

UNVEILING THE CROSSROADS OF ANTIQUITY: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF ANCIENT CONTACTS BETWEEN ATHENS AND THE IONIAN ISLANDS WITH EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

Greece and Egypt are two ancient civilizations that developed individually in two continents, Europe and Africa respectively. History reveals a long-lasting mutually beneficial relationship that was maintained between these two nations. The primary aim of the research was to identify the types of encounters recorded in ancient literature and revealed through modern archaeology. Thereby, the research developed into understanding the nature and dynamics that nourished the significant diplomatic relations maintained between ancient Greece and Egypt from the 8th century BCE to the 4th century BCE. The research mainly followed a historical method in acquiring knowledge from primary sources and adopted an analytical and eclectic research method under qualitative research methodology to extract the findings from the gathered information. The research recognized several significant grounds developed between Greece and Egypt that strengthened their bilateral relations. A close examination of the evidence revealed this diplomatic understanding was mainly built between Athens, the Ionian states, and Egypt as a result of national interest, the impact of necessity, geographical proximities, political and social practices, and cultural similarities of each party involved. Significantly, the research identified an influential 'Intellectual Triangle' that developed between Athens, the Ionian states, and Egypt that bridged these regions enabling the exchange of a vast amount of knowledge in areas such as philosophy, art and architecture, medicine, mythology and religion that mainly enriched the culture of Greece. Further, they resulted in shaping the socio-political and military dynamics of ancient Greece and Egypt. In conclusion, this diplomatic understanding has evolved up to the development of mutually beneficial diplomatic agreements signed between Greece and Egypt in the 21st century while continuously strengthening the alliance between these two nations among the other countries in the Mediterranean basin.

KEYWORDS: *Greece, Egypt, Beneficial Factor, Diplomatic Relations, Intellectual Triangle.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Greece and Egypt are two ancient civilizations that individually developed on two continents, Europe and Africa, respectively. Greece is 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.

Ancient Greece consisted of several politically independent city-states (*poleis*) under individual governments and administrations in each city-state. Greek city-states were governed individually under monarchical, oligarchical, tyrannical, and democratic governments. Athens can be identified as a *polis* that underwent these political changes from its earliest periods of the 11th and 10th centuries BCE to the late Classical period, dated to the 5th to 4th century BCE. Sparta remained an oligarchic government and always catered to the needs of their city-state, to build a powerful military state. These principles of their national interests are further reflected in their foreign relations and agreements. Geographical proximity also affected the above principles and decisions of each state in ancient times.

Egypt is located in the northeastern part of Africa, and it today shares borders with Libya to the west, Sudan to the south, and Israel and the Gaza Strip to the northeast in the present day. In ancient times, it had well-defined geographical borders that were shaped by natural factors. To the north, Egypt faces the Mediterranean Sea, which forms a long coastline of about 1,200 kilometers. The Mediterranean Sea is separated from the Red Sea by the Sinai Peninsula, which is a land bridge connecting Africa to Asia. The Mediterranean served as the natural border to the north, while the Sinai Peninsula, with its abundant resources, served as the natural border to the northeast. Ancient Upper Egypt spread to the south along the Nile River, reaching its southern limit at the First Cataract near Aswan. Lower Egypt, the northern

portion, including the Nile Delta, extended northward to the Mediterranean Sea. 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. With its regular flooding, the Nile offered not just fertile land but also acted as a unifying factor for the nation. The Eastern (Arabian) Desert to the east and the Western (Libyan) Desert to the west surrounded Egypt, establishing natural barriers that preserved the civilization. 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. Egypt owns a rich tapestry of history that has influenced a lot of civilizations in the world.

