

# Theorizing Vulnerability and Resilience in Ancient Egypt: First Thoughts

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## Introduction

Benjamin Wisner (2009: 181) poses a question each researcher should pose before undertaking a study of a particular topic, and in this particular context the questions are: “Why am I studying vulnerability? Who will benefit from this study? What responsibility do I have to the vulnerable people who are willing to share their lives and knowledge with me?” This essay was written after I attended the international workshop “Theorizing Resilience & Vulnerability in Ancient Studies” organized by Caroline Heitz, Martin Hinz, Stefan Schreiber and Martin Renger, 19–20.01.2021.

Historians and archaeologists can answer all of these questions, even though on the first impression the last two might seem out of their reach. Why do we study vulnerability in the past? We study vulnerability in the past because it was one of the experiences that has made us who we are as *homo sapiens sapiens*. If we had not been vulnerable as a species, we would not have evolved. Who will benefit from studies of vulnerability in the past? Certainly, the fields of history, archaeology and anthropology, since the results of such studies add to our better understanding of different past societies. However, also those *who can identify with past vulnerable experiences* in different ways, since narratives of the past and museum exhibitions rarely offer them something they can relate to. What responsibility do we have to vulnerable people in the past and present? In the case of vulnerable people in the past, we choose to focus on them and to *tell their stories*, either because we aim at a more complete reconstruction of the past and/or because we share the idea of ethical and social responsibility towards vulnerable people everywhere and at any time. We are responsible to vulnerable people in the present because they are also part of the society we live and work in. Archaeology, after all, is among all else a “socio-political action in the present” (Tilley 1989).

In this short reflection, I follow Judith Butler when she writes that “the point is to highlight the unequal distribution of vulnerability” (Butler 2020: 71). My contribution will demonstrate the epistemological benefits of this approach by focusing on ancient Egypt, in particular ancient Egyptian warfare, and the question of hunger in the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2118–1980 BCE).

## Vulnerable Prisoners

Numerous representations of prisoners of war from the Early Dynastic period (c. 3200 BCE) to the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BCE) indicate that imprisonment and deportation to Egypt were experiences of vulnerability (Bestock 2018; Langer 2021; Matic 2019a; Matic 2021a). Imprisoned men, women and children, are depicted being led by Egyptian soldiers and registered by Egyptian scribes. Children are depicted holding on to the women, but it is not written in the accompanying texts whether these women are their mothers, sisters or cousins. Some of these women have children in baskets or slings, which is a good argument that they were indeed their

mothers (Matić 2015). Whereas imprisoned men (more) and women (less) are depicted being mistreated by the Egyptian soldiers, imprisoned children are never depicted being treated violently (Matić 2018). Imprisoned women and children ended up as workers in temple workshops conducting a wide variety of work, from agricultural field work to food processing and weaving. Indeed, children are even described as “the best of the spoils of war of His Majesty” (Matić 2017).

Some authors have argued that women and girls are correctly viewed as being vulnerable to sexual predation in refugee camps (Wisner 2009: 177). As much as this is true in many patriarchal societies, excluding men and boys from sexual predation is a very heteronormative assumption that cannot be justified, even in modern societies (Misra 2015). Indeed, there are almost no explicit depictions of sexual violence committed against prisoners of war, at least not in state-sponsored art where depictions of sexual intercourse are anyhow scarce throughout ancient Egyptian history and are limited to illustrations of cosmological episodes from mythology (Matić 2022). One possible case of fringe art depicting sexual violence committed against a prisoner of war is a piece of Early Dynastic rock art from Wadi Ameyra in the Sinai. Here, one can see a large figure of a bound prisoner with an erect penis and a small figure holding the prisoner by the hair and placing his erect penis close to his mouth (Förster et al. 2022; Tallet 2015: 128). Such depictions of fellatio are almost non-existent. One example is found on the Ramesseid ostracon from Deir el-Medina, now in a private collection. Here, a phallus is depicted close to the lips of a woman (Orriols-Llonch 2016: 201, Fig. 13.2). However, there are several possible indications that, although for reasons of decorum acts of sexual violence conducted against enemies and prisoners of war were usually not depicted, they might have occurred. One indication is the discursive passivization and feminization of enemies, either by referring to them as “back-turners” or as women (Matić 2019a; Matić 2021a; Matić 2021b). Another indication is possibly iconographical. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty tomb of General Intef from Thebes (TT 386), who was in service of King Mentuhotep Nebhepetre II (ca. 2009-1959 BCE), there is a depiction of the aftermath of war in which, in the second register from the bottom, one of the Egyptian soldiers holds one of the imprisoned Syro-Palestinian women by her hair (Fig. 1). The posture of the soldier resembles the posture of the king in ‘smiting of the enemy’ scenes. Female hair and wigs were sexually charged in ancient Egypt. Holding the imprisoned woman by her hair in such a violent way could also be an indication of her sexual subjugation (Matić 2021a).

