

Following the King to the Underworld: The Tale of Rampsinitus (Hdt. II 122) and Ancient Egyptian Tradition*

1. Rameses II and the origins of Rampsinitus' *katabasis*

Chapters 121f. of the second book of Herodotus' *Ἱστορίη* are dedicated to king Rampsinitus. In the first one, 121, Herodotus narrates the famous novella of the king and the cunning thief of the royal treasure. Much has already been written about this novella and its connections to Egyptian and non-Egyptian folktales have been satisfactorily examined¹. On the other hand, the second story, that of Rampsinitus' journey in the Underworld (II 122), presents a number of aspects that are worth investigating, such as: a) the probable form and structure of the original tale, as heard by Herodotus; b) some folktale motifs which have not so far been noticed²; and c) the sources of the tale in both historical and narrative terms.

Concerning the identity of Rampsinitus, scholars associate him with Rameses II and III³. The main reason for this identification is the correlation of archaeological findings with the statements of Herodotus about the monuments left behind by

* I wish to thank I.M. Konstantakos for his very useful comments on this paper; I am also grateful to him as well as to Alcibiades Zalavras and the anonymous native speaker for improving my English. Finally, yet importantly, I thank the anonymous referees of «Eikasmós» for all their corrections and advices through which they helped me to improve the quality of my research.

¹ See most notably Sayce 1883, 189; Wiedemann 1890, 447f., 450f., 453; Elwell 1890, XXV-XXVII; How-Wells 1912, 225; Pieper 1929, 77-79; Waddell 1939, 226; Aly 1969, 237, 240; Lloyd 1988, 53f.; Fehling 1990, 210f.; Munson 1993, 27-44; Hansen 2002, 359-370; Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007, 326f.; Ward 2008, 40f.; Haziza 2009, 216-218.

² Cf. Sayce 1883, 192f.; Wiedemann 1890, 454f.; How-Wells 1912, 225f.; Lloyd 1988, 55-59.

³ Sayce (1883, 189) identifies Rampsinitus with Rameses III, citing the etymologies of the name proposed by Brugsch (from *Ramessu pa nuter*, Rameses the God) and Maspero (*Ramessu si-Neith*, Rameses, son of Neith, cf. similarly Wiedemann 1890, 445; How-Wells 1912, 224). In the second case, the Greek form Ῥαμψίνιτος probably ensued by haplology from *Ραμψι-σίνιτος. Rameses III is also favoured by How-Wells (1912, 224) and Waddell (1939, 226). Wiedemann (1890, 445f.) believes that Rampsinitus is Rameses II, pointing out, however, many analogies with Rameses III. Kaiser (1967, 93f.) doubts about the identification with Rameses III; Morenz 1969, 157f. and 235 n. 98; Lloyd (1988, 52) remains cautiously indecisive, pointing out that Rameses was the name of several pharaohs of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasty to which Rameses II and III respectively belonged. Cf. Hansen 2002, 363. For further bibliography see Delgado 2011, 96 n. 6, who directs himself to Rameses II.

king Rampsinitus (II 121,1). According to the historian, he had left many monuments, the most important of which were two enormous statues. Nevertheless, both pharaohs with whom Rampsinitus has been associated, namely Rameses II and III, were exceedingly active in this respect, erecting sundry such monuments. As a result, the monuments Herodotus saw are equally likely to have belonged either to Rameses II or to Rameses III⁴. Therefore, archaeological findings offer little help as to Rampsinitus' historical identity⁵. The name 'Ραμψίνιτος itself affords no clue either, since many kings were given the name *Rameses* in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth dynasty⁶. It may be assumed that Herodotus, after observing those two statues, would eventually have asked about the king who had erected them. He would have been told that the king was 'Rameses', but presumably did not bother or manage to clarify exactly which king of that name was meant. Most probably he was not even aware that many such homonymous pharaohs had existed⁷.

The story of Rampsinitus' *katabasis* can shed light on the question of Rampsinitus' identity, as it contains information that points to a specific pharaoh, Rameses II. The very *katabasis* or Underworld journey seems to be directly linked with Rameses II, due to his persistent interest in his own immortality and deification, which he had been trying to consolidate throughout the kingdom by repeatedly organizing the Sed festival (*Heb-Sed*)⁸. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to compare in detail Herodotus' narrative with the procedure of the Sed festival.

According to Herodotus, king Rampsinitus travelled to the Underworld alive, where he met the goddess Demeter. He played dice with her and, having won and lost a few games, returned to the Upper World having won a golden handkerchief as a gift from the goddess. Here follow Herodotus' exact words (II 122,1):

μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἔλεγον τοῦτον τὸν βασιλέα ζῶν καταβῆναι κάτω ἐς τὸν οἱ Ἕλληνες Ἄϊδην νομίζουσι εἶναι, καὶ κεῖθι συγκυβεύειν τῇ Δήμητρει, καὶ τὰ μὲν νικᾶν τὰ δὲ ἐσσοῦσθαι ὑπ' αὐτῆς, καὶ μιν πάλιν ἀπικέσθαι δῶρον ἔχοντα παρ' αὐτῆς χειρόμακτρον χρύσεον⁹.

⁴ Cf. Lloyd 1988, 52. On the monuments of Rameses II see Faulkner 1975, 230f.; Clayton 1994, 153-155; Kitchen in Sasson 1995, II 766-769; Shaw 2000, 299f. On the monuments of Rameses III see Faulkner 1975, 244f.; Clayton 1994, 162-164; Shaw 2000, 305f.

⁵ On Herodotus' credibility according to his experience in the Egyptian monuments see Spiegelberg 1926.

⁶ Cf. How-Wells 1912, 224; Lloyd 1988, 52. On pharaohs of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasty with the name Rameses see Faulkner 1975, 217-251; Clayton 1994, 140-171; Shaw 2000, 297-313.

⁷ On the much debated issue of Herodotus' credibility see most recently Moyer 2011, 42-83, where he summarizes the hitherto discussion (especially concerning the second book of the *Historiae*).

⁸ Haziza (2009, 139) also suggests, among others, the Sed festival as possible origin of Rampsinitus' *katabasis*. However, she mentions this probability very fleetingly.

⁹ For the text of Herodotus I am using the edition of Hude (1927).

The Sed festival had its roots in the custom of African primitive tribes (particularly in Ethiopia and the African mainland in the south of Egypt) to kill the leader of the tribe when he reached a certain age. The head of the tribe was apparently believed to owe his supreme power to his physical ability and skills in relation to hunting activities¹⁰. He was the symbol of the strength and prosperity of his people as well as the model warrior-hunter for all the males of the tribe. In a period when tribes used to survive only by force of arms, using them either against other people or against animals, it is obvious that the leader had to surpass the others in such matters. Therefore, when he got old, his own subjects would probably kill him and entrust the leadership to the next stronger warrior-hunter. This custom gradually ceased to exist in its primary form; first, a replacement of the king was sacrificed instead, until in the end the succession was made bloodlessly, with the retiring king staying alive but ceasing to rule¹¹. In ancient Egypt a trace of this custom can be observed in the Sed festival, during which the pharaoh renewed his power and vitality through symbolic rituals, in order to prove that he indeed remained the supreme ruler of Egypt, preserving the primitive ideal of the mighty and skilful leader. The symbolic rituals of the festival included the reenactment of a journey to and return from the Underworld.

The Sed festival first took place in the thirtieth year of the pharaoh's reign and every three years afterwards¹². After thirty years of reign the pharaoh needed to prove that, despite the elapsed decades, he was still able to govern, and this was the essential purpose of the festival. The preparations could last several months or even years. When approaching the thirtieth year of his reign, the pharaoh would command the construction of stone kiosks in every town of Egypt. These were effigies of the official shrines in the capital, where the ritual was to take place. At the same time the pharaoh had to build a new palace specifically destined for the Sed festival, or at least refurbish the old one. Inside this palace the king rested during the breaks of the festival, which lasted a few days. This palace, according to Uphil, was very close to the temple where the rituals took place¹³, in order to avoid repeated long-distance movements by the pharaoh¹⁴.

