Passed Down from the “Mother of the World”: The Precarious Role of DNA in Reframing the Racialization of Ancient Egyptian Identity

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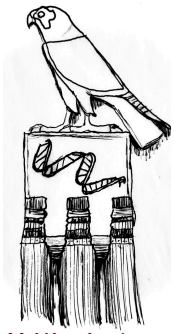

Maṣr Umm al-Dunya

"Egypt, the Mother of the World"

Introduction

Modern descendents, by birth or belief, often turn to the distant past to use historical precedence to legitimize claims of identity and belonging. Italians have looked to ancient Rome, Swedes to the Vikings, and Egyptians to the time of the pharaohs, each invoking a remote past to authorize a contemporary identity. Origin claims of this kind are not confined to Egypt, and colonial violence over indigeneity in Palestine, Ireland, and the politics of immigration across Europe and North America all turn, in part, on whose origin story is granted the authority of historical depth. As one of the oldest sustained civilizations and a frequent candidate for the title of "founder of civilization," ancient Egypt has functioned as a site of competing racial and cultural ownership claims advanced from positions as politically opposed as Eurocentric, Afrocentric, and Egyptian neo-pharaonist nationalism.

The concept of “origins” is often treated ambiguously, referring both to beginnings and to causes (Keita 112). Discussions of ancient Egypt frequently collapse the two: a claim about where some part of the ancient population came from becomes, almost imperceptibly, a claim about what ancient Egypt became. Origins and identity, however, are not equivalent. Identity is a relational and often emic category, while origins, in the genetic sense, refers to the deep histories of population movements that may or may not be remembered or socially meaningful within the descendant population. An individual's known and remembered ancestors at the family or ethnic level "may have genes from ancestors that are historically unknown, forgotten, or unknowable" (Keita 117). Exploring population affinity, in which the relative similarity between groups is assessed without reference to a predetermined racial schema, is methodologically and conceptually different from making racial identifications, in which an individual or population is assigned to one of a set of predefined racial categories. Genetic data can support the former. It cannot, on its own, support the latter.

These distinctions are easily lost when aDNA findings enter public discussion. The questions that have most often shaped the reception of new data are not questions about population affinity but questions about racial identity. Were the ancient Egyptians black or white? Did civilization arrive from outside Africa or emerge within it? Whose modern descendants have the most authentic claim to the pharaonic heritage? Each of these questions makes inevitable a series of further questions about access and authority. Whose buried remains get preserved enough to end up in laboratories, and whose do not? Which laboratories, in which countries, get to study Egyptian aDNA? Whose racialized assumptions shaped the analytical frameworks the data are interpreted within? And once findings are published, who is included or excluded by the categories the analysis produces? This paper reviews how these questions resulted from and continue to inform the study of identity and origin in Egypt and Egyptology. It situates recent archaeogenetic research within the colonial and racialized foundations of the field while considering how ancient and modern Egyptians have understood identity.

Dubious Foundations of Egyptology

Egyptology has, from its earliest stages, been governed by external observers. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BCE, produced one of the earliest sustained ethnographic accounts of Egypt in Book II of his Histories, and his characterizations have shaped Western treatments ever since. Although his observations were composed in Greek and filtered through a Hellenic worldview (at a time when hieroglyphic writing was still actively used), generations of scholars have continued to treat his testimony as a foundational, authoritative source on histories thousands of years before him. This external attention mutated with the rise of European colonialism and imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, fueled by and in turn strengthening an orientalistic captivation with the region and its ancestors. Napoleon Bonaparte's 1798 invasion of Egypt initiated a sustained European appetite for Egyptian material culture. The long British occupation that followed (1882-1954) and onslaught of Nazi-era German archaeological excavations oversaw the distribution of hundreds of thousands of artifacts and human remains to museums in the Global North, producing what historian Elise Burton terms a "mummy diaspora" (779). This supplied the physical material that further allowed Western scholars to claim interpretive authority over ancient Egyptian identity, positioning Egypt as a civilization to be studied, interpreted, and possessed by European institutions.

