

The Lost Tombs of Thebes; Life in Paradise by Zahi Hawass

2009 Thames and Hudson

201 colour illustrations and 7 B & W

This book is a large format "coffee table" book with some beautiful photographs by Sandro Vannini, mostly double page spreads and gatefold pages. The book is divided into nine chapters each looking at a different aspect of the Theban necropolis. The tombs represented in the book number 80 of the 400 in Thebes, all dating from the New Kingdom.

As with all of Hawass's books it is not the greatest of academic writing, with a consistent use of "I will show", "I did", "most interesting project I am working on", and "let me tell you of some recent cases in which the SCA is fighting" which is something that does not appear in any other Egyptological or indeed archaeological books. One would expect better from the head of Antiquities Service, but that is not the objective of this review.

The introductory chapter is the inevitable history of the New Kingdom, with a dynasty by dynasty break down with a brief discussion of Hawass's CT scan of Tutankhamun's mummy, which bears little relevance to the noble tombs of the New Kingdom. There is also an introduction to the tombs of the nobles in Luxor, and a brief description of the types of images depicted in the tombs. He acknowledges that not all of the tombs featured in the book are "lost" but are in fact very well-known, and well visited.

The first chapter looks at the administration of the New Kingdom, as a means of explaining who owned and were buried in the tombs, which he categorises as being the Ahmoside, or Thutmoside periods followed by the 19th and 20th dynasties, commonly known as the Rammesside period. I wonder why this term was not used as it would have fit in with this classification system. The chapter finishes when the Priests of Amun took the throne seeing the decline in the Theban necropolis and the end of the New Kingdom.

Chapter two looks at the function and architecture of the Theban tombs, and how the architecture fits into the wider context of the belief system of the ancient Egyptians regarding the afterlife. Hawass then looks at the evolution of tombs from Old Kingdom Mastabas, following through to the New Kingdom rock cut tombs, with sections dedicated to the New Kingdom dynasties. The decoration in these New Kingdom tombs is discussed in chapter three, beginning with a detailed description of the techniques carving stone and painting it. This is followed by a section on the artists themselves and how they were trained in their chosen profession. The artwork

discussion is continued in the following three chapters starting with "Scenes of Earthly Life" which discusses in particular royal scenes such as the tribute scenes, as well as the relationship between the king and the tomb owner showing award ceremonies, and an interesting image of the king being suckled by his wetnurse as well as an image of Queen Tiye with a pet monkey tormenting a cat, eating a pin-tailed duck. Other scenes not related to royalty, such as the scenes of food production and agriculture are discussed at length, which leads to the next chapter which discusses the journey of the afterlife starting with mummification, and funeral practices as well as the deceased's introduction to the gods of the underworld. Some of the scenes are then discussed in context of the Funerary texts, with a breakdown of the different texts as well as a description of some of the more famous scenes such as weighing of the heart is given. Chapter six looks specifically at cult rituals, offering meals and banquets in regard to tomb decoration explaining the purpose of false doors and ka statues, and the discussion of banquets and offering rites.

Chapter seven moves onto the funerary equipment discovered in tombs, and the first page of this chapter bearing the subheading "the Great Discoveries" seems to be a resume of Hawass's discoveries none of which can be classified as "Great" and is an example more of ego than archaeology. Then there is a break-down of some of the truly great discoveries including the tombs of Maiherperi, Yuya and Tjuya, Kha, and Sennedjem's with some illustrations of the goods discovered, There is then a rather general discussion of mummies, coffins, canopic equipment, shabtis furniture and food; the expected text for a book on funerary aspects of ancient Egypt.

Chapter eight discusses the problems that have, over the years affected the Theban necropolis including tomb robbers, vandalism and tourism; both ancient and modern although the modern is the 19th century rather than the 21st century which seems to be pretty much ignored here; it would have been interesting to hear Hawass's thoughts on the damage caused by thousands of tour buses as well as the millions of tourists and their Egyptian tour guides who touch and sit on the monuments. The final chapter looks at "saving the Valley of the Nobles" which does look at modern robbers and damage caused to the Valley of the Nobles by the villagers who lived there, as well as "naive foreigners". This chapter is by far the most interesting of the entire book, as the information is not to be found elsewhere, with a breakdown of the projects which are currently taking place in the Theban necropolis

This book is a typical Hawass coffee table book, beautiful pictures but very little substance; clearly aimed at lay-people rather than trained Egyptologists. Most of the information is widely available elsewhere, and considering the power, experience and knowledge Hawass has there is very little information presented which is as a direct result of his work. Saying that, this book is worth getting for the illustrations alone, and many photographs are from tombs that are not widely open to the public or the images are not widely reproduced.