledge that informed the idea of Egypt in Greek thought and literature. Though he compared Egyptian *realia* to the Greek texts,¹⁶ Vasunia's primary aim was "to understand the limits and parameters within which the barbarian functions and to appreciate the flexible but ultimately circumscribed space that no foreigner can transcend in the Hellenic imagination."¹⁷

In their analyses of the Scythians and the Egyptians as they existed in the Greek imagination, Hartog and Vasunia engaged with different strands of contemporary theory and criticism. Both works, however, share with their sources a self-reflexive, inwardly oriented approach, taking as their subjects various internally coherent Western representations of the other, and explaining how such knowledge was created. For Hartog's analysis of the rhetoric of alterity in the *Histories*, Michel de Certeau is especially important, along with his privileged example of ethnography, the early modern travel writing of Jean de Léry.¹⁸ Hartog describes Herodotus' method as translation, a means of conveying the distant and foreign *other* to the *same*, to the geographical and cultural location shared by Herodotus

¹³ Hartog 1980 focused primarily on the Scythian Logos in Hdt. 4, and Hall 1989 examined Greek self-definition through depictions of the barbarian in tragedy following the Persian Wars. Hartog 1986 and 2001: 41–77 has produced brief accounts of the Greek reception of Egypt. Cartledge 2002: 71–74 used the account of Egypt in the second book of the *Histories* as an example of Herodotus' rhetoric of otherness.

¹⁴ Vasunia 2001: 11–17. ¹⁵ Vasunia 2001: 11–12; Said 1978.

¹⁶ Vasunia 2001: 8–9 describes the summaries of Egyptian scholarship on particular issues that he "juxtaposes" to Greek views as a "counterpoint." When, for example, Vasunia 2001: 110–35 considers Herodotus' representations of Egyptian history and conceptions of time, he does acknowledge contemporary Egyptian views, but does not explore the interrelationship between the two.

¹⁷ Vasunia 2001: 6.

¹⁸ Hartog 1988: 215, 237–38, 248–50, 263, 286–88, 296, 308; de Certeau 1988: 209–43.

and his audience: the language of the Greeks, their existing knowledge, their horizons and expectations. In de Certeau's analysis of Jean de Léry, the itinerary of translation (*translatio*) is even clearer. His travel narrative is a voyage from "over here" in Europe to "over there" in the Americas and back again. The work of bringing the other back to the same takes the form of an exegesis that replaces the spoken words of the primitive other with profitable, written meaning and a way for the West to articulate its own identity. This process of ethnographic writing, de Certeau observed, left behind an unrecoverable remainder, the elusive speech of the other which provoked the writing in the first place. In explaining the process, de Certeau acknowledged that he replicated its effects, and he disclaimed any ability to represent the lost voice of the other that lies behind the text.¹⁹ Hartog also excludes what is external to the text, though for different reasons. He rejects as simplistic positivism any evaluation of Herodotus' quality as an historian that relies on comparisons with a Scythian point of view reconstructed from archaeology or Ossetian epic, opting instead for points of reference within the *Histories* and within the shared knowledge of fifth-century Greeks.²⁰ Though both Hartog and de Certeau focus on "Western" practices of translating the other and writing an ethnographic text, the approaches of Herodotus and de Léry are in fact not quite commensurable, as Hartog himself points out. Jean de Léry created the "savage" and self-consciously replaced the voice of the savage with writing. Herodotus, on the other hand, created the "barbarian." Since the barbarian (especially the Egyptian) could write, there was no *leçon d'écriture* in Herodotus. Though his ethnography was written, he did not translate the other across a strong divide between his own authoritative textuality and the orality of his object. Herodotus was himself between orality and literacy. Relative to the literate barbarian, he did not have, nor was he conscious of, that differential power of writing which looms over modern Western ethnography.²¹ Hartog points out this difference but never asks the questions that follow. Is the speech of the other as evanescent in Herodotus' work as it is in Jean de Léry's? Did Herodotus' representation entirely supplant the voice of the other, or is it the analogy to modern ethnography that does this work?

¹⁹ de Certeau 1988: 211–15. The "other" in de Certeau is treated in terms similar to Lacan's little other and big Other, though Hartog does not explicitly adopt this perspective.

