

Egyptians and Libyans in the New Kingdom

An Interpretation

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For Classical authors such as Herodotus (ca. 450 B.C.), all the various independent people inhabiting the huge land mass extending west from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean were called "Libyans." For convenience, we can also employ this general term for the Bronze Age inhabitants of the area. The Egyptians of the New Kingdom (1500-1050 B.C.), however, referred to their western neighbors as the "Tjehenu" and "Tjehemu." Their texts also mention specific subgroups called the "Meshwesh" and the "Ribu" or "Libu"—from which our modern word Libyan is derived. Other rare names seem to refer to smaller tribal groups.

The Meshwesh and the Libu probably lived in Cyrenaica, where climate and environment made a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life based on herding the most efficient one to follow. They were described by the Egyptians as *mhwt*, a word translated literally as "family"; however, as applied uniquely to these groups and to the nomadic Shasu of Palestine, *mhwt* clearly refers to a larger social group. By using this term the Egyptians were apparently emphasizing the primacy of kinship within the social and political organization of the Meshwesh and Libu, a characteristic shared with modern nomadic tribal societies such as the Bedouin.

Other Libyans known simply as the Tjehenu lived in Marmarica, the coastal region lying between Cyrenaica and Egypt. Further south, the oases of the western

Period	Date	Dynasty	Pharaoh
New Kingdom	1550 B.C.		
	1386-1349 1356-1340	18th	Amenophis III Akhenaten
	1295 1294-1279 1279-1213 1213-1204	19th	Seti I Ramesses II Merenptah
	1187 1185-1154	20th	Ramesses III
	1069		
	945	21st	
	715	22nd	

1 Chronological chart of Egyptian dynasties up to the 22nd.

desert were inhabited by non-Libyans; throughout the New Kingdom, all of these isolated agricultural settlements (with the exception of remote Siwa) were con-

trolled by the Egyptians. They were metaphorically called "mountains," reflecting their role as outposts on the frontier, protecting the Nile Valley proper from the "enemy of the



2 Egyptian representation of Libyan soldiers in the pharaoh's escort. (From the tomb of Ahmose, steward of Akhenaten, at Amarna. Davies 1905: Pl. 31)



3
Map showing the changing pattern of Egyptian/Libyan relations during the New Kingdom.



4
Libyan dignitaries being presented to Akhenaten. (From the tomb of Meryre, high priest of the sun, at Amarna. Davies 1903: Pl. 26)



5
Battle between Egyptians and Libyans from a relief on the Great Temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu. Ramesses binds two Libyan captives in the upper register; below, Egyptian troops are routing the Libyans. According to the text, the scene shows "[Ramesses] The good god, [great of] victory, lord of strength, carrying off every land, encircling all the lands of the Meshwesh [Libyans] to seek the transgressor of his frontier, entering into a throng and slaying hundred-thousands." The Libyans are identifiable by their narrow beards, the side-locks of hair, the long open robes, and the penis sheaths. (From Nelson 1932: Pl. 70)

The Libyans portrayed in these reliefs may well have been only those of Marmarica, and the implied Egyptian domination might have been quite light: Libyan soldiers

may have been recruited, rather than impressed; independent as well as vassal rulers sent representatives to the Egyptian court; and in the tribute scene, the Libyans are

West"—the Libyans.

Our clearest picture of the relationships between Libyans and Egyptians comes from the latter part of the New Kingdom. In the mid-13th century, Marmarica was dominated by an Egyptian fortress chain stretching along the coast as far west as the area around Marsa Matruh; by the early 12th century, Egypt claimed overlordship of Cyrenaican tribes as well. At one point a ruler chosen by Egypt was set up (briefly!) over the combined tribes of Meshwesh, Libu, and Soped.

But how far back can this pattern of domination and overlordship be traced? In the early New Kingdom, Libyans seem to have been of little concern to the powerful, expansive, and militaristic Egyptian state; but in the mid-14th century, under the Pharaoh Akhenaten, relationships became closer. Libyans, along with other armed foreigners, were included in the predominantly Egyptian military escort of the Pharaoh. High-ranking Libyans, as well as western Asiatic and Nubian representatives, also attended major pharaonic ceremonies, such as the rewarding of high officials or a ritual visit to an important temple. Libyans appear very rarely in earlier 18th dynasty tribute scenes involving foreigners (16th-15th centuries B.C.). Under Akhenaten, however, they are assigned a prominent place at the tribute ceremony, offering typical semi-desert products—ostrich feathers and ostrich eggs.

grouped not with the inhabitants of conquered Nubia and Palestine, but with Egypt's independent trading partners of Punt (Red Sea coast) and North Syria/Anatolia.


This Egyptian interest in Marmarica is part of a generally heightened interest in western contacts during the 18th dynasty. Under Akhenaten's father, Amenophis III, Egyptian ships were already visiting Crete and mainland Greece, and would naturally return to Egypt via the Libyan coast, as did traders from other lands involved in the eastern Mediterranean trade described by Conwell. Expanding Egyptian foreign contacts are further signalled during Akhenaten's reign by the first substantial appearance of Greek (Mycenaean) pottery in Egypt, at sites such as Amarna.

Late 18th dynasty Egypt may well have been in (indirect?) contact with Cyrenaica itself: Meshwesh cattle (but not tribesmen) were imported into Egypt under Amenophis III. But specific references to Cyrenaicans do not occur until after the 19th and 20th dynasties (1295-1069 B.C.), and these are almost invariably hostile. Libu, Meshwesh and others are spoken of with withering contempt; they clashed with Egyptian forces (sometimes at or within the Egyptian frontier) under pharaohs Seti I, Ramesses II, Merenptah, and Ramesses III. Within this context, the Egyptian fortification of Marmarica during the 13th century looks like an attempt to stop Cyrenaican movement towards Egypt. The attempted overlordship of Cyrenaica might well have been an effort to halt Cyrenaican pressure at its source.

Why did this marked change in Egyptian-Libyan relations occur? We can only speculate, but aggressive expansion by Egypt may be just part of the answer. It is clear that the Cyrenaicans, who were undergoing internal organizational changes, were also aggressors. In the 13th and 12th centuries B.C. the Libu and Meshwesh had centralized political leadership, military coordination, and a relatively wealthy ruling elite. Among nomads, this kind of complex political system often immediately precedes the founding of a "nomadic state." A typical mechanism of state formation is for

the nomads to conquer and permanently occupy regions occupied by sedentary agriculturalists, and then either become sedentary themselves, or exploit the conquered folk through tribute, taxation, and other means. Such a state provides an effective territorial base for periodic raiding and plundering of other nearby independent sedentary groups. This developmental pattern would explain the Cyrenaicans' repeated attempts (often partially successful) to invade and occupy Egypt's western and even central Delta (13th and 12th centuries B.C.).

According to Egyptian sources, the Libyan invasions failed; but in the long run they may have succeeded. Only a century after the

close of the New Kingdom a new dynasty controlled most of Egypt. This 22nd dynasty had a strongly Libyan character, proclaiming its descent from generations of Meshwesh who were originally prisoners of war, and settled by the Egyptians as military colonists in the eastern Delta. As Leahy suggests, this dynasty may have brought a Libyan dimension into Egyptian culture by governing in a mode derived from the practices of a nomadic society. Even more intriguing is the emergence along the western edge of the Delta of a kingdom or confederation ruled by successive "Great Chiefs of the Libu"; this obscure entity may prove to be (after further study) a genuine nomadic state. 

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