

1 Introduction

1.1 Egypt and Africa: A Debated Issue

Since the beginning of research into ancient Egypt the issue of its relations with the rest of Africa has been a constantly debated subject. It is well known that the Nile runs through Egypt, constituting its lifeblood, yet this river originates in Africa, a fact that has produced constant speculation on relations with the upstream regions. This debate on Egyptian–African relations is not only embedded in the geographical setting itself, but is also tied up with the origins of Egyptology and with the general cultural milieu of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe. It should be remarked that in the earliest studies on the cultures of the Nile valley, scholars were heavily conditioned by the ideas and theories elaborated by ancient writers. In particular, as far as this specific issue is concerned, Diodorus Siculus, a Greek author, suggested that several Egyptian religious features may have had a southern, or what he termed ‘Ethiopian’, origin (Diodorus Siculus *Bib. Hist.* III, 2, 3). For this reason, it was initially believed that the Meroitic remains of Nubia may have pre-dated Egyptian dynastic antiquities. Such a view arose after Mohammed Ali khedive of Egypt had conquered the regions South of the First Cataract in 1820, and the rich archaeological heritage of Nubia was revealed to Westerners (Trigger 1994: 325). However, after his first scientific expedition to record the monuments in the Middle Nile area (Lepsius 1849), Karl Richard Lepsius demonstrated that the Napatan and Meroitic remains were contemporary to the latest phases of Egyptian dynastic history and most of the Egyptian remains of the region could not be dated earlier than the New Kingdom.

After this first phase, also based on physical anthropological evidence, the origins of dynastic Egypt were placed within a broad Hamitic horizon characterizing several regions of Africa. Yet, these Hamites were not regarded as autochthonous, but were considered to have originated from migratory movements into the continent (Reid 2003: 65–6). Indeed, the general cultural and political atmosphere characterizing the West during the early twentieth century was deeply affected by colonialism and racial prejudice. Such preconceptions made it difficult to accept that the elaborate Egyptian dynastic culture may have originated from a local (i.e. African) background. Even William Flinders Petrie, the founder of Predynastic studies and an early expert on the emergence of the Egyptian civilization, was no stranger to such views. He believed that the origins of Egypt lay in subsequent migrations from Europe and Asia, whose cultural effects were sometimes disrupted precisely by Nubian (i.e. African) invasions, invariably leading to phases of regression (Petrie 1920: 47–9). Junker’s suggestion that the earliest inhabitants of the Neolithic villages in

Lower Egypt may have originated in Libya did little to challenge the then dominant view that the origins of dynastic Egypt were not African, as the peoples of early Libya were considered of Aryan origin (Voos 2016: 222–5).

This inherently colonialist approach is also evident in the interpretations of the cultural trajectories south of the First Cataract provided by George Andrew Reisner, the father of Nubian archaeology. In his view, the phases of cultural dynamism in Nubian history were largely dependent on the arrival of groups from the north (i.e. Egypt), while he invariably ascribed the phases of decline to a prevailing southern or local-indigenous (i.e. African) component (Trigger 1994: 331). This interpretation also relied heavily on the prevalent assumptions held by comparative anatomists in the first part of the twentieth century (Adams 1977: 91–2). Indeed, Reisner's interpretation of the site of Kerma is clearly emblematic: not only did he regard the site, which is characterized by the remains of monumental architectural complexes, as an Egyptian outpost in Nubia (Reisner 1923b: 542–3, 554–5), but he also outlined a trajectory of decline to explain its ultimate end and abandonment (Figure 1). He related this regression to the ethnic prevalence of African components over Egyptian ones (Reisner 1923b: 556–9). Of course, today we know that the site of Kerma was the main centre of the Nubian kingdom, which was the partner as well as

