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On Borders and Expansion: Egyptian Imperialism in the Levant during the Ramesside Period

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Abstract: This paper aims to define the way Egyptians perceived the boundaries of their land and reassesses the impact of Egyptian colonialism during the Ramesside period (c. 1292–1069 BCE). During this era, expansive wars, diplomatic action and land administration/governance reforms led Egypt to control a large part of modern Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. To refer to this period, historians often use the terms Egyptian "empire" and Egyptian "imperialism", extending terminology coined in the 19th century to describe modern cases of political dominance to Late Bronze Age Egypt. Furthermore, traditional scholarship also presents Egypt's borders in such a way that Egypt appears as a solid territory with fixed borders, despite evidence pointing to a different model of geographical division. Seeking to explore whether the use of modern terms on ancient Egypt may be an anachronism, this paper reviews the scholarship on (a) Egyptian records documenting conquests and (b) contextual archaeological evidence from the southern Near East itself. This review highlights differences between modern and ancient conceptions of land domination. Finally, Egyptian border-related terms are used in a strictly local symbolic cultural context but not in the one of international diplomacy. As for Egypt's boundary, it was mostly formed as a buffer zone rather than a borderline.

Keywords: archaeology; Egypt; New Kingdom; Ramesses; imperialism; border; frontier; boundary; Kadesh; Palestine; Syria; Israel; Mediterranean; history; heritage; culture

1. Introduction

In the history of academic research, scholarly interest in a local perspective on an imperialistic or colonial situation is a prevalent, but relatively new, area. Following World War II, there was a shift in the study of historical empires and their subjects as a result of geopolitical changes.

The term "imperialism" describes models of domination of a national entity over others that combine territorial expansion, political control, economic exploitation, and cultural influence. As an idea, it stems within the sphere of the 19th c. political thought, to describe modern cases of political dominance, reflecting, nevertheless, the classical paradigm of Rome [1] (pp. 2–3). The term has then been adapted and established to identify domination policies of other ancient territorial powers classified as 'empires', including pharaonic Egypt. Indeed, Egypt's policies towards its southern as well as northeastern neighbors have been persuasively identified as "imperialism" by modern scholarship [2]. However, there is still room to challenge the wide application of the term [3] (pp. ii, 6, 16–30). While "an imperialist power must have imperialist aims and motives" [4], these aims and motives still vary according to case. Since imperial systems are dynamic in nature [5] (p. 8), there is enough space for exploring the exact dynamics of Egyptian expansion during the Ramesside period, from the aspect of aims and motives that also characterize the cultural modality.

This paper seeks to reconsider the way Ramesside Egypt perceived the issue of borders and territorial expansion in relation to the way modern scholarship has presented it within its understanding of Egyptian territorial control and expansion policies as "imperialism".

It aims at highlighting the way Egyptians perceived their borders from c. 1292 to 1069 BCE, and to explore whether using the modern term "imperialism" to describe ancient Egyptian expansion policies is actually an anachronism. Thus, we review the scholarship on (a) Egyptian records documenting conquests and (b) contextual archaeological evidence from the southern Near East itself, recording Egyptian heritage elements. Finally, Egyptian border-related terms are used in a strictly local symbolic cultural context but not in the one of international diplomacy. This review highlights differences between modern and ancient conceptions of land domination and deepens into the ancient cultural diplomacy.

Historical Context

The issue of territorial borders is critical to beginning such an exploration as such borders set a temporary limit of territorial domination and set the controlled area apart from the uncontrolled/hostile one. In the traditional understanding of history, borders' setting, shifting and guarding is often presented as both the aim and the outcome of transformational events. The importance of border-setting for both European nation-states and postcolonial states [6] (pp. 177–178) has led to a common understanding that setting solid territorial borders is key to securing international prosperity. Additional to this assumption is the wide textual and contextual record from pre-modern times (Antiquity and the Middle Ages), such as peace treaties and monumental strings of fortifications perceived as imperial frontier walls (e.g., the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, UK, the Justinian Wall-Zenobia, Syria) [7] (pp. 233–236), [8] (p. 1).

