

Egyptology Today; an introduction. By Richard Wilkinson (Ed)

Cambridge. Cambridge University Press

ISBN: 978-0-521-68226-8

Egyptology Today is a collection of essays by a team of archaeologists, curators, scholars, and conservators who are all working in the field, present techniques and methods to explain the discipline of Egyptology. Richard Wilkinson has written a short introduction about how Egyptology has changed from a gentleman's pastime, to a multi-disciplinary science. The book is separated into four parts, with three essays covering many aspects of Egyptology.

Part I – Methods

Kent Weeks writes a nice introductory chapter describing Egyptology, its history and key players from the past including Petrie, Mariette, Reisner and Rhind. He describes the process required to obtain a concession in Egypt and the opportunities available in what is a changing, multi-disciplinary career. He makes an interesting comment that no new concessions are given in Upper Egypt. Only the Delta has available sites, in order to protect them from the threat of urbanisation.

This well-written chapter is followed by a rather verbose essay on the difficulties and challenges facing history writers, writing about ancient Egypt which Redford claims has too long been dominated by art history. He does however make the valid point that many books are indeed over-regurgitated information on Tutankhamun or Ramses II with no new insights or purpose other than saleability. This he blames on mass tourism, where people want short introductory books on Egypt rather than real history.

The final essay in this section is a fascinating outline of the uses of medical science in Egyptology. Until the 1980s mummies were still being autopsied, although in the later years this was only carried out on mummies already in bad preservation, whereas now non-invasive, non-destructive methods are employed such as x-rays, palaeo-odontology for evidence of dental hygiene and diet. Endoscopes are also used as a non-destructive means of extracting tissue samples from within the mummy, and immunological techniques can be used to identify disease with the mummy. Using such techniques the Manchester Mummy Project were able to identify schistosomiasis (bilharzia) in numerous mummies, and using DNA studies they were able to extract and identify the DNA of the schistosomiasis worm itself.

David discusses the important and developing role of Biomedical Egyptology, as it can provide information not available elsewhere, and has great potential for the future.

Part II – Monuments and Site Survey

Sarah Parcak's essay on site survey is particularly interesting although she paints a rather dismal picture of the discipline of Egyptology as being very behind the times in this discipline. Egyptology is primarily considered to be concerned with recording monuments, although as many sites are being lost due to urbanisation, it is important to identify and preserve as many sites as possible. Through the use of 100 year old reports, GIS and satellite imaging, records are being made to try to identify unknown sites. From her studies, Parcak has discovered that in the Delta only 0.001% of the

occupied land is excavated, and due to urban expansion over the next 70 years all the agricultural land in the Delta and the sites on it will be gone. Many sites visible in the 1960s are no longer visible today. However, Parcak's project has identified 87 previously unknown sites in Middle Egypt and 44 in the Delta. They now have the task of protecting them.

The final chapter is about the very topic that Parcak says Egyptology should be moving away from; epigraphy. However it still has an important role to play. Dorman starts with a brief history of hieroglyphics and hieratic, and the history of epigraphy itself, focusing on the Napoleonic team who made the first serious records of the inscriptions. He then discusses the methods used including archaic squeezes (damp pulp), watercolours, and the modern combined techniques of photography and tracing using sheets of acetate. However the role of the epigrapher is not just about copying inscriptions, but also translating, interpreting and publishing their finds.

The final chapter of this section deals with the conservation of monuments, which summarises quite clearly the break-down of all that damages them, from pollution, ground-water, urbanisation and mass-tourism. Jones is one of the few Egyptologists to openly criticise the way the SCA handle these issues, especially the latter. He comments that it is more important to the authorities to increase the tourist numbers, "quantity not quality is the chief objective" even though many people never return. He highlights that tourism effects conservation, using the tomb of Sety I as an example. The tomb is structurally unsafe but as it is not suitable for large tourist groups there are no plans to conserve it yet.

In order to conserve the monuments, archaeologists have a variety of options including recording and reburying the site, which has been carried out at the settlement near the sphinx, where a replica house has been built over the site of the original. Rebuilding collapsed monuments is also an option considered appropriate if authentic materials are used and further damage will not be caused. I found this a very out-spoken essay, which holds a great deal of relevance to the modern discipline of conservation.

Part III – Art and Artefact

Freed's introductory chapter to this art and artefact section, did not offer much that was new. It was a summary of the history of Egyptian artistic development from the pre-dynastic period to the Late Period and although was well-written, there was nothing unexpected.

