
HERODOTUS AND THE MISSING SPHINX

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I address a problem in the text and narrative of Herodotus' *Histories*, namely, a possible reason why the historian makes no mention of the sphinx at Giza in Book 2, while he is concerned to note a minor edifice at the complex containing the three great pyramids. I suggest that, whereas Herodotus devotes detail to the supposed history of one of the three small pyramids that stands beside the pyramid of Mycerinus, a story that contains similar topical elements to the story of the murder of the Lydian king Candaules by Gyges in Book 1, the argument that a description of the Egyptian sphinx was omitted because it was not visible probably holds no substance. Moreover, sphinxes elsewhere were a constant topic of interest, especially in various dramatic versions produced at Athens during the fifth century, and, depending on the date of the composition of Herodotus' Book 2, any audience of his history would have been familiar with the sphinx which features in the story of Oedipus, mythical king of Thebes. It is therefore argued here that had Herodotus composed Book 2 of his *Histories* at a time when Sophocles' play *Oedipus tyrannus* was produced in Athens, between 428 B.C.E. and 425 B.C.E., the sphinx at Giza would almost certainly have received a mention. But if Herodotus wrote this part of his *Histories* as early as 440 B.C.E., as suggested here, when the Theban sphinx was not an object of curiosity, then the Egyptian sphinx was omitted from the text simply because of the historian's understandable lack of interest in this form of statuary at that particular time.

INTRODUCTION

The second book of Herodotus' *Histories* digresses from the focus of the overall work, the aim of which is to recount the history of the Persian-Greek wars between 500/499 B.C.E. and 478 B.C.E. Book 2 is in fact an ethnographic exercise devoted to the study of Egyptian history, society, flora and fauna, and religious practices, and appears to have little relevance to the war between the Greeks and Persians or provide any background to the hostilities.¹ Indeed, so apparent is the disjunction in the narrative

¹ For Book 2 as a study in ethnography see Lloyd (1990:218–236).

that some scholars in the last century considered this section a later insertion into the history and possibly something of an afterthought.²

During the course of this lengthy excursus, Herodotus describes some of the most memorable buildings and statuary of ancient Egypt.³ The most famous of its man-made structures is arguably the Great Pyramid of the pharaoh Cheops (Khufu) (Herodotus 2.124-127). The pyramid of Cheops and its neighbour the pyramid of Chephrên (Khafrâ) are described in such a detailed manner that the reader is encouraged to believe that Herodotus had, at some stage, stood before them, since the historian states:

Cheops' successor Chephrên was not a better ruler and was similarly autocratic and like his predecessor had a pyramid built but of a smaller size – I measured both structures myself.⁴

Elsewhere in the same section, Herodotus is equally specific in claiming an intimate knowledge of his subject. For example (Herodotus 2.91), with regard to the cult of Perseus at Chemmis in the Delta:

When I asked why it was that ... of all the Egyptians only the people of Chemmis held games in his honour they replied that Perseus was native to their city.

And, most notably (Herodotus 2.99):

So far I have written those things which are the result of my own research and study and the views I have formed from these, but now my account is based on the evidence provided for me by the Egyptians, although in places I have added points

² An argument advanced by How & Wells (1912:13–14), although neither Asheri (2007:1–56) nor Lloyd (2007:221–239) in the latest commentary to Herodotus' *Histories* engage in this debate. The commentary by How & Wells remains the sole work covering the entire history of Herodotus. The most recent commentary edited by Murray & Moreno (2007) covers just Books 1 to 4 and has no index; and therefore the earlier work remains vital for any study of Herodotus.

³ Book 2 is one of the longer books of the entire work, with 182 sections, making it more extensive than Books 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9 but shorter than Books 1, 4, and 7. The divisions are not those of Herodotus, but were established in antiquity (Hornblower 1994:16).

⁴ Herodotus' measurements are incorrect but are regarded as within the bounds of acceptability, and his account of the construction is considered more reputable than that of Diodorus (1.63.2–1.64.9) (Lloyd 2007:330–333, and How & Wells 1912:228). On Herodotus' generally "keen observation" of, among other matters, social and religious affairs, see Lloyd (2007:237).

which I saw myself.

