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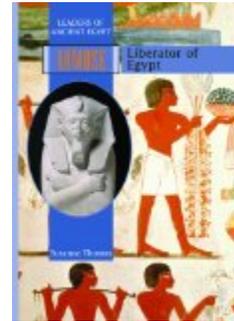
Susanna Thomas. *Ahmoses: Liberator of Egypt*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2003. 112 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8239-3599-4.

Susanna Thomas. *Akhenaten and Tutankhamen: The Religious Revolution*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2003. 112 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8239-3589-5.

Susanna Thomas. *Rameses II: Pharaoh of the New Kingdom*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2003. 112 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8239-3597-0.

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There Once Was a King...

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Here are three wonderful and highly informative books by Susanna Thomas, a Research Fellow at the highly respected School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology of the University of Liverpool. Without meaning to sound elitist, this sort of pedigree usually results in uncontested accuracy in the information offered in the book, and Thomas—who has also written about King Snefru (*Snefru: The Pyramid Builder*, 2003) and Queen Hatshepsut (*Hatshepsut: The First Woman Pharaoh*, 2003)—does not disappoint. The bonus here is that all three books are also “a good read,” with a strong narrative that keeps pulling the reader along.

The book on Pharaoh Ahmoses (1550-1525 B.C.E.) begins with an overview of ancient Egyptian history, with additional comments on geography and religion, leading up to the conquest by foreign kings, whom modern historians call “the Hyksos.” This is followed by a description of the foreign occupation and its effect on the Egyptian psyche, as well as the desire by local rulers in the city of Thebes, in southern Egypt, to rid the country of the Hyksos. The various battles for the liberation of Egypt are recounted, using contemporary texts to support the

narrative. A particular strength of not only this book but of all three reviewed here is that the author consistently uses quotations from the ancient texts to illustrate her story, giving a good feel for the times and how the ancient Egyptians themselves described their deeds and thoughts.

The story of the liberation of Egypt is where we meet the various combatants and see how Egypt managed to avoid a two-front war when the Hyksos king’s efforts to link up with the Nubian ruler at his Third Cataract capital of Kush (modern-day Sudan) were thwarted by alert Egyptian patrols who captured the Hyksos messenger in the western desert and found the actual letter proposing the military merger. This is all terrific stuff, which will delight military buffs.

Chapter 3 details the early life of King Ahmoses, generally considered the first king of the illustrious Eighteenth Dynasty. The chapter begins with the king’s childhood and his close connection to his mother, Queen Ahhotep, and goes on to describe Ahmoses’s early military training. The latter gives the author an opportunity to discuss the kinds of equipment worn by soldiers at the time as well as their weapons, which leads her to an ex-

cursus on metal working. The final battles pitting the Theban rulers with the Hyksos are recounted, as well as the subsequent Egyptians' military forays into western Asia to form a buffer zone between themselves and possible further conquest from the north-east.

Ahmose's military campaigns in Nubia are described next. Here we learn, among other things, that the king of Kush was buried under large round mounds, known as *tumuli*, which are twelve feet high and nearly three hundred feet across. These are enormous tombs—almost one full football field long—which must have required large amounts of manpower to build, and show the extent of those rulers' power. I mention these tombs because this magnificent African civilization is often overshadowed by its neighbors to the north in popular literature.

Once the wars of liberation were over, King Ahmose could turn his attention to governing the newly re-united country, which forms the subject of the next chapter. Here we read about some of the administrative branches like the vizier's office, the treasury, and the king's building projects. At this time, a new religious title was instituted, the so-called God's Wife of Amun; this was a post given to the king's wife or daughter, further reflecting the importance of women in the Eighteenth Dynasty. We next read about the king's death in 1525 B.C.E., where the author discusses mortuary rites and the process of mummification.

All in all, this is a most satisfactory book. Geared for younger readers, it still manages to not "talk down" to its audience, and, as stated above, the constant use of texts is to be commended. The book manages to convey the full drama of Egypt at a difficult time in its history yet on the verge of essentially re-inventing itself and embarking on a grander scheme, that of military imperialism. As an additional comment, anyone interested in a different take on this period of Egyptian history is encouraged to read Pauline Gedge's excellent trilogy, *The Hippopotamus Marsh* (1998), *The Oasis* (1999), and *The Horus Road* (2000), three wonderfully entertaining works of fiction.

