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PECULIARITIES OF THE NON-GREEK WORLD IN HELIODORUS' *AETHIOPICA*

ABSTRACT. Dworacki Sylwester, Peculiarities of the non-Greek world in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*.

All that was non-Greek, strange, and exotic regarding people and their environment was also always a point of interest in Greek literature. That interest got a new stimulus in the Hellenistic times, and was still vivid at the end of Antiquity, and in the novel, as well. As an example we may mention the *Ethiopian Story* of Heliodorus, and his novel is the main point of interest of this article. I discuss in it some characteristic places, that show the non-Greek world, its variety and peculiarities. They refer to the nature and its phenomena, to the world of plants and animals, and to the customs of various nations, mostly from the area of Egypt, and Ethiopia. In conclusion, I pay attention to the superiority of Greek world in Heliodorus' novel in comparison with non-Greek.

Key words: Greek world, non-Greek world, Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story*, ancient novel.

Ancient Greeks, as can be observed in their literature from its earliest forms, were genuinely interested in all that was foreign, non-Greek or barbarian. They could learn about it from travellers, merchants and sailors, who went all over the world then known (in practically all directions), but mostly within the Mediterranean Basin. Especially the Ionian logographers merit our attention, and after them Herodotus, who, writing the history of the world of his time as the Greeks knew it, expressed it in terms of an opposition between Greeks and barbarians, where *barbarians* meant *non-Greeks*. This interest in the non-Greek in Greek literature took on a new dimension in the Hellenistic Period, or after the expeditions of Alexander the Great, and it lasted uninterrupted until the end of Antiquity. It is very clear in the Greek novel from its beginnings, as illustrated by the fragments of the novel on Ninus and Semiramis all the way until the last work of that genre, that is Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. It is on this novel that I wish to concentrate in my article, discussing selected passages from it, which show the variety of the non-Greek world, as well as peculiarities of nature and of the social and cultural life of various peoples and nations, especially those of Egypt and

Ethiopia. It is Heliodorus' intention to arouse in his reader an interest in the non-Greek. He writes about it so as to show off his knowledge of it, and, at the same time, make it an integral part of the structure of his work; most importantly perhaps, of the confrontation of the Greek with the non-Greek, which by aiming to demonstrate the former's superiority, all the more strongly imprints the non-Greek in the reader's mind.¹

In terms of geography, the non-Greek world of Heliodorus' novel encompasses Egypt and Ethiopia. At the time of the story Egypt is under Persian rule, which the natives resent, rebelling against the Persians when the occasion arises. Thus we have in Egypt a collision of two non-Greek worlds, the one Egyptian, at first strange, dangerous and hostile towards the two main characters, though later siding with them against the Persian world; the other Persian, constituting the greatest threat to the couple. Also the Ethiopian world is represented in confrontation with the Persian (largely military confrontation, caused by Persian claims on Ethiopia), then as the place which Theagenes and Chariclea, the starring characters of the novel, hope to reach. But before their hopes are fulfilled, they will have to experience a number of things alien to the Greek world. I shall now continue by drawing an outline, necessarily limiting it to a few sample problems and details, of the three worlds, Egyptian, Persian and Ethiopian, as seen in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*.

EGYPT

The reader encounters Egypt right at the beginning of Heliodorus' novel, in the Nile Delta, at one of the mouths of that river. The white-skinned couple are captured by swarthy pirates (1.3), who carry them off to their village on the shore of a marshy lake overgrown with rushes. The description of the area (the lake accepting the excess water from the inundations), the village, its inhabitants and some of their customs, fills several chapters. The villagers live partly on boats, where they carry out their basic