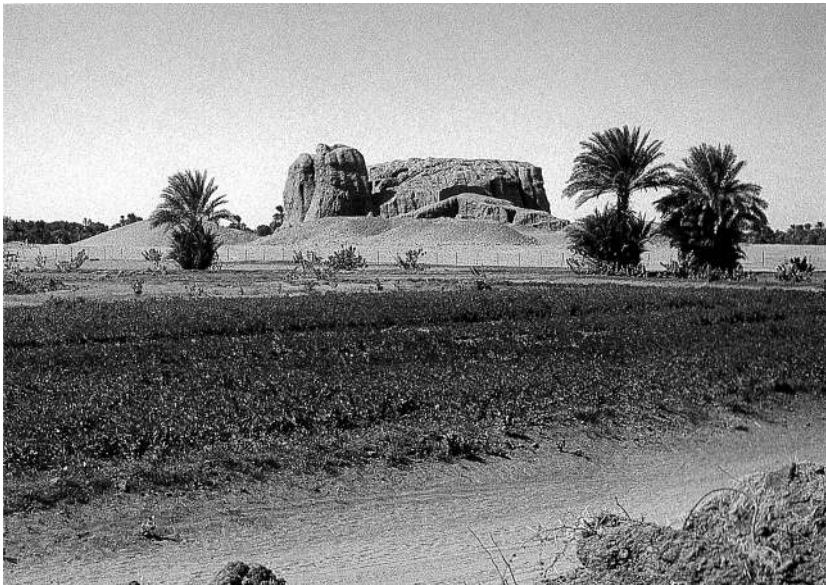


Figure 1 The Western Deffufa at Kerma, a temple of the local Kerma culture, thought by Reisner to be an Egyptian fortress (© Mission Suisse-Franco-Soudanaise de Kerma/Doukki Gel).

competitor of Egypt in the Nile valley from the second half of the third to the mid-second millennium BC (Sections 2.2 and 2.3). However, it took a long time for the general perspective to change: for a considerable period of time the archaeology of the regions south of Egypt indeed remained the archaeology of the Egyptian frontier (Edwards 2004: 7–9).

This view continued to dominate even after the Second World War. It portrayed Egypt's African neighbours as culturally passive actors in an asymmetrical relationship. Indeed, the Nubians were deemed to be dependent on Egypt for all forms of cultural and technological innovation. A real change in how scholarship understood Egyptian–African relations only took place in the more general context of the decolonization. The new African nations were eager to identify their historical roots and for this reason were highly interested in ancient history and archaeology. At that time, a debate began not only on the active role that Africans had in history, but also on the African roots of Egypt itself (O'Connor & Reid 2003: 7–8). In the specific case of Nubia, this debate involved scholars who had taken part in the final salvage campaign of the monuments of Lower Nubia started in 1960. These scholars certainly helped to bring a different perspective to the debate. Indeed, the colonial paradigm largely followed the view of the African peoples that emerged from ancient Egyptian texts (Adams 1977: 88–90, Török 1997: 20–2), while many of these scholars came to study Nubia via backgrounds that were not Egyptology. The extent to which early interpretations of the relationship between Africa and Egypt were re-evaluated is evident in the debate that followed the discoveries in the A-Group elite Cemetery L at Qustul. The identification in the remains at Qustul of locally made objects decorated with iconographies similar to the royal representations and symbols in Egypt and that were potentially earlier than Egyptian ones, led to the conclusion that they were the archetypes that inspired the Egyptian ones (Williams 1986: 139–47, but see Section 3.3) (Figure 2). In the meantime, Egypt was not only regarded as the oldest civilization in Africa, but also as the intermediary through which African civilization profoundly influenced the cultures of the Mediterranean and Europe (O'Connor & Reid 2003: 7–8). Moreover, as a reaction against the earlier interpretations, the Egyptian influence on its African neighbours was now considered marginal if not non-existent, and the cultural changes occurring in those regions were almost exclusively explained by internal socio-cultural or environmental factors (Trigger 1994: 336–8).

Of course, if the intensity and the complexity of the interactions between Egypt and its African neighbours is considered (see Sections 2 and 3), this narrative is also far from satisfactory, and for this reason a more balanced approach came to emerge. This understanding has largely been based on the

