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The historical evidence of fantastic classical stories on Ancient Egypt

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Abstract

The article considers the possible historical foundation for the fantastic stories on ancient Egypt, narrated by classical authors. It may be suggested that fable stories, like two legends, about Polycrates and about Busiris, didn't reflect Egyptian life, but Egyptians' imagination. These obviously impossible stories were not the result of pure fantasy, they originated from proceeding the basic elements of the ancient Egyptian world concepts – of equilibrium and creating power of depictions. Thus, the fantastic classical texts relying to ancient Egypt may be seen as the specifying evidence on Egyptian world view. The other fantastic classical ancient stories about Egypt can also be based on authentic concepts and be worth considering.

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Keywords

Maat, Polycrates' ring, ancient Egyptian world view.

Introduction

Among a great number of ancient Greek stories on Egypt there are also those that may be seen as apparently unrealistic with a contemporary perspective. However, was it only ignorance that made classical authors tell fables about Egypt, or is it possible to see any historical evidence through their narrations? Let us consider two plots of that kind; the stories, which firstly seem obviously fantastic

The first story is told by Herodotus (Her III, 39-46, 120-126). He narrates about Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, a Greek island in Ionia. Polycrates led a revolt and usurped power over Samos. Polycrates' fame and prosperity grew, he became known all over Ionia and the other Greek lands and was even able to make a treaty with the Egyptian monarch Amasis. They changed gifts and became navy allies. The Samian navy dominated in the Aegean Sea. Polycrates was extraordinary successful in his land wars and piracy. (Her III, 39) Samos reached the prosperity under his ruling. Herodotus describes the buildings in the island capital, also called Samos, as the biggest in Greece. The city was adorned with a giant Hera temple, protected from possible attacks with a dumb round the gulf, and got a unique water supply. It was pieced from the sprinkle through a solid rock mountain. Then the water was carried by the pipes to the city of Samos (Her III, 60), forming water supply of volume and pureness unknown within the Greek world. It was the first rock tunnel, more than a kilometer, excavated from two diametrically opposite sides and engineered exactly enough to be aligned. [Apostol, 2014] Making far of the largest Greek island a prospering center of trade and pirate state could demonstrate Polycrates' highest fortune. The Samos ruler seemed not to assume any failure. However, having learnt about Polycrates' progressing luck, the Egyptian king Amasis, sent a letter to his ally. The pharaoh considered such a happiness to be an alarming sign and advised to Samos ruler to balance his happiness with unhappiness. Amasis claimed he desired a mingling of prosperity and mishap for his friends and himself; a wealth and sadness, rather than continual good fortune, that couldn't have been stopped otherwise than with a great disaster. Therefore, the pharaoh advised Polycrates to reckon what he considered to be most precious and what he would grieve to lose, and cast it away so that he could not get it back. Polycrates liked the advice and considered his seal ring of gold and emerald to be an appropriate beloved item. He embarked a ship and cast the ring far in the sea, and then at his palace grieved for the loss.

Yet, as Herodotos tells, the ring miraculously returned to its owner. He was a fisherman, who brought a rare and a worthy fish as a present to the tyrant. Polycrates thanked the fisherman and got the gift. His servants cut the fish and found the ring in its stomach. They brought the fish with joy to Polycrates, but he was not glad and wrote to Amasis about what had happened to him. On reading the letter and learning about the wonderful finding, Amasis predicted Polycrates' unlucky fate. Being fortunate even to find what had been cast away, the Samos ruler was to meet his awful end. That's Amasis sent his herald to Samos to renounce their friendship and alliance in order not to be sorrowful for a friend one day. (Her III, 42-43). According to Herodotus Polycrates' fate came true as predicted. Polycrates was not able to break his happy line and was treacherously killed by the Persian satraps Orontes.

Main part

What historical evidence can be seen in this episode?

The Herodotos' commentaries do not tend to admit the story vernaculars. They call it a legend, a folk-art motif, and give the examples of similar world myths relying to items, swallowed by fishes and

miraculously returned from their stomachs to the owners of those items. [Labarbe, 1984; Segal, 2014] Meanwhile, the Polycrates' ring story, being obviously fabled, seems to carry a significant historical evidence, relying to the ancient Egyptian worldview approach. In the Herodotus' story on Polycrates the idea of happiness which is to be balanced by unhappiness is attributed to the Egyptian ruler Amasis. It was the Greek name for the really existed pharaoh Jachmes II. We do not know if the historical Ahmose II used to tell something of that kind, or if he actually sent letters to Samos. However, the ideas attributed to him by Herodotus, carry in line with the ancient Egyptian concept of Maat, personized by a goddess with the same name. This idea was thoroughly researched by the Egyptologist Henry Frankfort who thought it to be the concept of balance as the world foundation. [Frankfort, 1949] The researcher based his view mostly on the ancient Egyptian texts having no abstract definition of Maat. Ancient Egyptians did not need to translate that concept and certainly did not try to define it. Meanwhile, the ancient Egyptian texts, include advice how to behave. That kind instructions bring us closer to understand the concept of balance (Maat). For instance, the person who is accompanied by someone eating too much is advised not to eat at all (for balance, as H. Frankfort consider). Through an advice of such kind, we may see some general concept, life ideal, called the concept of balance by the researcher.

