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## **The Rhetoric and the Reality: Egyptian Conceptions of Foreigners during the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 BCE)**

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**The Rhetoric and the Reality:  
Egyptian Conceptions of Foreigners during the Middle  
Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 BCE.)**

**Amy Butner**

**University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
College Scholars Thesis  
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**Project Mentor:  
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## **Introduction**

The portion of ancient Egyptian history known as the pharaonic period (c. 3100 to 332 BCE)<sup>1</sup> has traditionally been divided by scholars into periods of political unity, referred to as “kingdoms,” and periods of political fracture, referred to as “intermediate periods.” These periods are further divided into dynasties, “each consisting of a sequence of rulers, usually united by such factors as kinship or the location of their principal royal residence.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is easy to look at nearly three thousand years of ancient Egyptian history and envision this civilization as relatively static and homogenous. The question of Egyptian ethnicity is, however, very complicated – much more so than the highly standardized artistic and linguistic conventions suggest.

Despite art and literature depicting foreigners as symbols of chaos to be subdued, Egyptian society was in fact quite dynamic and porous. Non-Egyptians were able to enter into Egyptian society, and managed successfully to assimilate into Egyptian culture. There are even instances of foreigners reaching positions of great power within the Egyptian political system, such as the oft cited example of Aper-El, a New Kingdom foreigner who managed to achieve the rank of vizier, a position second only to the king of Egypt in power and prestige.<sup>3</sup>

The tension that exists between representations of foreigners in art and literature and the real lives of foreigners living within Egypt has not yet been satisfactorily

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Shaw, “Introduction: Chronologies and Cultural Change in Egypt,” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Ian Shaw, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1. This is also reflected in the Biblical account of the patriarch Joseph, who, according to the book of Genesis, travels to Egypt and rises to a position of power second only to that of Pharaoh. (Genesis 41:37-43).

<sup>2</sup> Shaw (2000), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Shaw. “Egypt and the Outside World.” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Ian Shaw, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 315.



explored. The task of collecting and interpreting the vast body of Egyptian artistic and literary representations of foreigners is an enormous one, and the necessarily limited scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive investigation of all periods of pharaonic Egypt. Egyptian conceptions of foreigners as evidenced by stereotypical representations of non-Egyptians during Egypt's Middle Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 BCE)<sup>4</sup> will be outlined and discussed. This study will thus focus on the general trends concerning conceptions of foreigners within Middle Kingdom Egyptian society.

### **Methodology**

Egyptian art categorizes people into four separate groups of stereotypes: we will call these "Egyptians," as defined against "Asiatics", "Nubians," and "Libyans." Each of these stereotypes is easily recognizable based on distinct physical characteristics. Skin tone, clothing and hairstyles must be interpreted as particularly important indicators of perceived ethnic membership based on Egyptian attention to these details and their recurrence throughout Egyptian history. The physical characteristics of the people of the ancient Near East as portrayed by Egyptian art will be outlined and discussed in some detail.

In general, Egyptian men are portrayed with reddish-brown skin, long hair and white linen kilts. Asiatics are depicted with yellow or white skin, long hair, full beards and fringed skirts with colorful patterns. Nubians have much darker skin, short curly

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<sup>4</sup> Gae Callender. "The Middle Kingdom Renaissance," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, edited by Ian Shaw. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 148.

hair, and are often shown wearing large earrings and bracelets.<sup>5</sup> They also wear long skirts made of animal skins. Libyans, on the other hand, are often portrayed with yellow skin, long wavy hair, elaborate cloaks, feathers and sometimes penis sheaths.<sup>6</sup> (For different styles of dress see Figure 1.)

Egyptians also differentiated themselves from other peoples linguistically. Egyptians referred to themselves as *rmt*, a term that could signify “person” or “human” in addition to “Egyptian.” Egyptians contrasted this term with various words for the various peoples they encountered. The peoples of the Near East were broadly termed *‘3mw*, or “Asiatics.”<sup>7</sup> The peoples that inhabited the land to the south of Egypt were generally called *nhsj*, “Nubians,”<sup>8</sup> and the peoples living to the west of Egypt were referred to as *tmh*, “Libyans.”<sup>9</sup> As Egypt came into greater contact with outsiders, the number of ethnonyms in the Egyptian vocabulary grew. However, the terms outlined here remained the general designators for various peoples of the Near East and North East Africa.

### **Race vs Ethnicity**

Despite the Egyptian focus on physical differences, and this paper’s interpretation of this focus, the term “race” will be avoided where possible. The concept of “race” has long been used to describe and label people who display similar physical characteristics,

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Booth, *The Role of Foreigners in Ancient Egypt: A Study of Non-Stereotypical Artistic Representations*. (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Booth (2005),10.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*. 1. Band. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955),167.

<sup>8</sup> Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*. 2. Band. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955),303.

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*. 5. Band. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955),368.

most notoriously so in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Attempts to predict the behavior pattern of groups of people belonging to the various “races” were once backed by pseudo-scientific assertions that claimed that individual characteristics such as intellect and personality were biological and could thus be linked to physical characteristics like skin color. These arguments have no serious scientific grounding but the term “race” remains problematic. The idea that behavior or ability is connected with skin color is “the classic definition of racism”<sup>10</sup> and so, to avoid unintentionally bringing to mind the negative and primarily modern connotations associated with race, this work will focus instead on describing the ethnic identities of the various peoples of the ancient Near East and to interpret critically the relationships that existed between these groupings.

Of course, “ethnicity” is itself a term that must be carefully examined and defined. The history of this concept is extraordinarily complex, and the debate over a set definition of the term is still raging. In response to the plethora of possible understandings and interpretations of the concept of ethnicity, R. H. Thompson asserts that any theory of ethnicity must address three issues: (1) ethnic classifications, (2) ethnic sentiments, and (3) ethnic social organization.<sup>11</sup> This means that any well defined ethnic theory must not only be able to describe the mechanics, reasons and consequences of the formation of groups, but must also offer interpretations of these descriptions. Descriptions of ethnic classifications, therefore, must help determine, for example,

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<sup>10</sup> Richard H. Thompson, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson (1989), 15-18. Thompson includes the concept of “race” in his arguments, but the racial aspect of the model has been intentionally left out of this discussion.

“whether or not such categorizations are the product of biological or social tendencies.”<sup>12</sup>

Questions about ethnic sentiments, that is, the cultural significance assigned to ethnic affiliation, must outline, “whether such racial, ethnic, or national sentiments or beliefs are themselves natural, or otherwise biologically derived, or whether they are socially derived.”<sup>13</sup> An explanation of ethnic social organization must, according to Thompson, conclude why social stratification exists.<sup>14</sup> Ethnicity, which incorporates questions of cultural affiliations such as clothing and hairstyles, is a much more inclusive concept than race, and is considerably more useful when describing human relationships, especially as depicted in artistic form.

In *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*, Siân Jones defines ethnic identity as “that aspect of a person’s self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common descent.”<sup>15</sup> An ethnic group is, therefore, “any group of people who set themselves apart and/or are set apart by others with whom they interact or co-exist on the basis of their perceptions of cultural differentiation and/or common descent.”<sup>16</sup> The ethnic identities of the inhabitants of Egypt and the areas in contact with Egypt will be understood based on these definitions.

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that all theories of ethnicity have been formed, discussed, and refined in a modern, predominantly Western, context and by focusing on the complex socio-cultural interactions of modern societies and modern

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson (1989), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson (1989), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson (1989), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*. (London: Routledge, 1997), xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Jones (1997), xiii.

peoples. Any discussion of “ethnicity” in an ancient context is therefore at risk of an interpretation of modern conceptions projected anachronistically upon ancient phenomena. Despite this, the given definition of ethnicity “allows an understanding of *differences* in the manifestation of ethnicity,”<sup>17</sup> and therefore “preserves the possibility of exploring difference in the past, rather than merely reproducing it in the image of the present.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the danger of anachronistic definitions and understanding is reduced, and the possibility of critical interpretation is maintained.

Traditionally, archaeologists have interpreted continuity in the style and composition of materials as indicative of distinct ethnic groups. However, the description and categorization of peoples based upon material culture (ceramics, architecture, etc.) has proven to be extremely problematic and most scholars today hesitate to suggest that material culture can be used to classify human cultures more broadly.

### **Nature of the Evidence**

This study will focus primarily on Egyptian textual and visual representations of “the foreigner” to understand the relationships that existed between the Egyptians and the various groups that surrounded and lived among them and how these relationships developed over time. Textual evidence is of much broader value than material culture alone because texts “provide data concerning economic and political activities and relationships as well as the geographic locations of specific named populations.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the limitations of narrowly identifying the development and movement of distinct

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<sup>17</sup> Jones (1997), 129. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> Jones (1997), 129.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Kramer, “Pots and People,” *Bibliotheca Mesopotamica* 7 (1977): 95.

ethnic groups based on distinctive material culture, such archaeological evidence will be explored where appropriate.

Of course, textual evidence offers its own set of problems. In order accurately to interpret textual material, the purpose of the text must first be understood. This is extremely problematic, especially where the text does not attempt to explicitly outline its purpose. It is often difficult to distinguish texts that are intended to serve an historical function versus purely fictional textual accounts. Texts in the Egyptian context are additionally only useful for illustrating the views of the upper-class elites who were able to write. It is impossible to discern whether texts are indicative of minority views or of more general trends within other levels of Egyptian society.

In order to interpret the available textual, visual and archaeological sources, it is vital first to outline what can be gleaned about the cognitive framework of the Egyptians. It is important to remember how far away in space and time this civilization and its people are from modern, Western society. It is important to admit that there is no clear window into the ancient world, and that all interpretation will be clouded with modern concepts. Over the years that separate our world from that of the Egyptians, there has been much debate about the nature of Egyptian thought. That most of this debate has been waged between Western scholars has had profound effects on the interpretation of Egyptian data. It is therefore vital to be aware of the effect that Western scholarship has had on the analysis of Egyptian repositories of information, and to make every attempt to avoid forcing Egyptian material into a Western format.

## **Religion and World View**

In order to interpret Egyptian material from a non-Western point of view, the way the Egyptians themselves may have interpreted their world must be explored. Though we must be honest that it is impossible to fully separate modern notions from modern interpretations, investigating ancient thought patterns is nevertheless important in order to gain a broad understanding of ancient material. The first step in outlining the worldview of the Egyptians is to explain the complexities of Egyptian religion. Erik Hornung points out:

Egyptian religion lived on the fact that gods exist, and this certainty pervaded all of Egyptian life. If we remove the gods from the Egyptians' world, all that remains is a dark, uninhabited shell that would not repay study. The gods are part of Egyptian reality and hence are for us at the least historical realities that should be taken seriously.<sup>20</sup>

We thus get an idea of one conceptual framework that motivated the Egyptians, and the cultural background that influenced them.

