

How did the ancient Egyptians define themselves to their neighbors?

Ancient Egyptian identity was shaped through contrast. From the old kingdom onward, Egyptians imagined themselves as a distinct, ordered and divinely favoured people, living on the land of the Nile, who also saw themselves apart from the chaos and instability beyond its borders. Their relationship to neighbouring regions such as Nubia to the south, the levant to the north east and Libya to the west was famed though ideological, religious and political lenses.

Central to Egyptian self definition as the concept of *ma'at* which means truth, justice, order and cosmic balance. The pharaoh was responsible for maintaining *ma'at* ensuring the Niles agricultural prosperity and social stability.¹ In contrast *isfet*, representing disorder and chaos. Foreign lands were often symbolically associated with *isfet*, as they lay beyond the Nile valley, in deserts and untamed regions.²

The ideological framework was particularly visible during the middle kingdom. The reunification of Egypt under Mentuhotep II followed the political fragmentation of the first intermediate period. His mortuary complex at Deir el-Bahari visually celebrated restored unity, reinforcing the notion that Egypt, when properly governed, embodied divine order.³ under rulers such as Sunusret III, this ideology was projected outward. Boundary stelae in Nubia depict the king restraining rebellious people and securing Egypt's southern frontier.⁴ inscriptions present foreigners as aggressive and unstable, reinforcing Egypt's identity as a bastion of civilization.

Egyptians referred to themselves as “ the people of Kemet.” “Kemet” or the black land describes the fertile soil of the Nile Valley, in contrast to “Deshret,” the surrounding “red land” of the desert is used for the lower region of Egypt .⁵ This terminology reveals how geography shaped identity. The cultivated valley symbolised life and order, and the desert signified danger and marginality. Foreign people were categorized in art and text, Nubians (*Nehesy*), Asiatics(*Aamu*), and Libyans(*Tjehnu*). Tomb paintings at Beni Hasan from the reign of Senusret II depict Asiatic traders entering Egypt, their distinctive clothing and hairstyles mark cultural differences, yet the scene is peaceful and regulated.⁶ The representation shows the difference between cultures without denying interaction.

Furthermore the Egyptian identity was not based solely on hostility, rather difference was carefully sorted in visual and textual forms that reinforced Egypt's internal harmony.

The Egyptians relationship with Nubia in the middle kingdom shows the dual nature of ideology and practice, under Senusret III, Egypt pursued aggressive expansion into lower Nubia. A chain of fortresses including Buhen, Semna, and Uronatri was constructed along the second Cataract control movement and secured resources.⁷ Boundary Semna records the king's determination to prevent Nubians from crossing northward control intertwined. These inscriptions portrayed

¹ Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. p15-40.

² Barry J.Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of Ancient Egypt*. p.19-25.

³ Wolfram Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt*. p.28-33.

⁴ Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. p.164-168.

⁵ Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*. p.7-10.

⁶ Wolfram Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt*. p.62-65.

⁷ Barry J.Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of Ancient Egypt*. p.210-212.

Nubians as unruly and potentially rebellious. Yet Nubia was economically vital especially for gold, Egyptian garrisons did not just repel invasion they regulated the buyings and sellings between these people and regulating social interaction.⁸ The trade and military control were intertwined.

Moreover, archeological evidence indicates cultural interaction. Egyptian goods circulate in nubia and nubian artefacts appear in egyptian contexts.⁹ Over time Egyptian influence penetrated nubian society but this was a process of negotiation rather than imposition, in conclusion while the ideology framed nubia as chaotic, the egyptian monarchy knew, practiced and recognized its importance in the Egyptian economy.

