

EGYPT AND GREECE BEFORE ALEXANDER

مصر واليونان قبل الإسكندر

*Stefan Pfeiffer*

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## EGYPT AND GREECE BEFORE ALEXANDER

### مصر واليونان قبل الإسكندر

Stefan Pfeiffer

L'Égypte et la Grèce avant Alexandre

Ägypten und die griechische Welt vor Alexander dem Großen

*Egypto-Hellenic contacts, here defined as contacts between the ancient Egyptians and the “haunebut”—the peoples of the Aegean—can be observed since the beginning of Greek civilization. Both the Minoans and the Mycenaeans had intensive trade relations with Egypt and used Egyptian prototypes to craft their own objects, adapting the original Egyptian meanings into their own cultural contexts. In Egypt, Minoan and Mycenaean influence can be traced in the craftsmanship of pottery and textiles. The relations between Greece and Egypt in the Archaic and Classical Periods were based mainly on trade, but Greek mercenaries gained special importance for Egypt during the Egypto-Persian struggles of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. While Egypt profited from these contacts, Hellenic culture seems nevertheless to have had little influence on Egypt. Greece, in contrast, profited from Egyptian goods such as papyrus and grain. Moreover, Egyptian wisdom was held in high esteem in Greece.*

إن العلاقات المصرية-اليونانية ، والتي تعرف هنا بالاتصال ما بين قدماء المصريين والإيجيين، من الملاحظ أنها موجودة منذ بداية الحضارة اليونانية. كان لكل من المايسنيين والمنثويين علاقات تجارية مكثفة مع مصر واستخدموا نماذج مصرية لصناعة مشغولاتهم ، ماقلمين المعاني المصرية إلى ثقافتهم (مقتبس من الوسائل المصرية الأصيلة إلى تكوينهم الثقافي). أما في مصر فيلاحظ وجود تأثير الحضارتين المايسنية والمنثوية بصناعة الفخار والنسيج. كانت العلاقات ما بين اليونان ومصر خلال العصور اليونانية العتيقة والكلاسيكية تتمثل بشكل أساسي في التجارة، ولكن حاز المرتزقة من الجنود اليونانيين على مكانة خاصة خلال الصراعات المصرية الفارسية بالقرن الرابع والخامس قبل الميلاد. وبالرغم من أن مصر إستفادت من هذه العلاقات، إلا أنه على ما يبدو أن الثقافة اليونانية كان لها تأثير ضعيف على مصر. على النقيض من هذا إستفادت اليونان من مصر على نواحي عدة مثل البردي والغلال، كما كان للحكمة (العلم) المصرية مكانة عالية باليونان.



When we speak of contacts between Egypt and Greece before the time of Alexander, we should divide these contacts into two historical phases: the first comprises the contacts between Egypt and the Minoans (c. 3000 – 1400 BCE) and Mycenaeans (c. 1600 – 1100 BCE) and the second, the contacts between Egypt and the Greeks/Hellenes (c. 800 – 332 BCE) from the time the Greeks entered the scene of history in the eighth

century until the conquest of Egypt by Alexander. The two phases are separated by the so-called Dark Ages between the fall of the Mycenaean civilization and the formation of the Greek *polis* culture. To speak of “Egypto-Hellenic culture” poses questions of both definition and chronology. Does “Hellenic culture” define only the culture of Archaic and Classical Greece, or can the first phase of Minoan and Mycenaean Greece also be included? Since the

Mycenaeans were clearly Greeks as we know from their Linear B script, they are subsumed under the Egyptian-Greek contacts. It is improbable, however, that the Minoans were Greeks as their Linear A script is not a Greek dialect and has not been deciphered. A discussion of their relations with Egypt is nevertheless important to our understanding of the Mycenaean contacts.

## *Phase I*

### *Minoan-Egyptian relations*

Occupying the island of Crete, the Minoans were skilled sailors who had established hegemony in the Aegean; it was therefore natural that they made contact with neighboring civilizations. With Egypt they established mainly economic relations as far as can be judged by archaeological evidence. First contacts between Crete and Egypt are attested by a fragment of a 1st or 2nd Dynasty Egyptian obsidian vase found in Crete in an EM-II-A stratum (Warren and Hankey 1989: 125, fig. 1, tab. 1a), testifying to (indirect?) trading contacts since earliest historical times.

