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Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management

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Cultural Perspective on Sanctioned and Non-Sanctioned Violence in Ancient Egypt

Radwa Ahmed Ibrahim Mousa
Ph.D Researcher

Dina El Gabry
Associate Professor

Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Helwan University, Egypt

Abstract

Historically, Egyptian sources have displayed various attitudes towards violence, indicating that some violent situations were viewed positively and encouraged to destroy chaos, restore order, and achieve justice in ancient Egyptian society, while other situations were avoided such as stealing, murders, thefts, and plots. Violence is typically defined as the use of physical force to harm, injure, mistreat, or destroy; however, from a sociological perspective, violence can also extend beyond physical force. While some consider violence to be strictly limited to the act of physical aggression, others view harmful speech as a form of violence as well.

This paper explores the cultural perspectives on violence in ancient Egypt, focusing on the distinctions between sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence by discussing the reasons for each type along with the punishments associated with each case. The study examines the religious framework for sanctioned killing, the function of violence in ensuring order and justice, and the prevalence usage of non-sanctioned violence.

Keywords: Violence/ ancient Egypt/ crimes/ laws/ punishments/ sanctioned/ non-sanctioned.

1. Introduction

In the ancient Egyptian religious belief, the world was created in a state of perfect order known as *Maat* (Matić 2021, 5), everything was in harmony until rebellion destroyed this order and introduced strife, causing *Maat* to be lost (Bestock 2017, 6). Chaos and disorder, also known as *Isfet* appeared and aimed to erase *Maat* from creation (Muhlestein 2011, 2), therefore, the Egyptian kings and population resorted to violence as an appropriate response to eliminate chaos and restore order (Muhlestein 2015, 10).

The earliest pictorial representations of sanctioned violence date back to the First Dynasty, for example, the ivory label of King Aha depicts a ritual slaying (fig. 1). Royal battle scenes discovered in temples and funerary objects, as well as daily life scenes discovered in private tombs, are the main sources of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of violence in ancient Egypt (McDowell 2001, 315). Furthermore, archaeological sources complementing these visual representations include discoveries made during excavations, such as proof of violent rituals at various sites (McDowell 2001, 318).

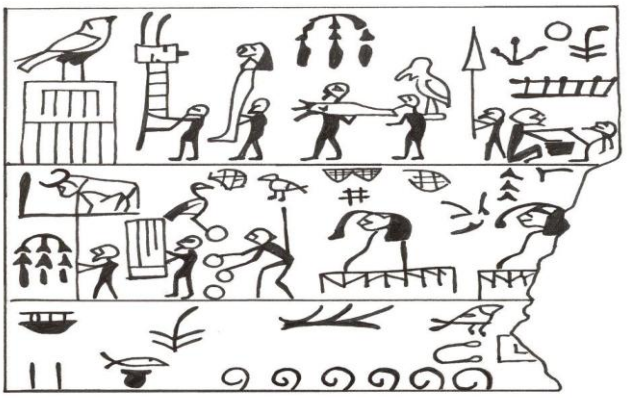

Fig. 1 An ivory label of King Aha shows a ritual slaying in the upper right corner

After: Muhlestein 2015, 4.

In contrast, there is no record of non-sanctioned violence since most materials date back to later periods in Egyptian history (Muhlestein 2015, 1). Therefore, the main sources for information about this type of violence are court records, letters, ostraca, oracle writings, juridical texts (Loprieno and Zivie-Coche 2001, 23-26), and literary tales that mention violence incidentally in late Egyptian periods. Consequently, less is known about non-sanctioned violence than about mythological and sanctioned forms of violence (Muhlestein 2011, 92).

