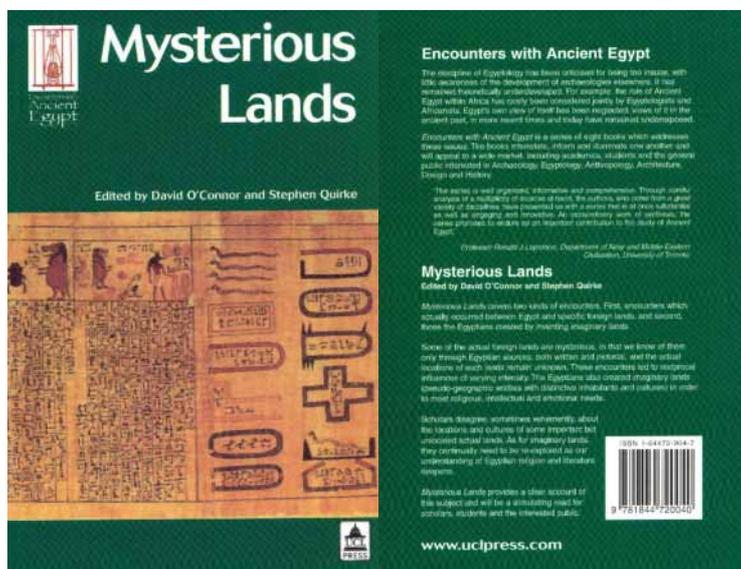


O'Connor, D. & S. Quirke. Eds. 2003. *Mysterious lands*. – London, UCL Press (*Encounters with ancient Egypt*)

Book review by J. Dieleman



The international conference ‘Encounters with Ancient Egypt’ held at University College London in mid December 2000 has resulted in an eight volumes publication with the same name, which deals broadly with questions of identity and the politics of representation and translation in both the ancient sources from Egypt as in modern scholarship and popular culture concerned with pharaonic Egypt. The series hopes to give an answer to the question “how far fascination and knowledge about Ancient Egypt have been based on sources of evidence rather than extraneous political or commercial concerns and interests” (series editor’s foreword). In a sense one could say that the series represents an attempt to combine a cultural studies perspective with a more traditional Egyptological approach: it is no longer solely the ancient artifact which is subjected to scholarly scrutiny but the scholar and his or her particular cultural background have become objects of study as well.

The present review is concerned with the collection of essays called “Mysterious Lands”. According to the introductory chapter, the papers are an attempt to “mapping the unknown in Ancient Egypt”. In this particular case, the word ‘unknown’ refers both to the lands that the ancient Egyptians considered unknown, secret, or forbidden to access (*sšḥ*) as well as to those lands that must have been a common reality for the ancient Egyptians, but which modern Egyptologists have so far not been able to identify securely. This either due to the lack or ambiguity of the archaeological and written sources at hand. The result of this endeavour is, on the one hand, a general inquiry into the imagined cosmography and geography of ancient Egyptian thought and, on the other hand, an assessment of the limits of our modern topographical knowledge of the ancient world. The general message that the book conveys throughout its eleven articles is that geography, referring either to an imagined or to a physical reality, should never be taken for granted by any external observer, but must be viewed in the light of the culture, societal layers and historical context from which the worldview derives and in which it functions. Any vision of the world, be it a visual or textual description of the cosmos, the underworld or real-life neighbouring countries, is the product of a dialectic between a culturally embedded perception of physical reality and the awareness of the describing subject that he or she occupies a specific place within this reality. Seen in this light, any attempt at ‘mapping the world’ is but the articulation of an ideology, which aims at offering its ‘reader’ a convincing, yet simplified model of reality. As a consequence, the particularities of any description of the world can only be meaningful and useful within a specific cultural and social setting. Each of the articles that make up this book deals with the issue one way or the other and demonstrates the difficulties in interpretation inherent in any cross-cultural encounter, be it ancient Egypt describing its neighbours or modern scholars describing ancient Egypt.

The book consists of eleven articles, the first and last of which provide a sophisticated discussion of the theoretical problems involved within a comparative framework. The remaining nine articles focus on one particular topic each. Chapters two and three are concerned with the question in what way and according to which categories the ancient Egyptian mind visualized the world. James P. Allen describes the Egyptian concept of the world through the lexicon and mythological imagery as contained in religious texts, starting with the Pyramid Texts and ending with the famous, though still highly enigmatic, depiction of the cosmos on the

sarcophagus lid of a certain Wereshnefer, dating to the early Ptolemaic period. Allen's survey of the material is comprehensive as an introduction, but remains on the surface. Especially the discussion of the sarcophagus lid might have deserved some extra attention and would probably have benefited from taking into account a similar image, which Clère (1958) published. Antonio Loprieno's contribution is a shortened and translated version of the chapter 'Le signe littéraire: pour une géographie de la fiction égyptienne' in his book 'La pensée et l'Écriture' (Loprieno, 2001). It is a discussion of the semiotics of topography in Egyptian literary narratives that portray a fictional character physically traveling through Egypt and countries abroad. Loprieno traces developments, from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period, in the direction of travel and in the conceptualization of space as reflected in the writings of place names with either the determinative for town (*njw.t*) or foreign/desert land (*h3s.t*). According to Loprieno there is a development from "a geography of real places" to "a topography of fictive locations" (p. 50), for which he finds a parallel, at least for the Middle Kingdom phase, in the rise of the bourgeois novel in 19th century European literatures. Moreover, the shifting use of the determinatives reveals a discourse on the definition of the Egyptian centre and its periphery.