The following description of the rituals is based on the analysis of Uphil, who has reconstructed the festival procedure on the basis of the illustrations found in Pharaonic tombs, such as the one belonging to Pharaoh Osorkon. The route of the procession was from the palace to the pharaoh's tomb¹⁵, where the procession was to reach its climax. Throughout the procession the king stopped at each of the pavilions placed along the route from the palace to the central temple. He started with sacrifices and offerings to several deities. Then,

¹⁰ Cf. Flinders-Petrie 1924, 17; Watterson 1996, 58 about these tribes and especially the most recent of them, the Shilluk of the Sudan.

¹¹ See Strab. XVII 2,3; cf. Flinders-Petrie 1906, 181 with a catalogue of examples of such customs.

¹² Cf. Redford 2001, I 522.

¹³ This temple, used for the final stage of the event, the iconic burial of the pharaoh, was the already existing temple dedicated to him. In ancient Egypt each pharaoh manufactured such temples for his worship, where he organized royal ceremonies, such as the Sed festival. See Redford 2001, III 375.

¹⁴ Cf. Uphil 1965, 368f.

¹⁵ The virtual tomb was often an extension of the already existing royal temple and was constructed exclusively for the Sed festival. See Uphil 1965, 368 n. 4.

after offering to the goddess Nekhbet an hourglass expressing his desire to renew the time of his reign, he proceeded to the first royal altar, accompanied by magicians and priests of the “House of Life”¹⁶. Among others, the king was escorted by a group of people carrying a portable shrine of the god Wepwawet. When the king arrived at the first pavilion, he made his first public appearance during the festival. The inscription on the illustration of this scene in the grave of pharaoh Osorkon reads: «Horus appears resting in the southern throne and there a uniting of the sky to the earth». Behind the pharaoh followed prophets, the so-called Followers of Horus, as well as effigies of many gods, including Wepwawet. Then the pharaoh and the procession headed to the area destined for the main rituals. At that point, the high priests of Heliopolis and Koptos appeared, while the portable shrine and the statues of Wepwawet continued to participate in the procession¹⁷. Afterwards the pharaoh is represented inside the palace built for the festival, where he makes offers to all the gods of the ceremony. He then has a meal with the powerful god Amon-Ra in another chamber called the “House of Food”, in order to receive as a gift from the god the right to continue governing Egypt. Having obtained the god’s blessing, he enters the temple of Wepwawet, where he finds the god’s prophets holding his statues and accompanied by priests of the “House of Life”, all of them exclaiming “Hail to the Sed-festivals of Horus forever”. After he leaves the temple, the pharaoh burns incense as an offer to twelve gods; the first two have the likeness of Wepwawet. Then he makes his last appearance as a living king, always escorted by Wepwawet among others¹⁸.

Finally the pharaoh enters the royal tomb where the ritual reaches its crucial stage. Inside the tomb there is a bed, under which there are the pharaoh’s personal belongings, such as weapons, clothes and royal utensils. Suddenly the pharaoh is depicted green, namely dead, while next to him there is a statue with the form of Osiris. Before him appears a god who shows him the symbols of life, stability and power, while the scene is accompanied by the inscription «Wake up». The re-enacted burial and funeral, along with the resurrection scene following them, happen after the pharaoh has entered the tomb. All objects have been placed there beforehand and the pharaoh’s entrance into the tomb symbolises his rebirth as Horus with the two eyes and the head of a hawk. The transition from Osiris to Horus is clear. After his revival, the pharaoh is transferred to the palace, having replaced the robe of the Sed ritual with his usual royal dress. The Festival ends with further rituals, the re-offering of the hourglass and the people’s cheers for the king¹⁹.

After the narration of Ramsinutius’ journey into the Underworld, Herodotus also describes a ceremony similar to that of Sed, which was performed in honour of Ramsinutius and his *katabasis*, according to what Herodotus was told by his informants. As the historian specifies, it was after the Egyptian king’s return from the Underworld that the festival started being performed in honour of his journey. This festival, Herodotus comments, continued to take place even to his time. Moreover, Herodotus gives some details of the festival rituals: some Egyptian priests

¹⁶ For the “House of Life” and its priests see Bonnet 1971, 417f.; Redford 2001, I 71.

¹⁷ Cf. Uphil 1965, 370-372.

¹⁸ Cf. Uphil 1965, 372-377.

¹⁹ Cf. Uphil 1965, 377-382.

wove a cloak, bound the eyes of a companion with a scarf and then led him up to the sanctuary of the goddess Demeter. The blindfolded priest was escorted by two wolves, which also brought him back to the starting place (II 122,2f.):

ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Ῥαμψινίτου καταβάσιος, ὡς πάλιν ἀπίκετο, ὄρτην δὴ ἀνάγειν Αἰγυπτίους ἔφασαν· τὴν καὶ ἐγὼ οἶδα ἔτι καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ἐπιτελέοντας αὐτούς· οὐ μέντοι εἴ γε διὰ ταῦτα ὀρτάζουσι ἔχω λέγειν. φᾶρος δὲ αὐτημερὸν ἐξυφηναντες οἱ ἰρέες κατ' ὄν ἔδησαν ἑνὸς ἑαυτῶν μίτρη τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, ἀγαγόντες δέ μιν ἔχοντα τὸ φᾶρος ἐς ὁδὸν φέρουσαν ἐς ἰρὸν Δήμητρος αὐτοὶ ἀπαλλάσσονται ὀπίσω· τὸν δὲ ἰρέα τοῦτον καταδεδεμένον τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς λέγουσι ὑπὸ δύο λύκων ἄγεσθαι ἐς τὸ ἰρὸν τῆς Δήμητρος ἀπέχον τῆς πόλιος εἴκοσι σταδίου, καὶ αὐτὶς ὀπίσω ἐκ τοῦ ἰροῦ ἀπάγειν μιν τοὺς λύκους ἐς τὸ αὐτὸ χωρίον.

As Lloyd has already noticed, this festival in honor of Rampsinitus appears to be a ceremony of succession and regeneration of power. A priest, who seems to represent the king²⁰, is taken blindfolded to a temple-grave²¹ as the blinded Horus (Osiris) and presumably returns without the blindfold, as Horus the successor with the two eyes²². If one accepts Herodotus' testimony that the protagonist was a priest, then this ceremony was clearly not identical to the Sed festival, where it was the king himself and not a priest who took part as the protagonist. Still, the ceremony described in Hdt. II 122 must have been concerned with the king's rebirth, as pointed out by Lloyd. In that case one cannot exclude the possibility that Herodotus' ceremony was some kind of representation or re-enactment related to the Sed festival of Ramesses II. This conclusion is supported by a series of similarities between the two events:

1) First of all, the main participant is accompanied in both cases by creatures in the form of jackals. In the Sed festival a whole group of priests of the jackal

²⁰ Cf. Lloyd 1988, 58.

²¹ As Herodotus immediately explains in II 123, Demeter, together with Dionysus, is the goddess who rules the Underworld. Herodotus' Demeter is the Egyptian Isis (II 59,2). As Edmonds (2004, 4) notes, writers narrating myths of journeys to the realm of the dead frequently express universal mythical patterns through elements identifiable by their fellow countrymen, in order to be better understood. In the same way Herodotus calls Isis Demeter, in order to help the Greeks understand his story. In such a ritual, where the priest-pharaoh performs a virtual journey into the Underworld, it was to be expected that his descent would be represented through the use of the temple of Isis, as she was the dominant deity of the Egyptian Underworld. Therefore, in the occasion of the festival described by Herodotus in II 122, her temple may have represented the Underworld itself or the entrance to it. In addition, Isis was the source of royal power, the mother of the reborn king, whom the king should visit and from whom he should return in order to renew his kingship. See Lloyd 1988, 58; Frankfort 1948b, 6.

