
**REMINISCING THE PAST THROUGH THE PRESENT:
A STUDY ON THE REMINISCENCE OF ANCIENT
BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN GREECE AND
EGYPT IN MODERN DIPLOMATIC AGREEMENTS**

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Abstract

The agreement on the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone in the East Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Egypt is identified as an important step in international affairs. On the 7th of August 2020, Greece and Egypt signed this agreement in Cairo and it demarcates an exclusive drilling right for gas and oil, two energy resources in the Mediterranean Sea. This recent agreement is reminiscent of commerce, diplomatic, and political contacts that existed between ancient Greece and Egypt. Unearthed archaeological evidence and historical references portray the nature of these ancient relations. A close analysis of the agreement and its implications along with an examination of ancient references is done under the historical method to evaluate the importance of this long-term diplomatic relation. Naukratis, the Greek port in Egyptian territory was a major trade port inhabited by selective Greek communities. The trading ports of Canopus and Heracleion also functioned as major ports linking ancient Greece and Egypt.

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Furthermore, there are ancient records of Egypt sending grain supplies to Athens in times of need. Further evidence shows Greece sending mercenaries to Egypt in request. Ancient Egypt had allied with selected Greek states, especially Athens, depending on their necessities. The recent agreement signed by Greece and Egypt in 2020 is examined as a present case study to reassess the continuation of these bilateral relations. Further, maritime commerce has played an important role in the continuation of foreign relations between Greece and Egypt throughout the centuries.

Keywords: Commerce, Egypt, Foreign Relations, Greece, Trade

INTRODUCTION

Due to the consequences and profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly threatened the global economy, many leading countries have implemented precautionary measures against any future economic vulnerabilities. Accordingly, bilateral agreements are meticulously formed to ensure mutual benefits for all parties involved. One of the most discussed and consequential recent agreements is the agreement signed between Greece and Egypt on the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. On the 7th of August 2020, a historic maritime agreement was formally signed in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, solidifying the maritime boundaries between these two nations. This pivotal agreement serves to precisely demarcate exclusive drilling rights for the extraction of two important energy resources in the Mediterranean Sea: gas and oil, both of which hold

effective significance on a global scale. Natural gas and oil

represent indispensable energy resources essential for both international exports and domestic consumption across the world. The discovery of natural gas reserves in the Mediterranean Sea by Egypt has projected her into the role of a preeminent gas exporter and a central hub for gas resources in the Mediterranean basin. Consequently, this agreement, which facilitates the shared utilization of these natural reserves, not only strengthens the diplomatic ties between Greece and Egypt but also recalls the historical ties of commerce, diplomacy, and political interactions that were maintained between these two nations since prehistoric times.

Greece and Egypt are two ancient countries that individually developed on two continents, Europe and Africa respectively. Greece is located in the Southeastern part of Europe, with its southern border extending into the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean Sea is separated from the Aegean Sea by the Greek islands. The Aegean Sea is located to the east of Greece, while the Ionian Sea is located to the west. Greece is part of the Balkan Peninsula and is bordered by Albania, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria to the north and Turkey to the east in the present day. The country is characterized by a mountainous terrain, with a coastline that stretches for over 13,000 km, including numerous islands in the Aegean and Ionian Seas.

Egypt, on the other hand, is located in the northeastern part of

Africa and shares borders with Libya to the west, Sudan to the South, and Israel and the Gaza Strip to the North-east in the present day. Egypt faces the Mediterranean Sea to the North, which forms a long coastline of about 1,200 km. The Mediterranean Sea is separated from the Red Sea by the Sinai Peninsula, which is a land bridge connecting Africa to Asia. The Nile River, which is the longest river in the world, flows through Egypt and empties into the Mediterranean Sea, creating a delta that is one of the most fertile areas in the country. The northern part of Egypt, including the Nile Delta, is known for its mild climate and agricultural productivity, while the rest of the country is characterized by arid deserts and rugged mountain ranges. These geographical implications can be identified as effective causes for extended foreign relations between Greece and Egypt.

There are many historical records and archaeological evidence that suggest the relations between Greece and Egypt run far back to the Minoan periods (c.3000 BCE-1500 BCE), the Bronze Age of Greece. The Minoans and the Mycenaeans (c.2500 BCE-1200 BCE) had developed direct trade links with Egypt through varied methods. A close examination and analysis of the excavations and the findings provide evidence for the nature of relations that prevailed between the two countries.