It is also important to acknowledge the scope of Egyptian religion within the Egyptian context. The English word "religion" here fails to offer us an accurate description since it immediately calls to mind the structure and capacity of modern Western and world religions, Christianity in particular. This modern notion of religion is much too limited to serve us fully because Egyptian religion was not based on purely theological thought, but also represented considerations in issues of philosophy, psychology and "theories about the functioning of the world and society."<sup>21</sup> The modern

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<sup>20</sup> Erik Hornung. *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 251.

<sup>21</sup> Gertie Englund. "God as a Frame of Reference: On Thinking and Concepts of Thought in Ancient Egypt," in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and*

scholar, trained in an academic world where these concepts are each explored in distinct disciplines, must therefore be cautious when conceptualizing and discussing the role and importance of Egyptian “religion,” which is infused throughout most parts of Egyptian life.

Vital to any study of Egyptian thought is the study of the concept of *ma’at*. Though a definition of this concept is never explicitly given in Egyptian sources;<sup>22</sup> the term was used throughout Egypt’s pharaonic history with seemingly little change in meaning. Based on the range of contexts in which *ma’at* is found, the Erman/Grapow *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, defines *ma’at* as, “*das Rechte, die Wahrheit.*”<sup>23</sup> The word is, consequently, most often translated into English as “rightness,” “order,” “truth,” or “justice.” However, the range of meaning contained within the word *ma’at* is too broad to fit nicely into any one German or English word. Indeed, no other language seems to contain a word that is able to express the same range of concepts that is incorporated into the word *ma’at*.<sup>24</sup>

*Ma’at* describes the Egyptian ethical and behavioral ideal. A goddess named *Ma’at* personifies this concept of order and justice. The goddess *Ma’at* is the embodiment of the proper order of the cosmos and to maintain this order, the individual must live according to her rules. Hornung describes this intricate relationship, pointing out that, “passively adapting to a preexisting order, following and respecting it, will not

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*Popular Expressions*, ed. Gertie Englund (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1989), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Erik, Hornung. *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, trans. Elizabeth Bredeck (New York: Timken Publishers, Inc., 1992), 138.

<sup>23</sup> Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*. 2. Band. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1955), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Maulana Karenga. *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt. A Study in Classical African Ethics*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 9.



suffice; rather, this order must be established and actively realized time and again. Only through proper behavior and active engagement is world order achieved.”<sup>25</sup> Thus it becomes clear that the Egyptians saw themselves as responsible for maintaining order in their world. If *ma’at* were not upheld, chaos would ensue and “the sun would not rise, the Nile would not flood, crops would not grow, and children would abandon their elderly parents.”<sup>26</sup> The concept of *ma’at*, embodied in the goddess of the same name, represents the world and the cosmos as they were meant to be.<sup>27</sup> Late Egyptian texts mention that the goddess *Ma’at* came into being in primordial times and has been in existence as long as the cosmos itself.<sup>28</sup> As Morentz points out, *ma’at* must therefore be interpreted as “the state of being...determined by/through the act of creation.”<sup>29</sup>

The Egyptian king, also referred to as “pharaoh,” played a pivotal role in the maintenance of *ma’at* and pharaohs are often depicted offering a small, seated figure of the goddess *Ma’at* to one of various gods associated with kingship and creation such as Amun, Re-Harakhty, or Ptah.<sup>30</sup> These scenes serve to associate the king with the goddess *Ma’at* and the concept she embodies, and thus to legitimize the king’s power and ability to maintain order. The offering of *Ma’at* to a powerful god legitimized the king’s human

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<sup>25</sup> Karenga (2004), 135.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter. *Egypt and the Egyptians*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>27</sup> The dual nature of the term ‘ma’at,’ encompassing both an abstract notion and a goddess, might have an echo in the Hebrew *chokhmah*. This word, most often translated ‘wisdom’ also functions as both an abstract noun and, occasionally, as a personification of that quality in female form (e.g. Proverbs 8-9 and The Wisdom of Solomon 6-12).

<sup>28</sup> Hornung (1992), 132.

<sup>29</sup> Siegfried Morentz. *Ägyptische Religion*. (Stuttgart, 1960), 122.

<sup>30</sup> Morentz (1960), 139.

power by proving that he (the king) was able to uphold the concepts that Ma'at herself represents.<sup>31</sup>

Hornung quotes R. Anthes who stresses the importance of Ma'at:

Ma'at holds this small world together and makes it into a constitutive part of world order. She is the bringing home of the harvest; she is human integrity in thought, word, and deed; she is the loyal leadership of government; she is the prayer and offering of the king to the god. Ma'at encompasses all of creation, human beings, the king, the god. She permeates the economy, the administration, religious services, the law.<sup>32</sup>

*Ma'at* is the concept that holds both human society and the greater cosmos together. Thus, the Egyptian idea of the cosmos becomes clearer to us. The world of humans and the world of the gods were separate, but “remained completely integrated into one single sphere of belonging.”<sup>33</sup> The rules that apply in the earthly world also apply in the next world. In this organization of worlds, “death represents the threshold between ‘this’ world of indirect proximity to god and ‘that’ world of direct communion with him.”<sup>34</sup> The distinction between these two worlds does not, however, diminish the importance or worth of this world. As Hornung describes “God divided, creation is divided.... The divided elements are interdependent, but remain divided so long as they are existent. Only the return of nonexistence fuses what is divided...”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the very nature of creation is to divide and differentiate.

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Teeter. *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt*. (Saline: McNaughton & Gunn, 1997), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Hornung (1992), 138. Hornung here quotes R. Anthes' *Die Maat des Echnaton von Amarna*. (Baltimore, 1952.) Translation by Elizabeth Bredeck.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Assmann. *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 2002), 170.

<sup>34</sup> Assmann (2002), 170.

<sup>35</sup> Hornung (1982), 253.

### **Egyptian Political Relationships with Asiatics in the Middle Kingdom**

The term “Asiatic” refers to various peoples of the Near East, including those peoples inhabiting the Levant; an area that refers to what is now Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Egyptian texts of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 BCE)<sup>36</sup> refer to this region as “*Retenu*.”<sup>37</sup> Later Egyptian texts refer to the region under Egyptian control as “Canaan” (*kn’n*).<sup>38</sup> The designation “Canaan” refers specifically to the area “to the west of the Jordan River, Phoenicia, and part of southern Syria during the second millennium BCE,”<sup>39</sup> though scholars often refer to the region throughout the Bronze Age as “Canaan.”<sup>40</sup> The earliest reference to “Canaan” in Egyptian texts is found in the fifteenth century account of the pharaoh Amenhotpe II (1454-1419BCE.)<sup>41</sup> The term “Canaan” is thus used anachronistically when used to describe the region during the Middle Kingdom.

The exact nature of Egyptian relationships with the Levant, during the former’s Middle Kingdom remains complex and difficult to determine with certainty. The extent of Egyptian political and cultural influence over Western Asia must be considered alongside the question of the organization of Levantine civilization during the time period. The degree of urbanization in the Levant would have determined the level of

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<sup>36</sup> Callender (2000), 148.

<sup>37</sup> Donald B. Redford, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt: Volume 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 338.

<sup>38</sup> Redford (2001), 227.

<sup>39</sup> Redford (2001), 227.

<sup>40</sup> Redford (2001), 227.

<sup>41</sup> Redford (2001), 228.

Egyptian interest and power in the region.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, this time period, referred to as the Middle Bronze Age IIA (MB IIA) is characterized by Susan Cohen as “one of the most complex and least understood periods in the history and archaeology of the Levant.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to the problems of reaching a satisfactory conclusion about the political situation in the Levant, the relative chronology between this region and Egypt has long been disputed. Thus, a full understanding of the political and social relationships between these peoples is highly problematic. The scope of this paper does not allow for a full analysis of the situation, and will therefore rely on the work of Cohen and others.

Cohen argues that by “the Twelfth Dynasty, Egypt maintained a considerable interest in the goods and commodities available in the neighboring regions to its northeast...”<sup>44</sup> However, despite the evidence of Egyptian interest and presence in the Levant during the twentieth century BCE<sup>45</sup>, the exact relationship between Egypt and the Levant has not yet been satisfactorily outlined. Various models have been suggested to explain this relationship. The traditional explanation places Egypt and its northern neighbors into an imperial relationship with Egypt as the dominant power. Other models range from simply suggesting less Egyptian control over the region, to complete Egyptian ambivalence.<sup>46</sup> According to Cohen, however, the peoples of the southern Levant experienced a great amount of cultural and political change over the four hundred years

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<sup>42</sup> Susan L. Cohen. *Canaanites, Chronologies and Connections: The Relationship of Middle Bronze Age IIA Canaan to Middle Kingdom Egypt*. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen (2002), , 1.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen (2002), , 45.

<sup>45</sup> Callender (2000),, 158.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen (2002), , 33.

that make up the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the political and economic relationships similarly changed dramatically over time. Cohen points out, “as [the southern Levant] developed and grew stronger, in part as a result of contact with Egypt, Egyptian contact with Canaan [the southern Levant] also changed in response to a stronger power to the north.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Egyptian conceptions of foreigners must be analyzed in light of the ever-changing political situations, both international and domestic.

### **Artistic Depictions of Asiatics in the Middle Kingdom**

The Egyptian Middle Kingdom began, according to most scholars, when the pharaoh Mentuhotep II successfully reunited Egypt after the political chaos that characterized the First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055 BCE.)<sup>49</sup> As expected, the inscriptions and reliefs from his reign focus on stating his legitimacy as a ruler of all of Egypt. The relief found at Tôd, for example, depicts Mentuhotep standing before the god Montu. The goddess Hathor and three kings, drawn on a smaller scale denoting their lower status, follow the king.<sup>50</sup> (Figure 2) A similar drawing at Wadi Shatt el-Rigal offers further evidence of Mentuhotep’s “insistence on lineage.”<sup>51</sup> This relief shows Mentuhotep II standing with a king and queen, also drawn on a smaller scale, who are listed as his parents. (Figure 3) Labib Habachi argues that the inscription was designed to

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<sup>47</sup> Callender (2000), 148.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen (2002), 139.