²⁰ Hartog 1988: 3–7 rejects the externally oriented approach for these reasons but also because of his own lack of knowledge in the required areas of expertise and the fact that it was already pursued by Dumézil and others.

²¹ Hartog 1988: 286–89. On the "*leçon d'écriture*" in Jean de Léry, see de Certeau 1988: 212–15; see also Claude Lévi-Strauss' classic meditation in *Tristes Tropiques* (1974: 294–304) and J. Clifford's discussion of the ethnographic textualization of oral discourse (1988: 37–41).

Though Vasunia also works with the ethnographic analogy,²² he ranges more widely across authors and genres to analyze the constraints within which ancient Greek artists, historians, philosophers, and rhetoricians could comprehensibly represent the Egyptian other, and he moves beyond the bounds of textual criticism to consider the political effects of these representations. These are among the advantages he gains by adopting as a model Said's critique of Orientalist discourse. Along with this choice, however, come some of the limitations of Said's original project. Perhaps Said's most influential contribution was redefining Orientalism as an object of analysis by turning Michel Foucault's concept of discourse toward cultural constructions of the exotic, external other in colonial and imperial contexts. Foucault, of course, had been concerned with internal others and was self-consciously Eurocentric in his critiques.²³ Despite this shift, Said's account of Orientalism (as critics have pointed out) remains paradoxically embedded in Western discourses, and his oppositional stance did not escape some of the problematic modes of representation that he criticized.²⁴ An essentializing portrait of the West, one that verges on "Occidentalism," emerges from Said's critique, and the perspective from which he surveyed the misrepresentations of Orientalism was a humanism that has, historically, made universals out of Western categories of thought and experience.²⁵ The Orient itself and its historical responses to Orientalism play virtually no role in contesting the distortions of this complex, self-referential system.²⁶ Europe and its dialectic of same and other remain the core subjects, and Said did not, in this work at least, offer a clear alternative response to the question, "How does one *represent* other cultures?" without falling into the problematic binarism that seems inherent in the question itself.²⁷ Said was aware of this lacuna, and in later works filled it,²⁸ but such refinements have not

²² The work of J. Fabian, for example, is important to Vasunia's analysis of Herodotus (2001: 113–14).

²³ Clifford 1988: 264–65.

²⁴ See Clifford 1988: 255–76 (originally published as Clifford 1980), Young 1990: 119–40.

²⁵ Clifford 1988: 263, 271; Young 1990: 119–25, 130–31, 138–39; O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992: 155–58.

²⁶ Said's neglect of the "real" Orient was in part justified by his approach to Orientalism as a construct of the Western imagination. See, e.g., Said 1978: 71–72: "we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do . . . is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager and actors are *for* Europe, and only for Europe." See also Said 1978: 5, 21, 24, 94–95 and below.

²⁷ Said 1978: 325; Clifford 1988: 259–61; Young 1990: 127, 137–38.

²⁸ See n. 24 above, and Said 1978: 325–28. Said did note in his later "Afterword" to *Orientalism* (1994: 337) that in *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981) he attempted "to supply what was missing in *Orientalism*, namely a sense of what an alternative picture of parts of the Orient – Palestine and Islam respectively – might be from a personal perspective." He also briefly

always traveled with his original concept. This was largely the case when *Orientalism* came to Classics, a field in which there had already been a well-developed interest in Greek accounts of barbarians as well as disciplinary boundaries that generally constrained scholars to canonical Greek texts.²⁹ Vasunia's account goes beyond this tendency and does juxtapose Egyptian texts, ideas, or practices to Greek representations as part of the process of countering and falsifying their claims.³⁰ Such juxtapositions, however, in showing that Greek representations often had nothing to do with Egyptian realities, do not entirely undo the Greek–Egyptian dichotomy of the texts analyzed, and indeed they tend to preserve it at the level of scholarly analysis. Egyptians, moreover, are missing, and the subject of this work remains Western discourse on and domination of an Orientalized other.³¹

In Said's Foucauldian analysis, discourse preceded and prepared for domination. Power followed knowledge. Orientalism was not a rationalization of colonial rule after the fact; it justified colonial rule in advance. Said presented the long history of this discursive propaedeutic in the form of a genealogy that stretches back to Greek antiquity – a strategic redeployment of the standard myth of Western origins. Aeschylus' *Persians* and Euripides' *Bacchae* are among the privileged first texts of Orientalism.³² Classicists inspired by Said have explicitly or implicitly accepted this genealogy,³³ and Vasunia (among others) astutely points out the use of ancient Greek representations of the barbarian other, and of classical civilization more generally, in modern colonial and imperial projects.³⁴ The adoption of Said's

revisits his account of the Napoleonic expedition by drawing more attention to the historiographical perspective of Abdal-Rahman al-Jabarti's description of the invasion (Said 1994: 333–34). *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) was a sustained attempt to fill the lacunae of *Orientalism*.