Foundations of Egyptology in the United States had undertones (or perhaps overtones) of conceptions of slavery. The American ethnological school of Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott, and George Gliddon used skull measurements to argue that ancient Egyptians had been white slaveholders much like those of the antebellum South; their *Types of Mankind* (1854) declared Ramesses II's features "as superbly European as Napoleon's" (qtd. in Reid). The archaeologist

James Henry Breasted built American Egyptology in this climate. His high-school textbook *Ancient Times* (1916) annexed the ancient Egyptians to what he called the "Great White Race," insisting that its "men... created the civilization we have inherited" and that the "Negro peoples of Africa" were "without any influence on the development of early civilization" (qtd. in Reid).

An alternative, pan-Africanist racial framing developed in parallel with the African American author and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois writing *The Negro* in 1915. He argued that ancient Egyptians "were certainly not white in any modern sense of that word" and "stood in relationship nearest the Negro in earliest times" (qtd. in Reid). Du Bois recognized that race was a temporally impacted sociocultural construction rather than a fixed biological category, yet his antithetical account mirrored Breasted's in structure, staking "racial claims as sweeping as Breasted's, but in reverse" (Reid). Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop later extended this position into the laboratory, developing a "melanin dosage test" on mummified skin and urging, that paleoserology (the determination of blood groups from ancient tissue) be used to settle the question (Burton 783-84). His turn to science was "an effort to appropriate the growing academic authority of molecular biology over questions of racial classification rather than a truly radical reimagination of human history" … "rooted within a racial order defined by legacies of European colonialism" (Burton 785). Diop used, as his critics put it, "the same weapons as his adversaries" (qtd. in Burton 785). This is the role that aDNA research inherits as it advances into Egyptology, potentially hailed as an arbiter of objectivism that can be skewed to indisputably support claims based on modern motivations.

"Us" and "Them" Along the Nile

Ancient Egyptians called their country *Kemet*, the "Black Land," after the fertile Nile soil, and contrasted it with *Deshret*, the "Red Land" of the surrounding desert (Cornelius). Egyptians conceived their territory as cultivated and ordered, and lands beyond it as barren and chaotic, a distinction that was more geographic rather than racial (qtd. in Cornelius 327). Tomb scenes of the New Kingdom pharaohs Seti I and Ramesses III group humanity into typed categories under the sun-god Ra: Egyptian men were typically shown with reddish-brown skin, women as yellowish-pale, Nubians/Kushites in dark skin with tightly curled hair, Asiatics lighter and bearded, Libyans with goatees and feathered headdresses (Reid; Cornelius; Shaw). These depictions of peoples distinct from one another in physical characteristics and adornment with the "function [to] apparently … allow the Egyptians to define themselves as a national group, relative to the rest of the world." (Shaw 105)

The Egyptians themselves would have understood these as generalized portrayals, since the broader iconographic corpus depicts individual Egyptians across a wide spectrum of skin tones from light to dark brown and black (Shaw 105). Even the prone and decapitated figures on the

Narmer Palette cannot be visually identified as "foreigners" rather than Lower Egyptians, raising the further question of whether Upper Egyptians of the late predynastic period regarded their northern neighbors as quasi-foreigners in the first place (Shaw 101-02). More tellingly, the social and political integration of foreign-born individuals confounds any reading of Egyptian identity as racially closed. Maiherpri, an early Eighteenth Dynasty military official whose dark complexion and tightly curled hair potentially indicate Nubian relation, had the rare privilege of burial in the Valley of the Kings; Aper-el, whose name marks Near Eastern origins, rose to the position of vizier in the late Eighteenth Dynasty, a time where other Asiatics held high-ranking positions (Shaw 105). Such examples suggest that Egyptian identity functioned as a social and cultural category that could accommodate individuals of visibly diverse phenotypic backgrounds, provided they participated in Egyptian institutional life. Although the existence, appearance, and status of these officials are well attested, it remains unclear whether they were perceived differently from Egyptians who more closely matched standard iconographic representations when occupying similar positions.