<sup>49</sup> Stephan Seidlmayer. “The First Intermediate Period,” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Ian Shaw, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>50</sup> Labib Habachi. “King Nebhepetre Mentuhotep: His Monuments, Place in History, Deification and Unusual Representations in the Form of Gods,” *MDAIK* 19 (1963): 47.

<sup>51</sup> Callender (2000), 150.

prove that Mentuhotep was “ more important than his ancestors and that he was the son of a king and a queen.”<sup>52</sup> Royal propaganda played a vital role in the Middle Kingdom.

It is, therefore, significant that the earliest representations of foreigners in the Middle Kingdom come from the inscriptions of Mentuhotep. Reliefs from the reign of this pharaoh reflect the traditional artistic depiction of the Egyptian king smiting his enemies. In this type of illustration the pharaoh is typically shown “striding forward and holding the hair of a prisoner whom he is about to club with [a] mace.”<sup>53</sup> (Figure 4) Reliefs such as those from Gebelein and the Chapel at Dendera in Upper Egypt depict Mentuhotep II smiting various groups of foreigners, including Near Easterners (“Asiatics.”) However, it is unclear to what extent these depictions reflect the reality of Egyptian relationships with foreigners.

The relief at Gebelein, for example, shows the pharaoh holding in his grasp an Egyptian captive.<sup>54</sup> (Figure 5) This inclusion of an Egyptian in a smiting scene suggests that these artistic depictions were primarily symbolic in character and broadly depicted all enemies of Egypt. David O’Connor argues, “whether these were foreigners or defeated Egyptian rebels is irrelevant, because both rebellious foreigners and rebellious Egyptians are considered identically lawless, and open to exemplary punishment.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the figures “awaiting their turn to be clubbed”<sup>56</sup> must be interpreted as symbols representing the enemies of the pharaoh in general terms. It can therefore be concluded

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<sup>52</sup> Habachi (1963),47.

<sup>53</sup> Habachi (1963), 39-40.

<sup>54</sup> Habachi (1963), 39.

<sup>55</sup> David O’Connor. “Egypt’s View of Others,” in *Never Had the Like Occurred: Egypt’s View of its Past*, edited by John Tait (London: : Cavendish Publishing Limited, 2003), 157.

<sup>56</sup> Habachi (1963),39.

that in the early years of the Middle Kingdom, Asiatics were often viewed symbolically as enemies of Egypt. That Egyptians too are symbolically represented as enemies suggests this symbolism may have been used in a purely rhetorical context of royal propaganda.

Of course, such symbolism does not capture all of Egypt's experiences with Near Eastern peoples. There is evidence that the kings of Egypt had direct contact with their neighbors to the north and east. From some such evidence we get a quite different view of Egyptian relationships with Near Eastern foreigners than portrayed by the royal art and inscriptions of Mentuhotep. In contrast to the negative language and chaotic symbolism associated with foreigners in royal depictions, elsewhere, such as in the inscriptions found in the Sinai, Asiatic peoples are not submitted to this vilification.

As early as the fourth millennium Egypt was sending mining expeditions into the Sinai to exploit the rich turquoise deposits found there.<sup>57</sup> The earliest evidence from the Sinai indicates a violent relationship between Egypt and the Asiatics of the region. Reliefs from the Old Kingdom consistently depict the pharaoh of Egypt in the process of killing Asiatic prisoners.<sup>58</sup> However, Middle Kingdom evidence indicates a much more peaceful relationship between these peoples.<sup>59</sup> (Figure 6) The violent scenes that characterize the Old Kingdom Egyptian presence in the Sinai are conspicuously absent from the Middle Kingdom reliefs. This probably indicates a major alteration in the

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<sup>57</sup> Jaroslav Cerny. "Semites in Egyptian Mining Expeditions to Sinai." *Journal of the Czechoslovak Oriental Institute, Prague*. 7 (1935): 384.

<sup>58</sup> Cohen (2002), 42.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfgang Helck. *Die Beziehung Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962), 85.

Egyptian perception of Asiatics in the Sinai between the Old and Middle Kingdoms. It may also suggest a shift in political relationships from hostile to diplomatic.

The Sinai reliefs of the Middle Kingdom do not depict Asiatics as being somehow subservient or inferior to their Egyptian counterparts; quite the contrary. In addition to no depiction or textual mention of violence between Egyptians and Asiatics, there is no evidence that the Asiatics that are mentioned as having taken part in Egyptian mining expeditions were used for their labor. Jaroslav Cerny concludes, “these Asiatics were not used in the mining work, but rather as experts acquainted with the country and intermediaries in the contact with local inhabitants....”<sup>60</sup> Thus, despite royal rhetoric, the Egyptians quite clearly relied upon their Asiatic neighbors and were prepared to acknowledge this dependence.

Middle Kingdom depictions of Asiatics are not limited to those living outside of Egypt’s borders. There is pictorial evidence of Asiatics within areas under Egyptian control, as well as in Egypt itself. These depictions are most typically of an economic nature, and indicate a trade relationship between the peoples of the Levant and Egypt.

In the twelfth dynasty tomb of the nomarch Khnumhotep at Beni Hasan we find one of the most often cited pieces of pictorial evidence of Asiatic connections to Middle Kingdom Egypt. (Figure 7) This relief depicts a group of Asiatic traders from a land called Shu. An accompanying inscription indicates that some thirty-seven Asiatics have come to Egypt bringing *galena*, “the material from which black eye-paint is ground.”<sup>61</sup> Women and children accompany these traders, and their presence may suggest that these nomadic Asiatics were planning on remaining for some time in Egypt. Many

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<sup>60</sup> Cerny (1935), 385.

<sup>61</sup> Cohen (2002), 46.



interpretations of this relief have been offered ranging from simply representing a trading caravan, to depicting Near Easterners bringing tribute to Egypt, and even as being evidence in support of the “semi-nomadic patriarchal society in Canaan as described by the book of Genesis.”<sup>62</sup>

As Cohen points out, these various interpretations of the relief suggest quite different reflections of “the manner in which Egyptians viewed these peoples.”<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, the purpose of this relief remains unclear. It is not impossible that the relief does in fact record an occurrence of Asiatics coming to Egypt to stay. However, it is also possible that such movement of Asiatics was highly unusual and therefore the relief was included in the tomb of Khnumhotep, the “Administrator of the Eastern Desert” to commemorate an unusual event.<sup>64</sup>

However, despite the questions that still remain about the interpretation of the relief at Beni Hasan, it can be concluded that there is some sort of relationship, presumably an economically-driven one, established between Egypt and its Asiatic neighbors. Interestingly, this relief may offer us an insight into Asiatics working within Egypt. Hans Goedicke suggests that the Asiatics depicted at Beni Hasan are not bringing the materials needed for eye make-up, as has traditionally been presumed.<sup>65</sup> Instead, Goedicke argues, “the scene depicted in Khnumhotep’s tomb at Beni Hasan should be understood as concerning a commercial project” and “the group of [Asiatics] depicted...is not a stray trade caravan, but rather foreign workers from the North

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<sup>62</sup> Cohen (2002), 45.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen (2002), 45.

<sup>64</sup> Cohen (2002), 46.

<sup>65</sup> Hans Goedicke. “Abi-Sha(i)’s Representation in Beni-Hasan,” *JARCE* 21 (1984): 204.

Sinai....”<sup>66</sup> Thus, much like the evidence from the Sinai, the Beni Hasan relief might suggest a cooperative economic venture between Egypt and its Eastern neighbors. Even though the Beni Hasan evidence might suggest Egyptian control over Asiatic workers, it is still clear that the Egyptians rely upon these Near Eastern peoples.

### **Literary Depictions of Asiatics in the Middle Kingdom**

Long after political dissolution led to collapse of the Middle Kingdom in the seventeenth century, Egyptians considered this period of history to be the Classical or Golden Age of their civilization.<sup>67</sup> The language and literature of this period, therefore, remained important throughout much of Egyptian history. The Egyptians retained Middle Egyptian as a written language centuries after it had ceased to be a spoken language. As Dietrich Wildung explains, “instruction in schools given in this language...made use of literary texts written in Middle Egyptian in subsequent periods.”<sup>68</sup> This literature that came out of Egypt’s Middle Kingdom can thus be presumed to have enjoyed some level of popularity long after it was written.

Reading these texts in the hopes of finding information concerning how Egyptians viewed their neighbors during the Middle Kingdom is highly problematic. Egyptian texts, like other ancient texts, are notorious for being of doubtful historical value, it is often difficult to assess to what extent they can be used to glean information about actual Egyptian perceptions of foreigners. However, as Loprieno points out, “the appearance of

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<sup>66</sup> Goedicke (1984), 210.

<sup>67</sup> Dietrich Wildung. “Looking Back into the Future: The Middle Kingdom as a Bridge to the Past,” in *Never Had the Like Occurred: Egypt’s View of its Past*, edited by John Tait. (London: Cavendish Publishing Limited, 2003), 61.

<sup>68</sup> Wildung (2003), 61.

a literature independent of sociopolitical pressures [is] considered a much later achievement in cultural history.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, Egyptian literature can be expected to offer valuable insight into theses “sociopolitical pressure” and could indeed shed light on the question of the role of foreigners.

Much debate has been waged over the question of whether Egyptian writing should indeed be labeled “literature.” Hans Gumbrecht points out that modern literary theories “have been based, since their beginning, on a highly specific concept of literature, a concept which is unlikely to have more than rough parallels within Ancient Egyptian culture.”<sup>70</sup> Early scholars of Egyptology, as Antonio Loprieno explains, believed that “Egypt’s textual categories were similar to ours, but [that] literature had not yet fully developed as independent discourse.”<sup>71</sup> Loprieno goes on to suggest, “a hermeneutic approach to Egyptian literature is increasingly being adopted.”<sup>72</sup> The confines of this paper do not allow for a detailed analysis of this topic, and will therefore continue to refer to Egyptian compositions as literature.<sup>73</sup>

The question of the extent to which Egyptian literature reflects fictitious or non-fictitious information also creates problems with interpretation. Genre, therefore, must be clearly emphasized when decoding these texts because “if genre is not incorporated into

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<sup>69</sup> Antonio Loprieno. “Defining Egyptian Literature: Ancient Texts and Modern Theories,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003): 40.

<sup>70</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. “Does Egyptology Need A ‘Theory of Literature?’” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*. edited by Antonio Loprieno. (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Antonio Loprieno. “Defining Egyptian Literature: Ancient Texts and Modern Theories,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*, edited by Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003): 40.

