

SOME REMARKS ON *STROUTHOPHAGOI* TRIBES*

by

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Ptolemaic hunting expeditions for African elephants resulted in the discovery of previously unknown animal species¹ and also facilitated contact with local indigenous tribes. Ancient ethnographic descriptions referred to the *thaumasia* (marvels) of foreign cultures, their eating habits and struggles in obtaining their nutrition² underlining thereby differences between them and the “civilised” world. Stories regarding remarkable animals and people not only amused the ancient Greeks and Romans, but also made their way into Mediaeval folklore, such as the description of Blemmyes tribe, who, according to Pliny (*NH* V 46), did not have heads – their faces were instead placed on their chests. The existence of this tribe, nowadays identified with the Beja people, is confirmed by Christian writers. Their peculiar appearance can be explained by their use of ornamented shields or chest armour that when seen from a distance could be perceived as a face placed on a chest. Such misperceptions upon approaching the exotic and new could be the reason why many of these accounts seem fabulous and fictitious³.

The earliest expeditions resulting in marvellous stories are known to us due to the extant testimonies of Agatharchides of Cnidus, who wrote in the 2nd c. BC and detailed the exploration of the Red Sea region conducted by Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the 3rd c. BC, including descriptions of its fauna and the customs of its inhabitants. Among the inhabitants he described a tribe of *Strouthophaogoi* (Ostrich Eaters) and their hunting methods.

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¹ See e.g. the list of exotic animals brought to Alexandria at the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in Ath. V 197 C–203 B = *FGrH* 627 F 2.

² S. BURSTEIN, *Agatharchides of Cnidus. On the Erythraean Sea*, London 1989, pp. 25–27.

³ J.B. FRIEDMAN, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Syracuse 2000, pp. 23 f.; H. BARNARD, *Additional Remarks on Blemmyes, Beja and Eastern Desert Ware*, Egypt and the Levant XVII 2007, pp. 23–31.

Some *Strouthophagoi* hunt with bow and arrows, while others hiding themselves under ostrich pelts put the right hand inside its neck and wave them just like the ostriches move their necks; whereas with the left hand they pour seeds from the pouch hanging by their side; and with this bait they drive the animals into gorges: there, lying in wait, they strike them with hewn wood; and they dress in ostrich skins and make their beds with them. Aethiopians called *Simoi*, armed with oryx horns, fight with the *Strouthophagoi*⁴.

(*ap.* Str. XVI 4, 1 = GGM 57; transl. by the author)

Agatharchides, who follows the character of earlier ethnographic writings (hence the name “Ostrich eaters”) according to BURSTEIN composed his descriptions around an “idea that cultures were bundles of discrete customs maintained by the force of tradition”⁵ and focused on their manner of obtaining food⁶, all of which is well reflected in the *Strouthophagoi* hunting habits. He recorded these customs as they seemed most unusual for the Greeks. The idea of men dressing up and imitating an ostrich in order to catch one may seem unrealistic but, as with the description of the Blemmyes, is based on reality. In fact this passage is the first written testimony describing a Neolithic custom known otherwise from pictorial representations in the Nile Valley.

Recently discovered Neolithic petroglyphs (dated to around 4000 BC) found on the Hill of the Wind near Aswan⁷ depict a scene that could be interpreted as having been created especially for the purpose of illustrating this fragment of Agatharchides’ work, had they not been made some 3,800 years earlier. The carving depicts two men with an ostrich between them. The man on the right is shooting a bow, whereas the man on the left is wearing an ostrich mask and holding both his hands upraised.

A similar hunting custom is represented on a Predynastic period palette (ca. 3100 BC) which is now in Manchester Museum (no. 5476; fig. 1). In this



Fig. 1. Ostrich hunting, Manchester Palette, 3100 BC, no. 5476; drawing by the author

⁴ The description of the *Strouthophagoi* tribe based on Agatharchides is also quoted by Photius (Phot. 453 A) and Diodorus (Diod. Sic. III 28). The passage in Strabo’s *Geography* is the only one that details the peculiar hunting method, but, according to BURSTEIN (*op. cit.* [n. 2], p. 100, n. 4), it can certainly be attributed to Agatharchides.