Regarding ancient Egypt, the textual attestation of terms designating edifices of defensive character separating Egypt from the outside world as well as through an extensive record of written and archaeological heritage evidence indicating a systematic strict control of people and goods entering and leaving the territory of Egypt suggest the existence of strict, solid borders. However, examples from modern challenged territories show that borders can be designated in a complicated way, encircling areas under various levels of control and eternally subject to change (e.g., [6] (pp. 180–181), [9] (pp. 119–125)). Thus, evidence might not be enough to testify to the complete nature of Egypt's and other ancient states' territorial sovereignty.

For about four centuries (from the mid-16th to the 12th century BCE) the Egyptian state was characterized by territorial expansion and domination policies that have been interpreted as imperialistic. The first Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty, especially Thutmose III, pursued a series of campaigns resulting in several well-reported conquests in Nubia and the Levant [10]. This was followed by a military and diplomatic struggle for maintaining these conquests that lasted from the mid-18th Dynasty to the start of the 20th Dynasty, with breaks during the Amarna period and the last years of the 19th Dynasty. The Ramesside period (19th and 20th Dynasty, 1295–1069 BCE), which is essentially characterized by the struggle to regain what was lost during the Amarna period, is characterized by the stabilization of power with the Kadesh treaty (1269 BCE) and ends with Egypt's last conquests in Palestine lost and settled by new inhabitants [11] (pp. 272–309).

While the 18th Dynasty Pharaohs had an interest in expansion to both the North and the South, most of the Ramessides had a particular interest in maintaining their Levantine conquests. These were cities spreading along two main routes connecting Egypt to Asia Minor (one inland and one along the Syro-Palestinian coast), with major strategic and commercial prominence, yet challenged by nomadic tribes [12] (p. 193), [13] (p. 6). The issue inconsideration, however, is the actual geographical definition of the territory, which Egypt sought to control during the whole phase of the Empire, with a particular focus on the aspirations of the Ramesside pharaohs. Thus, tangible and intangible cultural elements, concerning the Egyptian border-related terms are used in a strictly local symbolic cultural context but not in the one of international diplomacy.

How did the Egyptians perceive the borders of their country during the Ramesside period? What did dominance over a territory mean for Egypt in the 19th and 20th Dynasty? To what extent is the Egyptian territorial dominance model different from the modern

concept of imperialism by which is often explained? As this subject is only slightly explored, with a limited bibliography, our work is a step forward in the knowledge of heritage studies from the point of sovereign supremacy in ancient Egypt and Egyptology.

Seeking to define the territory the 19th and 20th Dynasty Pharaohs sought to control, I will attempt a scholarly review of evidence in relation to the idea of borders as presented in recent scholarship, followed by a synthesis of available information. This evidence is both textual and contextual. Textual evidence comes in the form of terms, place names, expressions and text excerpts surviving in the Egyptian linguistic corpus and connected to ideas such as borders, frontiers, territorial expansion and even imperialism. Contextual evidence comes in the form of edifices interpreted as defining frontiers and ranking from simple stelae to larger structures such as forts and walls.

2. Material Evidence and Method

2.1. Egyptian Terms Related to Frontiers/Borders, Territorial Control and Imperialism

As the Egyptian linguistic corpus does preserve words and signs designating home territory, several terms have been linked to defining "border". In general, scholarship has interpreted the word djer (Dr) as referring to an eternal and universal limit and tash (tAS) as a signifier of actual geographic frontier set by deities, but also people [14], and is thus more akin to what is of interest here.

