

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Milton Meltzer. *In the Days of the Pharaohs: A Look at Ancient Egypt*. New York and London: Franklin Watts, 2001. 159 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-531-11791-0.

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In the Days of the Pharaohs is an interesting and well-written and -illustrated volume that seeks to capture ancient Egyptian society for the older student. It is organized thematically, rather than chronologically, into twelve chapters, an approach that is successful for the most part, but does have its drawbacks. The book would have benefited greatly from an early chapter on Egyptian history to provide a contextual setting for the later discussions.

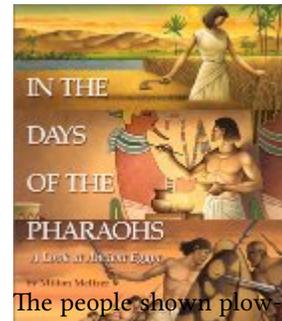
Chapter 1, titled "How We Know What We Know," covers the sources used in Egyptological investigation written, archaeological, and art historical. The author also touches on the origins of the ancient Egyptians, a thorny issue from which he does not shy away. He carefully delineates the strengths and limitations of each type of resource, and even discusses minor sources such as the scrap pieces of inscribed stone called ostraca. He mentions the beginnings of mummification in 2600 B.C., a date that may be revised significantly back in the light of recent discoveries in Egypt.

Chapter 2, "The Nile," discusses early Egyptian culture, the cycle of the Nile, crops, animals, and taxation. The following chapter, "Pharaohs, Laws, and Government," covers the beginning of the Egyptian state, the division of Egyptian chronology into dynasties, as well as such concepts as the divine kingship and "maat," or order, the maintenance of which was a responsibility of the king. The author also delves into the role of the kingship, the structure of government, and crime and punishment. He sometimes makes generalizations that cannot be substantiated, such as his statement that "princes learned to ride horses"; horses were rarely shown with riders in ancient Egypt. A section of color plates in this chapter is plagued by inaccurate or misleading captions, which is a

major problem with the book. The people shown plowing are not "peasants," but the tomb-owner and his wife plowing in the fields of the Afterlife; the Hyksos did not introduce bronze to the Egyptians as stated (bronze objects are known from the earlier Middle Kingdom); the temple of Ramesses II is "Abu Simbel" not "Abu"; and the craftsmen shown on the last plate are woodworkers, not vase makers.

Chapter 4, "Wars and Warriors," takes up the discussion at the end of the Old Kingdom, but this may well be confusing to the reader, because there has been no specific coverage of the Old Kingdom in previous chapters. This points again to the lack of an introductory chapter covering the basics of Egyptian history that would have been invaluable. (For instance, the small size of Middle Kingdom pyramids is mentioned, but the chronologically earlier, massive Old Kingdom pyramids are not referred to until the next chapter.) First Intermediate Period through New Kingdom military history is covered in this chapter, with sidebars about bronze weapons and Ramesses II. The caption at the beginning of the chapter is again misleading, as it mentions the end of the Old Kingdom while illustrating a New Kingdom relief.

The next chapter focuses on "Building the Pyramids and Beyond." The author begins with a detailed discussion of the Old Kingdom pyramids, including architects, sources of stone, and the significance of the pyramidal form. Individual pyramids are delineated, along with associated structures such as temples and the Sphinx. The organization of work crews, siting of the pyramids, and building techniques are also touched upon. The discussion then moves on to the New Kingdom, when pyramids were replaced by rock-cut tombs in the Valley of the Kings. A sidebar is devoted to the tomb of Tutankhamun.



Again in this chapter, there are generalizations and minor inaccuracies that mar the otherwise informative text. For example, Sneferus' first pyramid was not planned from the start as a true pyramid (it began as a step pyramid and was filled in later) and not all pharaohs were buried in pyramids until the rise of the New Kingdom, as stated. The discussion of Ramesses II's mortuary temple, the Ramesseum, is confusing, as it seems to equate it with his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, which is a separate monument. The largest tomb in the Valley does not belong to this king, but is the recently discovered KV5, the tomb of his sons. There is no direct evidence from Egypt that for the building of Ramesses' new city, he "rounded up the Israelites living in Egypt." And the "Rammesid" (sic) Dynasty actually covers two dynasties, the nineteenth and twentieth.

Chapter 6 is concerned with "The Beauty of Craft Work." It is a short chapter covering various artisans and workshops, including woodworking, pottery making, and textile manufacture. A sidebar is dedicated to the words of an ancient sculptor. Both of the illustrations in this chapter are mis-identified. The introductory illustration shows not chiselling a golden bowl, but a worker seated before a brazier with tongs and blowpipe, and the wall painting in the second illustration does not show the making of pottery vases, but part of a woodworking shop.

The next chapter, "Gods and Beliefs," discusses the role of religion in the lives of the ancient Egyptians. Gods and goddesses, temples, and the priesthood are emphasized, and the Amarna Period is touched upon, when king Akhenaten declared the worship of one god. Again there are broad generalizations that are difficult to confirm from existing evidence, such as the statement that "Everyone believed that the gods pitied the poor," or that every town had a sacred tree. In emphasizing the local nature of Egyptian deities, the author ignores the great state gods such as Amun, or "universal" deities like Osiris, god of the dead, whose influence extended the length of the Nile valley.

Chapter 8 is devoted to "Making Mummies," as well as funerary customs, tomb robbery, and a sidebar on paleopathology. The newest discoveries in the "Valley of the Golden Mummies" in the Bahriya Oasis are given a mention. This is the first reference in the book to the Greco-Roman period, but this period does not appear in the timeline at the end of the book, which curiously stops abruptly with the Third Intermediate Period, eliminating all mention of late Egyptian chronology.

The following chapter, "Calendars, Clocks, and Cures," contains interesting information on the contributions of ancient Egypt to mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The Egyptian calendar, seasons, and reckoning of time are all covered, as well as ancient diseases, medicines, and remedies. A section of color plates placed in this chapter is again plagued by misleading information and inaccuracies; the multi-chambered wooden object pictured held cosmetic eyepaint, not "different medical ointments for the sick," though the eyepaint may have had medicinal qualities in a country where eye disease was a problem; and the wall painting of "Nefertiti," the wife of Amenhotep IV, is actually an illustration from the tomb of Nefertari, wife of Ramesses II.

"Invention of Hieroglyphs" is an informative chapter on the need for written records and literacy as well as the development of the written word, the different types of writing in use in ancient Egypt, the life of the scribe, and types of text and literature. A long sidebar presents the Rosetta Stone and its significance for the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The accompanying illustration, however, lists "hieratic" as a part of the document, rather than the demotic that is discussed in the sidebar.

A short chapter follows on "Food, Fun, and Family," covering daily life. The typical family, food, music, and games are discussed. Again, curious undocumented statements such as "Even the poorest people welcomed all the children born to them" appear. It is also implied that the Egyptians ate with knives, forks, and spoons, which was not the case in dynastic times, when food was shown eaten with the hands.

The final chapter is titled "Women's Roles," and topics covered include the rights of women, daily life, professions open to women, and marriage. Women rulers are the subject of a long sidebar, ending appropriately with the death of Cleopatra, which marks the end of native Egyptian rule.

The text is followed by a timeline, which ends prematurely at the Third Intermediate Period, and whose ending date is erroneous; a bibliography; and an additional section that lists further reading, along with useful addresses and web sites of museums with collections of Egyptian art.

In general, this book is admirable in its scope and presentation, with an array of interesting topics covering the breadth of ancient Egyptian culture. It is unfortunate, therefore, that it does contain a number of problems of organization and accuracy.

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