⁵ BURSTEIN, *op. cit.* (n. 2), p. 26.

⁶ BURSTEIN, *op. cit.* (n. 2), p. 27.

⁷ Research conducted by Professor L. MORENZ from the University of Bonn, <https://www.uni-bonn.de/news/078-2017>, accessed on 9.7.2018.

scene, a man is pursuing three ostriches, but no weapon is visible. The man, however, has his hands raised in some sort of a dance. A peculiar detail emerges upon analysis of the hunter's face, which is not human, but is bird-like and thus he can be interpreted as an "ostrich-man". Moreover, to the right side of his silhouette there is a small pouch-like bag, while his gait seems to imitate an ostrich's movements⁸. The Manchester palette probably depicts the part of the scene described by Agatharchides in which the hunter baits the ostriches by pouring seeds from a pouch and then pursues them into a gorge. Perhaps such a gorge was located near the Hill of the Wind. The ostrich-man and the hunting scene on the Manchester palette can moreover be explained by the function of such palettes, as they could be used for grinding malachite⁹, applying pigments to a cult image or for preparing face paint for hunters¹⁰. In this context, putting on the make-up could be compared to wearing a hunting mask¹¹.

Hellenistic explorers encountered a custom which had been practiced for several millennia before their times. Over two thousand years after the Ptolemaic exploration of the Red Sea, 19th century travellers and animal hunters rediscovered the *Strouthophagoi* tribes and described their customs. According to Carl HAGENBECK:

The Bushmen in South Africa hunt ostriches somewhat differently. They cover their heads and bodies with the skins of dead ostriches, so that when walking along they much resemble real ostriches. They can thus approach to within close distance of a flock and shoot the birds with their poisoned arrows¹².

HAGENBECK's memoirs show the continuity of the 6,000 year old Neolithic custom; however he does not specify the tribe, instead speaking generally of South Africa. This means that such a custom was practiced not only in the

⁸ K. CIALOWICZ (*Les palettes égyptiennes aux motifs zoomorphes et sans décoration. Études de l'art prédynastique*, Kraków 1991, pp. 42 f.) interpreted the sheath as "l'étui phallique". Similarly, W. DAVIS (*Masking the Blow: The Scene of Representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art*, Berkeley 1992, pp. 72–74) wrote of it as a "belt with penis sheath", but in light of Agatharchides' account the phallic interpretation can be rejected.

⁹ W.M. CROMPTON, *A Carved Slate Palette in the Manchester Museum*, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* V 1918, p. 60.

¹⁰ T.A. WILKINSON, *What a King is This: Narmer and the Concept of the Ruler*, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* LXXXVI 2000, pp. 27 and 74. However, no traces of pigment are preserved on this or other similar palettes; see CROMPTON, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 60; DAVIS, *op. cit.* (n. 8), p. 74.

¹¹ On the Oxford palette, a hunter is wearing a canine mask and playing a flute, WILKINSON, *op. cit.* (n. 10), p. 27.

¹² C. HAGENBECK, *Beasts and Men*, London–New York 1912, p. 272. Also, contemporaries of HAGENBECK as well as a number of Victorian travellers documented Bushmen hunting ostriches in disguise (e.g. R. MOFFAT, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, London 1842, pp. 64 f.).

regions of Sudan and Ethiopia, but was also known below the equator. It seems that the application and meaning of this ritual varied to some extent from tribe to tribe or region to region and evolved over time, but a part of its meaning and origins can be explored.

There is certainly a connection between some tribal shamanic beliefs and this hunting technique. According to MORENZ (comparing the carving with rituals of San People), the carving on the Hill of the Wind is a representation of some kind of shamanic hunting dance¹³. The San (referred to as Bushmen) were traditionally a hunter-gatherer society that originally inhabited South Africa speaking a dialect that belongs to the Khoisan language group¹⁴. The following myth repeated by the Khoisan language tribes has been recorded:

The ostrich had a fire on which he cooked his food whilst the others ate food raw. One day he went to visit the people and they saw black spots on his legs. The people asked: "Where did you get those [burn marks]?" The people said, "We have to organize a dance together". When they danced the ostrich hid the fire under his arms and didn't stretch his wings. The people asked him "Why don't you stretch?" So he did and he forgot about the fire and a person stole it. The ostrich chased him and kicked the rock. That is why he only has three toes¹⁵.

