

A history of ancient Egypt

Marc Van de Mieroop, *A history of ancient Egypt*, (Second edition). Blackwell history of the ancient world. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021. Pp. 416. ISBN 9781119620877. £37.95.

Historians and archaeologists of Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean studies, when writing an overview of the scholarship and debates within the study of their field(s), whether that is a general introduction or a textbook for a specific course, often include Ancient Egypt.¹ Marc Van de Mieroop, one of the most prominent ancient Near Eastern historians, in his *History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BCE* (3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell 2016) excludes Egypt explaining that the diversity of cultures and histories in the extensive territorial scope of Egypt and the Near East together is too vast an area to be described in a single book.² His

¹ See, for example, Knapp, Arthur Bernard. 1988. *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*. Chicago, Ill.: Dorsey Press; Stiebing, William. 2018. *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*. New York & London: Routledge; Kuhrt, Amelie. 1997. *The Ancient Near East: c. 3000–330 BC*, New York & London: Routledge; Stefanović, Danijela. 2020. *The Ancient Near East*, Belgrade: Evoluta (in Serbian) and most recent Radner, Karen, Nadine Moeller, and Daniel T. Potts, eds. 2020. *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East: Volume I: from the Beginnings to Old Kingdom Egypt and the Dynasty of Akkad*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Van de Mieroop, Marc. 2015. *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BCE* (Third edition), Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

overview of the history of Ancient Egypt therefore appeared in a separate volume, the second edition of which is presently under review. This book aims to provide ‘anyone with an interest in ancient Egypt with a basic survey that pays attention to all periods of its 3000-year-long history and covers the main events, whether used as an undergraduate textbook, or an introductory book for the wider audience’ (p. xxix).

The structure of the book follows the traditional periodization of the political history of ancient Egypt; consequently, the political history dominates. The author specifies that, with a limitation to the book size, his work does not argue but asserts following the topics and interpretations of data that he ‘found most convincing or appealing and in the Guide to Further Reading gave preference to works that were the most useful in guiding my decisions’ (p. xxx).

The volume starts with *Introductory Concerns*, overview of the geography, chronology, sources, and prehistory of ancient Egypt. The main part of the book is organized (at least, that is the reviewer’s impression) into two main sections: first focusing on the history before the middle of the II millennium BC (chapters 2–6), and those presenting the historical overview after c. 1500 BC (chapters 7–13) ending with the late IV century AD.

Chapter 2, *The Formation of the Egyptian State (ca. 3400–2686)*, presents the late Naqada period until the end of the Second Dynasty, stressing the importance of the foundation of many political, social, religious and ideological features of early Egypt.

Chapter 3, *The Great Pyramid Builders (ca. 2686–2345)*, outlines the main historical features and explores social, economic, and institutional structures during the Old Kingdom.

Chapter 4, *The End of the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period (ca.*

2345–2055), highlights the political fragmentation of the country, and points out the new approaches in historiography and archaeology of Egypt toward the reevaluation of available sources for the given period.

The first half of the II millennium BC is dealt with in chapters 5–6: *The Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055–1650)* and *The Second Intermediate Period and the Hyksos (ca. 1700–1550)*. The section outlines a period of transformation in Egyptian history starting with the unification of the country under Mentuhotep II, the marking of the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, followed by royal military exploits of the Twelfth Dynasty that brought Egypt's annexation of Nubia (an expression which is, in the reviewer's opinion, far more suitable for determining Egyptian policy toward Nubia, than colonisation, the term which is nowadays more or less generally accepted in Egyptology), a period of decline during the Thirteenth Dynasty, and the rise of new hybrid political powers ('domination of Hyksos').

With chapter 7, *The Birth of Empire: The Early 18th Dynasty (ca. 1550–1390)*, a reader, especially if familiar with the history of ancient Egypt and the history of the Ancient Near East, becomes aware that Van De Mieroop's book is far more than another general overview. Although the historians and archaeologists of the Ancient Near East touch upon history and archaeology of ancient Egypt, especially when dealing with political processes and societal features from the mid of the II millennium BC on, and which by all means need to be so, Egyptology, with very few exceptions, still tends to be isolated in her own Nile valley world. As far as the Near Eastern historian cannot understand the nature of Egyptian presence in the Levant during the Ramesside era without knowing all domestic (political and economic) and international processes leading to it,

even more an historian of Ancient Egypt cannot understand, for example, the reasons for the collapse of the Ramesside imperial system, without being aware of all processes and single events leading to it in its Near Eastern background. Perhaps to an even greater extent, the same applies to the history of the 1st millennium BC.

