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When Greeks Roamed the Nile.

Pre-Hellenistic Greek Networks in Egypt: Trade, Settlement, and the Cultural Foundations of Ptolemaic Legitimacy

Ana Belén Rumí Gutiérrez

Abstract

The interconnections of the ancient Mediterranean, initiated during Minoan maritime trade networks, persisted despite disruptions caused by the invasions of the Sea Peoples around 1200 BCE, as witnessed in the 1884 discovery of Naukratis by Flinders Petrie. Evidence from Naukratis demonstrates that Graeco-Egyptian trade continued after the fall of the Mycenaean world and before Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE. While Naukratis was long considered the only officially recognized Greek settlement in Egypt, more recent archaeological investigations at sites such as Thonis-Heracleion, Thmuis, and the Metelis region suggest a broader and more enduring Greek presence prior to the Ptolemaic era.

This paper seeks to investigate the question: To what extent did pre-Hellenistic Greek settlements in Egypt influence the later acceptance of the Ptolemaic dynasty into the pharaonic tradition, particularly in a context where dynastic legitimacy was not solely achieved through marital alliances? Using a comparative archaeological approach, the study analyzes material culture from Greek-identified sites in the Nile Delta dated between the 7th and 3rd centuries BCE, examining these alongside textual sources to trace cultural and economic continuities.

The paper argues that a sustained Greek presence, embedded through trade, religious activity, and urban settlement, laid important groundwork for the Ptolemaic dynasty's legitimacy in Egypt. This evidence challenges narratives of abrupt cultural imposition and instead suggests a gradual process of integration rooted in long-standing Graeco-Egyptian interaction.

Keywords: Graeco-Egyptian; maritime trade networks; Naukratis; Ptolemaic Egypt

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Interest areas

Hellenistic and Ptolemaic Egypt, Graeco-Egyptian Relationships, Greco-Egyptian Integration and Local Acceptance.

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استمرت الترابطات الإجتماعية والإقتصادية لشعوب حوض البحر الأبيض المتوسط القدماء، التي بدأت خلال شبكات التجارة البحرية المينوية، وذلك بالرغم من الاضطرابات الناجمة عن غزوات شعوب البحر حوالي 1200 قبل الميلاد، كما في حالة اكتشاف نوكراتيس عام 1884 من قبل فلندرز بيري. تُظهر الأدلة من نوكراتيس أن التجارة المصرية اليونانية استمرت بعد سقوط العالم الميسيني وقبل فتح الإسكندرا الأكبر لمصر عام 332 قبل الميلاد. على الرغم من أن نوكراتيس اعتُبرت لفترة طويلة المستوطنة اليونانية الوحيدة المعترف بها رسمياً في مصر، فإن التحقيقات الأثرية الأكثر حداثة في مواقع مثل ثونيس-هرقليون وتموي والمنطقة الميثيلية تشير إلى وجود يوناني أوسع وأكثر استمرارية قبل العصر البطلمي.

تسعى هذه الورقة إلى التحقيق في السؤال: ما مدى تأثير المستوطنات اليونانية قبل الهلينستية في مصر على القبول اللاحق لسلالة البطالمة في التقليد الفرعوني، وخصوصاً إن الشرعية الحاكمة لم تكن تأتي فقط من خلال التحالفات الزوجية؟ باستخدام نهج أثري مقارنة، تحلل الدراسة الثقافة المادية من المواقع المحددة بأنها يونانية في دلتا النيل المؤرخة بين القرنين السابع والثالث قبل الميلاد، مع فحص هذه الأدلة إلى جانب المصادر النصية لتتبع الاستمراريات الثقافية والاقتصادية.

تؤكد الورقة أن الوجود اليوناني المستدام، المدمج من خلال التجارة والنشاط الديني والاستيطان الحضري، وضع أساساً مهماً لشرعية سلالة البطالمة في مصر. تُطعن هذه الأدلة في الروايات المتعلقة بفرض ثقافي مفاجئ وبدلاً من ذلك تشير إلى عملية تدريجية للتكامل متجذرة في التفاعل اليوناني المصري طويل الأمد.

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Introduction

Extensive scholarship has focused on the governance of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled Egypt from 323 to 31 BCE, making it the longest-reigning royal house in Egyptian history. Emerging after Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BCE, the Ptolemies are often studied for their political structures, social policies, and cultural programs, including artistic patronage. Notable contributions by Fraser (1972), Bowman (1996), and Vanoyeke (2000) reflect this interest. However, comparatively few studies examine the underlying conditions that facilitated the Ptolemies' rise to power. Most existing literature attributes their legitimacy primarily to Alexander the Great, whose reception as a divine savior and pharaoh, particularly during his visit to the oracle at Siwa Oasis (Arrian, *Anabasis* III.1.1–1.4; Bell 1965, 37; Gómez 2007, 43), is seen as foundational. Ptolemy I Soter, initially appointed as satrap, later claimed dynastic legitimacy by associating himself with Alexander, eventually proclaiming himself pharaoh in 305 BCE, almost two decades after Alexander's death (Vanoyeke 2000, 54; Moretti 1981, 199).