The earliest records of Greek-Egyptian contacts can be traced from the remaining archaeological findings in Greek settlements in Egypt from its 18th dynasty (1550-1290 BCE) onwards as well as among the archaeological sites in the Minoan (3000-1100 BCE) and

Mycenaean periods (1600-1100 BCE) of Greek history. Apart from existing archaeological evidence, many literary sources speak of the ancient Greek-Egyptian contacts, specifically poets, historians, philosophers, and logographers from Greece have recorded instances that depict major and minor contacts that prevailed between Greece and Egypt.

OBJECTIVE

The recent agreement signed by Greece and Egypt 2020 will be taken into consideration in this study to reassess how the two countries had maintained long-term relations benefitting both parties. The modern case will be studied as reminiscent of the ancient relations between Greece and Egypt. The paper will elaborate on the continuation and reformation of historical trade links between Greece and Egypt until modern times and dwell on how the cultural developments and geopolitical factors have not discouraged but strengthened these bilateral relations between the two nations. The objective of the research is to illustrate how Greece and Egypt maintained continuous diplomatic relations with each other with understanding and loyalty on each other since the earliest times of history.

METHODOLOGY

This study will encompass the 2020 maritime agreement between Greece and Egypt, signed on August 7, 2020, serving as a contemporary case study. It will be juxtaposed with three

significant trade interactions that transpired between Greece and Egypt in ancient times, specifically before the conquests of Alexander the Great (c. 336 BCE-323 BCE). These historical cases recorded in literature are the recorded grain gift from Egypt to Athens during the time of the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century BCE, as chronicled by the Athenian historian and the atthidographer Philokhoros (340-261 BCE)ⁱ and the Greek biographer Plutarch (c. 46 CE)ⁱ. Additionally, the study will delve into the significant role of Naukratis as the first and only Greek port cityⁱ (Emporion) situated in Egyptian territory, alongside two other prominent port cities, Canopusⁱ and Heracleionⁱ. These case studies from antiquity will be analyzed to discern the mutual benefits and foreign policy dynamics of trade between Greece and Egypt in both ancient and modern eras, along with the beneficiary factors for each country. The study will also indicate one of the statements that the Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 BCE) brought into light, that the contacts between West and East are continuously changing. English translations of original Greek texts were used for the study. Accordingly, the relationship between Greece and Egypt is a fine example to examine the strategies and continuation of diplomatic relations for the longest time among two leading and ancient countries in the Western world and Africa.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Countries in the world maintain foreign policies to manage healthy co-relations with each other, equally enjoy common privileges

accessible to each state, and prevent any future threats that would threaten the security and stability of a country. "As the main part of foreign policy, Diplomacy defines the purposes and missions of the states and implements practical forms, methods, and tools to create and maintain regular and complex relationships in the international environmentⁱ. In most cases, these agreements and alliances that are mutually beneficial for each country, are maintained in understanding and cooperation rather than force and war. The diplomatic contacts between Europe, Asia, and Africa are constantly changing. This can be seen in several instances when tracing back the diplomatic relations of leading countries from the two continents. These changes have occurred since the earliest times, as revealed in surviving literary and archaeological sources. Thus, the changes are not novel, and it can be assumed that the same will happen in the future. Diplomatic relations in the new millennium change continually due to the emergence and disappearance of states, borders, and governments. On the other hand, existing co-relations and diplomatic agreements come to a new light with alterations depending on present issues, needs, and necessities.

The maritime agreement signed between Greece and Egypt on 7th August 2020, on the delimitation of the sea boundary in the east Mediterranean, benefits both parties in drilling gas and oil energy resources. This agreement was signed by Sameh Shoukry, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt, and Nikos Dendias, a member of the Hellenic Parliament and the current

Foreign Minister of Greece. 'The delimitation of sea zones "allows both countries to move forward in maximizing the utilization of the resources available in the exclusive economic zone, especially promising oil and gas reserves," Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said after signing the pact, in a joint press conference with his Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias in Cairo.' This statement underlines the mutual understanding of the parties involved in the agreement while benefiting both. Irrespective of the objection of Turkey to nullifying the agreement, legal representatives of both Greece and Egypt have pointed out the legality of the terms and conditions in the agreement. Accordingly, the trade contacts between Greece and Egypt have come onto the surface in a new light by heightening the diplomatic relations that prevailed between the two countries on the East-Mediterranean border.