Stephen Quirke [15] (p. 261) interprets tAS as "frontier", also making a clear distinction between frontier and border. According to Quirke, a border is more or less fixed while a frontier is a loose "indefinite zone" "when the polity comes to an end". Later, Galán [2] (p. 9) focuses on evidence from the Empire's formation during the 18th Dynasty and argues that tAS refers to "the area limits of someone's authority or sphere of action". He also highlights that tAS could "be set" (iritAS) and "expand" (s.wsHtAS), with the second having arguably the closest Egyptian parallel to the term "imperialism" (referencing Bleiberg [16]). However, he refrains from discriminating between what in English is called "border" and "frontier". Only recently, Langer and Götz [17] (p. 34) have interpreted the distinction between border and frontier as a continuum rather than a dichotomy between two types of boundaries. In this study, in which previous bibliography is assessed, the following is demonstrated:

- Egypt's tAS is equal to a "sphere of influence", the territory directly or indirectly controlled by the state, while Dr is a "sphere of chaos" beyond the Egyptian control.
- tAS is connected to the cosmological idea of mAat and Dris equally connected to the idea of isft, mAat's opposite and
- The two are fluid and while the Egyptians expand the tAS, the Dr is reduced. Since movement was continuous and Egyptian control fluid, the result was the creation of culturally mixed borderlands.

The assessments above are based on records dating prior to the Ramesside period. Still, key Ramesside examples from royal temple inscriptions seem to confirm:

- There is a set tAS that might be threatened or/and plundered by enemies; e.g., Pharaoh Merenptah accusing the "Nine Bows" of plundering Egypt's borders present an example of the term's use [18] (p. 4).
- The tAS is fluid, and ideally ever-expanding: The word is used in the standard royal phrase defining the Pharaoh as one 'who establishes his boundary as far as he wants, in any land' [irtAS = f rdd(t) Hr = f]. e.g., the "rhetorical" text of Seti I in Karnak, [19] (p. 7). The Kings are also praised for having extended it; e.g., Ramesses II is "extending their borders forever" (sHD.n = k tAS = sn) [20] (p. 197).

On the contrary, the Kadesh treaty, the "international" document signed between the Egyptians and the Hittites, does not employ the term tAS for borders. Instead, the phrase used in the hieroglyphic text of the treaty, as it survives in Karnak, is "trespass the land" (thi r pAtA) for indicating violating the border of Egypt (kmt)and of Hatti (Hti), respectively [20] (p. 227, §13–14)

2.2. Lists of Placenames

Since the 18th Dynasty, lists of foreign place names (often associated with the iconography of bound captives) have been inscribed on temple walls, statue bases or stelae set within the premises of temples or other royal edifices; indeed, this custom continues throughout the Ramesside period, with Seti I and Ramesses II, Merenptah and Ramesses III commissioning such lists on their monuments. These lists, recording place names of the Near East (Northern lists) as well as Nubia (Southern lists) have been recorded, documented [18–20] and also assessed by K. Kitchen who has classified them according to context and content [21].

According to this analysis, context-wise, these place names, often linked with triumph scenes, record the willingness of the pharaohs to report the gods on their success in imposing mAat to a certain geographical sphere outside Egypt. In the case of Seti I, Ramesses II, Merenptah and Ramesses III such lists may also occur in battle reliefs [21] (p. 130), an event further highlighting the link between war and the domination over certain lands. Content-wise, the Northern place names of the Ramesside period reproduce original lists of Thutmose III. In the case of Seti I and Ramesses II, however, lists include additional, original place names [21] (p. 136), in an attempt to reflect contemporary events.

2.3. Egyptian Terms Related to Fortified Frontiers and Areas of Control

Since the Middle Kingdom, the Egyptian record preserves the term inbw-HqA, translated as "The Walls of the Ruler" and connected with a series of fortresses along the Eastern Delta that defined the frontier line with Palestine [14] (p. 318), [22], [23] (p. 159). During the New Kingdom, there is extended evidence referring to a similar defense system known as "The Ways of Horus" (wAtHr). The term is already recorded in the Old Kingdom's Pyramid texts, but only in the New Kingdom is it associated with a heavily fortified gateway to the Northeast, in use as such already in the reign of Thutmose III [24] (p. 7). Alan Gardiner identified and documented Ramesside epigraphic evidence on the Ways of Horus in a series of reliefs commissioned by Seti I on the outer North wall of the Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Amun at Karnak [25] (pp. 99–116). Gardiner also identified several place names mentioned in the reliefs to others, known from Papyrus Anastasi I [25] (p. 103). Later scholarship confirmed that the Ways of Horus indeed had the form of a series of settlements extending from modern-day Qantara in Ismailia to Rafah in the modern border of Egypt with Palestine (the Gaza Strip) [26] (p. 33), actually ascribing an Egyptian-controlled route, connecting rather than separating Egypt from the outside world. The easternmost site attested in both documents of Pap. Anastasi I and Seti I's reliefs at Karnak, and solely associated with the end of the route at least during Seti I's time, is Rafah. The later record bears one more entry, Gaza itself, mentioned as the last part of the route in Pap. Anastasi I [25] (p. 113). Central to that roadway was the Tjaru/Sile, identified with Tell el Heboua, near Qantara.