A few slips of the pen occur here and there. The illustration from the tomb of the vizier Rekhmire, does not show men "making mortar for construction," as the caption tells us, but rather pounding beans in a mortar (pp. 12-13). This is made clear in the hieroglyphic text above them, which tells us that they are "pounding carob beans in the Treasury of the god Amun, lord of the Thrones of Egypt, in order to make offerings at every festival that His Majesty re-established." The caption on page 22 informs us that we are looking at "hieroglyphic symbols

associated with the Hyksos rulers" (Dynasties 15 and 16), but they are actually the cartouches of King Merneptah of the Nineteenth Dynasty. The image of the so-called Rhind Mathematical Papyrus (not the "Rhind Historical Papyrus," as stated on page 54), is upside down (pp. 36-37). The statement on page 72 that "Thebes was the hometown of the Middle Kingdom pharaohs" is disputable; if we are to believe a literary text from that period, they came from much further south, at the first Cataract. The caption on page 91 should state that the image shows us the sun god's journey into the afterlife, not that of the pharaoh.

The second book under review, on Pharaoh Akhenaten (1353-1336 B.C.E.), treads the same path as the first. Setting up her narrative with background history, the author introduces us to Akhenaten's father, King Amenhotep III, Egypt's self-styled "sun king." He ruled Egypt at the height of its power, controlling a territory that stretched from modern-day Syria in western Asia to the 4th Nile cataract in modern-day Sudan. The international relations are nicely detailed for us, using the so-called Amarna Letters, texts written on clay tablets in Akkadian, the diplomatic language of the time. We also learn about the royal family, including the importance of the great Queen Tiye. For example, we read that the queen actually corresponded herself with other kings and queens. This preeminence of the royal wife is a theme upon which the author had elaborated in her book on King Ahmose. The description of the long reign of Amenhotep III includes an interesting discussion of the so-called Sed festival, or royal jubilee, usually celebrated after thirty years on the throne.

At his death, the king's second eldest son—an older Crown Prince, Tuthmosis, had died earlier—acceded to the throne, as King Amenhotep (IV). It was soon evident that this king would be like no other before him. The first hint was in the royal titulary he chose for himself. Instead of proclaiming his military prowess as the previous rulers of the Eighteenth Dynasty had done, he elected to emphasize his connections to the divine. He also conducted international affairs in a very different way. Where his father had actively corresponded with rulers from western Asia, the new king preferred a more *laissez-faire* attitude, which looked to all concerned as uncaring and neglectful. The author quotes from one famous Amarna Letter that shows Akhenaten's contempt for some of his contemporaries. As one king complained: "My brother [how rulers addressed each other] has not sent the gold statues that your father was going to send. You have sent plated ones of wood" (p. 29)! Another

wrote to Akhenaten: “Why, my brother, have you held back the presents that your father made to me while he was alive” (p. 29)? This inattention to foreign affairs would have dire consequences for Egypt in the long run.

From detailing Amenhotep IV’s family and his famous queen, Nefertiti, to their six daughters, the book goes on to discuss the new religious ideas introduced by the king. Continuing his father’s concentration on the Aten, a god representing the sun disc itself, he now built a brand-new temple to this god to the east (not the north, as mentioned on p. 35) of the great temple of Amun at Karnak. To expedite matters, the royal architect chose to use smaller limestone blocks, called *talatat* today, which measure 52x26x24 cms (about 20“x10”x9“) or, in ancient measurements, one cubit long and half a cubit wide and tall. This allowed the builders to quarry stone more quickly and enabled one man to carry a block on his shoulders. This new temple was enormous and was a harbinger of things to come, as the king’s new center of worship would soon displace all other temples in the country. The worship of this new god was also accompanied by an eventual persecution of the older gods the ancient Egyptians had previously worshiped. This zealotry on the part of the king might have been his downfall. If he had simply told his subjects that henceforth they were to worship the Aten first and foremost, but without actually denying the existence of other gods, the population might have accepted Akhenaten’s new ideas. But the king’s religious intolerance was too much for them and his religious revolution would not survive him. To say that his philosophy was monotheistic is probably an over simplification, but it certainly can be compared to the monotheistic religions known today. Here, I have a minor quibble with the book. When the author states on that “in modern times, most of the world’s religions have been monotheistic,” this may be overstating the case (p. 50). True, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic, but to say that these represent “most of the world’s religions“ ignores others, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which are not monotheistic.

The next topic discussed is the king’s peculiar appearance. Early representations of him show him with a long face, neck, and body, slanting eyes, as well as a thin waist and thick bulging hips. An old theory that he suffered from Froehlich’s Syndrome must be discarded since this causes impotence, but a newer one, that the king suffered from Marfan’s Syndrome, has gained respectability. However, it must always be remembered that ancient Egyptian art was never meant to be a faithful portrait of the person, so such theories must remain in the realm of

speculation.

