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## **Did Solon travel to Egypt?**

### **Abstract**

Solon is widely thought by classicists to have once travelled to Egypt during his lifetime; this paper in contrast denies Solon set foot in Egypt based on issues with Herodotean chronology as well as puts forward a new argument: Egypto-Greek contact during Solon's lifetime was limited to commerce mostly by Greek merchants from Asia Minor (such as Ionia), rather than mainland Greece or Aegean. Solon therefore unlikely considered travelling to Egypt for his *apodemia* (10-year period abroad). It is concluded that since Solon had never visited Egypt, Plato's story of Atlantis that Solon supposedly overheard from Saitic priests is wholly fiction.

## Introduction

Most classicists do not doubt the ancient Athenian lawmaker Solon (c. 640-560 BCE) visited Egypt after his legal reforms were passed; *The Cambridge Ancient History* notes “the visit itself is likely”.<sup>1</sup> Scepticism about Solon’s visit to Egypt is a minority view held by very few classicists, none of whom have presented a detailed argument for doubting Solon’s visit to Egypt, aside from raising some concerns about chronology.<sup>2</sup> Herodotus (c. 440 BCE) in *The Histories* claims Solon went abroad for 10-years (*apodemia*) shortly after he passed his laws and Egypt was a country he visited (Hdt. 1. 29. 1-2, 30. 1). It is widely accepted “the main bulk of his legislation fell in his archonship”<sup>3</sup> and because Solon’s archonship is traditionally dated by a classical source,<sup>4</sup> to 594 BCE, “his visit to Egypt is usually dated about 590 BC”.<sup>5</sup>

## Herodotus and Solon’s *nomothesia*

Elsewhere in his same work, Herodotus notes Solon travelled to Egypt to visit the royal court of pharaoh Amasis II (Hdt. 1. 30. 1; 2. 177. 2). This is surely a chronological error since the start of Amasis’ reign (570/569 BCE) didn’t start until two decades after Solon’s archonship. In response to this problem with Herodotean chronology, a minority of classicists deny Solon ever visited Egypt.<sup>6</sup> However, a few classicists have tried to solve this issue by either arguing Solon’s legal reforms (*nomothesia*) weren’t passed during his archonship, but in the late 560s BCE or downdating Solon’s archonship to 573/572 BCE.<sup>7</sup> The latter has not received much, if any, acceptance and can be ignored.<sup>8</sup> As noted by David Asheri in his *A Commentary on Herodotus* at least three conditions are required for Solon’s visit to Egypt to have plausibility:

The historicity thesis may be acceptable on three conditions: (1) Solon's *apodemia*, his residence abroad, must be linked to the rise of Pisistratus (c. 561/60 BC) and not to Solon’s archonship (usually dated to 594/3); (2) the *nomothesia* must be downdated to the late seventies of the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. (3) 559/558 must be rejected as the date of Solon’s death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Braun 1984, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Linsforth 1919, 299; Lloyd 1975, 55; Leftkowitz 1996, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Cadoux 1948, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Sosicrates *ap.* Diog. Laert. 1. 2. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Luce 1969, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd 1975, 57; Smith 2016, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Miller 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Dillon and Garland 2000, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Asheri 2007, 99.

The idea Solon's legislation didn't take place during his archonship is difficult to reconcile with classical sources<sup>10</sup> that assign the laws of Solon (*nomothesia*) to his archon year.<sup>11</sup> There is also the simple fact "we never find so much as a hint in any source that any part of Solon's legislative activity was carried out in someone else's archonship".<sup>12</sup> While there is no valid reason to separate Solon's archonship from his legislation, it is quite possible his *seisachtheia* ("shaking-off burdens") was enacted as a separate economic reform – a short time prior to his legislative activity as mentioned by Aristotle (*Const. Ath.* 10. 1) and Plutarch (*Sol.* 16. 4-5).<sup>13</sup>

### **Downdating the *apodemia*?**

Some classicists<sup>14</sup> argue to downdate the *apodemia* from the 590s to late 560s BCE because Diogenes Laertius (third century CE) in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (1. 2. 50) dates Solon's journey abroad during the tyranny of Peisistratos. However, this causes yet more problems with chronology since Peisistratos' tyranny is dated to about 561 BCE, when Solon died c. 560 BCE. For this reason, it is almost unavoidable proponents of downdating must revise the date of Solon's death. The c. 560 BCE (usually 559 or 558) date for Solon's death has rarely though been challenged by scholars; another problem is Solon is unlikely to have visited Amasis II, when elderly. Downdating should be rejected because of these issues.