²² Cf. Lloyd 1988, 58.

god Wepwawet²³, emphasized in the illustrations and almost separated from the rest of the king's followers, is constantly present during the whole march of the king to his final destination, namely his tomb. The pharaoh, moreover, enters Wepwawet's temple and, when coming out again, pays tribute to twelve gods, two of whom look like Wepwawet. Significantly, Uphil, who has interpreted the murals in the tomb of Osorkon II in order to reconstruct the Sed Festival, remarks many times throughout his description that the statuettes of Wepwawet are almost always distinguished from other idols²⁴. Similarly, the wolves mentioned in Herodotus are probably jackals which the historian confused with wolves²⁵. Furthermore, Lloyd argues that these wolves of Herodotus' narrative were possibly priests playing the role of Wepwawet²⁶. If so, the ties between Herodotus' ritual and the Sed Festival appear even stronger.

2) Secondly, just as in Herodotus' ceremony the priest returns with his eyes uncovered, the god appearing after the pharaoh's rebirth in the depictions of the Sed festival is the hawk-god Horus with two eyes. In both cases we have a virtual rebirth of the pharaoh, which clearly reflects the myth of Osiris and his succession by Horus²⁷. More specifically, in Herodotus' ritual the priest representing the king recalls Horus of Letopolis, who has two forms: "He whose face has no eyes" (*Mḥnty-n-irty*) and "He whose face has eyes" (*Mḥnty-irty*). The first one is the dead Horus, namely Osiris, while the second one is the successor Horus full of power and magnificence, illuminating the world. Accordingly, the priest/king of the Herodotean narrative goes towards Isis' temple/Underworld blindfolded, i.e. quasi-blind, and returns with his eyes uncovered (Herodotus does not explicitly refer to the return of the priest with uncovered eyes, but it is easy to understand that this was the case – otherwise it is difficult to explain the binding of the eyes at the beginning of the ritual)²⁸. Similarly, in the Sed festival the pharaoh is pictured after his resurrection as Horus with two eyes. Besides, inside the pharaoh's cenotaph Uphil recognises a statuette of Osiris. This may have remained inside the tomb even after the pharaoh left, replacing him, as he, after his resurrection, was no longer Osiris but Horus.

3) Thirdly, the Sed festival is essentially the king's fictional journey to the Underworld, just like the ritual in Herodotus II 122. Both in the Sed and in Herodotus' ritual the constant presence of the jackal-god Wepwawet shows that

²³ Wepwawet was represented by Egyptians with a human body and the head of a jackal, which was the sacred animal of the god.

²⁴ Cf. Uphil 1965, 365-367.

²⁵ Cf. Sayce 1883, 193; How-Wells 1912, 226; Lloyd 1988, 58f.; Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007, 328.

²⁶ Cf. Lloyd 1988, 58f.; Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007, 328.

²⁷ On this myth see Flinders-Petrie 1924, 90; Müller 1918, 92-121. On its connection with the pharaoh's death see Frankfort 1948a, 102f.

²⁸ Cf. Lloyd 1988, 58.

the pharaoh is accompanied by the god in his journey to the world of the dead. Besides, in both cases a special cloak is made for the protagonist.

Pharaoh Rameses II, the third king of the nineteenth dynasty²⁹, seems to have been connected with the Sed festival more than any other pharaoh. As mentioned above, this was due to his persistence on his divine nature and eternal life³⁰. In the sixty-seven years of his reign (1279-1212 BC)³¹, he celebrated the festival thirteen or fourteen times. Unlike the other pharaohs, he did not wait to complete thirty years of rule in order to proclaim himself an immortal God. Although it was customary for a pharaoh to wait until his first Sed festival (thirty years) to perform his deification, Rameses II erected a huge statue of himself with the inscription “Rameses the God” already in the eighteenth year of his reign. Furthermore, he created a folk cult for himself in many Egyptian cities³². With regard to the Sed festival, after celebrating it for the first time, Rameses introduced the repetition of the occasion every three years. As herald of the event he had appointed his son Khaemwaset, who, during the period before the celebration, travelled along the kingdom and announced the specific time of the festival’s performance³³. Khaemwaset was posthumously connected in popular tales with the Underworld as a legendary traveler called Setne to the world of the dead. He was associated with such stories because of his passion for excavations and archaeology, but also because he was responsible for his father’s iconic burial and resurrection, as he had retained his position as herald for twelve years, from the thirteenth to the forty-second year of Rameses’ reign, for five consecutive festivals³⁴.

In addition to the multitude of the Sed festivals, another factor which contributed to the creation of Rameses’ myth was the success of his government. Through his military operations and campaigns against the Hittites and the Syrians he expanded the frontiers of the empire more than any one of his predecessors³⁵. At the same time he turned his interest to the expansion of the trade³⁶ as well as the restoration of all the old temples and the construction of new ones, transforming Egypt into a country full of imposing monuments, which reflected the prosperity of his kingdom³⁷. In conclusion, Rameses’ reign marked the high-point of Egypt’s prosperity³⁸.

²⁹ Cf. Clayton 1994, 146; Bard 1999, 57. On king Rameses II see Breasted 1906, 102-237 where all sources are collected; Faulkner 1975, 226-232; Clayton 1994, 146-153; Bard 1999, 57f., 87-90 and 830 on his tomb; Shaw 2000, 297-302. See also Davies 1997, 55-150, inscriptions – both literary and historical – about the battles of Rameses II and his Hittite weddings; Foster 2001, 96-99, hymn to Rameses II.

³⁰ On Rameses’ deification see Bard 1999, 87-90.

³¹ Cf. Clayton 1994, 146.

³² Cf. Shaw 2000, 301.

³³ Cf. Faulkner 1975, 232.

³⁴ On the folktales of the legendary Setne see Maspero 1915, 115-171; Pieper 1929, 54-60; Lichtheim 1973, 125-151; Bresciani 1999, 882-908.

³⁵ On the battles of Rameses II with Hittites see Faulkner 1975, 226-229; Clayton 1994, 147-153. Generally on his campaigns see Faulkner 1975, 229f.; Bard 1999, 87-90.

³⁶ Cf. Bard 1999, 58.

³⁷ See above p. 140 n. 4.

³⁸ Clayton 1994, 146; Bard 1999, 58.

All this glory was connected with the journey to the Underworld not only because Rameses always promoted the issue of his deification but also owing to the long duration of his rule, which would have made common people consider him an immortal³⁹. He ruled for sixty-seven years⁴⁰ and remained unharmed after all the battles against the enemies of Egypt. He had almost one hundred children (forty or fifty sons and as many daughters), most of whom died before him and only one, Merenptah (1212-1203 BC), managed to succeed him⁴¹. Rameses seemed to be indestructible, and the repeated performance of the Sed festival had certainly inculcated a strong impression of power in his people's conscience. The festival was organized from 1249 to 1212 BC, for almost forty years, and there were certainly people who during childhood and well into maturity had watched thirteen or fourteen times their king carrying out his virtual journey to the Underworld, as well as his resurrection and rebirth.

