

CASA ESSAY

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THE PROFESSIONAL GREEK MERCENARY IN SAITE EGYPT

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Introduction

The Greek soldiers who came to fight and settle in Egypt under the Saitic kings served up until the fall of Egypt to the Persians in 525 BCE. The last kings to rule Egypt prior to the Persian invasion, Amasis II (570–525 BCE) and Psamtik III (525 BCE), still relied on Greek mercenaries introduced into Egypt by the first Saitic king, Psamtik I (664–610 BCE). Clearly, Greek mercenaries played a significant part in the military exploits of the 26th Dynasty, and consequently either directly or indirectly helped shape the social and political landscape of Egypt during this dynasty's rule. The inscription carved by one of these mercenaries (included here as appendix A) is just one example of the primary archaeological evidence revealing the long and complex relationship that existed between Greeks and Egyptians.

The 'international' Greek soldier of the archaic age is unfortunately little understood and under-researched. Coupled with this, the later part of Egyptian history, and particularly the period of the dynasties that span the 7th and 6th centuries, is often glossed over in favour of periods such as the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Researching and understanding these important interactions between the civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean allow for a deeper and more holistic understanding of the ancient world. In order to demonstrate this complex relationship, this essay will focus on one facet of the relationship in the field of ancient warfare. The following extract will serve as a springboard to begin my inquiry into the Greeks who lived and fought in Egypt during the Saite period:

'Hoplite battles were themselves singular and brief. They were also not frequent before the fifth century'. By Hanson's own tally of hoplite warfare in the seventh and sixth centuries, 'there were not more than a dozen important campaigns in the historical record involving the major Greek city-states in more than two hundred years'. This observation fits well with Hornblower's claim that in Greek literature and art 'the prominence of war is disproportionate to its frequency and significance in practice'. Yet such sporadic warfare would seem unlikely to stimulate or sustain any cultural

tradition, especially a highly specialized military tradition. If the hoplite tradition was not fostered through regular combat between Greek city-states, then we must look elsewhere for the conflicts that offered long-term and consistent training in the arts of war. Just such conflicts existed outside the Greek homeland, in the wider Mediterranean world. Away from the polis, a more extensive and detailed historical record bears witness to the second strand of early hoplite warfare: campaigns undertaken by Greek soldiers of fortune. These men fought not on the fields of Greece but overseas, as pirates, raiders, mercenaries, bodyguards, land-grabbers, and generals for hire. Archilochus of Paros presents their philosophy, which is utterly antithetical both to the 'good death' advocated by Tyrtæus and to the ritualized combat described by Herodotus (Hale 2015:178–179).

Hale and others challenge the view that Greek warfare developed exclusively on mainland Greece. They are not of the view that it emerged solely as a result of the fiercely independent warring city-states, continuously fighting each other in pitched, controlled hoplite battles. Nor are they convinced that this resulted in the highly trained heavy infantry capable of defeating enemies such as the Persians during the classical age,¹ and of being the tool with which Alexander III of Greek Macedon² was able to conquer much of central Asia.

In addition to belonging to and fighting for a city-state, many Greeks hired out their services to foreign powers. This led to Greeks finding themselves employed by the Egyptians,³ Assyrians⁴ and Persians⁵ as mercenaries over the course of their histories. The Greek mercenary soldier is normally thought of as a

¹ For a detailed study on the significance of these developments, see Green 1998.

² The hoplite was slightly altered by the innovations of Phillip II, one example being the development of the *sarissa*. It should be noted that by this time cavalry featured heavily in the armies of Alexander during his campaigns in Asia, and often cavalry was the deciding factor in Alexander's pitched battles, though this was in conjunction with highly trained heavy infantry. Previously, Greek city-states tended to focus only on hoplite warfare, with auxiliary units playing a lesser role than during the Hellenistic period. Despite a wide array of new units being used in Hellenistic armies, the core of the army continued to be made up of heavy infantry in phalanx formations. This lasted till the rise of the Roman legions. For an in-depth discussion of Greek Macedonian military developments, see Markle 1977.

