

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anne Millard. *The World of the Pharaoh*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1998. 48 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87226-292-8.

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With so many books written on ancient Egypt, it is sometimes difficult for an author to find a “hook,” a different spin on the topic at hand. Thus it is that Anne Millard looks at ancient Egypt using the pharaoh as the focal point. With formal training under her belt, the author is able to present some of the latest information on ancient Egypt to her readers. Well-written and easy to follow, the narrative—although short and therefore somewhat choppy at times—moves along at a good pace and presents a surprising number of topics in its forty pages of text. Useful and informative sidebars are offered throughout, although their designation as “Fact and Fiction” may puzzle some readers. I looked in vain for the “Fiction” part of the sidebars (a notable exception is at the end of book, in the chapter on the Valley of the Kings, where the so-called “mummy’s curse” is nicely refuted), since most of these simply give additional information on the topics at hand.

After an Introduction, the book is divided into eighteen short chapters, followed by a chronological Who’s Who (which consists mostly of royal names), and a useful Index. Although this is not specifically stated, these eighteen chapters are presented thematically. The first chapter is a quick run through 5000 years of Egyptian prehistory and history. In the section on the Predynastic Period, ca. 5000-3100 B.C.E.—although the reviewer fully realizes the author’s mandate to write as short a book as possible—it might perhaps have been prudent to mention that the invention of picture writing came quite late in that period. Although it is now believed that writing was introduced in Egypt somewhat earlier than 3100 B.C.E., as older books state, the impression given here is that writing was introduced as far back as 5000 B.C.E. In the section on the Fourth Dynasty, the mention of straight-sided pyramids built at the sites of Giza and Sakkara is not quite accurate, since these are found at Giza, Meidum, and Dahshur at this period, and not at Sakkara.[1] In the section on the Twentieth Dynasty and the mention of the defeat of the Sea Peoples by King Ramesses III, again it might have been nice to add that one of these

Sea Peoples, the Peleset (as the ancient Egyptians called them), are the Philistines of the Bible and the Palestinians of today. And since this is a review of a book about an African country, I cannot help mentioning a notable fact about the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. These are the Nubian kings who conquered Egypt in the Eighth Century B.C.E. but were driven out of Egypt by the Assyrians. They returned to Napata, their capital city at the Fourth Cataract in modern-day Sudan, and went on to establish a dynasty there that was to last until the mid- Fourth Century C.E.—around 1200 years!—one of history’s longest living dynasty.

After this historical introduction, the first theme offered is the geographical setting of Egypt. A chapter on the Nile and its importance both for cultivation and as a highway is followed by chapters on agriculture and the surrounding deserts and the latter’s mineral resources. Next come two chapters, “God on Earth” and “Becoming King,” which present the first family of gods, from whom all mankind descended, and whose representative on earth the king was. One minor correction here (p. 18) is the writing of the name of the goddess Ma’at: the letter between the two a’s should tilt to the left and not the right, since these represent two different Semitic letters. On the same page, the mention of the creator gods Re and Atum is confusing. Atum did not create the mound from which the sun god Re subsequently appeared. The mound appeared by itself and Atum—simply another manifestation of the sun god (Khepri is the young morning sun, Re is the sun at its zenith, and Atum is the aged sun in the evening)—then began to create the rest of the gods.

This is followed by two chapters on the royal family and royal palaces. These go a long way to presenting the kings as human beings, an important distinction after describing him as the descendants of a divine family. The point is well made that it is the office of kingship that is divine, and not its human holder. A minor quibble here (p. 25) is the illustration showing the Window of

Appearance, from which the king and queen shower deserving officials with gifts: although the reviewer realizes the illustrator's wish to compress the image for the sake of fitting it into a page, the actual evidence from Egypt suggests that these windows were much higher off the ground.

The next two chapters, "Governing Egypt" and "The King's Taxes," discuss the administration of the country. From a brief description of the king's chief ministers and civil servants, and the legal system, the section goes on to describe the ways in which the labor force was gathered and administered, and the taxes collected. A useful description of the barter system can be found here.

Next comes a chapter on temples and priests, and the king's role in the religious realm; this includes remarks on divine oracles and the king's Sed Festival, where the king's authority to rule was reaffirmed. The following section in three chapters, "The Egyptian Army," "Warrior Kings," and "Trade and Tribute," considers Egypt's external affairs. An account of the soldiers of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, with the various historical developments nicely detailed, is followed by the king's role in warfare and a cataloguing of Egypt's traditional foes. The dress worn by the latter is particularly well rendered by the artists. Regarding the various products brought into Egypt as trade, it would have been nice to mention the little known fact that our word "ebony" comes from the ancient Egyptian word *hebny*, just the sort of thing children love to find out. A chapter on Egypt's population, "The King's People," is a quick summary of the role of women and children in society.

The book closes with a section on funerary beliefs. Useful descriptions of burial equipment, mummification, and royal funerals are followed by the history of the development of the shape of royal burials, from early mastabas (here, perhaps the point might have been made that this is actually a modern Arabic word, not what the

ancient Egyptians called the structures) to pyramids and the reason for the latter's shape. The final chapter, on the Valley of the Kings, makes the point nicely that the site was probably chosen because of the natural pyramid-shaped mountain that overlooks the valley. Thus, if the kings of the New Kingdom wished to hide their tombs in a far away valley, they still had the luxury of being near symbolic sun rays, upon which they could mount up to heaven.

With an astonishing span of three thousand years of history from which to choose, it is often difficult to write a flowing narrative on ancient Egypt without interrupting one's story with constant caveats about why a given detail is true of one period but not of another. Thus, the author wisely chose to select most of her information from the time of the New Kingdom, from which we have more data. The book is wonderfully illustrated throughout, with the artists often rendering actual objects from ancient Egypt (such as the throne from the tomb of Tutankhamun, which appears on p. 20, in the section on coronations) in their drawings. In this, they show good knowledge of ancient Egypt, which should be acknowledged. With interesting and reliable information presented in a clear and lively fashion, the book is a splendid addition to the literature on ancient Egypt, and for this the author and the illustrators should be congratulated. I highly recommend the book to all who are interested in ancient Egypt.

Notes:

[1]. For a useful table of pyramids, their shape and provenance, see Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1997), pp. 16-17.

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