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## Reflections



# Global History in Egyptology: Framing Resilient Shores

Gianluca Miniaci

University of Pisa

*gianluca.miniaci@unipi.it*

Global history is generally viewed as solely pertinent to 1492 CE and subsequent centuries; nonetheless it should not be understood in such literal terms. The world has been interconnected for far longer.<sup>1</sup> Globalization—that is, multiple connections across regions—affected Egypt and the Near East far more deeply than has often been accepted.<sup>2</sup> The methods and approaches developed within the global perspective offered by “global history” have been used as tools for rewriting another type of history.<sup>3</sup> Scholars, including the contributors to this volume, who view societies as mutually constituted and engaged in a transformative cultural dialogue with one another, are currently rewriting history to give a greater voice to marginal, neglected, and counterhegemonic identities; they are writing a history that digs inside the interstitial spaces, forgotten adobes, and ignored frontiers.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years numerous scholars in adjacent fields have adopted an explicitly globalist approach. Several recent books, for example, have set out to understand the ancient Mediterranean as a contact zone (see for example, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea*, Cyprian

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1 Kearney, “The Local and the Global.” Cf. Müller, “Globalization, Transnationalism, and the Local in Ancient Greece.”

2 Geller, *Melammu: The Ancient World in an Age of Globalization*. Cf. Bevan, “Mediterranean Containerization”; Rollinger, “The eastern Mediterranean and Beyond.”

3 For a reference volume, please see Maurel, *Manuel d’histoire globale*.

4 See for instance, the forthcoming volume of the journal *World Archaeology*: “The archaeology of marginal places and identities” edited by Alfredo González-Ruibal.

Broodbank's *The Making of the Middle Sea*, Joseph Manning's *The Open Sea*.) Similarly, the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum has presented a series of three exhibitions and catalogues that together address the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean as a single deeply enmeshed unit (*The Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*;<sup>5</sup> *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*;<sup>6</sup> *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age*).<sup>7</sup> With a few exceptions,<sup>8</sup> such as Juan Carlos Moreno García's article "Egyptology and Global History: Between Geocultural Power and the Crisis of Humanities" in this volume, Egyptologists have been slow to adopt either the scope or the methodologies advocated by global history.

Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966) opens with a famous passage from a tale by Jorge Luis Borges that mentions "a certain Chinese encyclopedia." In this imaginary encyclopedia there is a taxonomy of animals including: those belonging to the emperor, the embalmed ones, the fabulous ones, and those that have just broken the water pitcher.<sup>9</sup> This idea spurred Foucault to confront the limitations and artificiality of the occidental way of thinking. The "Chinese encyclopedia" gave rise to an ontological turn that shifted Foucault's gaze towards other shores. Since the Enlightenment, Western culture has privileged scientific methods of scrutinizing and cataloguing reality based on a supposedly objective view of how the world is constituted (because it was based on the objectivity given by science).<sup>10</sup> Thus, 2 + 2 must always be 4; *Canis lupus* cannot be *Canis familiaris*; female beings have a different biological anatomy from male beings,<sup>11</sup> and so on. We may not be aware of it, but the system of categorizing reality on the basis of a scientific approach is itself a "dogma": once a reality has been classified and fitted into particular category boxes there are no other possibilities. The perceived truths of the dominant class of the dominant civilization, Foucault recognized, become world truths, and a stasis sets in that is advantageous to the *status quo*. But the supremacy of a dominant view obscures alternatives, and isolation leaves "truths" unquestioned.

While classification brings new identities into existence or transforms previous ontologies, it may also lead to an unexpected stasis. Any identity can

5 Aruz and Wallenfels, *Art of the First Cities*.

6 Aruz, Benzel and Evans, *Beyond Babylon*.

7 Aruz, Graff, and Rakic, *Assyria to Iberia*.

8 Baines, "Ancient Egyptian cities"; Baines, Stark, Houston, Garrison, "Cities as performance arenas."

9 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

10 Maxwell, *Karl Popper, Science and Enlightenment*.

11 Butler, *Gender Trouble*. Cf. Lal, "Not This, Not That."

be moved within the taxonomy chessboard—changing names, features, structure, ontologies—but in the end it will stay firmly tied to the same chessboard. Once created, each identity begins to legitimize itself, since it provides the reason for its own taxonomic existence by being different from something else. The more isolated an identity is, the higher is its self-legitimizing value. An identity that is legitimized by its own history tends not to be questioned. Ancient Egypt and the moment of the “rediscovery” of its forgotten history offered a perfect conjuncture, triggering the rapid and progressive creation of the self-legitimizing identity of Egyptology together with its field of study. This is why the methodological insights of global history have so much to offer with respect to our understanding of ancient Egypt and also the intellectual history of Egyptology.<sup>12</sup> Both have too long been characterized by isolationism.