The task of searching for potential energy resources began in the early 2000s, and the maritime boundaries of coastal line states Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Turkey needed to be set. The first boundary setup was initiated by Cyprus and Egypt, whereas Greece and Egypt had begun discussing the matter in 2005. The present agreement of 2020 has affected the neighbour Turkey, where they have tried to nullify the contract. "Shortly after the announcement, the Turkish foreign ministry issued a statement calling the deal "null and void," claiming the area "lies within the Turkish continental shelf" and also violates Libya's maritime rights."ⁱⁱ Turkey is situated in the delimited area as a third state. Nonetheless, after several agreements and disagreements,

Greece and Egypt came to a final decision to sign the contract regardless of the opposition of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

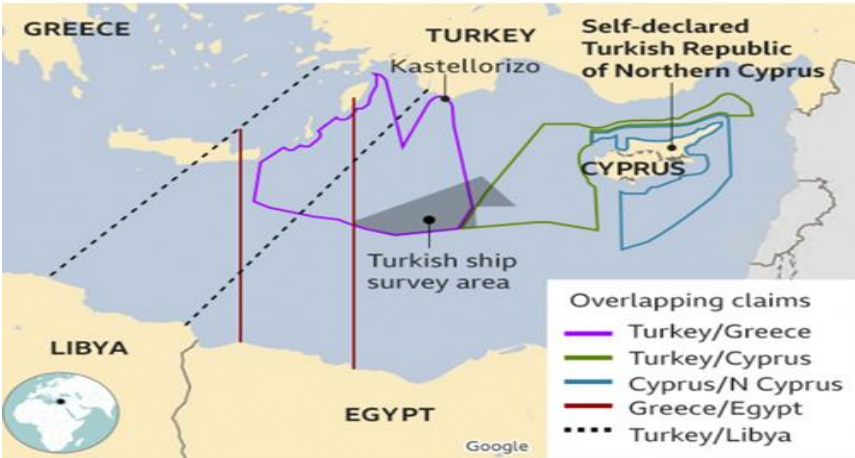
These political and diplomatic agreements and disagreements again depict the presence of constant friendly alliances and antagonistic rivalries between the nations representing the West and East. The limitations and delimitations between the countries themselves are evidence of their rivalries on different terms and standards for sharing the resources accessible to all at the border of the Mediterranean Sea. Accordingly, even Greece and Egypt are opposed to each other to go into such an agreement on energy resources. For instance, at the launch of the current agreement, 'there were two options for delimitation: a negotiated and amicably agreed on the boundary and, if negotiations failed, recourse to third-party adjudication or arbitration.'ⁱ Nevertheless, they have come to an understanding on better terms to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship addressing their current needs. As the Greek Prime Minister mentions, "Today we have proven with Egypt that abiding by international law is the only path that leads to security, peace, stability and good neighbourly relations. We intend to follow this road with all our neighbours. We hope and expect they will do the same." Likewise, creating and strengthening diplomatic ties between beneficiary relations among the countries continue in modern times like in ancient times under different circumstances. The political leaders take measures to continue these agreements to stabilize friendly alliances expecting privileges from each other,

especially in times of need.

This agreement is released to the public and written only in the Greek language. Nevertheless, many online newspapers and blogs such as EJIL: Talk (Blog of the European Journal of International Law), Ekathimerini (An online daily morning newspaper published in Athens), and AP News (An American News Agency) have paid attention to the content of the agreement. Analysts around the world also release many analyses and discussions. As reported in news items, the introductory paragraphs of the agreement or the preamble mainly focus on good terms between Greece and Egypt. The agreement was set up according to 'the relevance and applicability of the UN Charterⁱ and UNCLOSⁱ ' ⁱ. Thus, the main target of the agreement is the maintenance of a benefitted neighborliness, faith among the two countries and cooperation for a valued reason.