The following four contributions investigate Egyptian textual and archaeological sources related respectively to the 'exotic' land Punt (two articles), Libyan tribes and the Sea Peoples. The articles discuss the sources in search of clues to find a more precise location on the world map for each ethnic category. Egyptian language and terminology are now not analysed as if they were tools for constructing and maintaining an imaginary landscape, as is the case in the two former chapters. The question here is to what extent the Egyptian ethnic terms conformed to a historical reality. The major problem all four contributions face is that the available sources present an Egyptian perspective. So far no archaeological data or written sources have been found or identified that can securely be attributed to the Puntites, Libyan tribes or Sea Peoples. In other words, any assessment of the cultural encounter between Egypt and Punt, Libya or the Sea Peoples is biased from the outset, because one of the partners involved is mute hitherto.

Dimitri Meeks presents a thorough, yet succinct review of the major sources related to the land Punt and comes to the conclusion that Punt is to be located in "the western part of the Arabian Peninsula bordering on the Red Sea from Arabia Petraea to the Yemen" (p. 77). His arguments are not only very convincing, but also important because it conflicts with the prevalent view that Punt was an African state and situated somewhere in the Horn of Africa. It is therefore to be regretted that Stephen P. Harvey probably did not have the opportunity to read Meeks' contribution before publication. Harvey situates Punt in Africa without ever addressing Meeks' arguments, with the result that the article loses much of its relevance. Steven Snape deals with the relations between Egypt and Libya, primarily during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. His excavations of the Ramesside fortress in Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham have yielded important new information about Egypt's contact with Libyan peoples. Located at the Mediterranean coast in the western desert close to the Libyan border the fortress not only served as a defence against a potential threat of Libyan expansion, but likely also as a trading post in the eastern Mediterranean maritime trade circuit of the Late Bronze Age. Other important sources of information about the infiltration of Libyans into Egypt around this period are the 'Giornale' documents from Deir el-Medineh and a number of texts from the so-called 'Late Ramesside Letters'. Since these are missing from Snape's article, I duly refer the reader to Haring's article (Haring, 1991). The contribution of Eric H. Cline and David O'Connor is certainly one of the gems of the book. Their discussion of the Sea Peoples is a careful and well-structured examination of the relevant texts and the iconography of the Medinet Habu war reliefs. Although the authors cannot solve "the mystery of the 'Sea Peoples'" (title of their contribution), their discussion of all peoples involved is excellent and summarizes the major debates. Their analysis of the function of the war reliefs within the Egyptian temple decoration program, i.e. on the level of the King's novel and cosmographic symbolism, is also lucid and intriguing. In addition, they provide the reader with ample illustrations and translations of the relevant inscriptions as an appendix to the article.

The next three articles focus on religious topography, i.e. Egyptian descriptions and illustrations of places and regions that only have significance within the world of Egyptian cult and theology. It is especially with these texts that the application of the western concepts 'map' and 'geography' becomes problematic. In my view, these texts are not concerned with describing a trajectory from point A to B or with giving directions from A to B. The texts' primary concern is to confirm the existence of these places as points in space, not so much as to describe their spatial relationships. They represent an attempt to come to terms with the intangible presence of the divine. As such, they are the articulation of a world view which visualizes the cosmos as a dynamic space filled with divine powers, which demand appropriate rites at specific places and specific times. It is therefore probably best to speak of cultic *topography*, thus stressing the fact that the described places are localities on their own with their own set of rules, not necessarily logically connected through space with each other in the way as seen on a modern western map of the world.

Peter Robinson's contribution is a reading of the Middle Kingdom 'Book of the Two Ways' as a ritual landscape. The author seems to struggle with the question whether the book is a detailed road-map serving the deceased as a travel guide to the realm of the gods or rather a ritual topography, which solely describes specific

stations during the travel without regard for the spatial relationships. Willems' (1996) analysis of the coffin of Heqata and the reuse of certain sections in Book of the Dead spells 144-147 (discussed on pages 154-157) are arguments in favor of the second option. In this respect an assessment of Hermesen's publication (Hermesen, 1991) is dearly missed. Stephen Quirke's article on the use of numbers and measurements in funerary texts as tools for defining (not necessarily mapping) space is very rich in content. His critique of the word 'map' is meaningful in this context and shows again that this type of texts is primarily concerned with a discourse on knowledge of rites and cultic places. John Tait presents a comprehensive description of the 'Book of the Fayum'; a composition dealing in word and image with cult places in the Fayum region, which is preserved in several versions dating to the Greco-Roman period. The composition is a beautiful example of how cult and myth take precedence over physical reality in describing the world. An intriguing parallel to this type of cultic topography is to be found in Vandier (1960).

All in all the book addresses a number of pertinent questions, which give the reader plenty of food for thought. The book is certainly not exhaustive, but several contributions provide, between the lines, avenues for future research. I warmly recommend this book to any scholar interested in the concepts of space and geography in ancient Egypt.

O'Connor, D. & S. Quirke. Eds. 2003. *Mysterious lands*. – London, UCL Press (Encounters with ancient Egypt). 245 pp. ISBN 1844 72 00 47. Price £ 25.00.

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