If Herodotus' story of II 122 is indeed derived from Rameses' reputation of immortality, then the *terminus post quem* for its creation must be the year of the first Sed of Rameses, namely 1250/1249 BC⁴². As mentioned above, Rameses did not wait for this event to declare himself immortal, but had already done this in the eighteenth year of his reign (1262/1261 BC). Therefore, he had already prepared a fertile ground which welcomed seeds of fairy tale from the first Sed onwards. Subsequently, the repetition of the event doubtless inscribed it into the people's consciousness as the resurrection of the king.

2. *The tale of Merire and the funeral scene of Rampsinitus*

The brief tale in Hdt. II 122 contains several basic patterns of Egyptian literature. These are a) the journey to the Underworld, b) the game with a creature of that realm (mortal or divine) and c) the acquisition of an object as a prize for winning the game⁴³. What follows in this section is an analysis of these motifs, which outlines the form they probably had within the original tale heard by Herodotus. By looking more carefully into relevant Egyptian stories, one forms the impression that Herodotus must have heard the tale of Rampsinitus' *katabasis* in a more extended form and enhanced with many more distinctly Egyptian mythical patterns.

³⁹ Nowadays, of course, it is not easy for someone to understand that long kingships led to the deification of sovereigns. For example, the common people of England will never believe that Elizabeth II is immortal, no matter how long she will reign. However, in ancient Egypt things were far different. I cite Wilkinson's exact words (2003, 57): «it seems clear that such kings usually 'earned' their immortality through long and successful reigns. The clearest evidence for this comes from the New Kingdom; although the exact details of the situation are not always clear, the living deifications of Amenophis III and Ramesses II are relatively well attested».

⁴⁰ The longest reign after Pepy II (about 2278-2184 BC). Cf. Shaw 2000, 302.

⁴¹ Cf. Shaw 2000, 302.

⁴² For a different opinion see Delgado 2011, 100.

⁴³ Cf. Sayce 1883, 192f.; Wiedemann 1890, 454f.; How-Wells 1912, 225; Lloyd 1988, 56f.

The most characteristic parallels for Rampsinitus' *katabasis* are the *Tale of the Magician Merire* and the stories of Setne⁴⁴. The *Tale of the Magician Merire*⁴⁵ survives in the *Vandier Papyrus*, dating to the late sixth century BC. The composition of the story, though, goes back even earlier, to the period between the eighth and the sixth century BC, while its narrative core perhaps comes from the Ramesside Period⁴⁶. According to the plot, the pharaoh is doomed to die and Merire takes his place going to the Underworld himself. While Merire is there, the pharaoh kidnaps and marries Merire's wife and kills his son. The story ends with the return of Merire, who finally takes revenge⁴⁷. If one compares the adventure of Merire with the tale of Rampsinitus, one does not find at first sight any similarity except the fact that both stories concern a man who descends to the realm of the dead. Moreover, not only is it difficult to find any similarity, but the stories also differ in two points: a) Herodotus makes clear that Rampsinitus descends alive (II 122 ζῶν καταβῆναι κάτω)⁴⁸, whereas Merire's journey actually means his death; b) Merire's tale includes a full scene of the procession taking place in his honor, while there is no such part in the story about Rampsinitus.

However, these disparities may well be due to Herodotus' epigrammatic style and summary narration of the tale. A careful examination of the entire chapter II 122 may allow us to reconstruct possible parts of the genuine Egyptian tale of Rampsinitus' *katabasis* – parts that may have been similar to the corresponding elements of the story of Merire. Especially useful in this respect is the information offered by Herodotus immediately after the end of Rampsinitus' journey. As shown in the previous chapter, Herodotus describes a ritual procession which was probably performed for the king and in memory of his journey to the

⁴⁴ As rightly observed by Delgado (2011, 97), Memphis itself connects Setne's story with Herodotus' Rampsinitus, as it is at the same time both the 'spatial context' of Setne's tales and the place where Herodotus was mainly being informed about Egypt by the priest of the area.

⁴⁵ Although scholars cite Setne as a parallel of the story of Rampsinitus, in the case of Merire they seem not to take account of the connections of his story with the *katabasis* in Herodotus. Cf. Sayce 1883, 192f.; Wiedemann 1890, 454f.; How-Wells 1912, 225; Lloyd 1988, 56f. Cf. also Delgado 2011, 104, who believes that the story is not comparable to Rampsinitus.

⁴⁶ Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1987, 5f.; Bresciani 1999, 610; Konstantakos 2008, 225 n. 82 with more bibl.

⁴⁷ Cf. Bresciani 1999, 611-616.

⁴⁸ This is a difficult statement. Delgado (2011, 102-105) explains it as an interpretation *graeca* referring to the Pythagoreans and the Orphics, based mainly on the fact that only the deceased were considered by the Egyptians to be able to play the senet. This is a weak argument, given that Setne, though being alive, plays the game with the mummy. Folklore imagination can change even religious restrictions. For this reason I cannot accept also his view that the senet can give to the winner only the capability of going in an outside the world of the dead. We must take account of the protagonist's nature: Setne is a lover of antiquities and a magician and the senet gives him Thoth's writings. Besides, there is no hint in the text of the story that he will not be able to leave in the case that he loses the game. Similarly, Rampsinitus is above all a king and for this reason the senet is to be supposed that it gives him mainly the opportunity to renew his reign. Moreover, we must not forget that most Egyptian people had been watching for several years Rameses II getting into his tomb alive during the Sed Festival and this might be an affirmation of the Egyptian origins of Herodotus' ζῶν. However, we must indeed be cautious regarding this difficult issue.

Underworld (at least according to what Herodotus was told by his informers). Accordingly, in the Merire narrative the procession scene evolves as follows: Merire wears a linen mantle designed especially for the occasion. He also shaves himself and is properly prepared for his appearance before the god Ra. After completing his preparation, he leaves home and goes to the palace of the Pharaoh. Then, escorted by the king and by the royal magicians, he heads for the Underworld, probably to his tomb. The pharaoh offers him a statuette of the goddess Hathor as well as one of a dog-headed monkey. Finally, when Merire is ready to start his journey, he asks his escorts, including the pharaoh, to stop following him and watch him no more⁴⁹.

The similarities between Merire's tale and the ritual in Herodotus are as follows:

a) The entourage of the *καταβαίνων* stays behind and stops following him from a point onwards. According to Herodotus, the priests escort the priest-Rampsinitus not to the sanctuary of Demeter but only to the beginning of the road leading to the sanctuary, namely twenty stades from the starting point. Similarly, Merire advises the pharaoh and his courtiers to stay away and not even look at him during his descent. In both cases the traveler must cover some distance alone.

b) Furthermore, both the main characters, Merire and the priest-Rampsinitus, have only animals (either real or effigies) accompanying them during the last stage of their route. In Herodotus' case two wolves⁵⁰ follow the priest to the sanctuary and back again. In the same manner Merire, in addition to the statue of Hathor, which is a forecast of what follows⁵¹, asks for the statue of a dog-headed monkey (viz. a baboon)⁵² to be brought to him. The presence of the baboon is not explained in anyone of the following scenes of the story, and this perhaps indicates that here

⁴⁹ Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1987, 9f.; Bresciani 1999, 613.

⁵⁰ Most scholars believe that Herodotus' wolves are actually jackals. Cf. Sayce 1883, 193; How-Wells 1912, 226; Waddell 1939, 229; Lloyd 1988, 58f.; Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007, 328; Haziza 2009, 138. On the opposite view, namely that Herodotus correctly mentions wolves and not jackals see Wiedemann 1890, 456. Although there is a general consensus on the identity of the animal (jackal), there are different opinions about which god these animals symbolized in Herodotus' ceremony: Anubis (cf. Sayce 1883, 193; Wiedemann 1890, 456) or Wepwawet, the god guiding the dead to the Underworld (cf. How-Wells 1912, 226; Lloyd 1988, 59). Indeed, in the Egyptian religion the jackal represents the burial gods Khenti-Amentiu and Anubis. The same animal also appears for the rarer god Sed. Jackals, when representing belligerent deities, appear upright, while they kneel down when representing burial gods (cf. Bonnet 1971, 674f.). For an explanation of the connection of this animal with burial gods see Flinders-Petrie 1924, 80f.