Figure 01: Countries that border the Mediterranean Sea



Initially, the boundary (Figure 01) clarifies the maritime areas appertaining to Greece's and Egypt's maritime jurisdiction and the applicable delimitation principles consistent with UNCLOS and customary international law. Second, it clarifies the exact limits of overlapping maritime claims with other States in the areas.¹¹

Figure 02: Overlapping maritime claims and the agreed limitations between Greece and Egypt

As the map indicates, mainly the Greek islands (along Crete and Rhodes) are taken into consideration in the agreement. This also clarifies all the limits which also overlap maritime claims with other states in the Mediterranean Sea. Further, as shown in the map, the boundary is not a direct median line, favoring Egypt by allocating

a ratio of about 9:11 to each state. On the other hand, Greece has faced several limitations "while Athens succeeded in enshrining the islands' rights to a continental shelf of their own (by starting the delimitations of the maritime boundary from its two largest islands, Crete and Rhodes)."ⁱ Nevertheless, both countries expect a mutual understanding and a share of the energy resources, gas, and oil in the East Mediterranean Sea. In addition to these factors, Turkey also plays a vital role in the process. Economic growth in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea during the last two years has led Greece and Turkey to unfavourable interest towards each other while they came 'dangerously close to war three times in the past (August 1976, March 1987, and January 1996)ⁱ over oil exploration rights and the other maritime rights in the Aegean, but each time, it was Greece which first opted for rapprochement and subsequently paved the way for a period of détente.' It is evident in these instances that the countries located in a rich maritime area like that of the Mediterranean Sea try either to keep constant good terms with each other or to go to war for rights over the resources. The same incidents had occurred in varied circumstances under varied terms in the past.

As mentioned earlier, the study focused on three ancient encounters/contacts of Greek and Egyptian relations. Continuous diplomatic relations benefitting both Greece and Egypt can be witnessed in these historical references. Both Greek and Egyptian political figures have taken measures to extend the alliance that prevailed between the two countries from the Minoan period (3000-

1100 BCE) onwards. Based on the surviving archaeological evidence found at the two palaces at Tell el-Dabaa/ Avaris in the Nile delta of Minoan frescoesⁱ, it is evident that Minoans were in close contact with the Egyptians. The paintings represent depictions of bull-leaping, bull-grappling, griffins, and hunts that were common themes used in the frescoes in the Minoan civilization (Figure 03).



Figure 03: Reconstructed Minoan Fresco from Tell El-Dab'a, Egypt, in Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete.

The unearthed evidence can be traced back to the beginning of Egypt's 18th Dynasty.ⁱ In addition, several scenes in the Theban tombs in Upper Egypt depicting 'Minoan legates'ⁱ from Keftiu (as Crete is called in Egyptian texts) bearing tributeⁱⁱ are evidence that supports close diplomatic and political contacts between the two nations. These tombs are located on the West bank of the Nile River and are recognized as the tombs of the Nobles of a particular area. As Panagiotopoulos comments in his inquiry into the Theban tombs, "During the time of the 18th Dynasty, the representation of foreign embassies bringing valuable objects to the Egyptian king

became a favorite theme in the pictorial program; of Theban private tombs."ⁱ Panagiotopoulos descriptively discusses the historical value of tomb paintings in his article. He sees the activity depicted on the frescoes as a diplomatic gift-giving that strengthens ongoing relations between the nations.

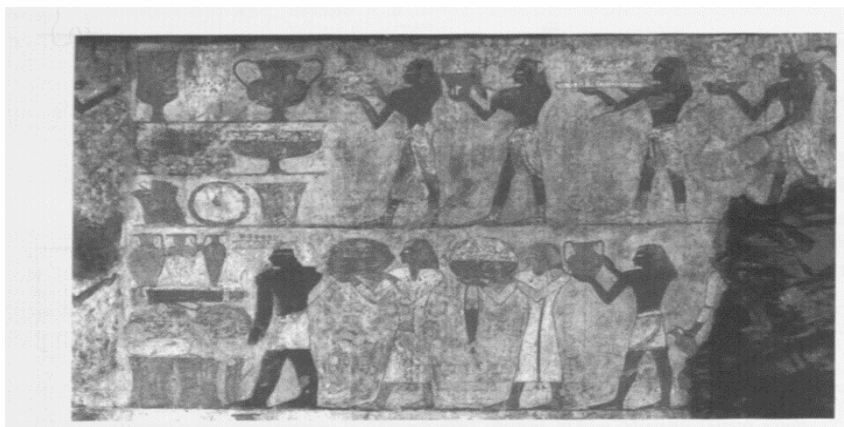


Figure 04: Tomb of Useramun . Detail from the representation of Aegean and Syro-Palestinian gift-bearers.

