

Niki Kantzios October 1st, 1996

Herakles in Egypt: A Greek View of the Egyptians

The 5th-century Greek historian Herodotos records that the

Egyptians seems no more malicious than that at the expense of Greeks and their institutions, although some of its punch lies precisely in the ironic distinctions between Greek and Egyptian usages, e.g., Egyptian worship of animals that the Greeks contemn or offer in sacrifice to the gods. The commonest humorous stereotype was of Egyptians as merchants, who were, like the Phoenicians, avaricious,

sometimes sleeved, other times not, belted and flounced. One scene shows the Egyptians wearing earrings.

As to racial types, in two cases the foreigners have Greek-style hair and beards (and clothes in contemporary Athenian style). Eight examples show

which may not lawfully be offered. Wherever this ultimate hero enters the mythological picture, heroism tends to become super-heroism, mock heroism. As Greek he is not only youth and vitality to the stolid antiquity of Egypt, but an excess of primitive energies. The Hellenes saw the Egyptians as the originators of their own religion, its pantheon and civilizing rites; not to be acquainted with this "Egyptian" cult is not only

the overthrowing of the cosmic order. It is an Egyptianism which Herodotos specifically cites as utterly contrary to Hellenic custom. Like the sacrifice overthrown, it bespeaks chaos and otherness, even impiety, since in Greek usage the crop-headed mourner was considered defiled and was forbidden to take part in sacrifice.

As for physiognomy, Egyptians are interchangeably portrayed as blacks, "others" of a non-black stamp,