Greek landings and Hellenic appropriations in ‘the island’ (the Egyptian Delta)

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This article proposes a re-examination of historical traditions, mainly ‘non-Herodotean’, that concern the first Greek landings in Egypt. If the Herodotean narrative is focused on the military arrival of ‘Ionians and Carians’ during the first years of Psamtek I, i.e. in 664–650 BC, some heroic traditions concerning such place names as ‘the Watchtower of Perseus’ or ‘Thonis’ suggest pre-Saitic Dorian abortive landings via the Libyan coastline. These early tentative landings were repelled by the drastic control of the shore established in the early years of the Saite dynasty, as Hecataeus of Abdera (cited by Diodorus I, 66, 8 Bekker 1888–1890) tells us. Finally, Strabo’s statement about ‘the Wall of the Milesians’ confirms what the archaeological evidence already suggested: that the opening of inland Egypt to Ionian trade, and the creation of the emporion of Naukratis, occurred in the last years of Psamtek’s reign, i.e. between 625 and 610 BC.

In participating in the highly stimulating ‘Naukratis Workshop’, my aim was to put this famous archaeological site in the wider context of what I call ‘Hellenic appropriations’ of the Egyptian Delta. In other words, I tried to investigate the way Greeks used to appropriate for themselves, physically but also mentally, this part of the Egyptian land. Of course, the first action was physical: that is, landing on the shore and, from there, trying to make their way upstream. But when did they land? And where? In what conditions and through which of the numerous mouths of the Nile? And, afterwards, how did they construct their own appropriation of this foreign space, and what was the role of Naukratis in this process?

Usually, all these questions have been answered by a quite universal and, let us say, somewhat naïve use of the Herodotean tradition. Everybody knows the famous story of the ‘men of bronze’, and it is unnecessary to narrate it again. Let us only remember that it definitely sets the ‘first historical landing of Greeks’ in Egypt during the first years of Psamtek’s reign, between 664 and 650 BC. These ‘first Greeks’ would be, Herodotus says, Ionians along with (non-Greek) Carians. But, as soon as we speak in terms of something ‘first historical’, modern historians have been very prone to accept the Herodotean story as a ‘first historical fact’ on the simple and crude assumption that Herodotus was indeed the ‘first historian’ … This seems rather an odd argument. My point will not be to reopen the debate about the accuracy of the Egyptian narrative of Herodotus. We must remember, however, that as the ‘new Homer’ Herodotus made...

1 I am very much indebted to my colleagues at Angers University, Michel Darmon and his wife Sheena Trimble, for checking my English, and also to François Leclère, for his friendly advice. Of course, all mistakes are mine.

2 Many thanks to all British Museum colleagues, and particularly to Jeffrey Spencer, Ross Thomas and Alexandra Villing. After the British Museum event, Jeffrey and Alexandra went to Paris in order to present the renewal of British research on Naukratis (Leclère, Spencer and Villing 2013, 126–35). Many thanks also to Penny Wilson, who said she agreed with the views here discussed.

3 Concerning Greek territorial appropriation, see Malkin 2011, 141.

4 ‘Herodotus was a liar!’, the late Professor Jean Yoyotte was accustomed to tell me, in a somewhat excessive but, to my mind, not entirely wrong opinion. Contra Lloyd 1975.
a creation of his own, establishing the limits of what he called 'Ἱστορίη' according to his own assumptions.\(^5\) Indeed, concerning Egypt, the fact that these assumptions cannot be taken at face value is worth remembering.

For instance, in modern times, scholars have emphasised that the Herodotean narrative does not fit very well with the archaeological evidence (Bowden 1996, 17–37). As we know, this evidence points to the decade 620/610 BC for the main arrival of Greek material in Egypt in general, and at Naukratis in particular, and neither to 664/650 BC (‘the men of bronze’) nor to 570 BC (Amasis’ reign), as Herodotus seems to imply.\(^6\) On the other hand, some literary traditions allude to Greek landings on the Egyptian shore earlier than 664 BC.

Is it possible to reconcile these apparently antagonistic traditions? That is what we will try to do below.