<sup>72</sup> Loprieno (1996), 41.

<sup>73</sup> For a closer discussion of this topic see Antonio Loprieno, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*. (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996)

the approach, there is a serious danger of misreading texts.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, the author’s possible intention must be examined before an adequate analysis can take place. This paper will focus primarily on the genres of didactic and narrative texts since these texts most often deal with concepts of the proper control and order (*ma’at*) of the Egyptian state.

Miriam Lichtheim breaks up the genre of didactic or wisdom literature into five sub-genres. These sub-genres are:

- (1) Works bearing the title “Instruction” which teach right living, and do so in the form of advice and exhortation spoken by respected elders.
- (2) “Royal Testaments” whose named kingly authors instruct their sons in state craft.
- (3) Texts that berate and lament the overthrow of the social order with its rightful kingship, and its descent into lawlessness and civil war.  
[Laments]
- (4) “Instructions” that enjoin loyalty to the reigning king, and hail the blessings of kingship.
- (5) Works that inveigh against wrongdoing, spoken by individuals who have suffered wrongs.<sup>75</sup>

The so-called Laments are the most interesting for this study because of their explicit mention of foreigners. These lamentation texts describe a complete inversion of social, political and natural norms: the poor become rich, the powerless rule, and even the Nile runs dry.<sup>76</sup> While many scholars have interpreted these texts as being in response to some sort of specific historical catastrophe, Lichtheim prefers regard them as a literary device, pointing out that “the theme ‘national distress’ was an intellectual problem that

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<sup>74</sup> Richard B. Parkinson. “Types of Literature in the Middle Kingdom,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003): 311.

<sup>75</sup> Miriam Lichtheim. “Didactic Literature,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Form*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996): 243.

<sup>76</sup> Lichtheim (1996), 249.

became a literary topos. It required no specific factual basis but merely the general phenomenon of civil disorders that could, and did, break out periodically.”<sup>77</sup>

Texts such as the Prophecy of Neferti and the Admonitions of Ipuwer, according to Lichtheim,

Formulated a general social problem and treated it from an entirely loyalist point of view: the king was the guarantor of order and of justice. This point of view was of course inherited from the Old Kingdom. What is new is that it is now formulated through a depiction of chaos, the chaos that overtakes the nation when kingship is weak.<sup>78</sup>

It can therefore be assumed that these texts were created in order to emphasize the power of the pharaoh by contrasting the state of the universe under his control with the universe devoid of his power. These texts are characterized by the frightening reversal of every aspect of the Egyptian world. The sage Ipuwer laments,

See, a man is slain by the side of his brother,  
Who abandons him to save himself.  
See, he who lacked a team owns herds,  
He who could not find plow-oxen owns cattle.  
See, he who lacked grain owns granaries,  
He who fetched grain on loan issues it.  
See, he who lacked dependents owns serfs,  
He who was a magnate does his own errands.  
See, the mighty of the land are not reported to,  
The affairs of the people have gone to ruin.<sup>79</sup>

Whether such broadly propagandistic portrayals of social structure and “proper” world order were the explicit intention of the genre is unclear. The notion that all members of society knew their place within the established social hierarchy suited the

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<sup>77</sup> Miriam Lichtheim. *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 139.

<sup>78</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 134.

<sup>79</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 158.

elites well. Perhaps such texts were merely used for entertainment purposes and had no conscious agenda. Either way, as royal rhetoric or elite horror story, these lamentation texts offer us valuable insight into the perception of Asiatics in the Middle Kingdom. Of course, the image of Asiatics we get from these texts is, by necessity, a negative one. Neferti, in his “prophecy” describes the impact of Asiatics on an inverted world bereft of the power of the Egyptian pharaoh:

All happiness has vanished,  
The land is bowed down in distress,  
Owing to those feeders,  
Asiatics who roam the land.  
Foes have risen in the East,  
Asiatics have come down to Egypt  
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Desert flocks will drink at the river of Egypt,  
Take their ease on the shores for lack of one to fear;  
For this land is to-and-fro, knowing not what comes....<sup>80</sup>

Here again we find foreigners fulfilling the symbolic function of chaotic forces working against the order of the Egyptian kingship. In this passage, as in other lamentation texts, the Asiatics are not simply depicted as hostile forces outside of Egypt. Instead, they have actively come into Egypt and have taken up residence thanks to the power vacuum created by the hypothetical lack of a pharaoh. Their presence has sent the land of Egypt into a downward spiral of inversion and chaos.

Their destructive role, moreover, does not stop with their presence in Egypt. Ipuwer despairs that, “foreigners have become people everywhere.”<sup>81</sup> The term “people”

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<sup>80</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 141.

<sup>81</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 150.

(*rmt*) was reserved solely for the description of Egyptians themselves.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Ipuwer is lamenting the fact that foreigners have managed to become Egyptians. This has important consequences for our interpretation of the role of these texts and for our understanding of ethnicity. Mention of the integration of foreigners into Egyptian society in a text that describes a chaotic world where the laws of nature and humanity have been subverted and overturned is a condemning inclusion; it suggests that the integration of foreigners goes against these laws. These texts would lead us to believe that the Egyptians of this time saw their Asiatic neighbors as being the manifestation of an irreconcilable force of chaos. Asiatics are doomed to remain outside of Egypt's borders and these texts suggest that the presence of these foreigners in Egypt should be seen as an abomination of nature and humanity, and should indeed be reason to fear.

However, the strikingly negative image we get of Asiatics from the texts of Egyptian literature is far from simple. The *Tale of Sinuhe*, one of the most widely known examples of Middle Kingdom literature is also one of the best examples of Egyptian relations with its neighbors to the northeast. Once considered to be an autobiography of a real person, the *Tale of Sinuhe* is now interpreted as a fictional example of Egyptian literature. The narrative models itself on the genre of Egyptian autobiography, but, as John Baines explains it, "departs from the norms of the genre it mimics almost at once."<sup>83</sup> Many scholars have commented on the uniqueness of the *Tale of Sinuhe*. Baines mentions that, unlike most Egyptian literature, the *Tale of Sinuhe* is attested from two

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<sup>82</sup> Charlotte Booth. *The Role of Foreigners in Ancient Egypt: A Study of Non-Stereotypical Artistic Representations*. (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 9.

<sup>83</sup> John Baines. "Interpreting Sinuhe," *JEA* 68 (1982): 32.

periods of Egyptian language, “including the significant transition from Middle to Late Egyptian.”<sup>84</sup>

The *Tale of Sinuhe* describes the travels abroad of a man named Sinuhe who flees Egypt upon hearing of the death of the Egyptian king. A group of nomadic cattle herders save Sinuhe from dehydration on his desperate flight from Egypt, and he wanders for a year and a half around the Levant before he is asked to settle in Upper Retenu by an Asiatic ruler named Ammunenshi. This ruler marries Sinuhe to his eldest daughter, allows him choose the best plot of land for himself, and makes him the ruler of his very own tribe. Ammunenshi thus takes on the symbolic role of the pharaoh, offering gifts and protection to those loyal to him. That Sinuhe gives his loyalty to Ammunenshi and spends “many years”<sup>85</sup> with him, integrating into elite Retenu society and even fighting for his foreign host illustrates his willingness to accept a foreign ruler in this position of power.

Amicable relationships between Egyptians and the inhabitants of western Asia are also recounted in the *Tale of Sinuhe*. Sinuhe is in fact directly involved in various relationships that cannot be seen in any other light. However, each of these positive relationships involves foreigners who have political power and who have been exposed to Egyptians, and ultimately each of these relationships is doomed to fail based on a failing of the foreigner.

At the very end of the narrative, Sinuhe is overtaken by a severe fit of homesickness, and the nature of the story shifts drastically from triumph in a foreign land

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<sup>84</sup> Baines (1982), 33.

<sup>85</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 227.



to pining for the homeland.<sup>86</sup> This juxtaposition between the material wealth and social position gained while abroad, and Sinuhe's longing for the Egyptian palace marks the major turning point of the narrative. Sinuhe comes to realize that all that he has acquired abroad is useless when he compares it to his life in Egypt. All of these accomplishments are empty: Ammunenshi has failed somehow in his symbolic function as pharaoh. It is not his political power or even his country that is found lacking; Ammunenshi is simply not able to meet Sinuhe's religious and funerary needs.

As Antonio Loprieno explains, the Egyptian palace is "an ultimate symbol of Egyptian values, the interface between the social and the religious aspect of rejuvenation."<sup>87</sup> To an Egyptian, proper burial and the establishment of a funerary cult were paramount to ensuring a satisfactory after-life.<sup>88</sup> Nothing was more terrifying than the idea of being buried in a foreign land that did not understand the intricacies of Egyptian funerary practices. It is thus not surprising that a now aging Sinuhe should be so suddenly and so acutely concerned about returning to Egypt and the palace.

The *Tale of Sinuhe* reveals tension, at least among the Egyptian elites, between perceptions of their Eastern neighbors as being hostile enemies to order, and as normal, albeit not Egyptian, people. The author of this text is clearly encouraging any would-be wanderers to stay in Egypt, or at least to return to Egypt before becoming too deeply integrated into a foreign society, warning of the dangers of dying abroad. That such a deterrent text was deemed necessary indicates that there were indeed Egyptians who, like Sinuhe, left Egypt to seek their fortunes. However, despite its cautionary tone, this text

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<sup>86</sup> Westendorf, 128. (See Lichtheim 1975)

<sup>87</sup> Loprieno(1996), 44.

<sup>88</sup> Redford (2001), 442-443.

recognizes foreigners who are considered equal to Egyptians, and are therefore not referred to in negative or stereotypical terms.

It is interesting to note, however, that though all of the positively viewed foreigners in the *Tale of Sinuhe* have some sort of political and cultural connection to Egypt, none of them is mentioned as staying in Egypt for an extended period. In fact, no mention at all is made of foreigners living in Egypt. Foreigners within Egypt's borders are, it would seem, assumed to be either elites on official, presumably diplomatic, business, or enemy warriors for the pharaoh to violently subdue. Thus, the idea of Asiatics as manifestations of chaos is maintained in a text that simultaneously recognizes them as having the capability of being almost equal to Egyptians.

