



REVIEW

**FOREIGNERS IN ANCIENT EGYPT:
THEBAN TOMB PAINTINGS FROM THE EARLY 18TH DYNASTY**

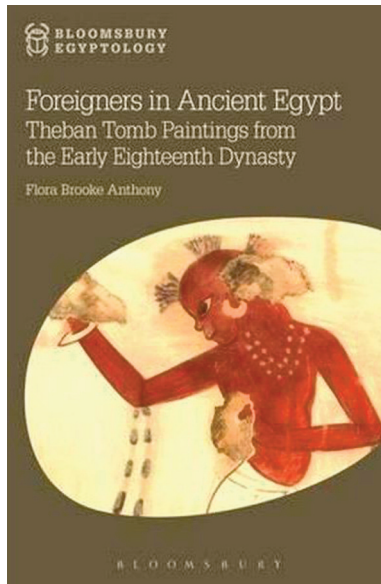
by Flora B. Anthony
Bloomsbury, London, 2016

Reviewed by Rennan Lemos,
University of Cambridge

The book under review comes in good time. Recent discussions on the interactions between Egypt and its neighbors, especially Nubia, may benefit from the data systematization and analysis provided by Anthony throughout the nine chapters. Previous publications have emphasized the historical, realist aspects of sources like tomb paintings, aiming to search for accuracy between what was represented on tomb walls and the realm of material culture. However, today scholars are exploring other aspects of these sources, an example of which is the book under review. Anthony

makes a clear differentiation between the objectives of past scholars and the limits of the sources, which, according to her, express different perceptions of foreigners according to context. Therefore, instead of conveying steady notions of race/ethnicity, hierarchy etc., Egyptian tomb paintings are a product of an specific cultural setting, expressing specific ideologies and worldviews.

Anthony's arguments and analysis are based on the recognition of the relational meaning that Egyptians attributed to tomb representations. The author explores the way Egyptians interpreted and engaged with depictions of foreigners in tomb



paintings, highlighting how different ways of depicting foreigners conveyed different conceptions of foreign peoples according to context. Therefore, the author offers us evidence to contest interpretations based on fixed and immutable cultural categories. On the contrary, these forms of categorization change according to the social space into which they are inserted—royal, élite, non-élite etc.—as well as according to cultural interactions that produce new phenomena, drawing from various cultural references. Anthony addresses one possible way of dealing with Theban tomb paintings—that is,

how the Egyptians attributed meaning to those representations.

Past scholars have approached these sources by means of identifying foreign groups, their material culture, customs, modes of dressing etc. It is true that tomb paintings in the New Kingdom carry real-world connotations. At Amarna, for instance, representations in tombs helped to identify and interpret structures in the city.¹ Therefore, there is an undeniable link between representations and reality. But as Anthony notes there are limits for such a 'realistic' approach. Most importantly, one should understand tomb representations in their symbolic

context of use, the main reason for which they have been produced.

The book also represents a good resource for those debating cultural entanglements, even though the author does not engage directly in these discussions. The detailed account provided of how ancient Egyptians created and gave meaning to their representations of foreigners may lead us to ask how foreigners would have interpreted and engaged with such Egyptian representations. Such a question would be useful for understanding, for example, the phenomenon of Egyptian-style decoration in Nubian tombs in the New Kingdom, or the symbolism of Egyptian material culture in Nubian burials. Anthony presents the Egyptian side of this issue, which also offers insights into the other side of the same coin, as we start to explore other possibilities than the Egyptian ways of giving meaning.

In general, this book combines the sensibility of identifying or opening space for different relational meanings of iconography with the detailed description of the meanings a specific society—the Egyptians—have attributed to pictorial representations in tombs. The descriptions the author provides of different ways of depicting foreign types, as well as the things they brought with them in tribute scenes, is a valuable resource for future investigations on the subject. It is likely therefore that Anthony's book will become a reference for future research, due to the publication's strong empirical basis.

It is important to note that across chapters, Anthony has been able to identify patterns in the representation of foreigners, some of which have been ignored by previous scholarship. For instance, the author's discussion of representations of female Nubians in tribute scenes offers new insights on gender, both in the context of Egyptian conceptions of the "other" and the context of the social interactions between Egypt and foreign countries. The latter would require a consideration of the reality of such representations, apart from their specific, Egyptian symbolism.

