

THE EGYPTIAN CINDERELLA

by Pat Dargin

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We cannot forget Rhodopis and her turquoise sandals, for she became the model for a fairy tale that took place many centuries later—a tale of a young girl who wore glass slippers and whose name was Cinderella.

This final paragraph of ‘The Turquoise Sandals’, a fable retold by Amy Zerner,¹ confused me. Her story was an intriguing one: the characters a slave girl, a Greek merchant and an Egyptian pharaoh—not a stepmother, a fairy or prince in sight! I conceded—some elements were similar to those in Cinderella. I was curious—what was the background of this story? Then in *swag*²...*The Egyptian Cinderella seems to have been built around the true story of the Greek slave Rhodopis who married the Pharaoh Amasis in the sixth century and became Queen...*³ That did it! ‘The Turquoise Sandals’ was nearly believable but I wanted to know about time, place and people. I needed to know more about her story.

Having a fascination for Egyptian mysteries I set forth. Catalogues in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, list books of legends from ancient Egypt. Only

Donald Mackenzie⁴ mentioned Amasis, the last Egyptian-born Pharaoh, who reigned 570-526 BC. Amasis, Amosis are the Greek interpretations of the name Ahmose II, who ruled in Dynasty XXVI.⁵

Roger Green retells ‘The Girl with the Rose Red Slippers’ in *Tales of Ancient Egypt*.⁶ Rhodopis, Charaxos and Amasis are the characters. He writes that Herodotus, a Greek historian, visiting Egypt c.450 BC certainly knew of Rhodopis but may have confused her with an earlier concubine—Queen⁷ and continues...but the full tale was given by another Greek historian, Aelian, in his ‘Varia Historia’ in the third century AD.

On the shelves of the Sydney City Library is a wealth of stories and dissertations about ‘Cinderella’. Judy Sierra in her Cinderella collection⁸ records a ‘fable’ told by Strabo, a Greek historian who lived during the time of Christ. The woman Rhodopis, he said, was bathing near Naucratis when an eagle took her sandal. This led to the Pharaoh marrying her. She was buried in one of the great pyramids. Sierra writes...this is the earliest written record we have of the

unique motif of the Cinderella story, the slipper test for choosing a bride. Variations of Strabo’s story appear in *The Cinderella Story*⁹ and in *Cinderella*, a folklore casebook.¹⁰

June Barnes-Rowley supplied Shirley Climo’s text of *The Egyptian Cinderella*¹¹. I questioned its elements of fantasy. I needed the book. My favourite bookseller was unable to find the title in his extensive catalogues, however I am grateful to Joanne Hay, a teller visiting from the USA, who searched and bought the book for me. It is a richly coloured production in which the author uses the term ‘gilded slippers’ and notes...Ancient Egyptian gold was sometimes mixed with iron, which gave it a reddish hue... Bettelheim¹² says...artistically made slippers of precious material were reported in Egypt from the third century on...and [in Rome] gilded slippers for women...[probably due to eastern influence]. Although Egyptians often went barefoot, they usually wore sandals not slippers but this might be a generic term for footwear.

A series of programs about ancient Egypt featured on TV. Occasionally they provided a worthwhile snippet

of information about everyday life—customs, clothing, fabric and jewelry. Semi-precious stones and polished agates were popular and used for decoration as well as adornment.

In ancient times, Pharaoh Sneferu sent expeditions to Maghara in the Sinai Peninsula to mine turquoise. I found maps showing the turquoise mining sites. He had butterfly shapes and beads made for his wife. I found illustrations of the stones being drilled to make beads for jewelry and decorated trinkets. Turquoise was a valuable gemstone and sandals decorated with turquoise beads, a gift of great value, to be given to one you loved. Were turquoise sandals a feasible alternative to gilded slippers? Definitely.

So, who was Rhodopis? Her name means 'rosy cheeks'. Descriptions varied—a Greek child captured by pirates, a young fair-skinned woman, a slave, a courtesan; she lived on Samos at the same time as Aesop. In Zerner's version Rhodopis could read and write.