Such declarations may either be taken as an indication of genuine empirical research or could be regarded as a literary topos intended as a way of proclaiming an expertise and familiarity that is actually false.⁵ Herodotus was not the first to write about Egypt and that fact alone should make one a little cautious in accepting the notion of a well-travelled historian in that region.⁶ Nowadays, there is a tendency to believe in the methodology of Herodotus' research and to allow considerable latitude when it comes to content, although this is often faulty.⁷ Moreover, for much of what he presents, there is no corroboratory evidence, especially for the claims he makes to "having seen", "having witnessed", "having heard about" or "learned about" the material he incorporates into the narrative.⁸

THE SPHINX VERSUS THE PYRAMID OF CHEOPS' DAUGHTER

It is precisely the question of, on the one hand, recording a minor structure at Giza and, on the other, missing altogether any mention of undeniably the second most famous edifice of ancient Egypt, namely the sphinx, which is the focus of discussion here. The statue of the sphinx is dated to about 2500 B.C.E. and has the body of a lion with a male human head. The head is taken to be a likeness of the pharaoh Chephrên,

⁵ A middle route might also be acceptable and hence a measure of literary topicality but possessing some but not an in-depth knowledge. For further discussion on this subject see Hornblower (1994:16–17) and especially Hornblower (1994:32), and Fehling (1989:245–249).

⁶ Herodotus cites the Milesian chronographer Hecataeus as a source for information about Egypt and it is usually argued that the latter had travelled in that part of the Mediterranean. For Herodotus' relationship with Hecataeus see Hornblower (1994:15–16, 24).

⁷ Herodotus' figure of 1.7 million as the total for Xerxes' army of invasion into Greece in 480, (Herodotus 7.60; cf. 7.70 for 3 millions) is the most glaring example of exaggeration and guesswork.

⁸ Herodotus makes numerous such claims in the course of the narrative of Book 2, more here than in any other book. The use of the first person is frequent in the *Histories*. Dewald (1987) has noted that "I" appears 1087 times in various contexts, including a claim to have seen/visited/learned first-hand, while Thomas (2000:236) has noted this inclusion of the historian's persona as a literary device, which is possibly unique to Herodotus. In Book 1 there are just five claims to having undertaken some sort of personal research, in Book 5 seven, but in Book 2, thirty-nine.

with whose pyramid the sphinx is aligned.⁹ The statue is 73.5 metres in length (241 feet), 19.3 metres wide (63 feet), and 20.2 metres high (66 feet). Since statues of lions are often placed as guardians of religious or funerary sites — compare those at the Luxor complex, or on Delos, or beside the tomb of Hephaestion at Ecbatana — it would seem natural to assume that the sphinx did this duty for Chephrên’s funerary monument. Herodotus claims to have measured the pyramids at Giza but fails to note the existence of one of the most intriguing and largest statues ever erected. The fame of the sphinx may be appreciated from the following comment of Pliny the Elder (NH 36.17.77) who wrote in the first century CE: “In front [of the pyramids] is the sphinx, perhaps more worthy of notice, about which they are silent. It is a god of the local people.”¹⁰

The consensus opinion regarding this omission excuses the historian and exonerates any shortcoming by dwelling on the physical location of the sphinx, which lies in a hollow. It is suggested that this level regularly filled with sand that at times covered almost the entire statue, except for its head.¹¹ There is early evidence to support this argument contained on the so-called “Dream Stele”. This inscription relates a tale about the pharaoh Thutmose IV (18th Dynasty) who ruled Egypt between about 1400 B.C.E. and 1390 B.C.E., who as a young man sheltered in the shade of the sphinx and in a dream was urged to clear the depression of sand, for which act he would be rewarded by becoming pharaoh. If sand had filled the hollow at the time of Herodotus’ visit, the head alone, however large, so it is claimed, would not have been striking enough to interest either the historian or his guides. Still, this explanation takes no account of the fact that elsewhere Herodotus shows considerable interest in minutiae and more obscure sites, such as the pyramid ascribed to Cheops’ daughter.

⁹ For a map of the site see Lloyd (2007:331).