This was followed by an interesting analysis Egyptology presented in museums. Kozloff starts with an inspired comparison between museums and ancient Egyptian temples, where nothing was destroyed, just reused, buried or used for filler in pylons preserving artefacts for millennia. Then there was a comprehensive list of museums with Egyptian collections both in Egypt and abroad, as well as those planned by the SCA which are to be funded by foreign exhibitions of Egyptian objects. The SCA hope that once these are completed they will never need to send objects abroad again. The most important temporary exhibitions in foreign museums are also listed and it is interesting to note that the Egyptian museums do not design temporary exhibitions of their artefacts, even though they have more artefacts than any other country.

Kozloff also discusses the difficulties that face museums displaying Egyptian objects, including temperature, humidity, lighting, and in earthquake zones specialist stands need to be created; all

very expensive and complex. These features have not been addressed in the Egyptian museum in Cairo since it was built in the 19th century, other than the gold of Tutankhamun which draw in the crowds.

The importance of museums is specifically emphasised, and especially the importance of these temporary exhibitions, coupled with interactive workshops, activities for children, and the use of the internet for virtual tours, some of which are listed and described. This chapter was useful, well-written, interesting and quite thought provoking.

The final essay in this section concerns the important topic of conservation, which starts with a discussion about the role of conservation in Egyptology and how the skills come from a multi-disciplinary background. Interestingly enough although highly trained in techniques, studies in Egyptian conservation is not available and after qualifications are obtained, specialisation develops on the job.

One of the main problems facing conservationists is the damage caused by earlier attempts at conservation, using materials available at the time which caused more damage. This needs to be dealt with before the conservation of an object can take place. Generally in the modern world, conservation is mostly about preservation of objects and monuments through management programmes and careful site and artefact monitoring.

One of the most difficult relationships described by Gänsicke, is between conservators and museum display staff as what is best for the object is not necessarily going to display it to its best advantage. For example, mummy cases on the whole, should be displayed horizontally but aesthetically a vertical position is favoured. A compromise needs to be reached so neither the objects nor the museum numbers suffer. A real conflict of interest which is dealt with very diplomatically by Gänsicke.

Part IV – Texts

Allen opens this section on texts with a concise breakdown of the history and structure (grammatically and phonemically) of hieroglyphics, demotic and the Coptic language. He explains clearly the origins of the languages and scripts as well as historical considerations, which led smoothly to the next essay by John and Ann Foster, who provide a summary of the types of literature discovered from ancient Egypt. He opens the chapter with a quote from Chester Beatty IV Papyrus which emphasised the importance of literature to the ancient Egyptians themselves, and goes on to discuss the importance of narratives, instructions, hymns and songs. They show that techniques such as similes, metaphors, and characterisations are common in Egyptian literature, using the Memphis Ferry, and the Shipwrecked Sailor to demonstrate. Although it appears that much of the literature was probably verse it is emphasised that some of the impact is lost as we do not know how the language sounds and therefore how the timbre and metrics should be used.

A question often asked is how Egyptologists come-by the best translations, which is explained. They use a series of parallel text fragments laid side by side to get the fullest version of the completed text and therefore the best translation. This they explain is particularly useful when the texts are very fragmentary. They conclude the chapter with areas of the discipline which still need to be worked on, such as comparative studies between cultures, as well as re-translations, re-

interpretations and re-studying of texts that have already been worked on to advance the study of Egyptian literature.

The final chapter in this section (and the book) is a detailed essay on Egyptian religious texts which is ambitious with the amount of material Leprohon covers, in the amount of space available. The chapter is essentially a summary of the main myths, funerary and religious texts, with little here that has not been covered elsewhere.

Although all the essays in this book, are interesting and relevant to the topic in hand I felt there was no consistency in approach, and some of the essays were rather basic, aimed at a total novice, and others were far more complex assuming a great deal of knowledge of the subject. It gave the impression that the target audience for this volume was not clear to the authors or indeed to me as I read it. There were a few black and white images in the books but nothing that was unavailable elsewhere, perhaps with the exception of some of the imaging in Parcak's chapter. This book however would be an interesting reference book, but one that would potentially be out of date very quickly as technology progresses and the discipline changes. An ambitious book, with high expectations, but one that is not rivalled at the moment with anything similar.