

El-Daly, O. 2005. Egyptology. The missing millennium. – London, UCL Press

Book review by C.P. Duinmaijer



The subject of this book is medieval Arabic writings about ancient Egypt. The author states in the introduction that Egyptology is too much Western oriented and that the early Arabic writings and research about ancient Egypt are largely ignored and dismissed as fairytales by Egyptologists. During the Middle Ages a large number of texts about ancient Egypt were written. The author used material from more than one hundred different sources for the book; sources mostly unknown to Egyptologists and thus little used by them. An exception is Kuhlmann (1983), who uses the descriptions of several Arabic travellers to reconstruct the now destroyed temple of Akhmim. But with el-Daly's book a large corpus of little known and less accessible material becomes accessible to Egyptologists.

The book consists of eight chapters, each dealing with a specific topic such as 'Medieval Arabic attempts to decipher ancient Egyptian scripts' (chapter five). Each chapter is divided into several sections with a specific theme. For example, in chapter five sections have themes such as 'Arabic works on decipherment' and 'Egyptian scripts correctly deciphered'. This arrangement of the material makes the book easy to consult.

Although it is very interesting to know how Arabic writers thought about ancient Egypt, it is not always clear how reliable the sources are. Sometimes the author does not check the claims made by his sources, although these could have proven the reliability of the source and its contribution to Egyptology. Given of the amount of the material used, it is understandable that the author could not comment on every aspect of his sources, but at certain points in the book more detailed information would have helped to clarify things.

It is not always clear whether a certain statement was made by the author, or by a medieval writer. For example, on page 53 the author gives an overview of the aspects of ancient Egyptian temples as mentioned by Arabic writers. It remains unclear if these various aspects are aspects of ancient Egyptian temples correctly identified by the Arabic writers, or aspects that Arab writers thought ancient Egyptian temples had (whether correctly identified or not).

Sometimes the author makes the mistake to believe the content of an Arabic source without looking for supporting evidence. In the section 'The natural sciences' (p. 116–117) a story from Al-Qifti (d. 1248 CE) tells us how Archimedes built dykes to regulate the floods of the Nile. The author accepts this story as a historical fact. But he presents no evidence from the time of Archimedes, or later classical evidence to support Al-Qifti's story.

In the section 'Early contacts between Egypt and Arabia' (p. 13–17) and 'The country' (p. 23–24) the author stresses the bond between the ancient Egyptians and the Arabs. In the first section the contacts between Egypt and Arabia are discussed. Much evidence from ancient Egyptian sources for this contact is given, some of it is quite convincing, such as demotic texts mentioning a campaign to Alby (Arabia) and the occurrence of *hkr* (Hagirs = Arabs) in ancient Egyptian texts and the existence of a Ptolemaic coffin with inscriptions in a South-Arabian alphabet. But a closer look at some of this evidence shows uncertainties. The publication of Posener (1957) about Arab names in the Middle Kingdom only mentions Semitic names, while the author claims they were Arabic names. From the *sh3sw*- and *3mw*-people (which both should be Arabic according to Al-Daly) only the *sh3sw* are identified by Givon (1971) as Arabs. Givon identifies the *3mw* as a people from Syro-Palestine

and Transjordan. Both areas may be inhabited by Arabs nowadays, but in previous millennia these lands were inhabited by Phoenicians, Philistines, Hebrews and others. These were Semitic people like the Arabs, but they were not Arabs.

In the last of these two subchapters the author explores similarities between Arabic and ancient Egyptian languages. The author presents interesting similarities, but maybe a Semitic language with older written records, such as ancient Hebrew, would have been a likelier choice to compare its linguistics with the ancient Egyptian language. The most logical way to explain the linguistics of a word is to try to explain the oldest known version of a word, not its current version. Naville (1917) explains, for example, the biblical name for Egypt, Mizraim, as Hebrew for “two walls”, while the author of this book explains the modern name for Egypt, Misr (meaning: “country, urban centre and border”), with the ancient Egyptian word *mdr* (meaning: “walled in”). The words *mdr*, Mizraim and Misr may have similar meanings, but explaining Misr from ancient Egyptian skips the older Hebrew name for Egypt which may be an older version of the word Misr.

It also seems that the author is too eager to identify more correct facts in the writings of medieval Arab writers than there actually are. This is especially the case in the chapter ‘Medieval Arab attempts to decipher ancient Egyptian scripts’ and its subchapter ‘Egyptian scripts correctly deciphered’. The author claims that the Arabic author Dhu Al-Nun al-Misri correctly identified the Coptic alphabet. But in the accompanying picture (figure 15) only a few Coptic letters are recognisable and correctly identified. The same happens on page 72 when the author claims that the Arabic author Ibn Wahshiyah correctly identified the *nb-hwt* hieroglyph as “justice”, because, according to the author, both elements of the hieroglyphs stand for the temple where justice was given. This is a very strange and unlikely argument. The elements of the hieroglyph may resemble parts of a temple and temples may have been seen as places of justice, but the second fact is not the logical conclusion of the first one. The author does not give any evidence from ancient Egyptian texts in which this hieroglyph expresses justice. As with the Demotic–Arabic alphabet of Jabir Ibn Hayyan (figure 25), in the same section, the author claims that several signs are correctly identified. But the “correctly”–identified *a-*, *b/p-*, *kh-* demotic signs bear little resemblance to the *a-*, *b/p-*, *kh-* demotic signs from the ‘Demotisches Glossar’ (Erichsen, 1954).

In his conclusion the author calls out to Egyptologists to study the medieval Arabic sources on ancient Egyptian religion and philosophy for a better understanding of these two. Although these Arabic sources are certainly intriguing for Egyptologists, it is mostly the descriptions of ancient buildings and monuments that will help Egyptologists with their study of ancient Egypt, and not those texts about ancient Egyptian religion and philosophy. Because ideas and beliefs change with time and because it is impossible to tell how the view on certain aspects in the ancient Egyptian religion changed during a certain period, a medieval source can not help an Egyptologist to understand the sun cult in Heliopolis in the Old Kingdom or Middle Kingdom. Ideas do not remain the same during millennia, or even centuries, a fact which the author seems to have overlooked.

Although the author is a little too enthusiastic to prove the importance of medieval Arabic writers for Egyptology, this does not diminish the importance of the book. It provides Egyptologists with a clear overview of the material from the little studied Middle Ages. The author wanted to show the contribution of the medieval Arabic writers to Egyptology in this book and he succeeded to do so.

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