⁵¹ Merire deliberately asked for a statue of Hathor, in order to gain her sympathy while staying in the Underworld. The goddess confirms his expectations by helping him several times. She tries to convince the supreme god of the Underworld to allow Merire to return to the Upper World. Furthermore, she is willing to bring him news from his family. See Fischer-Elfert 1987, 10f.; Bresciani 1999, 613-615.

⁵² Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1987, 9. The text at this point is damaged and very fragmentary. It seems, though, to mention a baboon (at least according to Fischer-Elfert, although other scholars, such as Posener and Bresciani, do not confirm this reading).

too, just as in Herodotus, this animal is nothing more than the escort of the dead. The baboon is most probably a form of the god Thoth, who was often represented with a baboon's head, as a complement to Hathor⁵³. Thoth is perfectly suited to Merire's journey to the Underworld, because when having the head of a baboon he is considered a god of the dead and participates in the judgment of the souls. Therefore, the presence of the baboon here symbolizes the god of the Underworld who accompanies the *καταβαίνων* in his journey⁵⁴.

c) In both cases there is a special cloak to be made for the *καταβαίνων*.

Unfortunately, Herodotus' narrative about Rampsinitus' journey does not include such an episode. The similarities just presented connect the *Tale of Merire* with the ritual that Herodotus describes after the *katabasis* story as taking place in his own time. However, the original Egyptian tale heard by Herodotus may well have been longer and fuller, possibly including such an episode. This is indicated by the fact that the analogous ritual recorded by the Greek historian was performed in commemoration of Rampsinitus' *katabasis* and is closely connected with its story. This assumption is strengthened by three arguments. First of all, the existence of such an episode in the *Tale of Merire* shows that the motif of the ritual procession in honor of the *καταβαίνων* actually existed in Egyptian stories of this sort. Besides, the *Tale of Merire* goes back to the Ramesside period, in which the tale of Rampsinitus/Rameses II also has its origins, as argued above. Therefore, since this motif demonstrably occurs in one *katabasis* story of that period, it is plausible to expect its existence also in another story of the same age and the same subject-matter.

Secondly, the hero of Herodotus' *katabasis* is not a simple Egyptian but king Rampsinitus himself. This strengthens the probability that the Egyptian model of Herodotus' story included a ritual procession. If in the *Tale of Merire* the ritual scene is used for a simple layman, it is reasonable to expect the same scene in stories concerning the pharaoh himself, such as that of Herodotus. Moreover, since Merire actually takes the pharaoh's place, it is very likely that the procession escorting him was the one which should follow the king, in case he descended into the Underworld himself. This is precisely the case in Herodotus' story, in which a king is himself going to the world of the dead. The original Egyptian narrative about Rampsinitus must therefore have contained a similar scene.

Finally, the Egyptian royal etiquette offered ample scope for the creation and development of such a pattern. The Sed festival, as explained above, was actually a ceremony representing, among other things, the king's journey to the Underworld, and was very similar to the ritual described by Herodotus (II 122,2f.). Therefore,

⁵³ Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1987, 9 n. 14.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bonnet 1971, 811f.; Redford 2001, III 398. Thoth matches one of Merire's guides to the Underworld for one more reason: this god, either as an ibis or as a baboon, was the protector god of scribes (cf. Redford, *l.c.*), and Merire was a scribe.

the tale about Rampsinitus could have drawn the motif of the ritual scene both from its historical background (royal etiquette/Sed festival) and from its narrative one (stories like *Merire*).

3. The game in the Underworld

The existence of the ritual scene in the original tale of Rampsinitus must remain a hypothesis, however likely. On the other hand, it is fairly clear that the second part of Herodotus' story, the 'board game' (II 122,1 συγκυβεύειν) with Demeter, must have been based on an originally ampler narrative. Herodotus' text itself helps us to discern, partly at least, the original structure and perhaps even some details of the plot of the genuine Egyptian tale. According to the Greek historian (II 122,1): a) Rampsinitus won some games (καὶ τὰ μὲν νικᾶν αὐτήν), b) lost others (τὰ δὲ ἐσσοῦσθαι ὑπ' αὐτῆς) and c) finally won a gift from the goddess (καί μιν πάλιν ἄνω ἀπικέσθαι δῶρον ἔχοντα παρ' αὐτῆς χειρόμακτρον χρύσειον), with which he returned to the Upper World. The order of these incidents, however, calls for further examination.

Considerable help for reconstructing the game episode is offered by the Egyptian narrative tradition created around the legendary sage and magician Setne. This figure is based on a historical personage, Khaemwaset, the fourth son of Rameses II, who gained this special place in Egyptian folk fiction for reasons that we have already mentioned above⁵⁵.

There are two narratives about Setne associated with Rampsinitus' *katabasis*: *The Adventures of Setne and Si-Osire*⁵⁶ and *The Romance of Setne Khaemuas and the Mummies*. The first one is not very relevant to Rampsinitus' *katabasis*, except in so far as both stories contain a journey to the Underworld. The story incorporates material from Greek myths⁵⁷. On the contrary, the second story, *The Romance of Setne Khaemuas and the Mummies*, is fully Egyptian in its origins and presents both thematic and structural affinities with Herodotus' narration. The story survives in *P. Cair.* 30646, dating to the Ptolemaic period. The first two columns are lost and we can read the story only from the third column onwards⁵⁸.

The game episode is almost in the middle of the tale. At this point Setne is in Memphis, inside the tomb of Naneferkaptah, who lies there mummified. Setne has come in

⁵⁵ See above p. 145.

⁵⁶ Cf. Pieper 1929, 57-60; Simpson 2003, 470-489.

⁵⁷ See the parallels with the Underworld torments of Tantalus and Oknos pointed out by various scholars: Hollis 1995, 2261; Ritner in Simpson 2003, 471; Konstantakos 2008, 262f. n. 8, with more bibl. One could also compare the story of Er (Plat. *Resp.* 614b-621d), where the souls of the dead are judged, while the most sinful of all, such as the tyrant Ardiaeus, get punished in public to be made an example of. However, even if the story draws patterns from Greek mythology, the central theme, the *katabasis*, can easily be derived from Egyptian tradition.

⁵⁸ On the textual tradition of the story see Maspero 1915, 115; Lichtheim 1973, 126, with more bibl.; Bresciani 1999, 882f.; Simpson 2003, 453f. and 582-584, with more bibl.

order to obtain a magical papyrus of Thoth now owned by Naneferkaptah and kept in the tomb beside his mummy. Naneferkaptah refuses to hand the papyrus and proposes to play a 'board' game with the papyrus as a prize for the winner. Setne accepts the proposal and the game begins. Naneferkaptah wins the first three rounds and punishes Setne by hitting him and casting a repeated spell upon him. At the first time he hits Setne on the head with the gaming board and thrusts him into the ground up to his legs. In the second game he thrusts him deeper into the ground, up to his genitals, and the last time up to his ears. Here ends the first part of the game. Setne, being unable to beat the mummy, sends his brother Inaros to bring from the pharaoh's palace Setne's amulets and magical books. Inaros runs and returns with everything Setne has asked for. Thus begins the second part of the game, which Setne wins, finally obtaining the papyrus of Thoth⁵⁹. This is a battle of magic, a motif frequently occurring in Egyptian popular literature, especially in Demotic narratives.