Egyptian involvement in long-distance commercial networks long predates the dynastic period itself. Naqada I material culture (ca. 4000-3500 BCE) shows notable West Asian influences, and pottery from this period has been recovered from Lower Nubian graves (Bergendorff 11). Trade brought sustained contact with Nubia to the south, the Levant to the northeast, Punt and Sinai along the Red Sea, and the Aegean. Cedar from Lebanon, copper and turquoise from Sinai, gold and incense from Nubia, and lapis lazuli routed ultimately from Afghanistan all moved through Egyptian markets and workshops (Cornelius 333-34).

The language surrounding the basic designation of the land is a conspicuous derivative of overlapping external and internal conceptions. The word "Egypt" derives from the Greek Αἴγυπτος (Aegyptos), itself adapted from the Egyptian ḥwt-k□-Pṯḥ, meaning "House of the Ka of Ptah," a term for Memphis. Herodotus's claim that Thebes was once called "Egypt" likely reflects a phonological confusion between the Egyptian terms Kemet (Egypt) and Tjamet (Thebes), which would have sounded indistinguishable to a Greek speaker, ultimately leading to the widespread use of the term today mainly outside of Egypt (Piccolo). The country's standard name in Arabic of مصر (Misr, Maṣr in local dialect), stems from the semitic origin of "civilization" and "the two lands" alongside the earlier Akkadian term related to "borderland," highlighting Egypt's role as a significant geographic and cultural epicenter while being a boundary of surrounding powers (Dallmayr; Black). Egypt is also referred to as أم الدنيا (*Umm al-Dunya*), the "mother of the world," a salient, colloquial interjection of modern Egyptians' pride in identifying with the prolific and venerable history of Ancient Egypt. This name is largely considered to be affectionate while reflecting the Egyptian self-conception of continuity from their over 5000-year-old roots.

For most modern Egyptians, the historian Donald Reid notes, “religion has been far more critical than race in their debates about pharaonic heritage,” and Western debates over whether the ancient Egyptians were Black or white strike them as “off key.” (qtd. In Reid) However, Egyptian self-conception is not free of racial hierarchy, seen through their several nationalistic movements throughout modern history (Table 1). Through much of the 20th century, rhetoric of Nile Valley “brotherhood” with the Sudanese often carried a paternalistic façade, presented as shared children of the Nile beyond skin color. This was frequently used to justify Egyptian expansionist claims over Sudan, tied to efforts to “civilize” populations caricatured as “primitive savages” in derogatory political cartoons, while an Arabic term meaning “slaves” continues to be used as a slur against Black Africans (Reid).

Period	Nationalist Ideology	Notes/Key Leaders
Late 1800s–1920s	Territorial Nationalism, Pharaonism	Saad Zaghlul, Wafd Party
1930s–1950s	Arab Nationalism, Supra-Nationalism	Interwar and WWII era
1952–1970	Nasserism (Arab Socialism)	Gamal Abdel Nasser, Free Officers
1970s–1980s	Islamic-Influenced Nationalism	Anwar Sadat, national shift to Islamism
1980s–Present	Civic/Military Nationalism, Neo-Pharaonism	Mubarak, Sisi, resurgence of Nasserism imagery

Table 1. Nationalist movements, ideologies in modern history in Egypt. (from Shams)