In addition to this Egyptian self definition can be seen in language. Egyptian inscriptions frequently describe foreign lands using expressions emphasizing distance, hostility or inferiority. Nubia might be characterised as “wretched kush” while Asiatic territories were portrayed as unstable or divided.¹⁰ such phrases were not neutral descriptions but literary conventions that reinforced hierarchy. However the repetitive and stylised nature of these suggests that they functioned symbolically. Royal texts were concerned less with accurately describing foreign societies and more with affirming the king's role as maintainer of order. By portraying the world beyond Egypt as volatile, inscriptions magnified the achievement of stability within Egypt itself. At the same time administrative papyri and trade records demonstrate far more practical and neutral engagement with foreign individuals. This contrasts between rhetorical hostility and bureaucratic normality underpunches the constructed nature of Egyptian identity. Forgiveness was a political category deployed in specific contexts particularly monumental royal ones rather than a constant expression of everyday social relations. Identity was constructed through contrast, but sustained through interaction and continual negotiation with surrounding cultures and powers.

Relations with the Levant (Syria and Palestine) further complicate the image of Egyptian superiority. Timber from byblos was essential for construction, copper and other goods were imported from the near east.¹⁰ Egyptian artefacts including scarabs, have been found in Canaanite sites, demonstrating reciprocal exchange. Middle kingdom lineature offers insight into egyptian perceptions of the levant, “The tale of Sinuhe,” composed in the 12th dynasty, recounts the flight of an egyptian courtier to syria following the death of a king.¹¹ Sinuhe was made successful abroad and gained prestige among foreign rulers, however he longs to return to Egypt for a proper burial, believing that only Egypt can guarantee eternal life. The narrative is revealing, foreign courts are depicted as impressive, even admirable however , Egypt remains spiritually superior. The story reinforces Egyptian centrality while acknowledging the sophistication of the neighbouring societies.

In addition to this Egyptian self definition was in the funerary belief and attitudes toward the afterlife. Proper burial within Egypt was not only just a personal preference but a cultural necessity. The land itself was sacred, west of the Nile as the necropolises, this symbolically aligned with the setting sun and rebirth. To be buried outside of Egypt risked exclusion from the

⁸ Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. p.170-172.

⁹ Mario Liverani, *International Relations in the Ancient Near East*. p.35-40.

¹⁰ William Kelly Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*. p.54-66.

¹¹ Wolfram Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt*. p.134-138.

cosmic cycle guaranteed by *ma'at*. This anxiety was shown in the "the tale of sinuhe" he longs to be back in Egypt despite his material successes, Syria-palastine could not give a proper burial.¹² The text implies that no matter how prosperous they could never offer the same religious security. Identity was spatial as well as political. Egypt was not only the centre of civilisation in life but also the necessary landscape for eternity. These beliefs reinforced the distinction between Egyptian and foreign space and was embedded in national identity within spirituality itself.

During the late middle kingdom, Levantine populations settled in the eastern Nile Delta.¹³ Archeological evidence from sites such as Avaris shows material culture with near eastern characteristics, these communities were not immediately expelled or enslaved, they were integrated into Egypt's economic system. This demonstrates that the boundaries did not always translate into rigid social exclusion. Foreigners could live within Egypt, serve in administrative or military roles and adopt Egyptian customs. However, this later contributed to political change. In the second intermediate period, rulers of Levantine origin, the hyksos, gained control over northern Egypt, the shock of foreign rule intensified later Egyptian narratives of national restoration, particularly in the new kingdom.¹⁴ The experience reinforced the ideological contrast between Egyptian order and foreign domination.

Egyptian religion also reflected both distinction and adaptability. While deeply rooted in local cults, it was capable of incorporating foreign elements, Deities associated with Nubia and the Levant were sometimes assimilated into the Egyptian pantheon. In the middle kingdom, the cult of Amun rose to prominence at thebes eventually becoming central to Egyptian state ideology.¹⁵ Although Amun was originally a local deity, his elevation reflects the adaptability of Egyptian religion to political change. This adaptability extended outward when Egyptian influence expanded, Egyptian religious forms accompanied it, temples, rituals and art were all exported, reinforcing cultural cohesion even beyond egypt borders.

