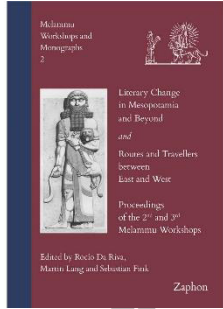


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# The Sage's *Lehrjahre*

Jaume Pòrtulas

## I

This paper examines several issues related to the accounts we find in classical sources of journeys made by archaic Greek thinkers to the lands of Egypt and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> I will be referring to figures who are historical but are all wrapped in an aura of legend such as Thales and Solon, and to the biographical (or more often pseudo-biographical) accounts of their pursuits that can be found in Diels/Kranz or in any similar work. The issue is caught up in a curious contradiction. Few scholars today would contest the idea that the Greeks were massively influenced by their Eastern neighbours; but many of the accounts by the Greeks (perhaps even the majority) generally used to illustrate this influence have every appearance of being a web of half-truths, conjectures, and pure and simple inventions unable to stand up to even a minimally rigorous analysis.

## II

To illustrate what I mean, I'll refer first of all to Solon's hypothetical trip to Egypt. Since it is not the biography of Solon as a historical figure that interests us here, I will not mention his other possible journeys (to Cyprus or Sardis, or anywhere else that any source say he visited). The trip to Egypt meets the requirements as an illustration of the point at issue here: (1) It is a journey to a site of ancient culture, where, *a priori*, Solon could have gathered together a great deal of information and knowledge; (2) it is documented in a fair number of sources; and (3), in spite of this, the discrepancies between these sources are so significant that many scholars have rejected the historical veracity of the story.

The positive accounts of this journey transmitted to us by classical Antiquity all seem to derive from the tradition (probably Athenian) reflected by Herodotus.<sup>2</sup> However, Herodotus' indications are not exempt from inaccuracies and novelistic elements; and from the chronological point of view especially, they raise insurmountable difficulties and contradictions. First, Herodotus (i 30) states that Solon travelled to Egypt after his archonship, to avoid having to make changes in his

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<sup>1</sup> A number of friends (Bernardo Berruecos, Sergi Grau, Teresa Magadán and Jordi Vidal) have read the previous version of this text and have made useful comments, for which I am very grateful. Translated by Michael Maudsley.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch's idea (*Life of Solon*, xxvi 6) that Solon's fragment 28 West (= 10 GP) "Νείλου ἐπὶ προχοῇσι Κανωβίδος ἐγγύθεν ἀκτῆς" (without context) definitively confirms the existence of the journey does not deserve any further consideration. The Athenian sage could have mentioned the mouth of the Nile for any number of reasons.

reforms;<sup>3</sup> but in a second passage he notes that certain aspects of his legislation were borrowed from the reforms that Amasis imposed in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Three remarks are in order here: (1) Amasis came to power *after* Solon's archonship – and therefore after his reforms. (2) The notion of borrowing tends to locate the journey of the sage before his reforms rather than after, as Herodotus himself had said at first. Supposing the existence of two trips (or two waves of Solonic reforms) seems excessive, in the absence of any other testimony.<sup>5</sup> (3) The motif of a legislator leaving, more or less voluntarily, the country in which he legislated, and in some cases never returning, in order not to be obliged to change his own laws, appears regularly in the 'biographies' of Greek legislators.

To complicate matters further, it turns out that the longer the time that has passed between the hypothetical journey and the source that reports it, the more specific, and rich, are the details that the source sees fit to transmit to us. For example, Plato, 'knew' (*Timaeus* 21e–22a) that it was thanks to Solon's trip to Egypt that some important news about Atlantis reached Athens. The philosopher even knew *where* this communication had taken place (in the Temple of Neith, in Sais) and some details concerning the informant, who turns out to have been a very old priest. But the privilege of giving the names of Solon's main Egyptian interlocutors was reserved to Plutarch (*Life of Solon*, xxvi 1), a few centuries later, at a time when Egyptomania was in full sway.<sup>6</sup>

However, a good many scholars conclude that it is better to accept the historical veracity of Solon's trip,<sup>7</sup> for a number of converging reasons: (1) The ancient Greeks accepted Herodotus' account, despite its contradictions, and never explicitly questioned the veracity of the journey; (2) for all it is worth, this traditional *communis opinio* is to be taken seriously; (3) we have no reason to doubt that Solon travelled a great deal; and (4) Egypt (specifically, the *entrepôt* of Naukratis) would have been a highly attractive destination for someone of Solon's interests and capabilities.

