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About three fair-haired Egyptian queens

August 19, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H Comments off Edit This

Thanks to the Giza Project at Harvard as directed by Professor Peter Der Manuelian, the discoveries and discovery procedures of pioneer archaeologists like George Reisner can be analyzed and applied to such intriguing questions as the blond ambition, as it were, of queens and courtesans in Egypt. The Classical Inquiries team has succeeded in persuading the Director of the Giza Archives Project to describe the challenges awaiting Classicists attracted by the comparative evidence offered by Egyptology.

§1. In this posting for 2015.08.14, I return to an earlier posting, for 2015.07.15, where I concentrated on Poem 66 of Catullus. This poem, as we saw, is a remaking or even a "translation" of a poem of Callimachus known as the Lock of Berenice (Coma Berenices, Callimachus fragment 110 ed. Pfeiffer). These two poems are about an Egyptian queen who dedicated a lock of her hair to Aphrodite, goddess of love and sexuality. Here is the historical background, reconstructed from the poems and from independent sources concerning the Hellenistic era of Egypt:

> The Egyptian queen here is Berenice II, who, shortly after her marriage in 246 BCE to the king Ptolemy III Euergetes, had vowed to shear off a lock of her hair if her husband, who had gone off to Syria on a military expedition, came back home safely. After Ptolemy's safe return from war, the queen's lock of hair was duly shorn off and dedicated to Aphrodite in her temple—only to disappear and then miraculously reappear as a constellation in the heavens. That is what both the Greek and the Latin poems say, highlighting the passionate love of the queen for the king.

As we read in the poem of Catullus, the lock of Berenice is shorn from a vertex or 'head of hair' that is pointedly described as 'blond' or flavus. Here is what the personified lock of hair says about itself:

> ||59 inde Venus vario ne solum in lumine caeli |60 ex Ariadneis aurea temporibus ||61 fixa corona foret, sed nos quoque fulgeremus, |62 devotae flavi verticis exuviae, ||63 uvidulam a fluctu cedentem ad templa deum me |64 sidus in antiquis diva novum posuit: ||65 Virginis et saevi contingens namque Leonis |66 lumina, Callisto iuncta Lycaoniae, ||67 vertor in occasum, tardum dux ante Booten, |68 qui vix sero alto mergitur Oceano.
>
> ||59 Then Venus,[1] intending to make sure that, in the varied light of the sky, |60 the golden thing originating from the head of Ariadne, ||61 her garland [corona], should not be alone in having a fixed place there [in the sky], but rather, that I too [= the lock of Berenice] should send forth a flashing light, |62 votive prize that I am, originating from a blond [flavus] head of hair [vertex], ||63 me, dripping wet from the rough seas of my weeping while heading straight for the celestial zones of the gods, |64 me did the goddess [Venus] situate, in the midst of old constellations, as a new one. ||65 For, right next to the lights of Virgo and savage Leo, |66 next to their radiances, and joined to Callisto daughter of Lycaon, ||67 I take my turn heading down into the western horizon, ahead of slow Boötes, |68 who plunges ever too late into the deep river Okeanos.
>
> Catullus 66.59–68

The lock of hair that gets separated from the head of the queen Berenice and becomes a constellation in the heavens is paired here with a garland that gets separated from the hair of the mythical princess Ariadne, daughter of Minos the ruler of the Minoan Empire.

§2. The part of the story that centers on the constellation itself is retold in many sources, as we can see from the succinct reportage we find in "Eratosthenes" Katasterismoi 27.5 and Hyginus Astronomica 2.5, and the mythological foundations of storytelling about such a constellation known as Ariadne's Garland are actually most ancient, going all the way back to the Minoan-Mycenaean era.[2]

§3. As before, I focus now not on the garland of Ariadne but on the vertex or 'head of hair' adorned by this garland. At verse 62 of the passage I just quoted from Poem 66 of Catullus, we have seen that the vertex of Berenice the Egyptian queen is flavus or 'blond'. Now I turn to Poem 64 of Catullus: at line 63 here, we see that the vertex of Ariadne the Minoan princess is likewise described as flavus.

§4. So, the hair of Ariadne is blond, as we see it described in Catullus 64.63, while the hair of Berenice is likewise blond, as we saw earlier in Catullus 66.62. And it is this blond hair of Berenice that now joins, as a constellation in the heavens, the garland that once adorned the blond hair of Ariadne.