These tensions have further intensified in recent years, with the state’s investment into racial nationalism through ancient nostalgia for legitimacy amid economic crisis. In the “Pharaohs’ Golden Parade” of April 2021, 22 royal mummies were transferred across Cairo in a televised and widely attended spectacle (Fig. 1). This has been read as the “cornerstone” of neo-pharaonism, “an extreme form of nationalism that underscores the exceptionality of the Egyptian race and claims that contemporary Egyptians share the same genetic makeup as ancient Egyptians,” often at the explicit expense of Arab or African identification (TIMEP). Efforts to push this ideology by the state are done so “to marginalize, exclude, and differentiate according to proximity to the racialized Egyptian ‘self’,” defining an “other” based on western racial conceptions rather than geographically like how the Ancient Egyptians had done (Shams). As in many parts of the world today, neo-pharaonists often take to social media to “warn” of the increasing number of refugees aiming to “steal” Egyptian jobs and resources, with a simple solution of “kicking them out.” Du Bois cites this phenomenon as an arbiter of racial divisions within the post-war American working class, with whiteness acting as a “public and psychological wage.” (qtd. in TIMEP) This is put plainly by Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in a 2023 speech: “If progress, prosperity, and development come at the price of hunger and deprivation, Egyptians, do not shy away from progress! Don’t dare say: ‘It is better to eat.’” (qtd. in Bower).

Fig. 1. Participants in the “Pharaohs’ Golden Parade,” Cairo, April 3, 2021. Adapted from The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (photo by Vassilis A. Poularikas/NurPhoto via Getty Images).

The state has articulated neo-pharaonism through archaeological policy to assert control over their own racial mythology, appealing both to a “truly Egyptian” base and conforming to various tourism demographics (Shams). This includes opening new museums to support the GDP

and revoking a Dutch excavation permit over an exhibit deemed Afrocentric (Jurman 16; TIMEP). Neo-pharaonism makes an explicitly genetic claim, relying on aDNA evidence to legitimize itself and readily conscripting any new findings into its narrative.

aDNA Evidence in Egyptology

The conditions under which aDNA research is currently conducted remain structurally uneven. Access to ancient Egyptian remains is determined in large part by where those remains are physically held, which are commonly in European and North American institutions with extensive collections obtained under the "mummy diaspora." The laboratories most active in aDNA research are typically those with the permission and equipment to undertake destructive sampling on materials within their own holdings. Egyptian institutions, by contrast, operate under stricter regulatory rules governing destructive analysis of human remains, creating higher procedural barriers for researchers to study individuals where they once lived (Burton 788).

The hot, humid climate and tomb conditions alongside caustic chemicals typically used in mummification have led to poor DNA preservation and therefore slower development of sufficient archaeogenetic analytical techniques. (Schuenemann et al. 2) Two recent studies, conducted by European institutions, illustrate how methodological advances in archaeogenetics have begun to transform what can be recovered from ancient Egyptian remains. Schuenemann et al. (2017) sequenced mummies from the late New Kingdom through the Roman Period while Morez Jacobs et al. (2025) studied one Old Kingdom individual. The studies do not so much settle older debates as expand the range of biological evidence available for interpretation, while exposing the considerable methodological constraints that continue to affect the field.

High-Throughput Sequencing of Genomic Continuity and Change: Schuenemann et al.

Verena Schuenemann and her colleagues analyzed 151 mummified individuals from Abusir el-Meleq in Middle Egypt (Fig. 2) (Schuenemann et al. 7). Using novel sequencing techniques, they claim to "provide the first reliable data set obtained from ancient Egyptians using high-throughput DNA sequencing methods and assessing the authenticity of the retrieved ancient DNA" (Schuenemann et al. 2). Their focus was cross-temporally comparing the genes of ancient Abusir el-Meleq inhabitants (and to modern populations), to therefore "study changes and continuities"…"at the genetic level by foreign conquest and domination" (Schuenemann et al. 2). Their samples spanned roughly 1388 BCE to 426 CE and were divided into Pre-Ptolemaic, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods. The team recovered 90 complete mitochondrial genomes and partial nuclear data

Fig. 2. Locations of the Nuwayrat cemetery (red dot) & Abusir el-Meleq (purple diamond) in Middle Egypt. Adapted from Morez Jacobs et al.

from 3 male individuals (Schuenemann et al. 1, 4). All samples came from German museum collections in Tübingen and Berlin.

