

Egypt, Old to New Kingdom (2686–1069 BCE)

Juan Carlos Moreno García

What Is an “Egyptian Empire”?

A historiographic tradition going back to the nineteenth century considers the history of pharaonic Egypt to be marked by a vivid qualitative contrast between two very different types of periods. Those regarded as “bright,” when the state was “strong” and centralized, are referred to as “empires” or “kingdoms” (*Reich* in German, kingdom in English, and *empire* in French: e.g., *Alten Reich*, Middle Kingdom, *Nouvel Empire* would be the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms of Egypt in German, English, and French, respectively), whereas intervening periods are suggestively called “intermediate” and are alleged to have been dominated by political turmoil, state collapse, and cultural decadence. A paradoxical consequence of such historical periodization is that Egyptian “empires” were primarily defined on the basis of internal considerations (e.g., social stability, administrative centralization, and the production of abundant, high-quality, state-sponsored art), and not on grounds of external expansion and conquest. Given the relative scarcity of administrative and diplomatic documents for these periods, art history and monumental architecture have played a determinative role in contemporary perceptions of ancient Egyptian power and state capacity.

Old Kingdom Egypt (i.e., *Ancien Empire*, 2686–2125 BCE), when no external conquests took place, presents an extreme example. The same is true of Middle Kingdom Egypt (2055–1650 BCE), which until the 1990s was interpreted by many studies as a peaceful period—a cultural efflorescence that blossomed in isolation. Nevertheless, the massive pyramids built during the former period, and the “classic” art and literature produced in the latter, were thought to have fulfilled the criteria needed in order to conceptualize both as “empires.”

The New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) stands in contrast to this, though somewhat puzzlingly. It was an age of extensive Egyptian conquests in Northeast Africa and the Levant, involving armed conflicts and diplomatic contact with the main powers of the Near East. However, this pharaonic expansion is usually argued away as an exceptional and vigorous *reaction* against prior foreign threats (or even as a result of a sudden and quite unexplained appetite for tribute). In short, it is presented as a rather eccentric episode in an otherwise isolated, inward-looking, and peaceful history. Remarkably, the Kushite and Saite periods of the first millennium BCE are usually dismissed as not being truly “Egyptian” because of foreign influences (both

are lumped into a decadent *Basse Époque*). This is again in spite of Egyptian expansion under both dynasties into the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as an active foreign policy involving Cyrenaica, the Aegean, the Syro-Levantine area, and Nubia.¹

What emerges is a naive, unarticulated, and, in the end, nearly incomprehensible interpretation of pharaonic foreign policy. It assumes that matters were determined by the supposed geographic isolation of Egypt. And this, in turn, assumes that Egypt had insignificant interests outside the borders of the country and a reluctance to get involved in external conflict, unless to counter foreign aggression. This limited perspective is the consequence of the traditional interpretation of ancient Egypt as a cradle of civilization and, accordingly, its “natural” central position as the primary source of diplomatic, economic, and cultural initiative in Northeast Africa and the southern Levant. Again, the very nature of the sources has greatly contributed to this unbalanced perception of Egyptian foreign policy, as historians have tried to compensate for the scarcity of administrative information (archives, diplomatic correspondence, official records) by giving inordinate attention to artistic and literary works. In fact, the bulk of the evidence consists of laudatory inscriptions, monumental iconography, and literary compositions, whose value as historical sources is burdened by the unilateral and heavily ideological perspective they encode. Further problems emerge from the insufficient use of archaeology in the study of the geography of power, conquest, and administration, in both a diachronic and comparative perspective. Likewise, they emerge from the neglect of geopolitical considerations, particularly with respect to the control of international flows of wealth, trade routes, as well as raw and luxury items. As for the role ascribed to the state (and its centralized control over economic activities), it is conceived of as the sole promoter of contact with foreign countries, ignoring the interests and capabilities of other social actors (e.g., traders, craftsmen, herders, mercenaries, potentates).² Even the mere possibility of the existence of divergent goals, interests, and strategies among competing factions within the ruling elite is dismissed in favor of an overwhelmingly monolithic state.

It nevertheless seems unrealistic that every commercial venture abroad should have passed exclusively through the infrequent expeditions organized by the state that were celebrated in monumental art and epigraphy (as though Egypt’s economy was virtually autarchic). Relatively obscure episodes like the Amarna interlude, or the advent of the New Kingdom Ramesside pharaohs, were accompanied by the foundation of new capitals (Tell Amarna, Pi-Ramesses), cultic innovation, and by marked divergences in foreign policy. This indicates that significant changes occurred, which are still poorly understood, in the balance of power between different sectors of the ruling elite (e.g., the military, priesthood, high officials) and distinct regions within the kingdom (e.g., Thebes, the Northeastern Delta). More intriguing, vital bases created by the pharaohs to organize and promote

¹ Vernus 2011.

² Moreno García 2014, 2017a, 2017b.

foreign trade—like Tell el-Dab’a or the fortresses in Nubia at the end of the Middle Kingdom—not only survived the collapse of central authority, but flourished in its absence. In fact, they became burgeoning multicultural centers engaged in trade, well-integrated into the international networks of exchange, and in some instances they developed into independent political centers. These examples illustrate, once more, how an uncritical reliance on the official pharaonic record has played a distorting role in our modern perceptions of ancient Egyptian foreign policy. They also show that trade and commercial interests have been largely neglected in the study of Egyptian imperialism.³ And this is most striking because while trade and the active integration of Egypt in international networks of exchange are well accepted for the Pre-Dynastic and Archaic periods,⁴ they are undervalued in historical times, as if state-sponsored expeditions and exchanges of diplomatic gifts, both infrequent, monopolized any foreign contact.

Nevertheless, recent archaeological discoveries suggest a rather more balanced interpretation of the nature, goals, and extent of the Egyptian intervention abroad. They also reveal the active role played by her neighbors, especially Nubia, as well as by mobile pastoral populations. Finally, they make it possible to set Egyptian geopolitical interests in a more comprehensive framework. Building an empire appears thus as only one option among several, following a particular historical logic that should be contrasted—in terms of costs, means, returns, and balance of power—with alternative “logics” that prevailed in other periods. In this light, Egyptian “empire” was quite limited in the period under consideration, being mostly restricted to the New Kingdom. Broadly speaking, Egyptian military intervention abroad was of two types. The first consisted of occasional expeditions into Nubia, Libyan territory, and into the Levant, accompanied—in the case of Lower Nubia—by the establishment of factories/fortresses. This seems to have been an effort to monopolize the traffic between inner Africa and the Mediterranean. The Nubian powers proved nevertheless to be not only indispensable mediators when dealing with regions further to the south, but also tenacious rivals, able to get involved in Egypt herself. It was only in the New Kingdom period that a new kind of intervention appears, doubtless responding to new economic and commercial conditions that emerged in Northeast Africa and the Near East after the Middle Bronze Age collapse of the Middle Kingdom. Occasional expeditions were replaced by a durable occupation of more extensive areas, significantly situated both at the source (i.e., Nubia) and at the end (i.e., Syro-Levantine region) of commercial routes that conveyed luxury goods (incense, gold, ivory, ebony, etc.) that were in high demand among Eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern powers. The virtual Egyptian monopoly over the main land and sea routes supplying such goods (including the Red Sea) probably explain the exceptional international position of Egypt during the Late Bronze Age. Several factors sealed

³ Welcome exceptions are Grandet 2008 and Bardinet 2008.

⁴ A recent example is Anfinset 2010 or the many contributions in the series *Egypt at Its Origins*.

off the possibility of recovering this position in later periods. The first was the development of new commercial routes at the end of the second millennium (for instance, the Incense Road). A second was the increasing involvement of mobile populations in exchange networks (for instance, Libyans, Sea Peoples, Chaldeans, Aramaeans). The final factor was the emergence of independent polities in some of the main areas of production (e.g., Kush, South-Arabia, Ethiopia), which escaped Egyptian control and its sustained logistic capacities.

Egypt at the Crossroads: The Geopolitics of Pharaonic Imperialism

The analysis of Egyptian imperialism in terms of crude economic interest—that is, as a predatory and self-conscious search for immediate and direct wealth (e.g., tribute, deliveries of precious items, and customs), as well as for direct political control over a given area—would be reductive, if not entirely misleading. Rather, the study of geopolitical considerations can prove to be more productive if pursued along a series of interconnected lines: the flows of resources and wealth; the accessibility and possibility to control them; the means available to achieve such control; the confluence or divergence of interests between different social actors (both internal and external); the balance of power between competing policies; and finally, the reactions (political, economic, social, geopolitical, and cultural) that were provoked by imperial policies.