There were three possible routes by which the Minoans (or their trade goods) could have traveled to Egypt. First, there was the direct passage over 350 miles of open sea, which does not seem very likely. The second option was to sail within sight of the shore along the Levantine coast (and probably trade with the settlements there) to (later) Pelusium. The third, and most likely, passage was to cross the Mediterranean to (later) Cyrene and then sail along the coast to Egypt (cf. Kemp and Merrillees 1980; Wachsmann 1998). The Minoans valued gold, alabaster, ivory, semiprecious stones, and ostrich eggs, but Egyptian stone vessels and scarabs were also found in Crete (Philips 2008). Some scholars maintain that Egyptian craftsmen were present on the island, based upon a statuette (14 cm high) of an Egyptian goldsmith called User that was found at Knossos (cf. Edel 1990); this single example, however, should not be considered as evidence for the migration of Egyptian craftsmen. In addition to these items of Egyptian origin, a certain adaptation of Egyptian styles in Minoan art is apparent (Panagiotopoulos 2004). The Minoan artisans used some Egyptian elements eclectically, adjusting or adapting their meaning to new contexts.

Conversely, Egypt imported Minoan pottery, metal vessels, and jewelry, and probably also wine, olive oil, cosmetics, and timber, as the archaeological record proves. We know that the first Minoan artifacts found in Egypt do not date prior to the time of Amenemhat II (1928 – 1893 BCE), because from his times Middle-Minoan pottery (so-called Kamares ware) is attested. All in all, Minoan culture had at least some influence in Egypt, as can be judged from Egyptian copies of Kamares ware (Kemp and Merrillees 1980: 39, 67ff.; cf. the Minoanizing small can from Qubbet el-Hawa near Aswan: Edel 1980: 200 - 201, 204; for Tell el-Dabaa: Höflmayer 2012). Even Minoan textiles seem to have been appreciated by the Egyptian elite, as Aegean textile patterns were copied on the walls of tombs from the reigns of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (Kantor 1947; Shaw 1970).

The pinnacle of Minoan-Egyptian relations can be dated to the beginning of Egypt's 18th Dynasty. Having already established good relations with the Hyksos, the Minoans stayed in close contact with a number of Egyptian pharaohs as well, as is proven by Minoan frescoes found in two palaces at Tell el-Dabaa/Avaris in the Nile delta (fig. 1). It was at first assumed that these royal houses were decorated during the rule of the Hyksos kings (cf. Bietak 1996; Bietak et al. 2007), but this view has been revised. It is now clear from the stratigraphical evidence that the palaces date to the Thutmosid era (Bietak 2005, but cf. the results of 14C dating by Kutschera et al. 2012). Contemporary with this evidence from Lower Egypt are scenes in seven Theban tombs of 18th-Dynasty high court officials that show Minoan legates from *Kefiu* (as Crete is called in Egyptian texts) bearing tribute (*jnw*) (Wachsmann 1987). According to some scholars, these scenes bear witness to reciprocity of political contacts rather than formal tribute to a dominant partner (cf. Zaccagnini 1987; Bleiberg 1996; Hallmann 2007). Thus the Minoan frescoes in the Lower Egypt and the pictorial evidence in tombs of almost the same period in Upper Egypt underscore rich cultural, economic, and eventually even political, contacts between Egypt and the Minoan civilization during the 18th Dynasty, just before the time of Akhenaten. This is corroborated by the fact that some Egyptian scribes seem to have known the Minoan language (cf. Kyriakides 2002).



Figure 1. Reconstructed Minoan fresco from Avaris, Egypt.

### *Mycenaean-Egyptian relations*

After the collapse of the Minoan culture, the Mycenaeans—who, like the Minoans, were located in “islands in the midst of the Great Green,” as the Egyptians called the Aegean (contra Duhoux 2003)—filled the economic gap left by Minoan traders. The earliest Egyptian attestation of the Mycenaeans dates to the 42nd year of Thutmose III’s reign (Lehmann 1991). The transition from the Minoan to the Mycenaean culture may be reflected in Theban Tomb 100 (of the high official Rekhmira, who served at the end of Thutmose III’s reign and into that of Amenhotep II), in which an Aegean tribute carrier is depicted. The wall painting is a palimpsest: Originally, the depicted person was dressed in a typical Minoan loin-cloth; later on, this garment was modified to a multicolored kilt, which is generally attributed to Mycenaean origins (cf. Strange 1980: 61 - 65). However, it is noteworthy that the interpretation of both garments as Minoan or Mycenaean, respectively, is nowadays questioned (cf. Rehak 1998).