One ‘clarification’ before all! The fact that there is no Greek material available in Egypt before 620 or possibly 630 BC (Weber 2012, 286; the securely established terminus post quem of the bulk of Naukratite pottery) cannot be taken as an argumentum ex silentio proving that there were no Greeks at all living before this date in Egypt. Their presence before 620 BC is indeed abundantly proven by written sources, mainly of military origin (Haider 2001, 197–215; Grallert 2001, 183–95; Vittmann 2003, 194–235). It follows that the absence of Greek material must be explained by other, mainly economic and purely archaeological, reasons. The main reason, usually forgotten, which explains this vacuum is simply the well-known subsidence of the Egyptian coastline, the result of which was to submerge all pre-Persian archaeological levels. If there existed relics of the first Greek landing places on the Egyptian coast earlier than 620 BC, and even earlier than 664 BC, they are nowadays completely concealed some 8m underwater. Further, on the assumption that the event might have involved only a very few people, and those hardly distinguishable from any other sailors, we are forced to rely exclusively on literary traditions in order to illustrate the first Greek landings on this shore.

Now the fact cannot be ignored that alternative stories concerning these landings were already circulating in ancient times, and they did not agree with what we have called the ‘Herodotean narrative’. These alternative stories concern three main landing places along the Egyptian shore, namely:

1. ‘Thonis/Herakleion’;
2. ‘the Watchtower of Perseus’;
3. ‘the Wall of the Milesians’.

Those three places are traditionally located at the two westernmost mouths of the Nile: ‘Thonis/Herakleion’ at the Canopic (also named Herakleotic) one, that is in Abukir Bay; and ‘the Watchtower of Perseus’ and ‘the Wall of the Milesians’, according to Strabo, at the next mouth to the east, the Bolbitine (or Saitic), that is the modern Rosetta, mouth. These locations confirm the fact that the first encounter of the Greeks with Egypt was made in the western parts of the Nile Delta.

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5 On the same idea, but concerning Cyrenaean foundation, see Calame (1996, 147–56).

This is a very important but overlooked matter, especially if we consider these two points:

1. the *Libyan* face of Egypt is, in terms of modern Egyptology, crucial for the period running from 1000 to 700 BC;
2. the Libyan shore was always, in Hellenic thought, fundamentally related to the *Dorian* face of Greece (Malkin 1994, 169–91). It is a surprise, then, when we meet on this ‘Dorian shore’ the ‘Ionians and Carians’ described as the first-landing Greeks!

By the way, we know of some Dorian sailors who landed on the Egyptian shore: the Spartan Menelaos, his wife Helen and their pilot, the young Canopus (Carrez-Maratray 2012), plus a fourth one, the Cretan pirate for whom Odysseus manages to be taken, when coming home to Ithaka (Homer, *Odyssey*, XIV, 243–86. XVII, 424–41, Murray). Of course, all of them belong to the heroic age, that is precisely the period excluded by Herodotus from his historical plan, when he says, for example, that it is only from Psamtek’s times that ‘we Greeks have exact knowledge of the history of Egypt’ (Herodotus, II, 154, Godley 1920). But this is nothing more than a guess by Herodotus and, even if Menelaos or the ‘Pseudo-Cretan’ were not historical figures, recent research by Sergio Pernigotti (1999, 27) and Günther Hölbl (2007) has suggested that they illustrated an obvious, even if episodic, presence of Greek sailors on the Egyptian shore before Dynasty 26.

That these sailors were following a western navigation route along the Libyan coast is illustrated by both the Pseudo-Cretan’s and Menelaos’ voyages from western Crete to Pharos. During this voyage, they passed along a Libyan cape, the Περσέως σκοπίη, the ‘Watchtower of Perseus’, which, by a strange and apparently unnoticed mistake, Strabo located at the Rosetta mouth (Strabo, XVII, 1, 18 Jones). This location is clearly invalidated by what Menelaos says, in Euripides’ Egyptian play, Helen, about his sad trip to Pharos:


This obviously means that the Watchtower of Perseus was passed by Greek sailors on their way along the Libyan shore before arriving at ‘Pharos’, i.e. at the west of the future Alexandria. This is confirmed by Herodotus when he quotes the opinion of the Ionians, ‘who say that only the Delta is Egypt, and that its seaboard reaches from the so-called Watchtower of Perseus, forty schoeni to the Salters at Pelusium’ (Herodotus, II, 15, Godley 1920). Forty *schoeni* amounts to some 400km (with the *schoenon* at 60 *stadia* of ca 180m), fully double the distance from Pelusium to Rosetta. This leads us far away to the west, far not only from Rosetta (where, of course, it is unbelievable that Ionians ever put the western limit of the Delta), but also from the Canopic mouth. We can go a bit further: this ‘Ionian’ assessment of the Egyptian shore as far as the Watchtower of Perseus rejects in the ‘far west’ the Dorian pretentions to Egypt, via the Libyan shore, pretentions expressed, e.g., by a ‘port of Menelaos’ upon it.8