### **Egyptian Political Relationships to Nubians in the Middle Kingdom**

Nubia refers to the region of the Nile Valley "from Aswan, in the north, upstream to ed-Debba. Nubia is subdivided into Lower Nubia, from the First to the Second Cataracts of the Nile River, and Upper Nubia."<sup>89</sup> Egyptians had various names for Nubia, including "Wawat," "Setju," and "Yam."<sup>90</sup>

Egypt's political relationship with Nubia was marked from the earliest periods by trade and the economic exploitation of Nubia's rich resources.<sup>91</sup> Egypt's power in and over Nubia grew quickly during the Old Kingdom as "trading gave way to raiding and

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<sup>89</sup> Donald B. Redford, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt: Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 551.

<sup>90</sup> Redford (2001), 551.

<sup>91</sup> Walter B. Emery. *Egypt in Nubia*. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1965), 127.

then to subjugation.”<sup>92</sup> Egyptian colonies were set up in Nubia, but these were most likely temporary settlements inhabited by merchants and metal workers.<sup>93</sup> As William Adams points out, “the Egyptian Old Kingdom was an age of exploration, characterized at first by sporadic and uncoordinated raiding and trading expeditions into southern lands. With minor exceptions...no effort was made to extend Egyptian political control or to establish permanent relations with the Nubian peoples....”<sup>94</sup> However, this imperial relationship disintegrated during the period of Egyptian history known as the First Intermediate Period when Egyptian centralized control collapsed.

The rise of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt signaled a major change in Egypt’s relationship with Nubia. During the Twelfth Dynasty, Egyptian monarchs once again turned to the south. Mentuhotep “set the tone for the period by campaigning south into Nubia shortly after reunifying Egypt.”<sup>95</sup> Egyptian interest in Nubia in the Middle Kingdom has been described as “a period of armed trade monopoly, operating through one or more established trading posts in the interior.”<sup>96</sup> As Stuart Tyson Smith explains, Mentuhotep’s campaign “set in motion a process that led to the absorption of Lower Nubia into a territorial empire guarded by some of the most impressive fortifications ever created in the ancient world.”<sup>97</sup>

It is doubtful that Nubia could have posed a serious military threat to Egypt at this time, and thus these fortifications were most likely used by the Egyptians to protect

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<sup>92</sup> William Y. Adams. *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 141.

<sup>93</sup> Emery (1965), 127.

<sup>94</sup> Adams (1977), 165.

<sup>95</sup> Stuart Tyson Smith. *Wretched Kush: Ethnic Identities and Boundaries in Egypt’s Nubian Empire*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 75.

<sup>96</sup> Adams (1977), 165.

<sup>97</sup> Smith (2003), 75.

their economic interests in the south.<sup>98</sup> These forts were called the Second Cataract Forts referring to their location near the Second Cataract, one of a series of waterfalls running along the Nile. The majority of the forts were located “over a distance of forty miles, from Buhen in the north to Semna in the south.”<sup>99</sup> This placed them directly on the border between Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia.

These structures served a variety of functions beyond the obvious one of defense. Archaeological evidence suggests these buildings also served as processing plants for the gold and copper ore that was acquired from Nubia.<sup>100</sup> The Second Cataract forts also had their own administrative center, located at Buhen.<sup>101</sup> Smith explains that in addition to serving a defensive function, these forts “also regulated and assisted riverine and overland trade, monitored the local population, and facilitated exploitation of the natural resources of the area.”<sup>102</sup>

Most importantly for this discussion, the Second Cataract Forts served a political and an ideological function. The massive walls and astounding defensive capabilities of these forts were surely able to “provide a dramatic materialization of Egyptian power.”<sup>103</sup> The names given to these fortifications such as “Repelling the Medjay<sup>104</sup>,” “Curbing the

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<sup>98</sup> Smith (2003), 76.

<sup>99</sup> Adams (1977), 176.

<sup>100</sup> Stuart Tyson Smith. “Askut and the Role of the Second Cataract Forts,” *JARCE* 28 (1991): 111.

<sup>101</sup> Adams (1977), 180.

<sup>102</sup> Smith (2003), 76.

<sup>103</sup> Smith (2003), 76.

<sup>104</sup> The Medjay were a specific Nubian ethnic group. This term was often used to describe Nubians in general.

Countries,” and “Warding off the Bows,” clearly suggest the psychological function they were intended to fulfill.<sup>105</sup>

### **Artistic Representations of Nubians in the Middle Kingdom**

Unfortunately, there exists little scholarship on the specific role of Nubians within Middle Kingdom Egyptian art. The depictions of Nubians from this time period have never been compiled, and even specific case studies representing Nubians are difficult to come by. From the information there is from Middle Kingdom sources, Nubians are depicted as bound captives kneeling before pharaoh, preparing to be executed. These illustrations clearly place the Nubians within the symbolic realm of the enemies of Egyptian royal power. In addition to these purely symbolic representations of Nubians, there are instances of Nubians in Middle Kingdom art that suggest quite a different relationship between Egyptians and Nubians.

There is evidence of Nubian mercenaries from the First Intermediate Period, the period directly preceding the Middle Kingdom. A number of funerary stelae found near the Egyptian community of Gebelein have been attested to Nubians living in the region. These stelae indicate that their Nubian owners “lived and were buried near the Egyptian community which they served and that they were buried in the Egyptian manner although retaining their identity as Nubians to the last.”<sup>106</sup> These stelae offer valuable insight into the nature of the complicated negotiations of ethnic identity within Egypt’s border.

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<sup>105</sup> Adams (1977), 180.

<sup>106</sup> Henry George Fischer. “The Nubian Mercenaries of Gebelein during the First Intermediate Period.” *Kush* 9 (1961): 44.

Most interesting for this study is the way these Nubians depicted themselves and their families. The Nubians from these stelae are easily differentiated from the Egyptians based on skin color and style of dress.<sup>107</sup> However, their wives are often depicted wearing clothing and hairstyles typical of Egyptian women, and are even sometimes depicted with “the customary yellow hue that is given to Egyptian females [in art].”<sup>108</sup> (Figure 8) It is unclear whether these depictions indicate intermarriage between Nubian men and Egyptian women, or whether elite Nubian women in this time period simply chose to portray themselves as Egyptian women. These stelae indicate “that these mercenaries became Egyptianized to the extent that they equipped themselves with funerary stelae made by the local craftsmen, and that they frequently adopted Egyptian names.”<sup>109</sup>

It is important to remember that despite adopting Egyptian funerary practices and iconography, the Nubians who commissioned these stelae maintained their Nubian ethnic identity, often self-identifying themselves as Nubians. These stelae represent an interesting example of the fluidity of ethnic boundaries during the First Intermediate Period. However, as Henry Fischer points out, “to explain why they retained their ethnic identity [as Nubians] as fully as they did, it is perhaps only necessary to point out that Gebelein was not a very great distance from their homeland.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Fischer (1961), 56.

<sup>108</sup> Fischer (1961), 59.

<sup>109</sup> Fischer (1961), 77.

<sup>110</sup> Fischer (1961), 77.

### **Literary Depictions of Nubians in the Middle Kingdom**

As has been outlined, the political relationship between Egypt and Nubia was quite different from the political connections between Egypt and its Asiatic neighbors. Egypt's political and economic presence in Nubia was much more clearly defined, and it can thus be assumed that Egyptians, at least on the elite and royal levels, had a much higher degree of direct contact with Nubians than with Asiatics.<sup>111</sup> However, much like the Asiatics of this time period, the Nubians that appear in Egypt's literature often serve as a symbolic enemy of the king; once again foreigners serve as chaotic forces in opposition to the ordered world of Egypt.

The image of Nubians from the Egyptian textual evidence of the Middle Kingdom is quite negative. However, many of these texts are obviously steeped in royal propaganda, and can thus only offer us insight into the royal rhetoric of the time. In these texts, Nubians are depicted as being rebellious groups that must be defeated and controlled by the pharaoh. Indeed, they are not merely seen as nuisances to be silenced, but rather, enemies to the Egyptian worldview. As Redford explains, "Pharaoh ruled all that the sun-disk encircled, Egyptian and foreigners: any act or omission on the part of the latter in their own interests was labeled 'rebellion' or 'uprising' in Egyptian rhetoric."<sup>112</sup>

An excellent example of the Egyptian view of Nubians is the Boundary Stele of Sesostri III. This text is also referred to as the Semna Stele because it once adorned a

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<sup>111</sup> Donald B. Redford. *From Slave to Pharaoh: The Black Experience of Ancient Egypt*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>112</sup> Redford (2004), 8.

stele that stood at Semna on the border between Egypt and Nubia.<sup>113</sup> The text itself clearly characterizes the stele as a boundary marker. Sesostris III praises his own ability to protect the borders of Egypt from attack, and his success in extending these borders farther south.<sup>114</sup> As Christopher Eyre points out, “fixed borders are not simply a means of political control, but in a literary context may also be an ideological definition of the limits of social or even cosmic order.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, the Semna Stele must be interpreted not simply as an official demarcation of Egyptian territory. The ideological and propagandistic elements of this work must also be taken into account.

At the end of this inscription, Sesostris III gives us details of his actions in Nubia and his encounters with the Nubians themselves. He explains,

I have captured their women,  
I have carried off their dependents,  
Gone to their wells, killed their cattle,  
Cut down their grain, set fire to it.  
As my father lives for me, I speak the truth!<sup>116</sup>

It is, however, the assessment of the Nubians themselves that is of interest here. The Egyptian king expresses his disdain for the Nubians, saying, “they are not people one respects, they are wretches, craven-hearted.”<sup>117</sup> However, it is clear that this royal scorn serves a clear and valuable rhetorical function. As Eyre points out, “There is no need to assume that the Semna Stele was inscribed to be read by any ordinary literate person, whether Egyptian or Nubian, who happened to have an idle half hour at the

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<sup>113</sup> Christopher J. Eyre. “The Semna Stelae: Quotation, Genre, and Functions of Literature.” in *Studies in Egyptology*, ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1990), 134.

<sup>114</sup> Eyre (1990), 134-135.

<sup>115</sup> Eyre (1990), 140.

<sup>116</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 119.

<sup>117</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 119.



border. There is an element of address to posterity, and it is assumed that any successor – ‘son’ —of Sesostri campaigning in the area will show interest.” Thus, the demeaning language used to describe the Nubians serves to “justify” Egyptian economic and political control over the peoples to the south.<sup>118</sup> The royal view of Nubians, therefore, must place these people below the Egyptians in order to maintain the legitimacy of Egyptian presence in the region.

