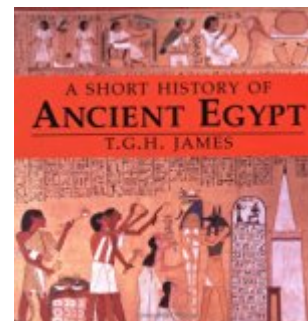


T.G.H. James. *A Short History of Ancient Egypt: From Predynastic to Roman Times*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. viii + 160 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5933-5.



Reviewed by Michael S. Heiser

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This book, written by renowned Egyptologist T.G.H. James, fills a longstanding vacuum for a concise introduction to Egypt of antiquity. Designed for use as an undergraduate textbook, it focuses exclusively on Egypt's history. Both the standard introduction by the dean of Egyptologists, Sir Alan Gardiner [1], and the recently published history of ancient Egypt by Grimal [2] are far too detailed for most undergraduate readers for whom the typical college course is their first formal introduction to ancient Egypt.

Grimal's work could even be labeled tedious, cluttered as it is with the most minute observations of recent scholars, most of whom, if their writing is any indication, have little or no ability or interest in communicating with young people just out of high school. Other less bloated tomes drift away from a purely historical focus, devoting whole chapters to religion, culture, writing, architecture, and art.[3] The result is usually that none of these subjects is covered adequately, including the historical survey. James touches on all these subjects, but always with the goal of reinforcing or illustrating an historical point. Still other

works, such as Barabara Mertz's *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs* sacrifice detail, colored illustrations (so important for an understanding of ancient Egypt), and the authoritative tone of a collegiate text, in favor of a conversational style. While it may be true that Mertz's novel-like style will hold the reader's attention more readily, James' effort is hardly dull.

James' contribution provides a concise, authoritative introduction that will not overwhelm the typical beginning undergraduate. With few exceptions he covers periods, events, and personages appropriately, moving quickly enough through his material to shift the reader's attention at regular intervals, rather than leading the unsuspecting student into a morass of arcane philological minutiae that allegedly *clarify* some point. The book is also lavishly illustrated with over one hundred sixty full color photographs and ten detailed, colored maps. Virtually every page contains at least one such illustration.

Having heard my share of lamentations at the unfamiliar, layered detail of Gardiner, and seen the glazed expressions of undergraduates (and

even fellow graduate students) saddled with the ponderous reference volume of Grimal, James' text is a welcome, an overdue, addition to the limited choice of texts for teachers of Egyptian history. He carefully reconstructs what scholarship has been able to capture of Egyptian history, explaining how the archaeological and monumental record support those conclusions. James is aiming for economy throughout, as evidenced by his brief but informative treatments of topics which often sidetrack other introductions for dozens of pages. James avoids long-winded excursions on the construction techniques of pyramids, attempts at *systematic theologies*, and the internal household intrigues and genealogical relationships of Pharaoh's household.[4]

Despite my enthusiasm for this book, there were some topics (though very few) I would like to have seen handled differently. For instance, James' downplaying of the truly exclusivistic nature of Akhenaten's devotion to the Aten is unwarranted. It may be true that the heretic pharaoh allowed himself to be worshipped, and that his monotheism does not conform to our western articulations of such, but the radical measures he undertook to eliminate the worship of other gods has been ably demonstrated .[5] Additionally, I was caught off guard by the terse treatments of Thutmose III (barely one page), and the omission of any mention of the Merenptah Stela. Undergraduates taking a course on ancient Egyptian history should be provided exposure to such information.

Nevertheless, I would certainly choose this book as a text for an undergraduate survey course on ancient Egypt or the ancient Near East. It is a useful complement to Mertz's classic work.

Notes

[1]. Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs: An Introduction*, Oxford, 1966.

[2]. Nicolas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, translated by Ian Shaw, Blackwell, 1994.

[3]. See for example, Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians* (Ancient Peoples and Places Series), Thames and Hudson, 1987.

[4]. Instructors could supplement James' book on the pyramids and Egyptians religion by such excellent and readable books as Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, Dover, 1993; and Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids*, Thames and Hudson, 1997.

[5]. See for example, Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, Princeton University Press, 1987.

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