³ As primary source material later in this essay will show, Greeks campaigned under the Egyptians as far south as Nubia and Ethiopia, and were stationed at forts throughout Egypt and Egyptian controlled lands in the Levant.

⁴ For a discussion on Greeks in service of the Assyrians and others, see Luraghi 2006, Rodan 2015 and Brown 1984.

⁵ For an in-depth treatment of the Greek mercenaries who served in Persia under Cyrus II, see English 2012.

later development, but, as I hope to demonstrate, this development began much earlier during the archaic age. Some scholars even hold to earlier dates, namely that this phenomenon had begun to occur in the Ancient Near East around the Bronze age collapse of 1200 BCE, and that the Philistines who settled in the Levant possibly had Aegean origins.⁶

With the above extract in mind, this essay will focus on a specific period in Greco-Egyptian relations in order to trace the development of the international ancient Greek soldier during the archaic period of Greek history.⁷ The example used for this research will be the employment of Greek mercenary forces by the Egyptians during the 26th Dynasty (664–525 BCE). Two central questions will drive the investigation:

- Why and how did these Greek mercenaries come to be hired?
- How successfully were these forces employed by the Egyptians in their military exploits during the 26th Dynasty?

First, the surviving primary evidence for the presence of these Greeks in Egypt will be discussed, including documentary evidence such as inscriptions, and literary evidence that alludes to, or directly mentions Greeks serving in Egypt as mercenaries. Secondly, in order to provide context as to why the Greek mercenary was effective against the armies of the Ancient Near East, a brief overview of the ancient Greek soldier will be given in terms of tactics and style of warfare. Once we have established why Greek soldiers were being hired as mercenaries, an overview of the Saite period in Egypt will be given, focusing on notable events and outcomes of Egyptian kings hiring Greek mercenaries.

Overview of sources

Appendix A is an inscription carved by one of the Greek soldiers in the employ of King Psammetichos II (as he was known to the Greeks), third king of the Saitic Dynasty.⁸ As Dillon discusses, many of the numerous inscriptions at Abu Simbel

⁶ Niemeier 2001:11–13. See also Knapp 1992 for a detailed discussion on the movement of peoples during the late bronze age in the eastern Mediterranean. Interactions with the civilisations and cultures of the Ancient Near East possibly had significant effects on the development of Greek warfare. See Raaflaub 2015 for a discussion of these influences on Greek military developments in terms of equipment and tactics.

⁷ Following Lavelle 2020:15, I have taken the archaic age to begin around 700 and ending roughly by 480 BCE, the classical age making up the remainder of the 5th century.

⁸ Psamtik II, who reigned between 594 and 589 BCE. These soldiers were on their way to campaign in Ethiopia, Dillon 1997:128.

include ethnicity while others do not.⁹ According to Jeffrey,¹⁰ it is possible that at least some of those who do not mention their ethnicity were Egyptian-born Greeks, sons of previously settled mercenaries, and thus were naturalised by the time of this campaign. The name of the soldier who carved this inscription is Psammetichos, which is indicative of how the veterans who had previously fought for Psamtik I were settled in Egypt by him.¹¹ The name of the king was given to this specific soldier by his mercenary father, who was following the custom of name adoption. An interesting development noted by Dillon is how the sons of these mercenaries continued to serve.¹²

Concerning literary evidence, the main source for archaic Greeks in Egypt is Herodotus.¹³ The accounts of his travels in Egypt continue to inform researchers on the presence of Greeks in Egypt, even if his accounts might not always be very accurate.¹⁴ Herodotus states that Greek knowledge of Egypt prior to the reign of Psamtik I is less known, but became more reliable following the rule of Psamtik I.¹⁵ Cook (1937) already provided an in-depth discussion of the different sites where these mercenary soldiers were possibly stationed, focusing on developments during the rule of Amasis II. The exact location of these sites, especially the initial site of their stationing at Stratopeda, is disputed. Greek pottery shards have been found at other sites across Egypt, with researchers having identified some of these as imported and others as having been manufactured in Egypt. This possibly confirms Greek settlements at multiple sites, even if relatively small in comparison to others such as Naucratis.¹⁶

