

1 | Laying the foundations for Roman Egypt

1.1 The pharaonic background and the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 BC)

As Ruler of the Two Lands, Egypt's pharaoh wore the double *pschent* crown: the red crown of Lower Egypt, in the north, surrounding the white crown of Upper Egypt, in the south. Personified in the ruler, this union remained a central ideal throughout Egyptian history. The unity of Upper and Lower Egypt, also symbolized in the knot tied between papyrus and reed, was long seen as key to Egypt's success. (Figure 1.1.1) In practice, however, the country was diverse in many ways, with an ongoing struggle between the central ideologies of unity and uniformity and the realities on the ground. Egypt was a self-consciously distinctive culture that also constantly received and absorbed immigrants from many countries into its society.

After the strong centralized monarchy of the Ramessids in the late second millennium BC (Dynasties 19–20), with its grandiose monuments and stable rule, the four hundred years of the Third Intermediate Period (Dynasties 21–25) saw the unifying knot become loose and at times untied, with different rulers based in different areas for much of the period. Many of these leaders originated from beyond Egypt's heartland of the Delta and the valley. Libyan rulers came into the Delta from the west, while others from the land of Kush (Nubia; what is now southern Egypt and northern Sudan) established themselves in the south. Egypt was also invaded in the seventh century BC by Assyrians from the east in a struggle to control the Levant that would often be replayed in later times.

Egypt's permeable western border with Libya is a desert, as hard to control then as now. The penetration of migrant groups into the Delta had started early, and, in a decentralized and fragmented country, Libyans were a presence to be reckoned with. Some were already settled as captives in the late New Kingdom by Rameses III, and others later served as Egyptian troops. In most respects, these Libyans became strongly



Figure 1.1.1 The Union of Upper and Lower Egypt, on the great temple of Rameses II (Dynasty 19) at Abu Simbel

The Union of Upper and Lower Egypt is signified in the knot held firm by Hapy, god of the Nile, in this image from the great temple of Rameses II (Dynasty 19) at Abu Simbel. On the left Hapy stands for Upper Egypt, land of the papyrus, and on the right for Lower Egypt, land of the reed, as shown in both his headdress and at his feet.

Egyptianized. The pharaoh Shoshenq I from Boubastis (945–924 BC, Dynasty 22), known as Great Chief of the Meshwesh (a Libyan tribe), was successful in extending his power beyond the Delta. He installed his son in Thebes (Luxor) and briefly controlled the whole of Egypt. This unity did not last. In Dynasty 23 (818–715 BC), Libyan kings again ruled from various centers, including Herakleopolis (Ihnasya el-Medina). In the Delta, Sais (Sa el-Hagar) later became the center of influence, and in Upper Egypt the main Theban priesthood of Amun-Ra remained important as a series of different rulers controlled the south.

Around the mid-eighth century BC, Thebes came under the control of a new line of Nubian pharaohs (Dynasty 25). A royal princess named Amenirdis was appointed to the central priesthood as God's Wife of Amun – an appointment that was also political, as is clear from later choices for this post. When, under growing pressure from rival powers, the Nubian ruler Piy moved north to subdue Hermopolis (Ashmunein), Memphis (Mit Rahineh), and finally the Delta, the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt was once again established, now under a dynasty of black

pharaohs from the south. Shortly thereafter, Memphis was recognized as the new capital of Egypt. Thebes, however, continued to be important as the main city of Upper Egypt, key to control of the south. Construction in the great Theban temple of Amun-Ra is evidence of the concerns and success of these strongly Egyptianized Nubian pharaohs. But problems now came from the east.

Egypt had lost her external possessions along the Levantine coast at the end of the New Kingdom. In 720 BC Assyrian forces defeated the Egyptians at Raphia, located in what is now the Gaza strip. Some fifty years later, under pharaoh Taharqa (690–664 BC, Dynasty 25), conflict again surfaced between these two powers. The Assyrians twice invaded Egypt, reaching Memphis and even Thebes on the second occasion, which they sacked. The Assyrians imposed a tribute, and set up vassal administrators in Delta towns. One of these was Psammetichos (Psamtek), who after a time asserted his independence from the Assyrians, ejected rival chiefs from the Delta, and established himself as ruler of a united and independent Egypt, founding the Saite dynasty (Dynasty 26). Once again the knot was tied.

