

Richard Bussmann

The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt: Society and Culture, 2700–1700 BC

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The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt: Society and Culture, 2700–1700 BC embarks on a compelling journey through ancient Egyptian society during the pyramid age, shedding light on fundamental aspects of this enigmatic civilisation. Positioned as a pivotal addition to the Cambridge World Archaeology series, this volume critically scrutinises the intricate societal and cultural layers of ancient Egypt during the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Employing an anthropological lens, Richard Bussmann adeptly dissects early complex societies, accentuating human agency and interactions within these ancient contexts. The author's academic endeavour is systematically organised across twelve chapters delineated within four core sections: 'Part I: Orientation', 'Part II: Living Together', 'Part III: Ritual and Discourse', and 'Part IV: Organising People'. Each part is meticulously crafted, integrating contemporary archaeological discoveries to unveil the societal plurality and cultural coherence of early Egypt.

Part I serves as a thought-provoking introduction, comprising two chapters. Chapter 1 emphasises the human dimension of archaeological artifacts, moving beyond the monumental pyramids to sketch out the everyday lives of ancient Egyptians. A central tenet of the argument advocates for an archaeology that places human subjects at its core, surpassing a focus solely on objects or aristocratic edifices. Particularly persuasive is the stress on the provincial peripheries over the regal centres, thereby elucidating the disparities and interactions between the royal court and local populations. Bussmann effectively bridges the gap between monumental structures and everyday human experiences, prompting readers to contemplate the cultural and social milieus that underpin these artifacts. Chapter 2 expertly sketches a historical outline, connecting the dots between key epochs and momentous events that shaped Pharaonic Egypt. Tracing the evolution of Egyptian society from the formation of a centralised polity to the rise of empires, the author expounds upon the details of dynastic transitions, chronologies and geographical divisions. The chapter meticulously analyses royal inscriptions, biographies and annals to unravel the multifaceted layers of the nation's past, scrutinising the ebbs and flows of centralisation, regionalisation and eventual reunification. This section is crucial for setting the historical and environmental backdrop against which the subsequent discussions on social structures and cultural practices will unfold.

In Part II, the exploration unfolds into the quotidian existence of ancient Egyptians, delving into themes covering urbanism, interregional exchange, and human reactions to the natural environment. Chapter 3 skilfully

intertwines the physical environment with human activities, unravelling how ancient Egyptians interacted with and adapted to their landscapes. Bussmann posits that while landscapes provided context, they did not dictate social organisation, astutely highlighting the stratification and diversity of Egyptian landscapes, paralleling societal structures. Moving on to Chapter 4, the author delineates the archaeological advancements in understanding ancient Egyptian settlements. A vivid tableau is revealed through a rigorous analysis of archaeological evidence, which depicts domestic life, social structures and economic activities. Bussmann engages with the persistent 'town problem' in Egyptology (p. 58), highlighting the paucity of evidence for urbanism and presenting a subtle critique of this issue, focusing on state-planned pyramid towns. Chapter 5 explores the interplay between urbanisation, state formation and religion. It discusses how state centralisation initially limited provincial urban growth, the co-evolution of temples and towns, and the shift from tomb-centred to temple-focused elite display. Through a judicious amalgamation of archaeological evidence and theoretical paradigms, the portion diligently untangles the sophisticated construct of factors propelling urbanisation in this epoch, thereby explicating the underlying complexities that underpin urban life during this transformative period. Chapter 6 aptly contextualises ancient Egypt within broader geographical and cultural spheres, clarifying the multifaceted cultural interrelations and subtleties between Egypt and its neighbouring civilisations. Bussmann critiques conventional Egyptological accounts that predominantly highlight elite influences, promoting a more comprehensive viewpoint that recognises the agency of diverse historical actors. The anthropological approach shines in this section, as he uses anthropological theory to interpret material remains and written sources, adroitly mapping out the transference of commodities, ideologies and individuals across geographic boundaries.

