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HELLENISTIC POETS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE NILE: A POETIC COMMENTARY ON A GEOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются места из Феокрита (7.113–114), Каллимаха (*H.* 4.206–208), Никандра (*Theg.* 174–176) и Оппиана (*Hal.* 1.620), объединенные совместным упоминанием Нила и эфиопов. Появление этих двух деталей в рамках одного стиха/предложения можно истолковать как намек на один из дискуссионных вопросов античной географии — местоположение истоков Нила. Вероятно, мы имеем дело с особым типом аллюзии: каждый из упомянутых поэтов отсылает не к конкретному месту или тексту, но к ученой проблеме, осведомленность в которой он желает продемонстрировать. В связи с пассажами из Феокрита и Оппиана релевантна также проблема «двойных» эфиопов (западных и восточных), берущая начало из толкований гомеровского места (*Od.* 1.23–24). Автор приходит к выводу, что перечисленные поэты создают своего рода комментарии к трудным географическим названиям; эта техника аналогична так называемой *interpretatio Homerica*, т. е. толкованию редких гомеровских слов путем помещения их в определенный поэтический контекст.

Ключевые слова: эллинистическая поэзия, античная география, Нил, Никандр Колофонский, Каллимах, Феокрит, Оппиан из Аназарба

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HELLENISTIC POETS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE NILE: A POETIC COMMENTARY ON A GEOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

Abstract. The paper deals with passages from Theocritus (7.113–114), Callimachus (*H.* 4.206–208), Nicander (*Ther.* 174–176), and Oppian (*Hal.* 1.620), united by the joint mention of the Nile and the Ethiopians. The appearance of these two details within the same verse/sentence can be interpreted as an allusion to one of the debatable questions of ancient geography — the location of the sources of the Nile. It is likely that here we are dealing with a special type of allusion: each of the poets in question refers not to a specific place or text, but to a scientific problem, awareness of which he wants to demonstrate. The author concludes that such geographical allusions can be regarded as an implicit commentary and are similar to the poetic technique of so-called *interpretatio Homerica* (the use of a Homeric *hapax*, in which the context itself contains the author's opinion on the correct interpretation of a particular rare word). In connection with the passages from Theocritus and Oppian, the problem of “double” Ethiopians — western and eastern — is also relevant. The article pays attention to the origins of this (Hom. *Od.* 1.23–24) and also considers interpretations of this Homeric place in Herodotus' *Histories*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Pliny's *Natural History*.

Keywords: Hellenistic poetry, geography of the ancient world, Nile, Nicander of Colophon, Callimachus, Theocritus, Oppian of Anazarbus

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Along with the cause of the inundation of the Nile, the location of its origin is one of the central problems of ancient geography [Honigsmann 1936; Dueck 2012: 65]. There are four main solutions proposed by the ancients.

1. The πηγαί of the Nile lie in the western part of Libya, i. e. the African continent (Hdt. 2.30–33, Juba apud Plin. 5.51).

2. The Nile's origin should be sought in India (Ps.-Arist. FrGrHist 646 F. 1(4), Str. 15.1.25, Arr. *Anab.* 6.1.4); the foundations of this belief were, first, the conviction that the Indian Ocean was an inland sea and that Africa and India were joined by a land bridge and, second, the presence of crocodiles in Indian rivers [Lloyd 1994: 109].

3. The Nile originates in the southern hemisphere in the land of Antichthonēs (Mela 1.46).

4. The Nile begins in the Ethiopian highlands (Ps.-Arist. FrGrHist 646 F. 1(10), Arist. *HA* 8.12.2). This view resulted from thinking on the causes of the Nile's inundation, in particular from the assumption that the summer heat melted snow which had been deposited on those mountains in winter [Lloyd 1994: 92, 110].

The last of the listed options, i. e. the localization of the origin of the Nile in Ethiopia, which most closely reflects the actual state of affairs¹, we find, for example, in Aristotle (*HA* 8.12 597 a 5ff., cf. also a treatise attributed to Aristotle, *περὶ Νείλου ἀναβάσεως* “on the flooding of the Nile” fr. 695 Gigon = FrGrHist 646 F. 1(10)). The same idea is also reflected in poetry. The earliest instance is Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (PV 807–812):

τηλουρον δὲ γῆν
ἤξεις, κελαινὸν φύλον, οἳ πρὸς ἡλίου
ναίουσι πηγᾶς, ἔνθα ποταμὸς Αἰθίοψ.
τούτου παρ' ὄχθας ἔρφ', ἕως ἂν ἐξίκη
καταβασμόν, ἔνθα Βυβλίνων ὀρῶν ἄπο
ἦσι σεπτὸν Νεῖλος εὐποτον ῥέος

A land far off, a nation of black people,
these you shall come to, men who live hard by
the fountain of the sun where is the river
Aethiops — travel by its banks along
to a cataract where from the Byblis hills
the Nile pours its holy, healthful waters.

