



Trabajos de Egiptología

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Alfonso MARTÍN FLORES

**Napatan Tomb Decorations. Loans from Private Theban Burials
in the Royal Kushite Necropolises**
Simone PETACCHI



 **Centros de Estudios Africanos**
Universidad de La Laguna



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Papers on Ancient Egypt

**Preliminary Report on the Third and Fourth Seasons
of the New Kingdom Scribes Project (2021–2022)**

Lucía DÍAZ-IGLESIAS LLANOS, Ángeles JIMÉNEZ-HIGUERAS,
Daniel Miguel MÉNDEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, Ignacio BERMEJA GIGORRO,
Sagrario MARTÍNEZ RAMÍREZ, Santiago SÁNCHEZ-CORTÉS, Antonio GÓMEZ LAGUNA

**Songs and Hymns for Hathor as Gold from the Old Kingdom
to the Late Period. Part I. Corpora of Texts and Complementary Documents**
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The God Shed at Amarna
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Cultural Similarities between Ancient Egypt and Byzantium
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A Female Egyptian Statuette in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid
Miguel JARAMAGO



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Artículos | Articles

Cultural Similarities between Ancient Egypt and Byzantium

Lloyd D. GRAHAM

This paper is intended as a joint tribute to the scholarship of Egyptologist Erik Hornung and Byzantinist Cyril Mango, both of whom recently passed away. Byzantine traits with obvious parallels in ancient Egyptian culture abound in Cyril Mango's introduction to *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, and yet –both there and elsewhere– one looks in vain for an overt acknowledgment that these two very different civilizations nevertheless shared a distinctive cluster of characteristics. Drawing on Hornung's *Idea Into Image* as a starting point for Egyptological insights, this paper seeks to establish such a correspondence. Shared features of the two cultures include their self-belief, theocratic disposition, bureaucracy, longevity, feigned immutability, preoccupation with order, dynastic tendency, temporal focus, ritualism and artistic conventions, as well as aspects of their kingship paradigms, afterlife anxieties and relative periodisation. The observed similarities point to a nexus of specific principles, behaviours and outcomes – components which tend to co-occur as a group in complex human societies.

Similitudes culturales entre el antiguo Egipto y Bizancio

Este artículo pretende ser un homenaje conjunto a la erudición del egiptólogo Erik Hornung y del bizantinista Cyril Mango, ambos recientemente fallecidos. En la introducción de Cyril Mango a *The Oxford History of Byzantium* abundan los rasgos bizantinos con evidentes paralelismos en la antigua cultura egipcia, y sin embargo –tanto allí como en otros lugares– se busca en vano un reconocimiento manifiesto de que estas dos civilizaciones tan diferentes compartían, no obstante, un conjunto de características distintivas. Basándose en la obra de Hornung *Idea Into Image* como punto de partida para las reflexiones egiptológicas, este artículo trata de establecer dicha correspondencia. Entre los rasgos comunes de ambas culturas se encuentran la fe en sí mismas, el talante teocrático, la burocracia, la longevidad, la inmutabilidad fingida, la preocupación por el orden, la tendencia dinástica, el enfoque temporal, el ritualismo y las convenciones artísticas, así como aspectos de sus paradigmas de realeza, preocupación por el Más Allá y periodización relativa. Las similitudes observadas apuntan a un nexo de principios, comportamientos y resultados específicos, componentes que tienden a coincidir como grupo en las sociedades humanas complejas.

Keywords: Byzantine Empire, intercultural comparison, cross-cultural studies.

Palabras clave: Imperio Bizantino, comparaciones interculturales, estudios transculturales.

It is hardly necessary to say that many circumstantial and societal factors differentiate the culture of ancient Egypt (*ca.* 3150–332 BCE) from that of the Eastern Roman Empire, which in its later incarnation is known to modern scholarship as the Byzantine Empire or, more concisely, Byzantium (*ca.* 330–1453 CE). But are there

also similarities? Surprisingly, Byzantine traits with apparent parallels in ancient Egypt practically leap from the pages of Cyril Mango's introductory chapter in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*,¹ a circumstance which prompted the present cross-cultural comparison. While one could argue that a comparison of the two civilizations is

¹ Mango 2002a.

permissible simply because both consisted of a monarchic theocracy with a large bureaucracy and a powerful priesthood,² it is admittedly unusual to compare two non-contemporaneous civilizations that have little or no geographic overlap. The exercise is therefore undertaken in the spirit of Guy Stroumsa, who noted that: “like all intellectual moves, comparison is most valuable when it is not obvious”.³ A detailed justification for the exercise is more naturally accommodated after its completion than before its commencement, so a defence of the project can be found in the concluding section of the paper. Since ancient Egypt will be very familiar to the readership of this journal,⁴ the present communication will assume a general understanding of Egyptian cultural norms and will focus on their potential counterparts in the Byzantine world.

Mango’s perceptive and insightful chapter is the source of many of the quotations about the Byzantine Empire in this paper, with others being drawn from elsewhere in the book. Its Egyptological counterpart would have to be Erik Hornung’s *Idea Into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*,⁵ a distillation of this major scholar’s wisdom. It is from Hornung’s short book that a number of the quotations about Egypt are taken, although –inevitably– the discussion ranges further afield. With the passing

of Mango in February 2021 and of Hornung in July 2022, this paper is offered as a joint token of appreciation for the great contribution made by both individuals to their respective fields.

Let me state from the outset that there is no attempt in this paper to pretend that ancient Egypt and Byzantium were monolithic and bereft of change during their long lifetimes. Both were highly stratified societies whose fortunes varied over time in response to internal and external changes. Egypt, for example, suffered three “Intermediate Periods” of relative disunity during its dynastic trajectory, being dominated in the second such period by Semitic Levantines known as the Hyksos.⁶ For its part, Byzantium underwent a *coupure* –a vast territorial contraction accompanied by governmental and urban collapse–⁷ in 575–650 CE, followed by a Dark Age that lasted until 780 CE;⁸ a capitulation to the Fourth Crusade in 1204 CE;⁹ and a series of catastrophes during 1341–1372 CE, which saw the state damaged irreparably by devastating civil wars, foreign invasions and bubonic plague.¹⁰ What concerns us here, however, is continuity rather than change. The many differences between the two cultures are freely admitted, too, and will be discussed further in the next section. The overall hope is that we can move beyond particulars and concentrate on essence – focusing not on the

² Runciman 1977: 1–2 and 161–163; Van Dijk 2003: 305.

³ Stroumsa 2018: 8–9.

⁴ Ancient Egypt is also well represented to non-specialists (through school and university curricula, museum exhibitions, newspaper and magazine articles, public lectures, television documentaries, websites, etc.) in a way that Byzantium is not.

⁵ Hornung 1992 [1989].

⁶ Bourriau 2003.

⁷ McEvedy 1992: 26–33; Mango 2002a: 3–4.

⁸ Treadgold 2002: 129–150; Mango 2002b: 214.

⁹ Reinert 2002: 250.

¹⁰ Reinert 2002: 263–270.

(metaphorical) food but on its flavour, or at least looking beyond obvious material differences in search of more subtle similarities.

As mentioned earlier, a justification for the exercise will be presented in the concluding section. There, it will be proposed that the cultural similarities are too great to be dismissed as coincidental. Since direct or indirect transmissions from ancient Egypt to the Byzantine Empire are very limited –both in number and in scope– it will be suggested that the observed similarities point to a survival strategy that has emerged independently more than once in the history of the world’s civilizations. In evolutionary biology, a shared adaptive response of this kind would be termed “convergent evolution”;¹¹ there is no *a priori* reason why this mechanism should not also operate at the level of entire populations.¹²

1 | Differences

One might reasonably begin by pointing to the very different geographical circumstances of Egypt and Byzantium. Concentrated in the Nile valley, Egypt’s heartland was always relatively isolated and protected from attack by the great powers of the Ancient Near East, such as the Akkadians, Assyrians, Mittani and Hittites. In contrast, Byzantium’s straddling of the junction between Europe and Asia, along with the maritime

setting of its capital Constantinople, saw it continually defending its borders against rivals such as Sassanian Iran, the Islamic Caliphate and its Balkan neighbours to the north.¹³ While the periodic collapse of the Egyptian state was essentially the result of internal stresses and domestic failures, the Byzantine *coupure* of 575–650 CE –although facilitated by a plague-induced fiscal shortfall and by a coup in 602 CE that descended into civil war– can largely be considered a response to external military pressure from Persian and Muslim forces, in that order.¹⁴ The Latin dismemberment of Byzantium in 1204–1210 CE was the consequence of its defeat by the European crusaders.¹⁵ The fragmentation of 1341–1372 CE was also due in part to foreign encroachment, mainly Serbian and Ottoman invasion and settlement.¹⁶

Following on from the different geographic circumstances of the two entities comes the ethnic homogeneity of ancient Egypt and the corresponding diversity of Byzantium. Egypt tended to acculturate –and often assimilate– its population intake from peripheral groups,¹⁷ which included Nubian nomads in the Second Intermediate Period and Libyan migrants in the Third Intermediate Period.¹⁸ Levantine and Nubian territories that were conquered during the New Kingdom were exploited and even colonised but never became part of Egypt itself;¹⁹ so the Egyptian population remained relatively homogeneous. In contrast, the population of the

¹¹ Conroy 2005: 89; Haviland *et alii* 2008: 110.

