

Douglas J. Brewer, *The Archaeology of Ancient Egypt: Beyond Pharaohs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii + 200, 75 illustrations, 6 tables. ISBN 978-0-521-88091-6 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-521-70734-3 (paperback)

There seems to be an unbroken demand for introductions to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt given the long series of relevant books published over the last two decades. Brewer intends to fill a particular gap with his book. He aims to reconcile Egyptian Archaeology with archaeological methodology, indeed an underexplored field. The subtitle “Beyond Pharaohs” promises insights into a version of Ancient Egypt different from standard textbooks allegedly focussing on monumental tombs and temples. Building on his research on zooarchaeology, palaeoclimate, and Prehistoric Egypt the author illustrates archaeological approaches to Ancient Egypt from prehistory to the 2nd millennium BC foregrounding material culture such as flint implements, pottery, settlement archaeology, animal bones, and faunal remains. The book follows the accessible style of previous publications of the same author such as *Egypt and the Egyptians* (with Emily Teeter, 1999) and *Ancient Egypt: Foundations of a civilization* (2005) and is written, according to the preface, for undergraduate students who wish to understand the contribution archaeology can make to the study of Ancient Egypt.

Parts of the book are refreshing as they cover topics one would usually not expect in a beginners’ textbook, making it a valuable addition to historically framed alternatives, such as K. Bard’s *Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt* (2007). Originally, the author intended simply to describe core sites and artifacts of Egyptian Archaeology but decided after discussion with colleagues from Anthropology that the book should rather explain archaeological interpretation. The result is a series of chronologically arranged chapters each highlighting a methodological approach felt particularly relevant for the period. The individual thoughts are clearly presented. However, it is difficult to understand how the book coheres overall.

Chapter 1 familiarises the reader with a history of Egyptian Archaeology, some basics of archaeological theory, and analytical key terms such as “site”, “method”, “hypothesis”, and “theory”. The author argues that archaeology in Egypt is most useful where texts and monumental representations are absent. However, this is, to a certain extent, self-evident and, in the worst case, downplays the material dimension of culture that embraces all contexts of society and culture. The short review of archaeological theory is welcome, in principle, but is not used to frame the argument in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 2 to 5 cover the periods from Egyptian Prehistory to the late Predynastic in a way similar to overviews of other authors, e.g. in K. Bard’s (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (1999), I. Shaw’s (ed.) *Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (2000), and K. Bard’s *Introduction* (2007). Brewer discusses flint morphology for interpretation of the Palaeolithic, archaeological sample techniques for the Neolithic, pottery typology for the Naqada period, and stratigraphic analysis for the late Predynastic. The methods described are no doubt highly relevant for primary analysis. However, they afford a

deeper critique for a discussion of whether they still shape current archaeological debates of Egyptian prehistory.

Chapter 6 is entitled “The first great cycle: hypotheses and models” and comes as a welcome surprise for those who feared a traditional review of Old Kingdom royal tombs and court cemeteries. Instead, the author presents the archaeological evidence of different types of settlements at Giza, Kom el-Hisn, and Elephantine and explains hypothesis building and modelling as a tool to predict the location of undiscovered sites. He could have developed in greater detail the interesting question of how regional settlement patterns reflect the establishment and transformation of centralised structures in order for the reader to understand the relevance of settlement archaeology for modelling the rise and “collapse” of the centralised Old Kingdom which the chapter heading refers to.

In Chapter 7, the author reviews issues of geoarchaeology, zooarchaeology, and archaeobotany using evidence from different periods, however with little information on specific site contexts. The second part comments on skeletal remains and on regional and social variability of the material culture in the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom. The author wisely rejects the hypothesis that environmental change alone accounts for the “breakdown” of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Apart from the keyword “environment”, however, there is little in this chapter that brings the various lines of thought conclusively together.

Chapter 8 fits more loosely in the chronological framework. It explores through texts, rock art, and ethnoarchaeology nomadic lifestyles in the deserts across time, an enjoyable part of the book if text and illustrations only provided more context information.

Chapter 9 purports to go “From artifacts to culture: back to basics” but neither the understanding of “culture” (meaning? texts? religion?) nor “basics” (old style culture history? lower social groups? re-interpretation through re-excavation?) is explained. The author describes briefly the meaning of New Kingdom temples and then focuses on Amarna. He argues that misleading labels given by excavators to architectural features can be rectified through analysis of associated find material, i.e. Pendlebury’s “magazines” are in fact bakeries. He also claims that statistical comparison of animal bone assemblages per house can easily run the risk of producing a wrong picture of social reality if commonsensical interpretation is not tested against statistical methods such as ranked order correlation. He concludes that the combination of archaeology, art history, and philology helps recreate a fuller picture of life in Amarna, thus underlines the overlapping rather than divergent dynamics of different types of data, but does not offer a fresh perspective on Amarna on the basis of the methods outlined.

The final chapter 10 is a sweet plea for cross-disciplinary research to understand the multi-faceted transformation of human experience across time.

On a technical level, some of the author’s photos are of a rather poor quality, for example fig. 4.14 and 4.18. As little if any information is given in the captions about exact location of landscapes and provenance of objects, the relevance of archaeological context is obscured, an annoying shortcoming for a book on the

Archaeology of Egypt. The “references” at the end of the book are, with a few exceptions, not being referred to in the text. In order for the reader to use them more efficiently, it might have been beneficial to arrange them chapter-wise or thematically.

The author showcases the diversity of archaeological research designs and seeks to combine historical and scientific approaches. Undergraduate students will appreciate finding explanation of the methodological reasoning behind interpretation. It is less clear, however, how relevant for wider syntheses the methods and sites described are and how methodology is underpinned by theoretical assumptions. Egypt is, almost accidentally, used as a case-study. The lack of details on archaeological contexts makes the reader feel somehow that dummies rather than real data are being discussed. The range of topics covered in the various periods is highly selective and the book is not representative of the archaeological record of Ancient Egypt. Funerary archaeology, one of the richest areas of Egyptian Archaeology, is almost entirely excluded from analysis. Perhaps this critique assumes too much that the book is primarily about Egypt and social dimensions of archaeology as the title suggests. However, B. Kemp’s *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization* (1989/2006) will remain the standard reference here. But when Brewer’s book is read as a loosely tied introduction to thoughts on methods and archaeological phenomena in Egypt, it can provide a basis for stimulating discussion in class and should be recommended to students.

RICHARD BUSSMANN
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON, UK