(trans. by D. Grene [1991: 169])

My paper focuses on four later poetic passages in which the Nile and the Ethiopians are mentioned together.

¹ The Nile is in fact formed from the Atbarah, the Blue and the White Nile rivers, each of which has its own source.

1. Theoc. 7.111–114

In Theocritus' Idyll 7, Simichidas threatens Pan with many misfortunes, if the god does not help Simichidas' friend Aratus in a love affair: among other sufferings, Pan will spend the winter in the far North and the summer in furthest Ethiopia, "where the Nile is no more seen".

εἵης δ' Ἡδωνῶν μὲν ἐν ὥρεσι χεῖματι μέσσω
 Ἔβρον παρ ποταμὸν τετραμμένος ἐγγύθεν Ἄρκτω,
 ἐν δὲ θέρει πυμάτοισι παρ' Αἰθιοπίεσσι νομεύοις
 πέτρῳ ὑπο Βλεμύων, ὅθεν οὐκέτι Νεῖλος ὄρατός.

...mayst thou <...> in midwinter find thyself on the mountains of the Edonians, turned towards the river Hebrus, hard by the pole. And in summer mayst thou herd thy flock among the furthest Ethiopians beneath the rock of the Blemyes whence Nile is no more seen (trans. by A. F. Gow [1952: 63]).

The Ethiopians mentioned here can be located first by referring to the Blemmyes² — a tribe that lived in the territory of the Kingdom of Meroe on the southern frontiers of Egypt — and by pointing out that the Nile is no longer visible from this area, i. e. that the area is far south of the Nile's origin [Gow 1952: 159 f.].

2. Callim. H. 4.206–208

In Callimachus' hymn to Delos the connection of the Nile with Ethiopia is expressed in a more clear-cut way:

ἔζετο δ' Ἰνωποῖο παρὰ ῥόον ὃν τε βάθιστον
 γαῖα τότε ἔξανίησιν, ὅτε πλήθοντι ῥέεθρον
 Νεῖλος ἀπὸ κρημνοῖο κατέρχεται Αἰθιοπῆος

[Leto] sat by the stream of the Inopus, which the earth then sends forth at its most abundant, when the Nile in full spate comes down from the Ethiopian highland (trans. by S. Stephens [2015: 176]).

As Susan Stephens comments on this passage, "probably because it is a dry watercourse most of the year the river [Inopus] was said (erroneously) to have a subterranean connection to the Nile (see *hArt* 171, Lycophron 575, Paus. 2.5.3), its increase in flow thought to depend on the Nile's annual rising from Ethiopia" [Stephens 2015: 213].

² This tribal name is first attested in Hellenistic authors, see: [Schneider 2004: 133–134].

3. Nic. *Ther.* 174–176

The connection of the Ethiopia(ns) to the Nile is also found in Nicander's *Theriaca*, namely in the description of the black cobra, which gets its color from the “soil of Ethiopians” and is therefore similar to the mud that the Nile pours into the sea:

πολλάκι δ' αἰθαλόεσσα μελαιομένη ὑπὸ βόλῳ
Αἰθιοπῶν, οἷν τε πολύστονος εἰς ἅλα Νεῖλος
πλησάμενος κατέχευεν ἄσιν προὔτυψε δὲ πόντῳ.

...but often, when it grows dark with the soil of Ethiopians, a smoky brown like the sludge which the roaring Nile in flood pours into the sea, as it dashes against the waves (trans. by A. F. Gow, A. F. Scholfield, slightly modified [Gow, Scholfield 1953: 39]).