¹² Caldwell 2008; Groucutt 2020.

¹³ McEvedy 1992: 12–91.

¹⁴ Sarris 2002: 49–59.

¹⁵ Reinert 2002: 250–251.

¹⁶ Reinert 2002: 263–265.

¹⁷ Shaw 2003: 320.

¹⁸ Kitchen 1991: 206; Broekman, Demarée and Kaper 2009; Török 2009: 202–203; De Souza 2013.

¹⁹ Assmann 2002: 318–319; Shaw 2003: 317–320.

Byzantine Empire – a veritable commonwealth of nations – was thoroughly mixed; besides “old native stock”, it consisted of Slavs (especially in the Balkans), Caucasians (Armenians, Georgians, Laz and Western traders), Oriental groups (Syrians, Turks and Christian Arabs) and resilient minorities (Jews, Romani/Gypsies and Vlachs).²⁰ While Slavs formed the majority of the population, Caucasians dominated the imperial apparatus.²¹ The linguistic situation in the two states mirrored the ethnic one. Egypt was essentially monolingual, although in the New Kingdom the Egyptian language was supplemented by Akkadian as the medium of international diplomacy.²² The linguistic landscape of Byzantium was far more variegated and also changed over time. Latin was at first the official language, but by the early seventh century it had been supplanted by the *lingua franca* of Greek; provincial languages of the Empire included Armenian, Syriac, and Arabic.²³

Although both were theocracies, the philosophical and religious spirits of the two civilizations were very different. The dogmatic intolerance

and abstruse theological controversies that attended Eastern Christianity²⁴ are wholly alien to the “flexible and pluralistic approach” that epitomises the religious and mythological thought of ancient Egypt.²⁵ In contrast to the Byzantine zeal for orthodoxy, whose absolutism mired the church in bitter and ever more torturous Christological and Trinitarian disputes, “the Egyptians knew that their answers could not be definitive” and set about “evading rigid schemes and fixed rules”.²⁶ Accordingly, their logic may be characterised as a pragmatic rationalism that “steers clear of monocausal simplification”.²⁷ Much acrimony – and indeed bloodshed –²⁸ could have been avoided if the Byzantine clerics and their emperors had possessed even a little of what Willeke Wendrich describes as the Egyptians’ “enormous flexibility in allowing non-harmonized parallel truths”.²⁹

While Byzantium, like Egypt before it, viewed itself as being divinely mandated and uniquely privileged – Egypt’s notional dominion encompassed “that which the sun-disk encircles”,³⁰

20 Mango 2002a: 11–12.

21 Mango 2002a: 11.

22 Ataç 2015: 432.

23 Mango 2002a: 5 and 7.

24 E.g., Chadwick 1967: 129–151 and 192–212. The dogmatic preoccupations of Byzantine Christianity reflect the empire’s heritage (via cities such as Alexandria and Antioch) of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy comingled with the Jewish hermeneutic tradition of detailed commentaries and interpretations.

25 Hornung 1992 [1989]: 14. Of course, one must exclude the twenty-year Amarna Period and the backlash that it provoked.

26 Hornung 1992 [1989]: 13–14 and 82. As an example of such “both/and” thinking, one could point to the concurrent use of many different – and to our minds, incompatible – views of the afterlife journey in the Netherworld Books of the New Kingdom; Hornung 1999 [1997]. Of course, the plurality of competing visions in Egyptian religion creates its own barrier to transparency – to the modern mind, at least.

27 Hornung 1992 [1989]: 14.

28 For wars partly motivated (or at least justified) by theological differences, one might cite the sixth-century attacks of the emperor Justinian on the Vandals and Ostrogoths, who were Arian rather than Chalcedonian Christians. See Mirsanu 2008; Nofziger 2012.

29 Wendrich 2010a: 4.

30 Hornung 1992 [1989]: 88–89. Ancient Egyptians believed that the gods had chosen Egypt to be the enforcer and guardian of the cosmic order (*maat*), which imparted a sense of national elitism and cultural superiority.

while Byzantium aspired to be the sole and universal Christian empire –³¹ there were marked differences in self-perception between ancient Egyptians and *Romaioi* (as the Byzantines called themselves), and these translated into opposite outlooks on life in this world. “The Egyptians never abandoned the belief that it was possible to change the world in productive ways [... and a]ncient Egyptian culture derived a remarkable energy and optimism from this belief”,³² whereas for the Byzantines “there was no expectation of [...] any physical or spiritual betterment. All one could look forward to were the final convulsions of a tired and sinful world”.³³

Ancient Egypt and Byzantium also enjoyed very different receptions amongst Western scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Egypt, the academy took its cue from Herodotus’ encomium: “nowhere are there so many marvellous things [... and] so many great works of unspeakable greatness”.³⁴ Napoleon’s *Description de l’Égypte* (1809–1829) spawned a frenzy of acquisition on the part of French and British Orientalists, bent as they were on stocking their national museums with the biggest and best of Egyptian treasures.³⁵ Pharaonic Egypt was appropriated by European colonialists as an ancient model for their own nations’ imperialism,³⁶

and –relocated to Paris, London and other capitals – its artefacts were displayed as trophies to demonstrate the supremacy of the colonial powers.³⁷ In tandem with this, Egyptianising influences on Western art and architecture reached new heights – Egyptomania at its zenith.³⁸ Even today, the glories of ancient Egypt enjoy a massive and unparalleled public appeal,³⁹ remaining ever popular in print, cinema, television, museum exhibitions and online media. What a contrast, then, we find in the Western reception of Byzantium. William Lecky’s 1869 appraisal conveys the tone that prevailed amongst scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:⁴⁰ “Of that Byzantine empire, the universal verdict of history is that it constitutes, with scarcely an exception, the most thoroughly base and despicable form that civilisation has yet assumed [...;] there has been no other enduring civilisation so absolutely destitute of all the forms and elements of greatness, and none to which the epithet ‘mean’ may be so emphatically applied”.⁴¹ It was not until the turn of the twentieth century that Byzantium’s reputation underwent something of a rehabilitation, one pioneered by the artistic avant-garde⁴² and “the gentlemen-scholars of Oxford University – so intrigued, as they were, by the

31 Runciman 1977: 1; Eshel 2018: 198–201.

32 Hornung 1992 [1989]: 91.

33 Mango 2002a: 16.

34 Herodotus II.35, quoted as frontispiece to Carrott 1978.

35 Jeffreys 2003: 3–4.

36 Jeffreys 2003: 1 and 12; Langer 2017: 182–202.

37 Hassan 2003; Bierbrier 2003: 69–76.

38 Humbert 2015.

39 Jeffreys 2003: 5–7; MacDonald and Rice 2003.

40 Mango 2002c.

41 Lecky 1869: 13.

42 Kourelis 2007: 391–393.

empire's fall from grace and its even harder fall from memory."⁴³

Despite the many obvious differences between the two civilizations and their contrary receptions in Western scholarship, there also seem to be remarkable similarities. We have already noted that each state considered itself to be divinely privileged, and that each took the form of a monarchic theocracy with a large bureaucracy and a powerful priesthood. Beyond these correspondences, however, lie more specific similarities. As mentioned in the Introduction, Byzantine traits with apparent parallels in ancient Egyptian culture abound in Cyril Mango's introduction to *The Oxford History of Byzantium*; it is to these that we now turn.

2 | Similarities

2.1 | Conservatism and longevity

Let us begin with the issue of timelessness, or the simulation thereof. Distancing himself from Yeats' characterisation –“Great Byzantium... where nothing ever changes”– Mango nevertheless agrees that “The empire, no matter how much it changed below the surface, did present a façade of studied immutability, which was an essential part of its mystique”.⁴⁴ He elaborates:

That is why on state occasions the emperor [...] reclin[ed] on a couch as no one had done since antiquity, and watched on the Kalends of January

a performance of dancing ‘Goths’, although no Goths had been in evidence since anyone could remember. That is why medieval court dignitaries bore Roman titles like consul, patrician, magister, quaestor and received as their insignia such outdated objects as fibulas, ivory tablets, and gold torques of a type worn by army officers in Late Antiquity; why on coinage barely intelligible Latin inscriptions were maintained long after the language had gone out of use.⁴⁵

Beyond noting a coincidental resemblance of the golden torques to the *šbyw* collar of the Gold of Honour,⁴⁶ Egyptologists may be reminded of the populous bureaucracy of ancient Egypt and its penchant for retaining and reviving honorific titles, whether royal, religious, courtly or administrative. The heads of the earliest divine cults already bore archaic titles, such that the high priest of Ptah at Memphis was the “Greatest of the Controllers of the Craftsmen”, and in the late Old Kingdom high officials were already using antique titles.⁴⁷ Both then and thereafter, Juan Moreno García can point to “the taste for archaism and titles no longer in use for centuries” as a source of prestige. The deliberate reintroduction of old titles provided “programmatically expressions of an ideal return to a glorious past. [...] This explains why some titles reappeared in the course of history, usually associated with an intentional use of archaic language and formulae, as well as with imitations of former epigraphic styles and the emulation of the art of the historical period chosen as a prestigious precedent for present times”.⁴⁸ Naturally, the actual office

⁴³ Reina 2022.