Mycenaean cities are mentioned in the geographical lists of the House of Millions of years of Amenhotep III (Edel and Görg 2005; Cline and Stannish 2011), proving knowledge of the Aegean world in Egypt. There were intense contacts in the time of Akhenaten, as is attested by Mycenaean pottery sherds dating to his reign. Mycenaean pottery is also found in post-Amarna times (for example, at Pi-Ramesse, the capital city built by Ramesses II): like their forefathers, Egyptian potters tried to copy the form and style of Minoan pottery, now aimed to imitate Mycenaean ware, even in

faience or calcite (Egyptian alabaster) (cf. Kedler 2010).

The view that post-Amarna contacts between the two worlds were mainly based on indirect trade relations via the Levant is nowadays being questioned; there are in fact hints to an exchange of individuals and ideas (Kedler 2010). What can be said is that the Mycenaeans, like the Minoans, were highly interested in Egyptian goods. Especially in Mycenae itself (LH III A–B), many Egyptian objects bear witness to close trade relations. Moreover, Mycenae seems to have served as a “gateway community” for the import of Egyptian goods to the whole Aegean world (Cline 1995).

Summing up, it is not easy to determine the intensity of relations between the two cultures. It appears prudent to assume that in the Mycenaean Period (as well as in the Minoan) durations of close contacts alternated with those of merely sporadic contacts due to wars or natural catastrophes (cf. Cline 2010).

### *Phase II*

#### *Pre-Classical relations between Greece and Egypt*

Already in the second Greek epic, the *Odyssey*, the geographical name Αἴγυπτος is attested. The best Greek source for Egyptian-Greek relations in Pre-Classical and Classical times is Herodotus’s second book of *Histories* (Lloyd’s translation and commentary: 1975, 1976, 1988), written in the second half of the fifth century. The value of this source is debated in modern historiography (cf. Pritchett 1993 contra Fehling 1989; cf. as well the works of the “Innsbruck school,” Bichler and

Rollinger 2000, who question the reliability of Herodotus for other regions, too), but Herodotus has often been proved right by archaeological evidence or written Egyptian sources that verify his accounts. Herodotus's reports on historical events and the cultural interrelations between Egypt and Greece can be augmented by the accounts of Diodorus and Strabo, two Greek authors of the first century BCE.

It is certain that Greek mercenaries, craftsmen, and traders traveled to Egypt since the middle of the seventh century BCE (Höckmann and Vittmann 2005). At Naukratis, Kom Firin, Sais, Athribis, Bubastis, Mendes, Tell el-Maskhuta, Daphnai, and Magdolos in the Delta, and Heliopolis, Saqqara, Thebes, and Edfu in the Nile Valley, Greek presence is attested by archaeological evidence (cf. Vittmann 2003: 198). With the aid of Greek mercenaries, Psammetichus I (664 – 610 BCE) succeeded in uniting Egypt under his sole rule by defeating various Libyan chieftains. He might in fact have made a dedication of his dress to the sanctuary of Didymae near Miletus, which is reported by Herodotus (2.159; later Amasis did the same in Samos: 2.182; and in Rhodes: 3.47). Afterwards he stationed Greek soldiers in the neighborhood of the city of Bubastis and at the Bolbitic mouth of the Nile (cf. Pfeiffer 2010: 15ff.). An Egyptian statue, dedicated by a certain Pedon, who perhaps took part in Psammetichus's campaigns, was found near Priene (cf. Ampolo and Bresciani 1988). The inscription on the statue relates that Pedon was given a golden bracelet and a city by Psammetichus because of his braveness. It is quite probable that, like Pedon, most of the Greeks in Egypt came from the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, because the Demotic word for "Greeks" is *Wynn* (i.e., Ionians); in hieroglyphic Egyptian they were called *Haunebut* (cf. Quack 2007). This is supported by several goods found in Ionia that bear witness to the close trade contacts between Greeks and Egyptians. It also indicates that Greeks who had stayed in Egypt brought home Egyptian objects like the statue of Pedon, or scarabs and figurines of Egyptian deities (Haider 2004: 452 - 456; Skon-Jedele 1994; Hölbl 1981).