4. Op. *Hal.* 1.620–627

Finally, the Ethiopians and the Nile (referred to as “the streams of Egypt”) are mentioned in an extended simile in Oppian's *Halieutica*: migrating fish are compared to cranes which leave the land of the Pygmies in Africa:

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἀπ' Αἰθιοπῶν τε καὶ Αἰγύπτουιο ῥοάων
ὑψιπετῆς γεράνων χορὸς ἔρχεται ἡεροφώνων,
Ἄτλαντος νιφόεντα πάγον καὶ χεῖμα φυγοῦσαι
Πυγμαίων τ' ὀλιγοδρανέων ἀμενηνὰ γένεθλα
τῇσι δ' ἄρ' ἵπταμένησι κατὰ στίχας εὐρέες ἔσμοι
ἡέρα τε σκιαοῦσι καὶ ἄλλυτον ὄγμον ἔχουσιν
ὥς τότε μυριοφυλοὶ ἀλὸς τέμνουσι φάλαγγες
Εὐξεινον μέγα κῦμα

And as when from the Ethiopians and the streams of Egypt there comes the high-flying choir of clanging cranes, fleeing from winter and the snowy Mount of Atlas and the weak race of the feeble Pygmies: as they fly in ordered ranks, their broad swarms shadow the air and keep unbroken line; even so in that season those myriad-tribed phalanxes of the sea plough the great waves of the Euxine (trans. by A. W. Mair [1958: 265, 267]).

The quoted texts contain a special type of allusion: by referring to the Nile and the Ethiopians side by side all four poets — Theocritus, Callimachus, Nicander, and Oppian — seem to have chosen one of the known localizations of the Nile's πηγαί and thus show familiarity with a scientific problem. In addition to the location of the Nile's origin, another geographical problem is relevant regarding these passages, namely that of two Ethiopias — the western one and the eastern one³. The problem originates from two verses of the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 1.23–24):

³ Specifically for this topic see: [Schneider 2015].

Αἰθίοπας τοὶ διχθὰ δεδαΐαται, ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν,
οἱ μὲν δυσομένου Ὑπερίονος οἱ δ' ἀνιόντος

the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain, the farthestmost of men,
some where Hyperion sets and some where he rises (trans. by A. T. Murray [1919: 5]).

Attempts to reconcile the Homeric “double Ethiopians” with the more rational view of the Oikoumene are reflected in Herodotus (Hdt. 7.70):

τῶν μὲν δὴ ὑπὲρ Αἰγύπτου Αἰθιοῶπων καὶ Ἀραβίων ἦρχε Ἀρσάμης,
οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἡλίου ἀνατολέων Αἰθιοῦρες (διῆνοι γὰρ δὴ ἐστρατεύοντο)
προσετετάχατο τοῖσι Ἰνδοῖσι, διαλλάσσοντες εἶδος μὲν οὐδὲν
τοῖσι ἐτέροισι, φωνὴν δὲ καὶ τρίχωμα μόνον· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀπὸ ἡλίου
Αἰθιοῦρες ἰθύτριχες εἰσὶ, οἱ δ' ἐκ τῆς Λιβύης οὐλότατον τρίχωμα
ἔχουσι πάντων ἀνθρώπων.

The Ethiopians above Egypt and the Arabians had Arsames for commander, while the Ethiopians of the east (for there were two kinds of them in the army) served with the Indians; they were not different in appearance from the others, only in speech and hair: the Ethiopians from the east are straight-haired, but the ones from Libya have the woolliest hair of all men (trans. by A. D. Godley [1920: 383]).

In this regard the passage from *Prometheus Bound* mentioned above is a *locus classicus* as well. If we accept the interpretation proposed by V. T. Musbakhova, the river Aethiops is to be understood as “one of the tributaries of the Nile or one of its channels before the confluence in the place that Aeschylus designates with the word καταβασμόν”, and the black tribe living by the origins of the sun are the Ethiopians located south of Egypt [Musbakhova 2013: 187] — and not the Indian Ethiopians, as most interpreters thought.

However, there was also a tradition of placing the eastern and western Ethiopians inside Africa, reflected, e. g., by Pliny (*NH* 5.43):

Interiore autem ambitu Africae ad meridiem versus superque Gaetulios, intervenientibus desertis, primi omnium Libyes Aegyptii, deinde Leucoae Aethiopes habitant. super eos Aethiopum gentes Nigritae a quo dictum est flumine, Gymnetes Pharusi, iam oceanum attingentes quos in Mauretaniae fine diximus Perorsi. ab his omnibus vastae solitudines orientem versus usque ad Garamantas Augilasque et Trogodytas, verissima opinione eorum, qui desertis Africae duas Aethiopias superponunt, et ante omnes Homeri, qui bipertitos tradit Aethiopas, ad orientem occasumque versos.

In the interior circuit of Africa towards the south and beyond the Gaetulians, after an intermediate strip of desert, the first inhabitants of all are the Egyptian Libyans, and then the people called in Greek the White Ethiopians. Beyond these are the Ethiopian clans of the Nigritae, named after the river which has been mentioned, the Pharusian Gymnetes, and then bordering on the Ocean the Perorsi

whom we have spoken of at the frontier of Mauretania. Eastward of all of these there are vast uninhabited regions spreading as far as the Garamantes and Augilae and the Trogodytes — the most reliable opinion being that of those who place two Ethiopias beyond the African desert, and especially Homer, who tells us that the Ethiopians are divided into two sections, the eastward and the westward (trans. by H. Rackham [1961: 49, 51]).