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7 ‘Tra la fine dell’VIII e l’inizio del VII secolo, numerose furono le incursioni di modesti nuclei di Greci (accompagnati o no da appartenenti ad altri gruppi etnici).’

8 Malkin 1994, 48–50, map 7. We follow Malkin’s conclusions, which are less rigid than those of Chamoux (1952, 62–63),
A similar rejection of what I would name Dorian traditions regarding landings in Egypt can be found in the stories concerning ‘Thonis’. As Jean Yoyotte demonstrated a long time ago (Yoyotte 1958, 423–30), this toponym: T3 hn.t, meaning ‘the laguna’, was used, in Greek tradition, to designate an Egyptian being of the heroic age: ‘Thôn(is)’, Polydama’s husband. What matters here is that we find clear evidence of a disagreement between Herodotean and non-Herodotean traditions concerning this Egyptian ‘Thonis’.

For Herodotus, Thonis is the name of a good overseer of the Nile mouth, working under the orders of the good king of Egypt, Proteus, based at Memphis. But for Hellanicus of Lesbos and for all the following traditions, Thonis is the name of a bad king eventually killed by Menelaos. The Herodotean version has been universally accepted by modern scholars inasmuch as it agrees very well with what we know about the customs control elaborated by the Saite kings and studied by Georges Posener (Posener 1947, 117–31). It does not, however, prove anything concerning the pre-Saitic control of the shore, for which it substitutes an anachronistic device. We can add that the Herodotean story did not receive support from anyone in ancient times, and was even vigorously attacked by, for example, Plutarch in his De Herodoti malignitate.

It is my view that this story of the ‘good Thonis’ was only created, in Saitic times, in order to reject some Dorian egyptophobic traditions concerning very difficult access to the Delta from the west: the ‘bad Thonis’ (Yoyotte 1997, 98, n. 148). These traditions simply reflect the drastic and vigorous measures taken, c. 700 BC, by the first kings of the ‘great kingdom of the West’ in order to protect their seaside frontier against raiders and traders (Perdu 2002, 1215–44).

This is exactly what another non-Herodotean tradition states, namely Hecataeus of Abdera, the man who became, with Manetho, the leading member of the ‘Egyptologist team’ of Ptolemy I, c. 300 BC. Cited by Diodorus in a frequently overlooked passage (Diodorus, I, 66, 8–12 Bekker 1888–1890), he rejected ancient historians who ῥηματολογοῦσιν, that is to say Herodotus and his fanciful story about the bronze helmet of Psamtek. Offering a rationalistic view of the king’s politics towards foreigners, Hecataeus states that, ‘in charge of the regions lying along the sea (τὸν παρὰ θάλατταν μερῶν κυριεύων)’, Psamtek did not ignore foreign trade (Phoenicians and Greeks) but restricted it to the shore under his control. It was only in a later period, after he repelled his opponents ‘into Libya’ and became sole king, that Psamtek, Hecataeus says, opened to strangers ‘the emporia of the rest of Egypt (τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην χώραν ἐμπόρια)’ (Diodorus, I, 67, 9 Bekker 1888–1890), that is to say the trading posts ‘not lying along the sea’, and of course, among them, Naukratis.

When did this ‘opening of inland trade’ occur? To this question, archaeological evidence gives a very clear answer: this occurred after 630/620 BC. This is exactly what the last ‘non-Herodotean tradition’ text about Greek landings in Egypt says, specifically the well-known

who thinks that ‘dans la toponymie hellénique du littoral libyen (…) il n’y a pas à chercher le souvenir d’une fréquentation ancienne des lieux’ (also n. 5 about the ‘Guette de Persée’ wrongly situated ‘à l’extrémité occidentale du Delta’). On possible Dorian/Ionian rivalry on the Libyan shore ‘as early as the first half of the seventh century’, see Walker (2004, 152).

