

A Short History of Egypt

Part IV: The Late, Classical, and Coptic Periods

Shawn C. Knight

Spring 2009

(This document last revised February 11, 2009)

1 The Third Intermediate Period Continues

About 945 BCE a pharaoh of Libyan origins named Sheshonq I came to the throne. He was probably the favored choice of the last Twenty-First Dynasty pharaoh at Tanis, and is considered the founder of the Twenty-Second Dynasty. Conveniently, the line of Theban high priests of Amun died out about the same time, and Sheshonq was able to install his own son as the new high priest, thus regaining control over the whole of Egypt.¹

We must emphasize the peaceful nature of this “Libyan takeover”. Sometimes the situation is oversimplified and one has the impression of a Libyan conquest. Instead, one should think of a situation like the Kennedy presidency: in a certain sense, it was an “Irish takeover” of the United States, simply because Kennedy was of Irish descent. Similarly, the evidence suggests that Sheshonq’s family had been situated at Bubastis for some time and had become largely “Egyptianized.” The dynasty is thought of as “the Libyan Dynasty” mostly because the most popular names of the kings—Sheshonq, Osorkon, and Takelot—are Libyan and very “un-Egyptian.”

Late in the Twenty-Second Dynasty, the pharaoh’s choice for high priest of Amun met with opposition and civil war broke out again. The Twenty-Third Dynasty was born when Pedubaste I claimed the kingship. The rest of this dynasty is very confused, but not long afterwards, the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Dynasties began as well, in Saïs and Nubia respectively. Thus four dynasties, 22–25, were in power and at war simultaneously.

2 The Late Period Begins

Around 712 BCE, the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty king Neferkare Shabaka reconquered all of Egypt, ending the reigns of Osorkon IV (Dyn. 22) and Wahkare Bocchoris (Dyn. 24), as well as whatever Twenty-Third Dynasty pharaoh might have remained. This reunification marks the beginning of the Late Period. We have the rest of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty being a line of Nubian pharaohs who maintained an Egyptian capital at Memphis and spent part of their time there, and who governed a unified Egyptian-Nubian kingdom whose sole rival for power in the region was the expanding Assyrian Empire.²

Invasions by Assyria drove the Nubians from Egypt, and the Assyrian king was able to promote the claim of Necho I, a ruler from Saïs, to the kingship, inaugurating the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. The Nubians continued to war against the Assyrians and the Saïtes, but by 650 BCE the second Saïte pharaoh, Psammetichus I, had eliminated the Nubian contention for power and had furthermore established his own independence from Assyria, aided by an uprising in Babylon which distracted the Assyrian army. He then had his daughter Nitocris³ adopted to the position of Divine Consort

¹Baines, John, and Málek, Jaromír. *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. Facts on File, 1989, p. 48.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

³Not to be confused with the Nitocris or Nitokerti who may have succeeded Pepi II during the collapse of the Old Kingdom.

of Amun at Thebes. This ancient and long-neglected office had been revived by Osorkon IV in the Twenty-Third Dynasty⁴ and rose to power as the most important religious position in the country. By installing Nitocris in it, Psammetichus consolidated his power base. Nitocris held the position for the rest of her life—61 more years—and took as her successor Ankhnesneferibre, the daughter of Psammetichus II, who held the position for at least sixty years herself.

The stability of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty ended when the pharaoh Apries sent his general Amasis to put down a revolt by Egyptian soldiers who were assisting Libyans in Cyrene, in north central Africa, against Greek colonists. Amasis joined the revolt and declared himself king. When Apries enlisted Babylonian aid from Nebuchadnezzar II, he was defeated and killed. Amasis gave Apries a proper royal burial, however; then he established new policies about the expanding relations with Greece. He confined the Greeks in Egypt to the Delta city of Naukratis, thus reducing Greco-Egyptian friction by reducing contact, while making the Greeks feel that they had a privileged arrangement by having an entire city dedicated to their commerce.

3 The Last Dynasties

525 BCE brought the invasion of Egypt and the beginning of the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty by Cambyses II, the ruler of Persia. He was highly unpopular, but his successor Darius fared better, taking an attitude of conciliation with the native Egyptian people and institutions. When the Greeks defeated the Persians at Marathon in 490, an Egyptian resistance developed in the Delta, who traded with the Greeks in return for aid. Finally, the Saïte ruler Amyrtaios freed first the Delta and then the whole of Egypt from Persian rule by 400 BCE. He is listed by Manetho as the only ruler of the Twenty-Eighth Dynasty.

Amyrtaios was deposed by a ruler from Mendes named Nepherites, thus beginning the Twenty-Ninth Dynasty; twenty years later, his successors were in turn deposed by Nectanebo I, the first pharaoh of the Thirtieth Dynasty, often considered the last dynasty of all, as it was the last one ruled by native Egyptians, and definitely the last dynasty written down by Manetho. These two dynasties had to repel repeated attempts by the Persians to retake Egypt. His cousin (?) Nectanebo II finally fell to the Persians in 343 BCE. The Second Persian Period⁵ followed for slightly more than a decade.

4 The Ptolemaic Period

In 332 BCE, the famous Macedonian king Alexander the Great arrived in Egypt and took power without bloodshed as the Persians fled before his army. Alexander apparently showed great respect for Egypt's place in world history and culture; he sacrificed to the Egyptian gods, consulted with their oracles, and established the plans for the city of Alexandria.⁶

Alexander left Egypt to continue his eastward campaigns, but following his death in Babylon, his body was brought back to Memphis by his general Ptolemy, who obtained Egypt as his *satrapy*, or share of Alexander's empire. The body was later transferred to Alexandria. A few years later, Ptolemy declared himself Ptolemy I Soter, pharaoh of Egypt.