Countries that developed in the Mediterranean basin have continued direct and indirect contact since ancient times. Its geographical location spread through a vast arena allowed the countries to maintain long-term mutually beneficial relations. "Some of the most ancient human civilizations – Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek, and Roman – were organized around it." (Lopes & Helena, 2010). As Lopes mentions, ancient communities communicated with other countries mainly through the methods of trade and transportation to share goods and resources. Colonization and war can be identified as methods they used either to expand their territories or to consolidate their power in a particular area. This was further promoted as a means of securing their existing power points. As a result of the above methods of communication, the ancient communities shared their cultural values and practices. As exemplified by Lopes, Greece, Rome, and Egypt can be identified as ancient civilizations that had built up foreign relations with many countries facing the Mediterranean Sea under different circumstances in history. A close analysis of each foreign encounter sheds light on the method they advocated to reach another country, the necessities that they wanted to accomplish, and the consequences of these diplomatic decisions.

The histories of Greece and Egypt reveal significant bilateral relations and cooperative understandings that

have developed and been maintained between them since prehistoric times. These interactions are reflective not only of the changing fortunes of these nations but also of the broader historical context of the Eastern Mediterranean and the international relations among the countries in the Mediterranean basin. Mainly, Athens and the Ionian and Aegean city-states had close connections with Egypt, as evident in direct references from modern archaeology and literature from both Athens and Egypt dated to the 8th century to the 4th century BCE. Understanding the foundation of this strategic partnership is significant to study the evolution of ancient relations and their modern imperatives. Further, they can be studied as strategic solutions from history for modern international affairs.

The main objective of the research is to comprehensively evaluate the existing historical evidence, spanning from the Archaic period to the Late Classical period of Greece, to shed light on the intricate and multifaceted nature of the relations that prevailed between ancient Greece and Egypt. The findings of the research mainly emphasized a pronounced mutual relation between Athens more than other Greek city-states and, Egypt. The historical references portray interesting dynamic relations between Athens and Egypt, highlighting a beneficial factor in these affairs. The mutual benefits and privileges that both Athens and Egypt earned from each other caused them to retain this reciprocal understanding for centuries. This research seeks to provide a nuanced and detailed analysis of the historical connections, aiming to elucidate the various types of relations that transpired between Athens, the Ionian islands of Greece, and Egypt within the specified timeframe of the discussion. Thus, the results of the study could even set an example to the modern world in international relations, offering insights into how historical alliances, diplomacy, and trade relationships between ancient states can inform and inspire modern diplomatic and international cooperation.

Foreign policy and diplomacy are widely discussed topics in foreign relations between countries in the world. In the present day, there are many terms and

regulations, written codes of law, and signed agreements by the involved parties, mainly to guide the activities and relations of one country with another. Further, Greece and Egypt were not merely two nations, but they were two ancient civilizations that equally contributed to the development of art and architecture, political theories, philosophical thoughts, mathematical and medical knowledge, and other cultural influences. The interstate relations that they maintained, therefore, are significant and worthy of study to understand the dynamics of antiquity.

Consequently, it is significant to study the reasons that led them to maintain such lengthy and complex relations. As Polly Low highlights in her studies, Greek states did not maintain methodical foreign relations but adjusted according to the situation, depending on the requirements of the state at a given time. According to her analysis, 'there is no evidence that the Classical Greek world ever came up with any sustained theoretical account of interstate relations' (Low, 2007). No literary record has specified such a theoretical account, but it has narrated instances where they interacted with other foreign countries for different reasons. Simultaneously, Low emphasizes the fact that even though there is no direct reference to a theoretical framework of any kind of standard policy or written principles in Greek foreign relations, 'the absence of an explicit theory of interstate politics does not entail an absence of complex thinking on the subject'. As evident in historical references to interstate and international relations in antiquity, it can be said that the events that happened throughout Greek history demanded the power and self-interest of city-states (Low, 2007). This refers to the national interests of a state or a country and how the government makes decisions depending on the needs of its community or the state.

Examining the nature, extent, and basis of the relations between Athens and the Ionian islands of Greece with Egypt fills a gap in the study of Greek history before the Hellenistic period while contributing to the understanding of international relations and the groundwork to maintain beneficial relations with other countries that are crucial for any time of the world.

The late Classical period of Greece witnessed the conquests of Alexander the Great. The consequences of the conquests of Alexander have been well studied in scholarship as the period dealt with a wide range of developments and changes in international affairs. However, the significance of foreign relations developed during the periods from the 8th to the 4th centuries BCE, the causes and consequences set vital diplomatic phenomena to be studied.