Another critical element explaining Egyptian expansion abroad was the need to obtain strategic commodities that were scarce or simply absent in the Nile Valley. Certainly Egypt was celebrated for its immense agricultural wealth, but it was impoverished in metal ore and wood. Timber, for instance, was an indispensable commodity for architectural projects, shipbuilding, or the manufacture of specific components of military chariots, but had to be mainly imported from abroad. As for metals, copper was available close to the Nile Valley (in Sinai, the Jordan Valley, and the Eastern Desert, for instance) but its exploitation usually involved the collaboration of local populations. Tin, however, was a central Asian commodity only available through trade. Finally, gold ore lay in close proximity to Egypt. The most noteworthy deposits were in Nubia and the Eastern Desert. The latter could be exploited directly by means of mining expeditions, but access to Nubian gold was not so easy, thus necessitating different political solutions that ranged from conquest (for instance, in the New Kingdom) to forms of collaboration/partnership with Nubian powers (in the Middle Kingdom). In fact, recent discoveries reveal that the Nubian kingdom of Kerma became a formidable power around 1650 BCE and that gold exploitation by local populations, apparently on a seasonal basis, provided Kerma with an important economic and strategic resource. Finally, silver was also imported. However, the huge quantities that were delivered as taxes by late second millennium farmers suggest that silver arrived in Egypt not only as tribute or

diplomatic gifts but also, quite probably, through commerce. Of course, this raises the question about the kind of goods that were exchanged for Egyptian imports. While pharaonic sources provide a homogenizing view of the commodities arriving in the Nile Valley as tribute, the reality was more complex. Textiles and high-quality manufactured items figure as the main exports, together with papyrus, natron, dry fish, linen, or lentils. But the bulk of Egyptian exports might have been cereals, as they were in Classical times. In fact, inscriptions from late second millennium BCE do reveal that grain was sent to the Hittite kingdom, quite probably in exchange for silver.⁵

A further aspect of Egyptian imperialism concerns the role played by mobile populations bordering the Nile Valley. Usually described in pharaonic sources as marauding troublemakers and bandits, they entered in fact into competition with Egyptian authorities for the use of grazing land in areas scarcely populated within Egypt itself, like Lower and Middle Egypt. Furthermore, archaeology reveals that they kept autonomous and extensive trade networks through the Western Desert and the Sinai, and also that some mobile populations, like the so-called Pan-Grave culture of the Eastern Desert, apparently carried out trade activities along the Nile Valley during the first half of the second millennium BCE. Far from the backward populations depicted in Egyptian sources, mobile populations were important vectors of exchanges, and their relations with Egyptian authorities oscillated between collaboration, competition, and conflict for the exploitation of the resources of the Nile Valley. That is why they were not simply repulsed when military conflict finally erupted but, instead, were settled as herders or policemen in Egypt itself.⁶ In sum, geopolitical concerns, rivalry with neighboring powers over strategic areas, access to critical resources, and control over trade networks figure prominently among the motivators underlying Egyptian imperial expansion along the Nile Valley and the Levant.

Recent archaeological work in different areas of Northeast Africa and the Levant has proven essential for a deeper knowledge of the exchange routes and of flows of wealth in which Egypt was involved. The discovery of the ancient site of Balat (i.e., the oasis of Dakhla, in the Western Desert)—a third millennium pharaonic settlement in the Eastern Sahara—as well as the traces of an ancient trail connecting Balat to the Uweinat region, which was marked out with inscriptions, reveals that Egyptian expeditions were traveling hundreds of miles into the desert in search of pigments and incense.⁷ Silver, base metals, and slaves were imported from the Levant at the end of the third millennium, according to the inscription of Iny.⁸ Meanwhile a slightly later tomb of an official buried at Elephantine describes his role as supplier of goods from Nubia, the southern Red Sea, and the Levantine coast. A new inscription from the necropolis of Dashur mentions several military expeditions sent to

⁵ Moreno García 2016.

⁶ Moreno García 2014, 2017a.

⁷ Kuhlmann 2002; Förster 2015; Clayton, de Trafford and Borda 2008.

⁸ Marcolin 2010.

Lebanon and further north at the beginning of the second millennium,⁹ while the excavation of Tell el-Dab'a, in the Eastern Delta, has revealed an active naval and trading base connecting Egypt with the Levant in the Middle Kingdom. Around 1650 BCE, it became the capital of the kingdom of the Hyksos (an independent polity that existed in the Eastern Delta around 1750–1550 BCE with a strong presence of peoples from the southern Levant). Tell el-Dab'a became the center of their Egyptian-Levantine multicultural state that was heavily involved in trade with the Levant and that corresponded through letters with both Mesopotamia and Nubia. Mersa Gawasis, a Middle Kingdom harbor in the Red Sea, has provided epigraphic and archaeological evidence of trade with Crete, Canaan, and the land of Punt (i.e., the Eritrean-Yemeni coast and the territories inland).¹⁰ The maritime diffusion of crops and animals between Africa and India are confirmed by finds of various millet seeds (*Panicum miliaceum*) at Ukma (close to Kerma, in Nubia), a plant unknown in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt but found in China and, from 2000 BCE, also in the Indus Valley.¹¹ A trade station operated at the oasis of Dakhla from 1700 BCE on, apparently independent of any state initiative,¹² while an inscription from Elkab describes a raid against this locality that was orchestrated by Nubians and people from Punt around 1600 BCE. The Ramesside fortress at Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham, about 300 kilometers west of Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast, was likewise a trade center with the Levant, as revealed by the remains of several storerooms and storage vessels from Canaan, Cyprus, and the Aegean.¹³ Finally, the surprising discovery of an inscription of King Ramesses III near the oasis of Tayma, in Saudi Arabia, shows that Egyptian interests also extended to this strategic crossroads in the Late Bronze Age.

What emerges from this very selective evidence is not only that Egypt was involved in trade, contacts, and exchange routes covering a far wider ranging area than previously supposed, but also that the traditional assumption of Egypt as the uncontested geopolitical actor in this region deserves considerable qualification. Accordingly, in contrast to the central role attributed to Egypt and the pharaohs (based solely on boastful texts and triumphant scenes), a more balanced picture would examine the aims, nature, and extent of Egyptian foreign relations. Certainly, Egypt was a strategic crossroads that connected Northeast Africa and the Red Sea to the Levant, the Aegean, and the Near East, but now—through this new lens—it did so in competition with other powers. Nubians, Puntites, Libyans, Hyksos, and even autonomous powers within Egypt herself therefore appear under a new light as active protagonists with their own interests, and not as mere agents and mediators of the pharaohs. All of this consisted in a complex and variable network of relations involving diplomacy, political alliance, and warfare—both small scale and

⁹ Allen 2008.

¹⁰ Manzo 2012, 2014.

¹¹ Boivin and Fuller 2009.

¹² Marchand and Soukiassian 2010.

¹³ Snape 2003.

large—but also smuggling and alternative circuits that circumvented state control and exploited lucrative routes. Mobile populations (Nubians of the desert, Libyans, “Peoples of the Sea,” Levantine Bedouins) played a crucial but underestimated role. They managed to develop their own trading networks abroad, so their depiction as marauders in Egyptian sources needs a thorough re-evaluation.

Two important considerations should then be highlighted about the role of Egyptian imperialism. On one hand, periods of strong, centralized pharaonic authority were concomitant with the creation of infrastructure aimed at controlling the routes through which commodities moved. Three types of infrastructure figure prominently in the archaeological and written record. First, certain harbors at the limits of the kingdom—like Avaris/Tell el-Dab’a in the Eastern Delta, Elephantine in the southernmost border of Egypt, and Ayn Sukhna and Mersa/Wadi Gawassis on the Red Sea—served as the main terminals for state-sponsored expeditions. Second, there were fortresses and chains of forts founded several hundred kilometers from the Egyptian borders, in the middle of potentially hostile territory, that served as checkpoints and trading centers. Their isolated location seems untenable on strictly military grounds, so their purpose must have been more commercial than defensive (the term “factory” would be probably better suited). This applies to Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham on the Libyan coast, Buhen, Mirgissa, and the fortresses founded around the Second Cataract, in Nubia, where the papyrological and epigraphic record reveals the importance of trade. Balat, in the oasis of Dakhla, combines aspects of both commercial base and fortified site. Third, select foreign countries appear as partners and intermediaries in Egyptian trade ventures, with Byblos and Punt being the best documented. Finally, it should be added that certain Egyptians institutions, like temples within and outside Egypt, also appear to be involved in trade and mining. This is true, for instance, of the temples in Nubia during the New Kingdom or the temple of Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai.

On the other hand, it can be observed that trade networks flourished in periods when the pharaonic state split into competing polities. The Egyptian Delta in those periods became more Levantine in terms of its political and economic activities. Political fragmentation (as happened at the end of the Old, Middle, and New kingdoms) produced a political landscape of small and ephemeral polities with petty kings at their head, perhaps linked by hierarchical ties to the more powerful centers (like Tell el-Dab’a in the late Second Intermediate Period, as shown by inscribed scarabs). Another consequence was a more fluid circulation of Levantine populations and pastoral elements (possibly including Libyans) into Lower and Middle Egypt,¹⁴ in an economic environment where trade flourished and external contacts became more active. It is significant that Egypt’s reunification and reincorporation of the Delta were usually accompanied by its administrative and political reorganization. It was also marked by negative references to pastoral and/or foreign populations, as literary compositions such as the *Teaching for Merikare*

¹⁴ Holladay 1997; Moreno García 2017a, 2017b

or *The Prophecy of Neferty* show. Upper Egypt, on the other hand, appears more stable, with the Theban region serving as the primary political focus, probably because of its strategic role as a crossroads linking maritime and land routes in Northeast Africa (serving as both the “horizontal axis” linking the Western Desert and the Red Sea, and the “vertical axis” through which the Nile flowed). But its isolation from the Mediterranean shore (where the trade routes ended), coupled with Nubian competition on the Nile, meant that any durable hegemony depended on control over its northern and southern rivals. Nubians, Lower Egyptian polities, and Thebans thus appear alternately to fight, ally, and collaborate until one of them finally imposed its supremacy over the region and its trade routes. Over the centuries, the Hyksos, Theban, Kushite, and Saite dynasties exemplify such outcomes.