### **Questioning the consensus**

Egyptologist J. J. Griffiths summarises the consensus of classicists who although aware of the aforementioned problems do not deny Solon travelled to Egypt (i.e., Sais) during his lifetime:

In the case of Solon's visit, we have the evidence of Diodorus Siculus, who was writing in the first century BC. We also have the important early evidence of Herodotus... there is a chronological difficulty, since Solon's archonship is usually dated to 594 BC., whereas the reign of Amasis did not begin till 570 BC... such errors do not suffice to establish that Herodotus should be rejected in toto. The strongest evidence for Solon's visit is that one of his poems was concerned with Egypt... It is Plutarch in his *Life of Solon*, 26, who quotes a line from the poem on Egypt, and he expressly connects it with Solon's visit to that country.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aristot. *Const. Ath.* 5. 2; Plut. *Sol.* 19. 3; Diog. Laert. 1. 2. 62; Aelian. *VH.* 8. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace 1983, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Croix 2004, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace 1983, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Hignett 1958, 318-321; Braun 1984, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths 1985, 5-6.

In other words, most scholars defend the historicity of Solon's visit to Egypt because "ancient authorities had never doubted it".<sup>16</sup> Additionally because Solon wrote a poem about the Nile delta, this is interpreted as evidence he had been there and what he wrote was based on first-hand observation. Concerning the former, classical sources that mention Solon's trip to Egypt include Herodotus (1. 30. 1, 2. 177. 2), Plato (*Ti.* 21c; *Crit.* 108d, 110b), Aristotle (*Const. Ath.* 11. 1), Diodorus Siculus (1. 69. 3-4) and Plutarch (*Sol.* 26. 1). These are all rejected as reliable source evidence by the classicist Alan B. Lloyd who doubts Solon set foot in Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

Lloyd rejects the tradition of Solon's journey to Egypt, writing "evidence for Solon's visit to Egypt does not exist".<sup>18</sup> He basis his argument primarily on the unreliability of Herodotean chronology, furthermore post-Herodotean (secondary) sources rely too heavily on Herodotus. As for Solon's poem, only a single verse is known: "Where Nile pours Forth his floods, near the Canobic shore" (Plut. *Sol.* 26. 1). This does not prove Solon was an actual eyewitness of what he was describing, for example in his biography of Solon, Ivan Linsforth notes "Solon might easily have written the line...without having ever left Athens".<sup>19</sup> The historical source evidence Solon actually travelled to Egypt therefore is lacking (and arguably is non-existent).

Lloyd highlights another chronological error in Herodotus who says when Solon travelled to Egypt shortly after passing his legislation, he took a law about land he heard in Egypt back to Athens (Hdt. 2. 177. 2).<sup>20</sup> As explained by another classicist, this could not have happened because Herodotus says that Solon passed his legislation (*nomothesia*) before going to Egypt:

There is also the problem of chronology: Herodotus says that Solon visited Egypt *after* he enacted his legislation (1. 30. 1). Perhaps what Herodotus had in mind was the law on the idleness of land (*argias*) attributed to Solon or Peisistratus (Plutarch, Life of Solon, 31. 2). But there is no reason to assume that Solon needed to go to Egypt to find out about land use.<sup>21</sup>

These chronological difficulties have not deterred most classicists from arguing Solon visited Egypt because it has been argued Herodotus amalgamated more than one journey Solon took

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<sup>16</sup> Markianos 1974, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd 1975, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Lloyd 1975, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Linsforth 1919, 299.