2. 1. Sanctioned violence:

While common Egyptians were expected to avoid violence, pharaohs and their delegates likely resorted to violence in certain circumstances (Muhlestein 2015, 1). Sanctioned violence refers to acts of aggression or harm that were culturally accepted and normalized within ancient Egyptian society (Lorton 1977, 41). Acts of sanctioned violence were typically carried out by those in positions of power with authority to enforce laws and maintain order such as rulers, priests, and overseers (Muhlestein 2011,12). Sanctioned violence was institutionalized in ancient Egyptian society and supported by both the state and religious beliefs. The acceptance of violence was primarily reinforced by religious teachings that justified violence as a means of ensuring social stability, enabling the state's reliance on such acts to maintain harmony (Campbell 2019, 12). The religious mythological framework allowed citizens to view acts of war and capital punishment as divine will, imbued with righteousness. The ancient Egyptian deities often carried themes of conflict and retribution in their depictions, such as God Seth who represented chaos and disorder, and God Horus who symbolized the fight for rightful dominion (Campbell 2019, 13). This conviction in the necessity

of occasional sacrifice for natural order was reinforced through festivals, memorials, and public executions. The elaborate rituals surrounding such violence further enhanced a sense of sanctity, elevating these violent acts from mere brutality to necessary functions of a well-ordered society (Bestock 2017, 6). There were various forms of sanctioned violence in ancient Egypt, including the use of force in military conquests and battles, and the application of legal punishments in multiple forms such as beatings, mutilation, and even execution (Manning 2012, 114).

2. 1. 1. Sanctioned violent punishment:

Ancient Egyptian civilization implemented a strict system to ensure compliance with its laws, which was crucial for the survival of the civilization (Ver Steeg 2002, 3). The pharaoh established a set of laws and punishments for crimes enforced by the local authorities (Assmann 2002, 127-134). Typical punishments for wrongdoings included torturing offenders, humiliating adversaries, and deterring wrongdoers and enemies by the use of corporal torture (Muhlestein 2015, 7).

Public shaming and mere severe punishments, such as mutilation or execution, were utilized to punish common crimes like theft, assault, rape, adultery, and murder (Manning 2012, 114). However, compared to other penalties such as losing one's position or being denied the right to be buried, corporal punishment may be seen as a more sympathetic kind of punishment (Tyldesley 2000, 75).

Although there is no codified written recording of corporal punishments, there is some evidence that supports the existence of such laws, like The Negative Confession which is often referred to as The Declaration of Innocence.

The deceased's soul is affirmed during its final judgment that had never committed the 42 sins.[1] The deceased makes separate speeches to each of the 42 underworld gods to demonstrate his good and devout life. He confessed that he didn't rob people violently, abuse men, commit theft, kill men or women, attack men, open his lips to speak negatively towards men, or defile men's wives.[2] The majority of these sins or crimes were punished with corporal torture during the deceased's life (Van Loon 2014, 10), in addition to the gods' penalty that would prohibit the sinner from being resurrected (Lorton, Sasson and Baines 1995, 355). During the New Kingdom, corporal punishment was recorded more frequently than before, due to the growing population and the people becoming more cultured. As a result, fear of crime also increased during this time, leading to the implementation of corporal torture as an effective punishment method (Tyldesley 2000, 69). Key examples include beatings, mutilation, branding, and capital punishment.

a. Beatings:

Two of the most popular types of punishment were beatings and infliction of open wounds. According to ancient records such as tomb scenes, the inability to pay taxes or bills, theft, false accusations of state employees and workers (Muhlestein 2015, 2-3), accusations against supervisors at work, spreading rumors, and failure to report crimes were among the most common causes of beatings (figs. 2-3) (Lorton 1977, 43-44). The most typical beatings involved 100 or 200 blows, while more severe penalties involved inflicting five open wounds (Boochs 1986, 68-69).

[1] The most well-known list of declarations is found in the Papyrus of the priest Ani from Thebes, Spell 125 from The Book of the Dead (1250 BC).
[2] Mark 2017, *https://www.worldhistory.org/The_Negative_Confession/*.

Although torture wasn't always successful, sometimes officials engaged in beatings in an attempt to get confessions from the accused ahead of the trial (Loktionov 2019, 44). According to Papyrus Leopold II, the district officers of Thebes arrested criminals and imprisoned them:

"They were first examined by beating with sticks and their feet and hands were [either beaten or twisted." Afterward, criminals awaited the king's final judgment (Peden 1994, 248; Tyldesley 2000, 132).

