INTRODUCTION

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Egyptology Today

Richard H. Wilkinson

The civilization of ancient Egypt was one of the greatest of the past, often inspiring awe and respect in other ancient societies such as those of the Greeks and Romans, whose cultures were themselves highly developed for their time. Today, ancient Egypt still continues to fascinate us through its many achievements. Depictions of the pyramids, temples, obelisks, colossi, and tombs of the Nile Valley are recognized by people around the world and Egyptology – the study of all aspects of ancient Egypt – has developed into a focused and thriving branch of our study of the past.

BEYOND TUTANKHAMUN AND INDIANA JONES

Probably no other area of historical study has been so typecast in the popular image it has developed, however. It is undeniable that both extraordinary real events such as the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun and fictional figures such as Hollywood's adventurer-archaeologist Indiana Jones have colored popular perception of the study of ancient Egypt. Regardless of whether the events and figures entrenched in popular culture fit any part of Egyptology as it is actually practiced as a modern scientific discipline, a large percentage of the general public remains enamored of the very idea of the search for and study of tombs, temples, mummies, and priceless artifacts.

Nevertheless, and Hollywood creations aside, many people are fascinated by aspects of real Egyptology that go beyond treasures and discoveries, and exhibitions of Egyptian art, studies of the ancient culture's kings and queens, and efforts to record, save, or restore its threatened monuments all attract genuine interest. A fairly constant flow of television

documentaries (the poor, but often more honest, relatives of Hollywood movies) dealing with such subjects attests to this fact.

Despite the great popularity of Egyptology and the wealth of books on ancient Egypt in the popular press, however, until the present volume there has been no single-volume introduction covering the present state of Egyptology as a modern field of study. This book fills that need by showing what Egyptology actually is as a modern discipline – what it does, what it knows, and where it is going or trying to go. It is an introduction to Egyptology written by practicing Egyptologists – all of whom have different careers and interests, backgrounds, training, and types of experience in the field, yet who share common goals.

BEYOND SPECIALIZATION

In the formative period of Egyptology, beginning with the early nineteenth century decipherment of the hieroglyphic script, most Egyptologists functioned like today's medical general practitioners – knowing something about everything in their field – even if they had some particular interest in art, history, archaeology, language, or some combination of these subjects. In a second stage of the discipline's history, especially in the early twentieth century, increasing specialization often resulted in scholars who knew and worked with only a narrow slice of this immensely broad field, which, it must be remembered, has as its subject virtually every aspect of a whole civilization over thousands of years. Whether concentrating on linguistic, historical, art historical, or archaeological aspects, these scholars sometimes had relatively little interaction with colleagues in other areas of the field. In recent years the stress on this kind of deep knowledge of some narrow aspect of Egyptology has been mitigated to some extent because of the realities of the job market and also the needs of the discipline itself.

Today, it is not uncommon to find Egyptologists who have broader training or who possess specific knowledge in related areas such as archaeology and geology, art history and conservation, or history and social sciences. This broader yet not entirely unspecialized training has also been enhanced by an increasing stress on interdisciplinary approaches and by cooperation in the everyday practice of Egyptology – whether on dig sites, in laboratories, or in museum galleries. This ever-increasing trend toward cooperation between Egyptologists and other specialists – both within the field and from related disciplines – has had a significant impact on Egyptology. It is seen, for example, in the fact that the archaeological excavation of an ancient site that does not utilize specialists when and where they are needed now draws immediate and justifiable criticism *within* the field. Egyptology is no longer a gentleman's pastime or the realm of the lone adventurer, as it may have been for many in its early years. The field has changed considerably as a discipline – not only in the last century, or the last thirty years, but it has also made some great advances in the application of modern techniques and approaches in even the last decade. Today's Egyptology demands a much wider level of scholarly interaction and cooperation, and while

it may not yet be perfect in this regard, this stress on interaction or the avowed need for it may be seen in every one of the following chapters.