9 Hellanicus of Lesbos, fragment 153 (Jacoby 1923, 143, F 153). Hellanicus floruit just after Herodotus, c. 430/400 BC.

10 Austin (1970, 55–56, n. 4), rejects this passage as ‘a rationalized version of Herodotus’ narrative’ corrupted by ‘mere embroidery’ of ‘no independent value’. This is excessive, since the ‘rationalized version’ is clearly intended against Herodotus’ narrative, which it denounces as ‘fanciful’. The author (Hecataeus) did not ‘rationalize’, on the contrary, he worked as a good ‘historian’, rejecting the saga for the facts. Vittmann (2003, 211), stresses that Diodorus’ statements are ‘interessanten Mitteilungen’.

passage by Strabo about the ‘Wall of the Milesians’:

In the time of Psammetichus (who lived in the time of Cyaxares the Mede), the Milesians, with thirty ships, put in (πλεύσαντες κατέσχον) at the Bolbitine mouth and then, disembarking, fortified (ἐκβάντες ἐτείχισαν) with a wall the above-mentioned settlement; but in time they sailed up into the Saitic Nome, defeated the city Inaros in a naval fight, and founded Naucratis (ἀναπλεύσαντες αἰς τὸν Σαϊτικὸν νομὸν καταναμαχήσαντες Ἰνάρων πόλιν ἔκτισαν Ναύκρατιν) not far above Schedia. (Strabo XVII, 1, 18, C 801 Jones 1932)

Even though I thought for a long time, like others (Drijvers 1999; Möller 2001), that this was a highly spurious passage, I consider now that it can be taken very plausibly at face value. Without entering here into the problematic question of the ‘Milesian foundation of Naukratis’, still dubious in my opinion, I would only insist on what concerns the seashore in this context and on this particular question: why did the Milesians ‘fortify the Bolbitine (Rosetta) mouth’?

All that we have observed previously, concerning the drastic control of the shore by Psamtek, excludes absolutely the possibility that this could have been done against the will of the pharaonic power, in a kind of a fanciful Greek ‘beachhead’ on the Egyptian coast. The Bolbitine mouth was the doorway leading directly to the capital, Sais, and building a ‘wall’ on it can only be understood as a defensive work realised within the framework of royal politics. It follows that a dangerous threat to Egypt arose during a part of Psamtek’s reign. What we read in Strabo’s story is that this threat occurred ‘at Cyaxares’ time’, that is after 625 (first year of Cyaxares’ reign), and that it was led by a certain Inaros (who was in my opinion a historical figure, following Jean Yoyotte [1997, 110, n. 213]). Inaros is a well-known name (Quack 2006, 499–505), illustrated in Egyptian folklore by such stories belonging to the demotic ‘Pedubast cycle’ as ‘the Battle for the Armour of Inaros’ or ‘Inaros and the Griffin’. Whether or not this was the same warrior, Strabo’s Inaros was defeated in a naval battle by the Milesian fleet. But when and where did the battle take place?

In his text, Strabo makes a threefold use of the grammatical iunctio ‘after they have done they did …’. The two first instances are limited to a simple succession: πλεύσαντες κατέσχον, ‘after they have sailed they put in’ and ἐκβάντες ἐτείχισαν, ‘after they have disembarked they fortified’. The third instance is a much more complex one: ἀναπλεύσαντες αἰς τὸν Σαϊτικὸν νομὸν καταναμαχήσαντες Ἰνάρων πόλιν ἔκτισαν Ναύκρατιν, ‘after they have sailed upstream after they have defeated Inaros they founded Naukratis’.

All scholars, as it seems, assumed that the three verbs in Strabo’s sentence, ἀναπλεύσαντες / καταναμαχήσαντες / ἔκτισαν were put in a chronological order, so that the Milesians:

1. sailed up the Nile;
2. defeated Inaros;
3. founded Naukratis.

11 Malkin (2011, 135), stresses that ‘walled-off’ sites appear much later than the 8th century. Motya’s wall, for example, was built only c. 580 BC.

12 For other defensive works against Libyan threat under Psamtek I, see the year 11 stela (Goedike 1962, 26–49; Der Manuelian 1994, 323–32; Pernigotti 1999, 36–38; Perdu 2002, 1215–44.

