

Methodology of Studying Ancient History Applied to Ancient Egyptian History

Zakia Zaki Gamal Eldeen*

The goal of historical research is to reconstruct the scenario of historical events so that it is as close as possible to the actual events. To achieve this goal, historians developed a methodology of studying ancient history that consists of a set of rules that guide historical researchers and help them come to accurate conclusions regarding the scenario of historical events. The first step in the methodology is to define what history is. Historians propose many definitions, but the most direct and expressive is that history is the set of events that took place in a specific location at a specific time. Therefore, in dealing with historical events, we have to consider the geographical background.

1 Geography

Geography is an essential partner in shaping the events of history and knowing geographical features helps in interpreting events which have taken place. Geographers state that every country has its regional character which differentiates it from all other countries. The regional character consists of the internal geographical features (position) and the external geographical features (situation). In 1.1 we illustrate the relevance of regional character to ancient Egyptian history and its deep effect on ancient Egyptian civilization.

1.1 The Internal Geographical Features (Position)

Regarding the internal geographical features (position), the most important element in these features is the Nile. The Nile expressed itself in different aspects of ancient Egyptian civilization. First, it facilitated early and permanent settlement, and Egypt became a centralized state very early in its internal development. The Nile gave Egypt its names. For example, the Nile is the reason why Egypt was known as *kmt*, which means the black land or the cultivated land, and as *t3 mry* (the land of the two shores). When we look to the Nile valley, we see that the delta has a triangular shape with its base to the north. The rest of the valley to the south has a line shape with some curves (see Fig. 1). This difference in shape between the Upper and Lower parts of the Nile valley was the reason behind calling Egypt *t3wy* (the two lands) and the king of Egypt was *nb-t3wy* (the lord of the two lands). The duality in the geographical features arising from the difference between the delta and the valley also affected the king's titulary, which is exemplified in the

* Department of Egyptology, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo University, Egypt.

duality in the king's title (*nswt-bity*, king of Upper and Lower Egypt). Likewise, the *nbtj* title of the king (meaning "who belongs to the two ladies") is a word of duality as is, *nḥbt* (the goddess of Upper Egypt) and *wꜣdt* (the goddess of Lower Egypt). We find this duality also in the administrative system. This was reflected in many administrative titles. For example, the title "*imy-r šnwtj*," which means the one who is responsible for the 2 granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt.



Fig. 1 Map of Egypt showing the Nile delta in the north and the rest of the valley to the south

The Nile was the main way of transportation. The Egyptians traveled with boats upstream and downstream and the Nile contributed greatly to uniting Upper and Lower Egypt. Therefore, the Egyptians considered the Nile as the first natural *sm3-t3wy* (see Fig. 2), which means uniting the two lands (Upper and Lower Egypt) and this was an important dogma in ancient Egyptian thought. Because the Nile was the main method of transportation between the different parts of Egypt from south to north, boats which were the vehicles of transportation on the Nile were very important. The Egyptians did not imagine any mode of transportation without boats so they considered that gods, in spite of their immense power, could not move around without boats. For example, the sun god Re had two solar ships: one for his day journey across the sky in the world of the living and the other for his night journey in the world of the dead. Also, the deceased must have had boats to be able to travel in the other world. For this reason the boat was an important element in funerary furniture. Boats also acquired a symbolical meaning. For example, a person who wanted to imply that he helps people would say: "I was the boat for those who had no boats." This means that he helped those who were in need.



Fig. 2 The Nile as the first natural *sm3-i3wy*, which means uniting the two lands (Upper and Lower Egypt)

The Nile defined the type of economy in ancient Egypt and Egypt was known as an agricultural country. Being an agricultural country affected the language, religious beliefs, habits and arts. The agricultural cycle and the Nile cycle instilled in the Egyptians from a very early time the strong belief in resurrection and that death is a temporary period. The Egyptians used pictorial writing which was also influenced by the agricultural nature of the economy due to the Nile. The word “year” was written using a sign representing a green branch (*rnpt*). The year has twelve months, divided into three seasons. This division is not according to weather, but according to the agricultural cycle. For example, *3ht* represents the inundation season; *pwt*, the flowering season, and *šmw*, the harvest season (see Fig. 3). The important role the Nile played in ancient Egyptian life also affected religious beliefs. When the Egyptians imagined their paradise, they thought of it as holy fields (the fields of *i3rw*) where the righteous deceased would enjoy practicing their favorite jobs without fear of insects or shortages during inundation (see Fig. 4). The god of inundation, *h3py*, was a very important god linked to rejuvenation. Some kings associated themselves with the god *h3py* to imply that they are the source of welfare and prosperity.

