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978-0-521-88091-6 - The Archaeology of Ancient Egypt: Beyond Pharaohs

Douglas J. Brewer

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Egyptologists, art historians, philologists, and anthropological archaeologists have long worked side by side in Egypt, but they often fail to understand one another's approaches. This book aims to introduce students to the archaeological side of the study of ancient Egypt and to bridge the gap between disciplines by explaining how archaeologists tackle a variety of problems. Douglas J. Brewer introduces the theoretical reasoning for each approach, as well as the methods and techniques applied to support it. This book is essential reading for any student considering further study of ancient Egypt.

Douglas J. Brewer is professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois. He is the author (with Emily Teeter) of *Egypt and the Egyptians*, as well as of numerous other books and articles on Egypt, covering topics from domestication to cultural change and the environment. He has more than thirty years of fieldwork experience in Egypt; currently he is researching the cultures and environment of Egypt's deserts.

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*TO MY WIFE ANN, AND THE BREWER AND PÉREZ FAMILIES,
THANK YOU*

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PREFACE

My original vision for this book was that it would be a review of archaeology's contribution to the study of ancient Egypt. The content was to be a simple enumeration of those sites and artifacts that in some profound way influenced our understanding of Egyptian culture. In my discussions with Egyptologists over the various sites to include, it became clear to me that there was a deep frustration with archaeologists, in particular those of us with an anthropological background. As one close friend and colleague said to me, "It is almost as if you archaeologists speak a different language." Obviously, we as archaeologists have done a poor job in explaining our position and goals to our Egyptology colleagues, even when they have worked literally side by side with us in a mosquito-infested excavation pit.

I for one have asked many questions of my Egyptology friends, and they have patiently answered them, and by extending that courtesy have allowed me to have a deeper appreciation and understanding of ancient Egypt. It struck me that perhaps I have not returned the favor. How could my Egyptology-oriented friends be expected to teach archaeology, its methods, and goals to their students, without some support from me (us)? I certainly could not teach subjects in Egyptology without strong support and guidance from them.

I thus changed the focus of the book – away from sites and lists of artifacts to the discipline of archaeology and the method, theory, and techniques commonly applied to retrieve and interpret those artifacts – the idea being that a good Egyptologist, professional or student, will already know the sites and what was found there (or could easily look it up), but might need help in understanding the reasoning behind a particular archaeological question or approach to the data. This difference revolves around the distinctive paradigms followed by the respective fields; that is, whereas the Egyptologist is looking for historical facts, the archaeologist is trying to view a process through time, which requires a different approach – one often not realized by those following a history-bound paradigm (and vice versa). To use an analogy, if a child has misbehaved, one approach would be to look at what that misstep was

and how it might be corrected. A different approach might be to look at the long-term path that led to the misbehavior to try and understand why it came to be in the first place. Although the child is the subject of both inquiries, very different approaches and types of data are required to answer the respective questions. Both approaches are certainly valid, and both may solve the immediate problem, but the paths taken are different. So in this text, my goal is to try and explain to students how the archaeological approach (particularly anthropological archaeology) differs from the more historical, Egyptological approach. Thus, the chapters introduce some of the theoretical reasoning for a given approach, as well as the methods and techniques applied to support that approach. Although a number of topics might seem rudimentary to some of my Egyptology colleagues, to others they may not. I am reminded of a statement made by a reviewer of an earlier work of mine, who questioned the need for a chapter on the Nile Valley's environment when discussing Egyptian culture, something this reviewer clearly felt was superfluous. To me, an archaeologist, this was an incredible statement. How could I discuss a culture and its evolution without knowledge of the environment within which it had evolved?

The greatest difficulty in completing this work was to find a series of sites that through a natural progression in time and subject matter would adequately tell the archaeological story. In some instances, this was easy, and in others, it was something of a stretch, but my hope is that the message, the manner in which we as archaeologists approach a problem, has transcended my choice of sites as well as their place in time.

For seasoned Egyptologists who are reading this text for some enlightenment, I do hope you find something here of interest, but the book was not written specifically for you. I envision the audience to be undergraduate students who have already taken an introductory Egyptology course and now need to think about what direction they might want to pursue next: philology, art history, or archaeology, which, of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. My hope is that this text might serve as that next step: introducing the student to the archaeological side of the study of ancient Egypt. Ultimately, it would be nice to see this work as part of a trilogy, with an introductory art history and philology text bundled together to assist the interested neophyte at the beginning of his or her scholarly journey.

As is traditional of such books, I have refrained as much as possible from incorporating citations within the text in the hope of making it an easier read for the intended audience. The references on which I have so heavily depended are listed at the end of the text. Although a seemingly simple book,

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I am surprised at how long it took me to write it. Throughout the course of this endeavor, there have been many to whom I owe thanks. Beatrice Rehl deserves special thanks for her numerous pep talks and for keeping me focused on the project, especially after I tossed the third completed draft in the trash, vowing never to return to it. Thanks go, too, to Robert Wenke for the innumerable discussions we have had on archaeology throughout the many years of our partnership, which more often than not occurred while we were sitting in a dusty, hot, and miserably uncomfortable vehicle riding to or from our excavation site. Emily Teeter, Donald Redford, Ron Leprohon, Edwin Brock, and a host of other Egyptologists deserve thanks for their frank discussion of archaeology and archaeologists. Finally, a thank you to the National Geographic Society, the Bioanthropology Foundation, and the University of Illinois Research Board, for funding many seasons of fieldwork, with a special thanks to the university for honoring me with a Beckman Award, which allowed me the opportunity to study the Bedouin and to record the ancient rock art in the Eastern Desert.