Given this geopolitical environment, two conclusions can be inferred about Egyptian imperialism. On one hand, the primary aim of pharaonic foreign policy was to control (and, when possible, monopolize) the flows of wealth circulating through Northeast Africa, the Red Sea, and the southern Levant—from Cyrenaica to Byblos and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean—to capture the lucrative trade routes developed in periods of state incapacity and to eliminate rivals.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, this inevitably led to conflict with other powers advancing similar claims, whether they stood at the starting point of such routes—in inner Africa and the southernmost Red Sea—or at their end in the Levant. The end of the Middle Bronze Age, in this respect, marks a turning point. The trade routes that flourished during this period were followed, for the first time, by several subsequent phenomena. The first was a *durable* imperial intervention by Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Nilotic powers in the Syro-Levantine area. The second was the Egyptian conquest of Nubia (at a time when Nubia was involved in long-distance contacts with the Indian Ocean and Punt). The third, and final, was large-scale military conflict with Libyan populations. Later, the collapse of the Late Bronze Age superpowers gave way to a new wave of flourishing trade and political fragmentation (in South Arabia, Phoenicia, Transjordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lower Egypt), which was followed in turn by the appearance of “world empires” seeking to control, for the first time, the Near East in its entirety, including its Nilotic and Arabian edges.

Empire as a Geopolitical Variable: A Historical Outline

The first “imperial” era in pharaonic history was the Old Kingdom (2686–2125 BCE), a period in which there was no true empire, since we lack evidence that Egypt occupied or administered foreign territories.¹⁶ What appears instead is a

¹⁵ On the notion of capturing trade routes by state powers, cf. Banaji 2007.

¹⁶ Moreno García 2010a.

foreign policy consisting of infrequent military and trade encounters with Egypt's neighbors in Africa and the Levant, along with—to judge by the limited archaeological evidence—occasional diplomatic contacts with Syrian states like Ebla.¹⁷

When considering the evidence provided by the *execration texts* (i.e., ritual formulae written on small crude figurines of prisoners which enumerate potentially hostile countries and people), Nubia appears to have been a major concern for the pharaohs. The majority of the peoples and places evoked are broadly located in Northeast Africa and they offer an invaluable, detailed picture of the political situation south of Egypt.¹⁸ Egypt's preoccupation with Nubia is further confirmed by occasional references to substantial pharaonic armies deployed there, sometimes numbering up to 20,000 men, which often resulted in the capture of prisoners and cattle, which were brought back to Egypt as booty.¹⁹ Nevertheless, commemorative texts present a rather unbalanced picture of relations between Egyptians and Nubians—tacitly assuming that conflict with “barbarian” Nubians was inevitable—to the point that it has been often admitted that these expeditions aimed at eliminating a potential menace on the southern border by depopulating Lower Nubia.²⁰ However, recent archaeological discoveries prove that this was not the case, and that a Nubian presence, in fact, also extended deep into the Western Desert and even into Egypt itself, especially in the region between Gebelein and Elephantine. Hunters, for instance, figure prominently among the inhabitants of several villages at Gebelein, as do nomads, whereas Nubian cultic centers have been discovered around Hierakonpolis. Other inscriptions reveal that their collaboration was essential to the success of Egyptian caravans entering inner Africa.²¹ Whether Buhen was only a fortress or a factory, its location as an isolated Egyptian outpost in Nubia would have been inconceivable unless its presence was at least tolerated by the Nubians. The same could be said of Balat, in the oasis of Dakhla. It seems preferable then to assume that the Egyptian policy consisted, in fact, of a combination of alliances, partnership, collaboration, and armed conflict with the different Nubian polities mentioned by the texts. As for the apparent scarcity of Nubians in Lower Nubia, it cannot be ruled out that this was the result of their mobility as well as their increased specialization in pastoral production, herding, and transhumance across vast areas, which might have been undertaken in order to meet a possible Egyptian demand for hides and other products.

In this light, Elephantine appears to have been a crucial base for the organization of caravans, as well as a multicultural society consisting of interpreters, soldiers, traders, leaders of expeditions, agents of the king, and Nubians—including *šjnw* (an Egyptian term translated as “runners” or “quick messengers”)—who are frequently attested in the *execration texts* (brief texts with lists of potential enemies of Egypt

¹⁷ Scandone-Matthiae 2003.

¹⁸ Osing 1973, 1976.

¹⁹ Strudwick 2005, 66, 76–77, 104, 150, 334–335.

²⁰ Török 2009, 55–56.

²¹ Strudwick 2005, 330–333.

written on figurines that represented prisoners).²² Trade appears to have been an important activity there from the very beginning of the Old Kingdom, and not always necessarily subordinated to the state. For instance, the main authorities of Elephantine did not hold the title of “great chief of the province,” as did their Upper Egyptian counterparts, but rather that of “overseer of interpreters/foreigners,” and their autobiographical inscriptions abound in fascinating details about the expeditions sent deep into Nubia. Herkhuf and Sabni, for example, led caravans of hundreds of donkeys loaded with incense, ebony, several kinds of resin, panther and lion skins, elephant tusks, and other goods.²³ The routes in use followed the course of the Nile and desert tracks (like the “route of the oasis”), the particulars of which probably depended on a combination of logistical considerations, the location of the goods sought, and the potential for hostile encounters. Nubians thus appear less as a threat or as passive partners, and more as politically arranged mediators, pursuing their own interests and facilitating the success of Egyptian expeditions.

Another element of such activities in Elephantine is the geographical scope of the expeditions led by the local leaders, which reached across a far wider area than in neighboring Nubia. Herkhuf, for instance, followed both the oases and the Elephantine trails. It departed from this locality, but also from Thinis, which was several hundred kilometers to the north.²⁴ Khnumhotep states that “I went forth with my lords, the noblemen and seal-bearers of the god, Tjeti and Khui, to Byblos and to Punt [lacuna] times. I returned safely after having crossed these lands,”²⁵ and Heqaib was sent to the Land of the “Asiatics” (*Aamu*) in order to bring back to Egypt the corpse of an official killed there, together with his troops, when he was building a ship to travel to Punt.²⁶ Similar networks are attested in an exceptional late third millennium inscription from the same place, where an official collected the goods in Elephantine that had been brought from the Nubian lands of Medja and Yam, consisting in myrrh from Byblos, gold and copper from “The Land of the God” (= Punt and other sites), incense from Yam, ebony from Wetenet, ivory from a region whose name is destroyed in the text, and several kinds of monkeys from other locations. Afterward, these goods were shipped to Heracleopolis, in the north.²⁷ The fact that Levantine goods arrived into Nubia and were collected by Elephantine officials reveals the existence of a trade network over a vast area (Levant, Punt, Nubia, the Eastern Sahara) that was not controlled by the Egyptian state. In fact, Elephantine officials also appear involved in such trade as a private venture, at their own initiative.²⁸ To sum up, Elephantine officials appear to have been true specialists in the provision of foreign valuables, not only from neighboring Nubia.

²² The “*excecration texts*” are lists of enemy peoples and hostile countries written on figurines of bound prisoners, bowls, etc., which were destroyed during magic ceremonies. They provide invaluable information about foreign peoples and lands, particularly for the late third millennium and the early second millennium BCE.

²³ Strudwick 2005, 331, 336.

²⁴ Strudwick 2005, 330–333.

²⁵ Strudwick 2005, 340.

²⁶ Strudwick 2005, 335.

²⁷ Edel 2008, 1743–1744.

²⁸ Förstner-Müller and Raue 2008.