The same idea is likely to underlie Oppian's view concerning the Ethiopians and the Nile, because they are mentioned alongside the Atlas Mountains located in West Africa (*Hal.* 1.622: Ἄτλαντος νιφόμεντα πάγον). It is also noteworthy that the Scholia on *Halieutica* 622 say that there are two Atlases — one in Libya and the other in Ethiopia:

...ἄλλοι δὲ λέγουσιν, ὅτι δύο εἰσὶν Ἄτλαντες, ὁ μὲν εἰς Λιβυκὸς, εἰς δὲ εἰς καὶ ἡράκλειαι Στήλαι, ὁ δ' ἕτερος κείμενος πρὸς τὴν Αἰθιοπίαν.

...other say that there are two Atlas mountains, the Libyan one, and the other lies in Ethiopia (trans. by the author of the paper).

In Pliny (*NH* 5.44) we find the tribe Atlantes as well as the Blemmyes attested in Theocritus — both mentioned among the people that live near the source of the river Niger:

Nigri fluvio eadem natura quae Nilo. calamum ac papyrus et easdem gignit animantes isdemque temporibus augescit. oritur inter Tarraeos Aethiopus et Oechalicas. horum oppidum Magium. quidam solitudinibus interposuerunt Atlantes, iuxta eas Aegipanas semiferos et Blemmyas et Gamphasantas et Satyros et Himantopodas.

The river Niger has the same nature as the Nile: it produces reeds and papyrus, and the same animals, and it rises at the same seasons of the year. Its source is between the Ethiopic tribes of the Tarraelii and the Oechalicae; the town of the latter is Magium. In the middle of the desert some place the Atlantes, and next to them the half-animal Goat-Pans and the Blemmyes and Gamphasantes and Satyrs and Himantopodes ("Strap-foots") (trans. by H. Rackham [1961: 51]).

5. Dionys. Per. 220–224

One passage from Dionysius Periegetes' *Description of the Oikoumene*, a poem whose proper subject matter is geography, forms an interesting parallel to the passages discussed above. In lines 220–224 the Ethiopians and the course of the Nile are also mentioned together:

Τῶν πάρος αἰθαλέων Βλεμύων ἀνέχουσι κολῶναι,
ἐνθεν πιεστότοιο κατέρχεται ὕδατα Νεῖλου,
ὃς δ' ἦτοι, Λιβύηθεν ἐπ' ἀντολίην πολὺς ἔρπων,
Σίρις ὑπ' Αἰθιοπῶν κικλήσκεται· οἱ δὲ Συήνης
ἐνναίται στρεφθέντα μετ' οὐνομα Νεῖλον ἔθεντο.

Before them reach the sunburnt Blemmyes' hills,
 Whence fall the quickening waters of the Nile,
 Whose mighty course, from Libya flowing east,
 Is named by Ethiopians Siris; but
 Nile by Syene's folk after its bend.

(trans. by J. L. Lightfoot [2014: 211])

From this quotation it is clear that Dionysius was not interested in the issue of the source of the Nile itself: in this regard he rather follows Herodotus' theory of the underground course of the river, cf. the double naming of Siris-Nile in the line 224. However, the mention of the tribe of the Blemmyes, the Ethiopians placed in the extreme south of Libya (this localization, in turn, does not fit the theory of western and eastern Ethiopians, which was certainly known to Dionysius) and the Nile can be interpreted as a hint to the scientific discussion about the sources of the Egyptian river.

* * *

To summarize, it can be concluded that in Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic poetry the so-called 'learned geography' was not a mere ostentation of rare toponyms as it is often believed to be. By using geographical names, a poet could create a kind of commentary on a debatable geographical problem and express approval of one or another view⁴. Implied commentary of this kind is similar to the *interpretatio Homerica*⁵ which was typical for these learned poets: by using a Homeric *hapax* in a certain context, they sought to express their opinion about which interpretation of a difficult word was correct.

Abbreviations

FrGrHist — *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*.

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⁴ See: "For the ancient Greeks, and to a lesser degree for Romans as well, *geōgraphia* represented a literary genre more than a branch of physical science" [Room 1992: 3].

⁵ On this term see: [Rengakos 1992: 21, n. 3; 1994: 21–27].

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