The results presented genetic continuity across the 1,300-year period as statistical and formal tests could not largely distinguish between the Pre-Ptolemaic, Ptolemaic, and Roman samples. This suggests that foreign rule by Libyans, Persians, Greeks, and Romans "impacted the town's population only to a very limited degree at the genetic level" (Schuenemann et al. 8). Principal component analysis (PCA) and outgroup f3-statistics placed the ancient Egyptians closest to Neolithic and Bronze Age Levantine, Anatolian, and Neolithic European populations, with two of three nuclear-genome individuals carrying the Middle Eastern Y-chromosome haplogroup J and one carrying the North African E1b1b1 (Schuenemann et al. 5) (Fig. 3). The observed genetic similarity between the studied ancient inhabitants and modern Near Eastern and Levantine populations lead the authors to conclude "close admixture and affinity at a much earlier date" than previously theorized (~750 years ago) (Schuenemann et al. 8).

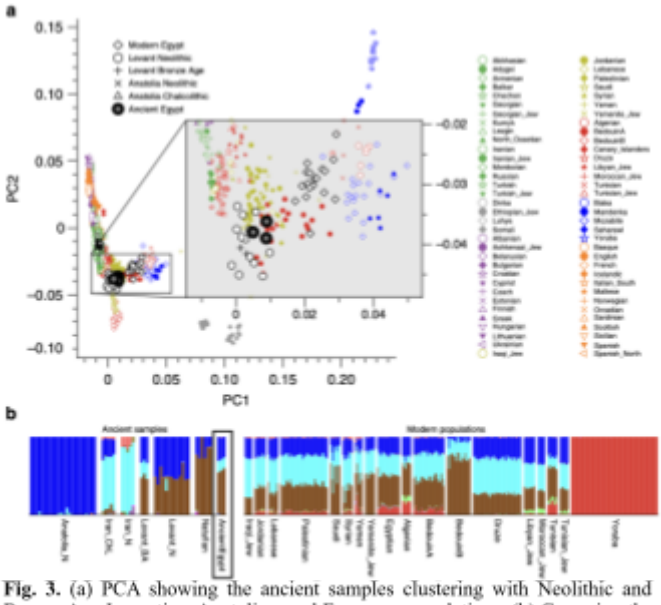

Fig. 3. (a) PCA showing the ancient samples clustering with Neolithic and Bronze Age Levantine, Anatolian, and European populations. (b) Cmparing the ancient samples with ancient/modern Near Eastern, North African, and sub-Saharan African populations. Adapted from Schuenemann et al.

This study has not gone without its share of criticism. The authors themselves acknowledge that data from Abusir el-Meleq, being a single Middle Egyptian site, cannot represent those simultaneously living in Upper (Southern) Egypt who may have had more Sub-Saharan DNA. They call for further study opened up by these technical advancements that are therefore necessary to build a more comprehensive understanding of the genetics of Ancient Egyptians. Biological anthropologist Shomarka Omar Yahya Keita extends these methodological concerns into a more substantive challenge to the framing of the study itself. The comparative framework treats a single recent Yoruba sample as a proxy for "sub-Saharan Africa," even though greater genetic variation has been documented within sub-Saharan Africa than between it and Eurasian populations, and Yoruba have at times been treated as a distinct population in their own right (Keita 119). Furthermore, Keita claims the framing of post-pharaonic sub-Saharan ancestry as the product of trans-Saharan slave trade routes reproduces a long-standing "Negro slave" trope, and rests on a sample heavily weighted toward post-New Kingdom material. Keita notes that the trope has a documented history in Egyptology, including the Neolithic-period Fayum skull once labeled a slave on the basis of perceived phenotype alone (118-19). When discussing the Near

Eastern-Egyptian relationship, Keita cites extensive textual (papyri), archaeological, and isotopic evidence for the chain migration and assimilation of northern Levantines into Egypt across the dynastic period (Keita 119-20). Rather than treating this documented migration as a contributor for the Southwest Asian genetic signal in their sample, the authors inferred population history back to a much earlier date, producing what Keita describes as a "beginning that explains" (120).