In the time of the Egyptian expansion under Necho (610 – 595 BCE), Greek soldiers in the army of the pharaoh reached, as archaeological finds

prove, Carchemish at the Euphrates (cf. Vittmann 2003: 199ff.). The presence of Greek mercenaries in the army of Psammetichus II is attested by some graffiti at Abu Simbel (cf. Hansen 1984; Hauben 2001; Haider 2001), inscribed during a Nubian campaign of the pharaoh (Sauneron and Yoyotte 1952; Kahn 2007). The Greeks who made a career in Egypt seem to have adapted Egyptian customs to a high degree as is evidenced by their funerals (if they can be traced at all), which were of Egyptian style (cf. Grallert 2001; Vittmann 2003: 203, 227 - 229). Like members of the Egyptian elite, some Greeks were buried near the Old Kingdom pyramids at Saqqara, accompanied by shabtis (cf. Haider 2004: 450).

Amasis (570 – 526 BCE) reorganized Greek presence in Egypt. According to Herodotus, he settled Greeks in the vicinity of Memphis (2.154), where they were known as the Hellenomemphites, and at Naukratis (2.178ff.), where their presence had already been attested since the seventh century BCE (Yoyotte 1992; Möller 2000, 2005; Höckmann and Kreikenbom 2001; Boardman 1980: 121; Bowden 1996). In later Greek tradition the city was a Milesian colony, but in fact it was a port-of-trade for many Greek cities—a Greek *emporion* rather than a *polis*, according to Greek constitutional understanding (Bresson 1980). The cities that participated in the *emporion* were, in addition to Miletus, Samos and Aegina, which had also founded their own local sanctuaries (Schlotzhauer 2006). Chios, Klazomenai, Teos, and Phocaea from the Ionian coast, Rhodes, Halicarnassus, Knidos, and Phaselis from Dorian Asia Minor, and the city of Mytilene from Lesbos in contrast had their religious focus at a temple precinct called Hellenion (Höckmann and Möller 2006; cf. Ehrhardt et al. 2008). It is assumed that this unique Greek *emporion* in Egypt formed a kind of buffer between two different economical systems: the redistributive system of Egypt and the free-trade system of the Greeks (Möller 2000; see also, skeptically: Pfeiffer 2010: 17). The new underwater discoveries at Thonis-Heracleion on the coast prove that the main entrance to Egypt for Greek traders was the Canopic branch of the Nile (Goddio et al. 2008; Goddio 2007), the same branch that passes the Saite nome and the *emporion* Naukratis situated within it.

To sum up, it can be concluded that Greeks of the Pre-Classical Period had gained substantial knowledge about Egypt, as intensive trading contacts seem very likely. Furthermore, Egyptian influence can be noticed in Greek art in the adaptation by Greek sculptors and builders of Egyptian statuary forms—sometimes they even used the Egyptian royal cubit (Kyrieleis 1996; Höckmann 2005). Some scholars suggest that the Greek peripteral temple actually had its roots in Egypt (Martini 1986; cf. the discussions in Bietak, ed. 2001). In contrast to the widespread presence of Egyptian material culture in Greece, Egyptians do not seem to have adopted Greek cultural elements: Greek mercenaries, craftsmen, and traders were welcome and needed, but the impact of Greek culture in Egypt cannot be traced.

### *Greece and Egypt in Classical times*

Since 526 BCE (not 525 BCE; cf. now Quack 2011) Egypt was a satrapy of the Persian empire. Due to this fact, Egyptian soldiers surely participated in the Persian wars against Greece (490 and 480 BCE). According to Herodotus, the Egyptian soldiers were the bravest in the sea-battle at Salamis (8.17). It is possible that Egyptian merchants were active in Greece since Classical times, as a cult to Isis is known to have existed in Athens dating back to the mid-fourth century (Dow 1937). During the fifth and fourth centuries there were Egyptian rebellions against Persian rule (Rottpeter 2007; Ruzicka 2012). Athens sent help to support the revolts of Inaros and Amyrtaios in the middle of the fifth century BCE (463 – 449/448 BCE; cf. Thucydides 1.104. 110; Diodorus 11.71. 74); so did Sparta in the fourth century BCE (cf. Plutarchus, Agesilaus 36-40). Furthermore, there seem to have been intensive economic contacts between Greece and Egypt in Classical times. Greek *polis*-states were interested in grain and papyri, while Egypt needed mercenaries for warfare and profited from imported timber and silver.

