

# Contact Points: Memphis, Naukratis, and the Greek East

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“During the Egyptian campaign of Cambyses [r. ca. 526–522 BC], the son of Cyrus, large numbers of Greeks came to Egypt for various reasons—to do business, naturally, to take part in the fighting, or just to see the country.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote the Greek historian and traveler Herodotus of Halikarnassos (ca. 485–424 BC). Herodotus himself was in this third category of visitor; his own trip to Egypt took place in the mid-fifth century BC, some seventy-five years after the invasion by Cambyses.<sup>2</sup> One of the stated goals of his work was “to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by Greeks and non-Greeks,” and he dedicates an entire book of his *Histories* to Egyptian history and customs.

Like the other Greeks who wrote about Egypt, such as Hekataios of Miletos and Hellanikos of Lesbos, Herodotus was especially interested in Egypt’s long history because it provided an instructive contrast to the Greeks’ own perception of history, which was characterized by myth and legend.<sup>3</sup> For the Greeks, there was no firm distinction between myth and history, as is evident in Herodotus’s own work; mortal kings were descended from mythical heroes, and legends were employed to explain historical phenomena. In Thebes, however, Herodotus (2.143–44) met priests who could trace their lineage back 345 generations, and could point to statues of each and every one of their forebears! This challenge to the Greek understanding of history, as well as the great antiquity that it implied, was fascinating to Herodotus and his fellow historians. He was similarly interested in the many differences between Greek and Egyptian customs. For Herodotus, Egypt was exceptional, and his account of its exceptional nature was widely popular in antiquity.

Herodotus’s main sources for Egyptian history and culture were priests. He says explicitly (2.3.1) that he sought out the priests of Memphis, Thebes, and Heliopolis as informants, and the

FIGURE 28 | Sketch plan of Memphis during the Late Period

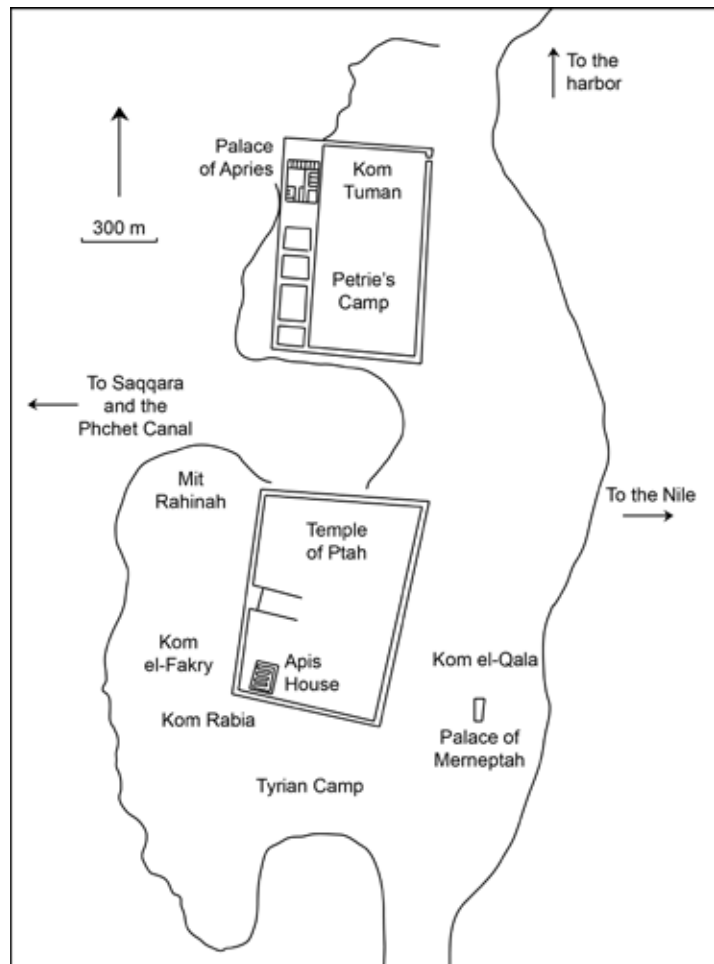
information presented in his account bears this out.<sup>4</sup> But it is likely he talked to Greeks living in Egypt as well. By Herodotus's day, his other two categories of Greek visitors to Egypt—mercenaries and merchants—had established communities at Memphis and Naukratis; Herodotus visited both during his travels. Memphis was the capital of Egypt during the Late Period, as it had been in many earlier eras, and was home to a Greek population of mercenaries serving the pharaohs and, later on, the Persian governors of Egypt. Naukratis, on the Canopic branch of the Nile, was an entrepôt founded by Greek merchants. These two sites were the primary points of contact with Egypt for much of the Greek world in this period. As Herodotus himself noted (2.154.4), it was because of these communities “that we Greeks have had some connection with the country, and that is how we have reliable information about Egyptian history from the reign of Psammetichos [Psamtek] onwards.”<sup>5</sup>