The First Whole Ancient Egyptian Genome: Morez Jacobs et al.

Eight years later, Morez Jacobs and her collaborators published the first whole-genome sequence from ancient Egypt. Their subject was one adult male buried inside a large ceramic pot within a tomb at Nuwayrat, a necropolis 265 km south of Cairo (Fig. 2) (Morez Jacobs et al. 715). Three independent radiocarbon dates were calibrated to 2855-2570 BCE, placing him a few centuries after Egyptian unification and bridging the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods (Morez Jacobs et al. 715). The individual's remains had been donated by the Egyptian Antiquities Service to the (British) Beni Hasan excavation committee in 1902-1904 and held in Liverpool since 1950. This individual (henceforth NUE001) was genetically and osteologically male, lived to roughly 44-64 years, and stood at 157-160 cm. Phenotype prediction, while acknowledged as imprecise for understudied populations, suggests brown eyes, brown hair, and "skin pigmentation ranging from dark to black skin" (Morez Jacobs et al. 715). They include a facial reconstruction in their extended figures. (Fig. 5) His Y-haplogroup, E1b1b1b2b, is most common today in North Africa, while his mitochondrial haplogroup, I/N1a1b2, is found across North Africa and West Asia. Multi-isotope analysis of dental enamel and collagen confirms he grew up locally in the Nile Valley on a typical diet of terrestrial protein, wheat, and barley. Pot burial inside a rock-cut tomb conventionally indicated

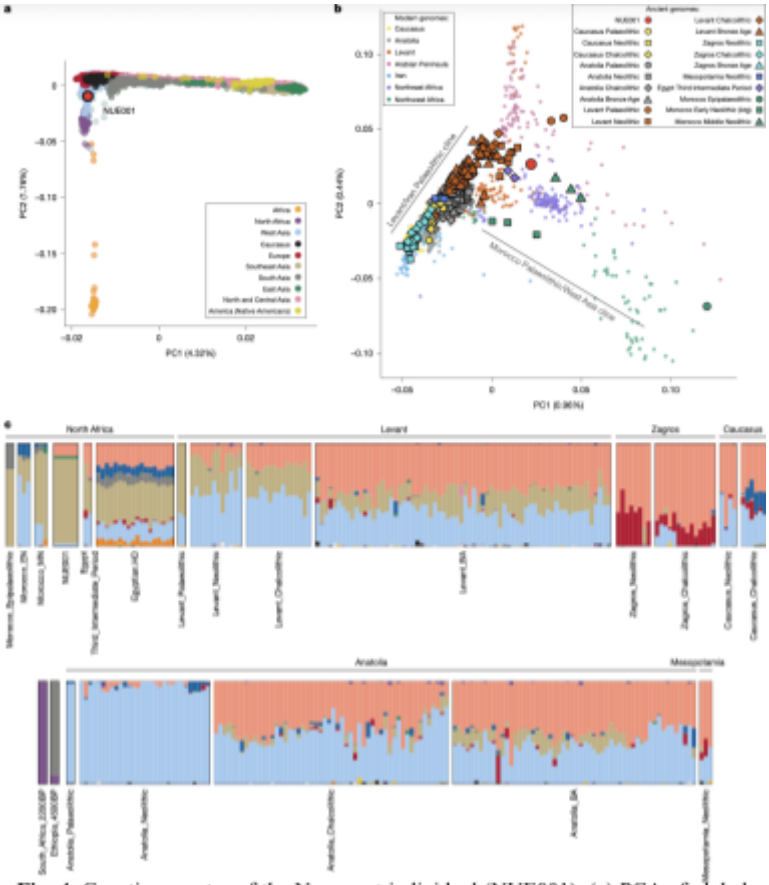

Fig. 4. Genetic ancestry of the Nuwayrat individual (NUE001). (a) PCA of global present-day populations with NUE001 projected. (b) PCA of North African and West Asian populations showing NUE001 between Levantine/Iranian and Moroccan. (c) Comparing NUE001 with ancient African, West Asian, and modern Egyptian genomes. Adapted from Morez Jacobs et al.