Egyptology Today

The chapters of this book have been organized into four themes, each of which looks at modern Egyptology not only as a distinct discipline but also as one that interacts with many other areas of knowledge.

Part I, "Approaches: Paths to the Ancient Past," examines some of Egyptology's major lines of evidence in terms of the relationships between the modern discipline and the underlying fields of archaeology, history, and science. Despite its specific geographic and chronological focus, Egyptology remains a part of these broader areas of knowledge, or implements them in its goal of discovering and interpreting ancient Egypt. So the discipline is perhaps best understood by first considering its relationship with these three larger fields of study. Other areas of humanistic study or social and physical sciences could certainly also be said to provide "paths to the past" for Egyptology, but many of these areas are considered in the following chapters in the contexts of their specific areas of application.

Part II, "Monuments: Structures for This Life and the Next," looks at the most visible remains of Egyptian civilization and how Egyptologists approach them. By surveying the manner in which pyramids, temples, tombs, palaces, dwellings, and other structures are now mapped, studied, documented, and conserved, this section covers a number of areas of the discipline, as well as looking at how Egyptology is approaching some of the very real problems that face some of its most important primary material – the monumental legacy of ancient Egypt.

Part III, "Art and Artifacts: Objects as Subject," continues the survey by examining Egyptology's study of smaller-scale objects – artifacts ranging from items of everyday life to some of the finest works of art (even though they may not have originally been viewed as art) produced in the ancient world. The chapters within this section deal with many issues regarding the analysis, handling, display, and conservation of this material evidence, as well as discussing questions of current importance, such as the worldwide trade in antiquities and aspects of their repatriation to Egypt.

Part IV, "Texts: The Words of Gods and Men," looks at a final area of primary evidence for ancient Egypt – the linguistic and literary. The first chapter deals with our current understanding of the Egyptian language and some of the recent approaches that have led to increased understanding of how it worked and of the ancient texts written in the hieroglyphic script. The second chapter covers the study of ancient Egypt's rich and amazingly varied literature, including the earliest examples of a number of literary genres, while the third chapter provides a focused examination of current study of the mythological and religious texts that represent an important aspect of ancient Egyptian civilization and an invaluable "window" into the ancient Egyptian's worldview.

Thus, the following chapters survey Egyptology as the fascinating discipline it is – a discipline incorporating the study of many types of evidence for one of the richest cultures to have developed in ancient history. The essays are not, however, merely paeans of accomplishment, but deal frankly, where necessary, with the ongoing growing pains of a discipline that, although two hundred years old, is still developing. These are the successes, challenges, motives, and materials of *Egyptology Today*.

PART I

METHODS

Paths to the Past

CHAPTER 1

ARCHAEOLOGY AND EGYPTOLOGY

Kent R. Weeks

Around 1250 BC, the High Priest of Ptah at Memphis, Khaemwese, fourth-born son of Ramesses II, cleared and repaired nearly a dozen pyramids and temples at Giza and Saqqara. Even in his day, they were ruins over a thousand years old, and he restored them, he said, because he "so greatly loved antiquity" that he could not bear to see them "falling into decay." Modern scholars have called Khaemwese the world's first archaeologist. Certainly, he was an enthusiastic supporter of archaeological preservation: he believed that by protecting religious buildings he honored Egypt's ancestors and ensured that contemporary religious practices would remain true to older – and therefore purer – forms of worship.[1]

Unfortunately, protecting ancient monuments has rarely been most people's goal: from antiquity onward, most saw them as buildings to be ignored or plundered. If a monument was accessible, it probably served as a village quarry, its stone blocks used to make new buildings, its crumbling brick walls used to fertilize fields. Nearby tombs were used as animal pens or storerooms. Even more detrimental, ancient sites were seen as treasure chests. Since antiquity, people knew that tombs and temples contained riches, including valuable herbs and spices, *objêts d'art*, expensive woods and cloth, papyri, and, best of all, gold. Stories of their great riches had become so common that by the eighth century AD, handbooks excitedly (and fictitiously) described how men became wealthy by robbing sites, even telling readers which sites to dig.[2]

And dig they did, even in remote corners of the country. For twenty-five centuries, until the twentieth century AD, the monuments of ancient Egypt were plundered, their treasures melted down, hacked apart, ground up, carted away, and sold. Few people showed any interest in recording or protecting antiquities.

