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Xenophobia and Integration

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To the uninitiated, ancient Egyptian representations of foreigners seem to indicate a paradox. The Egyptian public record of religious texts, temple and tomb inscriptions, border stelae and images portrays foreigners unfavorably, and does so in standardized scenes. These scenes usually show foreigners being humiliated, subjugated, slain, or meekly paying homage and tribute to the king.¹

Invariably, the foreigners in these depictions were stock characters – identified as foreigners by their skin color and garb, but never portrayed as individuals per se. Such dehumanization, presented consistently over millennia, was not only an outgrowth of, but the *intent* behind portrayals of foreigners. Official doctrine regarded foreigners, at best, as necessary evils, and at worst as inherently deleterious forces, to be kept at bay by any means necessary. But above all, foreigners outside Egypt were *symbols*. Smiting scenes were a staple dating back to the pre-Dynastic era (before 3000 BCE), which showed only a narrow range of variability through time.

The ancient Egyptians drew no distinction between the sacred and the profane, and viewed their king not as a human ruler "by divine right," but as an embodied god (a Horus during his lifetime and an Osiris in the afterlife). By extension, he embodied the link between the human and divine realms. Thus, state ideology and state religion were inextricably intertwined.

However, a very different impression emerges from history: foreigners traveled, and immigrated, to Egypt. As their stories show, attitudes towards foreigners in day-to-day life were decidedly more tolerant than the public record would suggest. Immigrants and their

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Seated scribe. Actor: Ashley Garner descendants were not systematically relegated to the underclass. Quite the contrary, they could become fully integrated members of Egyptian society. Unlike many societies of antiquity (and in our time), immigrants who integrated into Egyptian society and assim-

ilated culturally could become accepted as Egyptians. The descendant of a foreign mercenary or trader might become an Egyptian servant, artisan or interpreter.

Some immigrants achieved high positions in Egypt's bureaucracy. One example was Aper-el (or Aperia), a "Child of the Nursery," who attained the rank of vizier under Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten. Benia (also called Pahekmen), is another example. An "Overseer of Works" and another "Child of the Nursery," he was brought to Egypt at a young age and raised as an Egyptian during the early 18th Dynasty. In the Royal Nursery (kap), which was part of the palace during the New Kingdom and the training ground for the offspring of the ruling classes, elite Egyptians and foreigners were raised together in the Egyptian cultural traditions.

Descendants of these foreigners – second- or third-generation Egyptians – spoke and dressed like their native-born contemporaries. Often, only subtleties such as a foreign name, or reference to foreign origin through an ethnonym, would have indicated their descent from outside Egypt.

Contemporaneous sources offer possible explanations for the paradox of a society that advertised its xenophobia but practiced tolerance.

Foreigners came to Egypt in a variety of contexts: from artisans and craftsmen who brought new technologies and artistic techniques; to captives, who usually worked as cheap labor in guarries and mines; to the offspring of foreign royalty, who were brought to Egypt as hostages to ensure their parents' continued loyalty to Egypt. In these contexts, there was a seemingly limitless range of outcomes.

The xenophobic representations of foreigners in the Egyptian public record can be better understood through the ancient Egyptians' view of the cosmos, its relationships with mankind and nature, and the place that Egypt and the Egyptian king occupied in this worldview.

One central concept to this worldview was *Ma'at* – represented as a goddess who sustained order, truth, harmony and justice. Egypt, "home," was synonymous with the realm of *Ma'at*, and guarded by the king. By contrast, foreign lands were linked with Isfet, the divine antithesis to Ma'at, representing chaos. By the internal logic of this dichotomy, it followed that foreigners were, by definition, bearers of chaos - and that as such, they had to be kept at bay like chaos itself

This dichotomy also illustrates the seeming paradox between ideology and actuality: through assimilation, an immigrant could become Egyptian and, in so doing, convert from a "bearer of chaos" to a "bearer of order."

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In earlier representations, these foreigners were mainly from Western Asia (the Syro-Palestinian corridor), Nubia (Sudan), and Libya, and in later ones, from Anatolia (ancient Hatti, current Turkey), Punt (a land mentioned by Egyptian sources, probably in a region extending from the north of Somalia to the Sudan/Eritrean corridor), Mitanni (an ancient kingdom in northern Syria) and the island of Crete.

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Piles of severed enemy hands (or penises) were a standard motif in Egyptian military scenes. Military scribes are often shown counting these hands to record the number of enemies killed.

Ägypten sicherzustellen. Bei dieser Vielfalt von Zusammenhänjab es ein scheinbar grenzenloses Spektrum von möglichen icklungen.

Die fremdenfeindlichen Darstellungen von Ausländern in den ellen Urkunden Ägyptens lassen sich besser verstehen, wenn die altägyptische Sichtweise auf den Kosmos, seine Beziehung lenschheit und zur Natur, und die Stellung, die Ägypten und gyptische König darin einnahmen, betrachtet.

Ein Kernkonzept für diese Weltanschauung war *Ma'at* – welche öttin dargestellt wurde, die Ordnung, Wahrheit, Harmonie und chtigkeit aufrechterhielt. Ägypten, "die Heimat", war praktisch vnonym für den Geltungsbereich der *Ma'at*, der vom König bet wurde. Im Gegensatz dazu wurden fremde Länder mit *Isfet*, göttlichen Gegenpol zu *Ma'at*, welcher Chaos darstellte, veren. Aufgrund der internen Logik dieser Dichotomie ergab sich, Ausländer *per definitionem* die Träger des Chaos waren – und sie daher, wie das Chaos selbst, in Schach gehalten werden ten.

Diese Dichotomie zeigt zudem den Widerspruch zwischen ogie und Wirklichkeit: Durch Assimilation konnte ein Immigrant em Ägypter werden und damit von einem Repräsentanten des s zu einem "Repräsentanten der Ordnung".

In früheren Darstellungen stammten diese Fremden hauptsächlich aus Westasien (dem syro-palästinensischen Raum), Nubien (Sudan) und Libyen und in späteren Darstellungen aus Anatolien (dem antiken Hatti, das sich auf dem Gebiet der heutigen Türkei befand), Punt (einem Land, das in ägyptischen Quellen genannt wird und sich möglicherweise in einer Region befindet, die sich von Nordsomalia bis zum Sudan/nach Eritrea erstreckt), Mitanni (einem antiken Königreich in Nordsyrien)