Both of these communities were founded by Greeks from western Anatolia, especially Ionia and the neighboring islands, for whom Egypt was a land of opportunity. This is why so many of them left their homes to make their fortunes there. These immigrants maintained strong connections with their ancestral homeland in the Greek East; at the same time, they intermarried with Egyptians, started families, and generally became part of Egyptian society. By the time of Alexander the Great's arrival in Egypt in 332/331 BC, generations of Greeks had been born and had died in Egypt, living alongside many other people, including Carians, Phoenicians, and, above all, Egyptians.

### Memphis

When these Greeks first came to Memphis cannot be firmly established, but it is likely that their population was bolstered significantly when, according to Herodotus (2.154.3), Pharaoh Amasis (r. ca. 570–527 BC) relocated the Greek and Carian mercenaries based in the Nile Delta to Memphis, as a safeguard against the possibility of revolt by his Egyptian soldiers. These mercenaries became part of a larger population of resident foreigners, including Phoenicians, Syrians, Jews, and even Persians, who inhabited Memphis during the Late Period (fig. 28).<sup>6</sup> Documents from the Hellenistic period attest to the existence of a Greek quarter in the city, with its own temple (the Hellenion), and to a population of people called Hellenomemphites, who were the descendants of intermarriage between Greek and Egyptian residents of Memphis.<sup>7</sup>

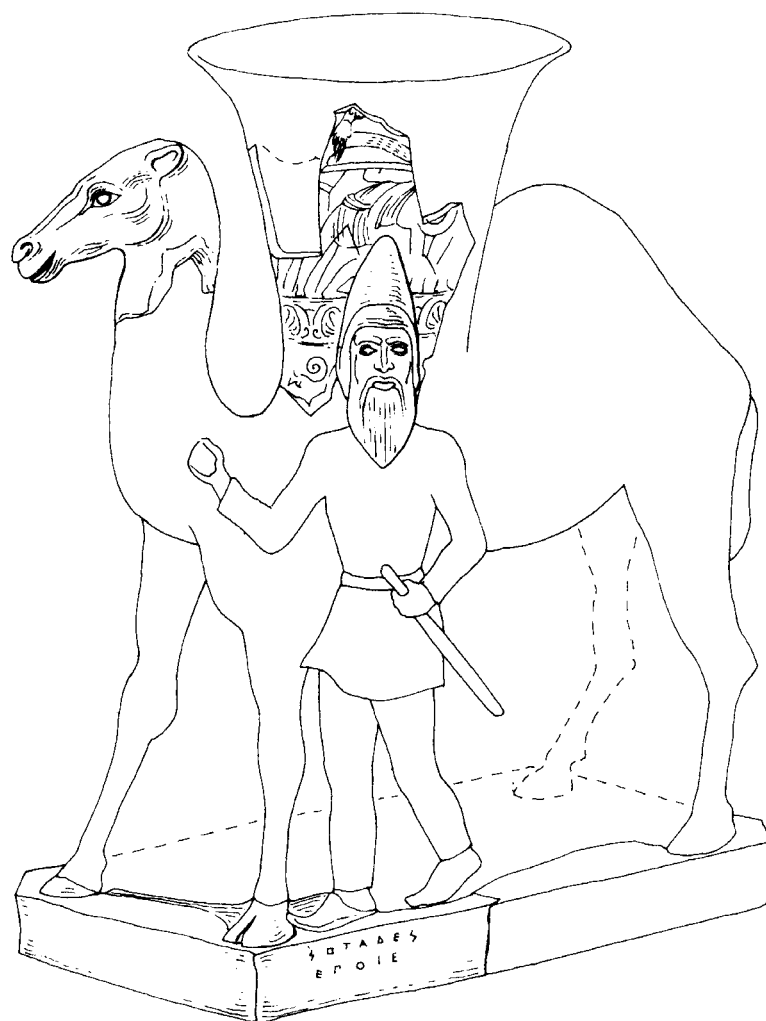
This Greek quarter was probably located near the palace of Apries at Kom Tuman, a large mud-brick structure faced with stone but now badly eroded.<sup>8</sup> The palace served as the administrative center of Egypt under the Saite and Persian kings, in addition to being a fortress. It sits in the northwestern corner of a