¹⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.17.77: “ante est sphinx vel magis narranda, de qua siluere, numen accolentium.” The Sphinx is not described by either Diodorus Siculus, who however mentions the three small pyramids (1.64.10), or by the geographer Strabo. However, it is highly unlikely that Diodorus, Strabo, or Pliny ever visited Egypt. The source for Pliny’s comment and the dimensions he gives (243 Roman feet in length, 61.5 Roman feet in height) is not recorded.

¹¹ On this issue, see Pliny, *Natural History* (ed. Eichholz 1962:60–61), West (1985:138), Gates (2013:96).

“Herodotus’ curiosity is boundless,” (Asheri 2007:14), but not, it appears, when it came to the sphinx. It is therefore difficult to accept that this “traveller” whose work betrays an insatiable appetite for any possible “historical” material, whether pertinent or not, could have walked past even the monumental head of a statue without making some comment about its nature and origin or that his guides would have been completely ignorant of the sphinx’s identity or purpose, or that Herodotus would have decided not to record it.

The three small pyramids standing in front of the smallest of the greater pyramids, that of the pharaoh Mycerinus (Menkaure), did however catch Herodotus’ eye and he claims (2.126) that the middle of these pyramids was the tomb of Cheops’ daughter. It was said that the pharaoh had outstripped his budget which threatened his grandiose building project. As a consequence he forced his daughter into prostitution and became her pimp. Unknown to Cheops, however, she overcharged for her services and took a sufficient cut for her to commission her own pyramid (Herodotus 2.126).¹² The story is rather fanciful and obviously unhistorical, especially considering the claim that the extra payment was in the form of blocks of stone which went towards building this pyramid, which Herodotus states was 150 feet square (50 metres), again suggesting that he had actually measured out this site. In fact, these three smaller pyramids are those belonging to wives of Mycerinus and have no connection with Cheops. Still, Herodotus took the trouble to relate this tale but has nothing to say about the nearby sphinx.

GYGES AND THE QUEEN OF CANDAULES

Another seemingly trivial story but one which again well illustrates Herodotus’ methodology and interest in all human affairs, occupies the very beginning of Herodotus’ *Histories* (Herodotus 1.6-12). Here he relates how Gyges obtained the

¹² The map provided by Lloyd (2007:331) clearly illustrates this point. The tale was possibly included to highlight feminine guile, a common theme in Herodotus’ history. Therefore, note the guile of Gorgo, the daughter of the Spartan king Cleomenes, or the audacity of Artemisia the Queen of Halicarnassus, or the scheming of Pheretima the Queen of Cyrene.

kingship of Lydia. Gyges was a close companion of the king Candaules, to whom the latter spoke about his passionate love for his own wife.¹³ Indeed, Candaules was so proud of his queen that, when it seemed that Gyges was unimpressed, he decided to introduce his companion secretly into the room he shared with his wife so that the latter might observe and enjoy this woman's naked beauty when she came to join the king in their bed. Gyges was understandably horrified, probably because of the compromising and intimate situation which — if the two ever fell out — would leave him extremely vulnerable, rather than because of a violation of the couple's privacy. Elite women lived segregated and secluded lives and, except for their household, would be seen only by their partners. This point easily emerges from Gyges' comment (Herodotus 1.8), as provided by Herodotus:

Master, what an inappropriate thing to suggest, I cannot possibly look at your queen when she is naked! I am sure that your wife is a very beautiful woman but do not demand that I behave contrary to what custom dictates.

Herodotus states that neither Lydian men nor women considered it decent to be seen naked, which he contrasts with male nudity commonly practiced among the Greek males in the gymnasia or on the battlefield. Gyges, notwithstanding his shock, assented; he really could not do otherwise. But this pride or hubris of the king brought about Candaules' downfall. The wife of Candaules was unaware of the presence of Gyges in the room and approached her husband's bed in the nude as usual. Gyges had seen enough and slipped out of the room. But that was not the end of the episode because the following day the queen summoned Gyges and offered him a choice of two courses of action. Either he was to be killed for having seen his queen naked or he must kill the king for Candaules' distasteful behaviour. The second action also involved marrying the queen. She had caught sight of Gyges leaving the bedroom and

¹³ The king's name was Myrsilus. Marincola (1996:552) and How & Wells (1912:56), suggest Candaules as a regnal name in much the same way as an Egyptian pharaoh took a name at his succession. Myrsilus is also a Hittite regnal name, although Candaules and Gyges are described as Lydian. Gyges is said to have been a member of the king's bodyguard, but given the story of their intimacy was perhaps rather closer than that, with a position more like the commander of the king's guard.