¹ One could hardly come across motifs in Heliodorus which would not be known from earlier Greek literature or which would not have been exploited by his predecessors. For instance, their novels often take place in the vast territories of that time. Certainly, many of the motifs known from Heliodorus' novel are easily to be found also in the novel of Achilles Tatius, who, however, quite often introduces them for their own sake without including them in the main stream of the action, and without using them for a certain propaganda. Anyway, this matter is not discussed in the present short article. My intention was to register the places in Heliodorus' novel which refer to the non-Greek world, and at the same time to show the superiority of the Greek world. As for up-to-day bibliography on Greek novel see: N. Holzberg, *Powieść grecka*, transl. into Polish by M. Wójcik, Kraków 2003, p. 140-191.

activities, give birth and bring up children, which they tie up for their own safety as they begin to move on their own, so they don't fall into the water. For the same reason they also tie up those children that live in houses. The water, the rushes and the winding paths cut out in them are supposed to keep the herdsmen (*boùkoloi*), as the villagers are called, safe. Later, as an invasion of neighbours utterly destroys the village, it will turn out they were never a guarantee of safety. Heliodorus also has a detailed description of a cave there (1.29) with its perfectly hidden entrance and its system of underground passages. Returning to the village with their captives and plunder, the pirates produce considerable excitement; the villagers, called by the author simple, gaze upon the girl with awe, seeing in her a goddess, carried away from a looted temple.

This Egyptian world, however, and the people our Greek characters interact with, are "civilised" enough to give them a chance of being saved. The leader of the pirates is in love with Chariclea and wishes to marry her. And although he treats her like a slave, he wants her to consent to the marriage, thus giving her a chance to delay and finally be free from his unwelcome advances. Their next experiences with Egypt and its inhabitants give Chariclea and Theagenes reasons to plan to continue on their way to Ethiopia, but now the Persians intervene. If Heliodorus' Egyptians are simply non-Greek to them, people with their peculiar way of life and their own customs, but civilised to an extent, his Persians are as simply barbarians, even though they rule over Egypt and have marvellous palaces and an army. When our heroes fall into their hands, Chariclea is saved for the time being by her own wit and through the help of a Greek merchant, whereas the fate of Theagenes seems sealed for now, since as an extremely handsome youth he is to be sent off to serve at the king's court. We have a right to believe that Heliodorus is here referring to the actual situation of a land occupied by Persians, whose inhabitants became the subjects of the Persian king; many a beautiful Egyptian would be simply carried off to the court. It might seem in Theagenes' case that as a Greek finding himself in Egypt by accident he is subject to a different law, but that means nothing to the Persians. However, our author allows Theagenes to regain his freedom, which he will soon lose again to serve at the table of a Persian lord, though a satrap rather than a king (7.27). That will allow Heliodorus to demonstrate the superiority of a Greek man over the Persians, recognized even by the satrap's wife. The world of the Persian court is one of luxury and splendour, but also one in which might is right, or those in power are. It was different back in Greece, its rule democratic although in practice often fallible, presented earlier in Cnemon's story about his adventures with his amorous step-mother. But in Egypt the power belongs to the satrap Oroondates,

which his wife Arsace knows very well. Although a sister of the Great King, she cannot count on her husband's leniency and prefers suicide to waiting to be punished for adultery (8.15). But the same satrap knows that a failure in the war against Ethiopia will be taken as treason for which he, too, must be harshly punished (9.21). The satrap is shown in an unfavourable light through his disloyalty toward the Ethiopian king Hydaspes, who in his magnanimity has given him an opportunity to withdraw from the cocksure, stupid of the war. Alongside these passages of the novel, in which the Persians are judged negatively, there are others, expressing respect and even admiration for the Persian army, especially its horse. Heliodorus describes in some detail all the arms, armour and equipment of a cavalryman, as well as the horse armour (9. 15). Yet ultimately it seems that when he praises the strength of the Persian army, apparently invincible, he does that to emphasize its utter defeat at the hands of the seemingly weaker force of the Ethiopian coalition. The victory goes, not to strength and arms, but to foresight as to the enemy's movements and imposing on him the conditions of the battle.