The next chapter discusses the new city built by the king. Not content to live in Thebes, in the shadows of the powerful priesthood of Amun, the king not only changed his name from Amenhotep (“Amun is satisfied”) to Akhenaten (“the one who is beneficial to Aten”). He also built an entirely new capital city in middle Egypt, which he called Akhetaten (“the horizon of the Aten”), modern-day Tell el Amarna. The author once again quotes from ancient texts where Akhenaten describes his wish to build his new city, and goes on to describe the city at great length. This chapter is full of informative material and draws a wonderful picture of the activities at the new site. She also makes the significant point that the archaeologist’s spade has shown that ordinary folks who lived at Akhetaten managed to hang on to their old beliefs, as shrines to Bes and Taweret—household divinities who protected children and women in childbirth—were found in homes in the poorer sections of the city. In a subsequent chapter, the full city is described. There, we learn, among other things, that the city’s streets were laid out in a grid pattern and that the Great Aten Temple was 2400 feet long and 750 feet wide. To use the same analogy as above, this would be around 800 by 250 meters, or nearly 8 football fields long and 2 and a half wide. To say that Akhenaten built on a grand scale would be a major understatement. One minor mistake occurs when the Small Aten Temple is said to be on the west bank of the Nile, when it, like the Great Aten Temple, was on the east bank (p. 71).

The last chapter narrates the final years of Akhenaten’s reign. Plagued by trouble abroad, Akhenaten and Nefertiti also suffered the loss of at least one of their daughters; there is a poignant relief carved in Akhenaten’s tomb showing the king and queen mourning a small body placed on a table. Three other daughters also disappear from the archeological record at this time, perhaps indicating that they too died. We next read about the death of Akhenaten and the troubled succession that accompanied it. A short-lived king named Smenkhare succeeded Akhenaten, but it is another son of his, probably from a minor queen called Kiya, who usually captures our attention at this point. A young—no more than nine or ten years old at the time—crown prince called Tutankhaten came to the throne, and eventually reigned for ten years. Under him, the old nobility and priesthoods who had been set aside by Akhenaten reasserted themselves, and the latter’s social and religious revolutions were over. The new king, who probably took very few decisions on his own, soon changed his name to

Tutankhamun. The author again uses primary sources to describe the conditions in Egypt when Tutankhamun came to the throne, and these paint a very bleak picture indeed. Even if we consider them to be hyperbolic spin on the part of the re-established nobility, the texts still vividly describe a country shorn of much of its empire, with an inefficient army, and with traditional temples throughout Egypt having “fallen into decay and ... overgrown with grass” (pp. 94-95). To make matters worse, a plague was sweeping across the ancient Near East, and it is easy to understand how the ancient Egyptians blamed Akhenaten’s disregard for the gods for the calamity. When he died—the author wisely stays away from any silliness about Tutankhamun having been murdered—a tomb was quickly adapted for his use, which remained practically undisturbed for over three millennia until its discovery in 1922 by the archaeologist Howard Carter. But that is a matter for another book.

In conclusion, this is another excellent offering, as highly informative as it is engaging. This is a most satisfying book on a tragic and enigmatic figure from ancient Egypt. Akhenaten’s story makes us pause and ask, what if he had been a better politician? Would his pacifist theories and social revolution have survived him? What if he had been more tolerant of different opinions? Would his religious revolution, with its hints at monotheism, have endured? In fact, did his religious ideas perhaps influence other people?

Here I permit myself a personal observation. On page 89, a few verses of the Great Hymn to Aten are quoted, which should be enough to give readers an idea of Akhenaten’s highly personal prayer to his god. While fully realizing the space limitations presumably dictated to the author by the publishers, it seems that a marvelous opportunity was lost to compare Akhenaten’s beautiful hymn to the Biblical Psalm 104. So here, are a series of parallels between the two texts, both of which demonstrate the joy and awe felt by their authors at their respective god for the marvel of his creation.

As for all distant lands, / you (also) make them live, / for you have made an inundation in the sky that it may descend for them, / and you make waves upon the mountains like the sea in order to irrigate / their fields in their towns (Hymn to Aten cols. 9-10).

The ocean covered it [= the earth] like a garment; / above the mountains stood the waters (Psalm 104:6).

All herds are at peace in their pastures, / and trees and plants flourish. / Birds have flown from their nests,

/ their wings in praise of your life force (Hymn to Aten col. 5).