Long before the foundation of the Greek trading settlement of Naukratis in the 7th century BCE, interactions between the Aegean and Egypt had already begun to take shape. These early connections can be traced back to the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations (ca. 2000–1100 BCE), which maintained maritime contact through trade and cultural exchange (Merrillees 1972, 281; Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 268–281; Wachsmann 1998, 295). Archaeological evidence, including Mycenaean pottery in Egyptian contexts and Egyptian objects in Aegean sites, confirms these early interactions (Cline 1990; Merrillees 1972, 1998; Sevilla Cueva 1991, 12).

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During the Mediterranean Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1100 BCE), diplomatic and commercial exchange intensified, particularly under pharaohs such as Amenhotep III. Although these exchanges declined following the collapse of the Mycenaean world and the upheavals associated with the Sea Peoples, a mysterious group of maritime raiders whose origins remain unknown (Cline 2014, 172; Alvar 1989, 43–44; Díaz Alonso 2015, 208–229) around 1200 BCE, contact gradually resumed by the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. This period of renewed engagement saw Greek merchants and mercenaries appearing more frequently in the Nile Delta, not only at Naukratis but also at key eastern sites such as Tell Dafana (Daphnae). These early encounters established the socio-economic groundwork for the formalized settlements of the Saite and Ptolemaic periods.

This study proposes a complementary hypothesis: that pre-existing Greek settlements in Egypt, evident through trade, cultural exchange, and long-term habitation, may have facilitated the Ptolemies' integration into the pharaonic tradition, distinguishing their rule from earlier foreign powers such as the Persians.

By examining archaeological and textual evidence from key sites across the Nile Delta and broader Egyptian landscape, this article investigates the research question: *To what extent did pre-Hellenistic Greek settlements in Egypt influence the later acceptance of the Ptolemaic dynasty into the pharaonic tradition?*

Early Greek-Egyptian Interactions: Chronology and Evidence

While Greek-Egyptian contact originated in the Mediterranean Late Bronze Age through Minoan and Mycenaean maritime networks (Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 268–281; Wachsmann 1998, 295), the subsequent disruption associated with the Sea Peoples necessitated a re-establishment of these ties during the 7th century BCE. This new era marked a shift from intermittent diplomatic exchange to a structured, permanent Greek presence centered in the Delta (James 2003; Möller 2000, 2005, 2019). This study focuses on a specific network of these settlements, particularly Naukratis, Thonis-Heracleion, Mendes, Thmuis, Kom Wasit, and Kom al-Ahmer, which demonstrate varying degrees of Greek integration from the late 7th century BCE through the late 4th century BCE. Across these locations, archaeological markers such as Greek-style ceramics, domestic architecture, and votive offerings point to a transition from seasonal trade to long-term, semi-permanent habitation (Tab. 1).

Systematic excavations, such as those conducted by the British Museum at Naukratis and the IEASM at Thonis-Heracleion, provide concrete evidence for this longstanding cultural hybridity (Robinson and Goddio 2015; Möller 2005). These are complemented by extensive studies at Mendes-Thmuis and Kom Wasit-Kom al-Ahmer, where the material record, specifically the presence of imported and locally produced Greek-style transport amphorae and fine wares, illustrates sustained socio-economic interaction (Marchiori 2014; Kenawi 2019; Kenawi and Marchiori 2025, XIX; Reghinham 2025, 197–208). Numismatic and artifactual distributions further support this integration,

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suggesting that these sites functioned as sophisticated regional hubs with multi-ethnic populations well before the transition to the Hellenistic period (Asolati et al. 2019). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that pre-Hellenistic Greek settlements functioned as both economic and cultural bridges, characterized by a material culture that blended Hellenic and Egyptian influences.

Pre-Hellenistic Greek Settlements and Their Impact on the Ptolemaic Integration into Pharaonic Tradition

Traditionally, Naukratis has been considered the only officially sanctioned Greek *emporion* in Egypt (Herodotus, Histories 2.178). Herodotus' account suggests an institutionalized religious and cultural presence, noting that Amasis "*gave those who came to Egypt the city of Naukratis to dwell in.*"

However, the claim that Naukratis was an isolated enclave has been challenged by archaeological evidence from sites including Sais, Athribis, Bubastis, Tell el-Maskhuta, and Daphnai in the Delta, as well as Memphis and Saqqara along the Nile Valley (Vittmann 2003, 198; Sevilla Cueva 1994; Fraser 1972). To understand the depth of this integration, this study employs a comparative archaeological approach focused on specific "*micro-regions*" within the Delta.

Table 1: Major Archaeological Sites in Egypt with Evidence of Pre-Ptolemaic Greek Presence.

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Site/Project	Location	Excavation History (Key Phases)	Greek Presence / Finds	Key Discoveries & Notes
Naukratis	Western Delta	1884–1903 (Petrie, Gardner); 1977–1982 (Coulson & Leonard); 2004–2024 (British Museum)	7th c. BCE – Byzantine	Sanctuaries (Hellenion), Greek pottery, figurines, and the Great Temenos.
Thonis-Heracleion	Aboukir Bay	1996–Present (IEASM/Goddio)	6th–4th c. BCE (Peak)	Aphrodite sanctuary, Greek weaponry, shipwreck "baris," and Saite-era artifacts.
Mendes	Central Delta	1964–1980 (NYU); 1990–Present (Penn State/Redford)	Late Period / Saite	Attic pottery, commercial traces, and imported transport amphorae.
Thmuis	Central Delta	2009–Present (Univ. of Hawai'i)	Late Period – Ptolemaic	Domestic Greek-style architecture, kilns, and ceramic assemblages.
Kom al-Ahmer / Kom Wasit	Western Delta	2012–Present (Univ. of Padua/Kenawi)	Late Period – Ptolemaic	Greek-style dwellings, structural remains, and numismatic evidence.