One distinctly Egyptian accent in Heliodorus is the worship of the goddess Isis (7.8-11). It is her that Calasiris serves as priest; and he is a key character in the novel, an instrument in the hands of the gods as they direct the main characters' lives. After carrying out his task it is in the temple of Isis in Memphis, whence he once left for Greece, that Calasiris dies. Also the satrap's wife sacrifices in Isis' temple, but her purpose is not to worship the goddess, but to use this occasion to bring the couple to her court in the hope she can make Theagenes her lover.

It is no accident either that Heliodorus shows off his knowledge of the necromancy practiced in Egypt (6.14). Now the mother of a man killed in a skirmish with the Persians intends to learn from her dead son the fate of another son of hers, who has gone on with his unit to fight the Persians. The magical practices she engages in are described in some detail and quite gruesome. The Egyptian priest Calasiris, who is our couple's guide, sees her. We learn from his words that such practices are ungodly and only done by godless people, practitioners of earth magic and necromancy. They are also condemned by the dead son, admonishing her that she has engaged in them for a long time now, for which she will soon be duly punished. Indeed, the woman dies in front of accidental witness. To the Greeks watching her magic it is an amazing thing to behold, and very interesting too, since in this way they learn by accident what the future holds in store for them. The aforementioned Egyptian Calasiris definitively cuts himself off from all such wicked practices and clearly would not have his country seen by the Greek couple as sunk in superstition. Earlier on, he shows his own way of

life, in this respect better even than that of a common Greek. He invites the young Greek Cnemon to share his table (2.23): "They then ate heartily of nuts, figs, fresh-gathered dates and other such things as the old man had for his daily food, for he never killed any animal for a meal; and for his drink he had water, while Cnemon took some wine".² Calasiris is, as we can see, not only a vegetarian but also a teetotaler, yet he does not brag about it but simply applies it in his life, entertaining the Greek as a foreigner deserves.

It is worth noting a few more details of the Egyptian world. The action of the novel starts in the estuary of the Nile, which river is in a sense a symbol of Egypt, known in literature since Homer's times. In fact, the Nile comes up several times in the novel. We have the Egyptian priest lecture in Delphi on the inundations (2.28), a mention of transport on the river (2.22), even a crocodile (6.1), whose shadow only Cnemon sees for the first time in his life (and the shadow is enough to terrify him), and the flamingo (6.3), common in Egypt. These are only details, but certainly details characteristic of Egypt, and so introduced by the author on purpose.

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is first mentioned in very general terms in 2.28 as the place from which the Nile has its sources. Soon (2.30) we learn in outline the story of Chariclea, born in Aethiopia, brought up in Greece and now in Egypt on her way back to her native land. Her return has been foretold by the oracle of Apollo, speaking vaguely of a land scorched with the rays of the sun. Then Ethiopia enters the novel in earnest as the heroes are taken captive by its king Hydaspes (8.17) during the war between Persia and Ethiopia over the disputed city of Syene, occupied by the satrap before the arrival of the Ethiopian army. The city is besieged (9. 1 ff.), although the way this is done will be of Heliodorus' invention, since Hydaspes first encircles it with earthworks, and then lets the water of the Nile fill the gap between them and the city walls. The inhabitants try to dig a tunnel to escape from the city, but this enterprise ends in part of the wall collapsing. Eventually the city has to surrender. This is not the place to describe the captured Syene in more detail. For Heliodorus the important thing is to judge the two leaders, the Persian satrap negatively, the king of the Ethiopians, positively. But the ancient reader might also have been interested in the battlefield itself, especially the heavily armoured Persian cavalry (9.15) and the Ethiopian battle elephants (9.18). And his curiosity could be aroused by the unfamiliar

² All quotations from: Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story*, transl. by W. Lamb, ed. by J. R. Morgan, London 1997.

names of peoples fighting as allies of the Ethiopian king, the Blemmyes, the Seres (which is actually an ancient word for the Chinese), the Troglodytes and the dwellers about the cinnamon-bearing country (9.16). Those latter carry on their heads quivers in the form of wreaths, containing arrows made of the spinal chord of some non-existing kind of serpent. And the Ethiopians have excellent archers, able to shoot their arrows right into the eyes of their enemies.