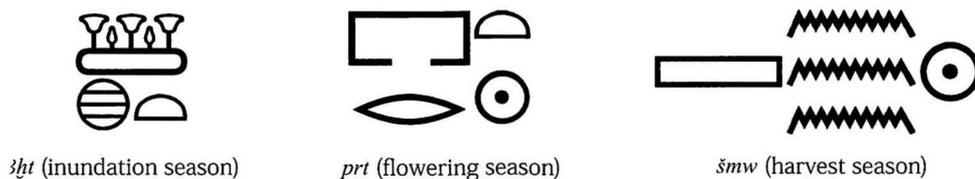


Fig. 3 The three seasons of the year in ancient Egypt

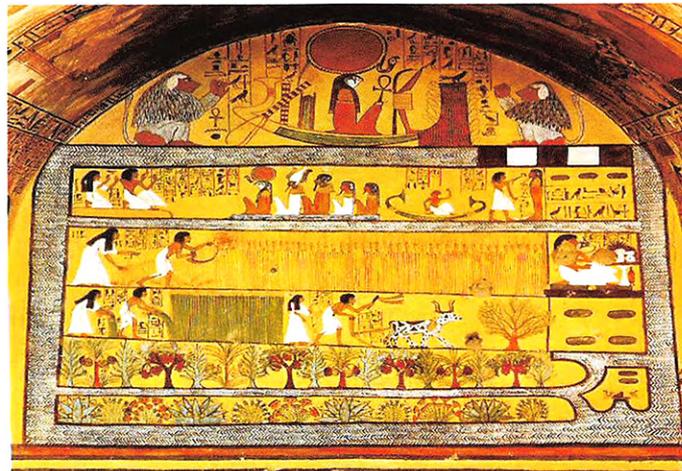


Fig. 4 The fields of *Brw*

(<http://jfbgradu.free.fr/egypte/LES%20TOMBEAUX/LES%20HYPOGEES/VALLEE-DES-ARTISANS/sennedjem/tombe-sennedjem06.php3>)

Another obvious feature in the internal geography is the deserts which envelop the Nile valley. The deserts provided partial protection against invaders. Since life in the deserts was different from the settled model in the Nile valley, the Egyptians thought of the deserts as a source of trouble and disorder. Also, the clans who roamed in these deserts were a chronic problem. Based on the large contrast between the Nile valley and the surrounding deserts, the Egyptian texts mention the king of Egypt as “*nswt kmt ḥk3 dšrt*,” who administrates the black land (the Nile valley) and controls the red lands (the desert). This shows that the ruling style differed according to the geographical features.

The climate of Egypt affected the customs and beliefs in ancient Egypt. Egypt lies in the moderate zone with a sun that shines all year round so the sun god Re was the dominant god in ancient Egypt who was never rivaled or shadowed by any other god (see Fig. 5). Re has a very important role in the god’s pantheon. He is *nb-m3ʿt* (the master of justice) and also had an effective role in the afterlife. The deceased hoped to join the sun barque as a sign of resurrection and everlasting life like the sun.

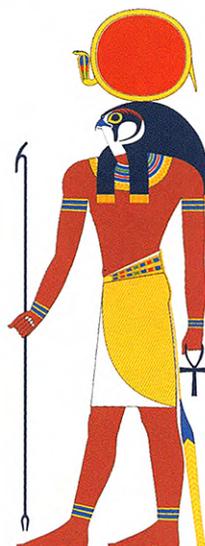


Fig. 5 The sun god Re

(<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Re-Horakhty.svg>)