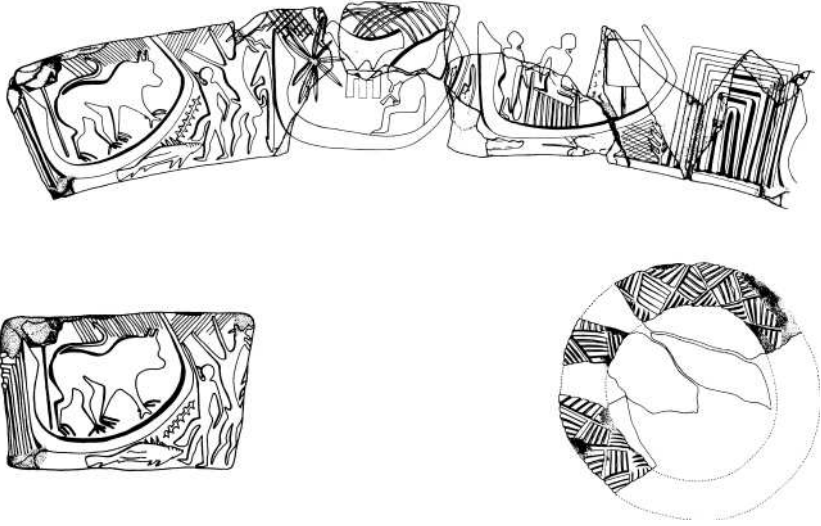


Figure 2 A stone incense burner from Qustul L Cemetery, decorated with iconographies also characterizing the earliest royal monuments in Egypt (© Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).

anthropological concept of entanglement. This concept has been adopted to study the interaction between the Nubian and Egyptian cultures and it recognizes the active role of both components (Smith 2014: 2; Section 3.3). In the meantime, the awareness also emerged in Nubian studies that there was a local function and a meaning given to borrowed cultural elements, whether originating in Egypt or elsewhere, and this was crucial to achieving a more nuanced understanding of cross-cultural interaction (Török 2009: xvi; 2018: 2). More recent studies on the Egyptian side of this interaction have pointed out the relevance of African elements to the rise of Egyptian culture (see Sections 2.1 and 3.3), following earlier suggestions on Egyptian kingship and religion by Henri Frankfort (1948; see also Cervelló Autori 1996). Moreover, African contributions to the later phases of Egyptian history can certainly be detected as well (Section 3.3). This counterbalances the traditional view that considers Egypt more closely linked to the Near East than to the rest of Africa (see Smith 2018: 327, 330).

1.2 Environmental Setting

The environmental setting of north-eastern Africa certainly played a role in the relations between Egypt and its neighbours. For this reason, it is worthwhile providing a general overview on the whole macro-region here, including the

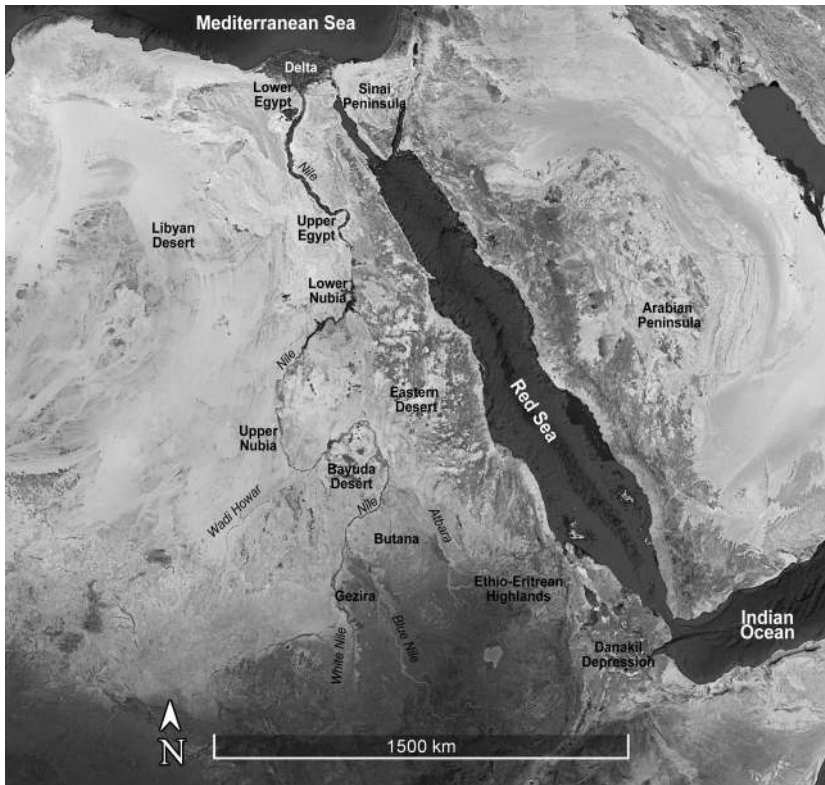


Figure 3 Satellite image of north-eastern Africa, showing its main regions and features (Google Earth).

ecological zones characterizing it as well as its topographical and hydrological features (Figure 3). Moreover, it should be stressed that this should not be regarded as a static context, as it was obviously affected by the changes that occurred on a global scale. The humid conditions emerging at the end of the Pleistocene continued up until the first half of the Holocene, when drier conditions progressively emerged. These drier conditions were more precociously felt in the northern regions (i.e. in the regions closer to Egypt and in Egypt itself), while the process was slower in more southern areas, where more humid conditions persisted until the end of the second millennium BC (Gatto & Zerboni 2015: 306–12; Riemer & Kindermann 2019: 197).