The desert and the mountains which border the fertile river valley on the east and west seem to separate the Nile valley dramatically from the rest of the world. The Mediterranean Sea to the north and a series of cataracts, beginning from Aswan, affect direct connections and networks among people. Monica Smith, in her paper “Linear Statecraft along the Nile,” explores how island state models can be applied to a context like Egypt. However, while Egypt represented a long and narrow corridor of human viability, it was not closed by any insurmountable physical boundaries; the Delta<sup>13</sup> and the region around Aswan<sup>14</sup> were home to a variety of different cultural groups. Nonetheless, from the beginning of Egyptian history, the pharaonic government exploited the physical structure of the landscape to sustain its distinctive national ideology, territorial identity, and social cohesion.<sup>15</sup> The geography of ancient Egypt fostered in the eyes of ancient and modern people a sense of isolation from other ecological areas, increasing the perception of unity within the Nile Valley and difference from other regions (Sudan, Libya, South Levant; but even: desert, oasis, Red Sea coastal territories).

By emphasizing the difference between a fictive “Egyptian” Self and a “foreign” Other,<sup>16</sup> the elite sought to reify its categorical ordering of the world—

12 In this paper the study of ancient Egypt is labelled with the term Egyptology, referred to as a “discipline” on its own; however, Egyptology may be more correctly considered a branch of social sciences, as in John Baines “Reflections on How Ancient Egyptian Comparative History is Done: from Microhistory to Cliodynamics,” in this volume, and Baines, “Egyptology and the social sciences.” Nonetheless, the strong separation from other geographical areas, accentuated by a perceived need for hyper-specialization (Sauer, “The Disunited Subject”), has tended to impart historically the dynamics of a discipline to the subject of study.

13 E.g. Mączyńska, *The Nile Delta*; Goddio and Masson-Berghoff, *Sunken Cities*.

14 Raue, Seidlmayer, and Speiser, *The First Cataract of the Nile*.

15 Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, 23–56.

16 Cf. Buzi, “Defining otherness and identity.”

delineating those who belonged to its imagined community from those who did not. To this end, the scribal elite promoted the *Tale of Sinuhe*, which narrated the adventures of Sinuhe's self-imposed exile in the Levant, but most of all celebrated his return to "civilization" ("You will not be laid to rest by barbarians" [...] "I was clad in fine linen; I was anointed with fine oil. I slept in a bed [...]. A pyramid of stone was built for me").<sup>17</sup> Moreover, foreigners entering the country were encouraged (sometimes forcibly) to take Egyptian names and wear linen, as well as to adopt Egyptian approaches to life and death. Politically and geographically Egypt operated an inclusive culture that absorbed those who were inside and excluded those who were outside. To that end, as early as the twentieth century BCE, the political program of Amenemhat I included the construction of a wall across the border with Sinai in order to regulate foreign immigration and to unify by virtue of differentiation and isolation—an old story with too many contemporary parallels.

In the propaganda it produced, Egypt presented itself as more internally coherent and autonomous than other cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Near East, and Northeast Africa<sup>18</sup> over whom they professed—in texts as well as images—to exert political or hegemonic control. State identity is by nature territorially bound and thus acts where possible to restrict or at least regulate mobility. Stereotypes, stasis, and safe borders constitute prerequisites for legitimizing power and safeguarding national identity. The pharaonic government was invested in depicting its heartland as closed, delimited, and bounded.

Segregation and isolation also characterize the hieroglyphic writing system, as mobilized and safeguarded by members of the educated elite. People who mastered the hieroglyphic script may have known its potential for radically opening up their writing (enhancing literacy?), as they used its "alphabetic" core structure to transcribe words and names from foreign languages. However, within the official administrative system and high culture, a transformation of the script into an alphabetic system never happened—any innovations in this regard occurred outside state-sanctioned activities.<sup>19</sup> Although passage to an alphabetic system should not be understood as a sign of progress, as a means of "democratization" and reading an alphabet could have been even more complicated than hieroglyphs;<sup>20</sup> keeping complexity high ensured controlled access to knowledge and social mobility.

17 Cf. Baines, "Interpreting Sinuhe."

18 Cf. Török, *Between Two Worlds*.

19 Goldwasser, "The Birth of the Alphabet" and "How the Alphabet was Born from Hieroglyphs." Cf. Haring, *From single sign to pseudo-script*; Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*.