1.2 The External Geographical Features (Situation)

The second element of the regional character of Egypt is the external features (the situation). Egypt lies in the northeastern part of Africa with wide shores on the Mediterranean to the north and the Red Sea to the east. Egypt had borders with Libya to the west and Nubia (Sudan) to the south. Being on the northeastern tip of Africa, Egypt had easy access by land and sea to Asia (see Fig. 6). The central situation of Egypt had a double-sided effect. The positive side was that Egypt had the chance to interact with many civilizations as far away as the Euphrates such as the city states of Syria. Egypt also interacted with the Mediterranean Islands (Greece). Egypt affected and was affected by these relations, which enriched Egyptian civilization, both materially and culturally. The negative aspect of the central situation of Egypt was that the traditional enemies of Egypt were its territorial neighbors: the Asiatics, the Libyans, and the Nubians. Egypt in the pharaonic era was a point of attraction due to its flourishing economy so its territory was always coveted by its neighbors. This tension is expressed in an artistic way where we find that the Asiatics, Libyans, and Nubians were depicted on the King's foot rest, which is a symbolic indication that they were under the full control of the Egyptian king.

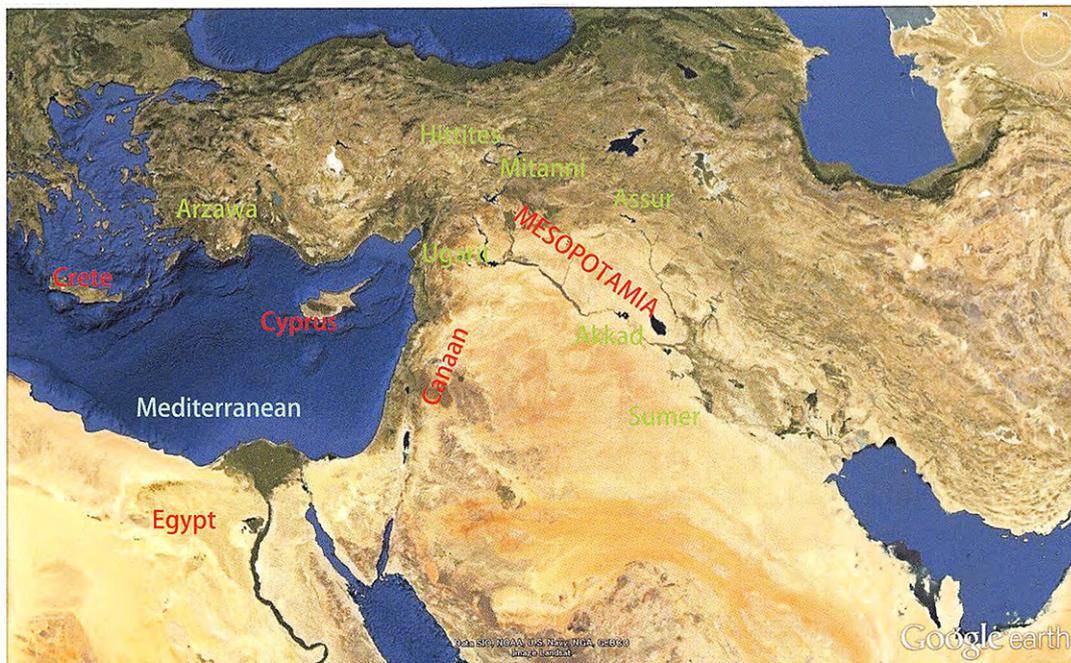


Fig. 6 Map showing the neighbors of Egypt

Geography made the ancient Egyptian relations with Nubia special. Nubia is the natural extension of the Nile valley so it was considered a native part of the Egyptian domain. This was expressed in the speech of king Kamose, the last king of the 17th dynasty, on his Karnak stela when lower Egypt (the delta) was occupied by the Asiatics (the Hyksos), where he said: "I should like to know what purpose serves my strength when one prince is in Avaris (in the Delta) and another is in Kush (Nubia) and I sit united with an Asiatic and a Negro, each man holding his slice of Egypt, who shares the land with me." King Kamose considered Nubia as much a native part of Egypt as the delta. Ancient Egypt's special relationship with

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Nubia was also expressed in the title of its administrator. He was given the honorary title of king's son because of the importance of his post.

From the preceding examples, we find that geography is an influential partner in the events of history, and geography is of great help in interpreting many historical events.

2 Methodological Rules for Studying Ancient History

The rules that define the methodology of studying ancient history as they are applied to ancient Egyptian history are discussed below.