2. METHODOLOGY

Considering the aforementioned historical references and research findings in this area, a question arises as to why Egypt confined her contacts with the Greeks to Athens and the Ionian states. Archaeological evidence unearthed at the Egyptian sites also reveals the presence of Greek mercenary communities whose identities were mainly from the Aegean and Ionian islands. Interestingly, there are fewer documented records of Egyptian contacts with other Greek states (eg; Sparta or the Peloponnesian League), especially before the 4th century BCE, and evidence of some Corinthian pottery findings in Egypt. Accordingly, the research focuses mainly on the factors that led to this special commitment to each other and what reasons that led them to continue such long-term relations for centuries until the conquest of Egypt by Macedonia in the Late Classical period.

The research mainly followed a historical method in acquiring knowledge from primary sources and adopted an analytical and eclectic research method under qualitative research methodology to extract the findings from the gathered information. Existing evidence from the Archaic period and Late Classical period is the key element to examine the nature of these relations that existed between ancient Greece and Egypt. Moreover, archaeological evidence from the Minoan and Mycenaean periods sheds light on the origin and the prehistoric connections that prevailed between the relative states. Further, this evidence helped to evaluate the evolution of relations between Athens and the Ionian islands with Egypt and identify the nature of the earliest bilateral contacts that were maintained between Greece and Egypt. Historians and

writers from the Hellenistic period and the Common Era also provide records on the early connections between Greece and Egypt. However, the literary evidence of the post-Alexandrian period was referred to only for cross-checking the details provided by the authors of the pre-Alexandrian periods.

When collecting information from historical sources, English translations were referred to for easy understanding instead of original records, which were written either in Greek or Egyptian. Nevertheless, most of the evidence is still being evaluated by archaeologists, Egyptologists, and Classical scholars. Thus, limited research and discussion on these latest findings have been published for the public reader. Thereby, the research mainly followed the published research work when incorporating the modern research perception into the current research discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical references by ancient historians, mostly Greek and modern archaeological findings from both Greece and Egypt, dating from prehistoric times, reveal different types of interactions between the two nations. The earliest recorded relations between Greece and Egypt during the Bronze Age mainly developed as military and trade arrangements. However, during the period after the Dark Ages of Greece and before the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek states and Egypt had more diverse encounters, paving paths to varied types of diplomatic interactions with each other. These encounters shed light on several significant facts about Greek-Egyptian diplomatic relations and political agreements.

Ancient Egypt recruited mercenary soldiers since prehistoric times. However, in the 5th century BCE, during the rebellion of Inaros against the Persian dominance over Egypt, Inaros requested the help of the Athenian naval fleet instead of recruiting mercenary services. Warfare was a key element in ancient Western civilizations. Greek military history reveals several types of soldiers identified mainly by the type of military equipment they employed (Trundle, M., 2004, p.10). Among them, the

mercenary soldiers can be identified as professional foreign soldiers who have fought in a foreign country for remuneration.

Herodotus and Thucydides refer to mercenary armies while narrating their histories of wars. It is fascinating to note that the earliest record of Greek mercenary service abroad is mentioned in the narration of Herodotus (the *Histories*, II.152-154). The incident records how the Ionian and Carian mercenaries fought alongside the Egyptian Pharaoh Psammetichus in 664 BCE. Trundle identifies this as a means of 'ritualized friendships' between Ionians and Carians that facilitated the friendship with the Egyptians (Trundle, M., 2004, p. 44). As evident in the geographical proximities and constant relations maintained between Egypt and specifically Ionian Greeks since the prehistoric times of Greece, both communities were not strangers but had identified each other as valuable resources or alliances in diplomacy. Thus, as Trundle argues, this understanding and familiarity that comes as 'a ritualized friendship' might have caused the recruitment of Ionian and Carian soldiers into their army and further kept them as bodyguards.