⁴⁴ Mango 2002a: 9.

⁴⁵ Mango 2002a: 10; see also Mundell Mango 2002.

⁴⁶ Binder 2008.

⁴⁷ Warburton 2005.

⁴⁸ Moreno García 2013: 7.

associated with a given title often changed over the appellation's long lifetime.⁴⁹

Looking more broadly at the conservatism of Egyptian society, Barry Kemp observes that “The general continuity of style in art and architecture owes itself to the careful reproduction of codified styles created in the Early Dynastic period and Old Kingdom”.⁵⁰ For example, archaism in architecture saw plant-based structural elements, which hark back to predynastic times, imitated in stone from the Third Dynasty onward,⁵¹ and the sculpture, reliefs and painting of the Twelfth Dynasty provided artistic models that were emulated until Ptolemaic times.⁵² Archaism –and the outright rebadging of earlier royal statuary– was especially marked in the Ramesside, Third Intermediate and Late Periods, as rulers strove to connect their own reigns with glorious ones of the past.⁵³ In addition, the script used to write the Egyptian language was practically invariant over the state's long history. “With a similar reverence for ancient forms Egyptian artists retained the original shapes of hieroglyphs with scarcely any modification for 3,000 years”.⁵⁴

Change did, of course, occur in ancient Egypt, although –to quote Kemp once more–

“An appeal to antiquity, and sometimes a cloaking in antique forms, made new ideas or new interpretations of old ideas more acceptable”.⁵⁵ In reality, however, an incessant privileging of the past can only demean a society's perception of its current lot. This much is evident from the latter part of Anthony Loprieno's observation that, for Egypt, “The past is a classical model to be emulated by the present, which is perceived as less prestigious”.⁵⁶ Similarly, Mango can say of the Byzantines: “If one lived in, say, the ninth or tenth century, one did not have to be a scholar to know that the past –[...] the Christian past of Late Antiquity– had been greater than the present”.⁵⁷

From the chronological remoteness of our own times, though, the pretence of timelessness by these ancient civilizations has proven more convincing. Just as Mango was able to write that Yeats' view of an unchanging Byzantium was “an illusion that professional historians have been trying to disprove for a long time”,⁵⁸ so too is the pharaonic façade of “eternal Egypt” an impression that modern Egyptologists have long been struggling to dispel.⁵⁹ It persists to this day in the popular imagination. The British Museum's

⁴⁹ Moreno García 2013: 8.

⁵⁰ Kemp 2006: 68.

⁵¹ E.g., the stone simulacra of papyrus-stalk columns and wooden logs (the latter placed above architraves) at Djoser's Step Pyramid complex in Saqqara; Arnold 2005.

⁵² Wildung 2003: 61–62.

⁵³ Wildung 2003: 64–65; also, for Middle Kingdom examples, 77–78; Van Dijk 2003: 291–292; Taylor 2003: 351–352 and 361; Lloyd 2003: 378 and 383.

⁵⁴ Kemp 2006: 68.

⁵⁵ Kemp 2006: 69.

⁵⁶ Loprieno 2003: 152. Unconscious traditionalism gave way to conscious classicism in the Ramesside period and outright infatuation in the Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Dynasties; Assmann 2002: 272–273 and 339–341.

⁵⁷ Mango 2002a: 9.

⁵⁸ Mango 2002a: 9.

⁵⁹ Wendrich 2010a: 8–9; Wendrich 2010b.

three-year, eight-city touring exhibition titled *Eternal Egypt*, which commenced in 2001, is but one of many modern attestations; the more recent US\$2.5 million online/multimedia “Eternal Egypt” project – a three-year joint effort between IBM and the Egyptian government – is another.⁶⁰

No society can truly evade time, of course, but both Byzantium and Egypt proved remarkably enduring. For the former, “The feigned immutability of the empire was matched by its extraordinary longevity. [...] Its longevity is, indeed, its most conspicuous feature”.⁶¹ Byzantium lasted for slightly more than a millennium. The longevity of ancient Egypt is even more conspicuous:⁶² its dynastic period spans almost three millennia, and its lifespan exceeds 3100 years if the period of Ptolemaic rule is included. For neither state was this prolonged survival achieved without ongoing military exertion; throughout their long histories, both powers were more or less continuously at war with one or other of their neighbours. Byzantium’s main enemies have already been listed in the Introduction; Egypt’s included Libya, Nubia, the Levant (Hyksos), Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and the enigmatic Sea Peoples. Naturally,

ongoing diplomatic exchange and international trade were also vital to Egyptian and Byzantine survival and prosperity. Domestically, both states operated extensive and centralised bureaucracies to administer and tax their economies, which were based primarily on rural agriculture.⁶³

2.2 | Monarchy and gender

In both societies, divinely-sanctioned kingship was the norm, with the Egyptian ruler officially perceived as a deity and the Byzantine one occasionally so viewed by at least some of his subjects.⁶⁴ In Byzantium, the eastern form of Christianity was its defining institution; after that, “[m]onarchy may be placed next because its necessity followed from religion. The governance of the earth being a reflection of that of heaven, no other system was pleasing to God or even worth discussing”.⁶⁵ Indeed, “the emperor was considered the living image of Christ”.⁶⁶ Similarly, for ancient Egypt, we learn from Boyo Ockinga that “as ‘image’ of the god the king represents and exercises the rule of god on earth”.⁶⁷ The common royal epithet, “Chosen One of the

God”, makes it clear that the Egyptian king has been divinely elected.⁶⁸ Moreover, “as ‘son’ of [the] god he possesses the divine attributes and qualities which make it possible for him to represent his ‘father.’”⁶⁹ In the same vein, the Byzantine Empire was seen by *Romaioi* as a “monarchy of Christ, with whom the emperor was said to ‘co-reign’” as saint and apostle,⁷⁰ i.e. as one whose unique sacredness qualified him for regal partnership with the only-begotten Son of God. In fact, the Byzantine arrangement has an almost exact Egyptian counterpart during the reign of Akhenaten, “for it is clear that in Amarna the king and his god exercised an actual co-regency, in which the god was the senior partner”.⁷¹ Curiously, Akhenaten’s pogrom against representations of the traditional gods – especially Amun – bears a superficial resemblance to the iconoclastic program begun by Emperor Leo III in 726 CE,⁷² and shares with it an ending in failure and reversal.

As royal succession in both Egypt and Byzantium was in practice often hereditary, the histories of both powers can be divided chronologically into dynasties.⁷³ Lecky’s dismissive opinion of Byzantium – that “the history of the empire is

a monotonous story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs, and women, of poisonings, of conspiracies, of uniform ingratitude, of perpetual fratricides” –⁷⁴ may for Egyptologists trigger memories of the suspected or proven harem conspiracies against Teti and Pepi I (Old Kingdom), Amenemhat I (Middle Kingdom) and Ramses III (New Kingdom).⁷⁵

As an extension to the theme of female intrigue, another shared feature of kingship in both cultures is the occasional emergence of women as sovereigns in their own right – something unheard of in, say, Mesopotamia or ancient Rome.⁷⁶ Often this developed from a period of regency for an underage son. The Empress Irene, widow of Leo IV and mother of Constantine VI, served as co-regent for her son from 780–790 and 792–797 CE. Refusing to step aside when Constantine came of age in 797 CE, Irene had her son deposed and blinded so that she could retain the throne as sole monarch, and reigned alone until she herself was deposed in 802 CE.⁷⁷ As John Middleton observes, “Irene ranks with Hatshepsut of Egypt (*r.* 1503–1483 BCE) and Catherine II (the Great) of Russia (*r.* 1762–1796) as a breaker of male-dominated dynasties”.⁷⁸

⁶⁰ Russmann 2001; Beasley and Kail 2008.

⁶¹ Mango 2002a: 10.

⁶² On the resilience of (just) the Old Kingdom, see Morris 2019; for a global perspective, compare this with the other papers in the same volume.

⁶³ Mango 2002a: 4; Sarris 2002: 24; Mundell Mango 2002; Magdalino 2002: 179 and 198–199.

⁶⁴ For an Egyptian example from the Middle Kingdom, see Sinuhe’s encomium of Senwosret I: “He is a God indeed, without peer”; Simpson 2003a: 57. For a Byzantine example from 449 CE, see the *History* of Priscus of Panium: “But Vigilias said that it was not proper to compare a god with a man, meaning Attila [the Hun] by a man and Theodosius [II, the Emperor] by a god”; Blockley 1983: 247. For a broader discussion focused on art, see Özbay 2015.