Bibliography

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1.2 Rebuilding a centralized state: Saite rule

With their capital now based at Sais in the Delta, the pharaohs of Dynasty 26 (664–525 BC) presided internally over a fairly successful and economically prosperous period. By the ninth year of his reign, Psammetichos I had taken Thebes and, in a move to reinforce control of the south, like the Nubian pharaohs before him he installed his daughter Nitocris as God's Wife of Amun, the highest priestly position in Thebes in this period, one that was later also held by the daughter of Psammetichos II (595–589 BC).

As always, Egypt's wealth lay in her agriculture, which in turn depended on the annual flood of the Nile (**Preface** and **1.13**). Egypt's rich harvests were the envy of the ancient world. Under the Saites, a strong financial structure was developed to exploit this agricultural wealth, with a financial official known as a *senti* in overall control. At the same time, overseas trade expanded, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, along the coast of Phoenicia and northward into the Aegean. Even more than in earlier

periods, Egypt welcomed traders who sailed there, and many stayed. With this greater interest in the sea, Egypt for the first time developed a significant navy.

The new regime embarked on an ambitious temple-building program. Starting under Psammetichos I, construction significantly increased, especially in Sais and the Delta but also in major cult centers along the Nile and in the western oases. In this way, pharaoh honored the gods of Egypt, in whose name he ruled and on whose support and protection he relied. But not all construction was of temples. At Memphis, the great palace-fort of pharaoh Apries (589–570 BC), with its huge fortified platform and surrounding ditch, still presents a lasting image of strength. The project to build a canal between the Red Sea gulf and the Nile, initiated under Necho II (610–595 BC) and finally completed three centuries later under Ptolemy II, is a measure of the confidence and stability enjoyed in this period, when Upper and Lower Egypt were united and the country turned its interest seaward.

Keeping control also required strong armies. In his initial campaigns to establish himself, Psammetichos I had employed foreign troops from Asia Minor. Some left a record. Pedon son of Amphinneus, from Caria (now southern Turkey), who fought for pharaoh, was rewarded with the gift of a city and a golden bangle, which he recorded on an Egyptian statue that he dedicated back home (Figure 1.2.1). The son of Greek immigrants Alexikles and Zenodote, in contrast, remained in Egypt. His Egyptian name *Wahibre-em-akhet* (“king Apries is in the horizon”) was probably acquired when he entered court circles. After an impressive career in the administration, Wahibre-em-akhet was buried at Saqqara (the great cemetery area of Memphis) in an Egyptian-style sarcophagus with a full set of traditional funeral equipment (Vittmann 2003: Taf. 21–22a; Villing 2018). Most foreign troops were settled in the Delta to protect Egypt’s eastern border against the Assyrians, and later, after the fall of the Assyrian empire, against the Babylonians and Persians. In the south, a military garrison was established at Elephantine, at the first cataract of the Nile. To the west, conflict continued intermittently. Under pharaoh Apries, Egypt supported the Libyan king against the Greek city of Cyrene. Amasis, the general sent by Apries to quell unrest among his defeated Egyptian troops, instead ousted his own ruler and established himself on the throne. During Amasis’ long reign (570–526 BC) the country continued to prosper both at home and abroad. Shortly after Amasis’ death, the Persian king Cambyses invaded Egypt, putting an end to the Saite period.

