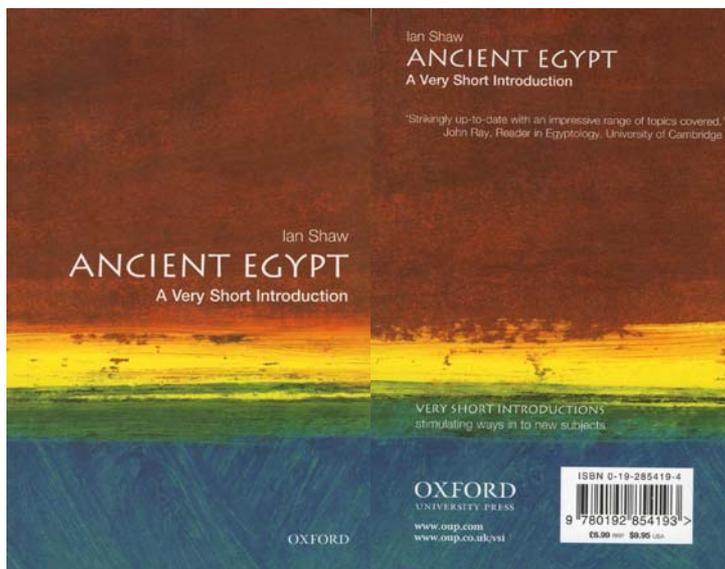


Shaw, I. 2004. Ancient Egypt. A very short introduction. – Oxford, Oxford University Press

Book review¹ by K.M. Cooney



This small volume discusses the context of Egyptological research, methodologies, the possible biases of its researchers, the strengths and weaknesses of the field of Egyptology, and the newest theories on particular topical issues. This book is not the expected narrative discussion of ancient Egyptian history and culture; instead it is a provocative introduction to the field of Egyptology. In fact, I think the book is actually mis-titled. It would be more appropriately called 'Egyptology. A very short introduction'. This quibble does not take away from the excellent prose and the important questions raised by the author Ian Shaw, but it does bring up the question of the book's audience. Shaw seems quite aware of this dilemma, and instead of the standard exhaustive approach seen in semi-popular books on ancient Egypt, he instead raises distinct but important key issues in the field of Egyptology, which he follows with case study discussions. This structure allows both the beginner as well as the established Egyptologist to be engaged in his examinations.

In chapter 1 'The story so far', Shaw introduces his discussion with the Narmer Palette, an object that he follows throughout the book to anchor his text and ideas. Here, the Narmer Palette illustrates the nature of the evidence with which Egyptologists grapple, effectively conveying that ancient studies are not always based on hard facts, as many assume, but on interpretation and re-interpretation. His examination of various scholarly readings of the palette is careful and even handed. Most of this chapter includes a historiographic discussion of ancient Egypt, beginning with Greek and Roman researchers and travellers, moving on to Egypt's links to Biblical literature and narratives, and ending with European discoverers, travellers, treasure hunters, and scholars. He criticises the 'clearance' archaeology of the 19th and 20th centuries, while praising the innovative archaeological techniques of Flinders Petrie and George Reisner. Shaw notes that Egyptology is only rarely mentioned in Bruce Trigger's 'History of archaeological thought', a testament to the field's lack of interest in theoretical and methodological innovation. Shaw (p. 26) provides the explanation that "While mainstream archaeologists such as Lewis Binford, Colin Renfrew, and Michael Schiffer were expanding the theoretical basis of archaeology, most Egyptologists were still preoccupied with the business of pure data-gathering and history-writing." Shaw therefore provides a very archaeological answer: Egypt suffers from an abundance of data, and the processing of this data inhibits the theorising found in other archaeological fields.