One of the main sources of metals and precious items (especially incense, myrrh, and semiprecious stone) was Punt.²⁹ Its remote location on both shores of the southern Red Sea, and the complex logistics needed to get there (including shipyards at Coptos, land trails crossing the Eastern Desert, and harbors like Wadi Gawassis), apparently precluded the possibility of armed conflicts and instead privileged trade expeditions.³⁰ Nevertheless, the one-sided picture in the Egyptian records needs qualifying. On one hand, it is quite possible that Punt was not necessarily the producer of all the goods sought by the Egyptians but was instead a crossroads for traders, where commodities from distant locations were exchanged and stored. In fact, the Indian Ocean appears increasingly to have been, from very early on, an important route where seeds, animals, and other goods circulated between Africa and South Asia.³¹ Perhaps the role of Punt was comparable to Dilmun (Bahrein), where Mesopotamian traders met their colleagues from distant countries, including India, Iran, and Oman. This could explain why goods from Punt reached Nubia independent of any Egyptian expedition, or why Asian seeds have appeared in several Nubian tombs, but not in Egypt. On the other hand, trade encounters between Puntites and Egyptians relied on mutual, not solely Egyptian, interests. And if Egyptians certainly sent trade expeditions to Punt, Puntites could eventually have made common cause with Nubian polities and attacked Egypt, coming to participate in internal Egyptian political affairs. In this respect it is worth remembering that governor Neheri I asserts at Hatnub, in Middle Egypt, that he faced a coalition of people from Nubia (the lands of Medja and Wawat), Asiatics, and Egyptians from both Northern and Southern Egypt. Moreover, another official—also from Middle Egypt, Khnumhotep I—boasted of helping his king to expel a local rival who was supported by Nubians and Asiatics.³² Nubians and Puntites appear therefore in a more balanced light, as both active partners and eventual rivals of Egypt, while contacts with Northeast Africa and the Red Sea appear to be more complex than previously thought, involving not only state-sponsored ventures but also independent, private initiatives.

As for the Eastern Sahara under the Old Kingdom, two different strategies are illustrated, respectively, in the cases of Libya and the oasis of Dakhla. Campaigns against “Libyans” involved the capture of substantial numbers of prisoners and livestock: 1,100 captives and at least 13,100 livestock in one case, and hundreds of thousands of cattle, donkeys, and small cattle in another.³³ Whereas such figures should be treated with caution, they reveal nevertheless that “Libyans” raised flocks that were too large to be exclusively confined to the arid environment of the Libyan coast. It seems more likely to assume that their pastoral activities

²⁹ Strudwick 2005, 72. For a comprehensive discussion on Punt location and economic role, cf. Boivin and Fuller 2009.

³⁰ El-Awady 2009; Manzo 2014.

³¹ Boivin and Fuller 2009.

³² Anthes 1928, 35–38; Breasted 1906, 225.

³³ Strudwick 2005, 67.

encompassed a vast area from Cyrenaica and the western oases to, at least, the western edge of the Delta—a vague border area dotted with substantial lakes, swampy areas, and meadows—which was well suited to grazing but underpopulated and difficult to control. There, we see evidence for Egyptian livestock centers that had officials concerned with cattle and pasture management.³⁴ As pastoralism is a specialized economic activity, often closely related to sedentary populations, its importance in the western Delta is quite probably linked to Egyptian demand, making it inevitable that conflicts over grazing rights and deliveries of cattle and other products might have erupted between herders and agents of the crown. This would explain the occasional armed encounters described by the sources.³⁵ A different strategy is attested further south. While the oases have only provided occasional evidence for a durable Egyptian presence there, Balat, at the oasis of Dakhla, emerges as a remarkable exception—a truly Egyptian town and administrative center, headed by a governor and tasked with providing necessary logistics for the expeditions crossing the desert toward Nubia and Uweinat in search for incense and other valuables.

Finally, while the Levant apparently avoided imperial conquest, judging by the evidence, it was only by providing access to precious valuables. Byblos was the main trade partner in the Levant. Furthermore, like Elephantine, a trade and logistical base was apparently founded in the Eastern Delta and on its fortified border: Levantine temples have recently been discovered there,³⁶ while Iny, an official who carried out many commercial expeditions to the Levant, set sail from Ra-hat—“the first mouth (of the Nile)” —toward Byblos, Lebanon, and other countries in the area. In the course of his many voyages under kings Pepi I, Merenre, and Pepi II, the small fleets he commanded brought lapis lazuli, tin/lead, silver, and resins to Egypt, as well as “Asiatic” (*aamu*) men and women.³⁷ Nevertheless, armed conflicts were not unknown that involved repeated military expeditions and amphibian operations, as well as huge armies in the order of tens of thousands of men. As a result, Asiatic fortified camps were razed, houses burned, and trees and vines destroyed.³⁸ Unfortunately the precise situation of the region is unknown but it certainly corresponds to southern Palestine. Trade and war appear thus as alternative strategies in the Levant, but permanent occupation was precluded, as in Nubia. Egypt seems instead to have pursued control of the strategic land route leading into Asia (the “Ways of Horus”), the fortification of the Eastern Delta border, and the creation of checkpoints at the end of caravan routes. Nesutnefer was an overseer of fortresses and watchtowers in the provinces of Abydos and Hemmamiya, in Middle Egypt, as well as in the Eastern Delta. He thus controlled the routes from Asia and

³⁴ Moreno García 2010b.

³⁵ The importance of cattle rearing in this area is best observed in Kom el-Hisn: see Cagle 2003; Moreno García 2010b.

³⁶ Bietak 2003.

³⁷ Marcolin 2010.

³⁸ Strudwick 2005, 354–355.

the Western Desert that reached the Nile Valley. The recent discovery of a chain of small circular forts in western Sinai, dating to the end of the Old Kingdom, reveals that military protection was needed at that time for the mining expeditions sent to this area. This was perhaps related to the conflicts described in the inscriptions of Weni and Heqaib of Elephantine.³⁹

Consequently, the absence of a true Egyptian empire in the third millennium may be explained by the fact that no other power challenged Egyptian interests and access to these routes (and their attendant goods). Both Nubia and the Levant were divided into many polities whose population and resources could not match those of Egypt. And, further afield, we hear of no other competing power contesting the Syro-Levantine and the Anatolian regions, with the short-lived exception of the Akkadian empire (ca. 2334–2218 BCE). As a result, no foreign invasion or premeditated attack threatened Egypt after the collapse of central authority following the Old Kingdom. This is worth stressing, as governors and cults continued to operate, apparently undisturbed, in the isolated outpost of Balat, at the oasis of Dakhla. Meanwhile Nubia, then more politically organized and with rulers who occasionally advertised Egyptian royal titles, never invaded Egypt. What is more, Nubian soldiers fought in the contending armies of Thebes and Heracleopolis, and managed to acquire property in Egypt itself during the civil wars of the late third millennium. Trade continued to link Nubia, Punt, Byblos, and the Aegean across Egypt.⁴⁰

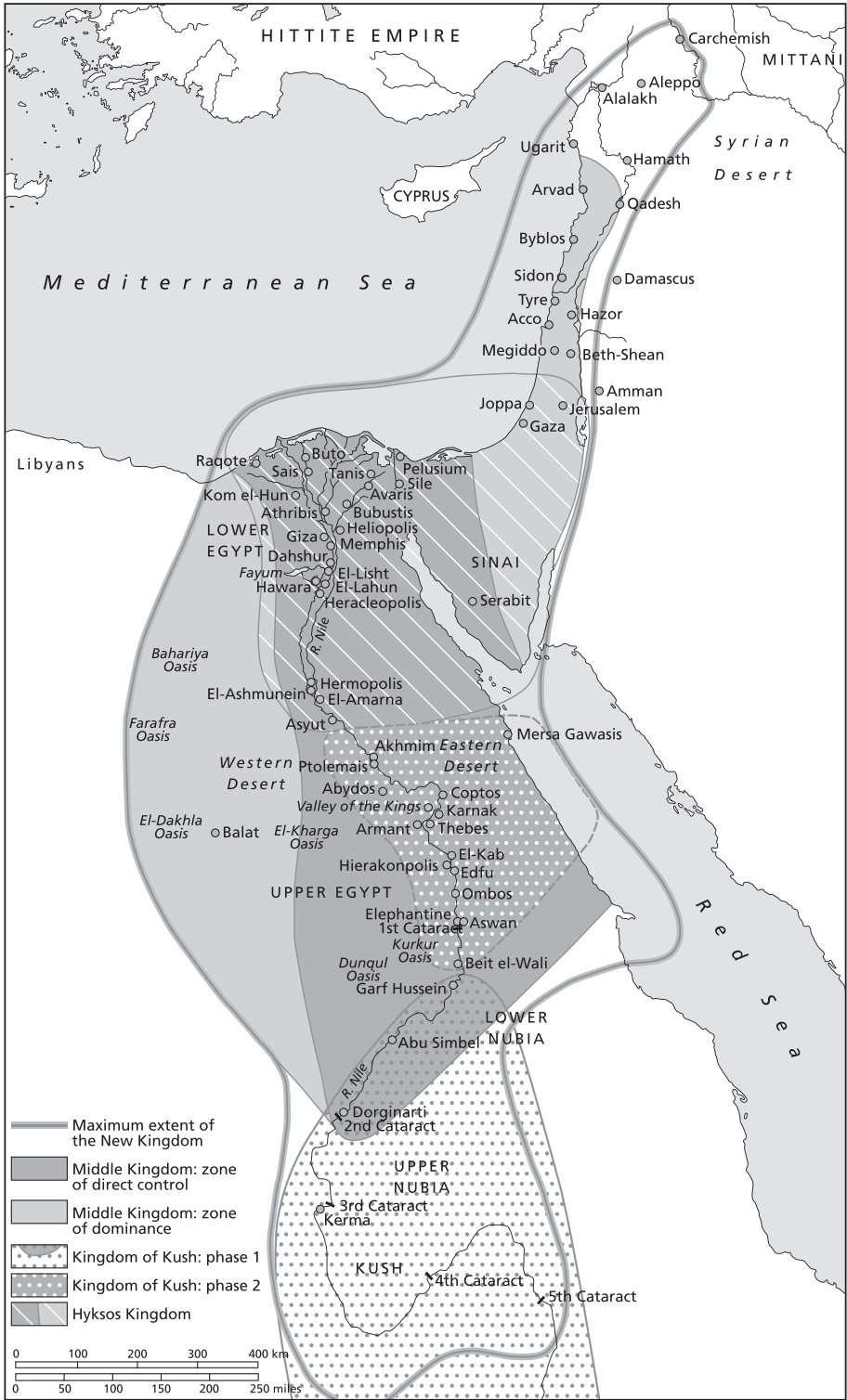
However, the reunification of Egypt at the very end of the third millennium witnessed the revival of the same geopolitical concerns as in previous periods—that is, control of riverine, maritime, and desert routes connecting the Red Sea, the Eastern Sahara, and northern Sudan to the Mediterranean. Military campaigns were launched against the western oases and Lower Nubia in order to bring them under Egyptian control. Meanwhile, maritime expeditions to Punt resumed and armies were sent to Palestine and Lebanon. See map 1.1.