§5. The blond hair of the Egyptian queen Berenice matches not only the blond hair of the Minoan princess Ariadne. It matches also, I argue, the blond hair of the Egyptian queen Nitōkris. I return here to my posting for 2015.07.01, where I analyzed a brief notice originating from the Egyptian historian Manetho, who lived in the third century BCE. According to this notice, the queen Nitōkris ruled toward the end of the 6th Dynasty, in the late third millennium BCE. In a surviving paraphrase from the work of Manetho, who composed in Greek, we read these further details about Nitōkris the queen:

> Νἰτωκρις, γεννικωτάτη καὶ εὐμορφοτάτη τῶν κατ' αὐτὴν γενομένη, ξανθὴ τὴν χροιάν, ἣ τὴν τρίτην ἤγειρε πυραμίδα, ἐβασίλευσεν ἔτη ιβ'.
>
> Nitōkris was the most noble and beautiful of all the women of her generation. She was fair [xanthē] in complexion [khroia]. It was she who erected the third pyramid. She ruled for twelve years.
>
> Manetho FGrH 609 F 2 (p. 26) lines 18–21

In my posting for 2015.07.01, as also in my posting for 2015.07.08, I translated the Greek word xanthē in this passage as 'fair', recalling the English expression 'fair-haired', and I allowed for the alternative translation 'blonde': according to the relevant paraphrase of Manetho by Eusebius in this context, the description of Nitōkris in the surviving Armenian translation of Eusebius' original Greek wording is rendered in Latin as flava rubris genis 'blonde with blushing cheeks'. These descriptions of Nitōkris, as I argued in my posting for 2015.07.01, correspond closely to the meaning of the Greek name Rhodōpis, 'the one with the rosy face'—or 'the one with the rosy looks'.

§6. Herodotus in his History (2.134–135) says that 'some Greeks' (metexeteroi . . . Hellēnōn) accept the idea that a courtesan named Rhodōpis gets credit for the building of the third and smallest of the three pyramids at Giza. And, as I noted in my posting for 2015.07.01, Herodotus rejects this idea and accepts the alternative idea that the third pyramid had been built by the pharaoh Mukerinos.[3]

§7. But who are these 'other Greeks' who accept the idea that Rhodōpis and not Mukerinos gets credit for the building of the third pyramid? In my posting for 2015.07.01, I argued that the stand-in for these 'other Greeks' is Hecataeus of Miletus, a predecessor of Herodotus who dates from the sixth/fifth centuries BCE. In this case, Herodotus (2.134–135) may be criticizing Hecataeus for seemingly accepting the idea that Rhodōpis, a courtesan who lived in the Greek enclave of Naucratis in Egypt and who was loved by Sappho's brother Kharaxos, commissioned a pyramid to be built.

§8. Both the idea that Rhodōpis gets credit for the building of the third pyramid and the story in which the idea is embedded are independently attested in Greek sources other than Herodotus. Whereas Herodotus (2.134–135), as we have seen, rejects the idea, these other Greek sources support it. I highlight as my first example a version of the story that we read in Diodorus of Sicily (first century BCE) as paraphrased from the work of another Hecataeus (fourth century BCE: he is not the Hecataeus from Miletus):

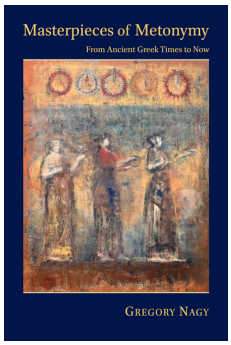
> ταύτην δ' ἔνιοι λέγουσι Ῥοδώπιδος τάφον εἶναι τῆς ἑταίρας, ἧς φασι τῶν νομαρχῶν τινας ἐραστὰς γενομένους διὰ φιλοστοργίαν ἐπιτελέσαι κοινῇ τὸ κατασκεύασμα.
>
> This one [= this third pyramid] is said by some to be the tomb of Rhodōpis the courtesan [hetaira]. They say that some of the nomarchs [nomarkhoi] became her lovers and, on account of their obsession with their love for her, they jointly undertook the commissioning of the building.
>
> Diodorus 1.64.14, paraphrasing from Hecataeus FGrH 264 F 25[4]

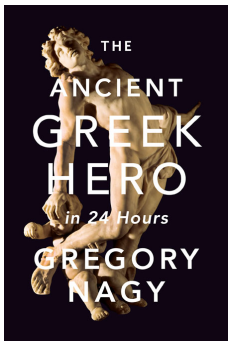
Looking at the overall context of the text in which this passage is embedded, I highlight the fact that the narration keeps stressing the diversity of Egyptian traditions regarding the historical circumstances that led to the building of the three great pyramids at Giza:

> περὶ δὲ τῶν πυραμίδων οὐδὲν ὅλως οὔτε παρὰ τοῖς ἐγχωρίοις οὔτε παρὰ τοῖς συγγραφεῦσι συμφωνεῖται.
>
> On the subject of the pyramids, there is no general agreement among the native informants or among the historians who write about it.
>
> Diodorus 1.64.13, paraphrasing from Hecataeus FGrH 264 F 25[5]