The story of Merire is also of interest here, with regard to Merire's manner of escape from his enforced stay in the Underworld. He asks twice the supreme god to allow him return to the Upper World, but the god refuses both times. Merire then creates a man of clay and sends him to the Upper World. When the man returns, he brings him a bouquet of flowers. Afterwards, Merire appears before the supreme god who, seeing the bouquet, screams very loudly and finally allows Merire to return to the Upper World⁶⁰.

We observe the following similarities between the story of Merire, that of Setne and the *katabasis* of Rampsinitus⁶¹:

a) In all three cases a man (in two of the three stories a magician) confronts a supernatural being: Merire confronts a god, Setne a mummy and Rampsinitus a goddess.

b) The supernatural being is directly connected with posthumous life. Naneferkaptah is a mummy which has remained a living-dead with the help of magic, while the god in *Merire* is the ruler of the Underworld. Accordingly, Demeter, who is of course Isis, is the central deity of the Egyptian Underworld, as Herodotus explains in the immediately following chapter (II 123).

c) The hero that invades the realm of the dead takes away something from there. Setne wins the papyrus and takes it away from Naneferkaptah's tomb. In Merire's case the thing which he wants to remove from the Underworld is himself. Finally, Rampsinitus brings from the Underworld a *χεῖρόμακτρον χρύσειον* as a gift from Demeter.

d) In the cases of Setne and Merire the mortal protagonist does not have the power to defeat his immortal opponent and succeeds only with the help of magic.

⁵⁹ Cf. Maspero 1915, 133f.; Pieper 1929, 54-56; Lichtheim 1973, 132f.; Bresciani 1999, 889; Simpson 2003, 462.

⁶⁰ Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1987, 10-14; Bresciani 1999, 613-616.

⁶¹ For a similar comparison but only between Setne and Rampsinitus see also Delgado 2011, 99f.

The forces of human nature are inferior to those of the beings of the Underworld and the only way for mortals to win is by using magic.

Did Ramsinutius' game with Demeter also contain magic? The identity of the game (συγκυβεύειν) seems to favor the presence of such an element in the original model of the Herodotean anecdote. Lloyd (1988, III 56f.) aptly observed that this must be the Egyptian board game *Snt*⁶²: this game matches not only συγκυβεύειν, being the most popular dice game in Egypt, but also the journey to the Underworld, because, from the New Kingdom onwards, it seems to have been strongly related to the fate of the soul in the afterlife.

Initially, in the Old and Middle Kingdom, the *Snt* game was just a pleasant way for Egyptians to spend their free time⁶³. The variety of the findings shows that it was a key part of many aspects in the lives of Egyptian people⁶⁴. Even animals are depicted playing *Snt*, while the game was a favorite pastime of the pharaohs as well⁶⁵. In the New Kingdom some illustrations still represent the game as a simple form of entertainment, but from the nineteenth dynasty onwards the game begins to have a ritual character linked to the journey of the human soul into the Underworld and its final judgment at the Court of Osiris. Between the twentieth and thirtieth dynasty, the religious role of the game is gradually consolidated⁶⁶. This shift in the function of *Snt* from popular entertainment to religious process⁶⁷ has been noticed by many scholars⁶⁸. The route followed by a player from the beginning of the gaming-board to its end represented the journey of the deceased through a series of landscapes of the Underworld, the final destination being the Chamber of the Thirty Gods, who judged the souls according to the Egyptian religion⁶⁹.

As for the presence of *Snt* and its magic character in Ramsinutius' *katabasis*, it is interesting to examine a hieratical text of the New Kingdom, in which an anonymous narrator-player describes step by step his *Snt* contest with an opponent.

⁶² Wiedemann (1890, 454) was the first to detect in Herodotus' συγκυβεύειν a kind of Egyptian board-game. Moreover, he refers to the well known depiction of Rameses III playing the *Snt* (cf. Decker-Herb 1994, Q 3.40a-b), without, however, identifying it explicitly with Herodotus' game. Cf. Delgado 2011, 97-100.

⁶³ Cf. Needler 1983, 115.

⁶⁴ The *Snt* as a daily pastime: cf. Decker-Herb 1994, Q 3.3, Q 3.4, Q 3.7, Q 3.11, Q 3.12, Q 3.14a-b, Q 3.15, Q 3.16, Q 3.18, Q 3.19, Q 3.20, Q 3.21, Q 3.23, Q 3.24, Q 3.37, Q 3.47, Q 3.49a-b (mostly in illustrations from tombs, from the 5th to the 30th dynasty).

⁶⁵ Cf. Decker-Herb 1994, Q 3.24 (Hatshepsut), Q 3.40a-b (Rameses III).

⁶⁶ Cf. Piccione 1984, 179.

⁶⁷ Deceased owners of the game depicted as players: cf. Decker-Herb 1994, Q 3.10, Q 3.27, Q 3.30, Q 3.31, Q 3.33, Q 3.34, Q 3.36, Q 3.38 (chiefly from the 19th dynasty, especially the period of Rameses II). On findings of the *Snt* not included in Decker-Herb see Piccione 1999, 121-125.

⁶⁸ Cf. Piankoff 1974, 118; Piccione 1980, 56, 118; Needler 1983, 116; Piccione 1984, 179; Decker 1987, 138. See also Piccione 1999, 120, with more bibl.

⁶⁹ On the description of the game see Piankoff 1974, 117f.; Decker 1987, 132-136.

This text survives in its complete form in two copies, *P. Cair. 58037* and *P. Turin 1775*. A hieroglyphic version also appears among the murals in the tomb of 'n-ḥrt-ḥ 'wy in Deir-el-Medineh (tomb 359)⁷⁰. The narrator-player states several times that in his effort to defeat his opponent he has been aided by something or someone. Apart from his own cunning («my heart is cunning, it is not negligent. My heart is observant ...») he clearly also receives some external help («I proceed as one who is rightly guided, together with the sun-disk, to the House of Regeneration and I was guided in [my] going; I was informed concerning those who were in the House of ...»)⁷¹. Piankoff, commenting on the text, notes that the aid received by the player may have come either from magic or a god⁷². This magic or in any case supernatural help offered to the winner also occurs in the stories of Merire and Setne. It thus seems likely that the same motif would have been included in the *Snt* game in the original Egyptian version of Herodotus' tale.

On the basis of all this, the game scene in the original story of Rampsinitus may be reconstructed. To begin with, the Herodotean order of the stages of the game must be reversed. Herodotus writes that Rampsinitus won τὰ μὲν and lost τὰ δέ. These words, however, must not be read literally: Herodotus does nothing more than draw an essential outline of the story without being as interested in its plot as he was in the plot of the first story (of the thief: II 121). Unlike the tale of the treasure, the *katabasis* story appears to be rather a rough summary of the oral report that Herodotus will have heard, not a full narrative with a sufficiently developed plot. The logic of the scenario is damaged, if we preserve the order given by Herodotus. On the contrary, the plot flows smoothly and in better agreement with the Egyptian tradition if we adopt the following order: a) Rampsinitus loses, b) then he wins, and c) finally he receives the golden handkerchief as a prize for his final victory (II 122,1 χειρόμακτρον χρύσειον). Why should Demeter offer him a gift, had she been the final winner? Moreover, along with the argument based on structure, in regard to the plot of the story the tales of Merire and Setne as well as the text of *P. Cair. 58037* strengthen the possibility that Rampsinitus used his cunning and some kind of magical means in order to defeat Isis.

In addition, the role of the gift itself deserves examination. Wiedemann⁷³ believes that the χειρόμακτρον χρύσειον could be the symbol either a) of a glorious period in the history of Egypt or b) of a good harvest or even c) of the Egyptian faith in the afterlife. However, Wiedemann expresses his views very briefly and without justification. Almost a century later Lloyd proposes his own explanations: the handkerchief might be related to a) the piece of cloth the pharaohs hold in their

⁷⁰ Cf. Piankoff 1974, 118f.; Piccione 1984, 179, with more detailed presentation of the tradition of the text; Decker 1987, 140.

