Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt

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Naukratis, Egypt and Mediterranean world: Greek–Egyptian relations in the 7th to 6th centuries BC

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The ancient civilisations that flourished on Greek and Egyptian soil, though separated by the Mediterranean Sea, had long been aware of each other, and at times had entertained significant levels of contact.

In the Bronze Age relations between Minoan Crete and Egypt are amply attested (e.g. Karetsou 2000; Karetsou et al. 2000; Panagiotopoulou 2005; Phillips 2008; cf. also Valbelle 1990; O’Connor 2003). It was only from the 7th century BC, however, that substantial and close direct relations developed. At this time, after a period of internal turmoil and relative isolation, Egypt once more began to open itself to contact with the wider Mediterranean world (Fig. 1). Egyptian Pharaohs of the Saite dynasty, newly established under Psamtek (Psammetichos) I (664–610 BC), increasingly engaged with neighbouring cultures both close by and far away, motivated by shared interests in prestige, trade and military security (Tanner 2003; Lloyd 1983; 2007b; Vittmann 2003).

This exchange left a visible mark particularly on Greek culture. Greek art, technology, religious ritual and also burial customs all now incorporated, to varying degrees, Egyptian elements; while some may have come to Greece through Phoenician mediation, others were occasioned by direct contact. First-hand experience is most likely responsible notably for the creative adoption of Egyptian architectural and sculptural schemes (and perhaps techniques), some of which became integral to local discourses of elite (and civic) competition: a taste for monumental sculptures and

Figure 1: Map of the Eastern Mediterranean. Drawing Kate Morton.
temples and the development of the quintessential young Greek male statue type, the kouros.¹

While the extent to which Egyptian ideas entered Greek cosmology or philosophy is debatable (Haider 2004, 466–71; Burkert 2004, 71–98), phenomena such as the popularity of Egyptian scarabs and amulets in Greece and in the wider Mediterranean world (Gorton 1996; Hölbl 1979, 2005, 2007) clearly demonstrates the appeal exerted by Egyptian ideas.

But in Egypt itself also, the time from the 7th century BC onwards is characterized by profound change, occasioned to a large degree by the growing contact with – and intermittent rule by – foreigners. Recent scholarship has been increasingly aware of this phenomenon, which manifests itself in major developments such as the spread of demotic script (Bianchi 2005, 68; Martin 2007), the monetisation of the Egyptian economy,² the increasing role of religion (‘sacralisation’) for the construction of Egyptian identity and the associated crystallisation of an encyclopaedic canon of knowledge (Assmann 1996, 90–2).

Contact and exchange can be traced (albeit not without difficulty and with many lacunae) by means of surviving written, but especially archaeological evidence. Hence we find Egyptian products and trinkets – present already in small numbers since the 9th century BC – increasingly infiltrating Greece and the wider Mediterranean world, notably in the shape of the small amulets mentioned above. Relations between Egyptians and Greeks manifest themselves also in the ‘diplomatic’ gifts that Egyptian pharaohs such as Necho II (610–595 BC) and Amasis (570–526 BC) are recorded to have given to major Greek sanctuaries at Miletos/Didyma, Rhodes, Samos and Sparta in the 6th century BC (Hdt. 2.159, 182; 3.47; cf. Möller 2000a, 30, 37–8; Ebbinghaus 2006; Lloyd 2007b). Within Egypt, the most prominent archaeological traces of contact are Greek (Fig. 2), Phoenician and Cypriot trade amphorae – imported wine being a commodity much appreciated by Egyptians. They are found throughout the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, from the mid to late 7th century onwards, and go together well with a note in Diodorus (1.68.8) stating that Greek and Phoenician traders had been admitted into Egypt since the time of Psammetichos (Psamtek) I (Johnston 2006; Marchand and Marangou 2007; Marangou and Marchand 2009; Weber 2012; Marangou 2012).³

In addition to passing traders and visitors, however, large numbers of foreigners also lived in Egypt for extended periods of time (Vittmann 2003; for Greeks in Egypt, cf. also Austin 1970; Braun 1982; Boardman 1999). Many came to Egypt for war: East Greek, Carian and other foreign mercenaries formed a significant element in the Egyptian army of the 26th

¹ For architecture, see e.g. Palagia and Bianchi 1994; Coulton 1977, 30–50; Königs 2005; cf. also the sceptical view of Helck 1995, 152, 170. For sculpture, see e.g. Levin 1964, 13–28; Kyrieleis 1996; Bianchi 2005; U. Höckmann 2005a and 2005b; and the most recent critical assessment by Carter and Steinberg 2010; cf. also Duplouy 2006, 203.
² Manning 2010, 130–4; note, however, that Manning erroneously gives the late 6th century BC as the date of the introduction of the word stater into demotic script; in fact this happens in the late 5th century BC: Chauvau 2000. The recent fieldwork at Thonis/Herakleion attests Athenian-style coins being minted there from the late 5th to early 4th century BC: cf. Bowman 2010, 103. The finds are being prepared for publication by Andy Meadows.
³ A major study of Greek amphorae in Egypt is currently being prepared by Mikaël Pesenti for his doctoral thesis ‘Amphores grecques en Egypte saïte: histoire des mobilités méditerranéennes archaïques’.
Dynasty, particularly in the wake of the alliance between Psamtek (Psammetichos) I and the Lydian king Gyges in 662/1 BC (Haider 1988, 1996, 2001; Kaplan 2003; Vittmann 2003, 197–203; Fantalkin 2006 and 2014). Archaeologically, we can sometimes catch a glimpse of them in Egypt through their burials, the votives they dedicate inscribed with their names in sanctuaries of Egyptian gods in Egypt, or, following their return, the Egyptian objects they offered to the Greek gods in Greece (Vittmann 2003; U. Höckmann and Vittmann 2005; Ebbinghaus 2006; cf. also Bumke 2012, arguing instead for dedication by Egyptians themselves). Some clearly occupied high levels of command within the army’s foreigners’ branch, such as Pedon, who proudly announces the rewards he received from Pharaoh Psammetichos on an Egyptian cube statue dedicated (presumably in the early 6th century BC) in an Ionian sanctuary (Vittmann 2003, 203–6, fig. 103; see also Parlasca 2004; Kourou 2004). Another example is Psammetichos, son of Theokles, apparently a second-generation mercenary; his name – presumably inspired by that of Egyptian Pharaoh Psammetichos (Psamtek) I – is preserved in a graffito at Abu Simbel left in 593 BC by Greeks in the army of Psammetichos (Psamtek) II (Fig. 3; cf. Vittmann 2003, 200–1; Hauben 2001).