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The selection of Naukratis, Thonis-Heracleion, Mendes, Thmuis, Kom Wasit, and Kom al-Ahmer is based on three specific criteria:

1. Chronological Continuity and Evidence: Selected sites provide clear archaeological evidence—primarily through ceramic and numismatic data—of sustained occupation from the Saite/Persian periods (7th–5th centuries BCE) through the early Ptolemaic transition.
2. Material and Functional Hybridity: Each site exhibits a demonstrable mix of Greek and Egyptian domestic architecture and ceramic assemblages, serving as either primary maritime gateways (emporion) or secondary inland hubs within regional trade networks.
3. Textual and Regional Correlation: Each location is explicitly mentioned in ancient textual sources, most notably by Herodotus, allowing for a direct correlation between the material culture and the historical narrative of the Late Period.

By examining the material record of these sites, we can identify consistent patterns of socio-economic and cultural hybridity. This methodology moves beyond traditional textual narratives to analyze domestic architecture, ceramic assemblages, and religious artifacts as primary indicators of long-term habitation and Greek-Egyptian environmental adaptation. Such a comparison allows us to assess how these



Figure 1: Map of the Nile Delta showing settlements with evidence of Greek presence. Map prepared by the author using Google Maps as a base, © 2025 Google.

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settlements functioned as foundational nodes of exchange, providing the material evidence for the cultural substrate that existed prior to the late 4th century BCE.

Naukratis and Pre-Hellenistic Greek Presence: Foundations for Ptolemaic Integration

Naukratis, located in the western Nile Delta near present-day Kom Gi'eif, represents the earliest and most extensively studied Greek settlement in Egypt. While often defined by its role as an emporion, archaeological evidence reveals a complex urban reality that predates and informs the later Ptolemaic administrative structures. Classical sources form the foundation of our understanding, though they require critical scrutiny. Herodotus describes the city as a joint precinct granted to the Greeks by Pharaoh Amasis (570–526 BCE):

"Amasis became a lover of the Greeks, and [...] he gave those who came to Egypt the city of Naukratis to dwell in, and to those who voyaged to the country without desire to settle there he gave lands where they might set altars and make holy places for their gods." (Histories 2.178, trans. by Godley).

In the original Greek:

"Ἀμασις δὲ φίλον ἐγένετο τοῖς Ἕλλησι, καὶ ἔδωκε τοῖς ἐλθόντις εἰς Αἴγυπτον τὴν πόλιν Ναύκρατιν οἰκέειν, καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις τῶν ἐλθόντων ἀπροσδοκῆτως ἐς τὴν χώραν ἔδωκε τὰς γαῖας, ἵνα ἐπιτελέσωσιν ἱερά τῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν." (Histories 2.178)

Strabo (17.1.18), by contrast, attributes the foundation to the Milesians under Psamtik I (664–610 BCE). This divergence reflects broader historiographical questions; when using these sources, one must account for potential Hellenocentric bias, where complex, organic settlement processes are often reduced to singular "foundational acts" by specific monarchs (James 2003).

The rediscovery of Naukratis began with Petrie (1884), followed by Gardner (1885), Hogarth (1889, 1903), Smith (1921), and Ali (1944). Systematic excavations resumed in 1977–78 under Coulson and Leonard, culminating in the British Museum's project Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt from 2012, which catalogued over 18,000 objects (Gardner 1886; Leonard 1997; British Museum 2017).

Archaeologically, Greek activity at Naukratis can be traced to at least the early 7th century BCE. Corinthian pottery dated around 620 BCE provides evidence of presence prior to Amasis' reign. While imported ceramics do not necessarily indicate permanent settlement (Austin 1970, 20–22), stratigraphy and architectural remains suggest that by the 6th century BCE, Greek populations were organizing within the city, establishing sanctuaries, domestic spaces, and civic structures that testify to a sustained, embedded presence. The city's layout reveals a complex, multicultural urban center divided into Greek and Egyptian quarters (Sevilla Cueva 1992, 180–182; Villing 2015 and 2019, 218).

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Notably, Naukratis contained at least six temples, including the Hellenion—a joint sanctuary of nine Greek cities—and the Great Temenos, alongside temples dedicated to Aphrodite, Apollo, Hera, and the Dioscuri (fig. 2). The sanctuary of Aphrodite appears to be the oldest, based on ceramic assemblages (Möller 2000). The temenos of Apollo dates to the early 6th century BCE, with a major construction phase between 530–510 BCE.

Adjacent is the sanctuary of Hera, attributed by Herodotus to Samian settlers. Initially misidentified as a palaestra, it was confirmed as a temple by Gardner through votive inscriptions (Leonard 1997). The Hellenion itself remains a subject of debate. While Petrie initially mislocated it, Hogarth uncovered substantial architectural remains in the north, including rooms enclosed by a massive wall. Ceramic evidence indicates three construction phases: 6th century BCE, 5th century BCE (with 4th-century renovations), and a final 3rd-century BCE Ptolemaic phase (Höckmann and Möller 2006, 11-22). The Great Temenos, initially thought to be a military camp, likely represents an Egyptian temple (Sevilla Cueva 1992, 180-182), illustrating the spatial coexistence of Greek and Egyptian sacred spheres.