⁶⁵ Mango 2002a: 14.

⁶⁶ Stoleriu and Stoleriu 2016: 412.

⁶⁷ Ockinga 1996: 80. Although the royal title “image of god” is primarily a New Kingdom phenomenon (Ockinga 1996: 79), “The concept of kingship that the Eighteenth Dynasty inherited was a very old one, and it must be admitted that, in sum, it changed relatively little over three millennia”; Redford 1995: 181.

⁶⁸ Ockinga 1996: 79–80.

⁶⁹ Ockinga 1996: 80.

⁷⁰ Magdalino 2002: 207; Shepard 2002: 230–237 and 243–244.

⁷¹ Ockinga 1996: 83 (quotation); similarly Assmann 2002: 300.

⁷² Treadgold 2002: 139; Karlin-Hayter 2002: 153–162; Hoffmeier 2015: 193–210, esp. 194.

⁷³ For Byzantium, see Magdalino 2002: 201.

⁷⁴ Lecky 1869: 13.

⁷⁵ Kanawati 2003; “Harem Conspiracies”, in Gurob Harem Palace Project 2012 (<http://www.gurob.org.uk/conspiracies.php>, Accessed 1 September 2020); Tobin 2003; Ritner 2017.

⁷⁶ Middleton 2015: 140. In fact, two women may have defied the gender-norm in Mesopotamia. (1) Ku-Baba, a tavern-keeper who became ruler of Kish *ca.* 2500–2330 BCE and was later deified. (2) Shammuramat, the widow of Shamshi-Adad V (9th century BCE) who may have ruled Assyria as regent for 5 years, and who remained influential in the reign of her son, Adad-nirari III. She is presumed to be a major inspiration for the legendary Queen Semiramis.

⁷⁷ Hollingworth and Cutler 1991a; Garland 1999: 73–94.

⁷⁸ Middleton 2015: 440.

Irene's refusal to step aside is certainly reminiscent of Hatshepsut's refusal to cede the throne to her nephew and step-son Thutmose III when he came of age. Having acted as Thutmose's regent for about seven years, Hatshepsut had herself crowned king and reigned as senior co-regent until her death some fifteen years later.⁷⁹ Irene usually styled herself *basilissa* (Empress) rather than *basileus* (Emperor) and was always depicted as a woman.⁸⁰ While Hatshepsut's titulary and grammar were usually feminine,⁸¹ she ruled as *nsw* –king, a word for which no feminine version exists– and her visual representations underwent a progressive masculinisation during her reign.⁸²

These instances of female rule led to contrary outcomes for the next generation. Constantine, who had been a weak and ineffectual leader,⁸³ probably died within days of his blinding (or, at best, died in exile within seven years of it),⁸⁴ whereas Thutmose went on to reign Egypt successfully for a further three decades, during which time he greatly expanded the territory under Egyptian control and ushered in a period of great domestic prosperity.⁸⁵ The historical reception of the two women in their respective

cultures was equally contrary. Irene's suppression of iconoclasm saw her otherwise underwhelming reign remembered favourably by *Romaioi*, despite her brutal treatment of her son,⁸⁶ and in some quarters she was even reimagined as a martyr and saint.⁸⁷ In contrast, Hatshepsut's sole rule –although relatively peaceful and prosperous–⁸⁸ was vigorously expunged from the Egyptian record late in Thutmose's reign.⁸⁹ Hatshepsut's proscription may simply reflect the inability of the Egyptian establishment to come to terms with the concept of a female king.⁹⁰ A corresponding objection to Irene's legitimacy on the part of Pope Leo III formed part of the motivation (or at least provided a pretext) for him crowning Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans in 800, “the pope arguing that the imperial throne was technically vacant as it was occupied by a woman”.⁹¹ This step formalised and deepened the growing estrangement between the eastern and western halves of Christendom, which ultimately culminated in the Great Schism of 1054 CE.⁹²

On other occasions in Byzantine and Egyptian history, the mother of the monarch provided

him with vital assistance in a time of crisis, and to great effect.⁹³ For example, Alexios I (*r.* 1081–1118) –the first ruler of Byzantium's long-lived revival under the Komnenoi–⁹⁴ was able to leave his widowed mother to run the civil administration of Constantinople at the start of his reign while he went to repel the formidable Norman attacks in the west.⁹⁵ Ahmose –the founder of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty and New Kingdom– owed a similar debt to his mother Ahhotep; a stele of his acknowledges that she “pacified Upper Egypt and expelled its rebels”,⁹⁶ perhaps while Ahmose was driving the remainder of the Hyksos from the Eastern Delta.⁹⁷ Of course, both civilizations had their power-couples, too, which sometimes bordered upon co-regencies; one might plausibly equate the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (*r.* 527–565) and his prominent wife –“the indomitable empress Theodora”–⁹⁸ with Egypt's Akhenaten and his powerful queen, Nefertiti.⁹⁹

Occasionally women had to assume rulership outright when male succession failed.¹⁰⁰ In 1042 CE, the two nieces of Emperor Basil II –Zoe and Theodora– briefly ruled the Byzantine

Empire together, but were sidelined when Zoe took a third husband, Constantine IX (*r.* 1042–1055).¹⁰¹ Upon his death Theodora returned as monarch, this time on her own (*r.* 1055–1056 CE).¹⁰² In Middle Kingdom Egypt, failure in the male line saw Sobekneferu, daughter of Amenemhat III, take the throne; she was the last ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty (*r. ca.* 1777–1773 BCE).¹⁰³ In the Ramesside era, after the death of Seti II, his widow Tawosret first became regent to Seti's heir, Siptah; when Siptah died, she assumed the throne herself to become the last pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty (*r. ca.* 1188–1186 BCE).¹⁰⁴ All of these reigns were brief; the monarch was usually a man.

2.3 | Ritual and the past

In both civilizations, the monarch's focus was retrospective and his aim was the restoration of an earlier, more ideal condition via the repetition of paradigms established in the distant past. In Byzantium, “It was the emperor's duty, stated the historian Zonaras in the period of the

79 Roehrig 2005; Galán, Bryan and Dorman 2014.

80 Garland 1999: 87–88; James 2009: 45–46.

81 Robins 1999.

82 Keller 2005a.

83 Garland 1999: 83 and 93.

84 Hollingworth and Cutler 1991b; Garland 1999: 86 and 93.

85 Allen 2005; Cline and O'Connor 2006.

86 Garland 1999: 91–94; Mango 2002a: 7.

87 However, Irene may never have actually been canonized. See Treadgold 1982; Garland 1999: 89–90 (Irene as martyr) and 92 (claim of canonization).

88 Galán, Bryan and Dorman 2014.

89 Dorman 2005; Roth 2005; Keller 2005b.

90 Dorman 2005: 269.

91 Garland 1999: 87.

92 Schwartzwald 2016: 75.

93 The assistance that Helena rendered to her son –Constantine I– in discovering Christian sites and relics in Palestine was also of enormous importance, but does not satisfy the narrower criterion (imposed here) of crisis management.

94 Magdalino 2002: 204.

95 Magdalino 2002: 206.

96 Sethe 1906: 14–24; for this translation, see Feucht 1997: 341.

97 An account of the expulsion of the Hyksos by King Ahmose is given in the autobiographical inscription of Ahmose, Son of Abana; see Wilkinson 2016: 17–21.

98 Sarris 2002: 46.

99 Van Dijk 2003: 268–269 and 272. In addition, the persecution of pagan cults under Justinian might be equated with Akhenaten's vendetta against worship of the traditional gods of Egypt; see Constantelos 1964.

100 Magdalino 2002: 206.

101 Middleton 2015: 140.

102 Magdalino 2002: 203 and 309.

103 Callender 2003: 158–159; Gillam 2005. The latter reference places her reign earlier than Callender does, *ca.* 1790–1786 BCE.