Tjaru is designated as anxtm, a term derived from the word "lock" or "seal" and generally meaning sites "locking" the access to an area worth controlling. Another toponym associated with anxtm on the Ways of Horus, which is mentioned in Pap. Anastasi I is hTyn. Gardiner identifies it with Megiddo [25] (p. 113) while Morris [27] (p. 804) sees it as identical to the Migdol of Menmaatre mentioned in Seti I's Battle reliefs [19] (p. 10). Beyond the Ways of Horus, however, Morris has recorded five other xtm fortresses functioning during the Ramesside period: "the xtm of the sea" set on the mouth of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, Tjeku (Tell el-Retaba) on the WadiTumilat transit corridor, thextm at the highland of Coptos on the Wadi Hammamat, and two at Elephantine and Biga on the first Cataract. The above evidence shows that the term was applied to forts controlling the main passages to Egypt, where the documentation of people and goods entering and leaving the country was first taking place [27] (pp. 804–814). Moreover, these Ramesside-era xtm fortresses appear as literally encircling the Nile Valley's Egyptian part and controlling routes at the same time.In that sense, they designate a borderline defensive network combination shaping a heavily controlled zone around Egypt.

It seems, however, that this Egyptian control network did not end with these lines of forts. According to Gnirs [26], a network of vassal cities beyond the Ways of Horus could function in a similar way to the fortresses, stationing Egyptian representatives who would send dispatches to the Pharaonic Residence, or securing military expeditions with provisions. Garrison towns designated as dmiw were founded, however, wherever the network was in need of a "bridge" between two of its towns, which would be subsequent but at a distance from each other [26] (p. 35). This system was forming a buffer zone between the heavily controlled area around Egypt and the outside world.

2.4. Boundary Stelae'

The term "boundary stelae" refers to a type of monumental inscriptions often accompanied with iconography, occurring either on free-standing blocks of stone or carved on rocks and interpreted as marking the end of a territory under control, whether this is Egypt as a country or the different names within it. Such a stela, commissioned by Thutmose III "to mark Egypt's northern border at his time" (carved alongside another one, made by Thutmose I), is known from six textual sources-five royal and one private [28] (p. 337), but not as a physical object. While no such stela has ever been found in Egypt's northern putative border, a number of monuments that marked Egypt's southern border survive in the area of Nubia; these monuments date from the Middle Kingdom up to the 18th Dynasty, but no later. A stela of Thutmose III surviving as a rock cut inscription at Kurgus, Nubia, and referring to his northern and southern "boundary"(tAS) may be seen as a parallel of Thutmose III's lost monument in the Northern Levant [29] (p. 51, Figure 7, p. 52). Kurgus has also given two more stelae set side by side, the first by Thutmose I and the second by Thutmose III. Inscribed with a curse-on-threat formula against the Nubians rather than a border-setting text, these stelae are placed in a mode reminiscent of the Levantine boundary stelae's description and may thus be considered as another parallel. A cartouche of Ramesses II carved next to them shows an attempt of the latter to "endorse" the stelae's message without erecting another [29] (p. 49, Figure 4, p. 50).