In general, the Holocene climatic dynamics emphasized the contrast between the Nile valley and its hinterland. The whole region is focussed on the Nile valley, which, as its axis, runs south to north. The natural riches of this river valley included water, land, animal and vegetal resources. The Nile valley is affected by the annual summer flood that originates from the seasonal rains in

the Lake Victoria basin and, even more so, from the Ethio-Eritrean highlands. Even to this day the riverine environment contrasts with the hinterland, yet this contrast came to prominence after the emergence of drier conditions from the mid-Holocene onwards. At that time, the available resources in the areas away from the river dramatically decreased, with the only notable exception being the oases in the Western Desert (Dumont 2009: 2–4; Riemer & Kindermann 2019: 195–6). It should be stressed that the very different ecological environments characterizing the valley and the hinterland favoured the economic interdependence between the two, which become increasingly evident in the drier setting of the second half of the Holocene (Gatto & Zerboni 2015: 317). The contrast between the Nile valley and the hinterlands is also evident in the southern fringes of the macro-region. However, it is somehow mitigated in the south by the belt of the tropical monsoons that result in the presence of vast steppes that occur seasonally, re-flourishing at some distance away from the river. The conditions become increasingly humid as we proceed towards the steep edge of the Ethio-Eritrean plateau, where the Blue Nile and the Atbara originate (Dumont 2009: 7). It should be stressed that with some scattered isolated granite or sandstone inselbergs, the Ethio-Eritrean plateau is not the only topographically relevant feature in the macro-region. Indeed, the Eastern Desert is very different from the mostly plain areas that mark the Western Desert, as it is characterized by hilly terrain: the Red Sea hills are crossed by deep valleys of dried up rivers oriented towards the Nile river or alternatively towards the Red Sea. The diversity of the inland areas produces further different ecological niches and concur to the environmental variety in the macro-region.

Over a long period of time, this environmental setting favoured the emergence of permanent settlements in the river valley and in the nearby regions, characterized by a considerable availability of resources all year round. These settlements became inhabited by agro-pastoral groups from a certain point onwards (Gatto & Zerboni 2015: 317). In contrast, the inland areas are characterized by a much lower concentration of resources and by higher seasonal variability in their availability. Consequently, the inland regions were mainly inhabited by more mobile groups, who from a certain point onwards were typically herders (Gatto & Zerboni 2015: 317). The ecological and seasonal contrasts, the economic interdependence between the different areas on one side, and the more general climatic changes on the other since the very beginning encouraged migrations and movements of people, which were also related to economic exchanges and cultural interaction. Indeed, while seasonal environmental variability may have fostered temporary cyclical movements every year, long-term climatic changes may have encouraged bigger and more permanent phenomena such as migrations.

The inherently high degree of connectivity characterizing north-eastern Africa resulting from these environmental factors was enhanced, at least from the fourth millennium BC onwards, by an increasing interest in some of the mineral, animal and vegetal resources that widely occur in the macro-region (Figure 4; Section 2.1). In particular, the presence of highly sought-after commodities was a driving factor behind the increased connectivity. Gold sources characterize the Eastern Desert of Upper Egypt and Nubia up to the north-western Ethio-Eritrean highlands and other gold-bearing areas also occur in the western regions of the highlands themselves (Manzo 1999: 8–9). Noteworthy also are the naturally occurring associations of gold and silver in some of those gold-bearing areas originating an alloy called electrum, while sources of pure silver are absent. Sources of obsidian, a glass-like stone which was highly appreciated for the sharp edges it produces when flaked and was exploited for the production of lithic tools from the prehistoric phases, are located on the Eritrean coast and in the Danakil depression nearby (Espinel 2011: 125; Manzo 1999: 9). This very special type of stone from the African (and Arabian) regions bordering the southern Red Sea continued to be used for producing high-quality luxury objects up until Roman times. In addition to these mineral resources, other commodities could be obtained in the southern sectors of the macro-region. Species of hard dark wood corresponding to what is called African ebony could be acquired from the north-western fringes of the Ethio-Eritrean highlands. This wood was highly appreciated for its use in the production of high-quality furniture (Espinel 2011: 125; Manzo 1999: 8). Found in roughly the same areas are also species of trees that produce aromatic resins: these resins are traditionally used in perfume production and medicine, yet arguably more important is their use for ritual purposes (Espinel 2011: 45–9, 125–6; Manzo 1999: 8). In more humid conditions, oils made of wood may have been widely produced in the Libyan desert (Moreno García 2018: 154). Finally, animal species like giraffes, felines and monkeys are present mainly in the southern sectors of the macro-region. Before the aridification process starting in the mid-Holocene these animal species were presumably more broadly distributed (Manzo 1999: 6–8). They were exploited for their skins/furs, but also were captured alive and displayed by high-ranking persons and, in the case of some species of monkeys, they were also used in ritual cultic contexts. Other very important animals in the same regions were elephants and, along the Nile, hippos, as both species were potential sources of ivory (Espinel 2011: 125; Manzo 1999: 7). Moreover, from a certain point onwards, after the Indian expedition undertaken by Alexander the Great, live elephants started being a desirable commodity. At that time African elephants were used as weapons of war, like the Indian ones, and they were also awarded an ideological,