elevated social status, yet osteological examination revealed extreme age-related osteoarthritis throughout his vertebrae and joints, along with activity-induced musculoskeletal stress markers corresponding to physical labor. The authors suggest that the patterns are “not inconsistent with those of a potter, as depicted in ancient Egyptian imagery” (Morez Jacobs et al. 715).

The genome itself, recovered at 2.02-times coverage, was modeled with source populations from Neolithic/Chalcolithic North Africa, the Levant, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus. The model attributed 77.6% of the individual’s ancestry to genomes from the Middle Neolithic Moroccan site of Skhirat-Rouazi (4780-4230 BCE) and 22.4% to Neolithic Mesopotamia (9000-8000 BCE) (Morez Jacobs et al. 718).

The authors are explicit about the interpretive limits of each genetic component. The shared affinity with Middle Neolithic Morocco supports the broader inference, also drawn from material culture and bioarchaeological analyses, that local Egyptian Neolithic populations contributed genetically to the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom people (Morez Jacobs et al. 718). However, the Middle Neolithic Moroccan source is itself a composite of Iberomaurusian-like and Levantine Neolithic components. The Levantine affinity could therefore reflect any of several earlier migration events, meaning the "North African" portion of his ancestry does not represent a single ancestral source (Morez Jacobs et al. 718).

Fig. 5. Facial reconstruction and remains of the Nuwayrat individual (NUE001). (a) Reconstructed face. (b) Overlay of face on skull. (c) Partial skeleton from pot burial. Adapted from Morez Jacobs et al.

The picture grows more complex when the same framework is extended to present-day Egyptians. Most modern Egyptian genomes can be modeled as deriving from five sources related to Nuwayrat (32.1-74.7%), Middle Neolithic Morocco (28.9-72.7%), Bronze Age Levant (11.6-57.1%), the 4,500-year-old Mota individual from Ethiopia (7.4-56.0%), and roughly 230-year-old individuals from Congo (4.8-52.0%) (Morez Jacobs et al. 720). The East and West African components are dated to about 27 generations ago, and approximately 20% of the modern Egyptian genomes included in the study do not fit the five-source model at all (720), reflecting internal diversity that these five sources cannot capture. The underlying methodological critique is that all of these inferences treat a single Old Kingdom genome as a regional reference. The authors acknowledge the limit, noting that their analyses are "limited to a single Egyptian individual who, on the basis of his relatively high-status burial, may not be representative of the general population" (720). This aside sits uneasily alongside the inferential weight NUE001 carries across two later periods. The resulting picture is informative, particularly in rejecting unbroken continuity from Old Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period and in documenting substantial Bronze Age Levantine admixture in later populations, but its reliability

rests on the representativeness of one individual whose social position and skeletal markers (particularly in relation to high age) suggest confounding characteristics that cast doubt on his representativeness of his own community, let alone his own period.