Two major changes, however, are apparent. First, significant maritime bases were established at Mersa/Wadi Gawassis, on the Red Sea coast, and at Tell el-Dab'a, in the Eastern Delta. Here Asiatics were settled as trade specialists, mercenaries, and interpreters, while Byblos remained the privileged Egyptian partner in the Levant.⁴¹ The growing importance of Asiatic affairs is also illustrated in literature (the *execration texts* from this period evoke dozens of Asiatic place names, peoples, and local leaders, while the *Tale of Sinuhe* is set in the Levant) and social dynamics (Asiatic serfs/slaves were transferred between dignitaries), while new administrative titles describe ships and trade with Byblos. As for Mersa/Wadi Gawassis, recent discoveries of Cananean, Cretan, Yemeni, and Eritrean wares, as well as inscriptions mentioning Punt, reveal the geographical scope of goods passing through this

³⁹ Mumford 2006.

⁴⁰ Fischer 1961; Edel 2008, 1743–1744.

⁴¹ Bietak 2006.



Map 1.1. Pharaonic Egypt.

Source: Bang and Scheidel, 2013, *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, 66. Copyright: Oxford University Press.

harbor connecting Egypt and Punt. In fact, the emergence of a Northwest Semitic alphabetic script (“Proto-Sinaitic”) in the first centuries of the second millennium provides further evidence for intense contacts between Asiatics and Egyptians. Inscriptions in this script have been found at Serabit el-Khadim (Sinai), a mountain containing important turquoise mines and a temple dedicated to the goddess Hathor. They were probably incised by Asiatic workers or by passersby. They have also been recovered at Wadi el-Hôl (a desert route near Thebes leading to the Egyptian oases), close to the inscriptions left by Bebi—an “overseer of the troop of Asiatics”—and by a certain Mesy, whose mother was Nebet-Kepenet (literally, the “Lady of Byblos”).⁴²

Second, a chain of impressive fortresses was built around the area of the Second Cataract, in Nubia.⁴³ The first group (Ikkur and Baki) controlled access to Wadi Allaqi, the main route to the gold and copper mines of the eastern Nubian Desert, as well as an important caravan trail. The second group, about 150 kilometers further to the south, were built around the ancient fortress and factory of Buhen, a gold-producing area with easy access to the trails of the western Nubian Desert and the oases. Finally, the third group was built about 100 kilometers further to the south, in a zone that enabled easy control of the Nile. Both papyrological and epigraphic evidence reveal that control of trade was one of the main aims of this network of fortresses and, in fact, settlements flourished around some of them, as at Uronarti⁴⁴ and at Mirgissa, where Egyptian houses surrounded by warehouses constituted the Open City.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the construction of the third group of fortresses does not imply the abandonment of previous groups, which suggests that their main purpose was not to form a fortified border against Nubian powers. A useful parallel is the relationship between Romans and pastoral populations in North Africa, wherein forts served to direct, control, and tax the production of pastoralists at fixed points that also served as markets, recruitment, and “information collecting” centers.⁴⁶

Trade thus appears to have been a major goal of Egyptian foreign policy, to the point that the infrastructures built for this purpose remained in use after the collapse of the pharaonic authority that created and supported them. Tell el-Dab’a became the capital of the new Hyksos kingdom, which was heavily involved in trade with Nubia and the Levant.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Nubian fortresses were not only not abandoned or dismantled, they became the nucleus of settlements whose inhabitants recognized the Nubian ruler as their lord.⁴⁸ In fact, the contrast in Middle Kingdom policy toward Nubia and the Levant is sharp. In the first case, a

⁴² Darnell 2005.

⁴³ Smith 1995.

⁴⁴ Knoblauch, Bestock and Makovics 2013.

⁴⁵ Vercoutter 1970, 11–12, pl. IX[b].

⁴⁶ Shaw 1995 [VII].

⁴⁷ Bietak 1996. The results are regularly published and discussed by M. Bietak and his team in the journal *Ägypten und Levante*. Cf. also Marcus 2007.

⁴⁸ Smith 1997.

network of fortresses and patrols sought permanent, comprehensive, military control, which made it possible to control the desert and riverine routes that connected inner Africa to the Mediterranean (along with the gold producing areas of Nubia and the Eastern Desert). Such control was facilitated by infrastructure on the Red Sea coast (e.g., the harbors of Mersa/Wadi Gawassis and Ayn Sukhna). Keeping in mind that Puntites attacked Elkab in alliance with Nubian tribes,⁴⁹ and that intermediary areas between Punt and Nubia—like the Gash Delta—played an important commercial role,⁵⁰ the strategic and geopolitical interests at stake in Nubia become clearer. As for their Levantine policy, data is scarcer. Certainly military expeditions against Palestine and Lebanon reveal a strategic concern, though this was apparently not followed by any permanent occupation or imposition of a durable “imperial” administrative structure.⁵¹

The end of the Middle Kingdom witnessed the consolidation of the Hyksos kingdom in the Eastern Delta and the rising power of the Nubian kingdom of Kerma. The Hyksos ruled a state that was in intensive contact with the Levant and was quite probably the hegemonic power over, at the very least, Lower Egypt. That region had broken up into a number of smaller polities whose rulers are primarily known from inscribed scarabs.⁵² This situation resembles the Levantine political fragmentation, with its numerous petty states in mid-second millennium BCE. Asiatic herders crossed into Lower Egypt through Wadi Tumilat.⁵³ Hyksos seals have also been found at Edfu, while some inscribed blocks with the names of Hyksos kings have been recovered at Gebelein. Contacts between Nubians and the Hyksos are also well attested through the oases of the Western Desert, and Nubian soldiers were present at the palace of the Hyksos king Khayan. Furthermore, a cuneiform tablet and a seal reveal some sort of diplomatic contact with Babylonia, whose commercial interests in the Levant are well attested at Hazor, in northern Palestine. Also noteworthy is the evidence of trade and contacts between Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia.⁵⁴ In fact, dense trade networks flourished during this period and linked the Eastern Mediterranean to Mesopotamia and Northeast Africa. Such trade was not necessarily channeled through the states and their institutions (e.g., palaces, temples) but rather by networks of private traders organized in “trade diasporas.”⁵⁵

The response to this flourishing trade was the emergence of several powers that competed for control over Syria and Palestine, where the main trade routes converged. The capture of these lucrative circuits, which allowed states to levy tribute and eliminate rivals or at least restrict their access to this area, was the primary strategic concern for the states that dominated the Near East during the Late

⁴⁹ Davies 2003.

⁵⁰ Fattovich 1995.

⁵¹ Altenmüller and Moussa 1991; Allen 2008.

⁵² Bietak 1996; Quirke 2007.

⁵³ Holladay 1997.

⁵⁴ Collon 2008.

⁵⁵ Holladay 2001; Wengrow 2009.

Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE).⁵⁶ The Hittite attack on Babylonia (1595 BCE) can be better understood in light of the trade networks that linked Babylonia to Syria and Hazor and the rivalries it provoked between Babylonia and the dominant powers in Upper Mesopotamian (Mari, Assyria under Shamsi-Adad, and later Mitanni). The Egyptians incorporated themselves into this system already holding an important asset—Nubia and the Hyksos kingdom—the conquest of which meant the elimination of a primary competitor on the Nilotic axis. It also meant control over the routes connecting the Red Sea and Northeast Africa with the Mediterranean, as well as control over gold production areas. In addition to these strategic, productive regions, after the expulsion of the Hyksos and conquest of the Levant, Egypt also controlled the arrival routes of these goods going from the Red Sea and Arabia to Syria and the Levant, including many of the main harbors and key land crossroads, like the Damascus basin. The virtual monopoly over trade routes connecting productive regions and markets for exotic goods brought Egypt fabulous wealth—a time “when gold was more abundant than sand,” according to the diplomatic correspondence known as the Amarna Letters.