In fact, the version I just quoted, claiming that Rhodōpis gets credit for the third of the three great pyramids at Giza, is just the third of three main versions to be found in the text of Diodorus. According to the first version, also highlighted in the text, the three pyramids were built by three pharaohs whose names are spelled Khemmis and Kephrēn and Mukerinos.[6] These three pharaohs correspond to Kheops and Khephrēn and Mukerinos in the separate narrative of Herodotus.[7] So, in this version as also in the version reported by Herodotus, the third pyramid had been built by Mukerinos. But then the text of Diodorus goes on to record a radically different second version in which the three pharaohs who built the three pyramids were Armaios and Amōsis and Inarōs.[8] Finally, the text of Diodorus gives a third version of the story, and, in this one, the third of the three pyramids was collectively built by the nomarkhoi 'nomarchs' of Egypt for the sake of a courtesan named Rhodōpis, as we saw in the passage I already quoted from Diodorus.[9]

§9. I highlight here the fact that the appearance of the queen Nitōkris, described by Manetho as a fair-skinned blonde and reputed to be the builder of the third pyramid at Giza, matches closely the meaning of the name given to the courtesan Rhodōpis, 'the one with the rosy face', who is likewise reputed to the





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builder of that pyramid. A striking parallel to the meaning of the Greek name Rhodōpis, as I mentioned in my posting for 2015.07.08, is the portrayal of the sensuous Beroe, daughter of Aphrodite and Adonis, in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus (42.75–78): the cheeks of this nymph are described as 'having rosy looks [rhodoeidea]' (77: ῥοδοειδέα) and showing a natural blush that needs no cosmetics simulating 'the complexion [khrōs-] of a blonde [xanthē]' (76: ξανθόχροϊ κόσμῳ).

§10. Such correspondences, I have argued, point to a pattern of estheticizing that verges on a kind of eroticizing. And this eroticizing, I have also argued, leads to mental associations identifying a courtesan with a queen who supposedly built the third pyramid at Giza.

Courtesy the Giza Project, Harvard University

§11. But now I turn to another example of an Egyptian queen who is likewise estheticized as a blonde, like Berenice and Nitōkris. Painted on the west wall of the main room of a burial chamber at Giza is the image of Queen Hetep-heres II, whose head of hair is colored yellow, accompanied by her daughter, Queen Meresankh III (sometimes spelled Mersyankh), whose head of hair is by contrast colored black. Here is how the excavator, George Reisner (1927) describes the image of Queen Hetep-heres II: "her short hair is painted a bright yellow with fine red horizontal lines."[10] He goes on to say:

> It seems clear that this lady was blonde or red-haired, the first of either type to be recorded among the black-haired people of the Pyramid Age. The explicit statement on the east wall that Hetep-heres II was a daughter of Cheops [= Kheops] excludes the possibility that she was an important foreigner; but, of course, she may have had foreign blood from her mother whom we do not know, or from some more remote ancestress. Her mother may have been a fair-haired Libyan from the western desert.[11]

In more recent research, however, this assessment by Reisner and others has not generally been supported. It has been argued, for example, that the image of Queen Hetep-heres II shows her wearing a blond wig, and that she was not necessarily a natural blonde.[12]

§12. What matters for the image, however, is not whether the queen was a natural blonde. What matters instead, I argue, is that she is represented as a notional blonde. And I offer the same argument in the case of later queens like Nitōkris and even Berenice.

§13. And what also matters is the pattern of mental association that links blond women with pyramids.

§14. What matters most of all, however, is the overall archaeological and historical value of the Giza Project at Harvard as directed by Professor Peter Der Manuelian. Thanks to this Project, the discoveries and discovery procedures of pioneer archaeologists like George Reisner can be analyzed and applied to such intriguing questions as the blond ambition, as it were, of queens and courtesans in Egypt.

§15. The Classical Inquiries team has succeeded in persuading the Director of the Giza Archives Project to describe the challenges awaiting Classicists attracted by the comparative evidence offered by Egyptology.

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Notes

[1] The verb that goes with the subject "Venus" is postponed until verse 64.

[2] Blech 1982:259–62. In Nagy 2013, I survey some of the major variations in surviving myths about Ariadne's garland.

[3] Herodotus 2.134.1.

[4] FGrH vol. 3a p. 44 lines 11–13.

[5] FGrH vol. 3a p. 44 lines 8–9.

[6] Diodorus 1.63.2–1.64.9. In 1.64.10–11, there is an added detail: the three pharaohs each built three other pyramids, smaller ones, for their gunaikes 'women' (I avoid assuming that all these women are 'wives'). The paraphrasing in these passages of Diodorus comes from Hecataeus FGrH 264 F 25.

[7] Herodotus 2.124–2.134

[8] Diodorus 1.64.13–1.64.14. Again, the paraphrasing in these passages of Diodorus comes from Hecataeus FGrH 264 F 25.

[9] Diodorus 1.64.14, paraphrasing from Hecataeus FGrH 264 F 25.

[10] Reisner 1927:66.

[11] Again, Reisner 1927:66.

[12] Dunham and Simpson 1974:2, 5, 14.

Tags: Ariadne, Berenice, blond hair, Catullus, Giza, Hetep-heres II, Nitokris, Rhodopis

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