Naukratis' material culture reflects this convergence. The Naukratis Stele (380 BCE) formalizes Greek religious presence and demonstrates Egyptian recognition of Greek institutions (fig. 3). Such embedded interactions—including trade, religious life, and urban cohabitation—provided a societal framework familiar with Greek culture long before the late 4th century BCE. While many areas remain unexplored, the evidence from Naukratis highlights a continuity of Greek presence that provided both the historical precedent and social familiarity that distinguished the region's trajectory from earlier periods of foreign contact.

Thonis-Heracleion: A Pre-Hellenistic Greek-Egyptian Maritime Hub and Its Role in Ptolemaic Integration

The discovery of Thonis-Heracleion by Franck Goddio in 2000 represents one of the most significant recent archaeological finds in Egypt. This fully submerged city, located in the Bay of Aboukir near the Canopic mouth of the Nile (fig. 1), served as a critical port city connecting Greece, the Levantine coast, and Egypt (Van der Wilt 2013). Its function as a maritime hub is evidenced by numerous artifacts, including over sixty shipwrecks, which suggest that the site operated as a primary customs and trading center between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE (Pfeiffer 2010, 17; Van der Wilt 2013, 7, 183).

Two key monuments—the naos of the temple of Amun-Gereb and the Stele of Heracleion (fig. 4)—have been instrumental in confirming the city's identity. The Canopus Decree explicitly mentions Amun-Gereb residing in a city called Heracleion,

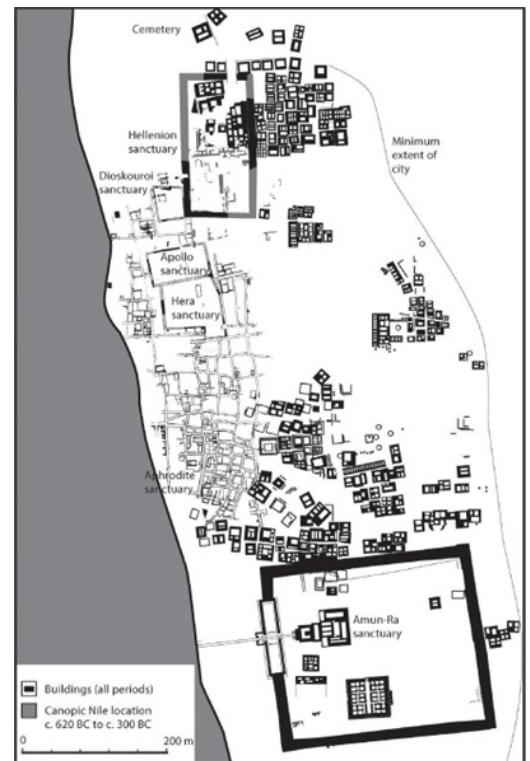


Figure 2: Map of Naukratis showing its buildings.

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with the Egyptian name *rA-Hnt* corresponding to the Greek Thonis (Van der Wilt 2013, 7). The Stele of Heracleion, issued under Nectanebo I (c. 380 BCE), is a near-identical twin to the Naukratis Stele found inland. Both stelae detail the same royal decree: a 10% tax on Greek imported goods and locally manufactured Greek products to be paid into the treasury of the temple of Neith. While the Naukratis Stele stood at the inland trading hub, the Heracleion Stele was positioned at the coast to regulate the actual point of entry. This dual-placement of identical administrative decrees demonstrates a sophisticated, state-sanctioned framework for Greek-Egyptian interaction that was fully operational decades before the Ptolemaic period.

Scholarly consensus identifies Thonis and Heracleion as the same city, with the Greek name linked to Heracles, who was associated locally with the Egyptian god Khonsu, son of Amun-Gereb. This religious pairing reflects the syncretic culture that facilitated long-term Greek-Egyptian coexistence (Van der Wilt 2013, 8). Situated amidst the Nile, canals, and a lake, the city's central island housed major religious and civic buildings, where colossal statues of Egyptian kings and deities stood alongside a rich assemblage of artifacts which includes Egyptian and Greek pottery, votive figurines, ritual objects, and imported trade goods dated from the late 7th century BCE. The presence of numerous baris vessels (fig. 5) recovered from the harbor further supports its identification as the principal trading port (Fabre and Belov 2009; Robinson 2018).

Thonis-Heracleion's role as a customs port likely peaked in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, serving as the primary gateway for goods moving upriver to Naukratis and into the Egyptian interior. Diodorus Siculus (1.19.4) corroborates this by describing Thonis as the principal emporion of Egypt at the Nile's mouth. This controlled access highlights the pre-existing framework of Greek economic and religious presence in Egypt, which the Ptolemies later integrated into their pharaonic administration.

While the rise of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE eventually supplanted Thonis-Heracleion as the primary port, archaeological finds—including a Ptolemaic-era stele (c. 118 BCE)—demonstrate that the site remained an active part of the Greco-Egyptian landscape until its eventual submergence (Pfeiffer 2010, 17; Van der Wilt 2013, 7).