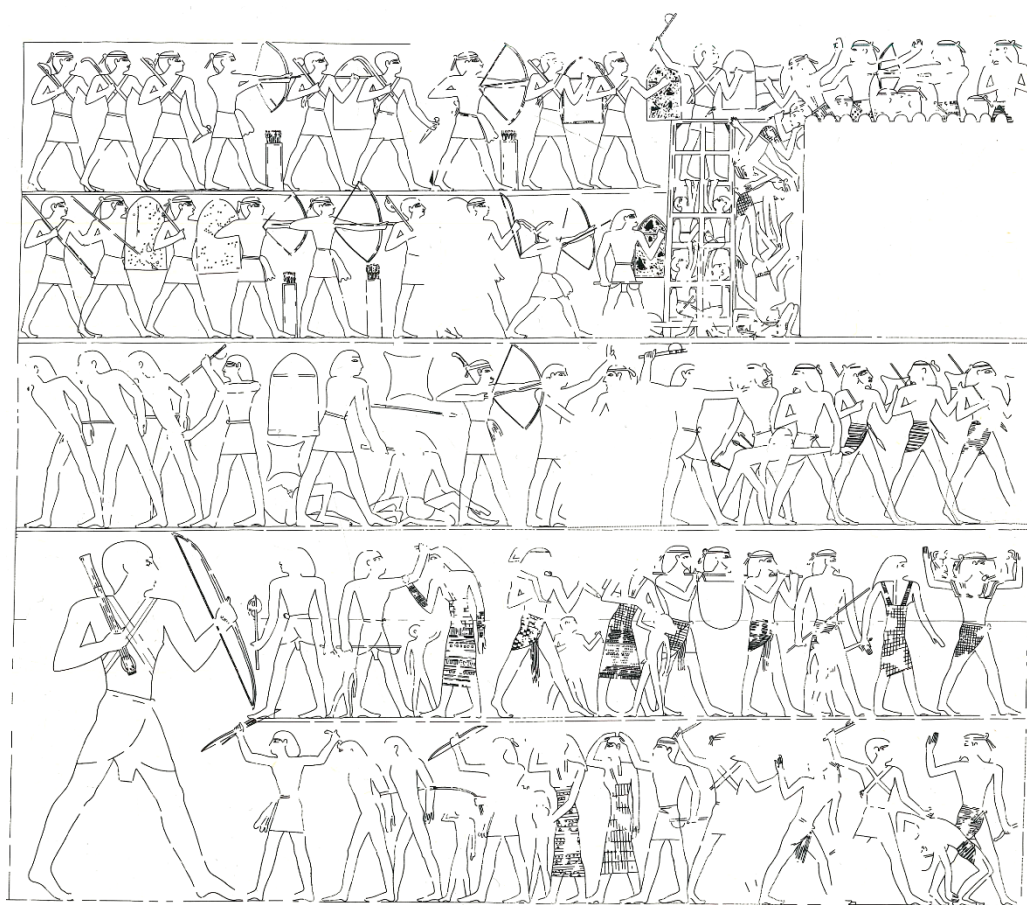


Fig 1. Siege of an Asiatic town, tomb of Intef (TT 386), 11<sup>th</sup> dynasty, line drawing, courtesy of Brigitte Jaroš-Deckert (after Jaroš-Deckert 1984: Pl. 17).

One would assume that foreign children were the most vulnerable but, according to the evidence at hand, at least in texts and images, they do not seem to be victims of violence as frequently as adults. However, we should be cautious in jumping to conclusions, since thematizing violence against foreign women and children, at least during the New Kingdom, could have been avoided due to decorum and “public taste” (Matić 2018).