Psammetichos I initially settled mercenaries at Stratopeda,¹⁷ sometimes thought to be Tell Defenneh or Daphnae, though Cook disputes that either Tell Defenneh or Daphnae were the site of Stratopeda; and to further complicate matters Daphnae and Tell Defenneh could be the same site.¹⁸ These mercenaries were later moved from their original settlements due to a change in local Egyptian

⁹ Dillon 1997. The inscriptions from Abu Simbel are collected in Meiggs & Lewis 1969.

¹⁰ Cited in Dillon 1997:128.

¹¹ Psamtik I, first king of the 26th Dynasty, who ruled from 664–610 BCE.

¹² Dillon 1997:128–129.

¹³ According to Cook 1937:231, 236, the passages in Herodotus which are most important concerning the settling of archaic Greeks in Egypt are *Hist.* 2.30, 154, 178, 179. These are not very helpful in accurately identifying the exact location of these sites, with the exception of Naucratis.

¹⁴ Cook 1937:235.

¹⁵ Hdt. 2.153–154.

¹⁶ See appendix in Cook 1937 for a list of these sites.

¹⁷ Rodan 2015:73 uses the term *stratopeda* to mean general military camps, Cook treats this as a place.

¹⁸ Cook 1937:227, 234–236.

sentiment towards them. They had come to be viewed as a threat following the rule of Apries, as he had used foreign mercenaries against the local Egyptian soldiery to enhance his own power base. In order to placate the Egyptians, Amasis relocated foreign troops in an effort to contain them and appease public sentiment, while at the same time preparing for conflict with the Persians.¹⁹ Amasis ordered these mercenaries to be moved to Memphis and Naucratis. Large amounts of Greek pottery shards have been discovered at Naucratis which is indicative of a large Greek community inhabiting the site during that period. The settlement subsequently grew into the most important Greek outpost in Egypt, which in turn attracted many Greek merchants, turning it into an important centre for trade.²⁰ This also corresponds with Herodotus' account of Naucratis.²¹ Smaller amounts of pottery have been found at the site of Tell Defenneh, thought to have been a fort, but still important as it suggests the presence of Greeks.

Waldbaum discusses the wide distribution of pre-Hellenistic Greek pottery found along the coasts of the Levant and the Nile delta. Pottery of this kind has not been uniformly treated in Ancient Near Eastern scholarship, and continues to be a debated topic as to the degree and scope of Greek settlements in the archaic age.²² Waldbaum treats the subject of the presence of Greeks mainly in the Levant, focusing on pottery shards as the most readily available evidence for trading or mercenary activity, though nothing substantial in terms of surviving architecture, inscriptions or tombs have been found that definitively indicate a large and permanent settlement of Greeks in this area during the archaic age.²³ It would seem Naucratis and the other minor sites in Egypt such as Tell Defenneh, coupled with Herodotus' accounts, serve as the most definitive physical and literary evidence of Greeks in Egypt and the Ancient Near East as a whole during the archaic age. Other inscriptions, reliefs and pottery that have been found relating to the presence of Greeks and, more specifically, evidence of Greek merchant or mercenary settlements in the Ancient Near East, continues to be debated among researchers.²⁴

¹⁹ Amasis II (570–526), successor of Apries and fifth king of the 26th Dynasty, see Cook 1937:236.

²⁰ Cook 1937:235.

²¹ Hdt. 2.178–179, trans. Purvis.

²² Waldbaum 1997:1–2.

²³ Waldbaum 1997:8–11.

²⁴ Luraghi 2006 provides a detailed analysis of Greek mercenaries across the Ancient Near East. He surveys the evidence that exists for this widespread phenomenon, but in terms of permanent settlements as a result of these interactions, Egypt seems to be the most conclusive.