The Ramesside kings produced a number of monumental stelae erected in the Levant [30] (pp. 1–3); these stelae are worth reviewing as we seek to identify possible "descendants" of the earlier border stelae known from Nubia. Seti I commissioned the northernmost known such stela, found at Kadesh (Tell Nebi Mend) in Syria [19] (p. 25 § 9), [30] (p. 2) as well as stelae in Tell el Shihab, Syria [19] (p. 17 § 5), Tyre in Lebanon [30] (p. 117) and two more at the Beth Shan in Palestine [19] (pp. 11, 12–15). Ramesses II boasts a larger corpus;like his father, he commissioned a stela in Palestine's Beth Shan, and in Lebanon's Tyre (two fragments inscribed with his cartouche [30] (p. 2, footnote 8) and Byblos (a site which has also given a stela by Thutmose III) [20] (p. 63), [31] (p. 224). In Lebanon, Ramesses commissioned a stela at Adhlun [20] (p. 223) and three rock cut stelae at Nahr el Kalb [20] (pp. 1, 149), [27] (pp. 360–361), [31] (p. 385), the earliest ones in an impressive group of 22 stelae inscribed there by different conquerors across the millennia [32]. Ramesses II is also attributed to a Syrian stela, from Sheikh Said which is known as "the stone of Job", (KRI II, 223). Then, a stela from at-Turra is the only known stela of Ramesses II ever found in what is now Jordan [30].

As demonstrated above, the term tAS is found in Seti I's Tyre [19] (p. 117) and the second Beth Shan stela [19] (p. 16). From the stelae of Ramesses II, the ones from Sheikh Said and Adhlun could be seen as signifiers of land dominance since they bear the iconographical themes of the King offering mAat to a deity and the King slaying enemies before Amun, respectively. Regarding textual evidence, only the stela of Byblos bears an extended text, recording Ramesses II's expedition in the area in his Regnal Year 4 [27] (p. 360). In the rest of the stelae, the text is either limited or not well preserved.

2.5. Archaeological Evidence Related to Fortified Frontiers and Areas of Control

The evidence presented here is coming exclusively from the seminal work of Ellen Morris on Egyptian imperialism [27], as she was able to relate toponyms referring to

Egyptian border control posts with actual sites in the area of the Sinai, Palestine and the Northern Levant. Of these sites, designated as xtmw or dmiw, the only fully researched are Tell el Retabah and Tell el Heboua I [27] (p. 807).

Tell el Retabah, located along the Wadi Tumilat, bears the remains of a fortress identified as the border fortress of Tjeku [27] (p. 396, Figure 28). The area gained prominence during the Hyksos period, and most architectural remains may go back to the 18th Dynasty; however, the earliest recorded portable finds come from the 19th Dynasty. Nevertheless, the settlement was surrounded by an enclosure wall and featured a 19th Dynasty state-sponsored temple dedicated to Atum of Tjeku and a monumental building made of bricks known as the "Great House". Further buildings do not survive, although there are early testimonies of "numerous remains of brick houses", anda necropolis of mudbrick tombs survives 400 m. north of the town [27] (pp. 504–508).

Tell el Heboua Ihas been identified as the ancient Egyptian Tjaru; also a former Hyksos power-base, it is an extensive settlement with a considerable amount of architectural remains (enclosure, granaries) dating before the 19th Dynasty. Research has so far shown that Seti I reconstructed and enhanced the settlement's mudbrick enclosure, while there is considerable architectural evidence to support the presence of a monumental building equivalent to Tell el Retabah's "Great House", as well as further administrative buildings, magazines, storage facilities but also houses. Around the site, research has located a number of smaller settlements identified as satellite communities [27] (pp. 509–511).

Elements common to both sites allowed for the identification of the characteristics of anxtm site. Such characteristics are the following:

- the location in an entry-site to the Nile Valley;
- the presence of a central monumental building serving administrative purposes
- fortification.

Thus, it is possible to identify several archaeological sites as xtm, sharing the characteristics described above, despite the fact that they are not documented as xtm in written sources; an example is Kom el-Qulzoum, a massively fortified site of 20th Dynasty date [27] (p. 742).

Alternatively, other sites known from the archaeological record of the southern Levant might be identified otherwise. A site is identified as a dmi if the central building known as the xtmw is central to an administrative-storage complex which often includes a temple as well as domestic space [27] (p. 816). Small, rectangular fortified compounds with "numerous small administrative, domestic and industrial buildings" surrounding an empty central area are identified as Mkdr (migdol) [27] (p. 819).