Ultimately, the city functioned as a key gateway where Greek culture was already embedded within the Egyptian economic and religious landscape, setting the necessary precedent for the Ptolemies' acceptance as legitimate pharaohs.

From Mendes to Thmuis: Economic and Cultural Foundations for Ptolemaic Integration in the Eastern Delta

The ancient cities of Mendes (modern Tell El-Ruba) and Thmuis (modern Tell Timai), located in Egypt's Eastern Delta (fig. 1), illustrate how Greek presence intersected with



Figure 3: *The Naukratis Stele (Decree of Nectanebo I).*

© Antikforever.com; original artifact in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 34002).

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longstanding Egyptian urban and economic traditions in ways that facilitated the Ptolemaic dynasty's later acceptance into the pharaonic tradition (Marchiori 2014, 86).

Mendes, situated on the Mendesian branch of the Nile, had been continuously inhabited since predynastic times, developing by the 7th century BCE into one of the Delta's most prominent port cities and serving as the capital of Egypt during the 29th Dynasty (Blouin 2014, 57; Redford 2010, 173–78). This status made Mendes an important political, religious, and commercial center.

Mendes was particularly renowned for its production of luxury goods, including perfumes and cosmetics highly prized throughout Egypt and the Mediterranean world. Archaeological and textual evidence indicate the city housed large-scale perfume workshops; local traditions even associate a famous perfume with Cleopatra VII herself, underscoring Mendes's enduring cultural influence (Marchiori 2014, 88; Littman et al. 2021). This luxury industry not only facilitated trade with Greek merchants but also established Mendes as a hub of cross-cultural commercial exchange before and during the early phases of Greek settlement in Egypt.

Nearby Thmuis likely originated as an industrial extension of Mendes, eventually evolving into an autonomous urban center by the 4th century BCE (Marchiori 2014, 87). Unlike Mendes's irregular urban fabric, Thmuis exhibits a grid-like layout characteristic of Greek urban planning, indicating deliberate Hellenistic influence on its



Figure 4: Map of key elements in Thonis-Heracleion.
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design and governance. This urban configuration reflects Greek-Egyptian synthesis, blending indigenous and immigrant architectural traditions. Environmental factors shaped the relationship between these two cities.

Over time, natural changes in the Mendesian branch of the Nile caused its course to shift closer to Thmuis (fig. 6), facilitating the latter's rise as a commercial and administrative center at Mendes's expense by the early 2nd century CE (Blouin 2014, 61, 65; Redford 2010, 199–202). The geographic shift demonstrates how environmental and economic factors intertwined to reshape the Delta's urban hierarchy, with Thmuis ultimately assuming the economic and civic functions previously centered in Mendes.

Greek-Egyptian interaction in this region is attested in classical sources as well. Herodotus (5th century BCE) mentions both Mendes and Thmuis within the broader context of pre-Hellenistic Greek settlements that served as points of economic and cultural contact between Egypt and the Greek world: "*The Kalasiries for their part are of the provinces of Thebes, Bubastis, Aphthis, Tanis, Mendes, Sebennys, Athribis, Pharbaïthis, Thmuis, [...]*" (Herodotus 2.166).

The planned urban layout of Thmuis, emerging next to an ancient Egyptian capital, demonstrates how Greek settlers adapted to local conditions while leaving a recognizable imprint on the urban and economic landscape. The evidence from Mendes and Thmuis suggests a sustained process of cultural and economic integration, characterized by trade, luxury production, and urban planning. These interactions laid important groundwork for the Ptolemies' later acceptance into the pharaonic tradition, providing a population already familiar with Greek-Egyptian hybridity. By inheriting cities where Greek and Egyptian elements coexisted, the Ptolemies could claim legitimacy in a context shaped by centuries of prior settlement, commerce, and cultural negotiation.

Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit: Western Delta Settlements and Their Role in Greek-Egyptian Interactions

The Kom al-Ahmer–Kom Wasit archaeological project, a collaborative mission led by the Università di Siena and the Italian Archaeological Center of Egypt (CAIE), was initiated in 2012 to enhance understanding of the Western Nile Delta's archaeological heritage, with particular focus on the hinterlands of Alexandria (Marchiori 2014, 79). The project centers on two neighboring sites—Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit—located in the modern Beheira province (fig. 1).

Historical records are scarce, and early looting has significantly disturbed the contexts (Manchip White 2011, 29). Nonetheless, these sites are posited to have played key roles as ancient urban centers, possibly serving as the capital of the Metelis nome.

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Figure 5: *The Baris-type vessel from Thonis-Heracleion. Photo by Christoph Gerigk; © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation, image via Smithsonian Magazine.*



The relationship between Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer suggests a migratory and functional shift reminiscent of the transition between Mendes and Thmuis in the Eastern Delta. Kom Wasit appears to have declined as Kom al-Ahmer rose in prominence, potentially reflecting the strategic relocation of the nome capital to maintain control over key waterways and trade routes (Marchiori 2014, 80). As administrative centers, these settlements facilitated multicultural exchanges and attracted diverse populations, including Greek merchants and settlers.