20 Quirke, "The Writing of the Birds."

Separation has also affected ancient Egypt in the *longue durée* of its history. The widespread adoption of Christianity in the late fourth century CE and the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century CE created a deep break with the pharaonic past, preventing the usual joining of past to present. In the eyes of modern scholars, Islamic Egypt, especially, became a wholly different field of study from ancient Egypt, increasing the academic isolation of the latter; only a few “Egyptologists” venture to explore the history of the country after the Byzantine Period.<sup>21</sup>

The moment when European and American scholars started to deepen their interest in ancient Egypt coincided—not coincidentally—with the moment when the imperialist and colonializing drive was reaching its peak. The “discovery of the key” to the decipherment of the hieroglyphic writing system in the form of the Rosetta Stone by Napoleon’s forces served as one of the favorite historical narratives of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In addition, interpreting hieroglyphs from the “discovered key” was conceived in the imagination of the time—and probably still is nowadays—as an achievement of which only a genius like Jean François Champollion was capable. Later scholars, as apostles of a unique event, bore and continue to bear the weight and narcissism of such a legacy on their shoulders. An achievement that is still closely guarded today.

The unlocking of hieroglyphs after more than a millennium of oblivion was a demonstration of the cultural superiority of the Western approach: only through scientific methods could hieroglyphs have been deciphered. The decipherment reinforced the colonizing drive, because it created a metaphor for the conquest of a world—the past of modern Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, the “discovery of ancient Egypt” constituted an apologia by Western culture in the form of a romantic narrative. Together with the Near East, Egypt was reimagined in an evolutionary view, as the cradle of the Graeco-Roman world, from which the “successful” European civilization originated (see Marc Van De Mierop, “Ancient Egypt and the Near East in World History”). Once the key was obtained, scholarly study of ancient Egyptian history and culture tended to be monopolized by Europeans and Westerners, even in relation to modern Egyptians, as Shereen Ratnagar highlights (“Appropriation and its Consequences: Archaeology under Colonial Rule in Egypt and India”). The colonialist grip that scholars dealing with the history of ancient Egypt inherited cemented the process of isolation.<sup>24</sup> A consequence is

21 Daly, *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium*; Ruffini, *Life in an Egyptian Village in*.

22 Parkinson, *Cracking Codes*. Cf. Miniaci, “Tracing a line to modern Egyptology.”

23 Cf. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

24 Only those who could read the code could truly have access to the history of ancient Egypt, as Champollion marked the path.

that data and perspectives from ancient Egypt contribute disproportionately little to debates in general history,<sup>25</sup> even though Egyptian sources are among the most comprehensive for any early civilization, not least because of the extraordinary quality of artifact preservation (including written sources).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, data and perspectives from more recent Egyptian history and from nonwestern societies and scholars contribute little to Egyptology, while ancient Egypt has thus far rarely been drawn upon by scholars interested in global history. Marc Van De Mieroop notes, for example, how Egyptian sources receive very little attention in James C. Scott's seminal volume, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017).

Thus, in a twist of fate ancient Egypt seems "predisposed" to be set on an exclusive plinth, seemingly isolated geographically from external interferences, living off the same ideology of exceptionalism as its ancient elite espoused. This isolation is both the burden and the delight of Egyptology. Ancient Egypt is often seen as offering an ideal environment for research, as it is easier to extract data and information from contexts that are relatively uncontaminated by external influence. This isolation, however, risks dooming the study of ancient Egypt to remain largely self-referential and unreflective. Indeed, at its most quarantined, Egyptology risks becoming a living counterpart of the desert sand metaphor, which preserves its achievements by burying them.

This perhaps leads us back to Foucault's starting point: if Egyptology has few interlocutors, it risks sterility. Once its "taxonomy" has been set up according to western models, western scholars risk projecting their own categories onto a reality that was extremely different. We continue to write our own history and not that of the ancient Egyptians. The idea of incorporating concepts of global history into Egyptology is to set readers before Foucault's "Chinese Encyclopedia" and help to turn Egyptology towards more surprising and ultimately productive shores.

Among the main aims of global history are: 1) decentering, as well as transcending the boundaries of single states, regions, or cultures; 2) recognizing connections, not only among regions, areas, and cities but also between the different facets of society; and 3) comparison, reinforcing a comparative approach in order to avoid isolation and stimulate new perspectives that arise from contact with different fields and cultures.

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25 See Juan Carlos Moreno García, "Egyptology and Global History: Between Geocultural Power and the Crisis of Humanities". See also the series *Ancient Egypt in Context* from the Cambridge University Press, which has the aims of bringing ancient Egypt to the attention of the broader humanities community.