instead of showing her anger at the actions of the men she chose to take revenge on her husband. Gyges chose to kill the king and was provided with a knife by the queen, who also hid him in the same room he had been in the night before. The king came to bed and slept and was murdered. Gyges married the queen. However, because Gyges had killed the king rather than lose his own life, he eventually brought a disastrous end to his own family's rule of Lydia, which ended when the Persian king Cyrus besieged and occupied Sardis and took its king Croesus captive in about 545 B.C.E.¹⁴ Thus the placing of this episode at the start of an account of the Persian Wars is highly relevant, and not simply a digression, since the events in Lydia ultimately brought the Greeks into conflict with the Persians. Still, however relevant the story of Gyges and Candaules was to Herodotus' narrative, the predominantly male audience must have reacted either with shocked disapproval or prurient delight, but, at the same time, the historian's attention to such detail can then account for the inclusion of tales about a pharaoh's daughter in Book 2.¹⁵ Yet this makes even more inexplicable the absence of the sphinx.

SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

The date of composition and production of this drama is not known, but taking account of contemporary events for which there certainly appear to be allusions in the text, a date between 428 B.C.E. and 425 B.C.E. is held to be appropriate.¹⁶ It was staged for the festival of Dionysus (the Great Dionysia) at Athens held annually between March and April.

¹⁴ Croesus lost his kingdom about 150 years after Gyges had killed Candaules. For the Gyges and Candaules episode see also Lachenaud (1978:78–80) and Bernadette (1969:11–12).

¹⁵ The existence of a fragment of a drama, the plot of which clearly told the same or a similar handling of the story, was initially considered a possible source for Herodotus' account. However, the consensus view has now come to regard this as a later, thus Hellenistic composition of the third century B.C.E., the author of which used the historian as his source. See Griffin (2006:38–39, 50) and Marincola (1996:10, 552), which references other discussions. Note, too, that the guile of Candaules' queen sets an example at the start of the history, which reappears in the behaviour of Cheops' daughter and other female characters portrayed in the history. See above note 12.

¹⁶ Berg & Clay (1978:19), citing Knox (1956), suggest 425 B.C.E.

The essence of the plot is essentially that the city of Thebes was in the throes of an epidemic and its citizens believed that if their king Oedipus was capable of delivering the city from the oppression of the sphinx then he must be able to solve the cause of the disease and so restore the health of the community. In the meantime, Oedipus has sent a delegation to Delphi to request guidance on the issue. The envoys, including Creon, Oedipus' brother-in-law, return with an oracle from Apollo stating that the disease would be overcome only when a worse pollution has been expelled from Thebes (*OT* 95-98). The person who had caused this pollution was the murderer of Laius, the previous king. Oedipus had killed Laius in an argument when they met close to Thebes at a place where three roads met. At the time Oedipus was ignorant of the relationship between them. When he was born it was predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. His father was Laius. Laius had ordered that this son be left to die but he had been smuggled away and brought up in Corinth. After killing Laius Oedipus arrived in Thebes to find the city without a ruler. Since he had just caused the death of the sphinx he was declared the new king and married Jocasta, widow of Laius.¹⁷

In the course of the play, both Oedipus and Jocasta gradually become aware of the truth. Jocasta sees the reality some time before her husband and tries but fails to turn him away from concluding his investigation into the identity of Laius' killer. And so she rushes into the palace where she commits suicide. Oedipus finally also sees the truth and his identity; and clearly believing that Jocasta — in yet another example of female guile — knew this beforehand, is about to murder her as well. When he finds her dead he blinds himself, as much because he had been blind to the truth yet had been skilled enough to see through the riddle of the sphinx, but because, also like Gyges, he had witnessed something he should never have seen, in this case the body of his mother-wife. The play ends with Creon, Jocasta's brother, becoming king, with Oedipus detained until an oracle is received from Delphi regarding his future, but by then the epidemic has run its course. The play hardly portrays in a positive light either

¹⁷ See also Holford-Strevens (1999:219, 240) where the chronological inconsistency is noted between the death of Laius and the sphinx and which of them, which is obscured in the text, came first.

the rulers of Thebes or its citizens.