104 Van Dijk 2003: 296.

Komnenoi [1081–1185 CE], ‘to preserve the ancient customs of the state.’¹⁰⁵ Those rituals focused attention on a time long gone. “The past validated the present and had to be repeatedly dusted off through a process called restoration, renewal or rejuvenation”.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, “For the Egyptians, th[e] creation was not a onetime occurrence; it needed continual repetition and regeneration”.¹⁰⁷ This was achieved through ritual, and in large part “The renewal of creation occur[red ...] through the person of the pharaoh”.¹⁰⁸ The aim of Egyptian civilization was in fact “to restore to the world something of the perfection it enjoyed at the time of its origin”.¹⁰⁹

As remarked above, Egyptians and *Romaioi* had a very different attitude to what we would call progress – the former active and positive, the latter passive and negative. Yet beneath these opposite dispositions lurked a similar theological take on the prospects for this world. “Christianity [... b]eing perfect, it admitted of no further development”,¹¹⁰ writes Mango, and –in this respect– “Byzantinism [...] had no programme for the future”.¹¹¹ Ancient Egyptian religion, too, struggled to envisage the future in terms of anything other than the past; in its pure form, the re-

sulting outlook bordered on the paradoxical. For the Egyptians, as Erik Hornung observes, “the past [...] was also the present and could be the future. [...] In other words, working toward the future is actually striving toward the furthest imaginable point in the past”.¹¹² Henri Frankfort, too, proposed just such a compounding of the past and the future for the ancient Egyptians.¹¹³ Moreover, in a move well aligned with the work of the present paper, John Hayes recognised that the comingling of the past with the present –a failure to see the past as past, so to speak– persisted in European thought until after the Middle Ages.¹¹⁴ The Byzantine world-view seems to have been especially influenced by this trait.¹¹⁵

2.4 | Order and afterlife

The never-ending Egyptian preoccupation with order (*maat*) and its preservation in the face of chaos (*isfet*)¹¹⁶ –the province of the wilderness, of foreigners and of unruly or malign deities–¹¹⁷ also has a striking counterpart in Byzantium. “If one were to identify a single principle that underlay the Byzantine conception of the virtuous

life, it would be that of order (*taxis*). Supreme-ly manifested in the heavenly court, it permeated the whole world. Absence of order (*ataxia*), i.e. randomness or turbulence, was characteristic of barbarians and demons. In human affairs order entailed the observance of established principles”.¹¹⁸ So too in Egypt, where “*maat* reveals itself as the foundation of all order in the created world; it is the basis for life in a specifically social sense, and in the much broader sense of cosmic order or balance”.¹¹⁹ Performing *maat* was the hallmark of a virtuous life,¹²⁰ which in turn merited reward in the form of a blessed afterlife – itself the epitome of unchanging order.

Just as ancient Egyptians were highly motivated to avoid personal obliteration and to secure a pleasant afterlife by correct actions and provisioning for eternity, so too were *Romaioi* anxious to escape eternal damnation and gain a place in Heaven via correct belief. The Nicene Creed –formulated at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in 325 and 381 CE, respectively– specifies the tenets of orthodox faith, but only in summary. While it anticipates Christ’s return to judge the dead as well as the living, it glosses over the consequences of a negative outcome for the individual. In contrast, Byzantine paintings of the Last Judgement are typically graphic in depicting the Torments of Hell.¹²¹ Erik Hornung,

observing astutely that “The Judgement of the Dead is itself an ancient Egyptian concept”, adds that “Egyptian conceptions about infernal punishments [...] live on in the Christian Middle Ages”.¹²² Similar sentiments appear in John Wortley’s analysis of early Byzantine popular literature, a genre whose “tales have far less to tell us about the joys of the blessed than of the discomforts of the damned”.¹²³ Wortley concludes: “If (as we suspect) here is some indication of pre-Christian Egyptian influence in this supplementary matter, this is not to be wondered at since the ancient Egyptians’ religion focused largely on the fate of the dead and possessed a highly developed eschatology”.¹²⁴

Afterworld torments do indeed loom large in the New Kingdom’s Books of the Netherworld, where “the business of destruction is carried out in countless scenes depicting the punishment of enemies [...] Here the destructive imagination knows no bounds [...] Those] whose evil deeds have led to their conviction at the Judgement of the Dead are bound, decapitated, and set on fire; their hearts are torn from their bodies, their heads placed at their own feet. [...] Other scenes depict fire-filled pits or the ominous Lake of Fire”.¹²⁵ Specifics within this Egyptian vision of hell include a huge snake “breathing on bound sinners before it and setting them

¹⁰⁵ Mango 2002a: 9. For the Byzantine emulation of ancient Israel, see ahead to Section 2.7.

¹⁰⁶ Mango 2002a: 9–10.

¹⁰⁷ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 163.

¹⁰⁸ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 53.

¹⁰⁹ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 164.

¹¹⁰ Mango 2002a: 13–14.

¹¹¹ Mango 2002a: 16.

¹¹² Hornung 1992 [1989]: 154 and 164. An in-depth treatment of this equivalence (along with a broader discussion on traditionalism in Egyptian and other ancient societies) is provided by Graham 2018.

¹¹³ Frankfort 1951: 9.

¹¹⁴ Hayes 2013: 23 and 34.

¹¹⁵ Of course, this in turn shows that the phenomenon extended beyond the eastern boundary of Europe.

¹¹⁶ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 131–145.

¹¹⁷ Robins 2007: 355–356.

¹¹⁸ Mango 2002a: 16.

¹¹⁹ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 134. Similarly Assmann 2002: 127, although compare his 2002: 230 and 297–298.

¹²⁰ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 131–145.

¹²¹ Mouriki 1976: 160–164.

¹²² Hornung 1992 [1989]: 101.

¹²³ Wortley 2001: 67.

¹²⁴ Wortley 2001: 69.

¹²⁵ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 99–100. The Netherworld Books were royal texts, but the afterlife in their non-royal counterpart, the Book of the Dead, was similarly fraught with perils, including hostile demons (e.g., Spells 125 and 144); vengeful snakes (e.g., Spells 7, 33–5, 37, and 39); removal of the heart (e.g., Spells 26–29a); decapitation (e.g., Spell 43); burning and scalding (e.g., Spells 63ab); the Lake of Fire (Spell 17); the Place of Destruction (Spell 176), and many other dangers. See Faulkner 1972.

on fire” and “knife-wielding demons [who] heat caldrons that contain the condemned, [...] boiling the condemned persons until they are tender”.¹²⁶ In Byzantine tales, “Hell is usually portrayed as a river (or lake, Rev. 20:14) of fire. [...] Hell is seen as ‘a dark and noisome place of fire’ in which notorious heretics are being tormented [...; these appear as] naked men and women in a river of fire, including emperors and empresses who ruled badly and sinfully”.¹²⁷ In Byzantine art, “The Damned are usually depicted as a mixed group driven into the fire by one or more angels [... or depicted in ovens where] only heads or busts are visible, the rest of the body being submerged in the fire”.¹²⁸ Alternatively, one may see “full-length figures which are standing or are hanged, sometimes upside down; these are usually either tortured by devils in the flames or encircled by snakes”.¹²⁹

Let us shrink from this horror and return briefly to the concept of order –the Egyptian *maat*– for which (as mentioned above) the Byzantines used the Greek term *taxis*.¹³⁰ In ancient Egypt, *maat* is personified by the goddess Maat, who is therefore the embodiment of order, truth and justice.¹³¹ Her closest counterpart in Judeo-Christian thinking is Sophia, the feminine principle of Wisdom.¹³² Citing the in-depth comparison of Crista Bauer-Kayatz, Martin Scott adduces

numerous specific parallels between Maat and Sophia; beyond these, their “roles are seen to be similar, in that both *MAAT* and Sophia are a ‘central concept which embraces God, the world and humanity, and draws into a unity theological, cosmological and pedagogical thought and will.’”¹³³ The Byzantine preoccupation with *maat*-like order may be one reason why the great cathedral at the centre of the Empire –its religious heart for almost a millennium– is formally dedicated to Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom).¹³⁴

2.5 | Art and literature

Parallels in the art of the two cultures run deep, encompassing both function and form. Let us first look at function. The purpose of a Byzantine icon is not to decorate but to provide a theophany; it is an “image that embodies and realizes deified existence aesthetically”.¹³⁵ Accordingly, icons are not merely religious pictures but conduits for the divine presence, “images mediating the holy”.¹³⁶ Similarly, in ancient Egypt, “statues were created not for their decorative effect but to play a primary role in the cults of the gods, the king and the dead. They were designed as places where these beings could manifest themselves in order to be the recipient of ritual

¹²⁶ Hornung 1992 [1989]: 100–101.

¹²⁷ Wortley 2001: 66.

¹²⁸ Mouriki 1976: 160.

¹²⁹ Mouriki 1976: 160.

¹³⁰ McCormick 1991.

¹³¹ Wilkinson 2003: 150–152.

¹³² Hebrew *Hokmâh*; e.g. Proverbs 1: 20–33 and 8: 1–36; Cutler and Kazhdan 1991.

¹³³ Scott 1992: 67–69. In turn, the excerpt from Scott quotes (in his own translation) from Bauer-Kayatz 1969: 136.

¹³⁴ Mango 1991.

¹³⁵ Tsakiridou 2013: 4 and 251–268.

