

# Chapter 2: Origins of Theatre and Drama

## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(58) Indeed, as to solemn assemblies and parades and processions, the first people to do these things were the Egyptians, and from them the Greeks learned them. My evidence for this is as follows: theirs (i.e. the Egyptians' ceremonies) seem to have been created over a long time, whereas the Greek ceremonies were created recently.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(59) They assemble, the Egyptians that is, not once in the year but at many assemblies, often and most eagerly at the city of Bubastis in honor of the goddess Artemis, secondly at the city of Busiris in honor of Isis—indeed in this city is Isis' largest temple and the city itself was built in the midst of Egypt's delta; . . .

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(59) Isis is in the Greeks' language Demeter—  
thirdly at the city of Saïs in honor of Athena they  
assemble, fourthly at Heliopolis ("Sun City" ) in  
honor of Helios (the sun), fifthly at Buto in honor  
of Leto, and sixthly at the city of Papremis in  
honor of Ares.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(60) When into what is now the city of Bubastis they arrive, they do the following things. They sail, men together with women and a large number of each in every boat, and some of the women carry rattles and shake them, and the men play flutes the whole way, and the remaining women and men sing and clap their hands.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(60) Whenever they come to a new city, they bring their boat close to shore and do the following: some of the women do the things I just said, others abuse and shout at the women in that city, others dance, others hitch up their skirts and stand up. These things in every city along the river they do.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(60) When they come to Bubastis, they have a festival and make great sacrifices and drink grape wine more in this festival than in the whole year remaining. They gather, whatever there is of men and women but no children, as many as 700,000 as the locals say.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(61) And these things are done in this place . . . .  
They beat themselves after the sacrifices, all  
men and all women making very many  
thousands of people. For whom (i.e. the god  
Osiris) they beat themselves, it is not righteous  
to say.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(61) Whatever Carians (i.e. Greeks from Asia Minor) are living in Egypt, they go so far as also to cut their foreheads with daggers and in this make it clear that they are foreigners and not Egyptians.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(62) In the city of Saïs, when they gather for sacrifices, on a particular night they all light many lamps out in the open around their houses in a circle. The lamps are really saucers filled with salt and oil, and on top there is the wick itself and this burns all night, and this festival has the name "The Lamplighting."

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(62) Those of the Egyptians who do not participate in this all-night festival still observe the night of the sacrifice by lighting lamps—everyone does this—and so not in Saïs alone is there the lighting (i.e. of lamps) but also throughout all Egypt. The reason that the light (or "the day" ) and the honor (i.e. of this rite) was given to the night itself is explained in a sacred myth concerning this (festival) . . .

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) . . . but in Heliopolis and Buto the pilgrims perform only sacrifices. In Papremis, sacrifices and rites, as elsewhere, are performed. At the setting of the sun a few of the priests attend to the statue (of Ares), but the majority of them hold clubs made of wood and stand at the temple's entrance while others make vows (i.e. to protect the god's statue), . . .

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) . . . more than a thousand men, all holding clubs and these stand opposite the rest in a mass. The statue, being as it is in a small shrine made of wood and plated with gold, they escort (this statue) on the day before to another sacred building.

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) And those few left behind with the statue pull a four-wheeled wagon carrying the shrine and the statue which is in the shrine, and the others standing at the front gates (i.e. of the temple) do not let them enter, but those who vowed to defend the god strike those resisting (i.e. preventing the advance of the statue into the temple).

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) Thereupon a battle with clubs, a rather large one, ensues, and they split skulls and, as I understand, many even die from their wounds; not, however, according to the Egyptians does anyone die. This all-night ceremony became a tradition for the following reason, say the locals:

. . .

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) . . . that there lived in this temple Ares' (i.e. the god of war) mother, and Ares who was raised elsewhere came — after having become a man — wishing to lay with his mother, and the servants of his mother, for not having seen him before, did not look the other way when he entered, . . .

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## **Herodotus, *Histories* 2.58-63**

(63) . . . rather they fended him off, and he fetching men from another city handled the servants roughly and went inside to his mother. For this reason this fight in behalf of Ares at the festival has become a tradition, they say.

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## **Anthropology**

- **James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*** (1896/1915)
- search for origins of Western (Greek) theatre in foreign/modern cultures
- this involves seeing those cultures as somehow “primitive” and their ceremonies as **relics** or “**fossils**” of early Western culture

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## **Anthropology**

- such an approach involves at least two significant fallacies:
  - the bigotry inherent in labelling certain cultures/ceremonies as “primitive”
  - it predicts the existence of “**transitional forms**” which the data actually render up very rarely

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## Theories of Myth

- anthropology stimulated new ways of thinking about culture and the arts
- e.g., **Bronislaw Malinowski** and functionalists: myth is **aetiological** and justifies the existing order
- also, **Claude Levi-Strauss** and **structuralism**: myth mediates the ineffable dualities of life

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## **Theories of Myth**

- most early Greek drama is built around myth, so can these theories inform us about the origins of Western theatre?
- for instance, should we look for aetiological or mediating elements in early Greek culture as possible building blocks used in creating theatre?

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**What do anthropology and theories of myth teach us about the origin of Western theatre?**

- **lumpers vs. splitters**
- are humans just “**mimetic**” (Aristotle)
- does the question of the origins of theatre belong to the discipline of anthropology? or history? or Classics?