The idea of artificially maintained balance was so common for Egypt that it revealed widely and in various ways. [Assman, 2003] The officials wore the figures of Maat as the pendants on their necks, little sculptures of Maat were used as scale weights at the markets, people wrote letters to Maat and pharaohs were called the servants of Maat. So, the Amasis advice to Polycrates to balance his enormous happiness with a self-made unhappiness looks rather similar for the traditional Egyptian feeling of world balance, Maat, which is to be restored by human in case of its visible breaking.

The Herodotus story on Polycrates' ring seems to present the most abstract narration of the ancient Egyptian world view approach. That story affirms the historians' conclusion based on the ancient Egyptian sources. Thus, in Polycrates story the typological fable plot of the swallowed and returned ring intercepts with the presentation of one of the central elements in the ancient Egyptian world view.

It may be noted, that geographically Samos is one of the Greek regions nearest to Egypt. In the VI century BC it belonged to the Greek areas mostly influenced by the Egyptian culture. [Davis, 1981] The evidence of that kind is the Samos Kouros, the ever biggest found stature of archaic Greek pattern, regarded to had been impacted by the Egyptian sculptural tradition. The most prominent Greek philosopher and mathematician of the VI century Pythagoras lived just in Samos. Diogenes Laertius and Isocrates told that he studied philosophy in Egypt. (Diog Laert 8,1; Isoc 11, 28) The legends connected his wisdom with Egypt so intensely, that being blamed by his contemporaries of having taken his mathematical ideas from the country of pyramids, Pythagoras had to sacrifice 100 oxen to prove that he had been inspired by the Greek gods, not by the Egyptian priests. On the other hand, the Egyptian sources tell about the city of Naukratis intended by Amasis for the Greek community in the country. [Cook, 1937] Thus, intensive Egyptian – Greek communication in the VI century, while Samos was one of its centers, doesn't make it impossible that basic Egyptian world viewing concept of Maat penetrates into Herodotus story of Polycrates' ring.

Let us consider the second apparently fable ancient Greek plot relying to ancient Egypt. It is the story of the pharaoh Busiris who ordered to kill all the foreigners coming to Egypt. Heracles was the first foreigner able to avoid the terrific order. He struggled against Busiris and killed himself the pharaoh.

Being the part of the Heracles romances, the legend of Busiris is narrated by many authors, most extensively by Pseudo-Apollodoros (II 5,11) and Diodoros (IV 18,1). Some of them hesitated about the

reliability of the story and tried to bring it to terms with reality. Isocrates, for example, made an attempt to explain it rationally. He described Busiris as an ideal ruler who had been defamed by his enemies (Isoc 32-33). The classical authors' doubt was based on the apparent legend nonsense – what was the rational aim of killing all the foreigners? – while any similar precedents were unknown for them in nontemporal Egypt or beyond it.

Let us examine ancient Egyptian evidence which may rely to the origin of Busiris legend. What obstacles and ideas could have created the myth? One of the beloved motives of ancient Egyptian reliefs and statues were defeated and tied captives – Libyans, Ethiopians, Asians – “foreigners” on the ancient Greeks opinion. This depiction stereotype has a collocational analogue “living killed”. According to O. Berlev's interpretation, it was the collocation for all people, whom a pharaoh intended to subdue. The depictions and utterances of such kind didn't have any relation to facts, but to wishes. For example, in the pharaoh Eschaton's palace the reliefs on the floor, depicting bound Asians, “living killed”, appeared just in the period when the Near Asian lands were getting out the Egyptian control one after another [Franken, 2015]. O. Berlev notes that sometimes “living killed” conquered Egypt. [Берлев, 1989]

Conclusion

Thus, in Egypt foreigners were “killed” not literally, physically, but figuratively through inscriptions and depictions. Just this phenomenon seems to give foundation for the classical myth about a cruel Egyptian ruler Busiris.

It should be noted that the described figurative practice concerning “living killed” was only the part of more general situation: according to Egyptian imagination, something uttered or shown created relying reality or at least helped it to be born. [Bolshakov, 1997] In view of it, tied captives were not only the element of art style. The legend on Busiris reflected the concept, typical for the general Egyptian world view.

Thereby, both considered plots, about Polycrates' ring and Amasis advice, and about Busiris's order to kill foreigners, both apparently fantastic, may reflect ancient Egyptians' imagination. These fable stories were not the result of a pure fantasy, they came from proceeding the basal elements of the ancient Egyptian world concepts.

So, the obviously fantastic classical texts relying to ancient Egypt may be seen as the specifying evidence on Egyptian world view.

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Историческая основа фантастических античных рассказов о Древнем Египте

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается возможная историческая основа фантастических рассказов классических авторов, писавших о Древнем Египте. Можно предположить, что сказочные сюжеты, подобные историям о перстне Поликрата и о Бусирисе, отражали не реалии древнеегипетской жизни, а представления древних египтян о мироустройстве. Такие истории не были плодом литературного вымысла античных писателей, скорее они отображали понимание греческими авторами древнеегипетских мировоззренческих установок, например представлений о мировом балансе (Маат). Таким образом, фантастические античные сюжеты о Древнем Египте могут послужить источником для уточнения наших представлений о древнеегипетской картине мира.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Маат, перстень Поликрата, древнеегипетские представления о мире.

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