much larger mud-brick enclosure that Flinders Petrie identified as a military camp.<sup>9</sup> The finds from this camp, however, are not military in nature, and it is likely that this was where the foreign mercenaries lived with their families. Recent excavations there have turned up Late Period material, as well as sherds of Athenian red-figure pottery, dating to between about 530 and 400 BC.<sup>10</sup> These sherds do not necessarily indicate the presence of Greeks in the camp, but they do show that the people living there were interested in Greek imports. Greek pottery has been found elsewhere in Memphis, too, albeit not in concentrations large enough to suggest a resident population.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, one of the most striking Greek vessels found in Memphis may have in fact been produced with a Persian audience in mind. It is an Athenian red-figure *rhyton* (fig. 29), which unfortunately survives only in fragments, and which has an inscription on its base labeling it the work of the potter Sotades.<sup>12</sup> This *rhyton* is in the form of a camel driver, and the cup that emerges from the camel's back is decorated with scenes of

**FIGURE 29** | Reconstruction drawing of the camel-driver *rhyton* by the Athenian potter Sotades, ca. 440 bc. From Memphis. Six ceramic fragments, H (base): 1.8 cm (1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre, CA 3825



Persians defeating Greeks in combat. The *rhyton* form is believed to have originated in Iran, and camels were associated with Persians by the Greeks; this and the painted decorations seem to indicate that Sotades made this vessel with a non-Greek market in mind. It is impossible to know who owned this vessel in antiquity, but its presence in Memphis, let alone the fact of its creation, points to a frequent exchange of people and ideas between Athens and Memphis during the fifth century bc, when Egypt was part of the Persian Empire.

The Greek community in Memphis had its own cemetery to the northwest of the city at Abusir, near the mortuary temple of Niuserre, a pharaoh of Dynasty 5.<sup>13</sup> The bodies in this cemetery were naturally mummified by the arid desert conditions, not embalmed as was standard Egyptian burial practice. Moreover, the cemetery's excavators discovered a papyrus containing several columns of the *Persians*, an otherwise lost play by Timotheos of Miletos.<sup>14</sup> This papyrus has been dated on paleographic grounds to the fourth century bc and is one of the oldest surviving Greek papyri. It provides an indication of the date of the cemetery, and

also shows that the Hellenomemphites maintained cultural links with the Greek East, in addition to commercial ones. A handful of stone stelai are associated with this cemetery, though unfortunately most lack secure archaeological provenance. A few of these have reliefs depicting *prothesis*, the Greek practice of laying out the body of the deceased prior to burial (fig. 30), and at least one features a fragmentary inscription in Greek.<sup>15</sup> The carving of these stelai closely resembles that found on burial monuments inscribed in Carian, and it seems likely that both communities were served by the same sculptors' workshops.