Heliodorus shows off his knowledge of certain details characteristic of Syene as well (9.22). When there, Hydaspes sees sundials, whose gnomons cast no shadow at midday, as the sun then shines at a right angle to the surface of the earth. He also looks down a well whose level indicates that of the Nile which, as the king at this point reminds the citizens, flows out of Ethiopia. After the story moves to Ethiopia we learn the situation of its capital Meroe, which is in fact an island formed by the waters of three rivers, primarily the Nile (10.5), its soil very fertile and growing corn so tall that a man riding a horse or a camel is completely covered by it. The island also has enormous trees and an unusual kind of reed suitable for tent poles (possibly bamboo). There are also huge animals, especially elephants. At the hecatomb celebrating the victory there are not only oxen, horses and sheep, but also antelopes, fabulous griffins and many other beasts.

A key role among animals, however, goes to the giraffe (10.27 ff.). One could say it utterly disrupted the preparations to celebrate the victory. Its appearance scares the bulls and horses standing at the altar where they are to be sacrificed. At that point Theagenes shows his Greek skill and agility, and then fights a victorious wrestling match against an Ethiopian whom nobody has defeated yet. Naturally a giraffe could scare other animals in Greece, but not in Africa, and its detailed description was interesting to the Greek reader, but completely superfluous in Ethiopia.

But the non-Greek world of Heliodorus is not made of details. The details usually known to the ancient reader, are rather ornamental and, being exotic, they attract attention. Rather, the non-Greek world is shown mainly in contrast with the Greek. Egypt, so wild and dangerous at the beginning of the novel, yields gradually to the young Greek couple to stand on their side against the Persians. Some of its aspects, such as vegetarianism, may even move the Greek reader to admiration. This attitude of the author to Egypt stems probably from the fact that in his times the country has been Hellenistic for a few centuries. The Persians, on the other hand, have no good associations at all in the novel, even if they impress with their luxury, their wealth and their lavish banquets. If they have a positive trait, it will be the somewhat peculiar philhellenism of the satrap's wife. Of Ethiopia one can figuratively say, reading Heliodorus' novel in some depth, that its soil

will soon sprout Hellenic culture as brought by the returning princess, conceived under the image of Andromeda and educated in her youth in the shadow of Apollo's temple in Delphi.

The superiority of the Ethiopian over the Persian world is shown in this sentence from Oroondates' letter to Hydaspes: "Seeing that, conquering me in battle, you have conquered me even more in judgment ..." (10.34). But that is not enough to reach the level of the Greek kind of ruler. "O King," says the gymnosophist Sisimithres, "you should long ere now concluded that the gods welcome this sacrifice that is being prepared for them... Come, let us recognize the divine miracle that has been wrought, and become collaborators in the gods' design. Let us proceed to the holier obligations, and exclude human sacrifice for all future time" (10, 39). And this is the turning point in the history of Heliodorus' Ethiopia, about to abandon primitive and barbarous practices, thoroughly alien to the Hellenic civilisation and culture. In this way the Greek civilising mission has reached Ethiopia to put down roots there. The Persian world has brushed against it too, but this will remain as it always was, whereas the non-Greek Ethiopia, which has certain native features bringing it closer to the Hellenic, embarks on its civilised existence. Civilisation, whose source is in Greece, is depicted by Heliodorus through that part of his story that takes place in Athens and in Delphi, but also in the attitudes and actions of the Greek Theagenes and his betrothed Chariclea, born in Ethiopia but brought up in Delphi in the shadow of Apollo's temple.

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