

Ancient Egypt; an introduction
By Salima Ikram
2010 Cambridge University Press

This is a lovely book, providing an introduction to ancient Egypt and the practice of Egyptology. The first chapter provides a good introduction to the landscape of Egypt, how it developed 64 million years ago, to the present day. The Nile features quite heavily in this chapter as it is the main focus of ancient Egyptian life. There are short sections on the divisions of the Egyptian landscape including the Delta, Western Desert, Oasis, Eastern Desert, and the Red Sea looking at how these areas were utilised, and their natural resources.

Chapter 2 is a study of Egyptology as a discipline, which began with Khaemwaset, a son of Ramses II. The difference of approach is addressed from ancient Greek travellers, to Christians trying to identify the relation between Egypt and Bible history. By the Islamic period so much had been written about some aspects of Egyptian history that Al-Idrisi (d. 1251) glossed over the Sphinx in his writings, as he said there was too much written about it.

Mass tourism began in the 17th century when Egypt was associated with great wisdom of astronomy, medicine and esoteric knowledge. This tourism had the purpose of collecting antiquities, or searching for the source of the Nile. The real interest however began after the Napoleonic expedition, resulting in the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, and the decipherment of hieroglyphs, which Ikram covers within the text. The chapter ends with the modern history of Egyptology with short biographies of all the pioneers and key players in the discipline.

The third chapter is a study of how archaeologists know the information they do about ancient Egypt. She describes the importance of primary sources, such as the monuments, temples, tombs and contemporary texts, as well as secondary sources such as travellers' accounts such as Herodotus, and encyclopaedic records like Napoleon's *Description*. Many sites described in these secondary sources no longer exist, and are therefore invaluable.

The latter part of the chapter investigates how technology is used to re-create the past. A comprehensive list of different surveying, recording and dating techniques is given although rather disappointingly there are no examples of how each technique was used in the field. That I felt would have been particularly useful for clarity.

These introductory chapters provided an interesting description of how archaeologists are able to reconstruct the past and how this has developed

over the last 200 years. Egyptology has gradually moved away from treasure hunting to a multi-disciplinary science using technology, as it is available, to gather as much information as possible.

The rest of the book is a description of the past that has been ascertained using all the methods described. Ikram starts with the pre-dynastic period and describes the progression of history dynasty by dynasty, with information about dynastic changes, politics and military activity. There are some interesting text boxes throughout the chapter, on such things as the Labyrinth at Hawara, the expedition to the Wadi Hammamat by Mentuhotep IV to choose a block for a sarcophagus, and the wonderfully titled "The pharaoh with a passport". It is interesting to note that whilst we have thousands of books about the history of Egypt the ancient Egyptians themselves did not write any similar documents, so everything we know has been gathered by archaeologists.

The following chapters continue in this vein, each focusing on a different aspect of Egyptian history including religion, social hierarchy, town and country life, daily life and funerary beliefs. Each chapter is sub-divided into easily manageable chunks such as "the pantheon", "temple architecture", and "festivals". Whilst covering the more commonly covered details of each subject Ikram also covers some aspects rarely covered or avoided, such as "foreigners", "slaves" or rather bizarrely "cobblers". The section on literacy also includes the hieroglyphic alphabet and transliteration so the reader can have a go at learning them.

All information is handled in a straightforward, friendly manner, and is easy to read. The book is also peppered with some fabulous colour photographs, illustrations, line drawings and plans where appropriate. There are also numerous text boxes throughout each chapter, all within a beautiful layout.

The volume ends with a glossary of useful terms with straightforward definitions. There is a list of egyptological resources, separated into topics, with some of the most, well-respected books on the subjects listed. There is a very comprehensive chronology at the start of the book, with lists all the kings in Egyptian history (where known) plus their dates (where known) which whilst being immensely thorough also highlights the gaps in the archaeological record which is explored in the text.

This was a useful book, offering interesting information for the enthusiast, looking for something a little bit new (especially the first 3 chapters) as well for the novice who wants a basic history of Egypt they can easily reference.