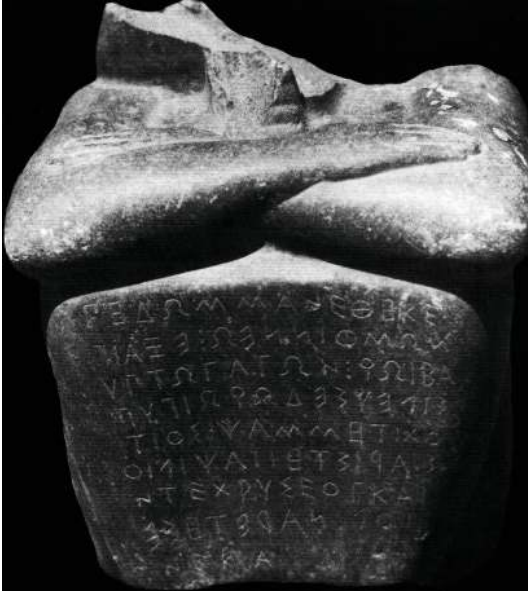


Figure 1.2.1 Block statue of Pedon, found in Priene

This Egyptian “block statue” of Pedon son of Amphinneus, found in Priene, carries a sixth-century Greek inscription on its front surface. Dedicated by Pedon, who had brought it from Egypt, it records gifts granted him by the Egyptian king Psammetichos II as a reward of valor: a golden bracelet and a city. The statue (without its head) measures 21 x 17 x 17 cm (8¼ x 6¾ x 6¾ in) and is now in the Denizli-Hierapolis Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 3162.

Bibliography

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1.3 Two Persian occupations and sixty years of independence

In the course of the next two centuries, Egypt was occupied by the Persians for two periods, one long (525–404 BC) and one short (343–332 BC). As was true later under the Romans, Egypt’s ruler was now an absentee pharaoh who, supported by garrisons at the borders, governed through a provincial governor, based at Memphis. The Persians introduced Aramaic – the most widely used language of the Near East – as the language of rule, though Egyptian continued in use in local administration, economic life, and elsewhere.

Our knowledge of the first Persian invasion and occupation comes from a variety of sources. The Greek historian Herodotus from Halicarnassus, who visited Egypt under Persian rule, wrote at length on Egyptian geography, history, religion, and customs in books 2 and 3 of his *History*. Archaeology is, as always, an important source of information. For example, not only do we find the inscriptions of the Persian kings on temple walls, but Persian efforts to expand cultivated land in the Kharga oasis are revealed by the buildings and irrigation systems excavated there. Aramaic papyri provide details of the lives and practices of the new immigrants, especially the mainly Judaeans stationed in Elephantine and Syene (Aswan) who, settled with their families, protected the southern border (*Pap.Eleph.Engl.*). Relations with local Egyptians are further illuminated by contracts, letters, and other documents written in demotic, the cursive Egyptian script developed under the Saïtes. Hieroglyphic texts record the careers of several prominent individuals. For instance, the inscription on the green basalt statue of Udjahorresnet (Figure 1.3.1) records his career (Kuhrt 2007: 117–122). He first served as a naval officer under the last two Saïte pharaohs; surviving the end of that dynasty, he was taken to the court of Cambyses in Persia (modern Iran). There he composed an Egyptian titulary (a set of royal titles to be inscribed in hieroglyphs, the traditional sacred script of Egypt) for the Persian king as the new ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt. In recognition of his services, Cambyses appointed him priest of the goddess Neith and chief physician, and Udjahorresnet exploited his influence at court to bring about the reconstruction, with generous endowments, of the great temple of Neith at Sais. Eventually, the inscription records, he was sent back to Egypt by Cambyses' successor Darius I in order to revive the House of Life at Sais (the temple library and medical school). The collaboration of such men was key to how the Persians ruled. After their initial conquest, the new rulers, while ruling from afar, opted to act as pharaohs should, offering respect and support for the temples and gods of Egypt.