<sup>20</sup> Lloyd 1975, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Leftkowitz 1996, 245.

into a muddled story<sup>22</sup> (meaning Solon went to Egypt on separate occasions, but Herodotus confused his visits). No classical source though says Solon travelled to Egypt more than once and this theory remains unsupported by any evidence. On the other hand, several classicists defend Solon's journey to Egypt on the basis of strong Egypto-Greek relations that they argue is supported by classical sources: "links between Egypt and Greece were so close in the sixth century BC, and commerce so regular, that some visits cannot be denied".<sup>23</sup> However, this doesn't stand up to close scrutiny and perhaps the opposite is true: that during Solon's time contact between Egypt and Greece wasn't frequent (therefore trade was somewhat restricted).

### **Egypt in early Greek literature**

The earliest Greek poets Homer (late eighth century BCE) and Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) seem to have held hazy rather than accurate geographical knowledge of Egypt. This suggests Egypto-Greek trade and travel between these two regions, a century before Solon, was not common, but unusual. It is remarkable Homer did not know of the Nile by any name (*Od.* 4. 581) and was unaware of its topography; according to the ancient geographer Eratosthenes (fragment 10 Roller) Homer had no knowledge of the Nile delta and was mostly ignorant of Egypt. This is perhaps proven by Homer's description of the island Pharos being a whole day's sail away when it was less than a mile off the coast (*Od.* 4. 356). Concerning his knowledge of Thebes:

Thebes<sup>24</sup> (iv 126) was surely no more than a name to him; the rather casual way in which it is mentioned suggests that he had no idea of its distance from the coast.<sup>25</sup>

Hesiod who flourished a little later than Homer seems to have had not much more knowledge of Egypt. While he does name the Nile, it is personified as a river god (*Th.* 338). Later Greek poets of the seventh and early sixth century BCE had little to say about Egypt as if it was not a destination for ordinary Greeks to have visited; an exception was traders. Charaxus, a rich merchant had gone to Egypt on a ship transporting wine (Strab. 17. 1. 33). Greek geographers didn't begin to mention Egypt and the Nile until Hecataeus' *Periodos ges*. Classical sources<sup>26</sup> reveal that Greek sailors throughout the Archaic period feared open-sea travel because of its dangers and tended to avoid it, instead preferring to sail as close as possible to coastlines:

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<sup>22</sup> Dillon and Garland 2000, 95; Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010, 298.

<sup>23</sup> Braun 1984, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Hom. *Od.* 4. 126; *Il.* 4. 126, 9. 381-382.

<sup>25</sup> Heubeck et al. 1998, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Romm 1992, 16.

“Greek sailors hugged the coast in as far as they could”.<sup>27</sup> For example, Hesiod (*W&D*, 648-649) “never sailed on the open sea, but only crossed once from Aulis to Chalcis in Euboea”.<sup>28</sup> The *Odyssey* claims that while Nestor and Menelaus sailed to Egypt – the expanse of water between Crete and Egypt was so formidable, birds dared make the journey, but once a year (*Od.* 3. 322). Nestor and Menelaus only arrived in Egypt from Crete by sheer accident, after their ship was blown off course and so an open-sea travel route was not planned (*Od.* 3. 320).

It is indeed true Odysseus is described as having intentionally sailed for five days from Crete to Egypt (*Od.* 14. 257), but Homer makes it clear he fabricated this journey and it never took place. In the *Odyssey* (3. 170-176) open-sea between Lesbos and Euboea is said to have been crossed but only when the gods granted a safe-passage to mortals which was exceptional; the ordinary route for ships instead was hugging coasts with land close in sight (but not too near to avoid clashing with rocks) and island-hopping between adjacent islands; the goddess Hera is even described as fearing crossing large stretches of water because of dangers (*Od.* 5. 100). The discovery of Egyptian objects (such as pottery) in Greece and vice-versa is sometimes cited as evidence of strong Egypto-Greek trade relation by archaeologists. However, between the end of Mycenaean Greece and the eighth century BCE, “Greek finds are conspicuously absent in Egypt”.<sup>29</sup> Only from 660-630 BCE<sup>30</sup> did Greek ceramics began to noticeably re-appear in Egypt, but by no means in large quantities. Some of these arrived indirectly (via Phoenician and Cypriot merchants) rather than transported by Greek traders. At the end of the seventh century BCE a Greek *emporion* (trade post) was founded in the Nile delta; Naucratis.