¹³⁶ Weyl Carr 1991: 978.

actions”.¹³⁷ Likewise, in the two-dimensional art of Egyptian tombs, “images were consecrated and transformed into a living force, effectively creating a bridge between this world and the next, [...] between the mundane and the sacred”.¹³⁸ Byzantine icons may owe a historical debt to Egyptian two-dimensional mortuary art of the post-dynastic period; as Morgan Lemmer-Webber points out, the “stylistic and ideological similarities” that icons share with Greco-Roman mummy portraits from Egypt’s Fayum region “are too strong to entirely disregard”.¹³⁹ Byzantine icons of Mary as *Theotokos* (Mother of God) are also believed to owe much to earlier Egyptian images of Isis with her son Horus.¹⁴⁰

Let us now look at the principles underpinning Egyptian and Byzantine two-dimensional representations. Ancient Egyptian painting is governed by formal rules of symbolism and decorum that deviate far from naturalistic realism, giving it a static and stylised quality. For the human figure, multiple incompatible views are combined to form a single aspective image,¹⁴¹ and formal conventions are used to denote movement.¹⁴² A similar paradigm underpins works of Byzantine art,¹⁴³ of which the mosaic

of the emperor Justinian I in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna (*ca.* 545 CE) is a good example (Fig. 1).¹⁴⁴ It too is static, symbolic, stylised and aspective, its visual logic contrasting sharply with the artistic realism inherited from classical Rome by the West. When we look at this mosaic, “we find ourselves in a different world. It is no longer a naturalistic representation of a ritual act (the offering of a chalice), but an icon. Justinian wears a halo. He and all the members of his suite face us frontally against a gold background. We do not immediately understand that the artist intended to represent a procession moving to the right, which is why the figures, in spite of their frontality, appear to be stepping on each other’s toes”.¹⁴⁵

On the canon of Byzantine two-dimensional art, P.A. Michelis comments that “The difference in the size of the figures [...] is not due to a sense of perspective, but rather to a sense of proportion, which impels the painter to make the more important figures larger”.¹⁴⁶ For example, “the Emperor and his courtiers are on a larger scale than that of the populace below. [...] On the same principle, the Almighty in the Byzantine churches is larger than any of the other

¹³⁷ Robins 2008: 19.

¹³⁸ Hartwig 2011: 319–320.

¹³⁹ Lemmer-Webber 2012: 12 (of online PDF); Tsakiridou 2013: 40–42.

¹⁴⁰ Dunand 2000: 165; Mathews and Muller 2005; Higgins 2012: 76–78.

¹⁴¹ Robins 2008: 21; Peck 2015.

¹⁴² Brunner-Traut 1974: 436; Ventura 2000: 25–26.

¹⁴³ This constitutes a major extension of Philippe Derchain’s assertion that “Egypt would then be another example of how a particular type of social structure results in the development of a symbolic language as is known to have happened in ancient China and in Europe in the Middle Ages”; Derchain 1976: 10. In Eastern Europe (Byzantium), the similarities with ancient Egypt go beyond the mere existence of a visual code in each culture to include a shared purpose and shared aspects of representation in the two codes.

¹⁴⁴ Mango 2002a: 4 (image).

¹⁴⁵ Mango 2002a: 3.

¹⁴⁶ Michelis 1952: 31–32.



Figure 1. Emperor Justinian and his suite, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Byzantine art resembles ancient Egyptian art in its static, symbolic, stylised and aspective nature (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanvitale03.jpg>, accessed April 3, 2020).

icons”.¹⁴⁷ Egyptian art, of course, uses the same principle of scale;¹⁴⁸ the king is always shown larger than his subjects, who in turn are larger than their enemies, and so on. Depth is shown in Egyptian art by horizontal overlapping or vertical stacking;¹⁴⁹ the same is true of Byzantine art, where “by superposition an illusion of depth is created”.¹⁵⁰ Analysing a fifth century

ivory relief of Christ and the twelve Apostles seated around a table, Michelis points out features that lead him to conclude that “there is, consequently, no perspective system here. [...] The impression derived is not of a single, but of numerous planes – at least one for each pair of Apostles opposite one another”.¹⁵¹ Similarly, since in two-dimensional Egyptian art

“different views can occur together in the same picture plane, the result is not rendered as from a single viewpoint, but rather is a composite assemblage”.¹⁵²

Similarities are also evident in the realm of language. Just as Egyptian hieroglyphs (Greek, “sacred carvings”) were to the Egyptians *mdw ntr*, “the speech of the god”,¹⁵³ so too did Greek come to play the role of a sacred language for *Romaioi*,

Greek [...] being the language of the N[ew] T[estament], the language of the Church Fathers, the language of liturgy and the only language, in Byzantine view, adequate for the discussion of Christian theological dogmas. Greek continued to be considered by the Byzantines as the hegemonic sacred language of the empire and Christendom in general, even after Byzantine missionaries promoted the creation of Slavic vernacular written and liturgical languages.¹⁵⁴

The literary corpora of ancient Egypt and Byzantium, too, share a number of features. “Most of the literature produced in Byzantium was written in a manner that is not easy for someone from outside the culture to appreciate: much of it was theological and much was written following linguistic rules which required years of study and were increasingly remote from the spoken language”.¹⁵⁵ Rhetoric was in fact the most popular

genre.¹⁵⁶ Ancient Egyptian writings, too, can appear arcane to outsiders, freighted as they are with “unfamiliar syntax, the abundance of metaphor and idiom, and [a] distinctive mode of expression”.¹⁵⁷ Its texts, which for the most part are “consciously intellectual”,¹⁵⁸ are often laced with oblique allusions and cryptic formulae. As with Byzantine writings, many Egyptian compositions have proven to be religious in nature.¹⁵⁹ Since the ability to read and write any kind of Egyptian texts required extensive training, only a small percentage of the population was literate.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the language of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055–1650 BCE) continued to be used for monumental inscriptions and religious texts until 394 CE,¹⁶¹ with the result that “The gulf between the spoken and written languages, even by the New Kingdom, must have been considerable”.¹⁶²

Egyptian hieroglyphs had, almost from the outset, a cursive counterpart that was much better suited to writing in ink on papyrus. This script, known as hieratic, was the main vehicle for utilitarian communications and informal records.¹⁶³ Classic Egyptian stories – such as the tales of the Shipwrecked Sailor and Sinuhe – were recorded in hieratic rather than hieroglyphic script, and have come down to us in that format.¹⁶⁴ In the Byzantine Empire, formal Greek texts were

¹⁴⁷ Michelis 1952: 32–33.

¹⁴⁸ Schäfer 1974 [1919]: 231–238; Nyord 2013: 139 and 153–155.

¹⁴⁹ Schäfer 1974 [1919]: 189–198; Brunner-Traut 1974: 434; Robins 2008: 23 (legend to fig. 13).

¹⁵⁰ Michelis 1952: 32.

¹⁵¹ Michelis 1952: 33.

¹⁵² Robins 2008: 21.

¹⁵³ Faulkner 1962: 122; Allen 2010: 2.

¹⁵⁴ Eshel 2018: 21–22 and 201 (quotation).

¹⁵⁵ Jeffreys and Mango 2002: 296.

¹⁵⁶ Mango 2002b: 223–224.

¹⁵⁷ Wilkinson 2016: xxv.

¹⁵⁸ Wilkinson 2016: xviii.

¹⁵⁹ Simpson 2003b: 2.

¹⁶⁰ Baines and Eyre 1983; Wilkinson 2016: xvii–xviii.

¹⁶¹ Wildung 2003: 61; Ockinga 2012: xiii.

¹⁶² Wilkinson 2016: xvii.

¹⁶³ Allen 2010: 6.

¹⁶⁴ Simpson 2003b: 6.

traditionally written using blocky uncial scripts (i.e., ones consisting of capital letters) such as majuscule. These too had long been accompanied by a cursive equivalent – “a specialized script, the preserve of trained notaries”¹⁶⁵ whose origins predate the Byzantine Empire. From the end of the eighth century CE this so-called Greek minuscule script began to be used for formal documents and books, including non-luxury editions of the Gospels.¹⁶⁶ The advantages of minuscule were similar to those for hieratic: it was quicker and easier to write, and far more economical in terms of the number of words that a scribe could fit on each page. Uncial scripts persisted alongside minuscule until the mid-tenth century. By this time most texts had been transliterated into minuscule editions and the uncial versions were abandoned.¹⁶⁷ The majority of Byzantine manuscripts that survive today are written in minuscule.¹⁶⁸

2.6 | Periodisation

Another correspondence, although hardly an unexpected one, is found in the periodic wax and wane of each state’s internal prosperity and external power. The key periods of Egyptian and Byzantine decline and disorder have already been mentioned in the Introduction. Beyond generic

cycles of rise and fall, however, some specific correlations may be proposed. Amongst times of strength, the reign of Justinian I (527–565 CE) was a time of expansion during which Byzantium became the largest and most powerful state in Europe; Justinian “restored [...] the dignity and confidence of Mediterranean civilization” in ways that cause us to admire “the ideals, and greatness, of his age”.¹⁶⁹ It was at this time that the enormous –and still extant– basilica of Hagia Sophia was built,¹⁷⁰ which might prompt a comparison to the Old Kingdom of Egypt and the Fourth Dynasty kings Khufu, Khafra and Menkaure, whose massive pyramids still stand at Giza. Interestingly, both the Old Kingdom and the Justinian era ended in economic exhaustion and fiscal collapse.¹⁷¹ The Macedonian Dynasty (867–1056 CE) afforded Byzantium a kind of “Middle Kingdom” in which the empire reached its greatest expanse since the Muslim conquests – “a superpower on two continents”¹⁷² accompanied by a Renaissance in arts and letters.¹⁷³ This of course invites comparison with the Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty’s unmatched efflorescence of art, sculpture and literature.¹⁷⁴

Both Egypt and Byzantium enjoyed a major resurgence and expansion in the second halves of their respective lifespans, peaking around the 60–70% mark on their timelines. The revival of Byzantine fortunes under the Komnenoi (1081–1185 CE)

¹⁶⁵ Mango 2002b: 218.