Within this context, Egyptian policy was built on the same principles prevailing in the Old and Middle Kingdom, the only difference being that, for the first time, it involved a direct confrontation with foreign states powerful enough to dispute its control over strategic areas. The Egyptian response was to build an empire. Nubia appears to have been the most strategic target. It was fully conquered and Egyptian influence reached the area around the Fifth Cataract, hundreds of kilometers further upstream than previous Middle Kingdom conquests. Not only the Nubian Desert and its rich gold deposits, but also the desert routes crossing this vast area (which probably represented an alternative land route toward Punt across the Gash Delta), thus fell under pharaonic control. As for the Western Desert, the recent discovery of a huge cistern excavated in the rock at Tundaba—between the Nile Valley and the oasis of Kharga—as well as ostraca mentioning taxes on liquids, show the extent of Egyptian authority over the surrounding deserts, their resources and trails. Towns and temples were founded in Nubia, Nubian princes were educated in Egypt, and a true administration was implemented in the region, supported by the collaboration and administrative integration of Nubian elites and rulers.⁵⁷

Such control contrasts with the rather more informal organization of the Egyptian conquests in the Levant. With the exception of the first campaigns of the Eighteenth Dynasty, which reached the Euphrates, Egypt's main concern was limited to the coastal areas of Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as some zones that appeared as important trade crossroads during the Middle Bronze Age, like the areas around Hazor and Damascus. Even in the aftermath of the Egypto-Hittite treaty (ca. 1258 BCE), when their respective areas of influence were clearly settled and mutually agreed upon, Egypt managed to preserve control over many

⁵⁶ Cohen and Westbrook 1999; Liverani 1990a.

⁵⁷ Kemp 1978.

of these strategic areas. This was in spite of the loss of the area around Qatna and Qadesh, along with the route leading to Babylonia. Sites like Sumur, Kumidi, and Gaza acted as administrative and organizational centers for Egyptian authorities. However, many petty kingdoms under Egyptian sovereignty apparently preserved a high degree of autonomy, as long as they collaborated with Egyptian authorities and remained loyal to the pharaoh.⁵⁸

The absence of the kinds of imperial structures created in Nubia casts some light on the policy toward both regions. What appears, from one perspective, to be comprehensive Egyptian dominion over Nubia probably conceals a high degree of collaboration with local elites, who were essential to preserving any stable control over such a vast area and its lucrative resources. In fact, the temples and towns founded there at this time can be interpreted as evidence that significant resources were left in Nubia and reinvested in the region. Even donations of land to temples and royal cults in Nubia, involving the participation of local potentates, appear to be a strategy to strengthen links between the Nubian elite and the pharaoh.⁵⁹ None of this was implemented in the Syro-Levantine region. The Amarna diplomatic archive reveals, by contrast, a surprising lack of concern toward their regional elite. However, appearances may be deceptive and, in fact, Nubia and the Levant may simply show two variants of the same policy, which allowed local powers a substantial degree of autonomy in order to gain their collaboration. In any case, both Mitanni and Hatti, the main rivals of Egypt in Syria, could hardly afford to extend their territories to distant, productive areas in Egyptian hands (most noteworthy, those producing Nubian gold, African ivory, exotic imports, and incense from Punt). This gave Egypt a substantial advantage in international exchange. Military confrontation thus concerned only the control over *some* of main land routes in the north, in Syria, and never seriously threatened Egyptian control over the southern routes that passed through Palestine and southern Syria. This is probably why Egypt did not seek to thoroughly integrate the Levant as it did with Nubia. Quite significantly, when new land routes appeared that evaded Egyptian control (for instance, the Arabian Incense Road) and the Nubian elite stopped collaborating with Egypt, Egypt's empire collapsed.

Nevertheless, toward the end of the New Kingdom, Egypt entered a period of strenuous military conflict on several fronts that contributed to the gradual breakdown of the empire. Military expeditions were launched against the Transjordan states of Edom and Moab. The Sea Peoples ravaged the Levantine coast and could only be stopped at the Delta. Libyans moved into Egypt through the Western oases and settled in the Delta as well as in certain regions of Fayoum and Middle Egypt. Meanwhile, a revolt led by the viceroy of Nubia was followed by a brief occupation of Thebes before his final retreat into Nubia, which then was definitively lost to Egypt. Interpretation of these dramatic events still remains controversial, especially

⁵⁸ Redford 1990, 1992; Bar, Kahn, and Shirley 2011.

⁵⁹ A good example in Frood 2007, 213–216.

because of the sudden divergence from previous centuries when relative geopolitical stability prevailed. Changes in production, in the development of new, alternative trade routes, and the emergence of small traders, outside the sphere of palatial intervention, have been proposed as the main explanations for the movements of peoples and the crisis of many palatial systems in the Eastern Mediterranean. Whatever the case may be, the disruption of maritime exchange networks appears as a surprisingly devastating vector in state collapse, and reveals the economic importance of trade for Late Bronze Age societies.⁶⁰

In the case of the Levant, the Ramessides sent several expeditions against Edom, in what has traditionally been interpreted as an effort to bring under Egyptian control the copper-producing area of Timna. One such expedition, under Ramesses III, is reminiscent of that of Weni at the end of the third millennium, in that it involved a combination of land and maritime forces. However, the recent discovery of an inscription of Ramesses III at the oasis of Tayma, in Saudi Arabia, reveals quite unexpectedly that Egyptian interests in Transjordan went beyond resource exploitation, pursuing control over land routes further east that included this strategic caravan crossroads. Keeping in mind that copper mining at Faynan and Timna—along the Arabah Valley—began in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age as a small-scale activity, without any trace of external control,⁶¹ we can infer the fact that mobile populations were important vectors in establishing alternative trade routes. These, in turn, eroded the control of Bronze Age states, like Arameans in Upper Mesopotamia, Chaldeans in Southern Mesopotamia, and Moabites and Edomites in the southern Levant. In this respect it is noteworthy that the involvement of Ramesses III in Tayma coincides temporally with the last known maritime Egyptian expedition to Punt, just before the Incense Road connected South Arabia directly by land with the Transjordan kingdoms and the Mediterranean.

Similar links between mobile populations and trade are observable on the western border of Egypt, and the Libyan invasions must be understood in the context of conditions prevailing in the Egyptian Delta. As stated before, the fact that cattle represented a substantial part of Libyan herds must mean that abundant water and pasturage were available to them and, consequently, that they traveled around the Western Delta. Nevertheless, the foundation of huge vineyards and olive plantations in the oases and around the western branch of the Nile, together with the needs of the new capital, Pi-Ramesses, located in the Eastern Delta, as well as the numerous herds kept in Lower Egypt, doubtless had a deep impact on the resources and land use of this region, making conflicts inevitable. As for the fortress of Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham, strategically located on the Mediterranean coast halfway between the oasis of Siwa and the Nile valley, the archaeological evidence reveals that trade was an important activity in the area. It also reveals that Libyans were in charge of the horticulture and agriculture of the settlement.⁶² As Libyans

⁶⁰ Liverani 1997; Sherratt 2003; Bachhuber and Roberts 2009.

⁶¹ Ben-Yosef 2010.

⁶² Nielsen 2017.

were also involved in trade, providing skins, elephant tusks, aromatic plants, and other precious items through the desert tracks, it becomes clearer why they, allied with some Peoples of the Sea, attacked the traditional grazing areas within Egypt (e.g., the Delta, Fayoum, and Middle Egypt) and settled there. All the oases of the Western Desert and the border areas of the Western Delta controlled by Libyans were crossed by exchange networks that connected the Mediterranean to the Fayoum through localities like Kom el-Hisn.⁶³ As for Nubia, its withdrawal from the Egyptian Empire was concomitant with deep changes in the southern Red Sea region at the turn of the first millennium, which saw the emergence of the Incense Road as well as the first known states in South Arabia and the Ethiopian plateau, with intense contacts between these regions of the southern Red Sea.