The Greek hoplite

The city-states of ancient Greece developed and perfected a style of warfare that focused on heavy infantry in tight spear formations known as the phalanx and made up of individual soldiers called hoplites.²⁵ These soldiers trained and fought together in units which prized collective effort over individualism. Hoplite equipment was comprised of a breastplate, greaves, a main thrusting spear, a short sword, a large circular two-handed shield, and a crested helmet that enclosed most of the face. These hoplite units were renowned for being highly effective against light infantry and cavalry. Examples which demonstrate the success of this style of warfare, though much later than the example of the mercenaries in Saite Egypt, are the Persian wars, specifically the battles of Marathon (490) and Thermopylae (480), where heavily armoured Greeks at a numerical disadvantage were able to win or inflict heavy losses on the numerically superior Persians. The Persians were unable to take advantage of their superior numbers, which, coupled with their reliance on cavalry, light infantry, and mass archer formations, resulted in their defeat at the hands of the heavily armoured hoplites.²⁶

Due to these effective fighting techniques, foreign kingdoms and empires sought the services of such well-trained troops. Herodotus mentions at 2.152 how the arrival of these mercenaries clad in bronze were a novel sight for the Egyptians. This demand gave rise to many Greek mercenary soldiers selling their services to those willing to pay. The best known example of Greek mercenary forces is the account of the Ten Thousand, which relates how, in the late 5th century, the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger assembled an army to challenge his elder brother Artaxerxes II.²⁷ The fame of this exploit is probably due to the detail in which it was related by its autobiographical author, Xenophon, but the tradition of Greek troops fighting in the Ancient Near East had much earlier origins. Luraghi convincingly argues that Ionian Greeks had found service in the armies of the Assyrians from the 8th century.²⁸ Though previous examples of Greek service have been thought to have occurred prior to the Dark Ages, this was before the development of hoplite warfare, and probably resembled something more akin to the styles of warfare already found in the Ancient Near East. Specialised heavy hoplite infantry was still some centuries away.

²⁵ The origins of hoplite warfare have long been debated and discussed. The emergence of this style of fighting coincides with the rise of the *polis*, and as a result, multiple theories have been put forward concerning the relationship between the two developments. See Viggiano 2015:112–133 for an in-depth discussion of the subject.

²⁶ Raaflaub 2015:97–98

²⁷ The exploits of these mercenaries are well known through Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

²⁸ Luraghi 2006:21–47.

Raaflaub discusses the development of Greek arms and armour and how this occurred in the archaic age.²⁹ Herodotus provides a list of inventions that the Greeks adopted, including the two-handed shields which were much larger than the previous single grip shields. Other inventions were the fitting of crests on helmets and additional parts for shields.³⁰ Raaflaub discusses these developments with reference to literary and physical evidence. The two-handed shield seems to have been a Greek innovation despite Herodotus' claim, while iron working seems to have been adopted from Cyprus and the Levant. The iconic Corinthian helmet, worked from a singular sheet of metal, seems to have its origins in Greece, originating in the 8th century. Pottery from the 7th century depicts hoplites in full gear, indicating that the phenomenon of hoplite warfare was now widespread, although how many soldiers were fully equipped with this gear is unknown.³¹ In conclusion, the archaic age saw the development of the hoplite as we have come to know it, and it appears to have been relatively early in this period. This equipment, whether its origins were foreign or developed in Greece, was utilised in ways that gave rise to a style of specialised warfare unknown in the Ancient Near East. This resulted in the development of the hoplite coinciding with the use of Greek soldiers as mercenaries in the Ancient Near East, and the rise of the *polis* on mainland Greece.

Saite Egypt

Manning provides an overview of what characterises the 26th Dynasty.³² In summary, his conclusion points to the extensive use of mercenaries during this period, including Lydians, Carians, Phoenicians and Greeks, who were employed together with the local Egyptians. The Egyptian army as a result came to be multi-ethnic and multicultural. The Saitic navy was able to assert dominance over Cyprus and establish a presence in the eastern Mediterranean, with Phoenicians often being utilised in this regard. The dynasty was able to expand both economically and militarily, while also being effective in the sphere of diplomacy, where healthy relations were being fostered with numerous other nations such as Lydia under Gyges and Croesus, Samos and Cyrene. The waning power of the Assyrians was marked by the rise of Babylon and Persia. Both of these powers posed a threat, especially to the later Saite dynasty. During this period the Greeks developed an intense interest in Egypt, at a time that also spawned the development of Greek

²⁹ Raaflaub 2015:99.

