

Review: Leonard Cottrell, *Life Under the Pharaohs*, Pan Books, London, 1955 (1957 edn.)

Pages: 191

Egypt Made Accessible

As a layman's introduction to Egyptology, this is an excellent resource.

Insights are geographical (e.g., the Nile was so narrow Egyptians necessarily lived in close proximity to animals), cultural (e.g., the practice of slavery mainly of Nubians but also Semites), economic (e.g., trade was all barter), and religious.

A clever historical-narrative approach is used to bring such an ancient culture to life, shadowing the activities of an historical personage "Vizier Rekhmire".

Is there any value in the study of ancient Egypt? It goes some way to providing context for Abraham, Joseph, and Israel's dealings with it in the Old Testament, e.g., blocks were often strengthened by mixing in straw and cattle dung [cf. Exodus 5.18]. Also, their way thinking is not far removed from today.

Introduction (pp. ix-xii)

Fellahin are lineal descendants of Ancient Egyptians.

I) The Land, the People and Their Gods (p. 13-26)

The Nile Valley coils through the desert 600mi and is only from 1-3mi wide.

The Egyptians thought it necessary to build an 'eternal habitation' replete with articles for a comfortable and happy life in the next world. This is why either tombs or religious buildings are mostly preserved.

Shawabti are funerary statuettes of servants left in tombs to continue serving their earthly masters..

The Egyptian pantheon had over 2,000 deities.

Re was worshipped at Heliopolis, but later Amun god of Thebes was made coequal then combined into Amun-Re, King of Gods.

The Middle Kingdom (2100-1700 BC) saw the rise of the Osiris cult: in the beginning there was only the ocean, from which the sun-god was born. He had four children: Geb (earth); Shu (atmosphere); Tefnut (rain); Nut (sky). Geb and Nut had Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, and Seth. Osiris became king and married his sister Isis. The jealous Seth killed him, then Isis recovered his body parts including the head from Abydos and had them reanimated via Anubis. Isis' son Horus took revenge on Seth.

Every year thousands would flock to Abydos to watch a reenactment of this story.

Comparison is made between the Osiris cult with Isis as mother-goddess and Horus to Catholicism.

Egyptians worshipped mummified cats and snakes, sacred stones, trees and pillars. [Rm 1.25]

“Primitive man simply doesn't know an inanimate world”.

The falcon became a symbol of royalty, the crocodile an infernal monster, the ibis Thoth (god of wisdom) and lion-sphinx of majesty.

Since the Nile was so narrow Egyptians lived in close proximity to animals.

II) Rekhmire Comes Home (pp. 27-39)

Pharaoh was also the Chief Priest.

Tuthmosis II conquered Syria, Israel and Lebanon.

Egypt had relations with the Hittites, Babylonians and Crete.

Buto was the northern capital prior to unification. The King's royal insignia was Buto's emblem with the falcon representing Nehken, the southern capital) beside it. He was thus called, "King of Upper and Lower Egypt".

Imhotep was the architect under King Djoser who designed the Sakkara Step Pyramid.

Egypt declined after the Sixth Dynasty with a century of confusion and foreign invasion [timing of the Exodus?]

Officials were either appointed or inherited roles, not elected.

Egypt's wealth was derived from land and manpower, so ultimately fertility of the Nile.

III) Houses and Furnitures (pp. 40-53)

Mud was the cheapest, most accessible, and easily workable material. Bricks have survived to today.

The Nile's brown mud rapidly greys under the host sun.

Blocks were often strengthened by mixing in straw and cattle dung [Ex 5.18]

Sloping roofs were unnecessary due to low rainfall.

Timber was highly valued and used sparingly so Egypt has no forests.

A *shaduf* is a water-hoist which raised water to higher canals.

Sakkara had fluted columns, centuries before the Greek Doric column.

Egyptian houses looked inwards.

On average, village streets were 11-15ft wide with a middle drainage channel. There were no footways since vehicles were rare. There was no sanitation or drainage.