It goes without saying that these arguments are, from a methodological point of view, extremely weak; but this does not necessarily imply that the conclusion is false. It is not inherently unlikely that Solon would have travelled to Egypt. The

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.* xi 1) and Plutarch (see note above) tell the same story, and in terms that closely follow Herodotus' text. If they do not derive from it directly, in any case they hark back to the same tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Hdt. ii 177: λαβὼν ἐξ Αἰγύπτου τοῦτον τὸν νόμον Ἀθηναίοισι ἔθετο.

<sup>5</sup> With characteristic bluntness, Lloyd (1975: 56–57) dismisses it all as "chronological nonsense".

<sup>6</sup> Fairweather (1974: 268); Lefkowitz (1981: 44; 2007: 109–110); Kivilo (2010: 211).

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Domínguez Monedero (2001: 100–106); Irwin (2005: 147–151); Noussia-Fantuzzi (2010: 297–300; 302).

problem lies in the difficulty of conclusively demonstrating historical realities, however plausible.<sup>8</sup>

### III

Of course, all this derives from the inadequate nature of the documentation. A subject such as the influence of the East on archaic Greek culture and its routes of penetration is not easy to debate when all we have at our disposal are a handful of para-biographical accounts about eminent characters. Even if we limit the issue to their more strictly intellectual aspects, and even if not all the accounts were subject to suspicion, it would be very difficult to derive any conclusions of a general kind from them.<sup>9</sup> And, as it happens, the reports transmitted by the ancient Greeks are practically all para-biographical or pseudo-biographical, almost by definition. One can justifiably speak of “a Greek taste for a *single source* from which all things came [...] a predilection for *simple schematized linear sequences*”.<sup>10</sup> This way of presenting the origins of complex cultural realities has spawned a very productive interpretive model: the *inventio* of a *πρῶτος εὐρετής* for most of the relevant innovations.<sup>11</sup> But even if this model was able to keep alive a certain memory of the past, as part of a basic oral culture with few resources to preserve copious documentation, it cannot be claimed that the accounts of *πρῶτοι εὐρεταί* meet modern standards of rigor and precision.

Moreover, the Eastern influence was, of course, more important in some areas than in others; and from one area to another, the difficulties in tracing this influence may also vary considerably.<sup>12</sup> This is also true of the informative capacity of an event such as the *Lehrjahre* of a σοφός to the lands of the East. I'll try to illustrate this with some remarks about Thales of Miletus' trip to Egypt.

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<sup>8</sup> Solon's fr. 19 West (= 11 GP) presents similar methodological difficulties, in this case concerning his trip to Cyprus. Herodotus (v 113, 2) mentions the fragment, and Plutarch (*Vita Solonis* xxvi 2–4) quotes it *verbatim*, both of them with the object of documenting the trip. But it is clear that both sources depend for their information only on their reading of the fragment itself – a reading which may be right or not. (Actually, some modern scholars had considered this fragment spurious).

<sup>9</sup> We need not address here and now the serious problems raised e.g. by a remark such as Kahn's (1979: 298): “Of course the possibility of direct (or indirect) borrowing cannot be ruled out; but there is no reason to assume that significant parallels are to be regarded only, or even primarily, as evidence for historical diffusion of ideas from one culture to another”.

<sup>10</sup> A.B. Lloyd (1975: 60); my emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> See Kleingünther (1933, *passim*); Baumbach (2001: cols. 466–467).

<sup>12</sup> As G. Lloyd (1991: 278–302 = 1982: 1–19) stressed. Lloyd proposed four specific domains for this kind of research: **1.** Technological innovations; **2.** Religion and mythology; **3.** Mathematics and astronomy; **4.** Medicine.

