CHAPTER XVIII

THE SAITE DYNASTY. THE SUBJUGATION OF EGYPT

The XXVIth or Saite dynasty was thus inaugurated, and under it Egypt enjoyed a more settled government, with some prosperity, for about 150 years. But it was an Egypt changed in character rather than rejuvenated. Under the dominion of foreign rulers, the continuous tradition inherited from the XVIIIth dynasty had been broken, and the cultured class had learnt to look upon the past with critical and eclectic eyes. In some respects art had made progress under the Bubastides. Mural decoration and portrait sculpture had gained in refinement if not in vigour, but no important architectural work had been accomplished since the days of Rameses III, and a tendency to supersede and even to destroy the works of preceding generations, which generally marks a period of growth in art, gave place to the practice of preserving them. The great pyramids were repaired, old temples were restored, and wealthy men prepared tombs imitated from the elaborate subterranean sepulchres of 700 years earlier. A large temple to the local goddess Neit was built at Saïs, of which nothing remains but unintelligible ruins. What it was like may perhaps be inferred from the later Ptolemaic temples, in which the ponderous art of Karnak or the Ramesseum acquires some relief in fanciful detail, which, however

1 See Breasted, p. 548.

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tasteless it may sometimes seem to eyes that have been educated by the restrained and precise forms of Greek architecture, have a kind of grace which distinguishes it from the work of greater days.

During this dynasty great changes took place in the relations of Egypt with the outer world. Immigrants in great numbers, especially Greeks and Jews, came from the coasts and islands of the Mediterranean for purposes of trade. Ionian and Carian mercenaries from Asia Minor formed a large proportion of the army. A Greek colony, which was established at Cyrene on the Libyan coast in the reign of Psamtek I (c. 630 B.C.), soon came under Egyptian influence, and Greek military towns or cantonments arose at Daphnae on the isthmus of Suez and elsewhere.

Psamtek's long reign of fifty-four years contributed to the prosperity of the country, which continued under his successors. His son Necho and his great-grandson Hofra (Apries) were tempted to assert influence in Syria where the power of Babylon had superseded that of the fallen empire of Assyria, but they were both defeated by Nebuchadnezzar II, who, however, seems to have left Egypt unmolested. A military disturbance between Greeks and natives led to the deposition of Hofra, and the usurpation of the throne by one of his chief ministers, who, as Aahmes (Amasis) II reigned with great ability for forty-four years. He did not neglect architectural works; many old temples were restored or improved, and he built splendid additions to those at Sais and Memphis. By the aid of a strong navy he annexed Cyprus and maintained friendly relations with foreign cities, especially with Greek communities. Greek traders enjoyed especial favour, and they had already
under Hofra been allowed to found a commercial settlement at Naucratis in the western Delta. A large temple called the Hellenion was built there at the expense of a number of Ionian cities, and four or five of the Grecian states provided special temples for their own colonists. All this architectural work has vanished.

The conquest of Babylon by the Persians took place in 529 B.C., when Aahmes had been thirty years on the throne, and on the subjugation of Egypt by Cambyses, which occurred soon after the death of Aahmes, the cities in the Delta declined. Naucratis remained for some time the chief centre of trade, until the foundation of Alexandria hastened its downfall; and in succeeding ages it was gradually reduced to a mere group of mounds, in which the explorations of Messrs. Petrie and Hogarth have disinterred little but foundations of walls and broken stones.

Cambyses made Egypt a satrapy of Persia, and though his successor Darius Hystaspes cultivated the goodwill of the inhabitants, and showed sympathy with their religion by building a temple to Amen-Ra in the oasis of El-Kharga, the next king, Xerxes, suppressed an attempt to regain independence with great harshness, and reduced the country to a condition of slavery, which continued under his successors for seventy years longer. Later revolts were more successful; during three short dynasties Egypt regained a transitory independence, and under Nectanebo (Nekht-Hor-Heb), who founded the XXXth dynasty, even enjoyed some prosperity. Many relics of his reign, which lasted eighteen years, have come to light. His sarcophagus, elaborately decorated and inscribed, and two small obelisks may be seen in the British Museum. He built additions to the temple of Isis
on the island of Philae, which is supposed to have been possibly founded by Aahmes II and rebuilt later. Two long colonnades and a smaller temple, which formed an entrance to the precincts, are the oldest buildings there, and may still be seen when not submerged by the Nile barrage at Assuan.

He was succeeded by his son and grandson, but under the latter the Persians again obtained possession of the country for a few years, until Alexander the Great defeated Darius III at the battle of Issus (332 B.C.), and having overthrown the Persian empire was welcomed by the Egyptians as a deliverer. He conciliated them by adopting their religion, and obtaining a divine ratification of his title from the priests of Amen; but his greatest work for Egypt was the foundation of the city of Alexandria. At his death one of his generals, Ptolemy Soter, assumed the administration of the country as the representative of Alexander's half-brother Philip Arrhidaeus, and of his son Alexander II, and there are works at Karnak and Luxor and elsewhere which were executed in their names. But on the murder of Alexander at the age of 13, Ptolemy assumed the crown, and founded a dynasty which lasted from 270 B.C. till 30 B.C. when Egypt became a Roman province.