

Warring Greeks find peace in ancient Egypt

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Naukratis, a Greek trade emporium on Egyptian soil, has long captured the imagination of archaeologists and historians. Not only is the presence of a Greek trading settlement in Egypt during the 7th and 6th century B.C.E. surprising, but the Greeks that lived there in harmony hailed from several Greek states which traditionally warred amongst themselves.

Dr. Alexander Fantalkin of Tel Aviv University's Department of Archaeology is delving deeper into this unique piece of ancient history to come up with a new explanation for how Naukratis developed, and how its inhabitants managed to operate on foreign soil and create a new sense of common identity.

The [Greeks](#) that inhabited Naukrtis, explains Dr. Fantalkin, may have come from warring city states at home, but they formed a trade settlement in Egypt under the protection of powerful Eastern empires. This link not only brought them together as a culture, but explains how they were allowed to operate in the midst of Egyptian territory. Dr. Fantalkin's theory was recently presented at the Cultural Contexts in [Antiquity](#) conference in Innsbruck, Austria, and will soon be published in the proceedings of the conference.

Making the best of oppression

Naukrtis is remarkable for two main reasons, Dr. Fantalkin says. First, the Egyptian empire allowed Greeks to operate a lucrative trade emporium at the delta of the Nile, complete with special privileges. Second, the Greeks who lived there, though from different tribes, lived and worshipped together, pointing to the emergence of a national Greek identity. The city also acted as a symbiotic nexus for the interchange of Greek and Egyptian art and culture.

How this arrangement came to be has always puzzled researchers, Dr. Fantalkin notes, explaining his new theory about Naukrtis. In Eastern Greece, the Greeks were plagued by powerful Eastern empires such as Lydia, which was located in the central and western parts of current day Turkey. The Greeks were forced to operate under the Lydian regime, paying tribute to their overlords.

Despite this situation, the so-called Eastern Greeks continued to lead advances in material culture and intellectual achievements. They were also politically savvy, Dr. Fantalkin says, when it came to economics. At the time Naukrtis was created, Lydia had a formal alliance with the Egyptian empire. A select group of Greek businessmen used this connection to set up a trade emporium — they paid tribute to their Lydian benefactors and were guaranteed rights and freedoms as Greek

representatives of the Lydian empire. Thus, they made the best of an oppressive regime.

The land of the free?

Previous theories suggested that the Greek traders settled in Naukratis of their own free will, creating a brotherhood of merchants in the process, indifferent to interstate rivalries at home and bound firmly by a common interest in trade. In reality, Prof. Fantalkin speculates, they operated as formal representatives of the Lydian power.

"On one hand," he continues, "the Greeks were given new opportunities for trade. On the other, they owed taxes to the empire that ruled over them. This was not a free settlement of Greek merchants as was previously thought, but an organized move on behalf of a more formidable empire."

Naukratis, in his opinion, should be considered a unique and particularly important instance of "contact zones" in antiquity, in which Greek trade, although controlled by the Egyptians and mediated to a certain extent by the Lydians, both contributed to and profited from the imperial ambitions of others.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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