



THE SIXTH SATRAPY: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EGYPT UNDER ACHAEMENID RULE

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The period of Achaemenid Persian rule of Egypt, Manetho's 27th Dynasty, c. 525-404 BCE, remains largely unknown archaeologically. This is due in significant part to the modern Hellenocentric perception that, sandwiched between the so-called 'Saite renaissance' of the 26th Dynasty and the last century of native Egyptian governance in the 28th to 30th Dynasties, the 27th Dynasty was a low point in Egyptian history -- little worthy of study as a time of foreign domination by the Persians. On account of this perception there has been a tendency to date material to the 26th or 30th Dynasties when there is no absolutely compelling reason to assign it to the 27th Dynasty.¹ Thus an artificial impression of scarcity of evidence prevails, making it intrinsically difficult to investigate this period at all, much less to examine it from fresh analytical perspectives. All this serves as an ongoing disincentive to scholars and further reifies the original historical biases that caused the dilemma in the first place. The trope of scarcity in the 27th Dynasty permeates general narratives of the history of the Late Period, resulting ironically in the two rather divergent views that Achaemenid rule was either oppressive and harsh (causing a suppression of native cultural expression), or that its social impact was completely ephemeral (leaving Egypt and the Egyptians essentially unaffected by it).

Yet as a period of sustained foreign rule, and an Achaemenid satrapy, Egypt in the 27th Dynasty presents an invaluable opportunity to study both Egyptian experiences with foreign imperialism and the nature of Achaemenid rule in a particular cultural arena of profound significance. Accordingly, since 2010 I have been engaged in a project to research the material culture of this important period. The project has three major goals:

- 1 To examine the intellectual foundations of our knowledge of the archaeology of the 27th Dynasty, with a view towards distinguishing between the products of ancient agency and those of modern scholarship.
- 2 To assemble a corpus of material culture pertinent to the 27th Dynasty. Although a comprehensive catalogue is clearly a desideratum, this project focuses on objects and materials whose dates can plausibly or definitely

be placed in the 27th Dynasty, on the reasonable assumption that they are broadly illustrative of further material which cannot be dated so securely.

- 3 To use that corpus to characterize the nature and impact of Achaemenid rule in Egypt. The goal is to test the widely held assumptions of the ephemerality or harshness of Achaemenid imperialism.

My research focuses on five areas of inquiry, two regional studies and three studies of certain types of material. The regional studies consider the city of Memphis, together with its necropoleis, and the Kharga Oasis. As the seat of the satrap and the administrative center of Egypt, Memphis was a major locus of interaction between Egyptians and the empire; thus it provides a rich body of evidence for this period, much of which can be positioned, at least tentatively, in the wider ancient landscape of the city. The Kharga Oasis, though lacking Memphis' centrality, was nevertheless the site of significant activity during Achaemenid rule, evidenced by the construction of temples and the introduction of *qanat* irrigation there. The other three areas of research concern representations of individuals (in form of statues, reliefs and seals), ceramics, and the role of foreign coins in the Egyptian political economy. The manner in which individuals conceived of themselves and their broader places in society informed how they chose to represent themselves in statues and seals; thus examination of these sorts of personal monuments reveals how certain individuals in Egypt conceived of themselves in the context of Achaemenid rule.² The procurement and use of ceramic vessels was also informed by broader social and economic conditions, including culturally charged dining practices, so changes in ceramics corpora from the 26th to the 27th Dynasty represent potentially momentous shifts in the social environments of certain Egyptian communities. Finally, as a satrapy Egypt had to pay tribute to the empire, and to do this it was necessary for the Egyptians to convert grain to silver, which they did by importing coins from the Greeks in exchange for grain and other products. The most prevalent silver coin in the eastern Mediterranean at this time was the Athenian tetradrachm. By the end of the fifth century it was not only the most common coin in Egypt, but it was also

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being used alongside Egyptian weight standards for silver. Imitations of it were even being struck there, and it is clear that this was a significant period in the monetary history of Egypt.³

In each of these five areas my main finding is that during the 27th Dynasty Egyptian people and institutions had a wide variety of experiences with Achaemenid rule. For some the empire

presented opportunities and options which were advantageous or attractive; for others its impact ranged from the negligible, invisible, or restricting, to one worthy of resistance. This variability is reflected in the spectrum of material culture from Egypt belonging to this period that my dissertation assembles and analyzes.

NOTES

¹ D. A. Aston, "Dynasty 26, Dynasty 30, or Dynasty 27? In Search of the Funerary Archaeology of the Persian Period," in Anthony Leahy and John Tait (eds.), *Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H. S. Smith* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1999), 17-22.

² For a preview of this methodology and some of its results see Henry P. Colburn, "Art of the Achaemenid Empire, and Art in the Achaemenid Empire," in

Brian Brown and Marian H. Feldman (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art* (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

³ For some preliminary findings on this topic, and its implications for the monetization of the Egyptian economy, see Henry P. Colburn, "The Role of Coinage in the Political Economy of Fourth Century Egypt," in Paul McKechnie and Jennifer Cromwell (eds.), *Ptolemy I Soter and the Transformation of Egypt, 404-282 BC* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).