2.1 The Importance of Sources

History is not a matter of invention or speculation, but studying ancient history depends on sources i.e., the material remains of ancient civilizations in their wide variety such as buildings, stela, written texts, tombs, seals, statues, etc. The first rule in the methodology of studying ancient history is the rule: without sources, there is no history. Based on the sources available to historians, they state that the historical time in ancient Egypt began with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt at about 3200 B.C. and ended with the invasion of Alexander the Great, in 332 B.C. Ancient Egyptian history includes 30 (31) dynasties (families of rulers) and these dynasties have been classified by the Egyptologists into a broad schema as follows:

- Archaic Period
- Old Kingdom
- First Intermediate
- Middle Kingdom
- Second Intermediate
- New Kingdom
- Third Intermediate
- Late Period

In applying this rule (where there are no sources, there is no history) to ancient Egyptian history, we notice that the darkest periods are the intermediate periods (the transitional periods which separate one kingdom from another). These periods are known as ages of turmoil and decentralized rule. The economy in these periods deteriorated and as a result, the archaeological material left from these ages is poor. We do not have enough sources to reconstruct the scenario of events. In studying these periods, historians have many open questions.

2.2 Historical Events are Closely Related

Another important rule in the methodology of studying ancient history is that events in history are strongly related to each other and the division of ancient history into dynasties or kingdoms does not

exclude the strong relationships between these divisions. We cannot understand the events of any dynasty or kingdom without examining the preceding era. Also the transition from one dynasty to another does not imply a new era with different circumstances since the different dynasties greatly affected each other. For example, at the beginning of the 6th dynasty, the names of its founder, King Teti (see Fig. 7), revealed an internal unrest. His titulary was as follows:

Horus Name: *shꜥp tꜣwy* (who pacifies the two lands) and his golden Horus name: *smꜣ* (the uniter).

These names reflect a state of internal unrest. This interpretation was strengthened by the historian Manethon, who wrote that Teti was murdered by his own guards¹. Many historians proposed that the problem may be related to struggles for accession to the throne. Therefore, the problems imported from the 5th dynasty affected the policy of the kings of the 6th dynasty. King Pepy the First, King Teti's son, began what is called a co-regency (the sharing of kingship with his son) to ensure his son's accession to the throne. Also, the kings of the 6th dynasty encouraged an increase in power of some district rulers in order to create new centers of power that they could be depended on to stand against the powers in the capital. The problems in the 5th dynasty thus shaped the events in the 6th dynasty. This is an example of the relatedness of historical events.



Fig. 7 King Teti

(<http://www.saqqara.nl/context/glossary/teti>)

Another example of the relatedness of historical events is how the events of the First Intermediate Period (2160 BC to 2008 BC) were affected by the factors that led to the collapse of the old kingdom. These factors include the weakening of the kingship and the increasing power of the district rulers which led to the decentralization of rule, which is a defining feature of the First Intermediate Period.

Another example is that the events that took place during the First Intermediate Period had a large effect not only in formulating the events of the Middle Kingdom, but they also affected the development of many beliefs and ideologies. The main feature of the First Intermediate Period is the decentralization of power, so that there was no sole ruler because many of the district rulers claimed authority in their districts. Because this period had many problems related to security and the economy, the autobiographies of the district rulers always mention how the rulers were effective in dealing with these problems and in providing security and prosperity to the people of their districts. This salient feature of the First

¹ Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, 2004.

Intermediate Period changed the ideology of the defied king and magnified the picture of the rescuer and redeemer. This picture of the redeemer had a big effect on the next era, namely, the Middle Kingdom. For example, this picture affected the kind of propaganda that King Amenemhat, the first ruler of the 12th dynasty, used to bestow legitimacy on his rule. King Amenemhat commissioned the writing of the prophecy of Neferti. This prophecy starts with a list of problems in the land. Next, it predicts the emergence of a strong king and states: "Asiatics will fall to his sword, Libyans will fall to his flame, rebels to his wrath, traitors to his might as the serpent on his brow subdues the rebels for him²." Therefore, in this prophecy, Amenemhat did not claim divine origin or royal descent, but he portrayed himself through his deeds as the rescuer and the one who will end the turmoil in the land. In this way the First Intermediate Period changed the ideology of the divine king which prevailed in the old kingdom and put forth a new concept of the king. It is an observed rule that the events of history deeply affect each other. Physical rules such as matter cannot be destroyed or created from nothing have analogous rules in history: Events do not arise without causes and their effects persist.