They give drink to every beast of the field; / the wild asses quench their thirst. / Beside them the birds of heaven nest; / they sing among the branches (Psalm 104:11-12).

You have made an inundation (lit. “a Nile”) in the sky, / that it may descend upon them [= foreign lands], / and make waves upon the mountains like the sea (Hymn to Aten cols. 9-10).

From your palace on high you water the mountains; / by your labor the earth abounds (Psalm 104:13).

When you set in the western horizon, / the earth is in darkness, as in the fashion of death ... / Every lion has come out of its den, / and all the serpents bite (Hymn to Aten cols. 3-4).

You bring darkness, that night may fall, / in which all the beasts of the forest prowl: / Young lions roar for prey, / to seek their food from God (Psalm 104:20-21).

The earth brightens when you have risen from the horizon ... / The whole land perform its tasks (Hymn to Aten cols. 4-5).

When the sun rises, / they come home and rest in their dens. / People then go forth to their work, / to their labor until the evening (Psalm 104:22-23).

How manifold is that which you do, / although they are hidden from sight! / O sole god, there is no other beside you. / You created the earth according to your wish (Hymn to Aten cols. 7-8).

How manifold are your works, O Lord! / In wisdom you have made them all; / the earth is full of your creations (Psalm 104:24).

Ships sail downstream and upstream, / for every road is opened because of your appearance. / The fish in the river leap at the sight of you; / your rays are within the Great Green sea (Hymn to Aten col. 6).

Here is the great and vast sea, / where countless beings teem, / living things both great and small. / There the ships go, / here Leviathan, which you made, plays (Psalm 104:25-26).

You have allotted each man his (proper) place, / and you have provided his (lit. “their”) portions, / with each one of them according to his (own) diet (Hymn to Aten col. 8).

All of these look to you to give them food in due time (Psalm 104:27).

When you have arisen, they live. / When you set, they die (Hymn to Aten col. 12).

When you give to them, they gather; when you open your hand, they are well filled / When you hide your face, they are lost (Psalm 104:28-29).

These few parallels are not meant to imply that the Old Testament poet had a copy of the Hymn to Aten before him. But perhaps, given how pervasive and powerful oral tradition can be across both time and distance, he had heard snippets of the old Egyptian song performed and he either consciously or sub-consciously borrowed some of its themes for his own composition.

One small error has crept in to the final manuscript: on pages 74-75, the caption tells us that the image shows a tomb painting of a “pharaoh and his queen” worshipping a multitude of gods, when this is in fact from the tomb of a private individual named Senedjem from the site of Deir el-Medina.

The third book under review investigates the life and times of yet another famous pharaoh, Rameses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty (1279-1213 B.C.E.). The book follows the same formula as the first two. It first sets up the historical background of the so-called Ramesside dynasty, which followed the reign of Akhenaten and his few successors at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The latter had largely lost the hard-won empire in western Asia and it was up to this new family of generals to regain it. The second king of the dynasty, Pharaoh Seti I, campaigned in Canaan, reclaiming the lost territory there, and it was up to his son, Rameses II, to advance further north to recover the rest of the lost territory.

The author describes young Rameses’s early life under the tutelage of his father well. His training not only in military affairs but also in reading, writing, and mathematics is an occasion to detail an elite education of the time, painting a good picture of growing up wealthy in ancient Egypt. An episode in the young crown prince’s life is also recounted; after one of his father’s military campaigns ended in a draw, the two superpowers of the time, the Egyptians and the Hittites (from modern-day Turkey), agreed to a truce. The result was that Egypt kept the coastal ports on the eastern Mediterranean, but the Hittites would keep the all-important city of Kadesh (in modern-day Syria). The author comments that young Rameses never forgot the military humiliation of the

truce, but a point might be made that he also saw a peace treaty being drawn up, which saved countless lives afterward.

An account of Rameses’s co-regency with his father Seti I allows the author to discuss the royal titulary adopted by Egyptian pharaohs as well as Rameses’s family, including the fact that he eventually fathered nearly one hundred children. (Here, a small error occurs: the king’s name Rameses-Meryamun is said to mean “Rameses, Beloved of Ra,” when the epithet should have been translated “Beloved of Amun” p. 29). Seti I’s death is an opportunity to describe funerary equipment as well as the techniques of mummification. The point is made that King Seti I’s head is remarkably well preserved; as an aside, it can be mentioned that his head was the model for Universal Pictures’ 1932 film *The Mummy* starring Boris Karloff.