²⁹ For Said's impact on Hellenists, see Vasunia 2003: 88–89.

³⁰ For this method of juxtaposition in order to counter Greek texts, and reveal what they have obscured, see Vasunia 2001: 9, 16–17, 29–32, 106–9, 126–31, 148, 152–54, 160–75, 182. At times, this effort is defeated when the “Egyptian” *realia* consist of idiosyncratic and self-consciously modern (Western) readings of Egyptian texts, such as Tom Hare's *ReMembering Osiris* (see the review by Troy 2002).

³¹ It is important to note that in more recent series of articles, Vasunia (2003, 2005a, 2007) has shifted his focus to a new direction: a more thorough examination of the interrelationships between classical civilization and modern imperialism in order to understand the trajectories of modern classical scholarship on these issues. This approach has been very fruitful. See further references below.

³² Said 1978: 20–21, 53–54, 56–58.

³³ The seminal work of E. Hall on *Inventing the Barbarian* (1989), e.g., explores the representation of the barbarian in Greek tragedy. This should now be read together with Hall's own insightful revisitation of her work (2006: 184–224) in the light of subsequent developments in post-colonial studies and other fields of criticism.

³⁴ On the reception of this genealogy in relation to Classics and the study of Hellenism, see Vasunia 2003: 88–91. On the use of Greek texts such as Herodotus in the context of modern imperial and colonial conquests, see, e.g. Vasunia 2001: 75, 110. See also his studies of Greek, Latin and the

teleology of empire to the ancient past, however, risks the hermeneutic circularity of reading Greek representations through the lenses of European colonial ideologies that were in part founded on selective appropriations of the classical past.³⁵ Herodotus, in such readings, is not merely an ethnographer, he becomes an auxiliary to empire-building.³⁶ Vasunia pursues this argument explicitly: the Greek discourse on Egypt made Alexander's conquest of Egypt possible, and shaped its course.³⁷ The analogy he draws with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, a foundational moment of Orientalism, is suggestive, but perhaps even more valuable because it is fraught with so many productive strains and incongruities.

Alexander undoubtedly drew on the pre-existing archive of Greek knowledge about the lands he intended to invade. And he and his father Philip before him, at least initially, imagined the conquest of Asia as a continuation of legendary and historical wars against the Trojans and the Persians. The latter, in fact, is a far more obvious motivation for Alexander's campaigns and for his invasion of Egypt (a satrapy of the Persian empire at the time) than Greek texts on Egypt. Fourth-century orators and intellectuals had repeatedly painted the Persians as weak, corrupt, and effeminate and called for a war against them.³⁸ In the archive available to Alexander, however, no text can be endowed with the practical importance that Said assigns to the Comte de Volney's *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* and *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs*, texts that served Napoleon as virtual handbooks in preparing his campaigns. Herodotus and other Greeks did not compose texts with Volney's manifest interest in providing information useful to the conquest of the Orient, and even if Greek intellectuals advised Alexander directly about his conduct toward "barbarians" it is not clear that they had much influence.³⁹ Ancient Greek ethnographies, moreover, did not

British civil service in India (2005a), and of imperial comparisons of "Greater Rome and Greater Britain" (2005b). The genealogical and comparative relationships between ancient and modern empires were quite explicit in the work not only of scholars but also of the agents of empire – indeed they were often one and the same. See, e.g., Sir George Cornwall Lewis' essay *On the Government of Dependencies* (1841, republished 1891) or Lord Cromer's study of *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (1910). Several scholars (in addition to Vasunia) have addressed various aspects of these entanglements (e.g. Jenkins 1980: 331–36, Majeed 1999, Bell 2006, Liddel 2009). See further below.