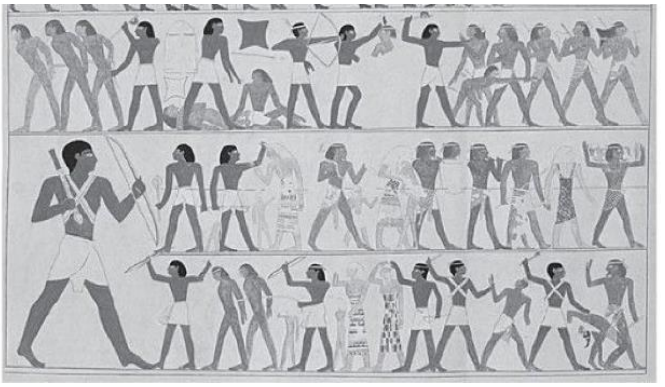

Fig. 2 A battle scene showing different corporal torture poses such as pulling hair, beating, and twisting, the tomb of Intef, overseer of troops, Thebes, 11th Dynasty.
After: Bestock 2017, fig. 8.7.

Fig. 3 Two officials beat a man with hands and sticks for not paying his taxes, at the tomb of Menna. New Kingdom
After: *https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/magazine/2019/01-02/egyptianpharaohs-laws-and-punishments/* Accessed on 2 March 2024, 11 am.

Sticks and batons were employed in the streets to re-establish order during the Intermediate Periods. In addition, schoolboys were also subjected to mild physical

punishment to redirect their course; however, this was not viewed as a source of shame by anyone (Caminos and Gardiner 1954, 254-258). During military campaigns, thousands of foreigners became captives. These slaves were obliged to undertake heavy physical labor and to endure beating penalties since needless murder was unacceptable (Tyldesley 2000, 79- 82).

b. Mutilation:

Mutilation is the act of removing or seriously injuring body parts such as hands, tongue, nose, ears, or phalli (Boochs 1986, 68-69), it was considered one of the most prevailing types of violent punishment. Although it wasn't always done, threats of nose and ear mutilation were common. Among the crimes punished by mutilations are trespassing on the private property reserved for gods and kings, "interfering with the offering," specific thefts as well as engagement in a plot or conspiracy against kings such as the Harem Conspiracy during the reign of Rameses III (Muhlestein 2015, 5). In oaths and other legal situations, the ears and nose were chopped off to deter offenders.

For example, according to the Judicial Papyrus of Turin, this type of punishment was inflicted on corrupt royal judges (Loktionov 2017, 265; Peden 1994, 206-209). Additionally, the legal decree of Seti I at Nauri threatened offenders with the punishment of having their ears and noses severed (Davies 1997, 294-295). Crimes related to taxes and temple administration, included in the Horemheb decree inscribed on Karnak temples, were also punished through nose mutilation (Lorton 1977,24-25). Mutilation is extremely painful, if not lethal, and it leads to serious long-term issues with one's physical and mental well-being as well as matters in the afterlife (Boochs 1986, 68-69).

Face mutilation can lead to death, disability, and social isolation due to a disfigured appearance (Peet 2006, 147-148). Texts don't specify whether the mutilation was conducted in stages or all at once, but the danger is greater if the nose and two ears are removed at the same time creating three head wounds (Loktionov 2017, 275). It was a common tradition from the time of Narmer and later in the times of Merenptah and Rameses III to mutilate the enemies by chopping off the shafts of their penises and hands after battles (Matić 2021, 130). Soldiers would offer these body parts to the gods, and the king would use them to evaluate the captured limbs and reward the soldiers based on how many enemies each one had killed (fig. 4) (Willems 1990, 33-34).

Soldiers severed the hands of their captives, both living and deceased (Janzen 2013, 188-189). Libyans were mostly stripped of their hands, while the Sea Peoples had their phallus severed (Breasted 1906, 46).

Fig. 4 A pile of male organs and hands presented to King Ramesses III as a trophy of military battles, Madinet Habu Temple. After: *http://bibleforzombies.blogspot.com.eg/2014/12/glutton-for-punishmentpart*, Accessed on 3 March 2024, 2 pm.