Contact and exchange between Egypt, Greece and other civilisations involved a range of different people and was played out on a variety of platforms. Military pacts, gift-giving and guest-friendships, immigration and migrant work, translocal elites, traders, aristocratic travellers, mercenaries, sailors, craftsmen, wives and courtesans, translators and administrators – all played their part in (Eastern) Mediterranean networks of contact and exchange. On the Greek side, Aigina and Athens, Sparta, but especially and particularly at the beginning the Eastern Aegean cities – such as Miletos, Samos, Phokaia and the cities on the island of Rhodes – were heavily involved, along with the Carians. So, too, were the major powers in their hinterland, Lydia and later Persia, as well as the cities of Cyprus and the Phoenician and Levantine coastland. All this was played out against, and ultimately depended on, the larger historical and economic constellations and events of the time – from the reshaping of the political map of the Eastern Mediterranean following the collapse of the Assyrian kingdom in the late 7th century (612 BC), to the Persian conquest of much of East Greece and Egypt in the later 6th to early 5th centuries BC, the rise of Macedon, the creation of the Ptolemaic dynasty and the formation and ultimate collapse of the Roman empire.

As these examples show, at least some Carians, Ionians and other foreigners adopted and practised aspects of Egyptian culture. This is also confirmed by other evidence that shows they could marry Egyptian women, take on Egyptian names and participate in Egyptian cults and burial customs (Vittmann 2003, 2006). Another early example of this phenomenon is Wah-ib-Re-em-akhet (an Egyptian name), the son of Alexikles and Zonodote (clearly Greeks), who in the late 7th century BC was buried in an Egyptian sarcophagus (Grallert 2001). Particularly in the region of Memphis, the multi-cultural centre of Late Period Egypt, a number of instances of intermarriage and adoption of Egyptian names and burial customs are recorded.
Sixth-century BC grave stelae of Greeks and Carians from Saqqara, the necropolis of Memphis, employ Egyptian motifs mixed with Greek/Carian traditions (Fig. 4), and are vivid testimonies to an eclectic hybrid material culture developing in this context (Höckmann 2001b; cf. Kammerzell 2001). The same phenomenon can also be witnessed in relation to the Phoenician, Aramaic and Achaemenid Persian presence in Egypt (Vittmann 2003).

While separate foreigners’ quarters are attested at Memphis and Elephantine, and even separate towns, such as the two ‘camps’ (stratopeda) mentioned by Herodotus (2.154) as having been given to Greek and Carian mercenaries somewhere in the North-Eastern Delta, near Pelusium, foreigners were not always segregated. By the mid 5th century BC, for example, Herodotus (2.39) mentions Greek traders in Egyptian towns, and there are a number of foreigners attested as occupying positions in Egyptian cult and administration (Vittmann 2003). All of this raises the question of how feasible it is in this period confidently to identify and distinguish between Greek/Carian and Egyptian ‘ethnic’ or indeed cultural identities, and to what extent ‘foreign’ material culture can be considered an ethnic marker or a commodity (Vittmann 2003, 2006; cf. Bresson 2000). The latter dilemma is exemplified, for example, by the relatively large amount of Greek painted pottery found in the Egyptian temple area in Tell Dafana/Daphnai, the largest such assemblage outside Naukratis, which originally led to the site’s identification as a Greek mercenary camp (Greek fine-ware pottery otherwise being quite rare in proper Egyptian contexts: Weber 2007; Weber in Schlotzhauer and Weber forthcoming). Yet now that the findspot has been clearly recognized as an Egyptian temple complex, the assemblage – which incorporates marked examples of Egyptian allusions in the Greek pottery’s iconography – must be reassessed in a new light in the context of contact between Greeks and Egyptians (Leclère 2007, 2008, 507–40; Leclère and Spencer 2014). The full potential (yet also the limitations) that material culture offers for tracing cross-cultural interaction, if carefully assessed, has only recently come to the fore in scholarship and particularly with regard to ancient Egypt, remains to be explored more widely (e.g. Smith 2003; cf. generally Jones 1998).

Of all the places in Egypt where Greeks are attested, or can be expected, to have lived, there is only one, however, where day to day contact between Greeks (and to some degree also other foreigners) and Egyptians can be traced continuously across time, and where processes of cultural contact, convergence and distinction can be examined from the 7th century BC to the 7th century AD: Naukratis, the earliest Greek settlement in Egypt.