Scrolls have been found around the eastern Mediterranean area written, not only in cuneiform, but in simplified hieroglyphics as well. It is said many people were able to read, although it is unlikely that the poor or slaves had access to this skill. However it is possible that, if someone showed intelligence and inclination, they may have been assigned to or received tutoring from a scribe or notary.

I researched people and neighbours of ancient Egypt. Around the Mediterranean lands most people had olive complexions and dark hair. Egyptian men and women prized blonde hair; if they couldn't lighten their hair they often wore wigs. A fair-haired slave would be

valuable, especially a woman. Slaves were the spoils of war or piracy; Herodotus records Rhodopis coming from Thrace, a northern part of ancient Greece. Phoenicians sold slaves around the eastern Mediterranean. Herodotus also gives authenticity to Rhodopis and Aesop being contemporaries as slaves on the island of Samos.

The wealthy bought or were assigned slaves to do menial chores or work in the fields—few went into domestic service. 'Poor' Egyptians became house servants so in the class system of the time, a slave was to be spat upon. Young slaves were popular with the buyers; they could be trained but often a girl-child was taken to bed at puberty—so there would be spirited bidding for the fair young slave, Rhodopis.

Marriage ceremonies did not exist—'marriage' did not have a written hieroglyph; the custom was to announce your intention of living as man and wife to an assembly. More than one woman could be taken but not all became 'wife'; a wealthy man might have a harem, Pharaoh had a 'House of Women'. 'Courtesans' was the appropriate term for the concubines. All the descriptions of Rhodopis could be factual.

Green says the old Greek merchant, Charaxos, came from the island of Lesbos before settling in Naucratis, the city established not far from the mouth of the Nile by Ahmose II, a 'Greek-lover'. Charaxos bought Rhodopis with a bag of gold dust—that was appropriate tender, as a monetary system did not yet exist. A wealthy man, he would have his estate beside the river. Because he was Greek he would accept the intervention of the Gods.

In the various retellings either an eagle (minor deity) or a falcon

(symbol of Horus, patron of the Egyptian monarchy) takes the slipper/sandal. To the Egyptians either bird was a sign from the Gods so the Pharaoh's union was accepted. From slave to Queen!

Strabo told Rhodopis' story as history but refers to it as a fable. But is it true, a fable, a myth or a fairy tale? If the definition of a fairy tale includes magic then the story certainly qualifies and Carolyne Larrington in *Egypt: Myth and Reality* says...In ancient Egyptian stories, we move out of the realm of pure myth and closer to reality. There are, however, still traces of magic: the gods constantly intervene...¹³

Now, after researching its background, I enjoy telling the Egyptian Cinderella story. My version is titled 'The Turquoise Sandal' and I tell the story to upper primary children and adults.

¹ *Scheherazade's Cat & Other Fables from Around the World*, Amy Zerner & Jessie Spicer Zerner, Tuttle Co 1993.

² *swag* Vol. 4, No. 2, *Cinderella is a Frog*, jb

³ See also *The Egyptian Cinderella in The Pied Piper* Vol. 21, No. 1, p6

⁴ *Egyptian Myth and Legend*, Donald A. Mackenzie, New York, Bell Co c1978, p.373-375

⁵ *The Hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt*, Aidan Dodson, New Holland 2001

⁶ *Tales of Ancient Egypt*, retold by Roger Lancelyn Green, Bodley Head 1967

⁷ *The History of Herodotus*, translated by George Rawlinson, Dent & Sons, 1949, Vol. 1

⁸ *Cinderella*, Judy Sierra (collect), Joanne Caroselli (illust.), Phoenix, Oryx Press 1992

⁹ *The Cinderella Story: The Origins & Variations of the Story Known as Cinderella*, Neil Philip, Penguin 1989

¹⁰ *Cinderella, a Folklore Casebook*, Alan Dundes (ed), New York, Garland, 1982

¹¹ *The Egyptian Cinderella*, Shirley Climo, illust. Ruth Heller, Harper Collins 1989.

¹² *Uses of Enchantment, the Meaning & Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim, Penguin 1976

¹³ *The Woman's Companion to Mythology*, Carolyne Larrington (ed), Pandora 1992