C. Branding:

Human branding is a cruel and painful method of violence used in ancient Egypt to mark slaves with the name of the king or to punish criminals, especially thieves

and captives. Different shapes of braziers were used for branding, some made out of copper or metal stamps shaped with the symbol of the god or the cartouche of the king (Katrandjiev 2023, 250). During the reign of King Horemheb, foreign captives were branded by stamping the name of the king:

"I have imprisoned their leaders in fortresses bearing my name, and I have added to them chief archers and tribal chiefs, branded and tattooed with my name, and their wives and children have been treated the same way (Loprieno 2012, 204-205; Bakir 1946, 109-110; Janzen 2013, 242)."

Ancient Egyptian women primarily used tattoos for decorative purposes, while brands were used to indicate ownership. Therefore, the brand mark was typically located on the right arm or hand, serving as a permanent visible sign of ownership over a person (Karev 2022, 191-203). Text records at Medinet Habu temple describe the use of branding after Ramesses III's victory over the Libyans: following the victory, Libyan leaders were grouped and branded with the name of the king (Dussaud, Edgerton and Wilson 1937, 27).

Moreover, branding was used as a torture method in case of adultery before throwing the adulterous woman into the river (Lorton 1977, 45).

D. Capital punishment:

Execution was a form of corporal punishment used for capital crimes, which inflicted severe bodily harm or death upon the convicted individual (Hegazy 2021, 7). However, capital punishment is believed to have originated after the Eighteenth Dynasty (Lorton 1977, 50). The motives and techniques used for executions evolved with time; however, the use of violent death remained an integral aspect of Egyptian civilization (Muhlestein 2015, 3).

High treason and crimes against the state, such as betraying or plotting to assassinate the pharaoh, were the main causes of execution (Loktionov 2019, 44). Throughout history, execution was a common punishment for rebellion, in addition, stealing or damaging state property also often resulted in death, although it is hard to determine this with certainty as there is limited evidence from certain periods, e.g., the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period (Muhlestein 2015, 4).

For example, the legal archives of Deir el-Medina show that official investigations into the affairs of the necropolis state that criminals should face the harshest forms of corporal punishment (Tyldesley 2000, 141). The death penalty was likely carried out publicly close to the place of the crime during important social events. We know public executions occurred despite the tombs of Deir el-Medina never mentioning that executions were spectator events (Müller-Wollermann 2015, 230). The offender loses his life, identity, and the right to a proper burial, with his name and figure excluded from tomb walls (Willems 1990, 53).

Although it's known that either the king or vizier authorized executions in many cases, there is a lack of sufficient evidence to confirm if this was the case every time.

There were various methods of capital punishment including strangling the victim to death, plunging into the victim's chest (Ellen 2007, 19) impalement (fig. 5), drowning, forced suicide, burning, and decapitating (fig. 6) (Müller-Wollermann 2004, 196). We are unable to ascertain the reasons why certain methods of killing were favored over others in different periods (Muhlestein 2015, 4).

Fig. 5 Determinative depicting impaling. Fig. 6 Determinative of a decapitated prisoner. After: Muhlestein 2015, 4.

Burning corpses was a cruel kind of physical punishment designed to disprove the existence of an afterlife (Muhlestein 2015, 3). The ancient Egyptians used to cut off heads as a traditional severe form of punishment for the enemies of the king as depicted in King Narmer's Palette, but there is no definitive evidence of it being used as a consequence of a crime (Boochs 1986, 68-72). Instead, it was more frequently conducted in a ritualistic setting (Muhlestein 2015, 3).

Drowning was infrequently used as a capital corporal torture technique (Muhlestein 2015, 4). Moreover, impalement was rarely used, except during the Ramesside Period, when it appears to have been the primary type of capital punishment (Muhlestein 2011, 73). The bodies of those who were impaled during the New Kingdom were kept silent even though physical pain was employed in the procedure (Leahy 1984, 199-200). The most well-known instances of capital punishment are derived from the accounts of the trial of the Harem Conspiracy during the reign of Rameses III, in which those who were directly responsible for the crime were executed, and those who knew the plot were also killed or forced to commit suicide (Redford 2002, 129).

The Judicial Papyrus recorded that Prince Pentawaret, the son of Ramesses III, was forced to commit suicide as an alternative to being impaled or burned, as suicide

was a privilege offered to very few, such as a royal prince (Peden 1994, 195-198). Despite the arguments of many scholars, there doesn't seem to be a clear pattern to clarify the reasons for the discrepancy between a death sentence versus an allowance to take one's own life (Muhlestein 2011, 59-60; Buck 1937, 156).