⁷¹ I am using the translation of Piankoff 1974, 119f.

⁷² Cf. Piankoff 1974, 118.

⁷³ Cf. Wiedemann 1890, 455.

hand in several depictions; b) the cloth Isis and Nephtys are depicted weaving for the dead Osiris during the Khoiak festival; or c) the *nms*, the yellow linen cloth worn by the pharaohs on the head, reflecting their divine nature. It is true that some of these explanations reflect genuine cultural concepts of ancient Egypt. For example, the connection of gold with agriculture may be correct. Lloyd's observations about the pharaoh's clothes can equally be correct. The question, however, of the function of the χειρόμακτρον within the narrative logic of Herodotus' story remains unsolved. Rampsinitus' *katabasis* does not take place in order to ensure a rich agricultural season but to renew the king's power. In this respect, its connection to agriculture seems irrelevant. Furthermore, Lloyd's comments on the handkerchief as an 'Egyptian' cloth may explain its relationship both with common people and with the king, but this does not reveal anything about its symbolic role in Herodotus' story. Additionally, with regard to Lloyd's second alternative explanation, even he himself finds it unlikely, since it is impossible for Rampsinitus to return to the Upper World as a resurrected Horus wearing the death cloak of the diseased Osiris⁷⁴.

The Herodotean text itself could give a better answer on the role of the χειρόμακτρον. Firstly, the protagonist is a king. Secondly, in the Egyptian religion Isis-Demeter is pharaoh's mother⁷⁵. Thirdly, as shown above through the comparison of the Sed festival with Herodotus' ceremony in honor of Rampsinitus (II 122), the king seems to have travelled to the Underworld with the sole purpose of renewing his royal power and confirming his immortality. If the χειρόμακτρον χρούσεων symbolized in the original story the fulfillment of Rampsinitus' purpose, then the third explanation offered by Lloyd seems to be the likeliest. The golden handkerchief is the political confirmation of Rampsinitus as eternal king and expresses both the royal authority recognized by Isis for her son and his immortality.

By recording the story in such a summary manner, Herodotus misses the inherent political connotations. The royal quality of Rampsinitus, the symbolic significance of Isis and the political confirmation through the χειρόμακτρον χρούσεων are not analyzed at all by the Greek historian. In II 123⁷⁶ he seems to connect Rampsini-

⁷⁴ Cf. Lloyd 1988, 57; Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007, 328. Lloyd's conjecture that the ceremony described by Herodotus reflects the Khoiak festival (burial ceremony of Osiris) seems to be inaccurate, as the priest is not buried without returning, but he returns from the Underworld (just like Rampsinitus). Besides, as shown in the first chapter (see above pp. 139-146), the ceremony described by Herodotus is akin in many respects to the Sed festival.

⁷⁵ Cf. Frankfort 1948b, 43-47; Bonnet 1971, 326-332; Troy 1986, 36-39; Redford 2001, II 188-190.

⁷⁶ Hdt. II 123,1f. ἀρχηγετεύειν δὲ τῶν κάτω Αἰγύπτιοι λέγουσι Δήμητρα καὶ Διόνυσον. πρῶτοι δὲ καὶ τόνδε τὸν λόγον Αἰγύπτιοί εἰσι οἱ εἰπόντες, ὡς ἀνθρώπου ψυχὴ ἀθάνατός ἐστι, τοῦ σώματος δὲ καταφθίνοντος ἐς ἄλλο ζῶον αἰεὶ γινόμενον ἐσδύεται· ἐπεὰν δὲ πάντα περιέλθῃ τὰ χερσαῖα καὶ τὰ θαλάσσια καὶ τὰ πετεινά, αὐτὶς ἐς ἀνθρώπου σῶμα γινόμενον ἐσδύνειν, τὴν περιήλυσιν δὲ αὐτῆ γίνεσθαι ἐν τρισχιλίοισι ἔτεσι.

tus' story only with the Egyptian faith in the afterlife, disregarding its political implications, which he was probably not aware of⁷⁷.

While Herodotus could have made this brief comment also in previous points of the second book⁷⁸, where he also deals with issues of the afterlife, he chooses to do so immediately after the account of Rampsinitus. This shows that he connected Rampsinitus' story with the Egyptian notions about the afterlife as directly and strongly as nothing else he had heard of. In II 123 Herodotus gives further clarifications on Rampsinitus' *katabasis*, explaining the role of Demeter. Further, he develops the Egyptian belief regarding the immortality of the soul. Therefore, if we follow the narrative from II 122 to 123, we can understand that Herodotus recorded a story about the Underworld, then gave interpretative details about it and finally inscribed it in the broader thematic unit to which it belonged, namely the afterlife.

At the end of the second century A.D. the Neo-Platonist Celsus in his work *Ἀληθῆς λόγος* attacks the Christians by noting that Jesus was not the first to be resurrected. He mentions a variety of individuals who went to the Underworld and returned. Among this variety of examples from different countries he also records Rampsinitus, citing Herodotus' text almost in its full form⁷⁹. A century later, the strong supporter of Christianity Origen in his work *Κατὰ Κέλσου* tries to refute Celsus' arguments. For Origen the χειρόμακτρον was nothing more than the proof brought by Rampsinitus to the living for the fact that he had indeed travelled to the dead and returned alive⁸⁰. Both scholars are a direct source for how Rampsinitus' *katabasis* was assimilated to Greek traditions in the centuries separating Herodotus from Origen. Herodotus, linking Rampsinitus' tale with the Egyptian faith in the afterlife, contributed to the classification of the story as a classical example of *post mortem* tales without conserving any of its political connotations.

Aristotle Univ. of Thessaloniki
Dept. of Classics, GR – 54006 Thessaloniki

VASILEIOS LIOTSAKIS
vliotsakis@yahoo.gr

⁷⁷ Lloyd's following words on Herodotus are worth mentioning: «the author shows no awareness in his historical narrative, or anywhere else, of the Egyptian ideology of divine kingship» (Lloyd in Bakker-Jong-Wees 2002, 427).

⁷⁸ Indeed, he had many such opportunities. As Davis (2011, 79) says, «book 2 is the religious book of the *History*».

⁷⁹ Cels. *ap.* Orig. *Cels.* II 55,3-11 πόσοι δ' ἄλλοι τοιαῦτα τερατεύονται πειθοῦς ἕνεκα τῶν εὐήθως ἀκούοντων ἐνεργολαβοῦντες τῇ πλάνῃ; ὅπερ οὖν καὶ Ζάμολξιν ἐν Σκύθαις φασί, τὸν Πυθαγόρου δοῦλον, καὶ αὐτὸν Πυθαγόραν ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ καὶ Ῥαμφίνιτον ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ· τοῦτον μὲν καὶ «συγκυβεύειν» ἐν ἄδου «τῇ Δημήτρει» καὶ ἀνελθεῖν «δῶρον» «παρ' αὐτῆς χειρόμακτρον χρυσοῦν» φέροντα· καὶ μὴν καὶ Ὀρφέα ἐν Ὀδρύσαις καὶ Πρωτεσίλαον ἐν Θεσσαλίᾳ καὶ Ἡρακλέα ἐπὶ Ταινάρῳ καὶ Θησέα.

⁸⁰ Orig. *Cels.* II 55,34-39 καὶ ὁ Αἰγύπτιος δὲ ἀπιστῶν τοῖς περὶ Μωϋσεως παραδόξοις πιθανῶς παραθήσεται τὸν Ῥαμφίνιτον, λέγων πολλῶ τοῦτον εἶναι πιθανότερον εἰς ἄδου καταβεβηκέναι καὶ συγκυβευκέναι τῇ Δημήτρει καὶ χρυσοῦν χειρόμακτρον παρ' αὐτῆς ἄρπασαντα δεικνύναι σύμβολον τοῦ ἐν ἄδου γεγονέναι ἀκαεῖθεν ἀναβεβηκέναι.