The myth of Oedipus is not mentioned by Herodotus, although there was more than sufficient context for noting his tragedy. Both during the course of Herodotus' lifetime and the time in which he composed his *Histories*, Thebes became an outcast among the city-states of Greece because of its Medising, or collaboration with the Persian invaders, between 480 and 479 B.C.E.¹⁸ Thebes had been besieged for its co-operation with Persia after the battle of Plataea by the victorious Spartan and Athenian allies. The Thebans surrendered and those accused of being collaborators were executed, and although the city was not destroyed, the Boeotian League over which Thebes had exercised hegemony was broken up. In changing diplomatic circumstances, however, Thebes became an ally of Sparta from the 450s B.C.E.; and it was the Thebans, almost certainly with Spartan approval, who attacked the city of Plataea in the summer of 431 B.C.E., beginning the hostilities which later commentators named the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 2.2). Thebes was constantly in the forefront of Greek affairs, but was certainly not always viewed in a positive way. The story of Oedipus could easily have been worked into the narrative by Herodotus and it is notable by its absence.¹⁹

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* failed to win the first prize for its author when it was performed, understandably perhaps, with its plot of relentless tension and social unease. Yet within a generation of the death of the playwright, this play was already considered by Aristotle in the *Poetics* (13-14) to represent the quintessential tragedy it has remained ever since.²⁰ Another reason for its initial rejection by the judges at the

¹⁸ As Herodotus (5.77–81) clearly shows, the Thebans had a longstanding grudge against Athens that dated back to their defeat in battle on the border between Attica and Boeotia about 507/6 B.C.E. and, as a result, probably lost control of the strategic harbour at Oropus (Hansen 1996:97–98). For Herodotus' negative picture of the Thebans see Stadter (2006:250–251).

¹⁹ Herodotus was elsewhere adept at introducing peripheral and often mythical material into his text. For example, the rise to power at Corinth of the tyrant Cypselus (Herodt. 5.92b–e) occurs as a digression during a debate of envoys at Sparta, and the life and career of Cleisthenes responsible for democratic reforms in Athens in 508/7 B.C.E. is related after the battle of Marathon (Herodotus. 6.121–131).

²⁰ Cf. Morrisey (2003) who argues that Aristotle (*Poetics* 14) considered Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* a better tragedy.

Dionysia was surely because the subject matter may have resonated uncomfortably with the audience, not so much because of the element of incest, although that may well have been sufficiently shocking to some – although the gods were not averse to such relationships – but precisely because the background to the plot exposed the extreme vulnerability of man in the face of natural and unnatural disaster. It was also at just this time that some form of virulent infection affected the population of Athens. Thucydides (2.47.2) states that the disease made its first appearance in the early summer of 429 B.C.E.²¹ And so the plague that Sophocles placed in Thebes would undoubtedly have caused an unpleasant reminder to the audience, among which many, if not all, would have known or been connected with someone who had recently died in their own city. Moreover, Thucydides (2.48.1) claims that it was widely believed that this disease originated in Ethiopia and spread via Egypt, through the Persian Empire and then into the Aegean with an outbreak on Lemnos, before its arrival at Athens where overcrowding in the city accelerated its spread.²² The Theban sphinx was also supposed to have originated in Ethiopia, and was itself a plague to the people of Thebes.²³ When the sphinx died, that disease was almost simultaneously replaced by the plague brought on by Oedipus' murder of Laius and his arrival in the city. However disturbing the plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was, it was still a myth, but the recent history of Greece allowed the Thebans, because of their support of Xerxes and the Persians, to be portrayed as a collective embodiment of the self-blinded Oedipus. So why would Herodotus ignore such a good tale, when elsewhere he incorporates almost the sublime and the ridiculous, and when Thebes was always a highly topical newsworthy item? The reason is probably because the story of Oedipus was not a

²¹ Thucydides explicitly states that an epidemic first became noticeable just some days after a Spartan invasion of Attica, which probably began in May 429 B.C.E. and after the Dionysia for that year. The references to a plague by Sophocles surely belongs to the next year, 428 B.C.E., or even in 427 B.C.E., when the disease was at its height. For possible dates down to 425 B.C.E., see Knox (1956:133–147), and above note 16.