Transitioning to the third part, the author explains the key ritual practices of ancient Egyptian, encompassing funerary culture, temple rituals, and the sacred and social dimensions of kingship. Chapter 7 concentrates on burial customs, the evolution of tomb structures, and the significance of funerary texts. Furthermore, this section critically evaluates the textual and iconographic evidence related to royal rituals, accentuating the performative dimensions of kingship. By challenging the conventional portrayal of the pharaoh as a god-like figure, the author interprets kingship as an institution subject to negotiation and contestation, which invites readers to reconsider established notions of royal authority and power patterns within ancient Egypt. In Chapter 8, the focus shifts to the dynamic role of rituals within Egyptian temples. The author maintains that temple rituals were not static but evolved over time, mirroring overarching societal changes. Moreover, through a comparative lens that scrutinises both grand royal cults and local shrines, the section elucidates the array of religious practices existing within Egypt, thus paving the way for an in-depth understanding of religious beliefs and practices that thrived in

REVIEWS

the ancient Egyptian milieu. Chapter 9 undertakes an incisive analysis of the twofold character of Egyptian kingship. By dissecting the divine attributes ascribed to the pharaohs, the social structures influenced by royal authority, and the interplay between the sacred and secular realms, the author successfully portrays kingship as a relational phenomenon, deeply embedded in societal norms and religious beliefs. This chapter culminates by positioning kingship as a dynamic institution, deeply rooted in societal values and relationships, rather than a static divine entity.

The concluding section explores the state formation, social stratification, and the lived experiences of non-elite populations of ancient Egyptian society. Chapter 10 centres on ancient Egyptian statehood, effectively harmonising archaeological evidence with theoretical insights. Bussmann contests the conventional understanding that equates the state with kingship, signifying the unique and separate functions that each entity fulfilled. Additionally, the discussion on administrative practices and the involvement of local elites clarifies the internal mechanics through which the Egyptian state exerted control and maintained unity across its vast territories. Proceeding to Chapter 11, the author ventures into the less explored realms of non-elite culture in ancient Egypt, seeking to unveil the lives and roles of commoners, the disempowered, and marginalised individuals. Through a critical examination of social hierarchies, cultural norms and historical evidence, the chapter scrutinises the underlying elements that define Egyptian culture beyond the elite sphere. It further probes cultural cohesion, questioning the assumed shared values across social strata, and deliberates on the interplay between material culture and societal structures. In the final chapter, the author brings attention to the localised experiences and interactions that formed the foundation of ancient Egyptian civilisation in the context of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy's project, New Qurna. The consideration extends to ancient Egypt, drawing parallels with pyramid-age settlements and the monumental discourse that shaped societal structures. The author proposes that while monumentalism was a hallmark of elite culture, the lived experiences of ordinary Egyptians were vital to the formation of civilisation.

The erudite analysis of the book not only underscores the scholarly acumen exhibited but also demonstrates adeptness in elucidating the evolutionary trajectory of ancient Egypt. An eminent strength is its interdisciplinary methodology, seamlessly integrating anthropological insights to unravel the multifaceted layers of Egyptian society. By prioritising mundane experiences over monumental structures, Bussmann effectively bridges the gap between scholarly investigation and a wider readership, encouraging contemplation of the cultural and social landscapes that influenced ancient Egypt. Furthermore, the critical engagement with key themes such as state formation, social stratification and religious practices underscores the book's scholarly rigour and profundity. While excelling in its extensive coverage and progressive scholarly

REVIEWS

approach, the book's dense academic language and extensive utilisation of theoretical paradigms may pose challenges for readers not well-versed in archaeological or anthropological discourse, particularly in chapters that delve into specific archaeological evidence.

Despite these challenges, the work is pioneering in its critique of conventional Egyptological accounts, particularly in its exploration of non-elite cultures and the lived experiences of commoners. This focus on the grassroots level of ancient Egyptian civilisation constitutes another salient advancement in the field, offering a more holistic view of the society beyond the privileged class. This shift not only broadens the scope of inquiry but also democratises the historical discourse on ancient Egypt, fostering inclusivity and representation across various societal echelons. In conclusion, this publication epitomises a scholarly and intellectually stimulating piece that significantly enriches our understanding of ancient Egyptian society and its cultural cohesion, pushing the boundaries of our recognition of ancient Egyptian civilisation. Its interdisciplinary methodology and centres on the lives of ordinary individuals distinguish it from other studies in the field, rendering it an essential resource for those interested in the archaeology and anthropology of ancient Egypt. This volume functions as an invaluable asset for academics and learners alike, furnishing a profound insight into the complexities that shaped one of the most captivating civilisations in human history.

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