Morris evaluates the extensive Ramesside architectural finds, which come from a number of sites spread along the main routes, joining Egypt to Palestine and Syria via the Sinai. At the same time, she assesses portable finds representative of the character of the material culture of these sites. Such sites, where Egyptian heritage is evident, include Deir el-Balah, Tell el-Ajjul, Haruba site A-345, Bir el-Abd [27] (p. 222), Tell el-Farah, Tel Sera, and Tell el-Hesi, (p. 394), Ashdod, Tel Mor, Gezer, Aphek, Jaffa, and Beth Shan, with some in use also during the 18th Dynasty.

Morris finds that, while in the late 18th Dynasty, Egyptians invested in the security of their immediate border territory by supporting bases clustered around the Ways of Horus [27] (p. 270); during the Ramesside period, they set military bases further ahead Gaza (the northern limit of the Ways of Horus), across the southern Levant's maritime way (Via Maris) [27] (p. 397 Figure 29, 717, Figure 54) probably in an attempt to monitor sea routes. Such bases flourish during the 19th Dynasty but fade by the mid-20th, especially after Ramesses III [27] (p. 738). Like the forts along the Ways of Horus, these bases seem to be set a day's journey apart from each other; still, while the Ways of Horus' bases are fortified, the ones further away are not [27] (pp. 387–388).Mostly designated as dmiw, these bases supported a considerable population with mixed (Egyptian and Levantine) cultural traits, living under Egyptian regional command [27] (pp. 826–827). These cultural traits, demonstrated in finds-ranking from locally produced yet stylistically Egyptian pottery and

Egyptianizing objects to large Egyptian-style temples [27] (pp. 713–714), suggest that these settlements' inhabitantshad developed a mixed heritage background [33] (p. 280); within this background, Egyptian influence is strong, yet not longstanding [34] (p. 249), [35] (pp. 78–79, 93, 99). Nevertheless, dmiw formed a buffer zone between the locks of the Nile Valley and "unconquered" lands.

3. Discussion

In search of Ramesside Egypt's "imperialistic aims", it is essential to define how Egyptians perceived the ideal border of their country and whether it was possible to reach it.

The so-called "boundary stelae" do not depict borders in a literal sense (contra [35] (p. 29)). Set either within spaces already designated as sacred or on sites with advanced symbolic importance, they mostly seem to express the willingness of the Pharaoh to declare his presence and dominion to a strategically important area rather than his ability to trespass into foreign territory, let alone declare a universally accepted limit between two territories. In that sense, the term itself might be problematic for stelae erected or located in the Egyptian/Southwest Asian borderland; consequently, stelae by Ramesside pharaohs in the Levant should not be considered as such.

Ramesside topographical lists may express actual contemporary Egyptian ideas on expansion. A comparison of 19th Dynasty material with earlier and later lists context-wise and content-wise show a certain originality that elaborated on the main purpose of such lists: to record the pharaonic ideal purpose of extending power and control as far as possible. Early lists may have recorded sites actually reached by the Egyptians (e.g., the great lists of Thutmose III). In other cases, however, lists record places linked with through nothing more than positive diplomatic relations and/or trade (e.g., the "Aegean list" of Amenhotep III [36] (pp. 313–317), [37,38]). Ramesside lists, especially the ones of the 19th Dynasty, continue serving a traditional symbolic role within the royal context of the Egyptian cultural sphere. Still, they add to our knowledge of new places of interest exclusive in the Ramesside period, which, alongside the known ones, comprise a network of sites linked with each other, where the Egyptians did express control during the 19th and 20th Dynasties.