## Vulnerable Kings

Ancient Egyptian kings were considered to be gods on earth, an ontological distinction observable, among other things, in their acts of violence and the way these are described in texts or depicted in images (Matić 2019a; Matić 2019b). However, although these gods on earth are often depicted in battles or described in royal texts as fighting against enemies with the help of gods and goddesses, not all of them actually participated in war. Some are known to have participated in military campaigns, and some are known to have been victims of violence, possibly violence in the battlefield. Rare cases are the

17<sup>th</sup> Dynasty king, Seqenre Tao (ca. ?-1540 BCE), who ruled over Upper Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period and King Woseribre Senebkay of the same period, who ruled from Abydos. During the Second Intermediate Period, Egypt was divided between the Hyksos kings, who ruled over Lower Egypt and Kushite kings with their capital in Kerma in Sudan, who penetrated into Upper Egypt. Both kings definitely suffered fatal wounds from blows of different weapons delivered to various parts of their bodies. Whether or not these kings were killed on the battlefield, or after imprisonment (Saleem & Hawass 2021; Wegner 2015: 76-77) or in a different way, is still a matter of debate. One thing is clear, these gods on Earth were vulnerable and battlefields are “spaces of vulnerability” par excellence (Etzold & Sakdapolrak 2016). In line with the current debates on the ontological turn in archaeology and anthropology (summary with further references in Harris & Cipolla 2017), which have also found their way into Egyptology (in the context of war and violence see Matic 2019a; Matic 2019b), we can say that their vulnerability does not make them less divine than other gods. We know of Osiris, who was killed and dismembered by Seth. We know of the contending of Horus and Seth in which the former lost an eye and the latter his testicles. We also know that Horus decapitated his mother in a rage during the fight with Seth.

## Vulnerable Society

It seems that Egyptologists dealing with climate changes and their possible impact on ancient Egyptian society have focused too much on systems (Bárta 2020) and neglected the experiences of people as a consequence (exceptionally Morris 2020). Contrary to Egyptologists dealing with complex system collapse, anthropologists understand catastrophes as “the end result of historical processes by which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, technological malfunctions, and communicable diseases and inequality distribute disaster risk according to lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity” (Barrios 2017: 151). One example of this is the case of hurricane Katrina. Natural disasters and catastrophes do not impact everyone equally as they do not occur in a political, economic or social vacuum. All phases and aspects of these disasters are socially conditioned and these disasters only replicate and amplify existing social inequalities and their effects. As the case of hurricane Katrina demonstrates, the black, the poor and the elderly remained in flooded New Orleans because their social condition impeded them from escaping disaster (Filipović & Žakula 2017; Norris et al. 2008: 137).

Egyptologists can learn much from the fact that “quite often it is not the system of production or habitation per se that is vulnerable to environmental hazards, but persons or households within those systems who lack the resources to mobilize the defenses such systems already have against hazards” (Wisner 2009: 178). We should be reminded that “food availability alone does not ensure adequate consumption by all persons” (Wisner 2009: 178). One

example comes from the recent work of the Austrian Archaeological Institute at the site of Kom Ombo in Upper Egypt. Although it was well known that Old Kingdom (ca. 2543-2120 BCE) and First Intermediate Period remains are present at the site, it was only after the excavations of the Cairo Branch of the Austrian Archaeological Institute in 2017 that the nature of these remains could be better understood. Now we know that Kom Ombo was already settled during the Early Dynastic Period and that its importance grew over time. During the Late First Intermediate Period/Early Middle Kingdom, part of the town housed an administrative complex with several rooms in which large bee hive-shaped silos for grain have been found (Forstner-Müller et al. 2019). Although these settlement remains are still being studied and the excavations in the area will continue, we can already say that at least one part of the town contained granaries of great capacity during this period. In fact, the First Intermediate Period is well known as a period of the political regionalisation and fragmentation of Egypt. Herakleopolitan dynasty or dynasties, depending on how different Egyptologists interpret them, ruled over Lower Egypt from Herakleopolis Magna, and they had local nomarchs in Middle Egypt as their loyal followers. At the same time, numerous local nomarchs first ruled over different regional centres of Upper Egypt independently, but were later conquered by those residing in Thebes. Not only did local Upper Egyptian nomarchs fight for supremacy, but, after the Thebans prevailed, they were in conflict with the Herakleopolitans. Therefore, different regions of the country were almost continuously in a state of war. Written sources (autobiographies of nobles) from this period often mention hunger as one of the problems resolved by local nomarchs, and not in their own but in the neighbouring region. The authors of autobiographical texts brag about the lack of hunger in their own regions and how they helped neighbouring regions that suffered from it. The hunger motif existed in earlier autobiographies from the Old Kingdom when the country was united under one dynasty (Franke 2006). Clearly, although it was a *topos* used for the self-presentation of local nomarchs in autobiographical texts, hunger was the reality for some throughout ancient Egyptian history. We can suppose that it emerged as a serious problem even more during the period of regional conflicts and competition. How do these first results from First Intermediate Period Kom Ombo challenge this? They do not. The fact that there are granaries with large capacity in one part of the town of Kom Ombo during this period does not mean that there was no hunger and their presence also does not mean that food was available to all. What these granaries indicate is that food was stored and that its storing in this part of the town was not a private enterprise. Access to these resources was controlled by the town government. Some had more access to it than others. Consequently, some were more vulnerable than others. This is very close to the “rule of relative advantage” since one’s embeddedness in the community, political connections, and social class determine the availability and accessibility of resources (Norris et al. 2008: 137). Therefore, when Egyptologists write about the First Intermediate Period as a period of crisis they should first answer the following questions: crisis of what and of whom? Another question is: for how



