

INSIGHTS INTO PHARAONIC EGYPT

BUSSMANN (R.) *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt. Society and Culture, 2700–1700 BC*. Pp. xiv + 426, figs, ills, maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £100, US\$130. ISBN: 978-1-107-03038-1.

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Ancient Egypt has played a paradoxical role in constructing modern disciplines such as philology and history. Firmly rooted in western traditions thanks to its prominence in Biblical and Classical texts, its cultural prestige increased exponentially after the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt (1798–1801). The publication of the influential *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1829) and the deciphering of the hieroglyphs (1822) were celebrated as the epitome of the triumph of reason. Both achievements revealed a fascinating world of ancient texts and monuments that became accessible to Western scholars. The dedication and rigorous work of the latter brought to light the almost forgotten history of one of the 'cradles of civilisation', according to the intellectual mentality prevailing at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, as the decades passed, these promising beginnings failed to integrate ancient Egypt into the most innovative trends in historical and social sciences research. Only very slowly the pioneering work of Egyptologists such as Barry Kemp, Jan Assmann, John Baines, Pascal Vernus and many others began to overcome outdated debates and obsolete methods, renew the foundations of Egyptology and succeed in integrating Egypt into comparative research. It has been a long and painstaking process, not yet fully accomplished. Nonetheless, the book under review is an excellent example of recent progress and paradigm changes. Given the period considered by B. (2700–1700 BCE), it continues the labour initiated almost 20 years ago by D. Wengrow in his groundbreaking book, *The Archaeology of Early Egypt: Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000 to 2650 BC* (2006).

Contrary to most books dealing with this period, which privilege the history of kings, their reigns and their monumental achievements, B. directs his attention to the social and economic basis of the monarchy and their changes over time. To achieve this endeavour, he privileges an archaeological perspective over a textual one. This choice enables him to build a narrative in which recent archaeological findings illuminate aspects of Egyptian life that are traditionally neglected. Far from old historical reconstructions, which saw an immutable power structure highly hierarchic and bureaucratic dominating the land of the Pharaohs, B. studies, on the contrary, how Egyptians organised and transformed the territory in which they lived. The dynamics of agricultural production, sedentary lifestyles and the exploitation of natural resources left their traces on the landscape. They also promoted differentiated forms of settlement in which kings intervened actively through diverse means, from the foundation of agricultural estates scattered all over Egypt to the creation of specialised settlements and facilities like pyramid towns, harbours, fortresses and working centres. Their frequent orthogonal layout and modular habitation units reveal the intervention of the central power, an aspect corroborated by the discovery of archives at sites like Lahun and others (pp. 71–85).

However, the progress of landscape and settlement archaeology is still insufficient, particularly when compared with similar studies in neighbouring areas such as Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Hence, the chapter 'Urban Growth' only discusses a handful of examples due to insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, it would have been helpful to include in this chapter recent archaeological surveys that show settlement growth and

decline cycles in the Eastern and Central Delta. These cycles diverged in both areas. They point more to the influence of socio-economic and, perhaps, political factors than climatic ones. Trade and exchanges probably had something to do with these phenomena. Chapter 6, analysing Egypt's foreign contacts, provides an excellent summary in which B. aptly discusses their nature and extent. At the same time, B. also addresses the delicate issue of ethnicity, interaction with foreign peoples inside and outside Egypt, and how Egyptians perceived their neighbours and their place in pharaonic society. In the case of Asians (*aamu*), their almost 'folkloric' depiction in some funerary scenes, wearing distinctive clothes, hairstyles and weapons, hardly conceals the fact that, in many cases, they lived and were perfectly integrated into their host society. Apart from their designation as *aamu* on their own monuments, perfectly Egyptian in style, nothing distinguishes them from their neighbours.

Another quality of the book is B.'s balanced approach to studying funerary culture. The richly decorated tombs of the elite – including royals, high dignitaries and officials – attracted the attention of scholars from the very beginnings of Egyptology. These monuments provide inscriptions and lively scenes that convey an apparent naturalist depiction of everyday life of ancient Egyptians. Only gradually did Egyptologists begin to understand the complex cultural codes that inspired the decoration of the tombs and the visual expression of a world view that, in the end, enhanced the centrality of the elite and their values. A substantial section of the book provides a more nuanced interpretation (Chapter 7). B. discusses the burials and funerary practices of humble Egyptians and shows that the distribution of their tombs often constituted clusters associated with the tombs of officials and other members of the elite. Without further sources of information, funerary landscapes reveal, for example, the importance of patronage and dependence networks that structured social relations in the countryside. Sometimes, people of modest status tried to imitate the monuments of their more powerful neighbours, either to express that they also belonged in some way to the elite due to their contacts or that their newly accumulated wealth favoured social promotion. In other cases, multicultural communities provide fascinating examples in which the material culture of the people buried intended to emphasise their ethnic origins, for instance, by choosing to refuse objects and burial practices characteristic of their Egyptian neighbours. Finally, family and kin bonds continue after death, and tensions may erupt in the complex relationship between living and deceased members. For example, the memory of deceased persons was preserved through the ubiquitous mentions of their names, titles, piety and achievements on their funerary monuments. Rituals in their tombs helped keep their memory alive, linking together the social circle that had gravitated around them and strengthened the group's cohesion. However, deceased individuals should also look after their relatives in case of troubles affecting the living. Otherwise, the latter may stop presenting offerings in their tombs.

Being a renowned specialist in the study of temples during the period considered, B. devotes an excellent chapter (8) to the cultural and social practices revolving around them. Temples close to the palace, in Memphis and Thebes, and temples and shrines in the provinces articulated social networks where the ruling elite presented themselves as keepers of the cosmic order and harmonious social relations that ensured Egypt's prosperity. In the absence of a corpus of law, temples and divine guidance sanctioned and legitimised the measures taken by the Pharaoh and his agents. At the same time, the management and access to the goods owned by divine institutions – land, cattle, precious goods – was a source of coveted income; so access to them was limited to restricted social groups, thus reinforcing the links between the king and the provincial nobility.

B. has succeeded in providing an innovative narrative through his careful and well-informed use of archaeological data. The bottom-up perspective in the book balances

other views mainly focused on the monuments and achievements of the tiny elite that ruled Egypt. The book thus offers a fertile ground for comparative research, not least because the Egypt it presents becomes more comprehensive for non-Egyptologists, including archaeologists, anthropologists and ancient historians. For these reasons and the competent work achieved, the book is a worthy heir of publications that helped break the traditional isolation of Egyptology. B. deserves our gratitude for such an outstanding intellectual accomplishment.

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