2.3 The Danger of Building on Uncertain Assumptions

One of the most important rules in studying ancient history is not to build a theory on uncertain assumptions. This rule concerns mainly the evidence of texts which are damaged or have gaps. When we apply this rule to ancient Egyptian history, we have the popular example of the Amarna boundary stela K (see Fig. 8). Amarna is a town in middle Egypt that was established by King Akhenaton in the second half of the 18th dynasty for his god, Aton the sun disc. Akhenaton called the town Akhet-Aton, "the horizon of the disc." The boundaries of this city were marked by a number of boundary stelae. In studying these stelae, the Egyptologists denoted them by letters: A, B, K, etc. These stelae are carved on the cliffs of the heights surrounding Akhet-Aton and contain in their top parts a depiction of the royal family worshipping the god Aton and then a long text. The greatest obscurities are found in Stela K. There are many difficulties in reading this text because it is badly damaged from natural erosion, so gaps and obscurities are frequent. In this text, there are some lines which express hostility against the king. These lines run as follows:

"Now as Aton my father lives regarding #####. In Akhet-Aton, it was worse than which I heard in regnal year 4. It was worse than which I heard in regnal year 3. It was worse than which I heard in regnal year 2. It was worse than which I heard in regnal year 1. It was worse than what *nb m3't r'* heard, it was worse than what *mn hprw r'* heard."

In this text, Akhenaten said that the present situation is worse than anything heard earlier in the king's reign or in his forefathers reign. Akhenaten, for his part, did not say much about his own disaffection except what might be contained in the missing text. Such gaps have made it understandably difficult to understand the exact meaning. The remaining signs in the gap are illegible. Some Egyptologists proposed the reading: "priests" for the unclear text marked by #####, and others followed this assumption and

2 W. Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj*, KAT, 1970.

considered the proposed reading a fact even though it is uncertain. For decades, Egyptologists interpreted the text above as indicating tension between the priests of Amun and the king. However, this interpretation is misleading because it depends on uncertain assumptions regarding the missing parts in the text. The problem that Akhenaten faced is still controversial, but this does not justify appropriating an uncertain interpretation as a definite fact. Therefore, in dealing with damaged texts, historians and scholars make assumptions and these assumptions should always be followed by interrogative marks. These assumptions can never become facts and should always be questioned. In sum, when interpreting the events of history, it is dangerous to depend on uncertain assumptions and to build a theory on top of such unfounded assumptions.



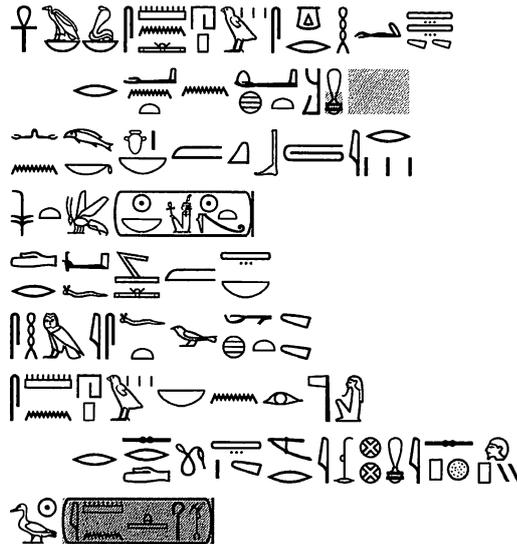
Fig. 8 Boundary stela K

(N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, Part V, London, 1908, Plate 38)