Bibliographic abbreviations

- Aly 1969 = W. A., *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen*, ed. L. Huber, Göttingen 1969².
- Asheri-Lloyd-Corcella 2007 = D. A.-A. L.-A. C., *A Commentary on Herodotus. Books I-IV*, Oxford 2007.
- Bakker-Jong-Wees 2002 = E.J. B.-I.J.F. J.-H. W., *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2002.
- Bard 1999 = K.A. B. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, London-New York 1999.
- Bonnet 1971 = H. B., *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin-New York 1971².
- Breasted 1906 = J.H. B., *Ancient Records of Egypt. Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, I-V, Chicago 1906.
- Bresciani 1999 = E. B., *Letteratura e poesia dell'antico Egitto. Cultura e società attraverso i testi*, Torino 1999².
- Clayton 1994 = P.A. C., *Chronicle of the Pharaohs: The Reign-By-Reign Record of the Rulers and Dynasties of Ancient Egypt*, New York 1994.
- Davies 1997 = B.G. D., *Egyptian Historical Inscriptions of the Nineteenth Dynasty*, Jonsö 1997.
- Davis 2011 = M. D., *The Soul of the Greeks. An Inquiry*, Chicago-London 2011.
- Decker 1987 = W. D., *Sport und Spiel im alten Ägypten*, München 1987.
- Decker-Herb 1994 = W. D.-M. H., *Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Ägypten. Corpus der bildlichen Quellen zu Leibesübungen, Spiel, Jagd, Tanz und verwandten Themen*, Leiden 1994.
- Delgado 2011 = J.M.S. D., *Rhapsinitus, Setne Khamwas and the descent to the Netherworld: some remarks on Herodotus II, 122, 1*, «JANER» XI (2011) 94-108.
- Edmonds 2004 = R.G. E., *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the 'Orphic' Gold Tablets*, New York-Cambridge 2004.
- Elwell 1890 = L.H. E., *A tale of thievery, Herodotus II 121*, «TAPhA» XXI (1890) XXV-XVII.
- Faulkner 1975 = R.O. F., *Egypt: from the inception of the Nineteenth Dynasty to the death of Ramesses III*, in I.E.S. Edwards-C.J. Gadd-N.G.L. Hammond-E. Sollberger (edd.), *The Cambridge Ancient History, II. History of the Middle East and the Aegean Region c. 1380-1000 B.C.*, Cambridge 1975³, 217-251.
- Fehling 1990 = D. F., *Herodotus and his "Sources": Citation, Invention, and Narrative Art*, transl. by J.G. Howie, Leeds 1990.
- Fischer-Elfert 1987 = H.W. F.-E., *Der Pharao, die Magier und der General – Die Erzählung des Papyrus Vandier*, «BO» XL (1987) 5-22.
- Flinders-Petrie 1906 = W.M. F.-P., *Researches in Sinai*, London 1906.
- Flinders-Petrie 1924 = W.M. F.-P., *Religious Life in Ancient Egypt*, London 1924.
- Foster 2001 = J.L. F., *Ancient Egyptian Literature. An Anthology*, Austin 2001.
- Frankfort 1948a = H. F., *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York 1948.
- Frankfort 1948b = H. F., *Kingship and the Gods: Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, Chicago 1948.
- Godley 1921 = A.D. G., *Herodotus*, with an Engl. transl., London-New York 1921.
- Hansen 2002 = W. H., *Ariadne's Thread. A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*, Ithaca, N.Y.-London 2002.

- Haziza 2009 = T. H., *Le kaléidoscope hérodotéen. Images, imaginaire et représentations de l'Égypte à travers le Livre II d'Hérodote*, Paris 2009.
- Hollis 1995 = S.T. H., *Tales of magic and wonder from ancient Egypt*, in Sasson 1995 [q.v.], IV 2255-2264.
- How-Wells 1912 = W.W. H.-J. W., *A Commentary on Herodotus*, I-II, Oxford 1912.
- Hude 1927 = C. H., *Herodoti Historiae*, Oxford 1927³.
- Kaiser 1967 = W. K., *Zu den Quellen der Ägyptischen Geschichte Herodots*, «ZÄS» XCIV (1967) 93-116.
- Konstantakos 2008 = I.M. K., *Ἀλίχαρος. Ἡ διήγησις τοῦ Ἀλίχαρ στὴν ἀρχαία Ἑλλάδα*, I, Ἀθήνα 2008.
- Lichtheim 1973 = M. L., *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1973.
- Lloyd 1988 = A.B. L., *Herodotus. Book II. Commentary 99-182*, Leiden 1988.
- Maspero 1915 = G. M., *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, transl. by C.H.W. Johns, London-New York 1915.
- Morenz 1969 = S. M., *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten*, Zürich-Stuttgart 1969.
- Moyer 2011 = I.S. M., *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, Cambridge 2011.
- Müller 1918 = W.M. M., *Egyptian Mythology*, London 1918.
- Munson 1993 = R.V. M., *Herodotus' use of prospective sentences and the story of Rhampsinitus and the thief in the Histories*, «AJPh» CXIV (1993) 27-44.
- Needler 1983 = W. N., rev. of E. Pusch, *Das Senet-Brettspiel im alten Ägypten* (München 1979), «JARCE» XX (1983) 115-118.
- Piankoff 1974 = A. P., *The Wandering of the Soul*, Princeton 1974².
- Piccione 1980 = P.A. P., *In search of the meaning of Senet*, «Archaeology» XXXIII (1980) 55-58.
- Piccione 1984 = P.A. P., rev. of E. Pusch, *Das Senet-Brettspiel im alten Ägypten* (München 1979), «JEA» LXX (1984) 172-180.
- Piccione 1999 = P.A. P., rev. of Decker-Herb 1994 [q.v.], «JNES» LVIII (1999) 117-125.
- Pieper 1929 = M. P., *Das ägyptische Märchen*, Berlin 1929.
- Redford 2001 = D.B. R., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, I-III, Oxford 2001.
- Sasson 1995 = J.M. S. (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, I-IV, New York 1995.
- Sayce 1883 = A.H. S., *The Ancient Empires of the East: Herodotus I-III*, London 1883.
- Shaw 2000 = I. S. (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2000.
- Simpson 2003 = W.K. S., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, New Haven-London 2003².
- Spiegelberg 1926 = W. S., *Die Glaubwürdigkeit von Herodots Bericht über Ägypten im Lichte der ägyptischen Denkmäler*, Heidelberg 1926.
- Troy 1986 = L. T., *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History*, Uppsala-Stockholm 1986.
- Uphill 1965 = E. U., *The Egyptian Sed-festival rites*, «JNES» XXIV (1965) 365-383.
- Waddell 1939 = W.G. W., *Herodotus. Book II*, London 1939.
- Ward 2008 = A. W., *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*, Waco, Tx. 2008.
- Watterson 1996 = B. W., *Gods of Ancient Egypt*, Stroud 1996.
- Wiedemann 1890 = A. W., *Herodots Zweites Buch mit sachlichen Erläuterungen*, Leipzig 1890.
- Wilkinson 2003 = R.H. W., *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, London 2003.

Abstract

Herodotus' story about Rampsinitus' journey to the Underworld (II 122,1-3) stems from stories about Rameses II and the Sed Festival. Parallels between this anecdote and similar tales in Egyptian literature (*e.g.* the stories of Merire and Setne) shed light on the details of the structure and meaning of the former.