

W.H. Peck, *The Material World of Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii +214. ISBN 9780521713795. Price £18.99.

Every year a plethora of general books about Ancient Egypt are published and one might be forgiven for thinking that this one is just another general summary. However, this is not so, the book is rather different in its approach to its subject and should be welcomed as a contribution toward securing Egyptology within its broader archaeological context.

The Material World of Ancient Egypt comprises 16 chapters, all of them quite short and the first two of which might be regarded as standard introductory fare – the geography and geology of the land and a brief history of Egypt. However, care is taken in the first chapter to stress the importance of geology since this will have a bearing on the subsequent materials chapters. Unfortunately there is, however, no map either physical or geological and both would be welcome in a book such as this. The history chapter, though brief, gives the kind of overview which students new to the subject will welcome and which is easily accessed by readers who want to refer back to it later. What is lacking, however, is a chronological table assigning kings to dynasties and dynasties to broad periods. Some of the dates are given in the chapter sub-headings but a table would make the work much more useful.

However, the main purpose of the book is not to introduce Egyptian geography and history but rather to look at Egyptian material culture in terms of its raw materials and technologies as well as its contexts of use and in this it succeeds. The third chapter of the book outlines the background to the study of the material world of ancient Egypt. By necessity it provides something of an overview of the history of exploration of the country but some emphasis is put on the recording and understanding of material culture. This could have been made a little more explicit, but it provides a useful background nonetheless.

The subsequent chapters deal with a whole range of aspects of material culture, dress and adornment, houses and furniture, food and drink, hygiene and medicine, containers, tools and weapons, basketry, rope and matting, faience and glass, transport, sport and games, music and dance and lastly weapons and armour. This arrangement of its subject matter means that some chapters deal with a whole range of different materials – for example, tools and weapons or transport, whilst others such as faience and glass focus on specific materials. This difference in approach does not detract from the value of the chapters, each of which provides an interesting overview of each of the topics concerned.

The treatment of technology is generally very good, something which is not easily achieved in a book of this length. There are one or two areas where some ambiguity exists, for example in Chapter 8, dealing with containers, where the coming into use of the “potter’s turntable” (p.129) is discussed. This is a confusing term and research in the 1990s by Catherine Powell (1995) showed that the New Kingdom “turntables” were used as true potter’s wheels. More recently doctoral research by Sarah Doherty has demonstrated that this was equally true of the Old Kingdom devices (for summary, see Doherty, in press 2014). We should generally regard the turntables as

potter's wheels and their products as wheel thrown rather than "turned" (except for the specific operation of removing surplus clay once leather hard which is the potter's meaning of the word). For the most part, however, students will find this a very useful and reliable introduction to a range of technologies and the material culture which resulted from them.

The concluding chapter is followed by a useful list of the sources used for the ancient quotations given at the start of each chapter and by a bibliography. The bibliography covers the range of topics well but most of the works cited are before 2005, the most recent item being 2011. This means that some useful works such as Veldmeier's (2010) book on Tutankhamun's footwear (2011), Rehren and Pusch's various publications (e.g. 2005) on materials from Qantir, Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood's book on textiles (2001) and some useful publications by Shaw (e.g. 2010) on aspects of the military are omitted. There are frequent references to the various chapters contributed to *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Nicholson and Shaw 2000) which contain extensive bibliography (although only to 2000).

The book is well illustrated, although figure 3 and figure 5 are essentially the same view but one taken from the west bank of the Nile, the other from midstream. One of these would have been sufficient. In fact my main criticism of the book as a whole is over the illustrations – the publishers should have produced them in colour. Many of the artefacts illustrated are highly coloured and it was their colour which, in many cases, led to their status (for example, glass and faience as artificial semi-precious stones). By rendering them in monochrome their significance within Egyptian culture is sometimes reduced. Similarly, the artefact images are reproduced without a scale bar, which is acceptable if dimensions are given in the caption but here they are not.

Overall, this is a book which will be much appreciated by first-year undergraduate students, and by those who teach them, as well as by general readers. I would like to have seen in-text references, or endnotes, for specific points made in the text so that students can find the relevant literature easily. The chapters are accompanied by a short list of further reading providing pointers for those who want to look at topics in greater depth but identifying the source of specific points is more difficult. The chapters have well-chosen examples and manage, in a relatively short space, to give a good impression of the various aspects of material culture covered. Those wanting a short introduction to the artefacts, in the broadest sense of that term, of ancient Egypt will find this ideally suited to their needs and I will certainly be recommending it as reading for introductory classes.

References

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