Between Methodological Advance and Interpretive Caution

These studies' aforementioned critiques, however, must be considered alongside the methodological constraints that define ancient DNA research itself. To object that a study lacks a larger sample size, broader geographic coverage, or deeper temporal resolution is to demand resources that the field is only now beginning to develop. The first whole genome from ancient Egypt was sequenced less than a year ago currently, and the recovery of usable genetic material from any given individual depends on a confluence of factors largely outside the researchers' control: the surrounding and internal environments, the form of interment, and the degree of post-depositional disturbance. The Nuwayrat individual yielded sequenceable DNA in part because of his pot burial, a practice neither chosen by the researchers nor previously recognized as a major contributor to genetic preservation. To withhold publication until a more representative collection of samples could be assembled would significantly delay the development of the field and forestall the methodological refinements on which any future representative sample would depend. The interpretive moves in both studies are nevertheless open to and deserve legitimate critique in order to propel the use of aDNA conceptually in a direction away from biases at the foundation of Egyptology. As the literature accumulates, more informed interpretations will become possible, but only if those interpretations remain grounded in multiple lines of evidence. Both studies attempt this kind of integrative reading when they situate their genetic findings against the archaeological and textual record of documented migration events. That interdisciplinary commitment is the needed and durable contribution which either study has made to the study of ancient Egyptian populations.

American media reported the Schuenemann study under the claim that the "Ancient Egyptian Race Mystery" had been "Solved" (Perry, Burton 788). The Egyptian geneticist Yehia Gad cautioned against over-interpretation, while the former Supreme Council for Antiquities director Zahi Hawass dismissed the results as "hallucinations" incompatible with Egyptian heritage (qtd. in Burton 788). The study's conclusion that ancient Egyptians from Abusir el-Meleq showed closer affinity to Levantine and Anatolian populations, alongside the claim that sub-Saharan ancestry increased only in post-pharaonic periods, lends itself prone to neo-pharaonist appropriation. At the same time, Afrocentric critiques challenge the study's methodology, particularly its limited methodological representation of sub-Saharan populations (Keita 119). The Morez Jacobs study complicates both positions, as its finding of predominantly North African Neolithic ancestry and the widely circulated phenotype prediction of "dark to black skin" for the Nuwayrat individual might appear to support Afrocentric claims. The same

study, however, explicitly excludes substantial sub-Saharan ancestry from his profile, leaving the dominant North African Neolithic signal analytically distinct from the sub-Saharan ancestry that Afrocentric arguments most often invoke (Morez Jacobs et al. 715, 719). The white-supremacist Great White Race framing canonized by Breasted rests on the claim that pharaonic civilization was the product of "white" efforts, which still surfaces in contemporary appropriations of new findings (104). Any signal of Levantine, Anatolian, or Mesopotamian ancestry can be conscripted to support this older logic, regardless of how carefully the authors of a given study qualify their historical interpretations. What unites all three receptions, despite their political opposition to one another, is the shared assumption that genetic data can settle questions about the racial composition of ancient populations and, through that settlement, cosign or invalidate their political identities.

Conclusion

The two case studies examined here represent significant methodological achievements that have each opened new lines of inquiry in Egyptology. The genetic record will continue to expand as additional individuals are sequenced, southern Egyptian and Sudanese sites are sampled, and methodological refinements such as DNA recovery from canopic jars are integrated into the field (Eppenberger). The analytical value of these advances, however, is impacted by how their findings are absorbed and deployed.

The investigation of ancient Egyptian genetics is in many respects more meaningful to modern scholars and political constituencies than it would have been to the ancient Egyptians themselves. The categories the data are now expected to confirm or refute, including racial groups, national identities, and politically charged claims of descent, are categories the ancient Egyptians did not share. What is being investigated, in other words, is less the identity of ancient Egyptians than the contemporary stakes of how that identity is now imagined.

The further question this raises is whether DNA, ancient or modern, can be said to determine identity at all, or whether identity is more accurately understood as the outcome of how appearance, descent, and ancestry are socially treated within a given historical moment. The Nuwayrat individual's 78% North African Neolithic ancestry does not resolve the question of whether ancient Egyptians were Black or white, because that question was never one the data could answer in those terms. The genetic continuity observed at Abusir el-Meleq across 1,300 years of foreign rule does not lend itself to any claim of racial purity, because the population it documents was already the product of regional contact and exchange. When read carefully against the textual, iconographic, and archaeological record, the studies inform the field that the population was local in some respects and broadly networked in others, occupying the geographic and demographic crossroads it always has.

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