Eye diseases from flies were common: trachoma and ophthalmia. Bilharzia or schistosomiasis from a worm was a danger; it causes organ obstruction. This was due to defecating and urinating in canals and irrigation ditches. The worms would first grow in snails to breed.

Villagers dug deep sewer pits and lined them with hard-baked bricks. After a few months they would be emptied and placed in the sun to kill any pathogens, after which it was used as fertiliser [!].

High officials like Rekhmire lived in houses with 50-60 rooms. Middle-class houses were 50 feet square.

A great gardener could rise to high rank.

Egyptians adopted a reclining posture for eating as the later Greeks and Romans. They didn't have communal dining tables.

Mattresses were cord and head-rests made of wood.

Nourishment prayers for the dead were made for bread, beer, beef and goose.

There was no milling technology. Corn was hand-pounded with great pestles.

Beer was their favourite beverage and they ate with their hands.

IV) The Vizier Gives a Party (pp. 54-69)

Egyptian inheritance was always via the female line, which is why Pharaohs married their sisters.

Green-blue eye paint was used.

The King's Fanbearer was a kind of Grand Chamberlain.

One was expected to get drunk at parties.

“Sister” and “brother” simply means “beloved” and is not necessarily for blood relationships.

On death: “None cometh from thence that he may tell us how they fare, that he may tell us what they need, that he may set our heart at rest, until we also go to the place whither they are gone.”

V) The Egyptian Woman (pp. 70-79)

“Anch-ere, the dead wife, is angry with her husband, and he might write her a letter to propitiate her grieved spirit.”

“Beware of women from strange parts”.

To avoid falling into snares, young men were advised to marry early and beget children.

Diodorus stated in Roman times it was a law in Egypt that brothers and sisters might marry.

If a husband leaves his wife he must return the dowry.

Divorce was easy with simply: “I have abandoned thee as wife”.

Egyptian women could be priestesses, midwives, dancers, and mourners.

A marriage contract between Jews in Elephantine, 442BC, allowed a woman to divorce her husband by paying five shekels.

VI) Lovers and Friends (pp. 80-87)

VII) The Pharaoh’s Army (pp. 88-99)

The only regular officer in the Old Kingdom with rank is “general” or “army commander”.

After collapse of the Middle Kingdom, Egypt was invaded by the Hyksos.

Thutmose III extended Egypt to the Euphrates.

Army divisions numbered 5,000, of chariotry and infantry. There were no cavalry since horses were too weak for military riding.

Chariots were light, springless, and two-wheeled driven by two horses. There were two men: an unarmed driver and a warrior, the latter armed with javelins, bows and a shield.

The horseshoe was not yet invented.

VIII) Per-Hor Goes to School (pp. 100-111)

“Be a scribe, who is freed from forced labour, and protected from all work”.

The Egyptian alphabet had twenty-four consonants.

The Phoenician goddess Ba’alat was consort of Baal. She was also Hathor, “lady of Turquoise”.

IX) The Craft of Writing (pp. 112-125)

Hieroglyphics can be read left to right, right to left and also vertically.

The Egyptians created a quicker, abbreviated script, called “hieratic”. They had unlimited supply of papyrus reeds.

A *kherheb* was a magician. One made a seven-foot waxen crocodile come to life.

In the time of Snofru, the chief *kherheb* Zazamonkh folded a lake of water twelve cubits deep in the middle like a cloth

X) Labourers and Craftsmen (pp. 126-145)

Rekhmire was responsible for the great estates attached to the Temple of Amun. For hours he sat on a gilded seat while foreigners filed past, and scribes noted down tribute details: Cretans carried lapis-lazuli vases, blocks of silver, a gold dish, and a drinking cup of gold with an ibex’s head; Nubians brought ostrich eggs, ebony logs, gold bars, leopard skins, ivory masks, and giraffe skins.