2. 2. Non-sanctioned violence:

Non-sanctioned violence refers to acts of aggression or harm that were not socially accepted by ancient Egyptian cultural norms. These were typically committed by individuals outside of positions of power and authority against the state or the community members (Muhlestein 2015, 10). This type of violence could include struggles between individuals, personal revenge, or acts of aggression driven by personal motivations such as jealousy, or anger. Therefore, given the disturbance to the social order, such acts of violence were often met with disapproval and resulted in legal consequences due to their disruptive effect on the social order (Černý 1929, 243-258).

Various instances of non-sanctioned violence were known from legal proceedings, royal decrees, and oracular texts (Muhlestein 2011, 61). Sample violent acts among non-royal individuals include the beating to death, murder, and burning of offenders as depicted in demotic literary tales (Muhlestein 2015, 11). Other literary tales depict non-sanctioned violence, such as The Story of the Eloquent Peasant where a minor officer beats the peasant unjustifiably for speaking his petitions (Parkinson 1991, 96). Royal decrees show evidence of common individuals committing violent actions.

The Banishment Stela of the 21st Dynasty clearly states that murder was a capital offense, suggesting that such a crime was not uncommon (Eyre 1984, 97). Likewise, one Demotic literary piece shows that murderers were burned as punishment, indicating that such crimes occurred (James and Orel 1992, 106).

Letters and ostraca provide evidence of forms of physical harm such as rape, domestic violence, and even murder that occurred in ancient Egyptian society (Muhlestein 2015, 10). Although formal complaints did not typically involve violent punishment for offenses like adultery, some references indicate that it could occur occasionally, and wisdom texts suggest that the wronged spouse could seek illicit retribution (Eyre 1984, 97). Historical evidence suggests that during the New Kingdom, there was a high prevalence of domestic and sexual violence against women, which had increased over time (Farouk 2021, 171).

Legal texts from that period suggest that incidents of men's violence towards women were rarely reported mentioning wife beating as a form of domestic violence (Matić 2021, 34). However, the fact that women filed complaints with the courts about their mistreatment implies the presence of a juridical system intended to protect them (Farouk 2021, 174). Moreover, only a few texts report violence in Deir el-Medina, which suggests that the village inhabitants may not have preferred to involve legal authorities in such cases. Family members potentially played a crucial role in resolving conflicts; however, the state intervened only when community-based conflict resolution failed (Matić 2021, 34).

Records from Deir el-Medina indicate that few individuals hit their subordinates for reporting their inappropriate behavior, e.g., a man was beaten for reporting the adulterous relationship between his superior and his wife (Demarée and Janssen 1982, 119).

Conclusions

It is noteworthy to mention that the archaeological records may not fully capture all aspects of violence in ancient Egypt. There were likely instances of violence that occurred outside of the sanctioned and non-sanctioned categories, and some

forms of violence may have remained archaeologically invisible. Studying sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence in ancient Egypt offers valuable insights into the societal norms, legal systems, and religious beliefs of this civilization.

The differentiation between sanctioned violence, executed as punishment by the ruling class or those in power, and non-sanctioned violence, involving actions not socially endorsed, illuminates the challenges of upholding order and justice in ancient Egyptian civilization.

The textual evidence from letters, ostraca, and legal writings, along with archaeological records, reveals a variety of violent behaviors, including sexual and domestic violence, as well as punishments for various offenses. The ancient Egyptians used harsh methods such as corporal torture, beatings, mutilation, and execution as forms of punishment to maintain justice and eliminate evils from their society. Additionally, their beliefs about the afterlife, especially the concept of *Maat*, greatly influenced their attitudes towards violence. The commitment to *Maat,* representing the state of perfect order and balance, emphasized the importance of maintaining justice and righteousness, influencing the judicial system and penalties in both life and the afterlife.

Overall, the cultural perspective on sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence in ancient Egypt emphasizes how social norms, religious doctrine, and legal frameworks interact in a complex way to shape attitudes towards violence and uphold social order in this ancient society.

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