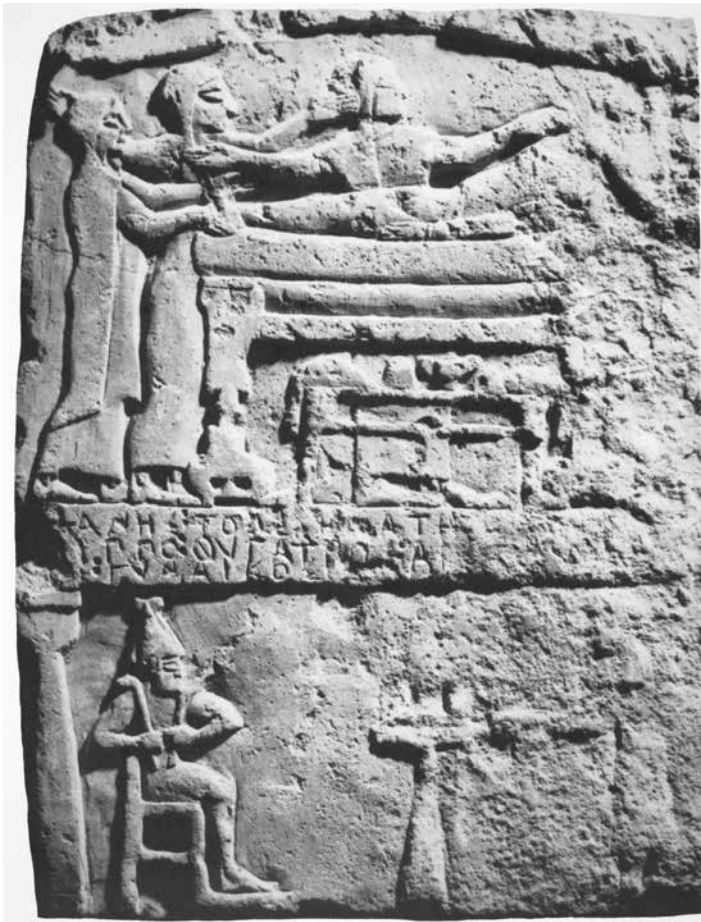
Though most of the evidence for the Greek cemetery at Abusir dates to the fourth century bc, it is quite possible that it was in use much earlier. This is suggested by a limestone stela in the form of a false door (fig. 31) bearing a Greek inscription that reads: "I am (the monument) of Exkestos, the son of Charon."<sup>16</sup> The letter forms used in the inscription indicate a date of about 570–520 bc. The door comes from the collection of Dr. Henry Abbott, a physician who lived in Cairo in the early nineteenth century, and who collected antiquities in the area. The false door

**FIGURE 30** | Funerary stela, Egyptian, ca. 5th–4th century BC. Probably from Abusir. Stone, 35 × 28 cm (13¾ × 11 in.). Current whereabouts unknown

was a common feature of Egyptian tombs, where, according to Egyptian belief, it permitted the spirit of the deceased to move from the world of the living to the world of the dead. It was adopted as a grave marker by Carians in Egypt, who inscribed these doors with their names and patronyms, written in the Carian language.<sup>17</sup> It seems Exekestos adopted this practice for his own tomb. Here, then, is an example of the complex overlapping of cultures in Memphis in this period: the Greek Exekestos used an Egyptian type of funerary monument in a manner widely used by Carians.

### Naukratis

In contrast to Memphis, Naukratis was a relatively new town, established in the late seventh century BC (see [Villing, this volume](#)). Its primary function was as a port of trade, linking Egypt to the Mediterranean world. According to Herodotus (2.179), at that time it was the only such port in Egypt the Greeks were permitted to use; those who landed elsewhere, he says, had to swear it was by accident and then bring their cargo



**FIGURE 31** | False door of Exekestos, Egyptian, ca. 570–520 BC. Limestone, 30.3 × 24 × 7.5 cm (11½ × 9⅞ × 2⅞ in.). New York, Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 37.1354E

to Naukratis, either by sea or in boats via the inland waterways of the Delta.