Rameses II’s early years are described next, from his early military campaigns to his building projects. The latter included a new capital city, this time in the northern part of Egypt whence the Ramesside family came. Called Piramesse Aa-nakhtu, “Home of Rameses, Great-of-Victories,” the city is well known as Raamses in the Old Testament (Ex. 1:11). Also described is Rameses II’s mortuary temple, the so-called Ramesseum; a fallen colossus from the remains of this temple was the inspiration for Shelley’s famous poem “Ozymandias” (1818).

In the fifth year of Rameses II’s reign came the military campaign that was a turning point in his life and would forever define his reign. In the spring of 1274 B.C.E., the pharaoh amassed a large army to counter the Hittite king’s challenge to his supremacy in Syria. Proceeding on faulty military intelligence, Rameses came incautiously close to the enemy lines, and he and his division were ambushed by a surprise attack from the Hittite chariotry. The battle waged furiously and Rameses came perilously close to losing his life, until reinforcements saved him at the end of the day. Although the encounter was a draw—the borders remained the same at the end of the campaign—Rameses II trumpeted his near-fatal encounter as a great triumph, and he never stopped advertising his prowess from then on. It was inscribed on the outside walls of a number of temples, to enable a largely illiterate population to see his bravery, and was also the theme of an epic poem that was presumably recited at social gatherings. The author again fills her narrative with texts, which give a true flavor of the ups and downs of the campaign, from the original military “disinformation” that the enemy lines were farther off than

they actually were to the ultimate triumph of the king. The book is at its best here, as the reader gets a full sense of the drama unfolding.

Further military campaigns, building projects, including huge fortifications on the northern borders of the country, filled the king's reign, until a truly momentous event occurred. Tired of the battles and gaining no territory worth further losses of human life, the Egyptian and Hittite rulers realized that a truce was necessary. Thus it was that the world's first peace treaty between two mighty nations was drawn up in Rameses II's twenty-first year. Engraved on two huge silver tablets as well as carved on the walls of the temple of Karnak at Thebes, the treaty detailed the various provisions agreed upon by the two nations. The treaty was sealed with both kings sending friendly greetings to one another. Even the Hittite queen wrote to Queen Nefertari of Egypt, "with me my sister, all goes well; with my country all goes well. With you my sister, may all go well, and with your country also, may all go well" (p. 85). The peace treaty withstood the test of time and never again would Egyptian and Hittite armies face each other on the battlefield. Now it is worth noting, without wishing to sound too cynical, that the treaty was drawn up at a time when the Hittites were facing threats from not one but two emerging powers to the east, the Assyrians and the Babylonians (from northern and southern modern-day Iraq, respectively). Thus the treaty might have helped prevent a two-front war for the Hittite rulers.

The book next details the king's family life and the importance of Queen Nefertari. Noteworthy is one of Rameses' sons, prince Khaemwaset, who had a passionate interest in the history of his country. He visited and restored monuments in the old Memphite necropolis, and thus could be called the world's first Egyptologist.

After a sixty-seven year reign, Rameses II died, by

then suffering from severe arthritis in his hips and hardening of the arteries in his lower legs, as well as afflicted by badly decayed teeth and gums. He can truly be called one of the great rulers of ancient Egypt, although his penchant for self promotion and his usurpation of previous kings' monuments—which make him look like a more energetic builder than he actually was—help foster that impression. Egypt was by then on the wane as a great power and would rarely see such wealth again as a nation.

The book is another terrific effort on the part of the author. Once again wisely letting the ancient texts speak for themselves, she weaves a good narrative that keeps the reader going through the major events of the reign, and she manages to give as much information as possible in the few pages she has at her disposal. My only quibble here, and this might again have had to do with space restrictions, is to have downplayed the role of Rameses II in the Biblical Exodus.

Although this episode is mentioned briefly on page 9, it might have been useful to further examine this topic, which is truly a turning point in world history, even though Rameses II may not, in fact, be the pharaoh who faced Moses. There is a minor slip, when a gold bracelet pictured is said to belong to Rameses II, when the cartouche on the object clearly reads "Tuthmosis" (p. 66). In fact, such mistakes might not have been the fault of the author. A careful reader may have noticed that most of my corrections come in the captions, which might have been supplied by in-house researchers and not from the author herself. In that respect, it is worth noting that a pertinent and well chosen illustration, detailing Egyptian soldiers beating Hittite spies at the battle of Kadesh, has its caption printed partially on the section of the scene we are meant to be looking at (p. 58)! Perhaps a little bit more care might have been expended by the publishers on the final product of what are, in the end, three terrific books. All are highly recommended.

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