### **Naucratis**

Naucratis was never a colony and it primarily attracted merchants for commerce; there is no archaeological evidence for permanent settlement by Greeks at the time of Solon and the first living-quarters (houses) and cemeteries at the same site date to the Classical period.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Naucratis, with the exception of temple sanctuaries was limited when Solon was alive to seasonal workshops for merchants to buy or sell goods; hardly the sort of place that would have appealed to Solon as a lawmaker. The ancient writer Plutarch (c. 100 CE) thought Solon was involved in commerce during his youth (*Sol.* 2. 1), but he does not say Solon travelled to

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<sup>27</sup> Jones 1988, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Most 2016, xii.

<sup>29</sup> Villing 2018, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd 1975, 10; Braun 1984, 54; Villing and Schlotzhauer 2007, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Villing and Schlotzhauer 2007, 5.

Egypt when young; this claim (suspiciously) is not found in Herodotus, nor any other earlier source and was probably made up. There was Egypto-Greek contact when Solon was alive, but it was largely confined to a commercial relationship, furthermore this trade was restricted to one port. Naucratis was not a tourist destination in the Archaic period and classical sources are clear it was a trading port during the time of Amasis II and it was the only one of its kind:

Naucratis was in the past the only trading port in Egypt. Whoever came to any other mouth of the Nile had to swear that he had not come intentionally... or if he could not sail against contrary winds, he had to carry his cargo in barges around the Delta until he came to Naucratis. (Hdt. 2. 179. 1)

There is no archaeological evidence of Cretan objects at Naucratis throughout the Archaic period. This argues against open-sea travel between Crete and Egypt when Solon was alive; Greek merchants likely arrived there having taken longer journeys, hugging the coast of Asia Minor and Levant, eventually reaching Egypt. Given the length of these journeys, most Greek merchants who visited Naucratis were almost certainly from Asia Minor, rather than Greece or the Aegean. This is supported by two main lines of evidence: the largest quantity of Greek ceramics to reach Naucratis derived from Ionia,<sup>32</sup> plus an ancient tradition recorded by Strabo (who was drawing upon earlier sources) notes that Milesians built Naucratis (Strab. 17. 1. 8).

### **Greek mercenaries in Egypt were from Ionia**

Pharaoh Psammetichos I and II (seventh to sixth centuries BCE) employed Carian and Greek mercenaries, attested by classical sources and epigraphical evidence. Greek mercenaries hired by these two pharaohs were though only from Ionia, not Greece (Hdt. 2. 152. 4-5, 154. 1-3). Carians intermixed among them (Strab. 14. 2. 18) to the extent an ancient writer, Polyaeus (7. 3. 1) thought solely Carians were Egyptian mercenaries. It was also Carians, not Ionians, who had a reputation for being mercenaries, thus the proverb by Archilochus (c. 650 BCE): “I shall be called a mercenary, like a Carian” (fragment 216 West). By the time of Amasis II, (570/569 BCE) mercenaries in Egypt were dismissed and those that remained were confined to solely guard Memphis (Hdt. 2. 154. 3). According to the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (1. 69. 4) owing to these restrictions imposed by Amasis II, Greeks “found it difficult in early times to enter Egypt”. This is another reason to doubt Solon (c. 590 BCE) went there.

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<sup>32</sup> Villing and Schlotzhauer 2007, 6.

## Conclusion

Egypto-Greek contact when Solon was alive was arguably limited to trade at a single port (Naucratis) and most Greek merchants travelling to Egypt came indirectly from Asia Minor, not Greece. For this reason, Solon is very unlikely to have ever travelled to Egypt, nor do classical sources support his trip because of chronological inconsistency and other problems. What is the significance of Solon having not travelled to Egypt? Plato in *Timaeus* (c. 355 BCE) recorded a story that Solon visited Sais and overheard a story about a sunken island named Atlantis. However, if Solon never visited Egypt – the tale of Atlantis must be fiction.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, 2016.

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