The wealth of Egypt was thus now exploited by a foreign power. According to Herodotus (3.91.2–3), a tribute of 700 talents was imposed – more than classical Athens originally collected from its entire confederacy in the fifth century BC. Garrisons were to be supported locally; the profits of the fisheries of Lake Moeris in the Fayyum went to the great king, with salt and Nile water for his table; and the town of Anthylla in the northern Delta provided shoes, girdles, and needles for the Persian queen. As elsewhere in the Persian empire, the building and upkeep of roads supported a well-regulated postal system. Furthermore, large Egyptian estates were granted to

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Figure 1.3.1 Statue of Udjahorresnet from Sais

Statue made of green basalt of the chief physician Udjahorresnet from Sais. His life and career under Egypt's Persian rulers Cambyses and Darius I are recorded in the hieroglyphic inscription that covers its surface. Udjahorresnet, 58 cm (23 in) high without his head, is shown holding a small shrine that contains a figure of the god Osiris.

high-ranking Persians, such as the fifth century BC satrap (governor) Arshama, whose Aramaic correspondence with his local steward Nakhtihor survives, written on skins – the standard writing material of the Persian empire (Hdt. 5.58.3). Later rulers also adopted the practice of rewarding loyalty with significant land grants, as in the case of Ptolemaic gift-estates (1.12). In the western oases, the Persians introduced a new technology for irrigation. Excavated tunnels (or *qanats*) used the natural slope of the land to bring water in over long distances from underground reservoirs. Agriculture flourished and, as before, its produce was taxed. The Persian “artaba” was introduced to Egypt as the measure for grain, and

Persian artistic forms, such as metalwork bowls, were adopted. Egypt's active Greek and Levantine trade is visible both in an Aramaic record of customs dues (475 BC; Kuhrt 2007: 681–703) and in the archaeological record – for example, in the finds from the recent underwater excavations at Thonis-Herakleion at the Canopic mouth of the Nile (1.4). Below the level of satrap, the administration mainly continued as before, with local officials in post.

As ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt, Darius I effectively put down an initial uprising. He boasted of further work on the Red Sea canal and, as part of an empire-wide project, supported the codification of Egyptian laws in the *Demotic Law Code* (Mattha and Hughes 1975). His fifth-century successors faced more severe trouble, both in Egypt and closer to home. Under Artaxerxes I, a Libyan prince named Inaros, supported by Athens, led a rebellion, centered in the Delta and Memphis, that was quelled only after several years, in 454 BC. From Sais, Inaros' associate Amyrtaios continued the struggle in the Delta, and yet a further uprising took place under Darius II. The Persians were losing control. In 404 BC, distracted by dynastic conflict on the death of Darius II and confronted with a new rebellion under Amyrtaios II, Persia finally abandoned Egypt.

The sixty years of Egyptian independence running from 404 BC to 343 BC (Dynasties 28–30) were marked by conflicting claims to rule and disputes between rival factions. Persia loomed as a constant threat. Egyptian rulers further built up naval strength in the Eastern Mediterranean and increasingly used their wealth to employ foreign troops to assist local forces.

Of these latest native pharaohs, Hakoris ruled the longest (393–380 BC). A far-reaching program of temple-building under him left still visible traces on the ground, and cults received their customary royal support. Egypt's military position improved considerably. Starting under Nektanebo I (380–362 BC) in Dynasty 30, impressive fortifications were built along the coast and in the northeast Delta. Strong protective walls of mud brick are a widespread feature of the period, and may still be seen, for instance, at Elkab in the south. A further striking feature of this time is the growing popularity of animal cults. Sacred animals and birds were bred for mummification, dedicated by pilgrims, and buried in vaults along the desert edge. Providing a steady business for their priests, these typically Egyptian cults may have strengthened a sense of Egyptian identity in the context of a widening world. So, probably, did the increasing use of the Egyptian demotic script with its rich literature.

After capturing Phoenicia and Cyprus, King Artaxerxes III took Egypt back into Persian control (343 BC). The resulting shortage of papyrus in the market, noted by the Athenian philosopher Speusippus, is a measure of how

deeply Egypt was involved in the Aegean world and how any interruption of Egyptian trade could have far-reaching consequences. Pharaoh Nektanebo II fled to Nubia, from where, according to the far later *Alexander Romance*, he supposedly visited Macedon and fathered Alexander the Great with the Macedonian queen Olympias thanks to a magical disguise.