Military campaigns were framed as necessary acts to preserve *ma'at*, inscriptions describe the king crushing rebels, pacifying lands and restoring order. However historians such as kempt take caution against taking these texts at face value, royal inscriptions were propaganda, emphasising victory and exaggerating threats.¹⁶ In practice, warfare was selective and strategic. Egypt did not seek constant conquest rather it intervened when trade routes, resources or security was at risk. Diplomatic gifts, tribute arrangements and negotiated exchanges coexisted with military action. The border fortress of Nubia showed this dual function, they served as a defensive installation and custom post which demonstrated administrative sophistication rather than just pure aggression.¹⁷

¹² William Kelly Simpson, The Literature of Ancient Egypt. p.60-64.

¹³ Jan Assmann, The Mind of Egypt: History and meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs. p.97-105.

¹⁴ Ian Shaw, The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt. p.171-174.

¹⁵ Assmann, Mind of Egypt. p.97-105.

¹⁶ Barry J.Kemp, Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of Ancient Egypt. p.222-228.

¹⁷ Ian Shaw, The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt. p.171-174.

The Egyptian worldview was hierarchical rather than isolationist. Egypt was conceived as the centre of the civilisation, but the world beyond it was not denied existence. Instead, foreign lands were incorporated but Egypt occupied their core. This worldview can be described as centralized, everything radiated outwards from the Nile valley. Foreign people were marginal however they were also necessary participants in Egypt's economic and political systems. The middle kingdom, in particular, reveals a civilization confident in its own identity. Following reunification Egypt asserted ideological superiority while engaging actively with neighbouring regions. Its identity was strengthened not weakened by interaction.

In Addition recent scholarship has emphasised that Egyptian identity was performative and situational rather than biologically fixed.¹⁸ Foreigners who adopted Egyptian language, dress, religious practice, and loyalty to the king could be socially integrated. Military records and administrative documents from the middle kingdom suggest that nubians and asiatics sometimes served in Egyptian armies or worked within temple and estate systems. The distinction between Egyptian and non-Egyptian was therefore cultural and behavioral, not strictly ethnic.

Furthermore the ideological contrast between Egypt and the neighbours functioned internally as much as externally. By depicting foreigners as embodiments of disorder. Egyptian rulers reinforced domestic unity. The external other helped stabilize the internal hierarchy. In the sense foreign policy and domestic ideology were intertwined. The assertion that Egypt stood at the centre of divinely ordered cosmos legitimised royal authority and justified taxation, Labour mobilisation and military campaigns.¹⁹ The foreigner became symbolic through which Egyptian society defined itself through, stability, piety, agricultural abundance and obedience to kingship. Egypt's relationship with the outside world cannot be reduced to xenophobia or imperial ambition. It was a dynamic system in which ideological superiority coexisted with pragmatic adaptation. Egyptians saw themselves as uniquely ordered. Yet they operated within a broader afro-urasian network of exchange and influence. Identity was constructed through contrast, but sustained through interaction

In conclusion Egyptians defined themselves through a powerful conceptual opposition between order and chaos, civilisation and marginality, kemet and the red land. These distinctions were expressed in art, literature and royal ideology. Foreigners were depicted as culturally distinct and often associated with disorder, reinforcing Egypt's image as divinely ordered under the pharaoh. Yet Egypt was never isolated. Trade with nubia and the levant, diplomatic engagement, migration and cultural exchange demonstrate sustained interaction with the wider world. The middle kingdom offers a particularly clear example of this balance, strong internal ideology combined with strategic external engagement. Egypt's relationship with its neighbours was therefore complex. Egypt's hierarchy asserted cultural superiority and relied on foreign goods and labour and diplomacy. Egyptian identity was constructed through contrast but it was maintained through connection. The world beyond the Nile was not just chaos, it was to be managed, negotiated with and occasionally conquered, all in the service of preserving *ma'at* at the centre of civilisation.

¹⁸ William Kelly Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*. p.60-64.

¹⁹ Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. p.111-118.

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