³⁰ Hdt. 1.171.

³¹ Raaflaub 2015:99–100.

³² Manning 2020:366–368.

historiography. This led to subsequent Greek accounts about ancient Egypt, of which our best-known authors are Hecataeus and Herodotus.

The Saite period began in 656 BCE and came to an end in 525 BCE.³³ The first king was Psamtik I, and the dynasty took its name from the seat of royal power at the city of Sais in Northern Egypt on the Nile Delta. Psamtik I initially ruled as a vassal king of the Assyrians and was set up in Egypt during the reign of Ashurbanipal. With the weakening of Assyrian authority he broke away and established himself independently. Thus Psamtik I served as a governor for the Assyrians before establishing the Saite dynasty. Prior to the rise of Psamtik I, Egypt had fragmented into multiple powerful *nomes* (the administrative divisions of Egypt, each headed by a *nomarch*).³⁴ During times of crisis *nomarchs* often consolidated power and ruled independently of any central authority.³⁵ Psamtik was able to reunify Upper and Lower Egypt, bringing the *nomarchs* once again under a centralised authority.³⁶

Over and above reunifying the country, Psamtik also led campaigns against the last remnants of the Nubian Dynasty, or the 25th dynasty, in Upper Egypt, effectively ending the threat of the Nubians. Rodan discusses how positive diplomatic relations with the kings of Lydia, initially with Gyges, allowed the Saitic kings such as Psamtik I to employ mercenaries from Lydian territories.³⁷ Ionian Greeks and Carians were under the rule of the Lydians at the time, and they were the first mercenaries to arrive. Psamtik's successor, Necho II (610/609–594), campaigned successfully against the king of Judah. He dedicated armour at the temple of Apollo at Miletus, acknowledging the role of the Greek mercenaries in his campaign in Judah.³⁸ Psamtik II next succeeded to the throne and led successful campaigns into Kush where he decisively defeated and sacked the Kushite capital Napata with a multi-ethnic expeditionary force. What can be deduced from the number of Greek inscriptions found at Abu Simbel (the camp site during the campaigns) is that Greeks made up a significant part of the Psamtik II's forces.³⁹

Following the rule of Psamtik II, Apries came to the throne but was overthrown and forced into exile by Amasis II. Apries tried to retake Egypt with

³³ Manning 2020:366.

³⁴ Macfarquhar 1966:109 discusses that it is likely the Assyrians contributed to the success of taming the independent *nomes* and weakening Kushite dominion in Egypt, developments credited solely to Psamtik I as relayed to Herodotus by his Egyptian sources (2.151–152).

³⁵ Lacovara 2017:324.

³⁶ Macfarquhar 1966:109–111.

³⁷ Rodan 2015:74.

³⁸ Macfarquhar 1966:110.

³⁹ Macfarquhar 1966:111.

the help of Babylonian forces but was defeated. Amasis had to navigate a delicate situation between Greeks and the Egyptians. Tensions began to brew between native Egyptians and the influx of Greek traders and settlers who were concentrated around Naucratis. Amasis limited Greek influence in the country, focused the Greek mercenary population by relocating them from the other sites mentioned, such as Stratopeda and Daphne, and restricted the influx of newcomers into Naucratis. With the growing Greek population, trade boomed. The cities of the Ionian Greeks were even individually represented, each city having its own quarter in Naucratis.⁴⁰ After the successful reign of Amasis, the last king associated with the Saite period, Psamtik III, was toppled following the campaign and invasion of Cambyses II against Egypt in 526/5 BC.