Apart from the fact that this supposes a very dubious naval fight on the Nile, this order of the events is grammatically impossible. Indeed, the words ἀναπλεύσαντες and καταναυμαχήσαντες are not coordinated by καί ('after they sailed up and after they fought'), but only juxtaposed, which means that the second verb specifies the conditions in which the first action occurred: the Milesians, sailing up the Nile after they defeated Inaros, founded Naukratis. We can therefore correct the translation of Jones as follows:

... the Milesians, sailing with thirty ships, put in at the Bolbitine mouth, and then, disembarking, fortified with a wall the above-mentioned settlement; but in time, sailing up into the Saitic Nome after they defeated Inaros in a naval fight, they founded the city Naukratis not far above Schedia.

The events can, therefore, be reconstructed in the following way: sometime between 625 and 610 BC (‘Cyaxares’ time’), a certain Inaros, probably coming from Libya, attacked Egypt and threatened the most important of the Nile’s mouths, the Bolbitine one, leading directly to Sais, the capital of old Psamtik. In distress, the king appealed to the Milesian fleet for help. The two parties came to an agreement according to which the Milesians, in return for protecting the Egyptian shore, would be granted open access, for their traders, onto the ‘inland emporia’ of the kingdom. This was done: the Milesians, after they had secured the Rosetta mouth by a fortification, sailed westward against Inaros coming from Libya. They defeated his fleet on the Mediterranean, probably at Thonis-Heracleion, a first ‘naval battle of Abukir’, some 2,420 years before Admiral Nelson. All this achieved, they sailed up the Canopic branch of the Nile (as the words ‘above Schedia’ imply) and they installed their traders in the emporion of Naukratis.

In my view, all these examples are going in the same direction. They illustrate the fierce will of ‘Ionian Greeks’ to take possession of the western part of the Delta, repelling Dorian pretentions far west on the Libyan coast, grumbling against the Saitic closing of the shore and, eventually, with the Milesians, forcing the pharaonic power to open the doors to their inland traders. From the period 610 to 580/570 BC, Milesian pottery of the ‘Middle Wild Goat Style’ starts appearing at a number of places in Egypt (Weber 2012, 282). Why not go farther? As Herodotus says, ‘in the opinion of Ionians, only the Delta is Egypt’. As we know that the Delta was nothing else, for the Greeks, than an island (Strabo, XVIII, 1, 4 Jones 1932 ; Pliny, Historia naturalis, V, 9, 48 Mayhoff 1906), and since ‘Delta’, as we all also know, is a Greek letter, we are entitled to replace: ‘in the opinion of Ionians, only the Delta is Egypt’ by ‘in the opinion of Ionians, the Delta is only Greek!’ This is what I call an ‘Hellenic appropriation’ and it can be, I think, verified more than once. Let us finish with two famous examples.

In a Greek poem written in Roman times, in memory of Antinous, it is said that Hadrian gave to his deceased lover ‘a city rich in grapes which lies along its fertile neighbour’, that is the town of Antinoopolis, in Middle Egypt, lying along the Nile (P.Oxy. 63, 4352, v. 14–17). But, for its part, the Nile gave Antinous ‘an island which accommodates the flower of Achaia and is surrounded by harbours that make it the elite of the plain’. This island is usually interpreted as the Hermopolite nome surrounding Antinoopolis, but how could this small region be ‘surrounded by harbours that make it the elite of the plain’? In our opinion, the ‘island’ given by the river to Antinous, i.e. a ‘gift of the Nile’, is nothing less than what it was already in Herodotus’ mind: the Delta itself, surrounded by such famous harbours as Canopus, Pelusium and Babylon, and last
but not least Naukratis itself.

On the mosaic of Palestrina, we observe a ship sailing upstream from Canopus to Babylon (Old Cairo), on the same route followed by the Milesian fleet in c. 620 BC. After passing a city of ibises which has been identified with Hermopolis Magna, but which must be its lower equivalent, Hermopolis Parva / Damanhur, he will arrive at the next port of call: Naukratis. In my mind, the Palestrina mosaic is a strict representation of an absolute claim: here is the Egyptian land of the Greeks.

Fig. 1  Front cover image: View of Naukratis in October 2018, by Aurélia Masson-Berghoff on behalf of the Naukratis Project © Trustees of the British Museum.
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