Book Review

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Ancient Egyptian Imperialism. By Ellen Morris. Pp. 320. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018. ISBN 978-1-405-13678-5. Price £24.

The publication of a book which approaches topics with a strong theoretical bias is always very welcome. Naturally, ancient Egypt is a relevant leading case for the study of the diverse dynamics of emergence, expansion, contraction, and even collapse of socio-political entities, due to its characterization as a pristine state and an evolvement through time which allows analyzing varied interrelational practices with other neighboring socio-political entities.

Comparison with other expansive polities – not only ancient but also modern or even contemporary – is a useful methodological resource to propose and eventually adjust concepts and categories which allow the explanation of dynamics that can also be corroborated in the past. Nevertheless, Morris states that creating or reifying classificatory schemes is not a goal of her work, and that she based her views on previous works of political scientists, anthropologists, and comparative historians (p. 8). She also sustains that her interest in the study of ancient Egyptian imperialism is not new and her goal in this contribution is not only to expand the analysis to other socio-political situations in ancient Egypt than those she analyzed in previous works, but also to reach a wider audience (p. 3).

The organization in nine main chapters following descriptive categories related to 'a central imperial theme' rooted in history, is an attractive resource which invites the reader to follow Morris' views on the dynamics of territorial expansion and control that the ancient Egyptian polity exerted over the territories laying beyond its borders. In this way, she incorporates ancient Egypt in the long historical list of political entities which expanded and dominated (through diverse strategies) other territories and societies. This is the path the author proposes the reader to go after and which is clearly outlined from the beginning of the book. The chapters roughly follow the development of the Egyptian state through time, from Nagada II to the end of the New Kingdom, framed by an Introduction and an Epilogue. The contribution also includes an onomastic Index, several appropriated figures and maps and a list of up to date – but not always complete – references.

The Introduction describes the main topics explored in each chapter in detail and the questions that guided the author's research interests. The first strategies examined by Morris are those implemented by the Upper Egyptian rulers from Nagada III to the First Dynasty 'to co-opt economic, political, and spiritual sources of power from the peoples they conquered and to consolidate their political grip' (p. 14) in those early times. Entitled 'Trade before Empire; Empire before the State (*c.* 3500–2686)', in the first chapter Morris sustains that from Nagada II onwards, Egypt entered into a prestige-goods economy, and consequently, trade – defined as external exchange – became not only essential but also had the quality of exciting 'imperial ambition' (p. 17). Thus, control of trade is at the base of territorial expansion, undertaken under the rule of a 'highly organized and ambitious' leader capable not only of conquering but also of consolidating the newly incorporated territories (p. 13). Here, Morris introduces a relevant point of departure for her approach to the phenomenon of imperialism: that empire precedes the emergence of the state (pp. 12–13 and 35). Based on this premise, she explores the strategies employed by the Upper Egyptian local rulers in fostering their ambitious plan of expansion and control: gathering resources to co-opt local populations and obtaining *exotica* to be distributed as gifts or rewards. With the aim of cutting costs by eliminating middlemen in exchange activities – like those from the Lower Egyptian site of Maadi, who intermediated in the exchange with Southern Canaan – expansion and control over crucial territories and resources were around the corner, fueled by warlike practices. The same economic argument, the reduction of the costs of exchange, is proposed to explain the abandonment of Southern Canaan settlements after the reign of Narmer, before engaging in exchange activities with the coastal city-port of Byblos (p. 23). Economic reasons are also claimed when explaining the change in the mode of occupation of the fortresses in Lower Nubia during the late Middle Kingdom (pp. 89–90) as well as when describing the organization of the newly incorporated Canaanite territories during the Eighteenth Dynasty (pp. 144–8). The Egyptian advance over Lower Nubia during the First Dynasty is described – following S. T. Smith's application of the R. Horvath's matrix to the situation of Lower Nubia at that moment – as 'Eradication Imperialism' which at a point dismisses the local population's agency by stressing the practices exerted over them by the aggressors. A superficial reference to the possibility that the Nubians preferred 'to withdraw beyond imperialistic reach rather than to live in subjugation' (p. 20) is introduced, but Morris does not delve deeper into it. However, the author's aim of describing the diverse strategies employed by the occupiers as well as the inhabitants of the dominated territory is well-achieved.

