

Μνήμη IN HERODOTUS II 77, 2:
“HISTORY” OR “TRADITION”?

by

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ABSTRACT: In this short article, the author analyses the word *μνήμη* in one specific place in the *Histories* by Herodotus (II 77, 1), taking into account the broad context in which this word appears. Previous commentators and translators have perceived *mneme* to be broadly understood as “history”, as contained in the various documents that record extensive knowledge of the Egyptians from the region which is described by Herodotus in Book II. In contrast to this previously held view, the present author explains *mneme* as “tradition” recorded in time, i.e. a rich collection of customs (νόμοι, τὰ νόμια) which cover habits, views, beliefs, behaviours and social norms cultivated (ἐπασκέοντες) by very wise people (λογιώτατοι) whom Herodotus encountered during his trip to Egypt. In such a sense, *μνήμη* is used here for the first time in the history of the word’s usage.

Among 16 attestations of the noun *μνήμη* in the *Histories* by Herodotus (four times each in Books I, II and IV, once in Book V, and three times in Book VI), one instance deserves special attention. Describing the way of life and nutrition of the Egyptians in Book II, Herodotus uses the word *mneme* and in this passage, in my opinion, for the first time in the history of its usage this word means “tradition”, i.e. knowledge and historical truth. The passage in question and its translation are provided below in order to analyse the meaning of *mneme* in a much broader context than has been done so far.

Αὐτῶν δὲ δὴ Αἰγυπτίων οἱ μὲν περὶ τὴν σπειρομένην Αἴγυπτον οἰκέου-
σι, **μνήμην** ἀνθρώπων πάντων ἐπασκέοντες μάλιστα λογιώτατοί εἰσι
μακρῶ τῶν ἐγὼ ἐς διάπειραν ἀπικόμην. Τρόπῳ δὲ ζῆς τοιῶδε διαχρέ-
ωνται
(II 77, 1–4)¹

And among the Egyptians, it is those who inhabit the farmlands of Egypt that care about **tradition** most of all people, and therefore are undoubtedly the most learned people I have ever met. And they practice this way of life.

¹ Greek passages from Herodotus are quoted from WILSON 2015. Translations, unless stated otherwise, are mine.