

## The Environment of Ancient Egypt: A Perspective From Within

2013: Howlett, L.

High-Res History. E-Book

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This book uses Landscape Archaeology to approach Egyptian history; investigating how communities lived within, manipulated and influenced the landscape as well as how the landscape influenced the communities. Primarily the book focuses on the pre-dynastic, early dynastic and Old Kingdom with the occasional reference to the New Kingdom where the author felt it was relevant to the argument.

The book is divided into five chapters, the first looking at *Perceived vs. Physical Boundaries* where Howlett covers different themes including the concept of the 'other', the physical boundaries of Egypt and how they were overcome or incorporated into the developing culture. Essentially the chapter is a chronological journey from the pre-dynastic period before people settled in the Nile Valley through to the early dynastic period. Howlett discusses the influence the environment had on these nomadic and then settled communities and how it changed over the centuries. The idea of core and periphery boundaries and the way they were viewed through the eyes of individuals and how they related to the physical boundaries is also introduced. The Delta, away from the unified hub, for example, may have been considered a 'periphery' as it was inhabited by a foreign population who were perhaps considered 'other'.

This idea is developed further in chapter two, *The Politics of Space*. Throughout the chapter the author discusses how the political boundaries of a unified Egypt perpetuated the 'them' and 'us' mentality. She introduces the concepts of the pyramid complexes not being simply a funerary space but rather a display of the king's power and divinity on the landscape. The royal economic power on the other hand was realized in the separation of royal agricultural estates which were essential for the economy of Egypt but also made an impact on the environment and the people who lived and worked in their shadows. Although the political boundaries were divisive in nature, with proximity to royal enclosures denoting power, the author asserts these boundaries also gave communities an identity.

The third chapter, *Ideology and Landscape*, investigates how the landscape influenced the construction of temples and their continued use using two case studies: the early dynastic town of Abydos and the New Kingdom town of Amarna.

The information presented can be found elsewhere and is therefore not new. The author however emphasises the difference between the two case studies in the sense that Abydos gained a spiritual identity over time as the site was reused whereas at Amarna the site was declared sacred with no past history as a sacred space.

The question of why such sites were chosen for monumental building works is discussed in chapter 4, *Influences Upon Site Selection*. Howlett returns to the Old Kingdom and the choice of pyramid sites and discusses David Jeffries' theory regarding the visible sightlines between the solar temple at Heliopolis and the pyramid sites. All were visible except Abusir and South Saqqara which Howlett suggests were in sight-line of a break in the east cliffs which resembled the hieroglyphic sign for akhet, or horizon. Where the sun rose between this gap it provided a direct path for the deceased king into the afterlife. The author also discusses the possibility that these cliffs represent the 'White Walls', a term used to describe the city of Memphis.

The final chapter, *Changes in Landscape and State Attitude*, moves away from architecture and looks at agricultural land and gardens. As there appears to be little evidence from the earlier periods, Howlett has drawn mostly on New Kingdom resources. This chapter essentially describes the food crops grown in Egypt and their relationships with ideology. However there is some confusion over sources as whilst discussing New Kingdom crops she mentions cotton and sugar cane, the former was not introduced to Egypt until the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD and the latter in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. However the chapter is a nice introduction to agriculture and gives an idea of the importance of crops for not only the economy, but ideology, politics and personal identity too.

This book, whilst not offering any new information, offers a fresh approach to pre- and early dynastic Egypt and is presented in an academic style with carefully structured arguments. However the author's referencing severely lets her and the book down. Many of her references run thus "Kemp 1993 quoted by Wilkinson 1999, 167". This indicates she has not followed up the source and shows a lack of research. Many of her references are extremely old (pre 1999) which she constantly refers to as 'recent' theories or debates 'still' on-going. These references are already at least 15 years old. Howlett also overuses the reference 'ibid' and often as she quotes the same resource for pages it can be tedious to go back in order to identify the book she is referring to.

At the rear of the book there is a 'selected bibliography' which lists books she has not quoted directly but fails to list those she has. The book would also be greatly enhanced by some illustrations but as this is published as an e-book perhaps that is the reason for the omission. There are maps throughout the text although these are in the form of external links, which personally I found frustrating. When I am reading a book I do not want to have to go to the internet in order to get information I need. But that is a personal preference. This book is priced well and if you are interested in an introduction to the early periods of Egyptian history then it is worth a look.