One of the few who seemed to care was Al-Idrisi, an Arab scholar in the thirteenth century AD who published detailed descriptions of monuments at Giza. He measured their

stones (and noticed that some were reused in later structures), described the clay plaster on their walls (he identified its composition and source), and analyzed the debris that buried their walls (he was one of the first to trace the stratigraphic history of an ancient site). Al-Idrisi also offered theories about the monument's functions. It would be many centuries before Europeans published comparable studies.[3]

There were several reasons for the lag in Europe's Egyptological scholarship. First, few Europeans read Arabic, and sources such as Al-Idrisi were unknown on the continent. Second, before the decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822, the only readily available information on Egypt came from Biblical commentaries and classical writers. Classical visitors to Egypt, including Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Horapollo, and Pliny the Elder, described some of the things they saw on visits to Alexandria and, occasionally, up the Nile beyond Giza and Memphis, but their descriptions were cursory and often fanciful. Postclassical travelers were interested in how Egypt might shed light on the Bible, not in Egypt itself, and that emphasis skewed what they wrote about and how they explained it. Third, until the seventeenth century, few Europeans visited Egypt. The only monuments they saw firsthand were the few obelisks carted back to Europe by the Romans.[4]

But, in spite of these limitations, stories about Egypt by European travelers were growing increasingly popular, and writers who had never been to Egypt simply invented tales that would sell books. They claimed to have seen one-headed, one-legged beings in the desert behind the pyramids and argued that Egyptians were semi-divine geniuses, intermediate between men and gods. They proclaimed that Egyptian culture was more advanced than anything Europe had ever produced, and that its science, engineering, art, and architecture reached levels ordinary mortals would never again achieve.

Egypt's natural environment was no less wondrous than the cultural. Writers reported frogs spontaneously generating in the black silts of the Nile Valley and told of women who had become pregnant simply by drinking the Nile's water. Egypt, they believed, was the Garden of Eden – literally, the most perfect place on earth.[5]

Accurate or not, such stories gained wide popularity in Europe, and people's appetite for things Egyptian was further whetted by the growth of museum collections in the eighteenth century. Thousands were now able to see Egyptian objects, and what they saw – mummies, statues with human bodies and animal heads, indecipherable hieroglyphs – seemed to confirm even the wildest ideas. Egyptology would not become an academic discipline until the nineteenth century, but by the 1600s and 1700s, ancient Egypt occupied a prominent place in the European imagination – romanticized, adored, imitated, and exaggerated. These early fantasies about Egypt had long-lasting consequences for its study. For example, many respected historians argued that, although all other ancient civilizations developed along similar paths, Egypt was an exception to the rules and should be excluded from any cross-cultural studies. (Arnold Toynbee argued this case in his famous *A Study of History*.) Such ideas delayed our understanding of how Egyptian civilization arose and prolonged the idea that it had appeared full-grown in the Nile Valley, with no indigenous antecedents.

The basis for such views began to change after the decipherment of hieroglyphics by Champollion in 1822, but only slowly. European scholars now clamored for accurate copies of hieroglyphic texts, and epigraphic expeditions duly set out from Europe to record Egypt's monuments. Great projects, such as those of the French (resulting in the *Description de l'Egypte*), Carl Lepsius (the *Denkmäler aus Aegypten*), and John Gardner Wilkinson (*Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*), produced copies of texts and drawings of monuments, and offered interpretations on which much of nineteenth-century Egyptology was founded. Once hieroglyphic texts began to be translated and published, Europe's picture of Egypt began to be transformed. Accurate descriptions began to replace fanciful ones, and Egypt's culture was seen to have a human origin, not a semi-divine one. (See Sidebar 1.1 for some key contributors to the growth of Egyptology.)

