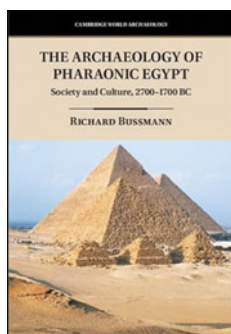


the use of archaeological data. Moreover, it examines the high elite through the notion of kinship. This multifaceted approach not only makes the book an enjoyable read but enhances understanding, supported by a variety of visual media.

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RICHARD BUSSMANN. 2023. *The archaeology of pharaonic Egypt: society and culture, 2700–1700 BC*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-11070-303-81 hardback £100.



With this book, Richard Bussmann places himself alongside Barry Kemp, Bruce Trigger, David O'Connor and Allan B. Lloyd in a group of major Egyptologists who see the importance of approaching ancient Egypt from a social perspective. This opens space for theoretical and methodological awareness and comparative approaches that ultimately remove ancient Egypt from a place of exceptionalism and take it seriously as a hierarchical, complex and diverse ancient society like many others. Drawing and expanding on ground-breaking syntheses such as 'Ancient Egypt: anatomy of a civilization' (Kemp 2018) and 'Ancient Egypt: a social history' (Trigger *et al.* 1983), *The archaeology of pharaonic Egypt* adds

depth to the perception and discussion of ancient Egyptian society, especially due to its emphasis on people and their agency beyond royal monuments and texts. Most importantly, and moving in the opposite direction of traditional Egyptology, the book highlights the existence and input to social relations and culture of communities comprising the vast majority of the population in all historical periods, conventionally referred to as 'non-elite'. This continues Bussmann's interest in social diversity as expressed in the agency of a variety of actors that shaped the complexity of ancient Egypt beyond elites and their partial textual sources (e.g. Bussmann 2020, 2022). This also moves Bussmann's work away from the aforementioned social syntheses of Egyptian history and archaeology; these have mostly focused on the social and material structures that limit agency, while the focus here lies mostly with the communities that shaped ancient societies through their agency.

*The archaeology of pharaonic Egypt* excels as an example of mature theoretical reasoning stemming from the evidence. Criticisms of Egyptology's lack of interest in theory have been published in the past. According to those critiques, Egyptology should incorporate externally developed theory into its discussions to allow for a greater dialogue with other social sciences (e.g. Moreno García 2014). It is important to include theoretical perspectives into the interpretation of the Egyptian evidence. Bussmann's anthropological take on the Egyptian evidence, however, adds to it and builds theoretical reasoning, which then becomes

relevant to understanding how authoritarian and colonial state societies operate in general, historically and geographically (see Bussmann 2014).

The book is divided into four parts. Part I, 'Orientation', lays out the book's anthropological emphasis on people and their experiences and (re)actions to society's structural limitations to agency. A traditional historical outline has been usefully incorporated into Part I, which helps the reader orientate themselves prior to diving deeper into the discussions that follow. Part II, 'Living together', is divided into four chapters exploring traditional topics in Egyptian archaeology taking into consideration the many agencies—individual and communal—that build and shape complex societies. Chapter 3, 'People in landscapes', provides a discussion of different ways in which people experienced social structures in ancient Egypt. The chapter lays the foundations of the book's later discussions and establishes the backbone of a social history of ancient Egypt 'from below', even if not explicitly engaging with historians such as E.P. Thompson (1966), C. Hill (1972) or E. Hobsbawm (1998), who are among the founding fathers of the 'history from below' intellectual movement. Discussions in the next chapters include topics intimately connected to a critical awareness of a multitude of agencies and inputs to society and culture in ancient Egypt during the 'Pyramid Age'. These include key themes such as differences between the life experiences of elites and non-elites in settlements (Chapter 4), the relationship between state control and urbanism (Chapter 5) and the embodiment of social relationships in monumental projects (Chapter 6). Part III, 'Ritual and discourse', includes Chapter 7 ('Funerary culture'), Chapter 8 ('Temple ritual') and Chapter 9 ('Kingship and the social'), which address the upper layers of the social pyramid. However, discussions on the 'archaeology of people' connected to temple ritual and comparisons between official ritual settings and contexts such as local shrines help us contrast and bridge experiences of a ritual landscape that should be seen as diverse in a context of extreme hierarchisation. Perspectives such as Bussmann's are crucial to overcome interpretations of ancient Egypt that overemphasise religion and ritual to explain virtually all aspects of the ancient society, while experiences of religion and ritual vary greatly according to numerous social contexts. Chapter 10, 'Scaling the state', addresses what Kemp (2018) referred to as the 'bureaucratic mind'. As a component of Part IV, 'Organizing people', the chapter focuses on the underlying social relationships beyond abstract institutional arrangements. Therefore, in Chapter 11, 'Archaeology beyond elites', the author populates these institutional arrangements with people belonging to different social groups to understand the materiality of social relationships in a highly hierarchical state society. Such an approach is fundamentally connected to the author's critical perspective on the limitations of textual sources alone to understand social relations and the emphasis on materiality as a way to integrate all types of sources to access a multitude of experiences of the social (see Smith 2010). Chapter 12, 'Civilization at grass-roots level', works as a general conclusion, in which the author stresses the importance of overcoming the idea of Egypt "as an exception among early complex societies" (p.356). *The archaeology of pharaonic Egypt* paves the way to overcoming elitist, partial views of ancient Egypt by exploring the immense body of overlooked evidence for diverse lived experiences of state control. However, the extent to which Egyptology as a discipline allows us to truly move away from pharaohs and elites remains open for discussion.

Ancient Egypt only becomes 'special' in historical narratives focusing on pharaohs, mummies and monuments. From an all-encompassing social perspective, the ancient Egyptian

evidence offers us grounds from which to explore human experience of hierarchisation, power and social control in similar ways as many other ancient complex societies. The key difference in comparison with other ancient societies is the amount of preserved information, historical and archaeological, to understand social relations and culture in the ancient Nile valley. Bussmann's perspective on the available Egyptian evidence incorporates all the people that contributed, in one way or another, to building and shaping society. This alone provides new ways forward and allows Egyptian archaeology to contribute original perspectives to how people experience state societies in a variety of ways. *The archaeology of pharaonic Egypt* is a further contribution to ancient Egyptian social history similar to the above-mentioned 'Ancient Egypt: anatomy of a civilization' or 'Ancient Egypt: a social history'. The book's emphasis on people, however, sets it apart from these previous publications, which focused more on how complex state societies operate and less on how humans experience complexity in different ways within the state's oppressive structure. Bussmann's new book should be read by all those who are tired of 'symbolic' explanations of everything on ancient Egypt and seek more complex ways of understanding ancient Egyptian history. It should also become a key reference in teaching if our aim is to shape a new generation of social scientists committed to more rigorous work on ancient societies.

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