26 Miniaci, "Revealing the invisible majority," forthcoming.

## 1 Decentering

The “world system” concept of Immanuel Wallerstein divided geographical areas into centers and peripheries, with the center perceived as the place where power, knowledge, and resources were accumulated.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the periphery—notionally poor and exploited—became a place “without history.”<sup>28</sup> This theoretical framework relies upon modern economic models. When adopted for research into ancient societies it has the disadvantage of marginalizing small groups and polities and denying them agency as fashioners of history. Perspectives on ancient Egypt have been distorted by the vision of Wallerstein-style world systems, although the pharaonic state is variously viewed as a center (with respect to Libya, Sudan, and the southern Levant) or a periphery (with respect to the Near East, Greece, and Rome). If the historians of ancient Egypt attend solely to the sources produced by its ruling elite, it is little surprise that Egypt emerges as the central focus. When ancient Egypt is viewed from the viewpoint of global history, however, the centrality of “peripheral” entities is often recognized.

Mark Horton, Nicole Boivin, and Alison Crowther (“Eastern Africa and the Early Indian Ocean”) focus on marginalized peoples in Eastern Africa, who interacted with Egypt, the Red Sea coast, the Gulf, and Southern and Southeastern Asia in the early maritime trade of the Indian Ocean. Major powers tended to overshadow these sea nomads and small-scale groups, who undertook maritime exchange around the shores of the Indian Ocean and were often unaware of the ultimate destination of the products they were exporting. These smaller groups and their often short-distance commerce can be seen as the facilitators of a pre-global network: moving goods, enabling trade, and facilitating cross-cultural interactions. Egyptian history was intimately tied to such communities and their commercial networks.

Interactions with different cultures also changed internal networks and structures of power. Ancient Egyptians did not form an isolated system or create and write their history independently, as textual sources might lead us to believe. As Svend Hansen demonstrates (“Eurasia and Ancient Egypt in the Fourth Millennium BCE”), the rise of power wielded by strong rulers in Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, and Egypt during the fourth millennium BCE was a synchronic process. In these regions state-level societies exhibited similar social developments, characterized by connectivity, iconographic expression, and technological knowledge. Egypt was part of a connected fabric, affected by

27 Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I*. Cf. Kaps and Komlosy, “Centers and Peripheries Revisited.”

28 Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.

the mobility of people who traveled in search of precious materials and metals, and who provided the stimulus to set up long-distance trade and exchange. Together with raw materials and artifacts, such people transmitted cultural knowledge and technologies.

## 2 Connections

Global history emphasizes the importance of studying states within the wider networks they inhabited.<sup>29</sup> Methods used in global history aim similarly to remove perceived boundaries within societies in order to understand the interconnections between people, thereby giving voice to those considered but lowly pawns in the chessboard of history. In this spirit, Carl Walsh (“Techniques for Egyptian Eyes”) tackles the emergence of a new elite social identity in Kerma through contact with Egyptian culture during the late Middle Bronze Age (c. 1650–1550 BCE) by analyzing cosmetic equipment for the eyes. Moving quite likely in conjunction with diplomatic exchanges, kohl pots and sticks represented markers of a precise identity (Egyptian), but at the same time they became a vehicle for the wealthy elite of Kerma to experiment with their own bodily performance, habits, and social identities. Moreover, the distribution patterns of this equipment in the disputed boundary region of Lower Nubia disrupts the binary histories of Kerma and Egypt. Kerma likely served as the end point of transmission from Egypt’s perspective. Yet, with reference to its own vassals to whom such gifts were often redistributed, it was Kerma that constituted the starting point of all important interactions. Studying these cosmetic jars and sticks acts thus to destabilize notions of both center and periphery.

Paolo Tedesco (“What Made a Peasantry”) focuses on the peasants of Byzantine Egypt, a subset of society too often reduced to a single mass of enserfed workers, unified in their opposition to free tenants. Through an exploration of aspects of the employer–employee relationship, the Egyptian papyri reveal a more complex social stratification in rural society: workers proved resilient and adaptable when facing attempts to control their labor. Precedents for the diversity of statuses encompassed by the term “peasant” can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Far from being the amorphous mass of backward farmers romanticized by western travelers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the strategies, interests, and connections of this heterogeneous group—both with local powers and with the remote authority of the king—shaped Egyptian society in complex ways. Village chiefs, priests, scribes, and traders

29 Crossley, *What is a Global History?*



were all affected by peasant initiatives. Thus, the myth of an eternal, rigidly centralized, despotically controlled Egyptian society is revealed as untenable in the light of studies such as Tedesco's.