The most probable reason for this rule is that customs duties on imports were assessed there. The best evidence for this comes from the Naukratis Stela of Nektanebo I (fig. 32), dating to 380 BC, which decrees a tax on imports coming from “the sea of the Greeks.”<sup>18</sup> And it is likely that Naukratis served this role in earlier periods as well. An Aramaic customs document dating to 475 BC, when Egypt was ruled by the Persian Empire, lists ships arriving from and departing to Asia Minor and the Levant, and the duties imposed on them.<sup>19</sup> The port where this took place is not named in the document, but Naukratis is a very good possibility. Indeed, the Greek ships appear to be labeled as being from Phaselis in Lycia, one of the cities that founded the Hellenion (the Greek sanctuary at Naukratis) and was responsible for the operation of the port. Earlier still, in the Saite period, certain Egyptians are known to have held the title “Agent at the gate of the foreign countries of the Great Green”; the “Great Green” is the Mediterranean, and this title has been interpreted as that of a





FIGURE 32 | Stela of Nektanebo I, Egyptian, ca. 380 BC. From Naukratis. Black granodiorite, 198 × 81 × 30 cm (77<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 11<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.). Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 34002

FIGURE 33 | False door of Apollon, son of Thalinos, Egyptian, 5th century BC. From Naukratis. Limestone, 41 × 25 cm (16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 9<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.). Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 27753



major customs official.<sup>20</sup> The town seems to have lost its exclusive status after the Persian conquest of Egypt in 526 BC, when other ports such as Pelousion in the eastern Nile Delta became accessible to foreign merchants, but Naukratis certainly remained Egypt's primary Mediterranean entrepôt throughout the entirety of the Late Period.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the Greeks who came to Naukratis were likely merchants and sailors who remained there for only a short period. The Aramaic customs document gives the names of individual captains, most of whom stayed in Egypt for one to three weeks before departing.<sup>22</sup> Others were more permanent residents who supported trade in other ways. A Greek inscription from Lindos

on Rhodes, dating to about 411–407 BC, decrees that the son of Pytheas (his name is not legible), “an Egyptian from Naukratis, an interpreter . . . should be a *proxenos* of all the Rhodians.”<sup>23</sup> *Proxenois* assisted the citizens of certain foreign cities, and in this case, the son of Pytheas seems to have been an interpreter for Rhodian visitors to Egypt. Naukratis was also home to Rhodopis, one of the most famous courtesans of her day. According to Herodotus (2.135), she was brought to Egypt from Samos as a slave. There she was purchased and given her freedom by Charaxos of Mytilene, a Greek merchant sailor and brother of the poet Sappho, who later ridiculed him for doing so in her poetry.<sup>24</sup> Herodotus found the courtesans of Naukratis to be

utterly charming, and this became a literary trope among later Greek writers.

Although Naukratis was primarily a port of trade, it was clearly also home to a permanent Greek community. The son of Pytheas, mentioned above, is called an “Egyptian” in the inscription from Lindos; this may indicate that he was born in Naukratis. There was also a cemetery at Naukratis where, as in the Greek cemetery at Abusir, there is little sign of Egyptian burial practices.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, at least one false door inscribed in Greek from Naukratis (fig. 33). Alongside the Greek community, there were certainly also Egyptians living at Naukratis, including the customs officials who assessed the duties on foreign cargo, as well as priests of Amun and other temple staff, and their families. There may have been Phoenicians and Carians living there, too.<sup>26</sup> Most of the Carians in Egypt were mercenaries, and the Phoenicians were probably merchants, though some of them may also have been mercenaries, tasked with maintaining the security of the port.