2.4 A Historical Case is Always Open for Reinterpretation

Ancient history is studied through media (namely sources) and the scenario is rebuilt according to what is available from what ancient civilizations left behind. Therefore, because of the very nature of studying ancient history it is impossible to put a closure to any suggested theories about ancient history, and cases of ancient history are always apt to be reconsidered. In applying this rule to ancient Egyptian history, we find that many theories regarding transitions between dynasties, or regarding Egyptian foreign policies during certain periods, or the evaluations of the actions of certain kings have had to be reconsidered. An example of this reconsideration is the reign of Amenhotep III (see Fig. 9), the 9th ruler of the 18th dynasty. Most scholars agree that his reign was the zenith of the glory of the 18th dynasty and the New Kingdom, and that under the rule of Amenhotep III, Egypt had never been more powerful. This theory was based on the impressive number of constructions and statues of Amenhotep III that showed his glory and deification, and the large number of texts praising him as a most beneficial king and a great god. The last decades have seen some writings expressing a different opinion. These writings focus on one of the forms of the Nbtj name of Amenhotep III (*smn hpw sgrh t3wy*) (who established laws and pacified the two lands). Scholars interpreted this title as indicating domestic problems during the reign of Amenhotep

III. However, scholars are still debating what kind of domestic problems he faced. Kozloff suggested an epidemic plague based on the large number of statues of the goddess *shmt* (see Fig. 10) which totaled more than 400 statues³. *shmt* is the goddess of plague. Another strong indication that Amenhotep III really faced an internal problem is a text from the Luxor temple saying:



ḥnh nbty smn hpw sgrh t3wy r ḥnt n mh3t mi//// nn h3k-ib nb m k3b irw nswt bity (nb m3t Rḥ tit Rḥ) dr:f grg m t3 nb shm isft ht idbwy smn hpw nb n ir ntr r srwd t3 mry mi sp tpy s3 Rḥ (Imn htp h33 w3st)

“May he live who established laws and pacified the two lands to enjoy the balance... No disobedient one in their midst (the two lands). The king of Upper and Lower Egypt nb m3t rḥ, the image of Re. He expels wrongdoing in all the land. He crushes falsehood through the two shores. He established all the laws of the gods’ doing in order to strengthen Egypt like the first time. The son of Re Amenhotep the ruler of Thebes.”

The plague suggested by Kozloff may not be the whole problem, because the text accused a specific group and called them “the disobedient.” So in looking thoroughly and considering these hints, scholars adopted a different opinion and the debate is not just about whether there is a problem or not, but about identifying this problem. This reconsideration changed what was believed about the reign of Amenhotep III as a glorious period, and also posed new questions. This shows us that sources are sometimes deceiving, but the truth can sometimes be uncovered from additional hints.

In studying ancient history, there will always be question marks, and the only unchanging part is the research methodology. Studying ancient history is interesting because it helps us understand recent events more deeply. However, such study makes the researcher suspicious of accepted opinions and makes

3 J. Yoyotte, “Une monumentale Litanie de granit, Les Sekhmet d’Amenophis-III et la Conjurati3n Permanante de la Deesse dangereuse,” BSFE 87, 1980, pp. 46-75.

him/her question the sources and assumptions behind these opinions. “I doubt therefore I think, I think therefore I am” said the French philosopher Rene Descartes.

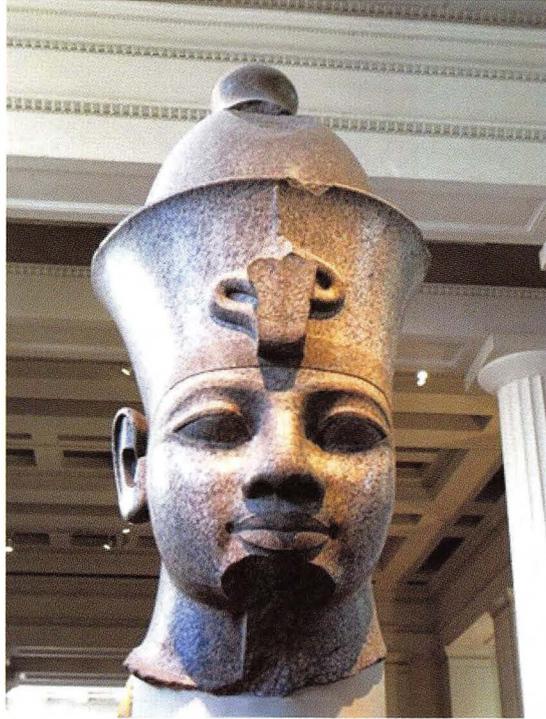


Fig. 9 Amenhotep III

(<http://blogtrotta.blogspot.jp/2009/12/my-british-museum.html>)



Fig. 10 statues of the goddess *sḫmt*

(<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/GD-EG-KomOmbo016.JPG>)