In chapter 2 'Discovering and inventing: constructing ancient Egypt', Shaw again returns to the Narmer palette to illustrate how some scholars may have over-interpreted limited evidence. He discusses the problems of dealing with objects that have not been well-excavated, such as this greywacke palette found by Quibbel and Green (1900-1902). In this chapter, he also provides two case studies of finds that have broken new ground in Egyptology: the Tell el-Dab'a frescoes and the Amarna letters. Both bring Egypt into a larger geographic and cultural context, Tell el-Dab'a linking Egypt to Minoan society and the Amarna letters providing a glimpse of diplomacy in a broad Near Eastern elite society. Using these particular case studies, Shaw stresses that Egyptology cannot isolate itself from its broader African, Mediterranean, and Ancient Near Eastern context. He urges constant re-assessment and reinterpretation, using the Elephantine scrolls, originally thought to be

¹ Second version, updated 1 July 2005.

Phoenician, and Petrie's 'New race' theory, now considered absurd, as examples. The last part of this chapter deals with Egyptology's use of scientific methods, including DNA analysis, prospecting technologies, geology, and ceramology, encouraging more specialisation and multi-disciplinary team-work in the field. One criticism: Shaw states that Tutankhamun's tomb has not brought much to Egyptological scholarship, except to place the field more squarely in the public spotlight. However, this statement discounts vital new information about artistic style, craft production, workshops, and the stocking of this New Kingdom royal tomb, the only royal tomb from the New Kingdom to have been found semi-intact to date.

Shaw opens his discussion of ancient Egyptian history with another look at the Narmer palette in chapter 3 'History: building chronologies and writing histories.' Using Predynastic material, he pits older diffusion theories against newer notions of indigenous development. Shaw argues that the history of ancient Egypt written by scholars is coloured by "modern concepts and categories that would often have no real meaning or relevance to the ancient writers (p. 56)." The Egyptians had a completely different agenda when writing their own history, which Shaw demonstrates very effectively through examination of various king lists as well as Manetho's much later history. He also urges the inclusion of archaeological data and cultural history into our Egyptological discussions, arguing that cultural change is not synonymous with political change. He includes a case study of the Qasr el-Sagha temple and a discussion of how one dates features and artifacts. He then continues with other dating techniques, including ceramology, thermoluminescence, and artifact seriation. However, given that this chapter does deal with the *writing* of history, it lacks a case study of ancient textual excerpts and how those ancient texts have been interpreted in various ways by Egyptologists.

Shaw (79-80) clearly establishes his own archaeological bias and mistrust of textual data in chapter 4 'Writing: the origins and implications of hieroglyphs': "In Egyptian archaeology, as in other historical disciplines, the written word, with all its potential for subjectivity and persuasion, has a paradoxical tendency to obscure – and sometimes even eclipse – the archaeological evidence." In this chapter, Shaw returns to the Narmer Palette and discusses possible interpretations of early writing systems and the first evidence for writing in the ancient Near East. Shaw tells us more about what early writing *cannot* tell us than what it *can*, rightly encouraging specialists of early Egypt to be careful with their limited data. Lacking, however, is a discussion of how text, image, and object *can* be balanced parts of a research project. While he does include David O'Connor's quote that text and archaeology are complementary data sets (p. 81), Shaw does not include a case study or scholarly example of text analysis and re-interpretation, in conjunction with archaeological materials.

In his chapter 5 'Kingship: stereotyping and the 'oriental despot'', Shaw first approaches the historiographic problems of 'kingship' in the field of Egyptology. He uses examples, such as the perceived athleticism of Amenhotep II, various biases for or against the female king Hatshepsut, and finally the despotic image of Ramses II, to illustrate his point that even well-trained Egyptologists have preconceived notions that come through in their research. Shaw effectively examines the main core of Egyptian kingship, while framing it within a historiographic discussion of Egyptological scholarship.

Shaw is not afraid to bring up the most delicate of subjects in chapter 6 'Identity: issues of ethnicity, race, and gender'. Starting with a discussion of ethnic identity as seen on the Narmer Palette, he moves on to an invigorating discussion of Afrocentrist views of ancient Egyptian Blackness, as well as Martin Bernal's (1987-1991) charge that white Europeans appropriated ancient Egyptian culture. He dissects Egyptologists' views of ancient Egyptian gender roles and stereotypes. Given that most Egyptologists are usually "white European or North African male academics" (p. 107), "they also seem to have had problems working with the more sexualized aspects of ancient Egyptian religion, or 'phallocentrism', as Shaw puts it. Shaw believes that new research is finally bringing more balance to what used to be a male dominated, Christian, and straight-laced field. Egyptology now includes many non-Christian or female researchers and is now examining the overlooked female, child, and the sexual context of which they were a part.