The book is divided into 9 chapters, of which chapters 1 and 9 are introduction and conclusion respectively. It also presents two appendixes, one consisting of a list of 18th dynasty tombs containing foreign depictions, and the other covering a bibliography for each type of scene. This turns the present book into a useful resource for both students and future research.

Chapter 3 describes the function of tombs in the ancient Egyptian worldview, paving the way for further discussions on why foreigners were depicted in tombs. The author highlights the function of those depictions in

the context of Egyptian ideology.

Chapter 4 also paves the way for the author's perception of an Egyptian way of conceiving foreigners. In this chapter Anthony describes in detail the types of foreigners the Egyptians represented. Here she presents artistic and technical details concerning phenotypes, as well as the objects that foreign groups carry in the tribute processions and the context in which they appear within the broader decorative scheme of the tombs. The author discerns and provides details on the representations of Nubians, Levantines, Libyans, Aegeans, oases dwellers, people from Wat-Hor and Puntites. Subsequently, a comparison between each foreign type is presented, evoking how Egyptians might have conceived each trait carried by those different groups.

The author also discusses the differences between tribute scenes and palatial representations, grounded in her perception of contextual meanings conveyed by tomb representations. Anthony establishes a more nuanced differentiation of foreigners as representatives of chaos (as in palatial representations) and as orderly components of the cosmos who bring wealth to Egypt. Here lies an interesting discussion. The author states that "Nubian girls are part of a scene [at TT 78] that shows the opulence and abundant resources of ancient Nubia" (p. 58–59). Current discussions in the archaeology of colonialism drawing from anarchist theory are focusing on alternative ways indigenous populations found to responding in equal terms—at least in specific contexts—to the colonial presence and domination. Nubian opulence and abundance of resources might be interpreted not only by its symbolic connotations in Egyptian mortuary contexts. Instead, and based on Anthony's perception of contextual meanings conveyed by tomb paintings, those representations could have functioned as a way of demonstrating Nubian power for Nubian people, creating a sense of relational identity even in a context of subjugation by Egyptian forces commanding tribute. After, in the Napatan Period, trade between Nubia and Egypt (Thebes) became a way of displaying the power of Nubian kings even when Egyptian patterns dictated the way they created strategies of power reaffirmation in Nubian ground.²

After discussing the general symbolism of foreign depictions in Egyptian tombs in chapter 6, the author discusses in chapter 7 the funerary symbolism of those images. Again, she establishes a useful comparative analysis of goods associated with Nubians, Levantines, Aegeans, the people from the oases, Wat-Hor and Punt in order to unveil how the Egyptian viewer would have conceived those representations in their own funerary

context.

The question of how other peoples with whom Egypt interacted might have seen the same scenes remains open. The author's emphasis on symbolism somehow diminishes the perception of the social role of the scenes and the interactions among different foreign groups that provided the social setting for those scenes to appear. A more balanced analysis that considers both symbolic and historical/social aspects, as well as the viewpoints of the different groups involved, might shed light on how different responses were given by one group to another in a context of interactions that makes possible the existence of material evidence of foreigners—such as the Theban tomb scenes. An interpretation that combines both aspects would enable us to address not only the Egyptian symbolism attributed to the tomb representations and material culture (which is the basis for the perception of the “Egyptianization” of foreign groups), but also how interactions produced new phenomena like the “international” style and “hybrid” images discussed by the author in chapter 6.

This book holds the potential of crossing Egyptological boundaries, as it provides the reader with a strong empirical basis that may be used for further comparisons. In this sense, a theoretical discussion on the strategies of producing identity³ and cultural entanglements,⁴ combined with the detailed descriptions of data provided, would have

been highly welcome. Such a theoretical preoccupation would have improved the discussions brought by this commendable publication, which should also be praised for its accessible language and format from which the general public may benefit. Anthony's book is a contribution towards the popularization of the knowledge on the role of foreigners in the constitution of our societies—a subject that is more than relevant these days.

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- ¹ B. J. Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti: Amarna and Its People* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012).
 - ² K. Howley, “Sudanic Statecraft? Political Organization in the Early Napatan Period,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 7,2 (2015): 30-41.
 - ³ F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969).
 - ⁴ P. Van Pelt, “Revisiting Egypto-Nubian Relations in New Kingdom Lower Nubia: From Egyptianization to Cultural Entanglement,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23.3 (2013): 523–550; M. Buzon, S. Smith, and A. Simonetti, “Entanglement and the Formation of the Ancient Nubian Napatan State,” *American Anthropologist* 118.2 (2016): 284–300.