#### Connections with the Greek East and Beyond

Most of the Greek visitors to Egypt in the three categories articulated by Herodotus came from the Greek East, especially Ionia and the islands off the coast of Asia Minor; Herodotus himself was from Halikarnassos on the Carian peninsula. According to his account (2.178) of the founding of Naukratis, the cities that established the sanctuaries there were all in the Greek East. The only exception to this was the sanctuary of Zeus, founded by the Aeginetans. This eastern connection continued into the fifth century, as is shown by the Aramaic customs register mentioned above, which lists Ionian and Phoenician ships arriving and departing from Egypt.<sup>27</sup> In many Near Eastern languages, including Aramaic, the term “Ionian” usually refers to all Greeks, not just those from Ionia in western Asia Minor. In this case, however, there is good reason for thinking that many of these ships were from the Greek East. First, as noted above, the Greek ships appear to be labeled as being from Phaselis in Lycia. Second, some of the names of the captains are widely attested in Asia Minor. Third, one of the ships made two trips to Egypt during a single sailing season, meaning it was most likely going somewhere nearby in Asia Minor, rather than further away to Athens, for example.

The Greek pottery found at Naukratis and elsewhere in Egypt permits some refinement to this view. Though most of the Archaic pottery excavated at Naukratis comes largely from Asia Minor and the islands of the eastern Aegean, pottery from Sparta, Corinth, and Athens was found there as well.<sup>28</sup> In the Classical period, Athenian pottery replaced East Greek vessels as the dominant fine wares imported to Naukratis.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, a similar

picture emerges from evidence of the coin hoards (cat. 81–88). The earliest hoards appear in the late sixth century BC and are quite varied in their contents; by the middle of the fifth century, however, the Athenian tetradrachm is by far the most common coin there (cat. 81–83).<sup>30</sup> As with the pottery, this does not mean that Athenian merchants were coming to Egypt in great number, only that in this period Egypt and Athens were both part of a larger trade network. The overall pattern seems to have been that when Naukratis was founded in the late seventh century, most of the merchants coming to Egypt and settling there were Ionians and their East Greek neighbors. Over time, they were joined by other Greeks, including Athenians. After the first Persian conquest, Egypt needed to import silver from the Greek world in order to pay tribute, which may have further spurred the creation of commercial links with the Greeks, especially the silver-rich Athenians.<sup>31</sup>

This general pattern holds for the Greek mercenaries in Egypt as well. As discussed elsewhere, Herodotus (2.152.4–5) describes the Greek mercenaries who first came to Egypt as Ionian (see Villing, this volume). His statement is supported by an Egyptian block statue (fig. 34) purportedly found near Priene, a city in Ionia not far from Miletos. The statue features a striking inscription written in Greek: “Pediton dedicated me, the son of Amphinneios, having brought me from Egypt; to him the Egyptian king—Psammetichos—gave as a reward of valor a golden bracelet and a city, on account of his virtue.”<sup>32</sup> The paleography of the inscription places it in the seventh or sixth century BC, and Pediton must have served Pharaoh Psammetichos (Psamtek) I (r. ca. 664–610 BC) or Psammetichos II (r. 595–589 BC); the former is more likely.<sup>33</sup> The block statue is a distinctive Egyptian type used from the Middle Kingdom to about the end of the seventh century BC. Pediton must have acquired this statue while in Egypt and shipped it back to Ionia, where it may have been set up at the Panionion, the common sanctuary of the Ionians, which was controlled by Priene.<sup>34</sup> The inscription, despite being in Greek, parallels Egyptian dedicatory inscriptions on similar statues. It suggests that Pediton was highly successful in his military career in Egypt, receiving awards from the king and a position of high authority in an unnamed city. It is unknown whether he retired permanently to Ionia or if he remained in Egypt, but it is clear that he maintained connections to both places.