³⁵ W. Nippel (2002) offers a brief and more historical version of the intellectual genealogy of Western constructions of the other, one that is open to the transformations, contingencies, and acts of selective appropriation in what is so often presumed to be unproblematically continuous tradition. See also Browning 1989.

³⁶ Vasunia 2001: 12. ³⁷ Vasunia 2001: 11–12 and 248–88.

³⁸ For a brief summary of these works, see Isaac 2004: 283–98.

³⁹ See Said 1978: 81–82. Volney's description of Alexandria, for example, considers its fortifications and the practicalities faced by a foreign power that would want to establish itself there (Volney

become enmeshed in social-scientific projects to reform Egyptians, as in the later British colonial regime.⁴⁰ Philosophers and natural scientists did accompany Alexander, but there is no evidence for a formal body quite like the *Commission des Sciences et des Arts* that Napoleon made an integral part of his armed expedition and even endowed with a military structure. Nevertheless, Vasunia has argued that the knowledge–power teleology culminated in a scientific expedition up the Nile, dispatched by Alexander, in order to find the causes of its irregular flooding – a “collusion between science and imperialism,” and an anticipation of the *Description de l’Égypte*.⁴¹ This configuration evokes the link between antiquity and modernity laid out in Said’s genealogy of Orientalism, but this is a genealogy in part forged by the authors of the *Description*.⁴² Accepting this link equates ancient relations of knowledge and power to those in modern imperial projects. This is a powerful idea, but what gets lost in such a domesticating translation? Are there not other ways of figuring the relations of knowledge and power between Greece and Egypt? Ones that do not recapitulate, but rather disturb and dislocate those modern genealogies and histories in which the “other” serves merely as an object to be incorporated into the intellectual and territorial domains of the West?

1792: 1.4–6). Isocrates (to choose one ancient example) did urge war against the Persians in the *Panegyricus* and his *Address to Philip*, but he paid little attention to Egypt. As for the influence of Aristotle and other advisors on Alexander, later tradition held that he ignored their advice to regard non-Greeks as enemies, slaves, or even subhuman (see Strabo 1.4.9; Plut. *Mor.* 329 b–d). For the difficulties in using these sources, see Isaac 2004: 299–302 and Badian 1958: 434–44.

⁴⁰ See Mitchell 1991: 95–127, esp. 104–11.

⁴¹ The actual evidence for a scientific expedition during Alexander’s visit to Egypt is disputable. Vasunia’s argument for the reality of a Nile expedition (2001: 278–82) follows Burstein 1976 in citing Lydus, *Mens.* 4.107 (sixth century CE), who was relying on Seneca’s *Naturales Quaestiones*, though Lydus clearly gives erroneous information. Vasunia and Burstein also refer to a comment by Eratosthenes (cited in Procl. *In Ti.* 22e) that expeditions have been made to see the “summer rains.” Eratosthenes is Ptolemaic in date (ca. 285–194 BCE), so the unspecified expeditions may have taken place under the Ptolemaic dynasty rather than under Alexander. The *Alexander Romance* mentions contact with Candace, queen of Meroe, but this is a doubtful historical source, and it certainly says nothing about searching for the source of the Nile flood. The only other source is Luc. 10.272–75, and at that date (first century CE), and in that context, Lucan is probably drawing on fanciful elements of the Alexander tradition. Burstein’s theory that Seneca and Lucan were drawing on a genuine tradition of a journey up the Nile by Callisthenes does not overcome the main reasons for doubt: the absence of any reference to such an expedition in the most reliable biographical traditions on Alexander (including those derived from Callisthenes), and the fact that Callisthenes was an authoritative name to which fabulous Alexander accounts were attached (like the *Alexander Romance*).

⁴² Fourier’s *préface historique* to the *Description de l’Égypte* uses images of Greek and Roman intellectual explorers’ and conquerors’ visits to Egypt (referring specifically to Alexander) as the primary European historical contacts which give the Orient its value. See Said 1978: 84–85; Vasunia 2001: 283–85.