Chapter 2, 'Settler Colonialism (*c.* 2400–2181)' turns to the situation in the Dakhla Oasis during the Old Kingdom, mainly the establishment of a colony – following G. Stein's definition of the concept (p. 41) – at 'Ain Asil. Through a historical reconstruction of the occupation, the author

presents a typical example of the establishment of a colony with the intention, in a context of dramatically low floods of the Nile, of 'securing the oasis from potentially hostile others, protecting and facilitating trade, and providing agricultural security to vulnerable population' (p. 52).

The Egyptian advance over Lower Nubia during the Twelfth Dynasty, through a system of fortresses which stretched from the First Cataract to Semna, is the main topic of Chapter 3, entitled 'Military Occupation (*c.* 2055–1773)'. Morris focuses on two main aspects: one, on the difficulties the occupiers faced in the newly controlled territory; the other, on the distinction maintained between the Egyptian and the C-Group material culture during the Twelfth Dynasty. With regard to the first aspect, and with some caution, the author compares the advance of the Middle Kingdom Egyptian state on Lower Nubia and the relationships established with the C-Group, to the British occupation of southern Sudan and the relationships established with the Nuer during the first decades of the twentieth century (p. 80). She highlights the difficulties in obtaining appropriate interlocutors in the local social groups and the low levels of income through taxes or labor taxes in both historical situations. With regard to the second aspect, Morris follows – again, but now cautiously – the R. Horvath's matrix which defines an occupation without colonization as 'Equilibrium Imperialism', a model also followed by S. T. Smith in his approach to the situation of Lower Nubia during the Middle Kingdom.[1]

Next, Chapter 4 'Transculturation, Collaboration, Colonization (*c.* 1773–1295)' continues focusing on the situation in Lower Nubia once a change in the mode of occupation of the fortresses – from rotating military garrisons to permanent settlers – took place. Morris dates the change to the Thirteenth Dynasty (p. 89) arguing that the reason laid in the economic need of minimizing the costs of the empire structure to afford the Hyksos threat in the north. Nevertheless, other researchers dated this change earlier, to after the reign of Senusret III during the Twelfth Dynasty, when the socio-political context was different.[2] Thus, a reference to alternative explanations could have helped to problematize a complex phenomenon. The author also explores the relationships between the diverse Nubian social groups and the Egyptians which she defines as a remarkable example of hybridity (p. 94), while characterizes the emergence of new cultural constructs mainly fueled by intermarriages and the diverse composition of the army as 'transculturation' (pp. 96–7). From this point on, Morris ensues a reflection on the significance of ethnicity with regard to Nubian leaders, like Heqanefer, as well as on how 'the experience of empire' affected diverse communities and individuals under the Eighteenth Dynasty rule (pp. 104–10).

From Chapters 5 to 7, the characteristics of the expansion of Egypt adopted during the New Kingdom, mainly on Canaan following the expulsion of the Hyksos, are described. Chapter 5 is entitled 'Motivation, Intimidation, Enticement (*c.* 1550–1295)'. It is divided in two main portions, the first one dedicated to exploring the motivations for expansion through diverse strategies (plunder, glory, recognition, and revenue) and the second one, to analyze the practices of intimidation and enticement (coercion and persuasion) fostered to acquire and retain the territory. Chapter 6 is devoted to exploring the 'Organization and Infrastructure (*c.* 1458–1295)' of the empire during the mid- to late Eighteenth Dynasty. Morris establishes a distinction between the southern territories subjugated through taxation, and those located to the north (today southern Syria, Lebanon, and northern Israel) which 'allied themselves with Egyptian interests and sent benevolences rather than regular taxes' (p. 161), a situation replicated in Upper Nubia. She defines the annual campaigns of Thutmose III – whom Morris considers an 'imperial innovator' like Genghis Khan, Shaka Zulu or Augustus – as a relevant novelty implemented to organize the empire's 'core' (pp. 143–9); then moves to analyze a set of combining strategies implemented to sustain the newly incorporated territories. Chapter 7 is centered on the local reactions to subjugation ('Outwitting the state (*c.* 1362–1332)') through diverse strategies documented in the royal archive of Amarna (p. 175), while Chapters 8 and 9 are focused on the 'Conversions and Contractions in Egypt's Northern Empire (*c.* 1295–1136)' and in 'Egypt's Southern Empire (*c.* 1550–1069)' during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, respectively. In Chapter 8, Morris explores the efforts Egypt made to control more efficiently its northern empire and the diverse ways the Canaanites reacted to it, as well as the ways the Egyptians tried to reshape Canaan's ideology, through the promotion of the cults of Amun and the divine king (p. 187). She considers the reaction against the Hyksos rulership as a subjacent motivation for the expansion during the Eighteenth Dynasty, and the Amarna 'trauma' a reason for understanding the foreign policy of the Nineteenth Dynasty. After detailing the actions performed by its first kings to reinforce the control of the eastern and western border of Egypt to the north, the author focuses on describing the new characteristics the Egyptian occupation acquired in the 'core' of the Egyptian northern empire, comparing the roles of the bases in Canaan to the roles C. Johnson attributes to contemporary American military bases (pp. 197–207). Then, Morris revises the reactions of the locals to the Egyptian domination, which go from positive (collaboration) to negative (resistance), to introduce the topic of the 'religio-political conversion' during the Twentieth Dynasty in Canaan (pp. 211–14).