Although comprehensive excavation of Kom Wasit remains limited, surface ceramic analyses by M. Kenawi and P. Wilson reveal continuous occupation from the 7th century BCE to the 1st century CE (Marchiori 2014, 84). Ongoing archaeological efforts try to bring to light the layout of Kom Wasit, with many of its main buildings still underground (Silverstein and Littman 2023, 247; fig. 7). Wilson's study identified a predominance of Ptolemaic pottery fragments, alongside earlier Late Dynastic and some Early Roman materials, corroborated by finds such as a lekythos and a Ptolemaic coin (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009, 176).

In contrast to many Ptolemaic baths later altered during the Roman period, Kom Wasit's Hellenistic tholos bath appears unmodified, suggesting abandonment by the 1st century CE, possibly due to rising groundwater and flooding damaging urban structures (Kenawi 2019, 73; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009, 176).

Kom Wasit's identification as the capital of the Metelis nome is reinforced by its spatial and chronological relationship with Kom al-Ahmer. Both sites enjoyed access to the Bolbitine branch of the Nile, situating them advantageously within regional trade networks connecting major centers such as Heracleion, Naukratis, and Alexandria (Kenawi 2014, 312; Marchiori 2014, 85). Greek presence is well-attested at Kom Wasit through imported fine ceramics and amphorae, including a late 7th–early 6th century BCE aryballos decorated with a palmette motif, indicating early Greek artistic influence

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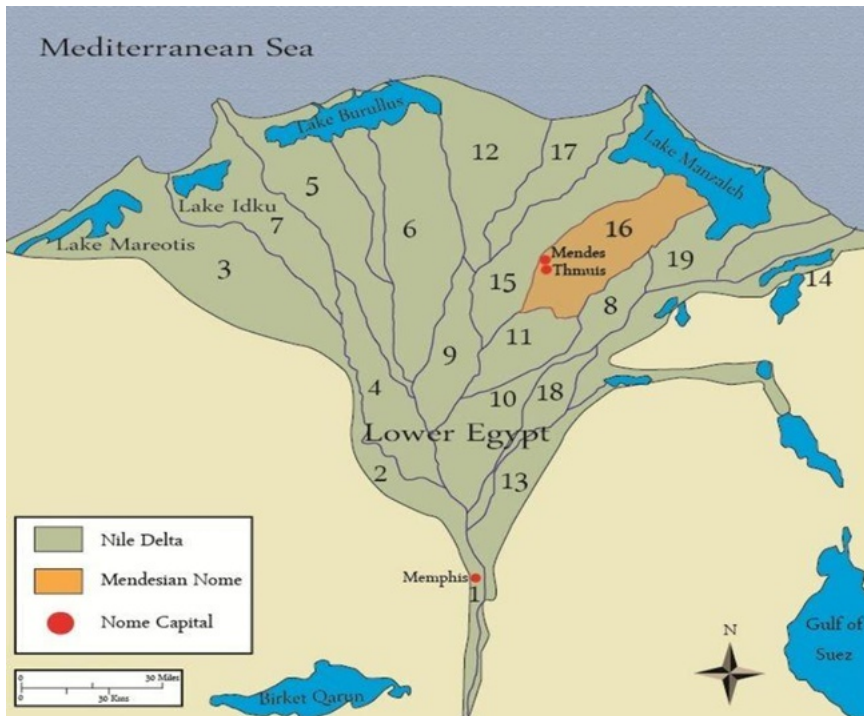


Figure 6: Map of the Mendesian nome, showing the relationship between Mendes (Tell el-Rub'a) and Thmuis (Tell el-Timai). Image via Alchetron; based on the archaeological survey of the Tell Timai Project. © Alchetron.