REPRESENTING EGYPT: IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL HISTORIES

This brings us to the second part of Momigliano's *praeteritio*. The Greek encounter with Egypt in the Hellenistic period, contrary to Momigliano's assertion, took a radically different form. The legacy of Greek descriptions of Egypt did, of course, persist, but the conditions under which Greeks obtained knowledge of Egypt and Egyptian culture changed entirely after Alexander's conquest and the establishment of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Momigliano, as I mentioned at the outset, passed Egypt by since it had (allegedly) become culturally subordinate to the Hellenizing Macedonians, and because, in any case, there could be no interaction between Greeks and Egyptians, owing to the inaccessibility of the Egyptian language. It is in hindsight surprising that Momigliano made these arguments, since they are not entirely consistent with his reasons for including other civilizations, and he was elsewhere quite sensitive to and critical of the imperialist and racist implications of some earlier scholarship on the Hellenistic period.⁴³ The explanation perhaps lies in the fact that Momigliano's arguments against discussing the Greek confrontation with Egyptian culture were firmly rooted in the historiography of Hellenistic Egypt; his statements simply and accurately reflected the current state of scholarly discourse in his day.

This discourse, which in various ways endures up to the present, is ultimately the legacy of Johann Gustav Droysen's *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, originally published 1836–43, in which he defined the Hellenistic period as a world-historical epoch of the highest importance: a pivotal transition between paganism and the predestined triumph of Christianity. In cultural terms, *Hellenismus* was a Hegelian synthesis of Oriental cultures and Greek civilization that overcame the divisions between earlier, more narrowly circumscribed cultures and prepared the way for the universal civilization of Christendom.⁴⁴ In political terms, this reorganization was accomplished through the domination of Eastern lands by Graeco-Macedonian rulers in the wake of Alexander's campaigns, and by the formation, in the Hellenistic

⁴³ Momigliano 1970: 152–53. As Vasunia 2003: 89 points out, "Some Hellenists have even claimed that Said's book was anticipated in large part by Arnaldo Momigliano's *Alien Wisdom*, which was first published in 1975 but based on lectures delivered a few years earlier. Whatever the merits of this claim, we can see that Said gave the issue of Greeks and barbarians an interpretative framework and depth that it had hitherto lacked, and assuredly no Hellenist treated the issue with the same commanding sweep and range of texts and materials as Said did in *Orientalism*."

⁴⁴ Perhaps the most explicit vision of the history of *Hellenismus* as a preparation for Christianity (even as an historical theodicy), is in the foreword to the second volume of the *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1843), reprinted in Droysen 1893–94: I.298–314.

kingdoms, of a new kind of unifying monarchical state that superseded the particularism of the Greek city-states and “tribes” as well as the “national” states of the East.⁴⁵ Though Droysen was not the first to write a history of this era, nor even to interpret Macedon as a prefiguration of Prussia’s role in German political unification, it is fair to say that he invented the Hellenistic period as it is now known by defining its character in terms of a political-cultural synthesis effected by the universalization of Hellenism.⁴⁶

The first steps in the development of this idea of *Hellenismus* can be traced to Droysen’s early study of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt. In 1831, he presented his dissertation at the University of Berlin, where he had followed several courses of lectures given by G. W. F. Hegel.⁴⁷ The studies that culminated in this dissertation, *De Lagidarum regno Ptolemaeo VI Philometore rege*,⁴⁸ were conducted primarily under the tutelage of the great classical philologist P. A. Böckh. But in this work and in contemporary correspondence, there is evidence that Droysen had already begun to approach the cultural and political conditions of the Ptolemaic kingdom from the perspective of Hegel’s philosophy of world history and to understand this period as a critical transition from classical Greek antiquity to the Roman empire and Christianity.⁴⁹ His dissertation also reveals the unquestioned supremacy of Greek civilization that would be at the core of *Hellenismus*, however synthetic the concept might appear. Egyptians and other oriental peoples were barbarians in the negative sense of the word, and he rejected the idea of Egyptian wisdom, entertained by some contemporary scholars, as the empty pretense of priestly charlatans.⁵⁰ Only through conforming to the Greek *ethos* and adopting Greek habits introduced by the new masters of the Nile, could Egyptians be redeemed from the “ancient indolence

⁴⁵ See especially Droysen 1877–78: 3.1–38. On Droysen’s formulation of Hellenism and the Hellenistic period, see Momigliano 1970 (reprinted in Momigliano 1977: 307–23 and 1994: 147–61), Bravo 1968 and Bichler 1983 (reviewed by Hornblower 1984). Momigliano, Bravo and Bichler all differ on the question of whether the political element emerged later – against the background of contemporary German political events (i.e. especially after the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament) – or whether the political and cultural elements were there from the start, even if coexisting incongruously. In any case, both these elements were important for the reception and development of Droysen’s formulation of *Hellenismus*.