### 3 Comparison

Global History aims not only to recognize connections between societies that directly or indirectly communicated with one another but also to recognize similar cultural dynamics in societies that lay at a great physical and/or chronological distance from one another. Here, comparison should not be interpreted simply as the act of evaluating two or more things by determining which characteristics of each are similar to the other, or which are different. Rather, it is dynamic: comparing here means expecting a reaction, a resistance, a response; comparing is measuring things against others, bringing together different realities and methods, focusing a different light on a supposedly well-known subject. Thoughtful and targeted comparisons of structural similarities between societies often offer fresh viewpoints on cultural interactions. This technique of practicing global history counters Eurocentric tendencies that can distort readings of the sources. Because writing the history of ancient Egypt became a Western activity, ancient Egyptians are typically interpreted through a distinctly Western ideological filter, as Ratnagar notes ("Appropriation and its Consequences"). Thus, by placing Egyptian society in dialogue with regions that have developed without (or with less) western input, scholars can learn to view familiar subjects with new eyes and are prompted to challenge long-established models. Michael Smith, Ellen Morris, and Juan Carlos Moreno García all serve as examples of the productiveness of this approach.

Michael Smith ("Ancient Egyptian Urbanism in a Comparative, Global Context") investigates urbanism in Egypt through comparison with other regions in order to compensate for lacunae in the archaeology of Egypt. His investigations lead him to conclude that state control, signaled by a large and active bureaucracy, defined the setting of Egyptian urbanism, together with the low level of the market—small-scale localized markets—in which goods were exchanged in a non-monetary economy.

Gianluca Miniaci ("From Tenochtitlán to Punt: When People Encounter the Distant and Unknown, a Cognitive Approach") examines culture contact initiated by Egypt from a comparative perspective that prompts him to reassess the validity of "historical" sources. During the fifteenth century BCE, Queen Hatshepsut dispatched an expedition to Punt that was displayed in images and texts in her temple at Deir el-Bahri. The portrayal by Hatshepsut's artists of an unequal relationship between the Puntites and the Egyptians exhibits

a number of cognitive similarities to the narratives fashioned or promoted by Europeans who came into contact with Aztecs, Cakchiquels, and Andeans in the sixteenth century CE, or with Tahiti and Hawaii during the eighteenth century CE. Moreover, the ethnographic and zoological details that Egyptian explorers and their European counterparts reproduced provided self-serving narratives that masqueraded as truth.

Ellen Morris (“Machiavellian Masculinities: Historicizing and Contextualizing the ‘Civilizing Process’ in Ancient Egypt”) employs a still wider range of cultural comparisons to contextualize and illuminate changes in Egypt’s hegemonic masculinity over time. By exploring patterns in the presence of weapons in warrior burials, Morris is able to point to a variability in ideologies of manhood and argue that these conceptions were not simple reflections of their time. Citing examples from Han China, Gupta Period rulers in India, Renaissance Italy, and the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan, Morris suggests that Egyptian ruling groups found it desirable to suppress the violent masculinities that came to the fore during times when state control was weak or nonexistent. Like rulers in other authoritarian societies, pharaohs employed a set of strategies intended to promote an irenic masculinity that lauded dignity over honor and courtiers above warriors.

Juan Carlos Moreno García and Yuri Pines (“*Maat* and *Tianxia*: Building World Orders in Ancient Egypt and China”) outline a comparison between ways in which ancient Egyptian and Chinese authorities thought about their role as architects of a cosmic order, as well as the tools they used to create that order. Ancient Egypt and China shared political and cultural systems that endured for millennia, and while the two were separated spatially and often temporally, the authors argue that they adopted comparable strategies for internal control over their populations. *Maat* and *tianxia* are concepts that encapsulate a discourse of internal superiority over lower-level groups in similar ways.

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A central goal of global history is to develop theoretical models that can contribute to our understanding of early civilizations. The editors of this journal believe that Egyptologists have the datasets to contribute far more to this endeavor than they have done hitherto. John Baines (“Reflections on How Ancient Egyptian Comparative History is Done”) stresses the unusual potential of Egypt and the need to move toward improved historical narratives, without the anxiety of a full-scale reconstruction of the past (“we will never know everything about the past, and if we did, we would not be able to handle it”). A traditional Eurocentric vision flattens the path of history and the vitality of ancient Egypt. This volume, then, is a concerted attempt to help foster a

dialogue that will—it is hoped—be of benefit both to global historians and to the study of Egyptian history, to which this journal is devoted. After all, a direction forcefully emerges through the clouds: more resilient shores are needed for Egyptology.

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