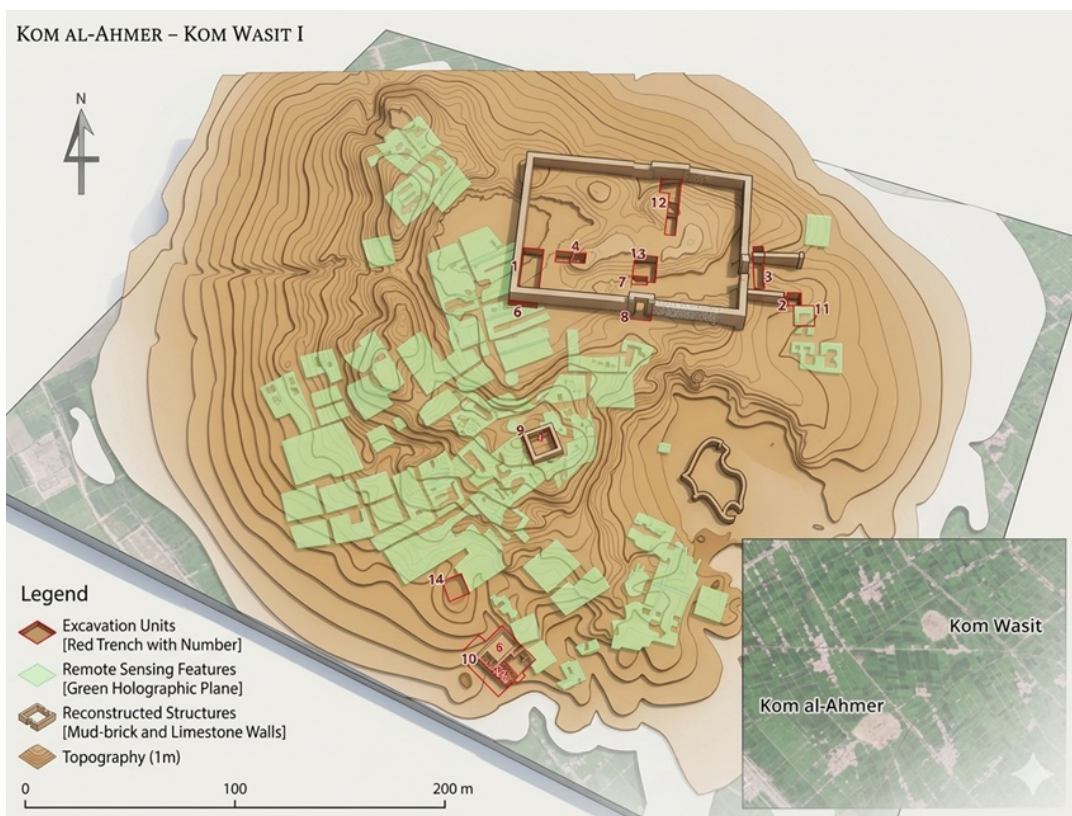


Figure 7: 3D map recreation of units in Kom Wasit. Generated with AI by author, based on Kenawi and Herslund (2019, p. 68, fig. 5.1).

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and commercial activity in the area (Marchiori 2014, 85). Kom al-Ahmer's occupation primarily dates to the Hellenistic period and later, as evidenced by Ptolemaic coin finds and ceramic sherds extending into the 9th century CE.

This suggests a prolonged settlement with sustained Greek-Egyptian interactions (Marchiori 2014, 85). The migration from Kom Wasit to Kom al-Ahmer mirrors the regional shifts observed between Mendes and Thmuis, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of these interconnected centers. The archaeological evidence from Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer demonstrates how pre-Hellenistic and early Hellenistic Greek settlements established entrenched economic and administrative roles within the Western Delta. Strategic locations and the presence of Greek material culture indicate that these settlements were active participants in the cross-cultural dynamics of ancient Egypt, contributing to a regional environment of hybridity long before the formal consolidation of the Ptolemaic state (Marchiori 2014; Kenawi 2014; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009). Kom Wasit's identification as the capital of the Metelis nome is reinforced by its spatial and chronological relationship with Kom al-Ahmer.

Both sites enjoyed access to the Bolbitine branch of the Nile, situating them advantageously within regional trade networks connecting major centers such as Heracleion, Naukratis, and Alexandria (Kenawi 2014, 312; Marchiori 2014, 85). Greek presence is well-attested at Kom Wasit through imported fine ceramics and amphorae, including a late 7th–early 6th century BCE aryballos decorated with a palmette motif, indicating early Greek artistic influence and commercial activity in the area (Marchiori 2014, 85).

Kom al-Ahmer's occupation primarily dates to the Hellenistic period and later, as evidenced by Ptolemaic coin finds and ceramic sherds extending into the 9th century CE. This suggests a prolonged settlement with sustained Greek-Egyptian interactions (Marchiori 2014, 85). The migration from Kom Wasit to Kom al-Ahmer mirrors the regional shifts observed between Mendes and Thmuis, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of these interconnected centers.

The archaeological evidence from Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer demonstrates how pre-Hellenistic and early Hellenistic Greek settlements established entrenched economic and administrative roles within the Western Delta. Strategic locations and the presence of Greek material culture indicate that these settlements were active participants in the cross-cultural dynamics of ancient Egypt, contributing to a regional environment of hybridity long before the formal consolidation of the Ptolemaic state (Marchiori 2014; Kenawi 2014; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009).

Discussion: The Influence of Pre-Hellenistic Greek Settlements on Ptolemaic Integration

The analysis presented here evaluates the evolution of Greek-Egyptian hybridity by synthesizing the archaeological data from the four micro-regions established in the selection criteria. By correlating the literary attestations of the Late Period with the material record—specifically the ceramic and architectural evidence from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE—we can move beyond traditional text-based narratives. The functional diversity of these sites, ranging from coastal gateways like Thonis-Heracleion to administrative inland centers like Mendes and Kom Wasit, allows for a comprehensive assessment of how Greek communities were spatially and economically embedded within the Delta's landscape. This comparative framework reveals that the "receptive infrastructure" inherited by the Ptolemies was a consistent, regional phenomenon rather than a series of isolated occurrences.

Regional Synthesis and Integration

These pre-Hellenistic settlements collectively demonstrate a deep-rooted and multifaceted interaction that long preceded the Ptolemaic era. They formed interregional networks connecting the Aegean and Egyptian heartlands, facilitating the exchange of wine, oil, and perfumes while enabling sustained social and religious negotiation (Redford 2010; Kenawi and Marchiori 2025; Reghinham 2025). The strategic prominence of Naukratis as a multi-ethnic emporion is underscored by its specific topographic layout, which allowed for a controlled yet fluid exchange between Greek merchants and the Egyptian administration (Sevilla Cueva 1992). This urban complexity provided the blueprint for the permanent Greek presence that would later characterize the Delta's commercial hubs.