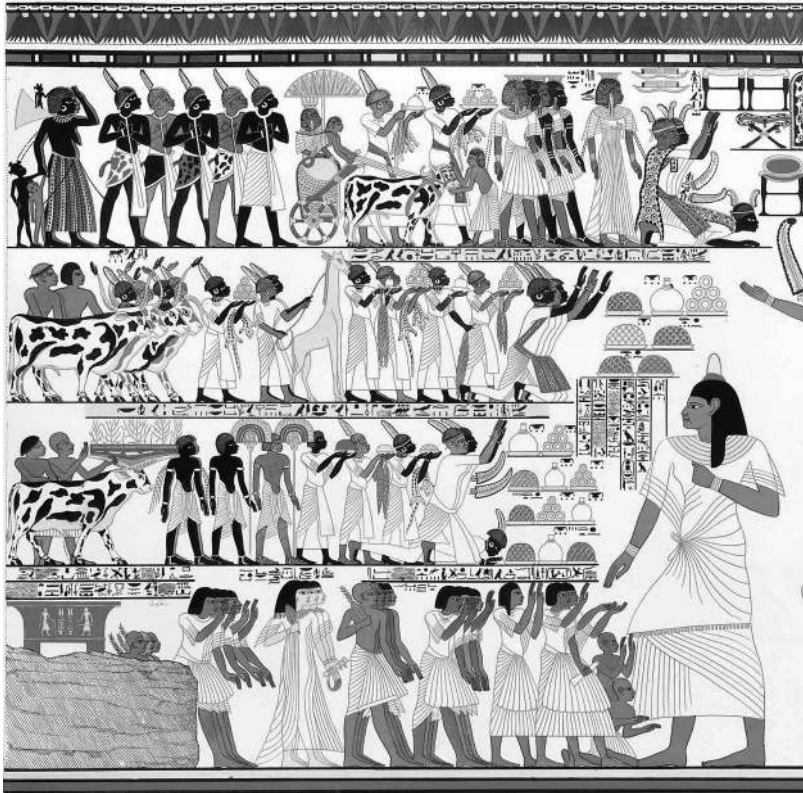


Figure 4 The presentation of the tribute of the southern lands in the tomb of Amenhotep-Huy (TT400), where several African raw materials are shown (from Lepsius 1849, p. 100)

significance, especially as they were now considered symbols of universal imperial authority (Scullard 1974: 130, 199–200, 206; see Section 2.5). The occurrence in some specific sectors of the macro-region of all these highly prized commodities certainly represented an important factor in the integration and further connectivity between Egypt and its African neighbours. However, at a global scale, these commodities also increased the levels of contacts for the whole of north-eastern Africa, which was involved in even broader networks, extending from the Mediterranean to the Near East and the Indian Ocean.

