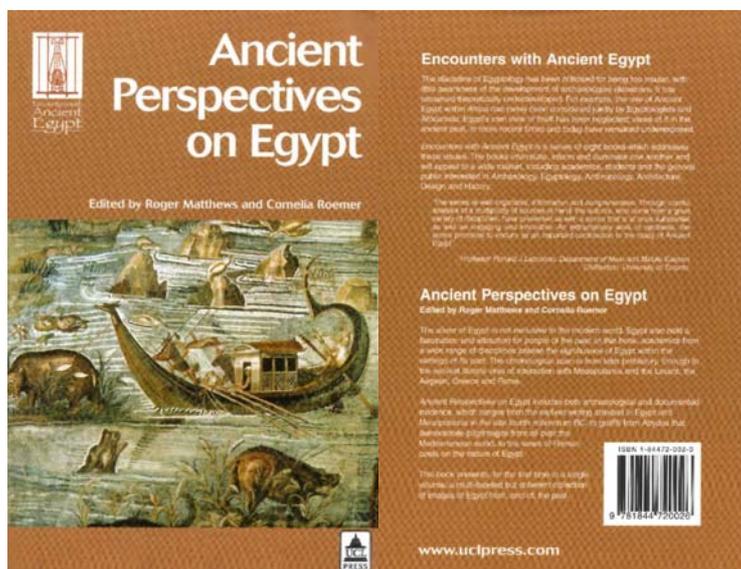


Matthews, R. & C. Roemer. Eds. 2003. Ancient perspectives on Egypt. – London, UCL Press (Encounters with ancient Egypt)

Book review by J. Dieleman



The volume ‘Ancient perspectives on Egypt’ is one of eight collections of essays that make up the University College of London series ‘Encounters with ancient Egypt’, named after the conference held in mid December 2000 at the Institute of Archaeology of UCL. The series is a multidisciplinary effort to come to terms with the various roles ancient Egypt has played as a neighbouring policy, object of study, or idea in antiquity and the modern world.

The twelve articles collected in the present volume are concerned with the way ancient Egypt was viewed by its neighbours in the eastern Mediterranean during the period between about 3500 BCE, when the Pharaonic state slowly began to take shape, and 300 CE, when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire. As the editors have to admit in their introduction (chapter 1), the book is somewhat unevenly balanced with respect to the subjects treated and the approaches adopted for studying these. The first part of the book, dealing with the eastern Mediterranean at large in the Bronze Age, shows a strong emphasis on archaeological analysis, whereas the remaining part of the book reveals a predilection for textual analysis, focussing on the Greco-Roman period. This imbalance is of course to a large extent due to the nature of the sources, but a study, for example, of the role Egypt plays in a number of the books of the Old Testament might have brought an interesting perspective, the aspect of cultural memory, to the articles treating the Bronze Age. As far as the second part is concerned, it is striking that the encounter between Jews and Egyptians in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman period is not given any attention.

The chapters 2-4 present useful analyses of archaeological sites in the Levant and the Aegean dating from the Bronze Age that have provided Egyptian material, especially in the form of ceramics and stone vessels. The articles bring together a large amount of material, made easily accessible in tables and charts, and give an impressive overview of the wide distribution of Egyptian wares, even at such an early age as the early Bronze Age. Whatever the exact function of the objects found may have been, diplomatic gifts, prestige goods, or ordinary storage vessels for trade wares, the articles demonstrate clearly the complexity of the international world of those days. Noteworthy, the question what the effect of this exchange of goods, or even ideas, may have been on the view of Egypt in the countries concerned, which is the topic of the book, is hardly addressed in the articles.

The next two articles discuss the relationships between Egypt and the Hittite empire (chapter 5) and Mesopotamia (chapter 6) in the late Bronze and Iron Age. The authors give an overview of the most important historical events by primarily taking recourse to historical and political documents, such as annals, letters and treaties. They have very little to say about the way these countries viewed Egypt as a political and cultural entity and how this perception might have had an effect on diplomatic relations and the decisions taken in international affairs. It might have been useful to take a closer look at the depiction of Egyptians in Assyrian reliefs or not only to read the annals as historical documents, but also to study them as ideological statements about foreigners and power relations. For example, in a book about ‘ancient perspectives’ one would surely expect a discussion of the famous Zincirli stele, which shows a large Esarhaddon keeping a small pharaoh Taharqa on the lead, which

goes through the pharaohs nose. And what about the Darius statue in Egyptian-Persian style that was found in Susa in 1972?

The next six chapters are concerned with the Greek and Roman world, starting with the question what the influence of Egyptian art might have been on the production of early Greek sculpture and monumental architecture, and ending with Roman-period Nile mosaics and the representation of Egypt in Latin poetry of the Late Republic and Early Principate. It must be said that all of the articles are very descriptive in nature without bringing much new material or insights to the fore. They can certainly be read as decent introductions to various aspects of the encounter between Egypt and the classical world, but they are certainly not representative of the many studies that have come out in recent years, dealing specifically with questions of cultural influence, acculturation, and strategies of representation in the complex interaction between Egypt, Greece and Rome. An exception to this critique is Ian Rutherford's analysis of the chronological and spatial distribution of the graffiti from the Memnonion in Abydos. The article not only assesses the ethnic diversity of the visitors to this temple, as recorded by the graffiti they left on the walls of the building, but also analyses the different clusters of graffiti as witnesses of changes in religious practice over time.

In conclusion, the book 'Ancient perspectives on Egypt' can benefit any student of international relations in the ancient world, who wants to be introduced to the Egyptian side of this intriguing field of research. However, scholars already working in this field will find less new insights in the articles.

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