The Impact of Empire

Building an empire had a significant impact on Egypt, both in terms of costs, allocation of resources, and expected returns. Egyptological scholarship is usually vague about the reasons underlying the Egyptian expansion abroad and vacillates between security and economic motivation, the latter being reduced to the capture of booty and tribute and, consequently, to an exercise in “bringing wealth” into Egypt. Nevertheless, both positions fail to explain why empire followed the global expansion of trade over a larger geographical span. In fact, the capture of lucrative trade routes appears to have been an essential cause of expansion abroad. When King Kamose launched an attack against Avaris, the capital of the Hyksos, and its harbor, he boasted that “I have not left a plank to the hundreds of ships of fresh cedar which were filled with gold, lapis lazuli, silver, turquoise, bronze axes without number, over and above the moringa-oil, incense, fat, honey, willow, box-wood, sticks and all their fine woods (all the fine products of Retenu [= Canaan and Syria]). I have confiscated all of it.”⁶⁴ While the reference to “hundreds of ships” might be bombastic, the cargo listed resembles the Uluburun wreck and its 10 tons of Cypriot copper, one ton of tin, half a ton of terebinth resin, 18 logs of ebony, ivory, ostrich eggshells, vestiges of murex, spices, metal vessels, and thousands of glass beads. Trade had expanded and fueled exchange during the Middle Bronze Age, to the point that capturing and taxing its revenues—at the cost of expensive wars, military occupation, and building an administrative structure on foreign territory—could prove to be more rewarding than seeking tribute alone. Compare the amounts of gold and silver gained in Thutmose III’s military expeditions in the Levant (between 1–6 kilograms per campaign) with the huge quantities obtained from taxes *within* Egypt. Ramesses III donated to the temples 52 kilograms of gold—about half of it from Nubia—and one ton of silver *from the annual taxes paid by the servants of*

⁶³ Moreno García 2014.

⁶⁴ Redford 1997, 14.

several royal temples and herds. Meanwhile, a single local guardian of natron paid 91 kilograms of gold, and individual fishers paid 0.27 kilograms of silver each in annual taxes. The contrast is striking and reveals the weight of exchanges, as well as the extent of precious metal circulation. Silver was scarce in Egypt and had to be imported. Trade was therefore necessary to convert commodities into precious metals that were, in part, subsequently paid as regular taxes to the treasury.

Traders figure frequently in New Kingdom sources as working for both institutions (for instance, for royal palace and temples) and for themselves (though not always officially), trading between cities along the Nile, selling and lending to private individuals and, in general, transforming commodities into precious metals and vice versa. The papyri that record the robbery of temples and royal tombs in the Late New Kingdom show, for instance, that traders were able to “launder” huge amounts of stolen gold and silver, thus confirming that both metals circulated widely in Egyptian society. Nevertheless, Egyptian traders were also very active in the Levant, and their activities are recorded in texts like the Amarna Letters,⁶⁵ in the archaeological record,⁶⁶ and even in literary texts, where exchange with the Syro-Levantine region is prominent among the business of wealthy individuals, who sold agricultural goods there.⁶⁷ In fact, the circulation of caravans and traders in the Near East was at that time subject to careful regulations among states in order to facilitate their activities. Silver fueled these exchanges. The recent discovery of three small silver hoards at the Levantine-Egyptian garrison town of Beth-Shean, together with stone weights using the Egyptian *deben* as the basic unit (as well as fish from the Nile), is illustrative not only of the use of “money” in transactions, but also of the existence of a trade system that included commodities like dried fish.⁶⁸ The export of Egyptian cereal was also a source of income, and shipments of grain to the Hittite Empire under Ramesses II, Merenptah, and Sethi II (1279–1194 BCE) have been linked to the contemporary debasement of silver in Egypt, probably because it arrived in huge quantities as payment for the grain. Foreign merchants are also attested in Egypt as well as in Nubia, where they could rise to high status (Simentu, for instance, one of the sons of Ramesses II, married the daughter of a Syrian shipowner).⁶⁹

Of course, this does not mean that tribute imposed on foreign territories played a minor role, but its conspicuous, symbolic role as a source of exotic goods, as proof of foreign submission, and as an indicator of the extent of the king’s authority have caused its role to be overvalued. In fact, what was in many instances unilaterally presented as tribute, on grounds of ideology and prestige, should be better described as commercial transactions and exchanges of gifts.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the

⁶⁵ Cf. letter no. 313 and Liverani 1990a, 89, 97–100.

⁶⁶ Holladay 2001.

⁶⁷ Caminos 1954, 138.

⁶⁸ Mazar 2011. Some of these commodities are enumerated in the late second millennium story of Wenamon (cf. n. 66).

⁶⁹ B. G. Davies 1997, 291.

⁷⁰ Marcus 2007; Moreno García 2016, 2.

conquest of foreign territories was accompanied by the imposition of tribute in the form of taxes (e.g., slaves, cattle, horses, cereals, wine, oil, metals, and timber; in the case of Nubia, gold, ivory, precious skins of exotic animals, and ebony). It was also accompanied by the delivery of prestige goods (e.g., incense, gold, silver, precious stones, and the products of craft specialists: chariots, wooden objects, prized textiles, stone vessels, as well as gold and silver items). Other services involved access to harbors and livestock centers in order to supply armies, messengers, diplomats, and Egyptian officials in transit.⁷¹ This usually meant that the resources of a given area were evaluated and taxes imposed, as in the case of the agricultural domains founded in the Jezreel Valley, which produced 207,300 sacks of wheat.⁷² In any case, the regular delivery of gold and silver by Levantine Egyptian vassals implies that trade was active in this region and that even small polities managed to accumulate significant quantities of precious metals. The campaign of Pharaoh Sheshonq I in Palestine (tenth century BCE), which was followed by massive donations of gold and silver to the Egyptian temples (182 tons of silver in one case, 209 tons of gold and silver in another)⁷³ give an idea of the wealth controlled by the pharaohs in previous centuries, when Egypt dominated, among other routes, the lucrative traffic in what would later become the Incense Road.⁷⁴

Temples figure among the main beneficiaries of tribute thanks to royal donations. This included precious metals, cattle, and serfs/slaves, to the point that “filling the stores of the temples” became a *topos* in royal inscriptions. Nevertheless, temples were also huge production and management centers that were involved in trade ventures, the management of crown lands, mining, and extensive agricultural production. The arrival of thousands of deportees and prisoners of war made it possible to expand the *ihwty*-system. *Ihwty*-cultivators worked standard tracts of land (about 5 hectares) and delivered fixed amounts of grain (200 sacks). As for the most important temples, their domains were spread all over the country. For instance, the decree of Seti I at Nauri (in Nubia) was intended to safeguard the Nubian property and personnel belonging to the temple of Osiris at Abydos. Such domains, usually administered by priests and high dignitaries, strengthened the links between the local elite and the royal palace. Tribute probably fueled economic sectors—building, for instance. The vast architectural projects of the New Kingdom involved the participation of huge numbers of both skilled and unskilled workers, on a seasonal or permanent basis, depending on the nature of their tasks. The extent of these projects would necessarily have had a deep impact on the economy of the country and provided income to a significant percentage of the population. The best-documented cases are in settlements of specialized craftsmen, like Der el-Medina, where artisans and their families resided permanently and the state met

⁷¹ Redford 1990, 40–63; Liverani 1990a, 205–282.

⁷² Na'aman 1988.

⁷³ Holladay 2006.

⁷⁴ Cf. the huge quantities of gold and silver rivets delivered by the locality of Hazor to an Upper Mesopotamian city in the Middle Bronze Age: Horowitz and Oshima 2010.

needs like food and lodging. Likewise, workshops that produced equipment for the army, funerary and other luxury goods for the elite, as well as huge quantities of glass and other valuable (for instance, ivory) exports, must have stimulated the urban crafts sector and constituted a significant source of employment.⁷⁵ Some of these goods were exported, as were fish, hides, linen cloths, papyrus, and natron.⁷⁶ These activities were subject to taxation within Egypt itself, and this may explain the expansion of fishery, livestock rearing, and linen cultivation in the Delta.⁷⁷ In all, it is quite likely that a “salaried” sector expanded within Egypt thanks to imperial conquests.

Another important consequence of empire was the rise of the army as a significant social, economic, and political force.⁷⁸ The military included highly skilled forces like charioteers and foreign mercenaries, as well as officials who occasionally played an important role in political events (the generals Horemheb and Herihor, for example, became pharaohs, while the Nineteenth Dynasty was founded by a family of military men from Lower Egypt). Nevertheless, the activities of the army were in no way limited to warfare, as soldiers and officials were also employed in agriculture, quarrying, mining, and building. In addition, it appears as an autonomous branch of the administration, whose activities quite often overlapped with those of other departments. The fact that officials were rewarded with substantial agricultural domains, in many cases associated with temples, royal statues, and crown lands, altered the structure of the local elite. Military people appear as a rural gentry, closely linked to the monarchy in the Wilbour papyrus. They also appear in inscriptions like those of Ahmose son of Abana, who, risen from the ranks, obtained land and slaves and was able to bequeath wealth to his descendants and to found a family that reached the upper echelons of the civil service. The same is true of Neshi, who was rewarded with a plot of land that became the subject of a long dispute among his descendants, centuries later. The army thus opened new paths for social promotion that enabled commoners to rise in society, accumulate wealth, and enter into patronage networks⁷⁹ while serving the interests of the monarchy in key institutions (temples, for example), in the countryside, and in counterbalancing the influence of other sectors of the ruling elite (i.e., the priesthood, local nobility, and civil service).

As for the cost of empire, military losses appear to have been significant toward the end of the New Kingdom (this included personnel sent to the quarries and mines—up to 10 percent of the total under Ramesses IV, even 50 percent in other texts). This was due to changes in military tactics (for instance, the introduction of swords), as well as the circumstances of fighting on various fronts. Thutmose III, for example, led 10,000 men in his first campaign into Palestine, and Seti I led 15,000 to

⁷⁵ Hodgkinson 2010, 2011.