Following the Minoan period, few depictions of men dressed in a Mycenaean kilt in Theban tombs and many Mycenaean pottery shreds speak of the intense and continuous contacts between Mycenaean Greeks and the Egyptians. Apart from these earliest contacts of the pre-historic era, Egypt and Greece sustained their trade, economic, and political links with each other during the historic period as well. The three examples selected in the study can be considered significant trade connections between Greece and Egypt during the pre-Alexandrian period of Greece (from the

Archaic to late Classical period). The discussion will focus on how these commercial contacts between the two countries have continued until the 21st century.

The Greek presence in Egyptian territory can be traced back to the period of Psammetichus I (664-610 BCE). Herodotus relates how both Psammetichus I and later Amasis came into close contact with the Greeks during their reigns.

"To the Ionians and Carians who helped him to gain the throne, Psammetichus granted two pieces of land, opposite one another on each side of the Nile, which came to be known as the Camps and in addition to the grant of land kept all the other promises he had made them. He even went so far as to put some Egyptian boys into their charge to be taught Greek...he tracts of the land where the Ionians and Carians settled, and where they lived for many years, lie a little distance seaward from Bubastis, on the Pelusian mouth of the Nile...Amasis subsequently turned them out and brought them to Memphis to protect him from his own people. they were the first foreigners to live in Egypt, and after their original settlements there, the Greeks began regular intercourse with the Egyptians, so that we have accurate knowledge of Egyptian history from the time of Psammetichus onwards."

(Herodotus,

The *Histories* 2.154-155)

First, according to the assumptions of the scholars, these lands were given to the Greek mercenaries only as a military settlement and later developed into trade ports contributing to the commerce in the Mediterranean Sea. After the permanent settlements, the initial activities of the particular area predominantly built up, focusing on extending trading links between Egypt and Greeceⁱ. As Stefan Pfeiffer comments, "Greek trade with Egypt, indeed even as settled Greek presence in Egypt began in an era when many local clan chiefs governed the country under the central government of the Assyrian King"ⁱⁱ. Further, as Pfeiffer relates, Psammetichus I was one of the earliest Egyptian rulers who recognized trade benefits with foreign countries to gain wealth and develop beneficiary relations. After 40 years of his rule, one of his successors, Amasis (570-526 BCE), came to power. Amasis identified the importance of maintaining strong trade relations with Greece, whereas he gifted Naukratisⁱ, the Egyptian city, to the Greeks for a continuous trade policy. Thus, Naukratis is recognized as 'the first instance of organized Greek presence recorded in Egypt' and its significance in creating cultural crossroads between Egypt and Greece.

Naukratis, located on the Canopic branch of the Nile in the western Nile delta, is a Greek port that consisted of a Greek community from the times of Psammetichus I onwards. Herodotus, one of the earliest and most important sources for Naukratis, records that the port city was given by Pharaoh Amasis to the Greeks.

"Amasis favoured the Greeks and granted them a number of privileges, of which the chief was the gift of Naukratis as a commercial headquarters for any who wished to settle in the country. He also made grants of and upon which Greek traders who did not want to live permanently in Egypt might erect altars and temples."

Herodotus,

the *Histories* 2.178

As evident in these recordings, the leaders have extended their boundaries to allocate areas to foreign traders encouraging economic interactions between the nations. According to Herodotus, Naukratis was the only Greek *emporion* in Egypt by the time and ventured into commercial activities with the Greek world. The Egyptians did not allow the foreigners to settle in other areas. Thus, Naukratis held a significant position as the exclusive Greek trading post in Egypt. As Astrid Moller comments, 'at Naukratis, the port-of-trade was administered by a group of poleis. Within a polis proper, an emporium is the place of external exchange, while the agora is the place of internal exchange¹. The Egyptian Pharaohs let the Greek community administer their *emporion*. This can be considered a political and diplomatic precaution as it led the Egyptians to engage in trade on a large scale with mainland Greece. As Moller further explains, Naukratis, as 'the port of trade', acted as 'an instrument of administrative trade, aiding the collection of toll

charges, controlling the exchange of goods, and acting as a buffer between two differently organized economies'. Even during this time, Greece and Egypt maintained beneficial relations with boundaries and economically supported each other.