²² The total population in Athens at this time was approximately 200 000. Perhaps a third of the population died, although the mortality rate would certainly have been highest among slaves.

²³ For the origin of the Theban Sphinx and its connection with Ethiopia and Egypt see Pausanias (9.26.2) and Apollodorus (3.5.8).

current topic of interest when Herodotus wrote Book 2.

Sophocles was neither the first nor the last to deal with the Oedipus story, since it features in Homer and in the tragedies entitled *Laius* and *Sphinx* by Aeschylus, and *Oedipus* by Euripides.²⁴ The plots and the dates of production for these other plays are unknown, but Aeschylus had died long before, in about 456 B.C.E., while Euripides' treatment is considered a later production, perhaps at least a decade after that of Sophocles.²⁵ Aeschylus' plays are likely to have been considerably earlier than the 450s B.C.E., which means that a revival of the Oedipus myth would have caused a stir, if not a sensation, with — and this may well have been Sophocles' invention — its storyline of incest, of children from an incestuous relationship and extreme self-mutilation.²⁶ It should also be noted that, whereas the existence of the sphinx is clearly intimated in Sophocles' text, the famous riddle itself is not related. Reference to the encounter between the monster and Oedipus in which he outwitted the sphinx occurs in a speech delivered by a priest at the opening of the drama (*OT* 35–36) where he addresses the king with the words:

Are you not the one who set us free from the harsh tribute we paid to the sphinx, when you came to the city of Cadmus?²⁷

The sphinx at Giza is not known to have possessed a riddle, but it was able to

²⁴ Pindar also mentions the Oedipus myth in his Second Olympian Ode in celebration of the victory of Theron of Acragas in the Games in 476 B.C.E. For further discussion on other plays devoted to the Oedipus myth see Burian (2009:100–101).

²⁵ The Euripides treatment of the myth, which survives in fragments, is considered to belong to between 415 B.C.E. and 406 B.C.E. For a discussion of the fragments which indicate a considerable departure in the narrative from that of Sophocles see Liapis (2014:307–370). A still later treatment by Seneca dating to the middle years of the first century CE follows Sophocles' rendition of the myth more closely.

²⁶ Kamerbeek (1967:1–5) discusses the complexity of the tradition of Oedipus and the Sphinx in Sophocles' drama.

²⁷ The personal triumph of Oedipus is repeated on three subsequent occasions where the name "Sphinx" is noted (*OT* 130, 508, 1199). The riddle is preserved by later writers such as Diodorus (4.64.4), Ovid (*Metamorphosis*, 7.759) and Apollodorus (3.5.8). The riddle itself had two versions and these are recounted by Apollodorus (3.5.8): "Which creature has just one voice, but becomes four-footed, two-footed and three-footed?" The alternative which has the same answer is: "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon and three feet in the evening?"

communicate through a dream to the future Thutmose IV. The Egyptian sphinx was also an altogether more benign beast than its monstrous Theban equivalent. The Theban sphinx was also female, and its telling of a riddle suggests again an instance of feminine guile or cunning, which in other places in his history, as with Cheops' daughter and the queen of Candaules, Herodotus was keen to relate to his audience. The male sphinx at Giza obviously has a link with the lion which, besides the king of the beasts and obviously a prolific killer, can also be portrayed in serene circumstances and without malice. The Theban sphinx on the other hand not only extorted a tax from the Thebans but also took great delight in eating those who were unable to solve her riddle. She killed not for sustenance but for pleasure, and therefore was somewhat above a beast but less than a human being. The male sphinx at Giza was therefore a superior being to the monster encountered by Oedipus.