¹⁶⁶ Mango 2002b: 218–219.

¹⁶⁷ Mango 2002b: 219.

¹⁶⁸ Fryde 2000: 19.

¹⁶⁹ McEvedy 1992: 26–27. For a positive but more cautious assessment, see Sarris 2002: 42–49.

¹⁷⁰ Mango 1991.

¹⁷¹ Sarris 2002: 511; Malek 2003: 106–107.

¹⁷² Magdalino 2002: 176–180.

¹⁷³ Mango 2002b: 216–229. Artistic production was focused on illuminated manuscripts and carved ivories, as opposed to sculpture, while literary production was focused on salvaging and editing classical texts rather than composing new ones.

¹⁷⁴ Robins 2008: 96–121; Wilkinson 2016: xvi.

may be considered a sort of “New Kingdom” for that empire, something akin to the Eighteenth to Nineteenth Dynasties of Egypt. (The instigators of these eras –Alexios I and Ahmose– have already been mentioned in connection with the vital wartime help that both received from their mothers.) The period saw an upsurge in legal studies, vernacular poetry, Aristotelian philosophy, and lay intellectualism within the empire.¹⁷⁵ For Byzantium, this was also a “golden age” in a very literal sense. As Paul Magdalino comments, “Under the dynamic leadership of Alexios I Komnenos, his son John II, and his grandson Manuel I, Byzantium regained its status as a great power in the Balkans, the Aegean, and the wider Mediterranean world, capable of deploying massive armies, impressive fleets, and seemingly unlimited sums of gold”.¹⁷⁶

The final Byzantine Renaissance, which occurred in the Palaiologan age (1261–1453 CE), focused on literary culture and exceeded the intensity of its predecessors. It is disparaged for “the cultivation of a *recherché* atticizing style at the expense of clarity and simplicity”.¹⁷⁷ While its output includes “a vast body of epistolography, usually very complicated and obscure in style[, and]

rhetorical addresses of remarkable verbosity”,¹⁷⁸ the movement also produced valuable new editions of classical authors and it systematised the knowledge of ancient literature via scholia, dictionaries and the like.¹⁷⁹ Its natural counterpart in Egypt would be the “Saite Renaissance” of the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty,¹⁸⁰ “in which as much written religious material as possible was codified and listed from earlier periods, then embellished”.¹⁸¹ This revival, which included not just literature but also architecture, art and statuary,¹⁸² came to be viewed by subsequent Egyptian dynasties as a “golden age”.¹⁸³ While much Saite artwork is of exceptional technical quality, this Late Period revival is –like its Byzantine equivalent– often derided for its excessive archaism.¹⁸⁴ A penchant for standardisation resulted in the “Saite Recension” of the hitherto heterogeneous Book of the Dead,¹⁸⁵ but in statuary the same trend resulted in “a preference for calm, even bland, idealising features”.¹⁸⁶ In subsequent dynasties this degenerated into “a bland simpler resembling the ‘archaic smile’ of early Greek sculpture”.¹⁸⁷ The resemblance may be more than a coincidence, since archaic Greek sculpture was probably influenced by Saite statuary.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁵ Mango 2002a: 12. The revival did not, however, proceed to the full flowering of the “twelfth-century Renaissance” experienced by the West.

¹⁷⁶ Magdalino 2002: 185.

¹⁷⁷ Ševčenko 2002: 287.

¹⁷⁸ Ševčenko 2002: 285.

¹⁷⁹ Ševčenko 2002: 286–288.

¹⁸⁰ Robins 2008: 210–229; Dodson 2012.

¹⁸¹ Wilson 2010: 253.

¹⁸² Lloyd 2003: 370–371; Robins 2008: 210–229.

¹⁸³ Stewart 1995: 29.

¹⁸⁴ Robins 2008: 210–229; Wilson 2010: 253–255; Der Manuelian 2014.

¹⁸⁵ Faulkner 1972: 14; Assmann 2002: 341; Wilson 2010: 253.

¹⁸⁶ Robins 2008: 226.

¹⁸⁷ Stewart 1995: 30.

¹⁸⁸ Braun 1982: 55.

2.7 | Limits and overlaps

The list of meaningful comparanda is not endless. Tempting though it might be, it is probably unwise to consider the Latin rule of Constantinople (1204–1261 CE) –following the city’s fall to the army of the Fourth Crusade¹⁸⁹– as analogous to the Persian domination of Egypt in the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty (or its encore in the Thirty-First).¹⁹⁰ Similarly, the Patriarch of Constantinople cannot reasonably be compared with the High Priest of Amun, and Heraclius’ stripping of gold and silver from the empire’s churches to replenish the Byzantine treasury (612–615 CE) cannot really be equated with the state-sponsored robbery of Egyptian royal tombs by Piankh and his successors at the end of New Kingdom.¹⁹¹ The more secure parallels already adduced make such strained comparisons unnecessary.

In combination, the numerous cultural similarities between ancient Egypt and Byzantium are remarkable, and –both in nature and degree– go significantly beyond the generic features that one might expect all great societies of the past to share. They are all the more poignant for the fact that, from *ca.* 400–600 CE, Egypt was an integral part of the Eastern Roman / Byzantine Empire, serving

as its granary.¹⁹² The shipments of grain from Alexandria to Constantinople provided a direct link between the two cities, then rivals for ecclesiastical and cultural supremacy within the empire.¹⁹³

Overtly, however, Constantinople styled itself as the New Rome and the Byzantine Empire as the New Zion¹⁹⁴ the kingdom of God on earth, spiritual successor to the Israel of David and Solomon.¹⁹⁵ The Old Testament’s account of the enslavement of Israel in Egypt¹⁹⁶ –ever the Israelites’ traditional enemy– can hardly have inspired any conscious aspirations on the part of *Romaioi* to emulate pharaonic civilization.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, their choice of ancient Israel as a model,¹⁹⁸ and the imperial Roman way in which they sought to actualise that paradigm, did impart to Byzantium some characteristics that are reminiscent of ancient Egypt. Thus, as acknowledged from the outset (Introduction and Section 1), each of these civilizations enjoyed an exceptionalist belief in itself as being divinely privileged, and each took the form of a monarchic theocracy with a large bureaucracy and powerful priesthood. Moreover, each was united and empowered by a sacred hegemonic language (Section 2.5).¹⁹⁹

An iconic fusion of pharaonic Egypt with the Byzantine world still stands in Istanbul in the

189 Reinert 2002: 249–256 and 310.

190 Lloyd 2003: 374–382.

191 On Heraclius and Piankh, respectively, see Sarris 2002: 55; Van Dijk 2003: 303.

192 McEvedy 1992: 12–29.

193 Baynes 1926.

194 Eshel 2018: 151.

195 Eshel 2018.

196 Genesis 39 – Exodus 14.

197 For Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, writing to his troops *ca.* 950 CE, it is the empire’s enemies who are likened to the biblical Egyptians; Eshel 2018: 106 and 108. The Latins of the Fourth Crusade were likewise identified with the Egyptians and Babylonians of the Old Testament; Eshel 2018: 197–198.

198 Eshel 2018: 198–201

199 For Hebrew as the sacred language of a “chosen nation” and its subsequent parallel in Byzantine Greek, see Eshel 2018: 22, n. 55.