According to prevailing archaeological evidence, Hellenion was one the main sanctuaries founded by Ionian, Dorian, and Aeolian Greeks in Egyptian landⁱ. Erecting sanctuaries confirms the permanent settlement of a community in the area. Thus, the mutual understanding and the agreement have aided in establishing sound relations between both parties. Further, this supports the fact that trade relations and agreements benefitting both parties is an ancient way of maintaining contacts between countries. The terms and conditions of exchanged goods may have varied. Nevertheless, this proves that Greece and Egypt have functioned as two major countries that benefitted from each other and have maintained fine diplomatic relations with each other.

Apart from the main trading port, Naukratis, other trading ports exported and imported goods between the two countries. As J. G. Mille points out, 'so far as the exports of Egypt are concerned, the list is brief: the only commodity which was shipped from Egypt to Greece in any quantity after the fall of the Mycenaean kingdom and before the establishment of that of Alexander was corn. In later times there were considerable exports of glass, linen, and papyrusⁱ. Equally, 'the return trade from Greece to Egypt was in all probability equally simple. It has been supposed that there was a considerable export of wine and oil from Greece to Egypt before

the Greek conquest.ⁱ Likewise, several items were exchanged through trade between the two countries.



Figure 05: Naukratis, Canopus, and Heracleion in Egyptian map

Canopus, an ancient coastal city in the Nile Delta, functioned as the main port for trade activities with Greece before the establishment of Alexandria. The earliest records on Canopus and its relation to Greece can be seen in Solon's poems, where Solon refers to Greek settlements on Canopus shore near the Nile Delta (Solon fr. 28 West). The ancient city Heracleion is also identified as an *emporion*. Likewise, irrespective of the time, both Greece and Egypt maintained trade and diplomatic contacts. These port cities functioned as centres for the stabilization and continuation of contacts. Maritime commerce and trade links played a significant role in the economic life of both Greek and Egyptian communities in their respective areas.

The Greek historians and authors record one of the significant

exchanges that happened between Greece and Egypt. Plutarch, the Greek biographer in *Life of Pericles*, mentions the King of Egypt sending grain supplies to Athens during the famine.

"Many years before, when Pericles was at the peak of his political career and had legitimate sons with his wife, he put forward a law that only people who had two Athenian parents would count as Athenian citizens. So when the King of Egypt sent 40,000 measures of grain as a present to the Athenian people and it had to be divided up among the citizens, there were lots of prosecutions against people who were now illegitimate because of Pericles' law; until then no one had noticed or questioned them, but many were also falsely accused."

(Plutarch, *Pericles* 37)

As the above quote records, this relates to Pericles' citizenship law that was introduced during the 5th century BCE. The shares of grain sent by Egypt were given to the Athenians, who were eligible to be citizens under Pericles' new regulations. This reference can be seen in another Greek historian and an attidographerⁱ, Philochorus (300 BCE), whose work survives in fragments and supports the same reference by Plutarch (46 CE-119 CE). According to Plutarch, Egypt has sent 40,000 medimnoi, but as Philochorus records, the amount was 30,000 medimnoi. Either way, the incident supports the fact that both Greece and Egypt have been on favourable terms

since ancient times. Further, in ancient times Egypt can be considered as the leading grain exporter in the Mediterranean Sea. These historical instances indicate that both Greece and Egypt have maintained direct and extensive contact with each other since the earliest times.

CONCLUSION

As evident in the present case and the references to history, maritime commerce has played an important role in the continuation of diplomatic relations between Greece and Egypt. Both countries held mutually significant roles as trade partners from the time of the Minoan period onwards until modern times. In conclusion, the maritime agreement signed on 7th August 2020 at Cairo by Greece and Egypt on the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone or the sea boundaries on the energy resources can be regarded as an extension of the mutual diplomatic relations that prevailed between the two countries from early times. In his opening lines of the *Histories*, even Herodotus records how these nations from West and East made long trading voyages and had conflicts and agreements from time to time. Gradually both countries relinquished their self-sufficient economic system yet continued to maintain trade relations with neighboring countries in the Mediterranean Sea. These relations and agreements changed with time but continued under favourable terms and implications in different periods. The present Maritime Agreement on the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Mediterranean Sea 2020 is a

significant instance that depicts the continuation of diplomatic relations between two ancient countries in the 21st century. Thus, history has evolved in a different facet to 2020 and will continue to be so in the future. The present maritime agreement is pertinent evidence for that.

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