In this general framework, the role of the Nile and of the Red Sea, two roughly parallel corridors crossing the tropical desert belt, cannot be over-estimated (Manzo 1999: 9–10). Water transport was certainly preferred when and where possible, because it allowed the movement of large quantities of commodities. It is important to note that a very articulated network of land routes also characterized the region. Indeed, the concentration of specific commodities in the inland areas enhanced the connections between the Nile valley and the hinterland, as did the need to bypass some areas of the Nile valley itself because of some of its topographic features, such as the cataracts, or because of specific political or economic circumstances that made transit difficult (Dumont 2009: 7; Manzo 1999: 10; see also Section 2). For this reason, although the environmental conditions in the second half of the Holocene could have transformed the regions to the east and west of the Nile valley into scarcely populated, and apparently marginal areas, they still remained crucial arteries of trade as they were crossed by routes through which commodities and raw materials could be obtained (Smith 2018: 328, 336–8). Of course, this network emerged in a setting that was already characterized by contacts and connections linking the Nile valley regions together as well as to the regions to the east and west of the river. Indeed, the pastoral economy adopted mainly by the inhabitants of the hinterland, thanks to the seasonal movements to the grazing areas and economic symbiosis with the inhabitants of the valley, resulted in enhanced contacts.

1.3 The Sources

The sources available to us for reconstructing the relations between Egypt and its African neighbours are both textual and archaeological, and a crucial challenge when dealing with the issue is how to combine the two (Adams 1977: 96–8). It should be stressed that the textual sources are almost exclusively from the Egyptian or external side. For example, as far as royal inscriptions are concerned – with the only notable exception of an inscription dating to the seventeenth to sixteenth centuries BC, which was made for a ruler of the kingdom of

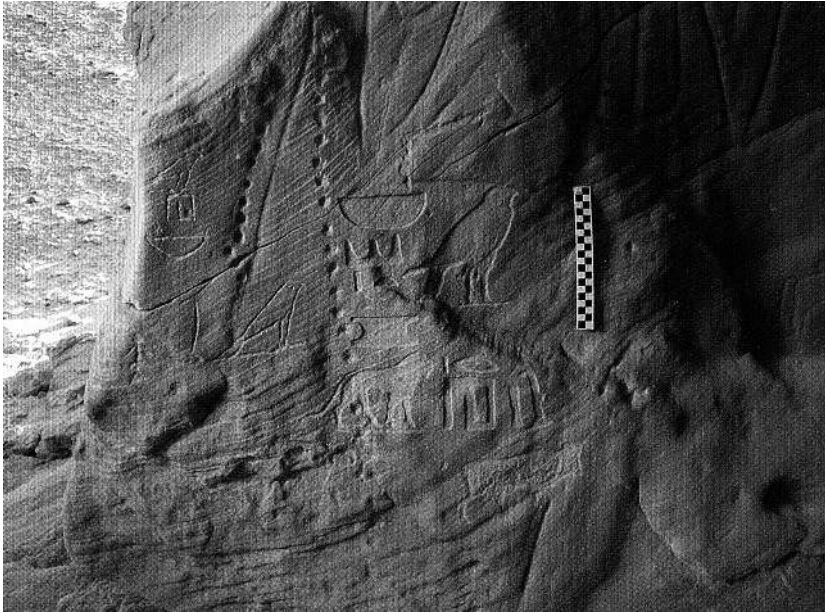


Figure 5 The seventeenth or early sixteenth century BC rock inscription of the ruler of Kush ‘Tr-r-h, the lion beloved of Horus lord of the desert lands’ in the Eastern Nubian Desert (courtesy Vivian Davies).

Kush (Figure 5) – the southern neighbours of Egypt did not produce written texts until the early first millennium BC, when inscriptions by Nubian rulers were produced (Section 2.4). Nevertheless, some Nubian royal inscriptions dating from the third century BC to the fifth century AD are poorly understood, due to our still scarce knowledge of the Meroitic language (Rilly 2007). Therefore, a level of bias emerges from most of the available textual evidence that basically expresses an external view of the African neighbours of Egypt.

As far as Egyptian sources are concerned, in Antonio Loprieno’s seminal work on the subject, *Topos und Mimesis* (Loprieno 1988), he demonstrated the ways foreigners were depicted in texts. Their iconographic representations also changed from royal to private monuments and according to the different private contexts. Indeed, on the one hand, some monuments produced for Africans who were integrated into Egyptian cultural and social contexts show how mimesis could prevail, i.e. they were presenting themselves as typical Egyptians with few elements referring to their origin (Section 3.2). On the other hand, in the case of monuments produced for Egyptians, the diversity of the foreigner was emphasized and the potentially dangerous chaotic otherness it represented was depicted as controlled by the ruler. Indeed, on royal monuments the depictions