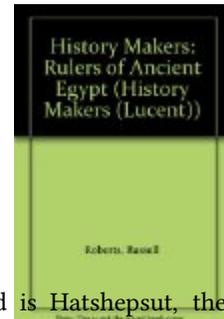


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Russell Roberts. *Rulers of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1999. 96 pp. \$23.70 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56006-438-1.

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Published on H-AfrTeach (June, 2000)



This book appears as one volume of the Lucent History Makers series, described as a “multiple biography.” Each volume consists of six to eight biographies of figures who were linked together by a common factor; in this case, the five people presented were pharaohs of ancient Egypt. As stated in the foreword, each volume is intended to introduce a range of figures, some better known than others, who varied in their impact on history. Both primary and secondary sources are utilized. Five of the best known rulers of Egypt are discussed in this book: Hatshepsut, Akhenaten, Tutankhamen, Ramesses II, and Cleopatra.

Writing biographies of ancient Egyptian rulers presents a special challenge due to the nature of the source material and the antiquity of the society. The ancient Egyptians did not write history as we would define it, and thus there is no body of texts or royal archive to consult for details of an individual's reign. One is dependent on texts left by the pharaohs themselves, sometimes bombastic and propagandistic in nature, as in the case of Hatshepsut and Ramesses II; archaeological evidence, such as material from Amarna, Akhenaten's capital city; and other miscellaneous records such as court or temple documents. Regarding Tutankhamen, there is an almost total lack of written historical evidence, even in the remains of his splendid tomb furnishings. Among those covered in this book, only Cleopatra is well documented, from Roman sources. The existing sources also give little evidence of these people as individuals, making the task of the biographer that much more difficult.

The book begins with an overview of the geography, religion, funerary practices, and general history of ancient Egypt. The modern rediscovery of this ancient society is also discussed.

The first ruler to be discussed is Hatshepsut, the queen who had herself declared king. A woman upon the throne, however, was not the unprecedented event that the author declares, as a woman reigned at the end of Dynasty 12, and possibly at the end of Dynasty 6. Mr. Roberts gives a good synopsis of her genealogy, marriage, and accession to the throne. The discussion of the relationship between Hatshepsut and her coregent Thutmose III is balanced and interesting, although there is much speculation here, such as the suggestion (by Evelyn Wells) that Hatshepsut wore male clothing partly to ease her father's grief at the death of his sons, or later (by the author) to reassure the people. Hatshepsut's many accomplishments are cited, including her trade expedition to the land of Punt, and her building campaigns at Karnak and Deir el-Bahri. It should be noted that the details of the Punt Expedition are recorded on the walls of her mortuary temple, not in her tomb as stated.

The next chapter focuses on Akhenaten, the so-called “heretic king” who declared the worship of a single god and built a new capital city. The introductory section lays out several possible views of this king: was he a religious visionary, political reformer, or weak and delusional ruler? The subject of his father, Amenhotep III's rule is touched upon, followed by discussion of Akhenaten's early buildings at Karnak, changes in art style, the move to the new city, foreign affairs, and the end of the reign. Unfortunately, this chapter furthers many misconceptions about Akhenaten's rule. Royal sons, for instance, were often not depicted on their fathers' monuments, so Akhenaten's absence in this arena is not as significant as is asserted. To state that he remained behind during religious ceremonies is pure conjecture. A coregency with his father is also presented as a certainty, when in fact it is one of the most hotly debated issues of Egyptol-

ogy. It also appears, from evidence found at Amarna, that though the worship of Amen was proscribed, other deities were at least tolerated. The problems in the chapter extend to the illustrations. The temple pictured on page 41 is certainly not an Amarna structure, and Akhenaten is not praying with his family as implied on page 43.

The next chapter covers one of Akhenaten's successors, Tutankhamen. His accession, reinstatement of the worship of Amen, the move from Amarna, his death and successors, and the 1922 discovery of his tomb are discussed. This chapter is again plagued by small errors and omissions. Akhenaten, for example, may well have been the father of Tutankhamen, but only Amenhotep III is listed as a possible candidate. Tutankhamen's tomb was not virtually intact, but had been entered and robbed twice in antiquity. The notion that the queen had clung to the body so tightly as to leave ashes upon the shroud makes for a good story, but there is no evidence to support this.

Chapter V, covering the life of Ramesses II, discusses his accession, the founding of the new capital at Pi-Ramesse, the famed battle of Kadesh and its aftermath, and his monuments. The reconstruction of the temples

at Abu Simbel is noted, as well as the recent discovery of tomb KV 5, the family tomb in the Valley of the Kings. It is a good blend of ancient events and modern investigations.

The final chapter highlights Cleopatra, the last ruler of independent Egypt. Her rise to power, family relationships, her interactions with Caesar, her trip to Rome, the years with Marc Antony, the final battles, and her suicide are covered in a good survey of the reign.

The book includes a general bibliography of both print and internet sources. The notes, however, had no page numbers, which would have been helpful to anyone attempting to locate a quoted passage.

Though *Rulers of Ancient Egypt* has its difficulties, the author is to be commended for his efforts to present a complicated subject in a comprehensible and interesting manner for young people.

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Citation: Sue DAuria. Review of Roberts, Russell, *Rulers of Ancient Egypt*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

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