## IV

At no time does Herodotus say *expressis verbis* that Thales visited Egypt; but many people have deduced it *a posteriori*, e.g. from the passage (Hdt ii 20) which lists the explanations of the flooding of the Nile proposed by certain Greeks. There, the name of Thales is not mentioned at all; but later authorities do mention him in their discussions of Herodotus' account.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Thales' hypothesis of the presumed impact of the Etesian winds on the flow of the Nile does not require an observation *in situ*; nor can we conclude from it that a journey was made.<sup>14</sup> Speaking in general terms, the 'naturalist' explanations for the Nile's flooding became common at many levels and were the object of many discussions in Greece. The three great Athenian ~~writers of tragedy~~, for example, all allude to this problem at one point or another;<sup>15</sup> and it was also obviously of interest to philosophers and sophists.<sup>16</sup> At the same time a series of tales about trips to Egypt by Greek intellectuals started to circulate, most of which were totally implausible. To give just one striking example, Diogenes Laertius, with an absolute disregard for chronology, tells about Plato and Euripides travelling together to Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

This is certainly not an appropriate place to review all the *testimonia* of Thales' voyage to Egypt. I will offer just a formal classification of the materials, based on the recurrence of certain narrative and historiographical *topoi*, and discuss only a few specific issues.

The classification of the reports of Thales' trip I propose is the following:

1. Sources that speak of Thales' journey in connection with the origins of Greek geometry (Diog. Laert. i 24; Proclus, *Commentary on the first book of Euclid* 65, 3–11 Friedlein).
2. Novelistic reports which, with a characteristic reversal of the above motif, describe how Thales taught the Egyptians to measure their pyramids (Diog. Laert. i 27; Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* xxxvi 82; Plutarch, *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* ii 147a).
3. Texts imbued with the Greek fascination for Egyptian priests, capable of teaching a profound esoteric wisdom. Some of these texts are excellent examples of Egyptomania (Diog. Laert. i 24; *schol. in Plato's Republic* 600a 1–10;

<sup>13</sup> See Diodorus Sic. i 38, Diogenes Laertius i 38; Pseudo-Plutarch, *Placita phil.* iv 1, 897f.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kirk-Raven-Schofield (1983: 80): "He could easily have got the relevant information (that the Etesian winds blow in Egypt too), an even the idea, from Milesian traders".

<sup>15</sup> Aeschylus *Suppl.* 559–561, TrGF 300 Radt; Sophocles TrGF 882 Radt; Euripides *Hel.* 1–3, TrGF 228 Kannicht.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Anaxagoras 25 D 66 Laks-Most; Aetius, *Plac.* iv 1 (= *Doxogr.* 384–86 Diels). On the Greeks' continued interest in the flooding of the Nile, cf. Vasunia (2001: 259–261; 275–282).

<sup>17</sup> Diog. Laert. iii 6 (= Euripides T 230 Kannicht). For a discussion about this piece of information, see Lefkowitz (2007: 101–105).

Plutarch, *De Iside et Osir.* xxxiv 364c–d; Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* ii 12, 5–12; ‘Thales of Miletus’, *Epistologr. Gr.* 740 Hercher; Aetius i 3, 1 [*Doxogr.* 276 Diels]).

In addition to these three groups, there are some reports that refer in more general terms to the Egyptian influence on Thales,<sup>18</sup> or to this sage’s commercial activities – in connection with Egypt? –, but without specifying anything regarding any particular trip.<sup>19</sup> The vagueness of these accounts advises against their use to confirm the historicity of any trip, even though more than one scholar has attempted to do so.

## V

The first specific comment I would like to make is that, although the information linking Thales with the Egyptian origins of Greek geometry have ended up converging with the accounts of a biographical character, the different kinds of materials must have had a quite different origin and development. ~~If we take~~ the prologue of the *Commentary on Euclid* (65, 3–11 Friedlein) by the fifth-century Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus, we find the following:<sup>20</sup>

Just as among the Phoenicians the necessities of trade and exchange gave the impetus to the accurate study of number, so also among the Egyptians the invention of geometry came about from the cause mentioned. Thales [= 11 A 11 DK], who had travelled to Egypt, was the first to introduce this science into Greece. He made many discoveries himself and taught the principles for many others to his successors, attacking some problems in a general way and others more empirically.