The Ptolemaic period was characterized by the "Hellenization" of Egypt. Greek advances in agriculture and commerce were integrated into Egyptian society, and the Greek population enjoyed better educational opportunities than the Egyptian population had in the dynastic periods. The Egyptian natives fared only slightly better than they had under their own rulers. The largest development project was the building of Alexandria, which had the side effect of preventing any real development in the rest of the country as it drew so much of the nation's wealth and social "clout". The Ptolemies set up stelae throughout Egypt with copies of their decrees carved in formal

⁴Yes, Osorkon IV came from an "earlier" dynasty than Osorkon III. It was a troubled time.

⁵Called by some scholars the Thirty-First Dynasty; it is labeled as such, in quotation marks, in the introductory notes for this course.

⁶More than one "Alexandria" was established by the Macedonian in his conquest of the known world, but Egypt's was by far the most famous and successful.

hieroglyphs, in *demotic* (a highly simplified version of hieroglyphs with a slightly higher literacy rate, which developed during the Late Period), and in Greek. A particularly important one of these stelae was issued during the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes and was found at the Western Delta town of Rosetta during the French occupation in 1799 CE.

In the years leading up to 30 BCE, the famous Ptolemaic queen Cleopatra VII challenged her brother, Ptolemy XIII, for rule of the country. With the aid of the Roman dictator Julius Caesar, she emerged successful and married their younger brother Ptolemy XIV, but engaged in a sexual relationship with Caesar which produced her son and heir, Caesarion. Following Caesar's assassination, Ptolemy XIV disappears, and Caesarion was installed as his mother's co-regent, Ptolemy XV. The politician Marcus Aemilius Lepidus joined forces with the Caesar's friend and co-consul Marcus Antonius, usually known in English as Mark Antony, and Caesar's great-nephew and heir Gaius Octavius, who became known as Caesar Octavianus, or simply Octavian.

These three men were commissioned by the Senate as "Three Men for the Organization of the Republic", or *triumvirs*. In 41, Antony went to the eastern provinces to deal with Judaea and Parthia, and he met Cleopatra and became her lover, fathering several children with her. Meanwhile, Antony's wife Fulvia led a revolt against Octavian, who remained in Rome. She was exiled and died in Greece, but Antonius returned to Rome and negotiated a truce with Octavian, marrying his sister Octavia to reinforce it. In 38 the Triumvirate's commission expired, but the Senate renewed it. Eventually, however, Antony left Octavia and returned to Cleopatra seeking aid for his campaign against Parthia. She gave it, but the campaign failed.

In 36, Lepidus challenged Octavian for power in Sicily and found himself abandoned by his armies and confined there in exile. Octavian then campaigned, politically, against Antony, with much success, for Antony would no longer leave Cleopatra and their children. He named their son Alexander Helios king of Armenia and Parthia, their daughter Cleopatra Selene queen of Cyrenaica and Libya, and the youngest, Ptolemy Philadelphus, king of Syria. He then declared Ptolemy XV Caesarion to be Caesar's legitimate son and heir. When the Triumvirate again expired at the end of 33, it was not renewed.

5 The Roman and Coptic Periods

Octavian's fleet, commanded by his best friend and right-hand man Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, met and defeated the Egyptian-Antonian fleet at Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian and Agrippa invaded Egypt the next year. According to tradition and the Roman historians, the lovers committed suicide.

Octavian arranged for their tomb in Alexandria to be completed and for them to receive a royal funeral and burial together in accordance with their last wills. He had Caesarion killed as an obvious threat to his position as Caesar's heir, but he spared Cleopatra Selene, and she married King Juba II of Numidia and Octavian later made her queen of Mauretania⁷ in her own right. Alexander Helios is believed to have died in the invasion or been killed by Octavian, but Ptolemy Philadelphus came to Rome with his sister, and was raised by Octavia, Antony's ex-wife. He became a successful charioteer and died in an accident while racing in 12 BCE.

Egypt became a Roman province, and an Imperial province at that, governed by imperial appointment rather than by the Senate, and given less autonomy than the other provinces. Octavian completed his transition from triumvir to emperor in the next several decades, and was granted the name by which he is best known, Augustus, by the Senate of Rome.

The Roman period saw a continuation of the native Egyptian religious tradition and the general social order, but very few new monuments were built as the country was impoverished by the harsh rule and high taxation imposed by the Romans. The Romans recognized Egypt as a vast source of food and gold, and they exploited it to the fullest.

Inscriptions in hieroglyphs continued to be added to monuments throughout the roman period and the names of many of the emperors can be clearly read in cartouches, including Augustus, Domitian, Trajan, and Septimius Severus. Most of them have the name *Caesar* or the Roman word *Autocrator* ("emperor") written in one of their cartouches. Theodosius I ordered all pagan temples

⁷The Roman province where Algeria is now, not where Mauritania (note the spelling) is now.

closed throughout the Roman Empire in 391 CE, and the final hieroglyphic inscription has been dated to 394. The next year, when Theodosius died, the Empire was divided into the Eastern and Western empires (Byzantium and Rome).⁸

The Christian sect known as the Copts developed in Egypt in the early centuries of the Christian era, particularly at the city of Koptos, from which the sect drew its name. The Copts used a modified version of the Egyptian language which combined Egyptian words and grammar with Greek import words and the Greek alphabet, with some additional signs added to render Egyptian sounds that the standard Greek alphabet lacks.

An amalgam of Roman, Byzantine, and Coptic culture characterized Egypt from the division of the Roman Empire until the conquest of Alexandria by the Muslim Arabs in 642 CE. At this point, we make the transition from the history of Egypt into the history of Egyptology.

— △ —

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.