While outlining the reestablishment of the newly unified Egypt, and its extensive international policy, from Ahmose's expulsion of the Hyksos to the Thutmosids' extensive campaigns in Nubia, Syria, and Palestine, Van De Mieroop stresses the process behind these individual events in order 'to understand both Egypt's international affairs and its domestic issues' (p. 148). The emergence of the New Kingdom in Egypt coincided with the rise of an entirely new world system, with large territorial states, such as Kassites, Babylonia, Assyria, Mitanni, and the Hittite state. Only western Syria and Palestine remained politically fragmented, and as such, an area over which powerful neighbouring powers fought, including Egypt. Egypt was an important link within the *Club of the Great Powers*, 'whose members exchanged diplomatic messages, gifts, and brides. They engaged in wars but also concluded peace treaties and alliances. Egypt was a very active participant in the system, but not the dominant one – no single state was – and unlike in its earlier international affairs, it could not dictate the rules of engagement' (p. 148).

Chapter 8, *The Amarna Revolution and the Late 18th Dynasty (ca. 1390–1295)*, summarises the political situation in Egypt and abroad, starting with the reign of Amenhotep III and then focuses on Akhenaton's religious reforms. Although often marked as one of the ages of Egyptian international supremacy, Van De Mieroop rightly states that in a given period Egypt's world domination was a fiction and that

‘Amenhotep III and his successors had to engage with countries in the eastern Mediterranean as equals’ (p. 177).

The history of the late New Kingdom, the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, was outlined in chapters 9–10: *The Ramesside Empire (ca. 1295–1213)* and *The End of Empire (ca. 1213–1070)*. Again, through the lens of Egyptian history, Van De Mieroop outlines important process markers of the global history of the Ancient Near East: seeing the battle of Qadesh as an indication of a changing eastern Mediterranean world, and ‘a sign of a breakdown in the expected diplomatic and military behaviour of the time’ (p. 204). Egypt witnessed the end of the international system with severe consequences, both internationally (shortage of resources and goods from abroad, the collapse of diplomatic network) and internally (political and financial instability).

Chapter 11, *The Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1069–715)* describes Egypt’s decline between the Twenty-first and Twenty-fifth Dynasties and the major changes that Libyan and Nubian rules and elites brought to the country.

In chapter 12, *Egypt in the Age of the Empires (ca. 715–332)*, Van De Mieroop sets his focus on a segment of Egyptian history when the country, with several exceptions (such as the Saite period), for a large part was incorporated into foreign empires. Another important feature of the given period, meticulously underlined by the author, is that international policy ‘was beyond Egyptian control; when they tried to influence the situation, they failed’ (p. 275).

The final chapter 13, *Greek and Roman Egypt (ca. 332 B.C.–A.D. 395)*, continues the focus on foreign empires (Ptolemaic and Roman) reaching its end with the process of Christianisation and final declining of ancient Egyptian culture. However, as the author rightly

stresses in the *Epilogue*, cultures never fully vanished and signs of ancient Egypt will never disappear (p. 328).

The book ends with an excellent *Guide for Further Reading*, *Glossary* (of terms used in the book), a *King list*, *Bibliography* and general *Index*. Numerous drawings and photographs enrich each of the chapters, as well as boxes containing *Sources in Translation* (as 5.1 The Execration Texts, pp. 107–108), *Special topics* (as 2.2 *Languages and scripts of Ancient Egypt*, p. 44–45), and *Key Debates* (as 9.1 Markets in ancient Egypt, p. 227) which are scattered through the whole book.

One small point: on page 288 the caption of the figure 12.4 indicates the famous relief fragment from the Brooklyn Museum (‘Woman with a Baby Stacking Fruit’; Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 48.74). Strangely enough, instead of the Egyptian artefact, there is the portrait of Mary Cabot Wheelwright, by Frank Duveneck (Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 40.87).

Marc Van De Mieroop has produced a deep and meaningful study which is certainly far from being just an introduction or textbook. Van De Mieroop presents the history of Ancient Egypt in a clear and stylishly crafted manner that places him within the international context of the Ancient Near East. The book is written lucidly to make it suitable both for students and for expert readers. The *History of Ancient Egypt* is an excellent work written by a leading authority in Near Eastern studies and is certainly welcomed among Egyptologists.

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