⁷⁶ Lichtheim 1976, 227–228.

⁷⁷ Wente 1990, 118–119; Murnane 1995, 237–238.

⁷⁸ Gnirs 1996.

⁷⁹ Exell 2009.

recapture Beth-Shean. Ramesses II led more than 20,000 at Qadesh. Nevertheless, foreign warriors made up a significant percentage of Egyptian troops—up to 3,100 within a single division of 5,000 men—while maintenance costs of the army partly fell on temples, who included officials, soldiers, and stable masters (i.e., those in charge of chariotry and horse rearing) among landholders of their agricultural lands. The imposing architecture of New Kingdom Nubia (with its temples and decorated tombs) has been interpreted as a high and (in the end) uneconomical price to keep the area under Egyptian control. However, it can also be seen as proof that Egypt's imperial dominion was highly lucrative, the profits of which were partly reinvested in Nubia and shared by the local elite. As for the Delta, the foundation of a new capital at Pi-Ramesses in the late New Kingdom, a site that also served as a military base and strategic harbor, altered the landscape of this region and paved the way for its later transformation into Egypt's primary economic and urban center. The same can be said of the high proportion of Lower Egyptians engaged in the military, the royal stables, fishing, and herding, as well as orchard and vine agriculture.

The Instruments of the Empire

There were three main instruments that made it possible to rule the empire: the army, the diplomatic service, and the integration of dependent elites.

The organization of the army is difficult to ascertain before the New Kingdom. Certainly, many administrative titles were related to military activities and to the management of troops, but specifying the degree of professionalization of the officials and soldiers proves to be difficult, with the exception of some elite corps like the palace and king's guards or charioteers. Garrisons were settled in select locations abroad, like the Nubian fortresses of the Middle Kingdom or the Levantine garrison cities of the New Kingdom. However, the bulk of the army consisted of conscripts as well as foreign fighters, who were assembled as needed in frontier bases, to be subsequently sent against the enemy.⁸⁰ Because military campaigns could be complicated, including both amphibious and land operations, as well as the coordination of armies following different routes, a good intelligence service was essential to monitoring geographical accidents, political realities on the ground, the disposition of other states, the availability of supplies, deployment of enemy forces, and so on. They were useful, too, in securing the collaboration of the local population.⁸¹ The size of military units thus mobilized depended upon the goals of each campaign, but could easily reach 20,000 men. "Mercenaries"—especially Nubian archers—appear throughout the sources, in all periods. The reasons for the Nubian archers' employment are obscure. Was it simply a political agreement between Nubian and Egyptian rulers? In some cases they were settled within Egypt and given property,

⁸⁰ Strudwick 2005, 354.

⁸¹ Wente 1990, 70–73, 106–109; B. G. Davies 1997, 86–95.

as in late third millennium Gebelein.⁸² However, Egyptians could also fight for Nubian rulers in exchange for gold. Only with the advent of the New Kingdom did a more sophisticated military organization emerge that included specialized troops (e.g., charioteers, archers, foreign warriors, and so on), as well as specialized equipment. Finally, the Egyptian military presence in conquered territory came to consist of occasional garrisons and patrols that rarely exceeded a few dozen or—at most—a few hundred men. Lists of toponyms and archaeological evidence reveal that the main access points into Egypt were surveilled by means of watchtowers and fortresses. The strategic “Ways of Horus” into Asia, for example, were dotted with forts and way-stations to safeguard routes, supplies, and water sources along it. It served Egyptian armies, messengers, and diplomats, while the Libyan borders were likewise guarded by means of fortresses during the New Kingdom.⁸³ Finally, arsenals appear to be closely related to specialized craftsmanship, as in the important harbor of Pi-Ramesses, in the Eastern Delta.

Diplomacy is probably the least well-known aspect of Egyptian foreign policy, and only the Amarna Letters, the treaties, and the Hittite correspondence of the Ramessides, together with sporadic references in Ugaritic and Levantine archives, help to counterbalance the rhetorical image drawn in Egyptian iconography and textual sources.⁸⁴ Exchanges of gifts, even of specialists (artisans, doctors, etc.), cemented good relationships between states and were part of a highly developed diplomatic and court culture, the corollary of which were state marriages and the exchange of princesses, including Egyptian ones. Ambassadors and envoys—the supply of which was an explicit concern in the papyrological record—circulated between the political centers of the Near East. Protection offered to foreign dissidents and royal pretenders in rival monarchies was also part of the political game, as was the obligation to send princes from subject regions as hostages to Egypt. These boys were educated at the court before being returned to their countries as (theoretically) acculturated, pro-Egyptian rulers.⁸⁵ Naturally, foreign powers were also well acquainted with the internal situation of Egypt.⁸⁶

As for local elites, their collaboration was essential in order to preserve Egyptian rule. Broader autonomy was accorded to some regions subject to pharaonic control, leading to different degrees of acculturation. Lower Nubia appears to have been the most integrated of the empire’s regions. Here temples and towns were built in Egyptian style and Nubian rulers were buried and depicted in pharaonic fashion. In some cases, Nubian nobility even succeeded to important positions in the Egyptian administration. It seems then that the strategic importance of this area, as well as the convergence of interests between Nubian and Egyptian elites, led to significant local investment of imperial resources. As for Asiatics, they too occasionally ascended

⁸² Fischer 1961.

⁸³ Morris 2005.

⁸⁴ Liverani 1990a; Cohen and Westbrook 1999.

⁸⁵ Liverani 1990a, 274–282; B. G. Davies 1997, 97–150.

⁸⁶ Liverani 1990b.

to high positions within the Egyptian administration. However, the control of the southern Levant did not require a similar level of elite integration as did Nubia. In fact, the main importance of the southern Levant was not as a producer, but as an intermediary where land and maritime routes converged, some of whose origins lay in Egypt (especially those from the Red Sea and Northeast Africa). It is hardly surprising, then, that Egypt's main concern in the Levant was to ensure the fluidity of trade, to the point that the unrestrained mobility of caravans and traders was an important concern in diplomatic and state archives. Local elites were thus granted significant autonomy provided that they deliver the tribute and services requested by the pharaonic administration. In the case of rebels, their sons were sent into Egypt as hostages in order to ensure this. Occasional gifts of precious goods distinguished strategic allies (as in the case of Byblos). In private life, local elites tried to emulate the dominant Egyptian culture.⁸⁷ But in some cases, the Egyptian administration had to cope with local particularities. This is the reason that Akkadian remained the administrative language in Northern Canaan, while hieratic is mostly found in the South. In other cases, common interests between Egyptians and local elites, based on purely private activities, might explain the presence of Egyptian traders, messengers, etc., in the Levant, as a sort of "trading diaspora" doing business with foreign partners.⁸⁸

The Ideology of Empire

From an ideological point of view, Egyptian self-representation was that of *the* center of prosperity and cosmic order, in sharp contrast with the poverty, chaos, and danger prevailing abroad. Consequently, the cosmic mission of the pharaohs consisted in preserving and extending the realm of the *maat* (order) by destroying any menace or enemy. Foreign populations were thus required to recognize the authority of the pharaoh in order to survive, but their beliefs, ways of life, and social organization were usually respected in the absence of a true policy of "Egyptianization." In fact, while foreign populations were usually depicted in stereotyped, negative terms, beyond the restricted domain of artistic and literary conventions, foreigners could apparently easily integrate into Egyptian society and even rise to eminent positions. Monumental stelae and inscriptions symbolically marked the limits of the king's authority, but they should not be regarded as the true empire's frontier, even as markers of effective direct rule.⁸⁹

Tribute was the conventional expression of Egypt's asymmetrical relations with its neighbors, which conveyed notions of submission, recognition of Egyptian rule, integration within the ordered world, as well as the proper transfer of wealth toward

⁸⁷ Higginbotham 2000.

⁸⁸ Holladay 2001; Wengrow 2009; Sparks 2002–2003.

⁸⁹ Vernus 2011.

its center (i.e., Egypt) and to the representative of the gods on earth (i.e., the pharaoh).⁹⁰ However, the expansion of empire, especially during the New Kingdom, motivated deep transformations in the self-representation of the king. A more militaristic ethos appears in iconography and in literature, and it is quite possible that the closer contacts cultivated with foreign powers, as well as military reversals that were inevitable over so extended a period of time, caused Egyptians to critically re-evaluate the role of the king himself. For instance, the emergence of the “personal piety” genre at that time has been interpreted as a reaction against increasing state corruption and a growing conscience of the limits of royal power.⁹¹ However, conventional scenes continued to represent the king smiting his enemies, fighting foreign armies, and receiving tribute, even when no true campaign, conquest, or military encounter had really taken place. Still, these scenes’ powerful imagery—symbolic of the pharaoh’s cosmic responsibilities—justified their continuous use for millennia.

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⁹⁰ Liverani 1990; Smith 1997.

⁹¹ Excellent overview in Vernus 2003.

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