These early epigraphic works are still of great value, because so many of the monuments they recorded are gone. Explorers sometimes carted away whole tombs and temple walls. Egyptian peasants, moreover, ransacked sites, searching for objects to sell to the increasing numbers of tourists. Poor excavation techniques also destroyed sites. Egyptian epigraphy and architectural history were improving their methods in the nineteenth century, but Egyptian archaeology was not. Even the most incompetent digs could produce treasure, and excavators still saw little to be gained by adopting more meticulous methods. Egyptian sites were archaeological cornucopias, they believed: there would always be more to find.

For example, in the 1830s, Howard Vyse was using gunpowder to locate the entrances of Giza pyramids and drilling holes in the body of the Sphinx to see if it was hollow. Excavators would hire hundreds of unsupervised workmen to clear sand from monuments. The sites they dug were usually stone temples or tombs, monuments known to have inscribed and decorated walls and fine-quality artifacts. Sites in the desert were preferred because they were easier to dig, less likely to have been plundered, and better preserved than sites in the wet mud of cultivated fields. An excavator might cursorily map a few stone walls during his work, but mud-brick walls were hacked away. Broken or undecorated objects were discarded, and only objects judged attractive enough for museum displays were saved. No record was made of where objects were found or of the features associated with them. Excavators published superficial information about their work, or they published nothing at all.

There were a few exceptions. In the 1850s, the Scotsman Alexander Henry Rhind dug in the Valley of the Kings and at Giza and meticulously recorded what he found, even describing fragments his colleagues would simply have thrown away. Rhind, who had dug early sites in Scotland before coming to Egypt, was one of the first to point out the dating potential of stratified deposits. He was one of the first to recognize the existence of a predynastic culture in Egypt, in several graves he cleared near Giza. He pleaded with his colleagues to leave ancient buildings intact and take away only copies of their inscriptions. He was also one of the first to urge that photography be used to record monuments, a practice that Maxime du Camp had begun in 1849. Finally, Rhind insisted that excavators should publish what they uncovered, promptly and completely. His pleas fell on deaf ears.[6]

SIDEBAR 1.1:

Fifteen Archaeologists Who Increased Our Knowledge of Egypt and Helped to Improve the Quality of Archaeological Research

(For bibliography, see Dawson and Uphill 1972.)

1. Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1772–1823). Italian, uncovered the entrance to the Giza pyramid of Chephren and the Valley of the Kings tomb of Seti I and made many other discoveries.
2. Auguste Ferdinand Mariette (1821–1881) – see text.
3. Alexander Henry Rhind (1833–1863) – see text.
4. Gaston Camille Maspero (1846–1916) – see text.
5. William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) – see text.
6. James Edward Quibell (1867–1935). British student of Petrie, excavated in the Valley of the Kings and extensively at Saqqara.
7. George Andrew Reisner (1867–1942) – see text.
8. Hermann Junker (1877–1962). German-Austrian priest, excavated various sites, including predynastic Merimde and, most importantly, Giza, where 15 years' work resulted in a masterful 12-volume study of its mastaba tombs.
9. Herbert Eustis Winlock (1884–1950). American, worked for the Metropolitan Museum of Art at several sites, especially the Deir el-Bahari cirque; considered one of the finest archaeologists of his day; his discoveries were among the century's most important.
10. Howard Carter (1873–1939). English discoverer of the tomb of Tutankhamun; meticulous record-keeper, artist.
11. Selim Hassan (1886–1961). First Egyptian professor of Egyptology at Cairo University; excavated at many sites, but best known for his work at Giza which he published in over 12 volumes.
12. Walter Bryan Emery (1903–1971). English, worked extensively in Nubia and in Early Dynastic remains at Saqqara.
13. Margaret Benson (1865–1916). The first woman to be granted a concession to dig in Egypt, at the Temple of Mut in the Karnak complex.
14. Gertrude Caton-Thompson (1888–1985). English archaeologist best known for her excavations of the prehistoric Fayum.
15. Jean-Philippe Lauer (1902–2001). French archaeologist and architect who for over 70 years dug and studied Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom remains at Saqqara.