Manning elaborates on the ramifications that this relationship between the archaic Greeks and Egyptians had for later generations of both peoples.⁴¹ Greek mercenaries continued to play a major part in Egyptian military exploits long after the Persians conquered the territory. The Athenian general Chabrias, for example, aided the Egyptians against the Persians, and the Spartan king and general Agesilaus consolidated power for Nectanebo II. Trade between Greeks and Egyptians continued, and so did the influx of Greeks into Egypt. The military, economic and social patterns begun by the Saitic kings laid the foundations for the next major phase of Greco-Egyptian relations, the rise of the Ptolemaic dynasty following the campaigns and death of Alexander.

Conclusion

In closing, the soldiers who fought and settled in Egypt challenge the common view of an insular Greece during the archaic age that developed Greece's particular style of heavy infantry warfare as if in a vacuum. The bond between the ancient Greek citizen soldier and his city-state was close, and often at the core of one's identity in the ancient Greek world. Despite this bond, many still sought opportunity elsewhere, leaving their city-states behind. The Egyptians of the 26th Dynasty ruled from Sais in Northern Egypt during a turbulent time in Egyptian history. Initially, its main threat was the previous long rule of their southern Nubian neighbours and then Assyrian hegemony. These events were paralleled by the fragmentation of Egyptian territory due to the absence of a central authority. Later, Greek mercenaries aided in defending the dynasty against the Babylonians and Persians, and Greek soldiers continued to aid Egypt even after Persia's successful invasion. The 26th Dynasty reunited the country, reasserting the rule of the king over the *nomarchs*, and expelled the Nubians, while also campaigning

⁴⁰ Macfarquhar 1966:112.

⁴¹ Manning 2020:367–368.

deep into their territory. The Greek soldiers who aided the Egyptian kings helped stabilise the country and win many great victories for their employers, both internally and abroad. As a result of these events, the relationship that developed between the Greek and the Egyptian civilisations during the archaic age laid the foundations for a relationship that would express itself in multiple spheres of human activity for centuries to come.

Appendix A

One of the many Greek inscriptions that can be found at Abu Simbel seen below (Greece High Definition 2019):



A clear rendering of the inscription as it appears on the leg of the colossus of Ramses II (Greece High Definition 2019), with accompanying translation:

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΕΛΘΟΝΤΟΣ ΕΣ ΕΛΕΦΑΝΤΙΝΑΝ ΨΑΜΜΑΤΙΧΟ
 ΤΑΥΤΑ ΕΓΡΑΨΑΝΤΟΙΣ ΨΝ ΨΑΜΜΑΤΙΧΟΙ ΤΟΙΘΕΟΚΛΟΣ
 ΕΠΛΕΟΝ ΒΛΘΟΝ ΔΕ ΚΕΡΚΙΟΣ ΚΑΤΥ ΡΕΘΘΕ ΒΙΣΟΓΟΤΑΜΟΣ
 ΑΝΙΒΑΡΟΛΟΣ ΟΣΟ ΒΧΕΡΟΤΑΣΙΜΤΟ ΔΙΓΥΡΤΙΟΣ ΔΕ ΑΜΑΣΙΣ
 ΕΡΑΦΕΔΑΜΕΑΡΤΟΝ ΑΜΟΙΒΙΤΟ ΚΑΙ ΠΕΛΕΚΟΣ ΟΝΔΑΜΟ

When King Psammetichos came to Elephantine
 This was written by those who, with Psammetichos son of Theokles,
 Sailed and came above Kirkis, as far as the river permitted;
 Potasimto commanded the non-native speakers, and Amasis the Egyptians;
 Archon son of Amoibichos wrote us and Pelekos son of Oudamos
 (Meiggs & Lewis 1969:12).

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Images

Inscription on leg of Ramses II, n.d. photograph, viewed 23 August 2020,
<https://www.greecehighdefinition.com/blog/2019/12/29/ancient-greeks-in-egypt>.

Rendering of inscription, n.d. photograph, viewed 23 August 2020,
<https://www.greecehighdefinition.com/blog/2019/12/29/ancient-greeks-in-egypt>.