THE DATE OF HERODOTUS BOOK 2

Having argued that Herodotus would probably not have included a reference to the Oedipus myth in his history because it was not current news when he wrote Book 2 necessarily means that some attempt to date this section of his history is now required. In her discussion of Herodotus Book 3, Stephanie West (1999:109-136) has argued that the portrayal of the behaviour of Creon, the Theban king, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, was modelled or influenced by Herodotus' portrayal of the Persian king Cambyses. She also suggests that the date of production of this tragedy was for the Great Dionysia in 438 B.C.E., and coincided with the revolt of the Samians against Athens.²⁸ Cambyses occupies Herodotus' text from the beginning of Book 3 to section 66, covering the years 526/5 B.C.E. down to the king's death in 522 B.C.E. This means that, if West is correct, then this section of Herodotus' history could have been in circulation for a year or two before the production of the play and, hence, written in about 440 B.C.E. According to that reasoning therefore, Book 2 of the *Histories* would already have been composed, providing that the historian followed a literal

²⁸ Cf. Rabinowitz (2008:155) who suggests 442/1.

methodology or, in other words, starting at Book 1 and ending at Book 9 and not indulging in insertions or major editing of the text.²⁹ And if events in the Eastern Mediterranean are taken into account, then the date of Herodotus' visit to Egypt – if he was there and if he wrote when he was there – may be narrowed down appreciably. It is highly unlikely that Herodotus could have gone to Egypt as a young man since the entire region was highly volatile following the defeat of Xerxes in Greece in 479 B.C.E. At that time Egypt, a satrapy of the Persian kingdom, was also in a period of instability when even a Hellenised Carian on a fact-finding mission such as Herodotus would not have been welcomed. Persian anti-Greek sentiment can hardly have improved until well after the Greek victory at the battle of Eurymedon in 469/6 B.C.E. and the failed Athenian expedition to aid the Egyptian rebellion in 460/59 B.C.E.–454 B.C.E. However, by the 440s B.C.E. and certainly in the 430s B.C.E., following a truce usually described as the 'Peace of Callias' in about 449/8 B.C.E.,³⁰ Egyptian affairs were more stable. Hence, if Herodotus saw what he claims to have seen, this can only have been in the 440s B.C.E.³¹

HERODOTUS AND SOPHOCLES

A further conjunction of evidence occurs which lends strength to the argument presented here. It is one of those dramatic coincidences of history that Herodotus, the first acknowledged writer of history, and Sophocles, one of the three great Athenian

²⁹ The most recent opinion seems to favour this method rather than that proposed by How & Wells (1912; cf. Asheri and Lloyd 2007 *ex silentio*; Rhodes 2006). On the other hand it is plain that Thucydides revised or edited his history excluding the last few sections of Book 7 and the whole of Book 8 — the last extant section.

³⁰ The existence of a peace treaty named after Callias is disputed which may belong to the 420s B.C.E., but some form of peace occurred after about 450 B.C.E. between Athens and the Persians.

³¹ Herodotus is placed in Egypt after 459 B.C.E. and "probably between 449 and 430" by Lloyd (2007:226; cf. How & Wells 1912:411), either between 449 B.C.E. and 443 B.C.E., certainly after the battle of Papremis of 460/459 B.C.E., with a slight preference for between 440 B.C.E. and 431 B.C.E. Herodotus (Herodotus 3.12) claims to have visited the battlefield at Papremis, and this also suggests a time of settled conditions in the region.

dramatists of the fifth century, were direct contemporaries.³² It is worth noting that, whereas the life of the playwright is well documented, there is little secure information about Herodotus except that which he provides in his own work.³³ For example (Herodotus 1.1):

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry so that human achievements may not be lost on account of the passage of time, and that great and remarkable accomplishments – some by the Greeks some by those who were not Greek – should be given their due glory. My primary focus here is to narrate why the Greeks and the Persians came into a protracted conflict.

However, from evidence provided by Plutarch (*Moralia*, 785B) it is evident that Herodotus and Sophocles were close friends. Plutarch states that he knew of a ‘song for Herodotus Sophocles wrote when he was fifty-five years of age.’³⁴ A friendship between the two seems indicated and although that need not mean that they influenced each other’s compositions, it is certainly plausible to argue that this might have occurred.

THE MISSING SPHINX: A CONCLUSION

Returning to the question about the missing sphinx: what may be deduced from the discussion here? Namely, that the beginning of Herodotus’ Book 3, as West suggests (1999:135–136) from internal evidence, has a terminus ante quam circulation date of about 440 B.C.E. If that date is tenable then the later sections of Book 2 in which Herodotus describes the pyramids but not the sphinx, surely belong to a time shortly

³² The birth of Sophocles is dated to 496/5 B.C.E., hence he was roughly five years older than Herodotus but he died only in 406 B.C.E., and as much as twenty years after the historian.