Despite these efforts, it was another man (whose atrociously bad digging techniques destroyed as much evidence as they recovered) who was responsible for changes that eventually brought an end to the destructive archaeological practices that Rhind railed against. August Mariette, a young assistant at the Louvre in Paris, had been sent to Egypt to purchase Coptic manuscripts, but instead used his grant money to excavate at Saqqara, uncovering there the great labyrinthine burial place of sacred Apis bulls called the Serapaeum. This highly publicized discovery was followed by others at Thebes, Abydos, Edfou, and dozen of other sites. By 1858, Mariette's reputation as an Egyptologist was unequalled, and the ruler

of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, appointed him Conservator of Egyptian Monuments, forerunner of the Supreme Council for Antiquities. Indeed, one of Mariette's first acts was to establish the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

At his death in 1881, Mariette was succeeded as Conservator by another Frenchman, Gaston Maspero, a professor of Egyptology who had come to Egypt in 1880. He served until 1886 and again from 1899 until 1914. Maspero made several important archaeological finds, among them the cache of royal mummies at Dayr el-Bahari and several major buildings at the great site of Karnak. But his reputation today rests principally on three other accomplishments. He founded the great *Catalogue générale* of the Egyptian Museum, a catalog that has grown to over eighty volumes and is still in progress, and he established a journal, the *Annales du Service des Antiquitiés de l'Egypte*, which is still the official record of Egyptian archaeological work. Third, Maspero and Mariette together took the first effective steps to stop the looting and protect archaeological sites in Egypt by establishing new rules for excavations and clamping down on thievery.[7]

It was also in the 1880s that an Englishman changed forever the way archaeological work in Egypt was carried out. William Matthew Flinders Petrie had come to Egypt as a young man to survey the Great Pyramid and prove correct a theory about its measurements that his father had supported. Instead, his precise work proved the theory wrong, and the meticulous report he published so impressed Amelia Edwards, founder of Britain's recently established Egypt Exploration Fund, that she offered to support his future work.

Petrie was self-taught, and he came to have very precise ideas about how best to conduct archaeological excavations and analyze their data (see Fig. 1.1). Compared to other excavations at the time, his work was so detailed that his colleagues dismissed it as a waste of time and money. Unlike his contemporaries, who still saved only museum-quality finds and rarely published their data, Petrie argued that even broken and uninscribed objects should be preserved for analysis, the context in which objects were found should be recorded, and sites should be mapped and photographed. He trained his workmen, developing a permanent staff that he employed for decades, rewarding good excavation technique with money and praise. Over nearly six decades, Petrie excavated and published more important archaeological discoveries than any archaeologist before or since. He worked at major sites, such as Giza and Thebes, but he also excavated minor cemeteries and mud-brick hovels – the kinds of sites other excavators had ignored because they were difficult to dig and considered unimportant.

Petrie's work was revolutionary. Although few of his colleagues adopted his methods, his students did, and future Egyptology benefited. Petrie showed that archaeological data could be every bit as informative as hieroglyphic texts. He showed the value of noting the archaeological context of finds; this would later lead to the use of grids and squares to divide a site into well-controlled excavation units. He was aware of the importance of stratigraphy as a chronological tool; by methodically tracking architectural details of badly preserved remains, he explained how royal tomb architecture had evolved in earliest Egypt. He developed a brilliant system for tracing the chronology of tombs and their contents