long? The archaeological methods available for dating structures such as granaries allow only a rough date. In the case of Kom Ombo, the granaries are dated to the Late First Intermediate Period and/or the Early Middle Kingdom based on pottery – a time span of a few decades. When exactly during this period these granaries were built and for how long they were used is currently hard to answer. It is also impossible to correlate their dating to the dating of specific autobiographies that mention hunger. Last but not the least, a large granary facility does not mean that it was full of grain all the time.

## Resilience

The concept of resilience is not better defined than that of vulnerability. It is often vaguely understood as the ability to adapt to, cope with or transform when facing different forms of stress (Faulseit 2016: 6-7; Wilson & Wilson 2019: 126-127).

In order to address this concept, I will not continue as the reader of this essay would expect. I will not discuss how commoners, prisoners of war, Egyptian and foreign women and children, kings fighting on the battlefields or people living in the First Intermediate Period coped with their different vulnerable experiences and how they were resilient. This demands more research. However, it is possible to demonstrate that certain social groups are more resilient than others. For example, whereas conflicted kings and local nomarchs fought each other, and some clearly died in the process, others found less vulnerable ways to deal with a country in a state of war: they they changed their allegiance, from one king to another. This happened in the Egyptian military forts in Lower Nubia after they were lost to the Kushite kings from Kerma. Egyptian officials stationed there continued their work but now they worked for the kings from the south (Knoblauch 2012). Different institutions experience different trajectories in times of social transformation (Faulseit 2016: 7). Some clearly remain unchanged. The case of the Egyptian officials from Lower Nubia nicely demonstrates the idea of Geoff A. Wilson and Olivia J. Wilson that resilience is often associated with “decentralised decision-making and empowerment at local and community level” (2019: 127) and the idea of Fran H. Norris et al. that “resilience is better conceptualized as adaptability than as stability” (Norris et al. 2008: 130). The weakening of the central government in Egypt meant the empowering of those in charge of administrating the peripheral regions of the country.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to demonstrate the value of considering vulnerability and resilience when analysing ancient Egyptian sources or developing research questions in Egyptology. I have deliberately chosen the above examples because they clearly point to the necessity of exploring vulnerability and resilience by bearing in mind the intersectionality of identity

and life experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Vulnerability during the imprisonment of foreign people was surely different for men, women and children of different status. This is indicated by a hierarchy of value assigned to prisoners of war of different age, gender and status in the lists of spoils of war. The most valued were foreign rulers and men who were members of a highly-positioned military class known as *maryannu* charioteers, then come their sons, followed by their wives. Other men, women and children come in this order at the end of the part of the list specifying prisoners of war (Matić 2021a: 91). The fact that children were highly valued spoils of war does not mean that they were not used for labour. Quite the contrary. Also, when the issue of hunger and instability in the land arose during the First Intermediate Period, intersectionality warns us that not all were suffering from hunger and that not all were vulnerable due to the lack of food. Instead, access to food as the most valuable resource was strictly controlled by regional town authorities who also used it as symbolic capital or legitimate competence, as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 245), to strengthen their regional positions.

Finally, we have the example of ancient Egyptian kings who fought on the battlefield or were imprisoned during battles. They were certainly better equipped and guarded by ordinary soldiers, but that does not mean that they were not vulnerable. The bodies of Woseribre Senebkay and Seqenre Tao clearly demonstrate this. From the point of view of the ontological turn, scholars interested in vulnerability should not focus on the question of how vulnerability challenges the notion of divinity assigned to the pharaohs by the ancient Egyptians. Rather, the question more in line with the ontological turn would be: is the vulnerability of gods different to those of humans and who is more resilient and by what means?

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