In this myth (the San version of the Prometheus myth), the dance is related to stealing the fire from the ostrich. Thus the ostrich-dances described above could be re-enactments of a similar myth¹⁶.

The significance of this hunting method is strengthened by the use of an ostrich pelt and mask. In shamanistic beliefs, a process of shape shifting occurred when a man bore an animal pelt, thus transferring the qualities of the animal onto himself. This practice can also be recognised in Mycaenean boar-tusk helmets, which transferred the boar's strength and power onto the warriors wearing them, thus making them invincible. This process can even be traced in Homer's *Iliad*, where warriors wore wild animal skins (of lions and leopards) when going into battle¹⁷. This belief was also present among the Khoisan people,

¹³ L. MORENZ, <https://www.uni-bonn.de/news/078-2017>, accessed on 9.7.2018; IDEM, <http://www.livescience.com/58394-ancient-egyptian-rock-carvings-discovered.html>; IDEM, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4345774/Neolithic-rock-carving-6-000-years-ago-Egypt.html>.

¹⁴ R. SHAH, *How the Ostrich Lost his Fire and Other Stories*, 2013.

¹⁵ C. LOW, *Birds and KhoeSān: Linking Spirits and Healing with Day-to-Day Life*, Africa LXXXI 2011, pp. 301 f.

¹⁶ In Pharaonic Egypt the ostrich dance was performed by the birds to honour the sun-like pharaoh; also its feathers held cultic importance. See e.g. L. DAUTHEVILLE, *Danse d'autriche en l'honneur du pharaon*, Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale XX 1922, pp. 85–89 and P. BEHRENS, *Strauss, Straussenei, and Straussenfeder*, in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* VI (1986), coll. 72–82.

¹⁷ Ch. MORRIS, *Animals into Art in the Ancient World*, in: L. KALOF (ed.), *A Cultural History of Animals in Antiquity*, Oxford 2007, p. 189; DAVIS, *op. cit.* (n. 8), p. 189.

according to whom animal qualities (strengths and abilities) were transferred to those people who wore or carried their parts (teeth, claws, skins); sniffing and rubbing them also had the same desired effect¹⁸. The ostrich is not a “war” animal, but Agatharchides also wrote that the *Strouthophagoi* used ostrich pelts as clothes and moreover that they fought wars against the neighbouring tribe of *Simoi*. Since the ostrich was known for its speed and ability to escape, perhaps the ostrich pelts served a similar purpose, allowing the wearer to escape the weapons of the enemies (made of gazelle horns). Herodotus records (Hdt. IV 175) that a Libyan tribe of Macae when going into battle wore ostrich pelts for protection. It is quite likely that this protection were shields made of ostrich skin. Such shields are confirmed for the Tuaregs, nomads inhabiting regions such as the Sahara, Algeria, Niger and Nigeria¹⁹. This fact not only verifies Herodotus’ words, but also is yet another confirmation for the credibility of Agatharchides’ description of the *Strouthophagoi*.

Contrary to the Blemmyes tribe the *Strouthophagoi* seem to have been described accurately, however their custom and its significance were undoubtedly not understood by the Ptolemaic explorers. There are more issues that could be studied further in the context of the ostrich-hunting dance: regarding the history of the hunter-gatherers, the evolution of their traditions and their migration; regarding its symbolism among the Khoisan tribes, or regarding its appearance in Egyptian art from the Predynastic through the Pharaonic periods. The ethnographic account by Agatharchides provides us with a valuable testimony as it connects the archaeological finds and modern descriptions of similar customs, giving an insight to their continuity in African societies.

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¹⁸ Low, *op. cit.* (n. 15), p. 302.

¹⁹ H. CURRIE, *Ostrich-Skin Shields*, RhM CV 1962, pp. 283 f.; D. ASHERI, A. LLOYD, A. CORCELLA, *A Commentary on Herodotus. Books I–IV*, Oxford – New York 2007, p. 700.