### **Political Situations Between Egypt and Libya in the Middle Kingdom**

Unfortunately, the political situation that existed between Egypt and Libya during the Middle Kingdom remains almost entirely shrouded in mystery. In later periods Libyans took a much more explicit role within the Egyptian political sphere and by the first millennium BCE even managed to defeat Egyptian kings to gain complete control of the Egyptian throne.<sup>119</sup> As Steven Snape suggests, “before the Ramesside Period, the Western Delta seems to have been populated only sparsely, and archaeologists have had difficulty in filling the gap between prehistory and that dramatic historical event.”<sup>120</sup> Our only evidence for Egyptian conceptions of Libyans in the Middle Kingdom comes from the limited examples of artistic and literary depictions we have. The relative lack of evidence for these people during the Middle Kingdom does not allow for an extensive interpretation of their role in the Egyptian mind. However, the Libyans were, as we will see, not entirely unknown to Middle Kingdom Egyptians, and the Egyptian evidence we have can still shed some light on its relationship to Libya during this time.

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<sup>118</sup> Adams (1961), 168.

<sup>119</sup> Steven Snape. “The Emergence of Libya on the Horizon of Egypt,” in *Mysterious Lands*, ed. David O’Connor and Stephen Quirke (London: UCL Press, 2003), 93.

<sup>120</sup> Snape (2003), 93.

### **Artistic Depictions of Libyans in the Middle Kingdom**

Despite the lack of information concerning the Egyptian political relationships with their Western neighbors, figures that can be identified as Libyans do appear in Egyptian art during this period. The depictions we have of Libyans during the Middle Kingdom primarily depict the Egyptian king holding bound prisoners by the hair with one hand, preparing to strike them with a mace held in the other.<sup>121</sup> (Figure 4) Libyans in Egyptian art of the Middle Kingdom serve an almost purely symbolic role. The Egyptians were aware of their neighbors to the West, and used them to represent the foreign and chaotic forces that stood in opposition to the power of the Egyptian pharaoh.

### **Literary Depictions of Libyans in the Middle Kingdom**

The best evidence for Egyptian conceptions of Libyans during the Middle Kingdom comes from how they are depicted within the literature of the time. Once again we see the Egyptians placing a foreign people into symbolic opposition to the Egyptian king. Libyans in Middle Kingdom literature are depicted as the enemies of Egypt, but enemies that are easily defeated. They are mentioned, almost as an afterthought, alongside Asiatics and Nubians, groups with which Egypt had much more explicit and complicated political relationships. The inclusion of Libyans in literature is simply a rhetorical device intended to emphasize the strength of royal power.

The *Prophecy of Neferti*, a Middle Kingdom literary work mentioned above, depicts the complete inversion of the ordered Egyptian world and predicts the rise to

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<sup>121</sup> Habachi (1963), 38.

power of a king who is able to restore social and political order.<sup>122</sup> Included in the description of this king, named Ameny,<sup>123</sup> is the effect his power will have on the chaotic forces embodied by the enemies of Egypt; foreigners and rebels. Both Asiatics and Libyans are mentioned:

Asiatics will fall to his sword,  
Libyans will fall to his flame,  
Rebels to his wrath, traitors to his might,  
As the serpent<sup>124</sup> on his brow subdues the rebels for him.  
...  
Then Order will return to its seat,  
While Chaos is driven away.<sup>125</sup>

This passage illustrates the clearly formulaic role of Libyans as representative of chaotic forces that may reign if royal power is weak. This chaos, however, is easily, almost instantly, defeated by the reinstatement of royal authority. Unfortunately, based simply on this stereotypical depiction there is little we can glean about non-royal conceptions of Libyans.

The *Tale of Sinuhe* describes an instance, albeit literary, of contact between Egypt and Libya. Here too the Libyans are in the position of rebellious foreigners that must be controlled by royal power. The narrator, Sinuhe, describes the events leading up to his discovery of the death of the pharaoh, news that sends him on the flight into the Levant discussed above:

His majesty, however, has dispatched an army to the land of the Tjemeh, with his eldest son as its commander, the good god Sesostris<sup>126</sup>. He had

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<sup>122</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 139.

<sup>123</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 143.

<sup>124</sup> This is a reference to the uraeus, a small figure of a snake worn on the head of the Pharaoh as a symbol of kingship and divine authority.

<sup>125</sup> Lichtheim, (1975), 143-144.

been sent to smite the foreign lands and to punish those of Tjehenu<sup>127</sup>.  
Now he was returning, bringing captives of the Tjehenu and cattle of all  
kinds beyond number.<sup>128</sup>

The role of the Libyan as the enemy of Egypt has not changed; they still need to be brought back under royal control. It is interesting to note that the Egyptians feel it necessary to “punish” the people of Libya though no offense is listed. The Egyptian audience is simply not interested in understanding why the army of Egypt is marching on Libya. It is, admittedly not central to the story, but the fact that the author did not include a reason may indicate that no explanation is necessary. The Libyans are simply used to give legitimacy to the rising pharaoh, Sesostri I, who was “co-regent at the time of his father’s death.”<sup>129</sup> He is depicted as being a strong military ruler who is capable of “bringing captives of the Tjehenu and cattle of kinds beyond number.”<sup>130</sup>

The Libyans are clearly chosen here as the legitimizing factor because of the story’s later focus on the lands to the east of Egypt. This not only accentuates the desperateness of Sinuhe’s journey from Egypt by emphasizing the distance he crosses in his flight, but explains why Sinuhe chose to escape to the east. The west was filled with peoples hostile to Egypt, and was easily within the reach of the exact royal powers that Sinuhe was trying to escape in his fear.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>126</sup> Most likely Sesostri I, Lichtheim (1975), 233.

<sup>127</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 233. Lichtheim explains “Tjemeh and Tjehenu designated two distinct Libyan peoples who merged in the course of time. In this story the terms are used interchangeably.”

<sup>128</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 224.

<sup>129</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 233.

<sup>130</sup> Lichtheim (1975), 224.

The Egyptians did not conceptualize all foreigners in the same way. There appear to have been slight variations in the role of foreigners within Egyptian society and propaganda, depending on ethnicity. The different treatment of the various ethnic groups by Egyptian elites was most likely based on the ever-changing and increasingly complex political relationships between Egypt and its neighbors. The political interactions between Egypt and the peoples surrounding it must have had a deep impact on the Egyptian conceptions and treatment of these peoples.

Like all foreign groups, Asiatics were used as symbols of chaos by royal propaganda. However, like the Asiatics found on the Sinai inscriptions and in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, they could also be depicted as respected and helpful peoples. Nubians and Libyans, on the other hand, were most often depicted in a negative light. This was most likely due to the political relationships Egypt had with these various groups.

During the Middle Kingdom, the peoples of the Near East were free from Egyptian control. There was trade between Egypt and the Levant, but Egypt did not exert the type of political and economic control over this region that it did over Nubia during this time period. Nubia was exploited by Egypt for its natural resources. Egyptian elites sought to portray the Nubians themselves as forces of chaos, and peoples that do not command respect in order to justify continued Egyptian presence in Nubia and exploitation of Nubian resources. Libya seems to have been poorly understood by Egyptians at this time, and its peoples were portrayed in highly symbolic forms.

It is clear that the rhetorical role of foreigners in the royal and elite documents and illustrations of the Middle Kingdom do not always reflect actual hostility to foreigners. Examples from the Sinai showing Asiatic elites assisting Egyptians with mining

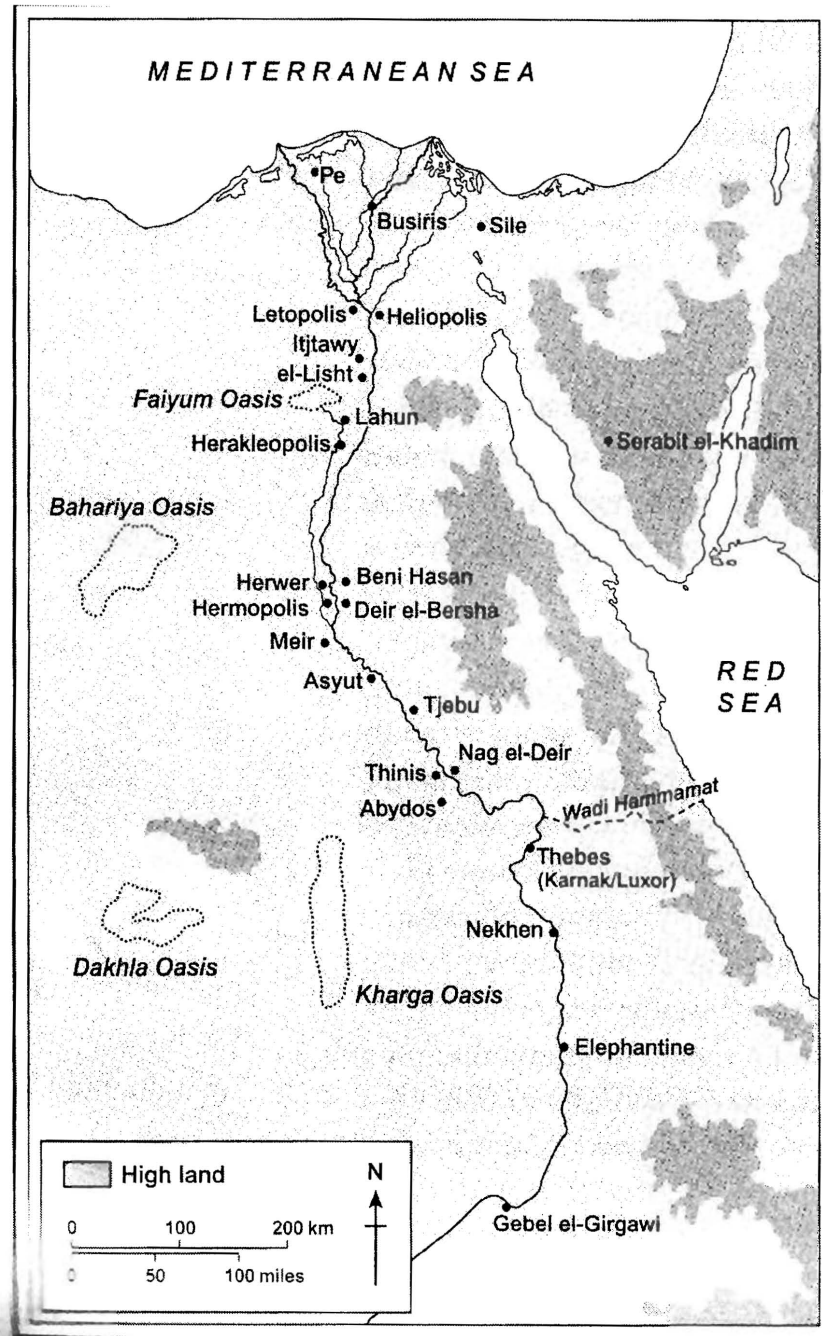
expeditions indicate Egyptian respect and familiarity with Asiatics. Nubian stelae at Gebelein indicate that in the period immediately preceding the Middle Kingdom Nubians were utilizing Egyptian burial practices, while maintaining their own ethnic identity.