The duties of a Vizier were to hear cases regarding Temp due deficits; all law cases; allow impost reductions; inspect water-supplies every ten days; and fit out ships.

Egyptian workmen bore out stone vases with a crank-operated stone or copper drill, weighted down to help with the bite.

Copper and tin were smelted in clay crucibles over hearths.

Huge rock blocks were jarred from their place by pounding with dolerite hammers, then wedges.

One strength alone does the job; harder or lighter blows have no effect.

At el-Barsha. 172 men are shown dragging a colossus.

Bronze saws could cut rock.

Egyptians used limestone, sandstone, granite (pink, grey, and black), and basalt.

Wooden wedges were driven in tightly, then soaked in water for ten hours to expand them.

A *seked* was a vertical height of one cubit.

Masons would dip a cord length in red paint, then stretch and slap against walls.

Some pyramid stone blocks weighed ten tons. At the Great Pyramid the mean joint thickness was 0.02 inches.

The only mechanical aids were the lever and roller; there were no pulleys. This is deduced by the lack of marks left by tongs of “lewises” used to grab blocks.

Stones were dragged on wooden sleds up the causeway. Ramps would lengthen.

A thick layer of mortar was said to have been used to reduce friction and push it neatly against its neighbour.

Egyptian ship hulls had no ribs, and seams were caulked with papyrus.

Native woods were sycamore, willow, tamarisk, persea, and siddar.

Coffins had halved, mitred and concealed mitre joints.

Nails were wooden pegs, or tiny gold ones rarely.

Tenon and mortise joints were used.

Cotton was unknown; all weaving was done with linen.

Panther skins were highly valued.

Rope was five inches thick on average and made from palm fibre.

The human mind is inclined to pantheism.

They did glasswork drawing rods around a cone.

Nubia was a rich source of gold.

Tutankhamun's coffin was solid gold and weighed 300lb.

XI) Magic and Medicine (pp. 146-154)

Some Egyptian skulls show evidence of trepanning and post-operation healing by knitted bone.

The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (c 1500 BC) is one of the oldest books on surgery.

The Egyptians were unaware of blood circulation and only had one word for muscles, arteries and veins. They thought the heart was the seat of intelligence and emotions, attaching little importance to the brain.

Physician and magician were often one and the same; where an illness' cause was unknown, it was attributed to evil spirits.

The bilharzia worm which uses a snail vector affects up to 14% of Egyptians today.

Gold wires were used to tie loose teeth together.

XII) Buying and Selling (pp. 155-161)

No coins were exchanged and all trading was by barter.

The King was the greatest landowner.

A spiral of copper wire, the *uten*, was a measure of value in the New Empire. One ox cost 119 uten.

Somaliland was the Land of Punt; too far for the Egyptians to reach. Nubia was a rich source of Negro prisoners, whose hands were manacled. Also, ivory, ebony, gold, precious stones, ostrich feathers (for fans), monkeys, panthers, and giraffes were taken.

Incense trees were imported into Egypt.

Semitic girls were often bought or stolen.

XIII) The People's Pharaoh (pp. 162-170)

The Pharaoh's crook represented Upper Egypt, the flail Lower Egypt. The first Pharaohs first reigned as long as was physically possible, but afterwards he was probably sacrificed.

The King was seen as the son of Amun-Re himself; he never died, rather, "went to his horizon".

Priests wore a hawk's mask to impersonate Horus.

XIV) House of Eternity (pp. 171-181)

Embalmmment and mummification took seventy days: first the brains were drawn out through the nostrils with an iron hook. The flank was then cut with a sharp stone and the entrails removed. The body was filled with pure myrrh and cassia and sown up. Lastly, it was soaked in natron [a mixture of sodium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate, and sodium chloride].

XV) Fact or Fiction? (pp. 182-186)

Killing slaves and servants of royalty to accompany them in tombs was abandoned early in Egyptian history; they were substituted by *shawabti* statuettes.