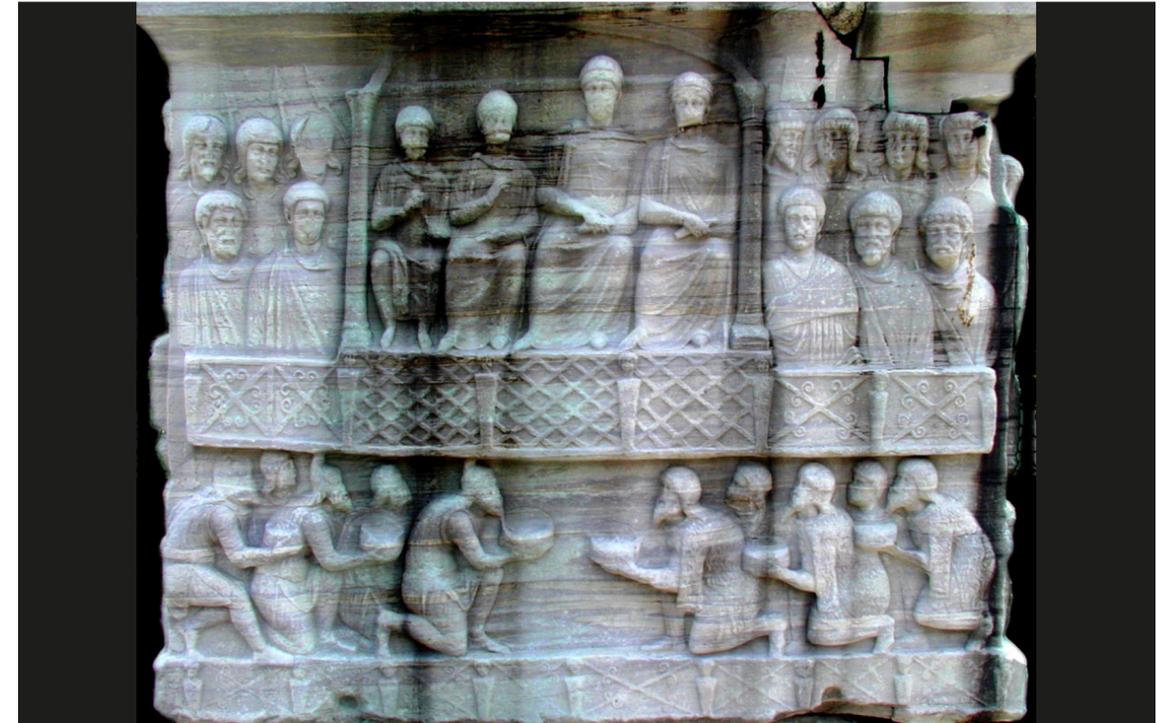


Figure 2. Base of Theodosius’ Obelisk, Istanbul. Northwest face: The imperial family in the *kathisma* (imperial box), with Persians offering gifts. The obelisk (not shown) was originally erected by Thutmose III at Karnak and later stood on this base in Constantinople (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Constantinople_Theodosius_base_NW.jpg, accessed April 3, 2020).

form of the Theodosian Obelisk, where a monument of Thutmose III (*ca.* 1479–1425 BCE), removed from Karnak by Constantine, now rises from a Byzantine base constructed for it in the late fourth century CE – one carved on all sides with scenes of the Emperor Theodosius I (*r.* 379–395 CE) and his court at Constantinople (Fig. 2).²⁰⁰

3 | Conclusion

For all the immediate resonances that Cyril Mango’s overview of the Byzantine Empire presents to anyone familiar with ancient Egypt –at one point it even refers to Byzantium as “smiting the Asiatics”²⁰¹ there is no overt acknowledgment

200 Parry 2014: 182–184.

201 Mango 2002a: 13: “Today we are more likely to praise Byzantium, not for smiting the Asiatics, but rather for having been multi-ethnic and multicultural”. The phrase is, of course, a common one in ancient Egyptian texts, where the activity is routinely ascribed to the king. For example, “That he (the king) was made is in order to smite the Asiatics”; Ockinga 2012: 46. The idiom abounds in the secondary literature, e.g. “Many reliefs represent great Old Kingdom Pharaohs, such as Senefru, Cheops, Sahure and Pepi II, smiting the Asiatics”; Gabra 1998: 76.

of these correspondences in that chapter, or indeed elsewhere in the book that it introduces.²⁰² Nor, for that matter, do the shared aspects of these two cultures seem to have been remarked previously in any other contribution to the literature – not even to register (or dismiss) the rapport as a curiosity. That the parallels make no appearance in Ken Parry’s “Egypt in the Byzantine Imagination: Cultural Memory and Historiography”²⁰³ provides confirmation –not that any were needed– that the *Romaioi* themselves were unaware of any such correspondences.

Of course, Thebes is not Constantinople, Karnak cannot be mistaken for Hagia Sophia, and a Weighing of the Heart vignette has never been confused with a Last Judgement. Although in the first century CE the Roman emperor had technically been a pharaoh as well,²⁰⁴ and although Greco-Egyptian religious syncretism underpinned much Late Antique and Christian magic,²⁰⁵ Dynastic Egypt and the Eastern Roman / Byzantine Empire could hardly be considered to form a cultural continuum in the manner of, say, ancient Greece and Rome.²⁰⁶ Accordingly, some might argue that there is little value in highlighting cultural similarities between civilizations that are – at best – separated by centuries and share only a modest territorial overlap. While the exercise may not enrich our understanding of

either culture in a strictly emic sense, surely there is merit in us emerging occasionally from our disciplinary silos and stepping back to gain a panoramic view, both in terms of chronology and geography. Perhaps this causes us to stray from history toward ethnography and anthropology, but is that so bad?

David Jeffreys seems to think that such a broadening of perspective is overdue. “Until quite recently, few students of Pharaonic Egypt seemed prepared to make cross-cultural comparisons with civilizations elsewhere in the region, much less to consider Egypt’s achievement on a global scale against those of more remote cultures. [...] Egyptologists are collectively accused of being concerned with the particular and descriptive rather than the general and explanatory”.²⁰⁷ His hope is that “Egypt [...] might be rehabilitated into a more rewarding worldwide debate, and contribute more substantially through new approaches to cognitive aspects of all past societies”.²⁰⁸ Inter-cultural comparisons involving ancient Egypt are not entirely lacking, however; apart from the obvious comparisons with Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East,²⁰⁹ other regions whose cultures have been likened to that of ancient Egypt include Japan, China and Brazil.²¹⁰ More recently, ancient Egyptian society has been compared with that of

202 Such a comparison lies beyond the book’s purpose, which Mango suggests is to enable one “to pass an informed judgement on the Byzantine achievement compared with other contemporary civilizations, notably that of the medieval West and that of Islam”; Mango 2002a: vi.

203 Parry 2014.

204 O’Neill 2011.

205 Betz 1986; Meyer and Smith 1999.

206 Some instances of potential religious carryover in Egypt and beyond are detailed by Naguib 2008. In the philosophical arena, Plato’s concept of the realm of Ideal Forms – which, as part of the intellectual legacy of ancient Greece, remained influential in Byzantium – may have been directly inspired by the Egyptian concept of *djet*-eternity; Gregory 2022: 21–23, 28–29 and 38–43.

207 Jeffreys 2003: 5.

208 Jeffreys 2003: 6.

209 Ataç 2015; Graham 2017.

210 Jeffreys 2003: 16.

early China; a monograph focuses on comparing New Kingdom Egypt with the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE),²¹¹ while a paper co-authored by an Egyptologist and a Sinologist compares the Egyptian concept of *maat* (which was discussed above) with a potential Chinese counterpart, *tianxia* (from ca. 600 BCE).²¹² The results of a broad societal comparison between ancient Egypt and Prehispanic Mesoamerica have also been published recently.²¹³ Cross-cultural studies which focus on cosmology and metaphysics have straddled the largest temporal discontinuity; these compare aspects of the ancient Egyptian world-view with indigenous beliefs and practices in modern-day Africa and Australia.²¹⁴

Inter-cultural comparisons involving Byzantium are somewhat uncommon, with Mango admitting to a paucity of comparisons with even the obvious targets – the medieval West and the Islamic Caliphate.²¹⁵ Accordingly, the pairing of ancient Egypt with Byzantium has faced a double reticence. Beyond that, traces of the two cultures’ very different past receptions in Western scholarship may linger still, making them seem such unlikely bedfellows that the prospect of shared features has never been given serious consideration. Perhaps now, with the advent of Big History, the time is ripe;²¹⁶ indeed, a recent

high-level analysis of civilisational transitions as a function of time has revealed an interesting symmetry between the two cultures.²¹⁷

So, are we discovering traces of a subtle unity amidst the obvious signs of diversity? The common features of ancient Egypt and the Byzantine Empire identified in this report include their self-belief, theocratic disposition, centralised administration, extensive bureaucracy, longevity, feigned immutability, preoccupation with order, dynastic tendency, temporal focus, ritualism and artistic conventions, as well as aspects of their kingship paradigms, languages and literary corpora, views of the future, afterlife anxieties and relative periodisation. They point toward a nexus of specific principles, behaviours and outcomes – features that seem to have a tendency to co-occur as an ensemble in complex human societies, at least those in proximity to the Mediterranean.²¹⁸ One might even dare to call the underlying impulse a neurosis, were it not for its demonstrated success in the form of an exceptional lifespan for the civilizations that have subscribed to it. In circumstances, times and places that are very different, we see telltale signs that point to the same adaptive response – and surely that in itself is something worthy of recognition and acknowledgment.

211 Barbieri-Low 2021.

212 Moreno García and Pines 2021.

213 Feinman and Moreno García 2022.

214 Martin 2008; Ndigi 2017; Graham 2022.

215 “Such comparisons have seldom been made”; Mango 2002c: vi.

216 Christian 2017.

217 Ancient Egypt and Byzantium occupy corresponding and complementary positions at opposite extremes of the S-curve that results when the sequence of ancient cultural transitions is plotted as a function of calendar date; civilizations towards either end of the plot are long-lived relative to those near the inflexion point at its centre (ca. 600 BCE). LePoire 2019: 8 (Table 2 / Fig. 6).

218 And perhaps beyond, given that ancient Egypt and early China “manifest many similarities (millennia-long continuity, monarchic rule, social order, scribal culture)” alongside their many differences; Stefanović 2022: E012. To this list of similarities we might add both societies’ strong self-belief and sense of cultural superiority over their neighbours; Moreno García and Pines 2021: 228 and 255–256.

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