In the 5th century, Inaros, the rebellious king, sought the support of the Athenian fleet instead of the mercenary service (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.104). This request should be considered as an exceptional circumstance that is different from the traditional method of recruiting Greek mercenary soldiers. The periods from the archaic to the late classical do not reveal an incident similar to the above between Greece and Egypt. Thus, several reasons might have caused this decision to request Athenian help from the Egyptians, and Athenian acceptance to send help to Egypt amidst the preparation of an internal war in Greece, the Peloponnesian Wars. One reason was that Persia was defeated by Greece during the Persian Wars, and Athens played an important role in the victory of Greece in the last stages of the war. Athens owned the most powerful navy of the time as a result of the reforms of Themistocles. Athens also controlled the fleets contributed by the member states of the Delian League. Secondly, Persia was a powerful and wealthy

empire during this period. This defeat in the Persian war created an enemy who was willing to take any action to fulfill their hope of capturing Greece in another chance. In addition, Egypt came under the power of Persia in 525 BCE. Inaros was rebelling against this Persian dominance (464 – 458 BCE) which led him to request the help of the Athenians identifying them as a powerful military force against Persia. Thirdly, Athens was dealing with several revolts in the Delian League during this time and had recognized the internal threat that they had while and after building up the Athenian empire. Especially, the members of the Delian League were discontented with the imperial policies of Athens (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 98-117). As a result, Athens might have recognized the importance of making foreign alliances whose partiality is the Athenians in times of need, while preparing for an internal war among the Greek nations.

In antiquity, the dynamics of Egyptian-Greek interactions were significantly influenced by the geographical locations of the key city-states involved. The close contacts of Egypt were predominantly established with Athenians and the Ionian/Aegean city-states, with Athens being specifically identified as an Ionian state. Athens occupies a wide coastal plain that slopes down towards the Aegean, surrounded by the mountainous reliefs of Parnitha, Penteli, and Mount Hymettus. This geographical proximity favorably facilitated regular trade routes, intellectual exchanges, and diplomatic relations between Egypt and Athens.

Greek settlements in ancient Egypt also reveal significant bonds between Athenians and Egyptians. These settlements can be categorized into two distinct groups, each serving unique purposes and reflecting diverse aspects of the complex ancient relationship between them. One category comprises mercenary settlements, established as a form of compensation/wages given for the military services rendered to Egypt. These settlements were essentially granted to Greek mercenaries as rewards for their loyalty and contributions to military campaigns. These mercenary communities often played a crucial role in maintaining

order and providing a military presence in strategic locations within Egypt, ensuring the stability of the region. On the economic front, another category of Greek settlements emerged around the city of Naukratis, characterized by friendly economic agreements around the 6th century BCE. Unlike the military-focused mercenary settlements, these trade-focused communities were established as centers for commercial activities and cultural exchange. Naukratis, situated in the Nile Delta, became a key hub for Greek merchants, fostering economic ties and facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas between the Greeks and Egyptians. Heracleion and Canopus were also two port cities that facilitated Greek-Egyptian trade. These trade settlements served as important channels for the flow of commodities, fostering a mutually beneficial economic relationship between the two cultures. The coexistence of mercenary and trade settlements underscores the multifaceted nature of Greek-Egyptian interactions in antiquity. As Herodotus mentions it was because of these combined communities that the early Greeks were influenced and get know about Egypt and the Egyptians (Herodotus, the *Histories*, II.154-4).

A new concept theorized by this research is that the overall contacts between Egypt, Athens situated on the coastal side of mainland Greece and the Ionian city-states located on the Persian border create 'An Intellectual Triangle' evident in the intellectual development and knowledge sharing among these areas (Perera, S., 2024). The close examination of contacts that prevailed between ancient Greece and Egypt from the 8th century BCE to the 4th century BCE supports the fact that the majority of these encounters were between Athens and the Ionian states with Egypt. In addition, the intellectual development of Greece during the above period mainly happened in Athens, which later turned Athens into a center of knowledge during the Classical period. Most of the classical authors and philosophers also came from the Ionian states and developed their intellectual discourse based in Athens. Especially with the development of trade and colonization during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, Greeks expanded their foreign relations more than in the early periods. The 8th and 6th centuries

mark a period that shows the extent how which the Greeks were influenced by Egyptian culture and knowledge. Later, the Greeks developed this influence into their own distinct character unique to their culture.