⁴⁶ As Momigliano pointed out in his 1952 inaugural lecture at University College London (1994: 17–18), John Gillies had compared Philip II to Frederick II of Prussia in 1778 and had written a history of the Graeco-Macedonian states from Alexander to Augustus in 1807. See also Vasunia 2007: 93.

⁴⁷ In addition, he also studied with several “Hegelians” at Berlin. See Bravo 1968: 169–72.

⁴⁸ Reprinted in Droysen 1893–94: 2.351–443.

⁴⁹ This was a modification of Hegel’s thought in that Rome had played that vital role in the *Philosophy of World History*. On Droysen’s dissertation as a precursor to the *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, see Bravo 1968: 226–50.

⁵⁰ Droysen 1893–94: 2.363–66; Bravo 1968: 236, 240.

(*socordia*) of their way of life” and “begin to ascend to a higher level of humanity, than would seem possible for the lethargy (*torpor*) and harshness (*tristitia*) of their nature.”⁵¹

Assimilation, however, was a double-edged sword in Droysen’s early view of Ptolemaic Egypt. Though Greek civilization dominated the Ptolemaic state at first, the Egyptian element had become ascendant by the reign of Ptolemy VI, the chosen subject of Droysen’s dissertation. Through contact with barbarians, the rule of Alexander’s successors degenerated into oriental despotism and the Greeks became enfeebled by the adoption of foreign ways. This was, for Droysen, the reason that the Ptolemaic kingdom began to split apart and decompose into its various elements, as the Hegelian *Geist* moved elsewhere.⁵² Hellenism had been the superior force that held together the Hellenistic state. The superiority of Greece over the Orient was a view widely held among German humanists of the nineteenth century, and there was perhaps already a precedent in the work of J. J. Winckelmann for seeing Hellenism as revitalizing the moribund culture of Egypt.⁵³ Droysen, however, with the help of Hegelian dialectic, extended the vitality of Greek civilization into the period after Alexander – a period that Hellenists had often neglected, if not despised – by undertaking a broader history of *Hellenismus* soon after the completion of his studies in Berlin.

Droysen’s formulation of *Hellenismus* as both a period of political history and a cultural condition, became especially influential after the revision

⁵¹ Droysen 1893–94: 2.390.

⁵² Droysen 1893–94: 2.368, 390; Bravo 1968: 231–34. The Hegelian notion of the historical *Geist* is implicit in Droysen’s description of the end of the Ptolemaic kingdom, in which history is represented as a process of metempsychosis (1893–94: 2.419–20): “Lagidarum regnum a principio aegrotavit; Philometoris aetate in letale adductum discrimen, ut diversa ista elementa dissolvi, ut quasi anima e corpore Aegyptiaco pro vernaculo migrationum superstitione revocari coepta sit; nam ut historia metempsychosis dei, ita gentes corpora, quas in stationes aliae aliis mentis divinae vices succedant. Lagidarum historiae principio Graeca res, exitio Aegyptiaca praeponderavit. Philometoris regnum vere Graecoegypticum dicas tristem tristioris mixtionis florem.”

⁵³ Bravo 1968: 240–41. Bravo in this context notes that one of the *theses controversae* that Droysen defended at his dissertation examination was that Greek religion is less removed from Christianity than Judaism. Droysen’s choice of Hellenism over Judaism as an historical path to Christianity is, of course, central to Momigliano’s famous study (1970). For the hostility to Egypt in the context of nineteenth-century German Hellenism, see Bernal 1986, which is insightful regardless of the controversies surrounding his subsequent *Black Athena* series. Winckelmann compared Egyptian art to “a tree which, though well cultivated, has been checked and arrested in its growth by a worm, or other casualties; for it remained unchanged, precisely the same, yet without attaining its perfection, until the period when Greek kings held sway over them . . .” He then goes on to say that “the same thing may have happened to [art] as to mythology; for the fables of the Egyptians were seemingly born anew beneath the skies of Greece, and took an entirely different form, and other names.” See Winckelmann 1968: 29, 31.

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