It is generally accepted that Proclus’ source is Eudemus of Rhodes (c. 370 BC – c. 300 BC), a disciple of Aristotle, considered as the first historian of Greek science.<sup>21</sup> But this attribution seems to apply to the scientific information only and not (or not necessarily) to biographical details. It would be excessive to deduce from the passage from Proclus that Eudemus devoted himself to telling the story of Thales’s journeys (although this is not inconceivable). Eudemus did not usually collect materials of this kind; this is confirmed by the fact that, on the five occasions he mentions Thales,<sup>22</sup> he always does so with regard to scientific subjects – never with regard to biographical traits. It must be said, however, that this

<sup>18</sup> Such as for example Josephus, *Against Apion*, xiv 2 (= Eusebius, *Praepar. evang.* x, 7, 10).

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Plutarch, *Life of Solon* ii 8: “Thales is said to have engaged in trade, as well as Hippocrates the mathematician; and Plato defrayed the expenses of his sojourn in Egypt by the sale of oil”.

<sup>20</sup> Translation by G.R. Morrow (1970: 52).

<sup>21</sup> See Heath (1921 i: 118–120); Mejer (2002: 243–261); Zhmud (2002: 263–306).

<sup>22</sup> Namely Eudemus’ fragments 134, 135 and 143–145 Wehrli = Thales’ *testimonia* n<sup>os</sup> 43–47 in the new collection *Traditio Presocratica* (Wöhrlé 2009), corresponding *grosso modo* to A 1, 5b, 17, 20 Diels/Kranz.

argument only has a certain amount of weight, given the fragmentary nature of the materials of Eudemus that have come down to us.

Details of a biographical nature usually have other, more colourful origins. A glimpse of sources of this kind can be gained from the passage in which Diogenes Laertius (i 24–25 = 11 A 1 DK), speaking precisely of Thales' intellectual debt to Egypt, mentions the “Historical Commentaries” (Σύμμικτα Ἱστορικῶν ὑπομνημάτων) of Pamphila of Epidaurus, an author from the time of Nero.<sup>23</sup>

## VI

To conclude, I would like to stress for a moment the obvious fact that if the Greeks themselves established a link between certain aspects of the thought of Thales and his travels in Egypt, this can tell us something about the mentality of authors who make this link; but it does not always demonstrate the rigor of the link itself. I will illustrate this with two reports of the impact of the old Egyptian religion on Thales' cosmological ideas. The two stories have some common traits.

Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* xxxiv 364c–d (11A 11 DK = TP 115 Wöhrle)<sup>24</sup>:

“They believe also that Homer as well as Thales had relied on Egyptian knowledge when he stated that the water was the first principle and origin of everything;<sup>25</sup> for they explain Oceanus as Osiris and Tēthys as Isis, since she it is who nurses and nourishes everything together.”

Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras* ii 12, 5–12 (11A 11 DK = TP 249 Wöhrle)<sup>26</sup>:

“Thales... advised him [= Pythagoras] to go to Egypt, to get in touch with the priests of Memphis and Diospolis; he confessed that the instruction of these priests was the source of his own reputation for wisdom.”

From these passages, scholars specialising in Late Greek Thought deduced that the esoteric prestige of the Egyptian priests had not diminished (if in fact it had not grown) during the Hellenistic-Roman period; and that Neoplatonist philosophers like Plutarch and Iamblichus liked to cultivate, each in his own way, the ‘Egyptian mirage’ so dear to Plato himself.<sup>27</sup> The fact that, long before the theories of transcultural diffusion propounded by modern historians, the Greeks had

<sup>23</sup> *FHG* iii 520, fr. 1 Müller. On this author, quoted eight times by Diogenes Laertius and twice by Aulus Gellius, see the accounts in the *Suda* (π 139) and the *Bibliotheca* of Photius (*codex* 175). See also the entry in the *PW* (Regenbogen 1949: cols. 309–328); Grau (2009: 78 sgg.), etc.

<sup>24</sup> Translated by J.G. Griffiths (1970).

<sup>25</sup> See *Iliad* xiv 201.

<sup>26</sup> Translated by K.S. Guthrie (1920).

<sup>27</sup> On the ‘Egyptian mirage’ and Plato, see e.g. Froidefond (1971: 267–342); Vasunia (2001: 216–247).

already sought bold connections between the cosmological systems of the ancient Middle Eastern cultures and the early Greek thinkers is significant, and we must bear it in mind. But it does not automatically 'prove' that Thales travelled to Egypt in person.

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