The importance of Egypt in Greek thought can be seen in the number of inquiring travelers who came to study Egyptian history, religion, and government (Hanrahan, M., 1961, p.33). As it was evident in the writings of Homer, Hecataeus of Miletus, and Herodotus, Egypt had a reserved significance throughout their narrations. Further, the descriptions of Egypt by these writers reveal a great deal of fascination and admiration towards Egyptian culture and knowledge.

Egyptian influence on Archaic Greek sculpture is widely acknowledged. The Archaic period in ancient Greece is characterized by a departure from the rigid geometric forms of the preceding era, as artists began to explore more lifelike representations of the human form. This shift is often attributed to the profound impact of Egyptian art, which, through trade and cultural exchanges, found its way to the Greek mainland. One of the key areas where Egyptian influence is evident in Archaic Greek sculpture is in the treatment of form and proportions. The Kouros sculptures, typical of the Archaic period, bear a striking resemblance to the rigidity and frontal pose seen in Egyptian statues, such as the statues of Pharaoh Menkaure. The elongation of the body, with an emphasis on verticality, and the stylized rendering of the musculature suggest a clear borrowing from Egyptian conventions. A detailed examination of the New York Kouros and the Menkaure Triad reveals intriguing similarities in pose and facial features. The New York Kouros, dated to around 600 BCE, exhibits a rigid frontal stance, akin to the Menkaure Triad (c. 2530–2500 BCE), where the figures also stand facing forward with deliberate symmetry. The pronounced musculature and the absence of naturalistic movement in both sculptures highlight the shared influence of Egyptian aesthetics on Greek artisans during the Archaic period. In addition to sculpture, Archaic Greek architecture borrowed Egyptian characteristics.

Reminiscence of Egyptian influence in Doric architecture, the oldest of Greek temple orders, can be witnessed in its slanting walls and stucco columns along with the temple plan that shows the peristyle and hypostyle halls (Marquand, 1890, p.58). Especially, the Egyptian column styles were borrowed by the Greeks in their temple architecture, denoting a grandeur outlook in its expression.

Greek philosophy originated with the Ionian school of thought. The Ionian School of Philosophy emerged in the 6th century BCE in the coastal region of Ionia, in Miletus. Historically acknowledged as the birthplace of Western philosophy, this school saw the flourishing of thinkers who sought to understand the fundamental principles underlying the natural world. Thales and his assertion that water is the fundamental substance from which all things arise bears a resemblance to ancient Egyptian cosmogony, where the primordial waters of Nun served as the source of creation. This parallel raises questions about the potential influence of Egyptian cosmological ideas on the conceptualization of the essential element in the philosophical thought of Thales. Thales' reported prediction of a bountiful olive harvest and subsequent economic success following a high Nile flood suggests an awareness of the cyclical patterns in nature, a notion that aligns with Egyptian agricultural practices tied to the annual inundation of the Nile. The Egyptian influence on the Ionian School of Philosophy marks a pivotal chapter in the intellectual history of the ancient Mediterranean world. As the Ionian philosophers laid the groundwork for subsequent philosophical developments in Greece, the exchange of ideas with Egypt played a crucial role in shaping the early trajectory of Greek thought. In addition, the mathematical knowledge from Egypt is articulated in Thales' ideas as evident in his calculation of the height of an Egyptian pyramid (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.74). This vast knowledge and intellect were greatly adopted by Greek communities for the development and growth of their own fascinating Hellenic culture.