References to borders may differ between official texts commissioned strictly within Egypt and others compiled within an international environment to serve diplomatic goals. The standard Ramesside royal epithet "the one who establishes his boundary as far as he wants, in any land", used in royal inscriptions, does express the idea of a border. On the contrary, in the Kadesh treaty's text, the phrase "trespass the land of Egypt . . . trespass the Land of Hatti" shows the perception of a fixed border, but lacks any particular wording to express it. Instead, there is the idea of two neighboring territories whose limits are well understood and mutually agreed. Geographical definitions to these borders/limits (absent from the Kadesh treaty) had probably been covered by previous treaties of regional scale, established through the two Great Kings' vassals [38] (p. 16). Overall, the idea of the border as a line between Egypt and abroad was largely symbolic, important only so much as it served Egyptian royal ideology, while territory was what mattered in the "real world" of international diplomacy.

According to the Egyptian worldview, the Pharaoh inherits "everything gods have created"at his coronation, and his purpose is to keep it in balance. The world itself is considered harmonious and the property of the Pharaoh [38] (p. 10) at a distance equal to the horizon or the four pillars sustaining the sky [39] (pp. 51–52). However, there was that part of the world outside Egypt, which was considered as ruled by chaos; only inside Egypt could one find balance (mAat). As a result, one of the duties of the Pharaoh was to expand the territory of mAat as much as he could, essentially by expanding the borders of his country.

The pharaonic duty of territorial expansion took on the dimensions ofa ritual drama concerning the fight of good against evil, depicted in temples and other monuments [39]

(p. 8); to express it, the Egyptians used the narrative of real conflicts, whatever the actual outcome of these fights was for the Egyptians. A clear example is Ramesses II's activity at the battle of Kadesh against the Hittites. There Ramesses is presented fighting to expand his borders against an enemy that behaved badly according to the rules of war [39] (p. 162) and he is finally saved by Amun, to save, as a god himself, his army at the end [40] (pp. 44–46). Gods stand with the Egyptians in every attempt for expansion; indeed, even the foreign gods appear to do so, as manifestations of the Egyptian gods [38] (pp. 11–14).

The reality, however, was different. Egypt had a natural border marked by the desert and the sea [39] (p. 86), [14] (p. 318);outside of these natural borders, communities with advanced standards of living, as well as centuries-old networks of cultural contact and political interaction, were forming a world equally balanced yet more dynamic than the one of Egypt. As a result, the will (and struggle) for expansion derived from the fight of harmony over chaos that tradition implied had to be put to a halt. To face political reality, Egypt had to change its expansion ideology from a centralistic to a pluralistic one: Egypt's borders would not have to be moving outwards; instead, the pharaohs would have to control their borders' fluctuation according to the balance of forces between Egypt and its neighboring states [41] (p. 46).

Diplomatic correspondences between Egypt and its neighboring states show that there was a shift to a pluralist approach concerning borders, at least since the reign of Thutmose IV in the 18th Dynasty. The Amarna Letters, the surviving corpus of the 18th Dynasty diplomatic correspondence, famously show that Egypt was an esteemed member of an "Eastern Mediterranean Great Powers' group" that exercised advanced diplomacy through a series of official letters and gift exchange. The letters reflect Egypt's will to sustain control gained during the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 14th c. BCE (LB IB period) across modern-day Palestine [42] (p. 12) and to maintain a power balance in the Levant together with several Near Eastern states of equal if not more prominent status (Babylon, Mitanni, Assyria and the ascending Hatti).

Ramesside kings had to face another reality: following the loss of the Egyptian prestige during the Amarna and the post-Amarna period, a centralistic approach was most definitely promoted by the military elite who rose to power during the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Dynasty as a justification of Egypt's "renaissance". At the same time, the domination of Hatti as a single Great Power in the Near East made the definition of borders in the Egyptian sphere of influence a top priority. The Kadesh treaty—its Egyptian version being carved in hieroglyphs in the precinct of Amunat Karnak and in Ramesses II's mortuary temple—demonstrates that the Egyptians accepted the end of expansion, not only within an international diplomatic context but also within a local cultic one. They had indeed changed the 'centralistic view' deeply imbued in their culture into a "pluralistic" one.