The artistic and textual evidence of foreigners in Middle Kingdom Egypt suggest Egyptian elites of this period had highly symbolic conceptions of non-Egyptians.

Foreigners appear time and time again in Egyptian art and literature as manifestations of chaos. The Egyptian kings often used images of defeated foreign enemies to justify or legitimize their reigns. Egyptian elites place foreigners in opposition to themselves, creating an outsider group that increased their political and social legitimacy. The symbolic role of the foreigner in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom is perhaps a product of Egyptian elites striving to maintain the status quo of Egyptian society, and their own positions of power.

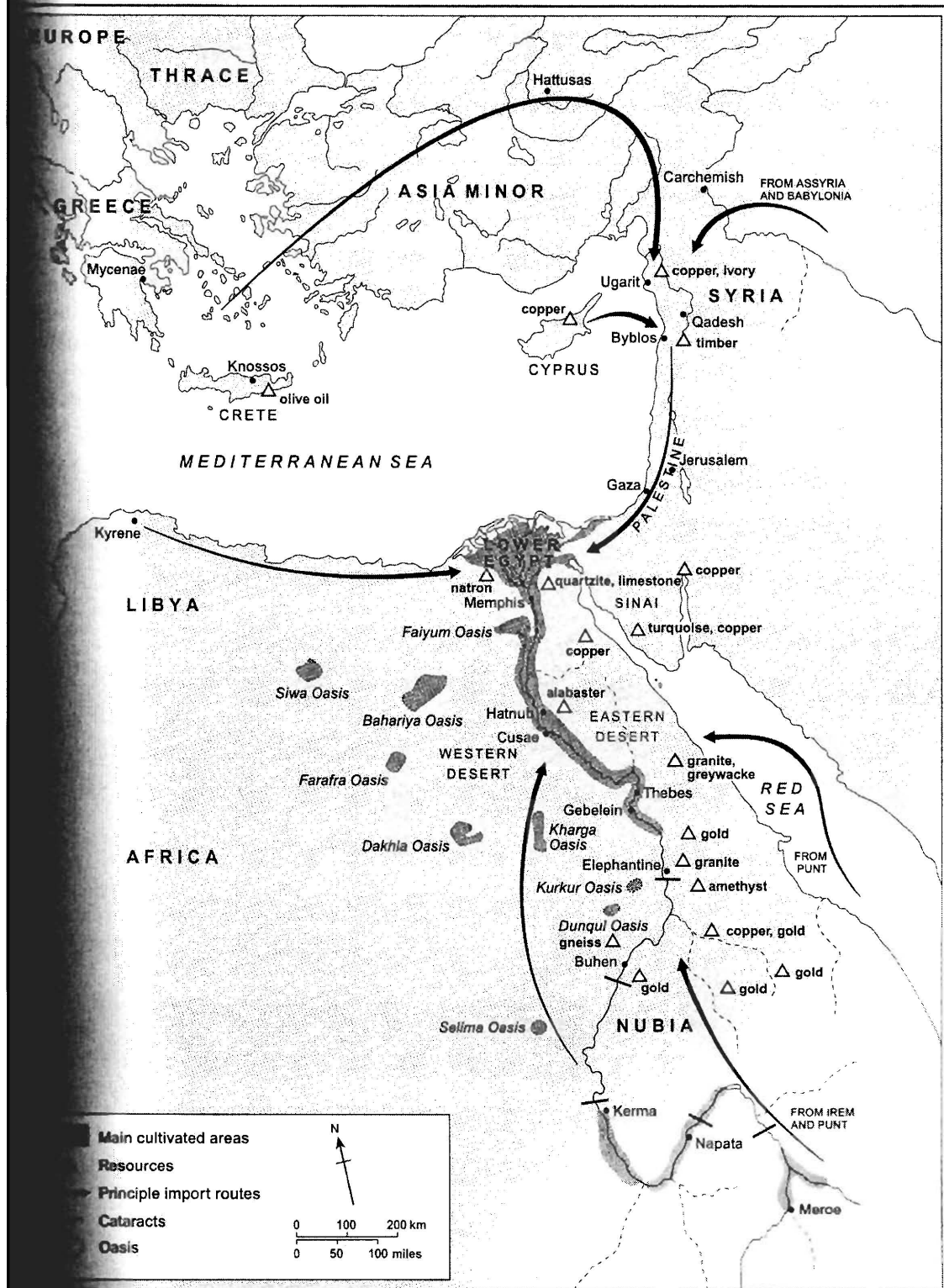
Egypt's relationships with its neighbors in the Near East and North East Africa were not static or fixed, but rather transformed to suit the ever-changing political and social climate of Egypt and the surrounding areas. Royal and political depictions of foreigners were thus capable of representing foreigners variously as symbolic forces of chaos to be subdued by the army of the Egyptian royal power, or as less threatening, though still inferior peoples. As Egyptians came into increasingly close contact with growing numbers of foreign ethnic groups, concept of foreigners among the Egyptian elite underwent significant shifts.

## Maps



“Map of Egypt showing the principal sites of the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom.” Shaw (2000), 164.

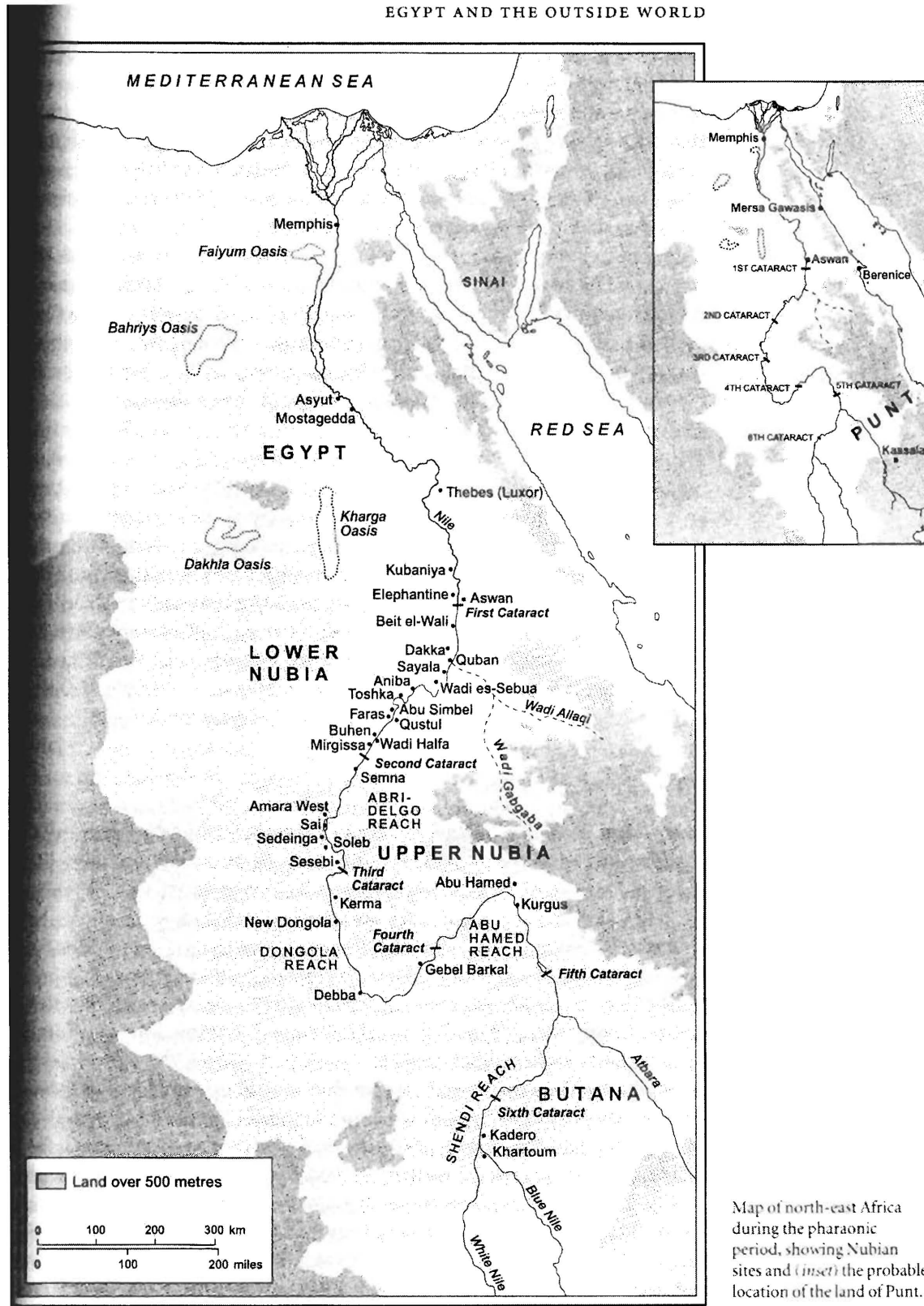
# EGYPT AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD



“Map of Egypt and the Ancient Near East, showing links and trade routes.” Shaw (2000), 318-319.



# EGYPT AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD



“Map of north-east Africa during the pharaonic period, showing Nubian sites...”  
Shaw (2000), 323.

## Pictures

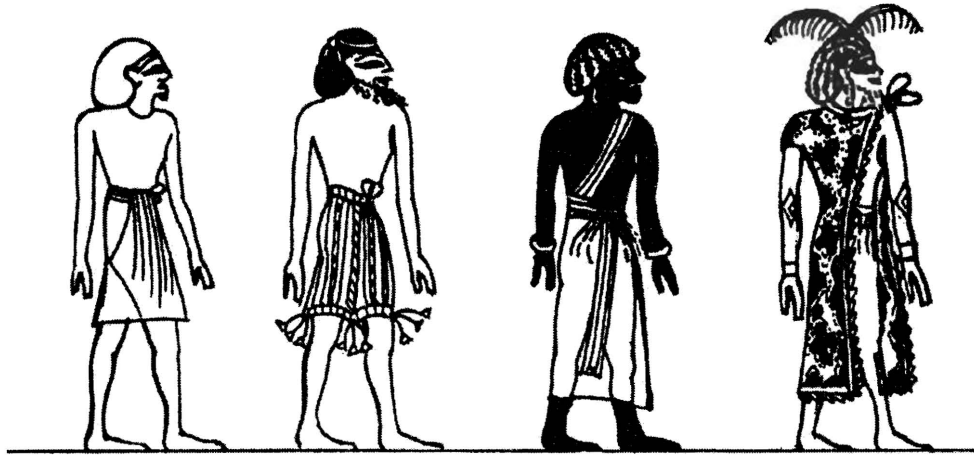


Figure 1. Depiction of the four “types” of humanity as illustrated by the Book of Gates,. Hornung (1989), 234.