In addition to the influence on art, architecture, and philosophy, Greek medicine, religion, and mythology show a great glimpse of Egyptian influence. Homer

was the first Greek writer who mentioned the use of Egyptian medicine by the Greeks; specifically, a drug that calms one's emotions (Homer, *Odyssey*, IV. 227-332). Borrowing Egyptian knowledge and practices in medicine can be explicitly seen in 5th-century BCE Athens. In his passages, Herodotus mentions that Egypt "is full of doctors" and attests to the prestigious of Egyptian doctors saying, "The practice of medicine in Egypt is as follows; each doctor is specialist in one disease" (Herodotus, the *Histories*, II.84). Egyptian medicine was practically used by the 5th-century physician Hippocrates (460 BCE). The pharmacopeia of Hippocratic medicine expressly mentions the products from Egypt, such as nitrate, alum, and types of medicinal oil (Jouanna, 2012, p. 5). Further, most of the remedies in the gynecological treatises of the Hippocratic Corpus recall those of the Egyptian papyri, both in their layout in content (Jouanna, 2012, p.5). Likewise, Egyptian knowledge has been borrowed by the Greeks, especially the Athenians, in ancient times. Conversely, at a later stage, Hippocratic knowledge was used by the Unani practices. Egyptian medicinal knowledge and customs are included in the theoretical framework of Unani medicine, which is based on the teachings and practices of Hippocrates.

In addition, Egyptian mythology and Greek mythology had similarities to each other, as it is believed that Egyptian beliefs and rituals influenced Greek mythology and religious beliefs. The creation myths of Greek religion and Egyptian religion go parallel to each other, as in Greek mythology, the creation myth revolves around Chaos, the primordial void from which everything emerges. Nun is considered the source of all existence in Egyptian mythology, which is a vast and formless primordial watery abyss. In both religions, the first deities emerged from these concepts of Chaos and Nun. Further, the Greek Olympian religion features a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses with their unique identities and powers. Egyptian Gods and Goddesses also carry such strengths of their own. Herodotus identifies these similarities and records how there are Egyptian counterparts for Greek Olympian deities (Herodotus, the *Histories*, II.155-160). In addition, the Egyptian belief in oracles is similar to that of Greek

beliefs (Herodotus, the *Histories*, II.55). Herodotus records that after visiting the sites of Egypt and gathering information, he built up a connection between Dodona in Greece and Ammon in Egypt. As reported by Herodotus, the Egyptians say that the oracles at Dodona and Ammon were first staffed by priestesses kidnapped from Egyptian Thebes. But the priestesses at Ammon say that their oracle and the one at Dodona were founded on instructions from a black dove that flew there from Thebes. Either way, the story relates that both are coming from Egyptian origin. The narration of Herodotus on the history and culture of Egypt refers to many borrowings, knowledge, practices, and intellect shared between Greece and Egypt since mythical periods up to his time, the 5th century BCE.

CONCLUSION

This intricate network of contacts between Egypt with Athens, situated on the coastal side of mainland Greece, and the Ionian city-states located on the Persian border, can be conceptualized as an "intellectual triangle" that profoundly influenced intellectual development and the exchange of ideas throughout these regions. This triangular relationship was marked by a dynamic flow of knowledge, cultural practices, and philosophical discourse. In this configuration, Egypt, with its rich ancient civilization, served as a repository of knowledge, particularly in fields such as philosophy, art and architecture, and mathematics, and astronomy. Athens, renowned for its philosophical and cultural achievements, emerged as a vibrant center of intellectual activity, especially during the period under discussion. Herodotus and Thucydides, the two historians from the Classical period of Greece, are from Halicarnassus, which is an Ionian state, and Athens, respectively. They are witnesses to the transmission of knowledge in this triangle of intellect.

Another fascinating fact is that this intellectual triangle connects three continents, Africa, Europe, and Asia, which is highly significant in their knowledge exchange. Each nation that was involved in this geographical area, which falls under this triangle proximity, gave preference to the national interest and

considered the impact of necessity in building up their foreign network with other countries. However, simultaneously they were not only addressing their political, economic, and military needs but exchanging indispensable knowledge and intellect with each other and passing their traditions and customs on a sharing basis. This led the way to the fusion of cultures in later periods that resulted in many creations in human civilizations.

The interplay between Egyptian wisdom, Athenian philosophy, and Ionian cross-cultural exchanges enriched the intellectual landscape of the ancient world. In conclusion, the findings of this research traced the nature of the contacts in the historical periods up to the advent of Alexander and established a significant understanding of the grounds they developed their diplomatic agreements while addressing the national interests of both Greece, specifically the Ionian states, including Athens, and Egypt.

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