The Saite and Persian periods provide a unique insight into the role that foreigners played in Egyptian society. Unlike earlier periods in Egyptian history, our perspective on the status of foreigners in Egypt in this era comes largely from the point of view of the immigrant communities themselves. There is little direct testimony from the Late Period that might reveal Egyptian attitudes to the foreigners that came to live in the country; but the evidence coming from the foreigners themselves is comparatively rich. We can infer from this material that the immigrant communities in Egypt were a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the Saites, and later the Persian occupiers, recruited foreigners to serve as a military support in manning garrisons and protecting the frontiers, enabling the rulers to engage in external campaigns, and protecting their position at home. Foreigners were also recruited to engage in trade and other productive activities, providing taxes to support the royal exchequer. This policy required granting these foreigners rights and privileges which were anomalous, and generated strong resentments among the native population. The resentments occasionally boiled over into acts of violence, and even outright revolt. Thus, the kings also had to create the appearance that those foreign groups, so vital to their rule, were being strictly controlled and restricted. The balancing act, of encouraging foreign groups while at the same time being seen to restrict them, was inherently unsteady. It contributed to the instability of the Saite Dynasty, and later exacerbated the resentment of the Persians by the Egyptians they sought to control.

Various groups settled in Egypt in the Saite and Persian periods (Kaplan 2003). In addition to the Libyans who settled in the Delta from the 20th Dynasty on, Greeks, Carians, Phoenicians, Jews, and Aramaeans all made their way into Egypt. Once there, they formed communities of mercenaries and traders. Although these groups served a similar range of functions in the different parts of the country in which they settled, there were also significant differences in the circumstances in which they found themselves in Egypt.
As a result, there are evident differences in the ways that Egypt treated them. The Egyptian policy seems to have developed in this period on an ad hoc basis, according to the needs of the Egyptian king, rather than on the basis of pre-existing social and legal traditions.

The first Greeks and Carians to settle in Egypt were recruited as mercenaries by Psamtik I. Although Herodotus claims that they arrived in Egypt originally as brigands, Diodorus and the contemporary evidence of Ashurbanipal’s annals suggest that Psamtik requested the Greeks and Carians from the Lydian king Gyges (Diod. 1.66.12). Phoenicians were probably recruited by the Saites as well, to serve as soldiers and sailors. Later, Jews and Aramaeans played a similar role under the Persians. The bulk of the evidence for these groups comes from the papyri of the Persian-era garrison at Elephantine (Yeb)/Syene in Upper Egypt, but there is good reason to believe that the community there traced its origins to the Saite period. The author of the second-century BC Letter of Aristeas asserts that Jews had been sent to help Psamtik (I or II) with his campaigns against the Nubians. These soldiers, being essential to the Saite and Persian kings for the maintenance of control over the country, were, as we shall see, accorded special privileges.

Foreigners in Egypt who did not serve as mercenaries often came as merchants and craftsmen. Here again most is known about the Greeks, who were granted the settlement of Naukratis as an emporion to regulate trade between Greece and Egypt, and also for the purpose of craft manufacturing for local sale and for export; but Phoenicians, Jews and Aramaeans also engaged in these activities. Merchants and craftsmen occupied a lesser status than mercenaries.

2 On the Ashurbanipal material, see Spalinger (1978: 402). Jer. 46:9 refers to people of Cush, Put (Libya) and Ludim (Lydians?) serving under the Egyptian king in the late sixth century; the latter could encompass the Carian and Greek mercenaries sent by Gyges; see Lundbom (2004: 201).

3 The evidence for Phoenician mercenaries in Egypt is scanty but compelling. The Phoenician residential district in Memphis is named the stratopedon Tyriōn by Herodotus (2.112), suggesting its function was originally as an army camp. Herodotus tells the story of the Phoenicians sent by Nekau to circumnavigate Africa (4.42). There are some Phoenician inscriptions alongside the Greek and Carian ones at Abu Simbel (Sauneron and Yoyotte 1952a: 132; 1952b: 188).

4 The reference is usually associated with the well-known campaign of Psamtik II to Nubia in 593; for arguments in favor of identifying it with an expedition of Psamtik I, see Sauneron and Yoyotte (1952a: 132; 1952b: 188). On the arrival of the Jews, see Modrzejewski (1995: 22–23).

5 The primary account of the establishment of Naukratis is in Herodotus, 2.178–9. A later version in Strabo (17.1.18), credits the Milesians with founding Naukratis, after establishing a fort on the Bolbitine mouth; but Herodotus’ version is generally preferred. The bibliography on