As with the Greek merchant communities in Egypt, East Greek dominance among the mercenaries there was eventually diluted by soldiers from other parts of the Greek world, especially Athens and Sparta. Most notably, during the short reign of Pharaoh Djedhor (also known as Tachos, r. 362–360 BC), the Athenian Chabrias raised a fleet for the Egyptian king’s campaign against Persia, and the famed Spartan king Agesilaos II likewise



**FIGURE 34** | Block statue of Pedon, Egyptian with Greek inscription, late 7th or early 6th century BC. From Asia Minor(?). Basalt, 21 × 17 × 17 cm (8¼ × 6⅞ × 6⅞ in.). Pamukkale, Hierapolis Archaeological Museum, 3162

commanded a mercenary force of some ten thousand infantry there, including one thousand Spartan hoplites.<sup>35</sup> Djedhor's campaign collapsed, and he was soon deposed by Nektanebo II (r. 360–343 BC). Agesilaos served the new pharaoh for a short time before departing Egypt, and he died near Cyrenaica during his return voyage. The Spartan custom, when a king died abroad, was to pack his body in honey to preserve it for the journey home. According to Plutarch (*Life of Agesilaos* 40.3), Agesilaos's men had no honey, so they packed his body in wax for the long trip back to Sparta. But he was far from being the last Greek king to come to Egypt; in 332 BC, Alexander the Great led his army into Egypt, albeit not as a mercenary but as a conqueror.

1 Hdt. 3.139.1; trans. R. Waterfield.  
 2 Some scholars doubt if Herodotus ever came to Egypt at all; for a recent summary of current thinking on this question, see Lloyd 2007, 226–27.  
 3 Moyer 2014.  
 4 Moyer 2011a, 42–83.  
 5 Trans. R. Waterfield.  
 6 Overview in Kaplan 2003.  
 7 Świderek 1961; Austin 1970, 20–22; Thompson 2012, 14, 77.

8 Petrie 1909; Kemp 1977; Leclère 2008, 65–69; Colburn 2014, 54–60.  
 9 Leclère 2008, 65–66.  
 10 Trindade Lopes and Fonseca Braga 2011.  
 11 Weber 2012, 246–56.  
 12 Paris, Louvre, CA 3825; Kahil 1972; Hoffmann 1997, 158–59, no. J1.  
 13 Watzinger 1905; Smoláriková 2000.

14 Van Minnen 1997.  
 15 Gallo and Masson 1993; Höckmann 2001; Vittmann 2003, 227–31. For the significance of *prothesis*, see Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 143–45.  
 16 New York, Brooklyn Museum, 37.1354E; Herbert 1972, no. 1.  
 17 Adiego 2007, 34–79; Masson 1978.  
 18 Lichtheim 1976; von Bomhard 2012. Another copy of this decree was erected downriver at Thonis-Herakleion, and the import duties may have been collected at either of these sites.  
 19 Briant and Descat 1998; Cottier 2012.  
 20 Agut-Labordère 2013, 1005–6. For more on the “Great Green,” see Kelder and Cline, *this volume*.  
 21 For the rise of Pelousion and other ports, see Carrez-Maratray 2000.  
 22 Briant and Descat 1998, 79–81.  
 23 Demetriou 2012, 126–28.  
 24 Rhodopis is also mentioned by Strabo (17.1.33). Sappho does not mention Rhodopis by name in her extant poetry, though it is often suggested that the figure of Doricha is an alias for Rhodopis.

Some newly discovered fragments of Sappho's work contain explicit references to Charaxos; see Obbink 2014.  
 25 Gardner 1888, 21–29.  
 26 Villing and Schlotzhauer 2006b, 7; Williams and Villing 2006.  
 27 Briant and Descat 1998; Cottier 2012.  
 28 Möller 2000, 119–35, 217–61; Schlotzhauer 2012.  
 29 Villing 2013, 95–97.  
 30 Thompson, Mørkholm, and Kraay 1973, 227–33; Colburn 2014, 356–58.  
 31 Colburn 2014, 359–68.  
 32 Translation in Moyer 2006, 248; see further Masson and Yoyotte 1988; Ampolo and Bresciani 1988; Pernigotti 1993; Vittmann 2003, 203–6; Parlasca 2004a, 3–4; Guizzi 2008, cat. 1.  
 33 Ampolo and Bresciani 1988; Moyer 2006, 248–49.  
 34 Moyer 2006, 250.  
 35 Ruzicka 2012, 140–53.