³³ See Asheri (2007:5) for possible date of birth and death, ca. 484 B.C.E. to a little after 430 B.C.E., and for an assessment of the evidence for Herodotus’ life and where he may have lived. However, Marincola (1996:xii–xiii) has suggested that Herodotus died sometime after 420 B.C.E.

³⁴ Sophocles either wrote this song when he was fifty-five or that this was the age of the recipient. There is obviously some doubt. The date would therefore be situated between about 440 B.C.E. and 435 B.C.E., significantly when West (1999) argues that Sophocles was composing his *Antigone*.

beforehand. Herodotus' Book 2 circulated not only sometime before the production of Sophocles' *Antigone*, but long before the dramatist's most famous play, produced in Athens two decades later. Griffin has drawn attention to a certain similarity in the description of Cyrus, the Persian king who 'sounds like Sophocles' Oedipus' (Griffin 2006:49). If the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was produced after the circulation of Herodotus Book 1, and by implication Book 2, then that comment needs to be reworded: the language employed by Sophocles to describe Oedipus' birth (*OT* 1080) and rise to fame is highly reminiscent of Herodotus' description (1.126) of Cyrus' early years and eventual rise to kingship. In other words, again, it was the historian's work which provided the idea for other writers and that the accolade of "genius" should be ascribed more to Herodotus than to his playwright friend.³⁵

A final problem remains and that is the one concerned with the date of completion of Herodotus' *Histories*. Herodotus's death has usually been fixed to the mid-420s B.C.E., as noted by How & Wells (1912:9), but this date has on occasion been challenged, as Marincola (1996:xii, 10) observes, although he regards the completion of the *Histories* probably by the 420s B.C.E.³⁶ Allusions in Herodotus' history to events or to performances of tragedies or comedies in Athens can more easily be assigned to the 430s and beforehand rather than later than the mid-420s. And this fact strengthens the argument here that the absence of a reference to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* indicates that the work was completed before the play was performed. Ultimately, therefore it seems justifiable to set aside the assertion of How & Wells that Book 2 "was written by itself when the rest of the history was practically finished, and then introduced into its present place later" and that its composition actually belongs to the late 440s B.C.E.³⁷ After all it is difficult to believe that Herodotus could have

³⁵ The same therefore also applies to the later play about Gyges and Candaules, see above note 14.

³⁶ See Cobet (1986:17–18) for a discussion of the argument for a later date for the completion of Herodotus' work but that it is difficult to justify. Rhodes (2006:27) probably has the last word on the subject by commenting that "most scholars think that (Herodotus') history was finished soon after (430 B.C.E.)."

³⁷ How & Wells (1912:13–15) essentially suggest that the material contained in Books 7–9 were composed prior to 445 B.C.E., that Book 2 is late addition, and that Books 7–9 were revised after the start of the Peloponnesian War. Allusions to the start of the war are found

resisted the parallel of one sphinx outside Thebes, destroyed by a clever Oedipus who proved not to be so insightful after all, with that majestic and inscrutable sphinx that stood guard over the pyramid just outside Memphis. In the late 440s B.C.E. a visit to Giza prompted Herodotus' interest in both great and smaller pyramids whereas the sphinx — either in its whole state or merely its head in the sand — was simply not currently an item regarded as sufficiently interesting for inclusion. Had Herodotus visited Egypt in the 420s B.C.E. after Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* had been produced, he might have looked at the sphinx with keener interest. Thus whereas Herodotus ought to have included both sphinxes in his narrative, his failure to do so indicates that his historical researches had been completed before the Theban sphinx became topical and that he missed the chance to exploit an Egyptian parallel to display to his audience.

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at 6.91, 7.137, 7.233, and 9.73, although these would not need to be later insertions if these last elements in the history were completed in the 420s B.C.E. It is interesting to note that Thomas (2000:20) considers some material was known to the public before circulation, and n. 60 with reference to Sansone (1985:1-9), who argues that Books 1-4 were written first and circulated in the 420s B.C.E., while Evans (1979:145-149) prefers an entirely singular approach with circulation of the material down to the author's death. For the unitary structure of the history see Dewald & Marincola (2006:1-7).

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