Chapter 9 turns to the situation in Nubia approached in Chapter 4 to go into three other conversions: the first one explores the Eighteenth Dynasty program of 'establishing civilian settlements on the sites of what were likely armed camps' (p. 227); the second one concentrates on the impetus in 'recrafting the religious landscape of Nubia' (p. 239); and the third one focuses on the 'spiritual wealth' represented by the transformation of a pastoral into a plantation economy administered by local Nubian elites (pp. 240–6). Finally, she devotes the final portion of the chapter to make a brief reference to the contraction of the

[1] S. T. Smith, *Askut in Nubia: The Economics and Ideology of Egyptian Imperialism in the Second Millennium B.C.* (London, 1995), 8–9.

[2] Cf. the discussion in Smith, *Askut in Nubia*, 53–80 and in L. Török, *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC – AD 500* (Leiden, 2009), 97–8.

Egyptian occupation in Nubia and the emergence of the Kushite empire (pp. 246–8). The Epilogue is a completely different exercise, through what Morris calls 'an efficient encapsulation of an idealized empire' (p. 253). The Akhenaten's tribute ceremony relief, preserved in the tomb of Meryre II at Amarna, is the scene selected to describe which were the main themes that the Eighteenth Dynasty wished to highlight, and which ones they wished to conceal with regard to its empire.

Morris' work is very valuable since she was able not only to distinguish the diverse strategies of expansion and control of ancient Egypt on other territories and populations and the reactions to them, but also their variations through time. Nevertheless, on the one side, a certain weakness in the use of theoretical frameworks is perceived. As mentioned above, she clearly stated that her approach was based on previous works of political scientists, anthropologists, and comparative historians. Nevertheless, a discussion on the concept which defines the title of the book and becomes its main topic would have been expected.[3] Moreover, an *automatic* usage of concepts coming from diverse theoretical perspectives is also noticed: for instance, in describing the relationship of subordination between the Canaanite local rulers and the Egyptians, she applies the concepts of 'vassal', 'nation-state' and 'core' – each of them with a strong charge of meaning(s) – in the same sentence without providing any definitions (p. 161). This functional application of concepts could lead, on occasions, to anachronisms that could be avoided.[4] On the other side, the author adopted an exclusive 'etic' perspective, and the complex Egyptian *Weltanschauung* – a universe conceived in terms of order and chaos, with Egypt identified as the 'ordered' center ruled by a king-god, who had to perform actions that concerned that opposition – is just interpreted as 'a bold fiction' (p. 34) useful to the ruling elite not only to justify coercion and expansion over others but also to satisfy their own ambition, as if rulers possessed some sort of 'class consciousness'. Thus, no reference to other Egyptological perspectives that consider the relevance and specificity of the Egyptian worldview in shaping the relationships with the surrounding world and their inhabitants are discussed.[5] Thus, as already mentioned, the book achieves the goal of reviewing the diverse strategies implemented by the Egyptians to control and administrate the newly incorporated territories and to subordinate their populations, and the diverse reactive strategies to a foreign rule pursued by the local inhabitants of those subjugated territories through time. Those interested in these issues will surely be satisfied.

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[3] As, for an example, in C. Langer, *Aspekte des Imperialismus in der Außenpolitik der 18. Dynastie* (Nordostafrikanisch-Westasiatische Studien Band 7; Frankfurt am Main, 2013).

[4] Cf. R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2002).

[5] For example, P. Vernus, 'Les jachères du démiurge et la souveraineté du pharaon. Concept d'empire et latences de la création', *RdE* 62 (2011), 175–97.