Any new regime needs to establish legitimacy, but the new Persian rulers who controlled Egypt from 343 to 332 BC had little time for this. Relying on their satraps, and with local magnates to represent them on the ground (men like Somtutefnakht or Petosiris of Hermopolis, whose statues or tombs have survived), these absentee rulers were less concerned than their predecessors to present themselves in Egyptian guise. Greek sources are regularly hostile to the Persians, while demotic papyri suggest that much in Egypt continued undisturbed.

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1.4 Greeks in Egypt before Alexander

When Alexander invaded Egypt in 332 BC, he found a significant Greek presence there, dating back to at least the seventh century. Greeks had come to Egypt primarily as troops, traders, and tourists. Ionian and Carian troops from Asia Minor were employed by Psammetichos I to establish his rule in the seventh century BC (1.2). Settled in camps in the Delta, they continued to protect the borders. Amasis later transferred these foreign fighters to Memphis, where, as Hellenomemphites (“Greek Memphites”) and Caromemphites (“Carian Memphites”), they became well integrated in the city. Furthermore, they provided a ready source of information on their adopted homeland for Greek visitors such as Herodotus (cf. 1.3) and later settlers.

In the fourth century BC, the Greek troops who became involved in disputes between Egyptian kings served under their own experienced generals. The Athenian Chabrias secured the throne for Nektanebo I and later headed his successor Tachos’ navy. Tachos also hired a Spartan king, Agesilaos, and his troops. When Agesilaos switched sides in a further family struggle for power, Nektanebo II prevailed with his support. Agesilaos departed the country a wealthy man but, perishing en route home, arrived as a corpse embalmed in honey.

As Egypt turned toward the Mediterranean, immigrant traders played an increasingly significant role in economic development. The Delta city of Naukratis (Kom Gi'eif, el-Nibeira, el-Niqrash) on the Canopic branch of the Nile was designated for settlement by Amasis sometime in the mid-sixth century BC, with land and cult centers for visiting traders. The main quarter of Naukratis was the Hellenion, founded by prominent cities from Ionian and Dorian Asia Minor, along with Mytilene on Lesbos. These founder cities provided officials to control trading matters in a community where many Egyptians also resided. Other Greek communities – Aegina, Samos, and Miletos – had their own cult centers in Naukratis. Thonis-Herakleion at the mouth of the Canopic branch of the Nile became a major port for Mediterranean commerce, as recent underwater excavations have shown, and with Naukratis upstream the Canopic branch dominated Mediterranean trade long before the foundation of Alexandria (Iskanderiya) in the same region.

The Delta region flourished and grew, as is clear from excavations and inscriptions. Twin hieroglyphic decrees, dated to year 1 of Nektanebo I (380 BC), record his grant of one-tenth of the royal revenue on imports through Thonis-Herakleion – gold, silver, timber, and wooden objects are specified – and on goods produced in Naukratis – such as perfume, faience, scarabs, and other amulets – to support the nearby temple of Neith at Sais (Masson-Berghoff and Villing 2016: 51; Lichtheim 1980: 86–89). Herodotus (2.175) describes the magnificent adornment of this temple by Amasis; he identified the goddess to whom it was dedicated with the Greek Athena. Naukratite production and trade joined agriculture as a source of wealth for the country. Egypt's first indigenous coinage, struck in imitation of Athenian tetradrachms, introduced a new method of facilitating payment for troops and possibly trade.

Not to be neglected are the Greek tourists who had visited Egypt over the centuries – according to Herodotus, this was a land of wisdom and marvels. In his poetry the Athenian statesman Solon recorded his presence in the Canopic region c. 600 BC. From the mid-fifth century a fine bronze statuette of an Apis bull from Memphis bears the name of its Greek dedicant Sokydes (Figure 1.4.1). These visitors were only two of many.

Bibliography

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