Several researchers have shown the division of Egypt's Levantine conquests into minor administrative territories; however, such scholarly opinions on the identification of these territories vary [35] (pp. 2–3), [27] (pp. 468–470), [37] (p. 47). This administrative division can be considered an indication that the Egyptians were seeking to exercise their control over a wide area that included settlements and countryside. Still, mapping Levantine cities and sites where Egyptian control is demonstrated, based on monuments found there, shows a pattern in the choice of localities [32] (pp. 6–7), [41] (p. 15), [27] (pp. 398, 716–717). These were cities situated along the two major routes used by the Egyptian army [12] (p. 168) and probably set apart within a specific distance equal to a day's trip from one to the other [27] (p. 532), allowing for marching troops or passing by travelers' supply. It is thus worth exploring whether the Egyptians sought to control specific sites of the Levantine territory or the whole region south of the Hittite area of control.

The idea that the Egyptian control expanded over a network of cities rather than a territory as a whole has been analyzed extensively [39] (p. 89). Since each of those towns seemed to play a different role (economical, administrative or strategic) [12] (p. 207), and they could be taxed more easily, the idea seems plausible. At the same time, large

parts of Canaan might have remained a "no man's land", frequented by nomadic groups which were related to the Egyptians ina rather symbiotic way [27] (pp. 488–489). In any case, the Egyptians do not seem to totally control the area, controlling only the territories surrounding settlements. It is also worth stating that cities themselves had no permanent borders [12] (p. 193). Therefore, it is much safer to refer to the Egyptian territory as a network consisting of subsequent settlements and their fluid extended area, rather than a compound conquered land.

4. Conclusions

With regard to the meaning of imperialism for the Egyptians and their consequent activity in the Levant, we have successfully assessed: (a)the scholarship on Egyptian records and (b) the Egyptian heritage elements found within Southern Near Eastern contextual archaeological evidence. Following this review, one can conclude the following:

Imperialism, as it is understood today, is applicable to ancient Egypt, as it connects effectively to the themes of conquest and subjection. Since conquest and subjection of foreign lands by border extension were part of the central Egyptian religious idea of maintaining mAat in the world, imperialism was a crucial part of any Pharaoh's foreign policy, interlocking his secular with his cultic duties. Still, cultural imperialism was present but limited as contextual evidence shows that most Egyptian cultural assets, though influential [43] (p. 126), were eventually appropriated rather than reproduced in the framework of the local Levantine/Canaanite cultural expression, and did not affect Southern Near Eastern heritage in the long term [34] (p. 249).It has also been shown that the local population and its elites were instrumental in shaping historical events in their area all through the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age [44] (p. 125). For all the above, I agree with Anne Killebrew in defining Egyptian imperialism being of an "administrative" or "formal" nature [34] (p. 55). In the Ramesside period, Egypt was threatened initially by the Hittites and later by the completely changed situation in the Western Mediterranean (due to the destruction of Hittites and the Aegean and North Syrian centers during the era of the so-called Sea Peoples). Thus, the Pharaohs' cultic role as maintainers of mAat by expanding the borders of the country became largely symbolic; at first, the Egyptian king had to limit his expansion, after negotiations with his Hittite counterpart, and during these procedures, he had to present himself as equal to his counterpart (Kadesh treaty). During the latest part of the Ramesside period, kings also had to accept their diminished control over the Southwestern Asia after the invasions of the Sea Peoples. Due to weakness, the last Ramessidekings were passive in matters of expansion, although they might have focused on consolidating their control "where Egyptian power was still maintained" [33] (p. 280).

The Egyptians were interested in maintaining control over a fluid sphere of influence rather than a territory in the Levant, which would be around a network of cities over two ancient main routes to Syria. During the Ramesside period, this network consisted of two types of settlements under Egyptian control: (a) Levantine settlements with advanced potential for trade activity and (b) Egyptian garrison towns and way-stations supporting military and administrative activity; the network had the form of a "spectrum", where territorial control was more intense the closer one would get to the Nile Valley. From Gaza and westwards up to Qantara, the network of potentially unfortified administrative centers was replaced by one of heavily fortified "gateways" to Egypt, aiming at controlling the access and exit of people and goods to and from the Nile Valley, respectively [45,46]. This buffer zone would be a protective zone in case of a potential invasion against Egypt [33] (p. 11) but also a safe haven for travelers and merchants.

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