
It is very difficult to evaluate a multi-authored work, especially one as long and detailed as this volume. The reviewer is liable to harp on what was left out and carp at insignificant mistakes. Eventually, the editor gets praised for uniting disparate orientations and talents, but inevitably what it all means to the reader gets ignored.

I prefer to look at each chapter, section by section, and to consider the strengths of each contribution. Given that this ‘History’ is complex and obviously not meant for the general reading public, the volume is more archaeological than I would have expected. Thankfully, The Oxford History of Egypt is not another overview of ‘Modern Egyptology’, whatever that phrase may signify. Yet it is neatly subdivided into sections which reflect the individual writers’ own interests. Naturally, the chapters vary in emphasis.

I will refrain from analyzing the calendrical issues that Shaw presents in the Introduction (ch.1). The editor might have given this topic to an astronomer-Egyptologist as he is distinctly naive in the science behind this subject. But the opening of the work really—and oddly—does not matter. There is plenty of ‘pre-Pre-Dynastic’ data. The lengthy (in approach, not in verbiage) Prehistory chapter even seems a little too superficial by contrast, although Midant-Reeves’ section on the Nagada Period is nicely presented. But why is the Narmer Palette represented here and then again (both sides) in ch.5?

With the ‘Emergence of the Egyptian State’, by Katherine A. Bard, one attains what traditional Egyptologists like to regard as ‘their’ field. The author’s orientation remains structural (and architectural) archaeology; and for this reason, I suspect, the clarity of prose suffers considerably.

The Old Kingdom essay by Malek is beautifully written. I recommend it to any native speaker of English. Not only is he able to steer away from controversial issues while simultaneously explaining their thorny outsides,
but he also presents a clear verbal picture of Dynasties III to VI judiciously illustrated by photographs. If the reader is skeptical of one person’s opinion, let me recommend Malek’s bibliography. Fair play is definitely his motto; avoidance of Hypermodernism must be another. One has the feeling that Emmanuel Lasker was writing rather than Akiba Rubinstein.

Because Seidelmeyer’s First Intermediate Period history is translated, one cannot gauge his assumptions about his audience. I found much to learn. But there is more information than a novice would be able to assimilate. (I warn the reader: pages 122-3 are crucial.) Better this challenge than another rehash of provincial dating through palaeography, a trend that should have seen its self-extinction but for the lack of hard dateable objects and inscriptions. No fault to Seidelmeyer, the transition into Gae Callender’s Middle Kingdom is abrupt.

While Dynasties XI to XII are treated politically, Janine Bourriau, utilizing the research of Ryholt, presents a very different overview of Dynasties XIII to XVII. Lovely plates and helpful diagrams round out one of the most interesting short pieces on the Second Intermediate Period. The tantalizing fragments from Abydos found by the excavator Stephen Harvey cannot be ignored. Why, however, seduce us with unpublished data, scenes which clearly indicate warfare directed mainly against Avaris? At any rate Bourriau correctly dates the fall of the Hyksos capital to the eleventh regnal year of the last northern ruler, when the ‘southern prince’, Ahmose, entered Sile. Her detailed analysis of the ‘break’ in the hieroglyphic tradition follows Vernus. One almost feels that this is perhaps adding too many spices to the broth, at least for the novice’s palette.

I must be circumspect in my praise for Betsy Bryan’s study of Dynasty XVIII because I am referred to positively on page 226. Nonetheless, it is obvious that she knows this great epoch. Her interesting sidebars on the role of women, the kings’ building programs and the like pepper this contribution to no small degree. Adding the perspective of the art historian Raymond Johnson was not really necessary. His analysis of Egyptian religion remains outside of the modern Continental norm, and his interpretation of the co-regency of Amenhotep III and IV is not viable.
After Bryan’s masterly presentation, Van Dijk’s examination of the Amarna and Ramesside Period reveals little that is intellectually challenging. The orientation is too art-historical, and the political understanding shallow.

Next comes Shaw’s surprise: ‘Egypt and the Outside World’. This chapter is simply charming. Well-rounded and full of new insights, this portion of the book effectively forms an interlude as it summarizes the external affairs of the Nile Valley.

The author of The Third Intermediate Period, John Taylor, was unknown to me. But from his able summary of the standard ‘facts’ perhaps he should not have been. This Englishman avoids an emotive description of the Libyan epoch, in which the foreigners were originally disliked by the Egyptians, and who equally distained the effeminate citizens of the luxury-laden Nile. Nonetheless, one feels that Kenneth A. Kitchen was deprived of his mantle, as in 1916 Joffre was removed in the West.

For the Late Period the energetic Alan Lloyd steers us through Egyptian history up to Alexander the Great. The information is standard, but is enlivened by his prose. In addition, there is a useful plan of Montuemhet’s tomb (392). The Ptolemaic Period ended Pharaonic culture. Missing from this chapter is a sense of cross-cultural interaction: the Ptolemæia with its stress on Venus and Canopus; the Canopus decree and Sothis; the astronomy of Alexandria. Instead, the story Lloyd retells of the rowers at Salamis is a travesty to the native Egyptians as well as their Macedonian-Greek overlords.

Here we must make a bold claim: Ptolemaic Egypt is an excellent case of a dominant culture (Greece) losing out over centuries as its population base declined. Lloyd should have emphasized the failure of the so-called ‘multi-culture’ in light of the native revival in thought, an opposition which led to an independent approach concerning Jesus: Egyptian monotheism. If one is enthusiastic about, truly overwhelmed by, the Nile civilization, then one becomes, frankly, pro-Egyptian, even though xenophobia and philoægyptiac attitudes must not affect the research.
Conversely, the lack of a true sympathy towards Egypt is what, to me at least, comes across in Lloyd’s ‘Classical’ approach.

So were the ‘right’ people chosen as contributors? Who minds? The product is what matters: in sum, for Egyptologists, a very interesting production; for outsiders, somewhat of a mystery. Good as it is, this book is not for the beginner. No new student of Egyptology could handle the data, must less recognize the bias towards archaeology. One still has to write ‘History’ for a general audience. If this is not done—and the volume edited by Shaw most certainly has eschewed such an orientation—then we are left with the nagging question: for whom, or in the title of the great Paul Auster, ‘Why Write?’

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