Figure 2. Mentuhotep before the god Montu. Block from Tod. Habachi (1963), 46.

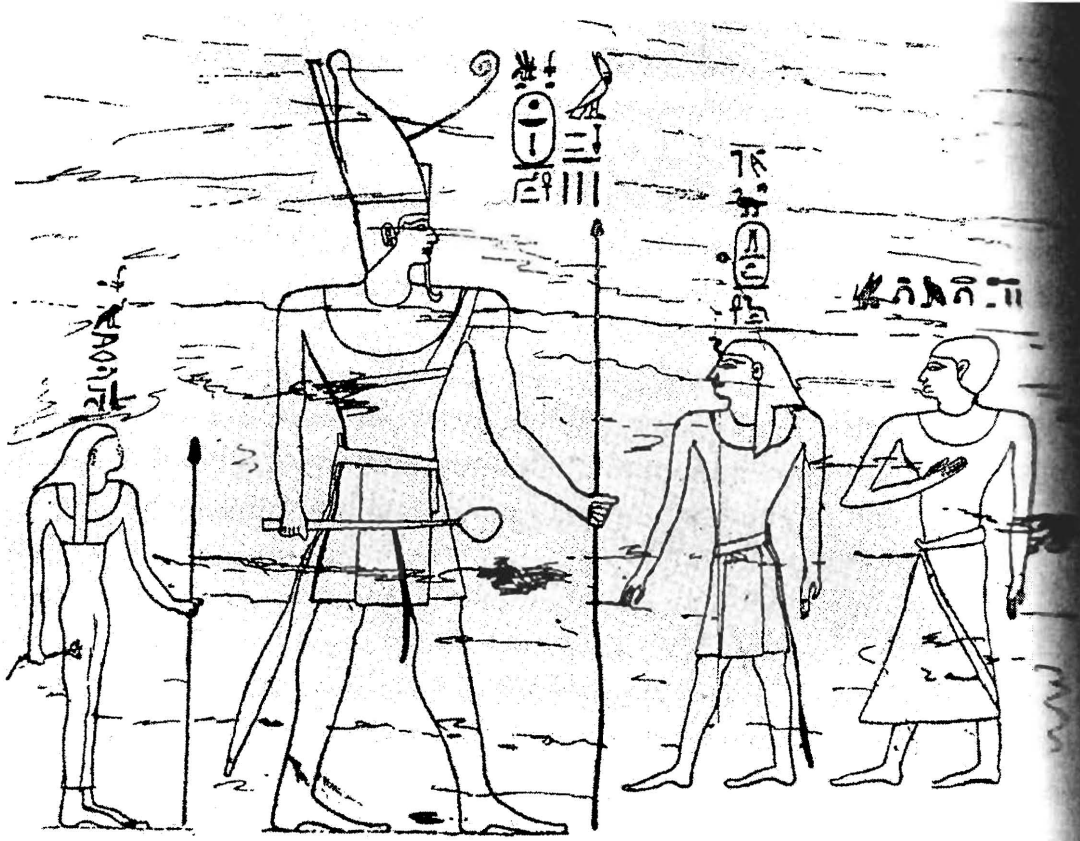


Figure 3. Mentuhotep with his mother, father, and chancellor. Wadi Shatt el-Rigal. Shaw (2000), 150.



Figure 4. Mentuhotep smiting a captive identified by the inscription as a Libyan. Block from Gebelein. Habachi (1963), 98.

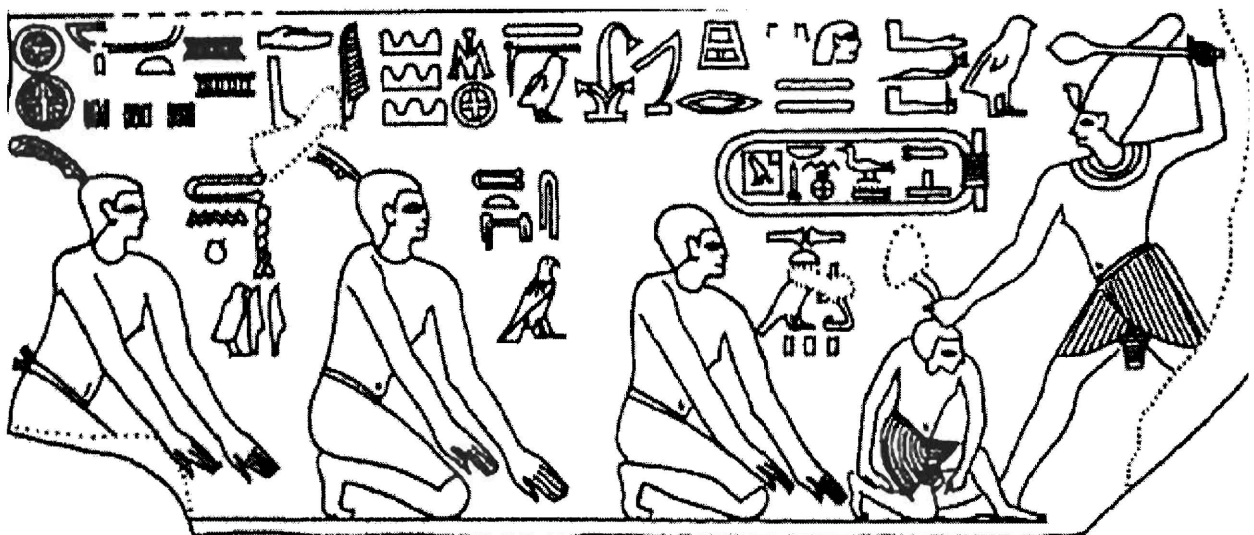


Figure 5. Mentuhotep shown clubbing an Egyptian prisoner. Other prisoners, identified as a Nubian, an Asiatic and a Libyan, await their punishment. Block from Gebelein. Habachi (1963), 39.



Figure 6. A man, identified as the brother of the ruler of Sinai rides a donkey.  
Cerny (1935), 388.



Figure 7. Asiatics and their families bringing *galena*. Beni Hasan.  
<http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/images/benihsan.jpg>

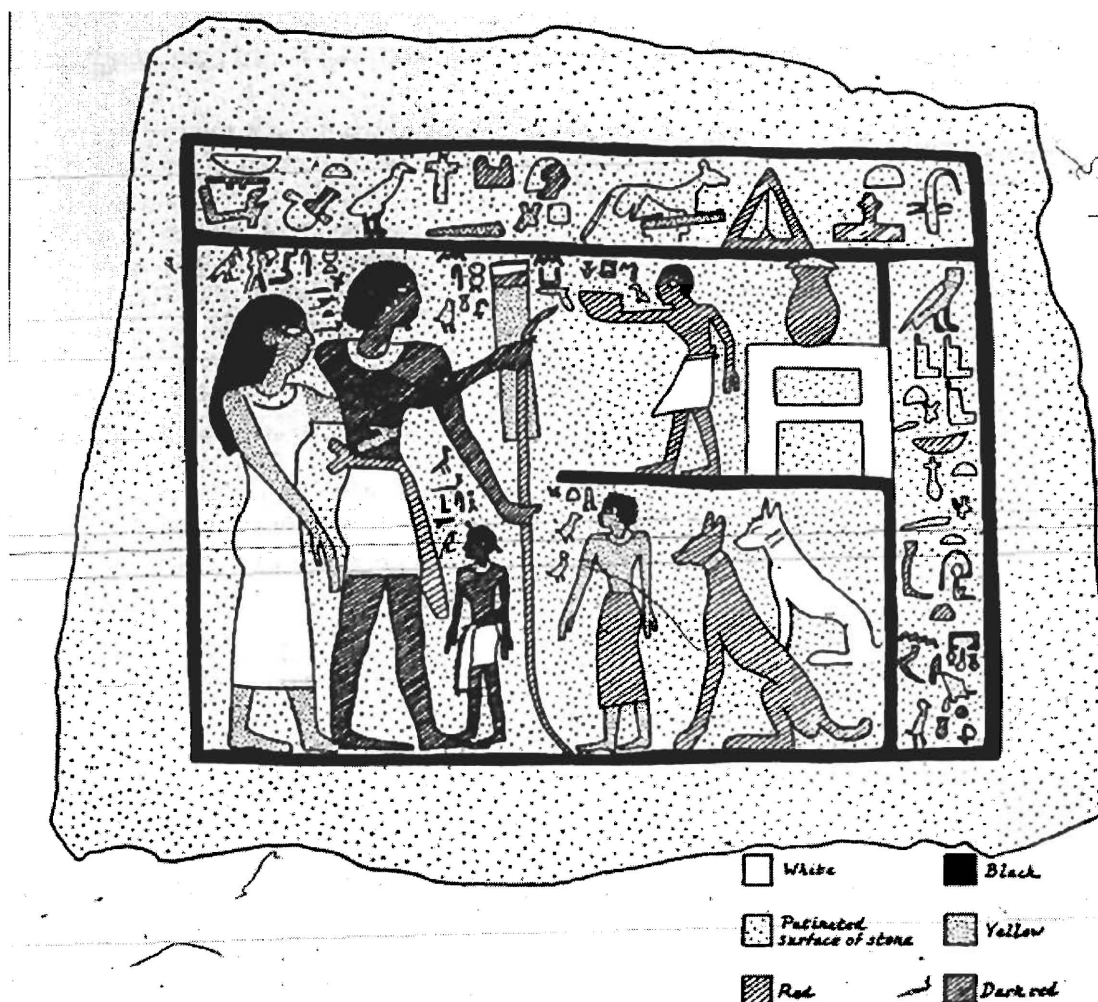


Figure 8. Stele of "the Nubian Nnw" and his wife, Gebelein. Fischer (1961), 57.

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