The position of Naukratis as a major port-of-trade in Egypt was probably taken over by Thonis-Heracleion in Persian times. We learn this from the so-called Naukratis Stela (also now misleadingly called “the Stela of Sais”) found at Naukratis (Lichtheim 1976: 139 - 146). A second copy of the stela was found during the underwater excavations

on the coast of Abuqir (Yoyotte 2001; von Bomhard 2012). Both stelae were erected in the first year of Nectanebo I (380 – 363 BCE) and offer almost identical texts. Only the last two columns (13 and 14) differ. The Naukratis Stela reads: “Let these things be recorded on this stela, placed in Naukratis on the bank of the Anu.” The one from Abuqir reports: “Let these things be recorded on this stela, placed at the mouth of the sea of the Greeks in the city that is named Thonis from Sais.” Both stelae state that all ships coming to Egypt had to levy duty to the goddess Neith of Sais and that the taxes had to be paid directly at Henu (= Heracleion). Thus, in the economic relations between Greece and Egypt, Heracleion played a key role, which it did not lose until Alexander founded Alexandria. In Naukratis, duty had now to be paid only on goods that Greek craftsmen produced there. Therefore it seems clear that Naukratis was an important center of Greek production in Egypt. However, no longer having the port-of-trade status, Naukratis appears to have achieved the political status of a *polis* during the last period of Egyptian independence (Bresson 2005).

In contrast to these intensive contacts, the archaeological documentation of Greek-Egyptian relations in Classical times (Goddio et al. 2008; Grataloup 2010), with the exception of findings at Naukratis and Heracleion, is relatively meager. It might only be supposed that Bubastis played some role because eventually a Doric temple was erected there in the fifth or fourth century BCE (Tietze 2003). The best example of Greek cultural influence might be the tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel (fig. 2; Lefebvre 1923 – 1924; Cherpion et al. 2007), which may be dated to the time immediately before Alexander the Great conquered Egypt: the decoration of the *pronaos* shows scenes that are stylistically not typically Egyptian but a mixture of Greek, Egyptian, and Persian traditions (Baines 2004; Klose *fc.*). From Herodotus we hear furthermore of certain cultural contacts and even of a feast in Chemmis, which he presents as a combination of Greek and Egyptian rituals. Some scholars accept Herodotus’s description at face value (Lloyd 1969), and as such it would indeed make a fascinating cross-cultural event, but the story should probably be treated with caution.

In addition to the extensive knowledge of Egypt the Greeks had acquired through their intensive

trading contacts and provision of soldiers for the Egyptian army, Greek intellectual elites had great interest in Egyptian culture and admired its antiquity and wisdom (Assmann 2000). The development of orphism, for example, was influenced by Egyptian thoughts on the afterlife (Merkelbach 1999). For Herodotus, Egypt was *mundus inversus*, a “world upside down,” yet at the same time had the most

pious inhabitants (2.37). In his perception Egypt was, for Greece, the “founding culture” (reflected, for example, in the names of gods, feasts, and religious processions.; cf. 2.4, 50, 58, and 82; Pfeiffer 2005).



Figure 2. Harvest scene in the *pronaos* of the tomb of Petosiris, Tuna el-Gebel, Egypt.

### *Bibliographic Notes*

A good overview of the relations between Egypt and the Aegean until the seventh century BCE is provided by Helck (1995). The trade relations between Greece and Egypt are investigated by Cline (1994). A valuable source of information on all manner of contact between the Greek world and Egypt in the first millennium is Vittmann (2003). On Naukratis see Möller (2000) and Bresson (2005); on Thonis-Heracleion see Goddio (2007). On the intellectual perception of Egypt in Classical times see Assmann (2000).

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Figure 2. Harvest scene in the *pronaos* of the tomb of Petosiris, Tuna el-Gebel, Egypt. Photograph by Roland Unger. Licensed under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0.