Chapter 7 'Death: mummification, dismemberment, and the cult of Osiris' begins with a discussion of Predynastic and Protodynastic royal burials at Abydos. After a discussion of the Osiris mythology and ritual, Shaw qualifies John Wilson's phrase 'democratization of the afterlife', interpreting the trend not as a disintegration of belief in kingship, but rather as flattery through imitation. After a brief discussion of Egyptian views towards death as 'a scattergun technique' that includes both material and spiritual preparation, he moves on to a discussion of mummification. Shaw ends this dialogue by looking at our own modern fascination with Egyptian death rites, in literature, cinema, and even through the fabrication of a kind of urban legend: the curse of the mummy. One of the great strengths of Shaw's book is that it consistently weaves together the ancient world and our modern perceptions thereof, constantly reminding the reader of modern cultural biases and the curiosities that drive us.

Shaw's chapter 8 'Religion: Egyptian gods and temples' begins with a discussion of religious elements on the Narmer palette and an examination of the origins of the ancient Egyptian religious system. This chapter suffers from a lack of close reading of ancient Egyptian religious text excerpts. Most of the examples are archaeological or architectural in nature. He briefly discusses the typical 'hetep di nesw' offering formula, but he

does not provide a viable full example in textual and spatial context. An excerpt is included from the autobiography of Ankhthifi to illustrate Egyptian morality, but in his brief comparative discussion of instruction literature, Shaw includes no quotes from the pertinent ancient texts, making this a very difficult section for the beginning student to understand.

The final chapter 9 'Egyptomania: the recycling and reinventing of Egypt's icons and images' is one of the most necessary in the volume because it exhorts Egyptologists to examine how and why ancient Egypt is processed, dissected, and re-interpreted by both popular and minority elements in modern culture. Ancient Egypt is after all "public domain" (p. 138) these days: on television, in popular music, in popular literature and in blockbuster exhibitions. In a number of case studies, including pyramidology, Amarna hypothesising, racial pronouncements, and New Age theorising, Shaw raises serious questions and problems, treating each 'alternative reality' not as fodder to be ridiculed and dismissed out of hand, but as interesting anthropological discussions of modern human interest in ancient Egypt tempered by minority values. The book concludes with a list of references cited throughout, literature for further reading, useful websites, a helpful glossary for the beginning enthusiast, a chronological timeline, and a thorough index.

One of the main problems with this small book, and certainly no fault of the author's, is the lack of photographs and line drawings. Often the author is forced to describe certain artistic pieces that are not pictured, such as a Protodynastic ivory label found at Abydos (p. 54-55), bogging down the discussion and the prose. The black and white photos that are printed are of low quality, problematic for some discussions that rely heavily on visual evidence. Another detractor is the uneven handling of all the specialisations of Egyptology. There is very little discussion of art historical sources or philological/epigraphic research. Instead Shaw's focus is archaeology. He does openly state on one of the last pages (p. 158) that the volume is "devoted mainly to the archaeology and history of ancient Egypt." Archaeology is the author's field of specialisation, and so perhaps he should be forgiven for including those case studies with which he himself was most familiar.

And yet, this book is not meant to be thorough, but provocative and illuminating. Shaw raises questions about the most prevalent problems and issues in the field of Egyptology. He also tries to place Egyptology in its modern context, as pop-cultural source material, as a touch point for racial identity questions, and as a focus on New Age theorising, all issues that Egyptology usually ignores out of hand in favour of the safe and often inaccessible walls of scholarship. Shaw should be greatly congratulated for stepping outside of our insulated academic world in the very attempt to explain Egyptology's perceived inaccessibility. This book should be read by every first year Egyptology graduate student.

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