

H-Net Reviews

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Ancient Lands. Microsoft Corporation.

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Ancient Lands is part of the Microsoft Home series of CD-ROMs covering a wide range of topics, from musical instruments to dinosaurs. Like the other CD-ROMs in the same series, *Ancient Lands* employs a hypertext environment to allow the user to move through materials (including text, sounds, pictures, video, and games) on the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. In this review, I summarize first the basic structure and content of this CD-ROM, and then consider its appropriateness as an introduction to the historical material it contains.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT.

Upon opening the program, the user can view an overview movie (hosted by an animated mummy) on how to use and navigate *Ancient Lands*. Alternatively, the user can go straight to a map page where he or she can click on Egypt, Greece, or Rome to begin moving through hyperlinks. The "home card" or "main page" for each civilization contains large illustrated zones which can link the user to the following categories: "Monuments and Mysteries," "Work and Play," "People and Politics," "Guides," and "Index." Rectangular buttons at the bottom of every page provide links to the same topics, in addition to "Map" (the main map page), "Back," and "Help." These rectangular buttons are also found at the bottom of every page in *Ancient Lands*. (For the purposes of this review, "page" and "card" are synonymous.)

To find out how links in *Ancient Lands* work thematically, I went from the "Egypt" home card to its "People and Politics" page, which provided an array of buttons to choose from; eight topics were represented, including "After the Pharaohs," "Timetable of Ancient Egypt," and "Queens of the Nile." I clicked "Rulers of the Old Kingdom," which took me to a page typical in layout to other pages at this level. At the top of the page, the title ("Rulers of the Old Kingdom") was framed by two buttons linking one to a map of Egypt and a condensed timeline,

both of which could appear in a medium-sized "popup" style window. In the center of the page (approximately) were placed several sentences of general text about the Old Kingdom; I could click on "hot words" to see a small popup giving the proper pronunciation and short explanation of the chosen word. Around the main text were arranged illustrations and several hyperlink phrases leading to brief individual popup descriptions of various topics, to a game ("Pharaoh Match"), and to a short digital movie ("Great Monuments of Ancient Egypt"). Towards the lower right of the page was a button inviting the user to move to another page at the same hierarchical level (i.e., by way of clicking "Map" to "Egypt" to "People and Politics") as "Rulers of the Old Kingdom." At the very bottom of the page were placed the universal buttons noted at the end of the preceding paragraph. Topics dealing with Rome and Greece could be browsed in the same fashion.

EVALUATION.

Microsoft *Ancient Lands* seems deliberately geared for the "home" audience, as indicated by the series title to which it belongs. I approached this CD-ROM from the perspective of a teacher of college-level introductory courses in world history, and also from the viewpoint of an academic historian in general.

On the positive side, the CD-ROM obviously exposes the user to materials touching upon ancient history. Timelines are relatively well-designed, though the maps are rather rudimentary. There are a number of pages providing general information on other ancient civilizations and themes (China, Persian Empire, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, and Ancient Artists, for example). There is even one page on "What is History?," though it is difficult to find if one doesn't know where to locate it in the index. Several dozen movies, both animated and from digitized video, are informative, if superficial. In short, if someone wished to "browse" rather randomly through multimedia materials touching on the human past in the hopes

of finding something mildly interesting, *Ancient Lands* might be of value. Alternatively, for someone who already knows a fair amount about ancient history, “exploring” *Ancient Lands* could be mildly amusing. Neither scenario is apt for a college student required to grapple with historical subject matter in a systematic, thoughtful, and analytical way. Unfortunately, Microsoft does nothing to restrain the built-in tendency of hypertext to distract a user from pursuing a sustained examination of a given topic (witness what happens to virtually all of us when we get on the Web). In fact, the design of *Ancient Lands* makes the situation worse; recall the linking button at the bottom right corner on pages covering themes of the order of “Rulers of the Old Kingdom.” Such buttons do not, as a rule, lead the user to a thematically related topic. For example, on the page entitled “Dangers in the Tomb” (yes, a rather sensationalist view of things historical is noticeable from time to time), the button links one to a general page on ancient China. From the movie “Great Monuments of Ancient Egypt,” one is tempted to jump instantly to “Greece, The Minoan World.” From a tour on Roman cooking one can easily be led rapidly to a page on rare recipes (logical enough), then on to a general card on ancient Mesoamerica, then on to ancient Greek clothing and jewelry. To make matters worse, the voice narrative that usually accompanies pages is not activated until one clicks the button taking one forward. And needless to say, the narrative does not match the text—or even sometimes the subject—portrayed on the page itself. For example, on a page on Greek “Thinkers and Storytellers,” the narrator focuses on Sophocles, but the only “hot names” visible are those of Thucydides, Socrates, and Plato—a bust and brief description of Sophocles is only found by pursuing a link to “Poets and Playwrights.” “Guided tours”

led by imaginary ancient characters (Rome, for example, offers tours by a chef, an advisor to Nero, a soldier, a vendor, a farm boy, and a slave girl) are at times cute, but hardly educative; they proceed through sequences of pages also accessible when the user is not “on tour.” The only honest claim this CD-ROM possesses, to true interactivity, is found in the games scattered here and there throughout the menu. What happened when I clicked on the game “Who Thought of That”? Several faces of Greek thinkers and poets appeared, and I had thirty seconds to match them all up with symbols supposedly illustrative of their great accomplishments (for example, I could click-and-drag a bust of Homer to—yes—a picture of a Trojan horse). If I dragged everybody to the appropriate place within the time limit, the sound of a crowd roaring came out of the computer speakers to cheer me on in my quest of history. In short, Microsoft *Ancient Lands* combines the worst kind of “edutainment” approach with an overall design and structure geared to suppress and deaden any stirring on the part of a user to focus on historical themes in a sustained way. It provides no coherent, developed historical narrative about the civilizations in question. Moreover, the user is encouraged to be passive by both a deliberately distracting hypertext environment and a shallow treatment of history as a commodity of information to be conveyed. Possibilities of questioning or exploring different perspectives on a given historical theme are ruled out—analytical thinking is not part of history as it is portrayed here. Not only is it not appropriate for use in a college-level introductory history course (one could, admittedly, show some of the short movies in class if one has access to an electronic classroom), but I seriously question the value of *Ancient Lands* as a means of popularizing history among a wider public—the simple lack of structural unity is itself a hindrance to this.

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