Thonis-Heracleion functioned as Egypt's principal maritime port and a customs gateway where Greek traders interfaced with Egyptian authorities (Pfeiffer 2010; Van der Wilt 2013, 7-8). The site's material record—including shipwrecks, imported ceramics, and monumental architecture—underscores how Greek commercial and ritual practices were already embedded within the Egyptian landscape (Goddio 2007; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009; Villing 2015). This prominence suggests that the "Greek world" was an integrated component of Egyptian political economy well before 305 BCE. Similarly, the transition from Mendes to Thmuis illustrates the adaptive nature of Greek settlement in the Eastern Delta. While Mendes was a center for luxury production (Redford 2010; Blouin 2014), environmental shifts led to the rise of Thmuis, whose grid-like urban layout reflects deliberate Hellenistic planning within a traditional administrative hub (Littman et al. 2021).

This regional continuity created the social familiarity necessary to support later Ptolemaic claims to legitimacy. In the Western Delta, Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer reveal a similar pattern of resilience. Continuous occupation from the 7th century BCE, signaled by Greek ceramics and domestic structures, points to embedded communities active in both trade and local administration (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009; Kenawi

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2014). The "shifting center" migration observed here mirrors the Eastern Delta, confirming that Greek settlers were not transient visitors but active participants in the regional evolution of the Delta.

The material and textual evidence collectively indicates that Greek presence was neither incidental nor transient. By distinguishing seasonal trade sites from those demonstrating permanent habitation—marked by Greek-style domestic architecture and sanctuaries to Greek deities—we see a degree of cultural embeddedness that fostered a receptive environment for the Ptolemies (Villing 2022; Austin 1970). By the time Ptolemy I Soter established his dynasty, he leveraged these existing networks of intercultural familiarity and urban infrastructure. This allowed the Ptolemies to adopt Pharaonic traditions more effectively than earlier foreign powers, such as the Persians, whose authority was often viewed as an external imposition due to limited social integration (Briant 2002; Knapp and Manning 2016).

As emphasized by Vanoyeke (2000), the success of the first Ptolemies rested on their ability to navigate this inherited landscape, transforming regional Greek-Egyptian commercial entrenchment into a centralized administrative system (Thompson 2012). Ultimately, these early settlements fostered the hybridity that allowed the Ptolemaic kingdom to consolidate power and establish one of the most enduring Hellenistic states (Fraser 1972; Kenawi and Marchiori 2025).

Conclusion

The archaeological evidence from Naukratis, Thonis-Heracleion, Mendes-Thmuis, and Kom Wasit-Kom al-Ahmer demonstrates that pre-Hellenistic Greek communities were not merely transient visitors, but were deeply embedded within the socio-economic and religious fabric of the Nile Delta. This study has shown that these settlements functioned as active centers of urban life where Greek and Egyptian practices coexisted and evolved through a 300-year process of maturation. From the customs gateways of the Canopic mouth to the industrial perfume-production centers of the Central Delta, the "Greek world" was an integrated component of the Egyptian landscape long before the arrival of Alexander the Great. The primary contribution of this research is the identification of a "receptive infrastructure"—a pre-existing network of trade, domestic architecture, and hybrid religious sanctuaries that facilitated the Ptolemaic transition.

By the time Ptolemy I Soter ascended to power in 305 BCE, he inherited a landscape already defined by intercultural familiarity. The success of the Ptolemaic dynasty in presenting themselves as legitimate Pharaohs was not a vacuum-born political strategy; it was the direct result of leveraging these established Greek-Egyptian social networks. This distinguishes their rule from the Persian administrations, whose authority—lacking a similarly integrated social base—was often contested as an external imposition.

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Site	Location and Coordinates	Period of Maximum Activity	Primary Economic/Cultural Role
Mendes/Thmuis	Central Delta 30°57'N 31°30'E	7th–4th c. BCE (capital of the Dynasty 29)	Perfume production; political/religious center.
Thonis-Heracleion	Canopic Mouth 31°18'N 30°07'E	6th–4th c. BCE (port of dynastic city Sais)	Principal maritime port; customs gateway; baris vessel; Stele.
Kom Wasit/Kom al-Ahmer	Western Delta 31°11'N 30°29'E	Late Period – Hellenistic	Regional trade hub; wine production (Mareotic); Hellenistic tholos bath; Metelis Nome administration.
Naukratis	Western Delta 30°54'N 30°35'E	7th–4th c. BCE	Multi-ethnic emporion; religious sanctuary (Hellenion); Stele.

Table 2: Comparative table of the deposits presented in detail. Prepared by the author.

Furthermore, the site migration patterns identified in this study—the shift from Mendes to Thmuis and Kom Wasit to Kom al-Ahmer—highlight the localized adaptability of these communities. These migrations demonstrate that Greek settlers were active participants in the regional evolution of the Delta, contributing to a permanent population familiar with Greek language, coinage, and urban grid-planning. Ultimately, the foundation of Ptolemaic legitimacy was built upon these pre-Hellenistic urban and social structures. This historical continuity explains how Alexandria and its hinterland became the center of a world-defining cultural synthesis, as the dynasty built upon three centuries of established Greek-Egyptian hybridity (Fraser 1972).

In sum, the integration of Greek and Egyptian identities was a process already well underway prior to 305 BCE. The pre-Hellenistic settlements acted as both cultural and political bridges, creating the social and economic frameworks that the Ptolemies would eventually adopt and expand. Their legacy underscores that long-term interaction and material hybridity, rather than conquest alone, defined the distinctive character of Ptolemaic Egypt as one of the most enduring cross-cultural episodes of the ancient world.

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