BOOK REVIEW

Egypt. By CHRISTINA RIGGS. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Pp. 216. Hardcover, $25.00. ISBN 978-1-780-23726-8.

That ancient Egypt has fascinated many different people and societies for centuries will hardly come as much of a surprise to anyone. Christina Riggs' monograph entitled *Egypt* in the new *Lost Civilizations* series traces the fascination with ancient Egyptian culture and its reception in the present day. This book is a particularly good fit: the purpose of this series is not only to consider the rise and fall of great ancient civilizations in terms of their culture and history, but also their lasting legacies and their relevance to the modern world.

The book contains nine chapters. The first chapter, "Looking for ancient Egypt," acts as an introduction and deals with the reception of ancient Egypt over the course of history focusing, in part, on the deity Thoth and the transmission of traditional Egyptian religion into later periods of history. The title of the second chapter—"Forty centuries"—neatly sums up "what we think we know" (32) about the history of ancient Egypt, and considers how the chronology of this history has been constructed.

Chapter 3, "Sacred signs," examines how the writing systems of ancient Egypt functioned, and considers both how and why they were translated later. Chapter 4, "Taken in the Flood," examines the importance and place of the Nile not only in ancient Egyptian thought, but also in the how this riverscape shaped other societies' and cultures' ideas about Egypt. The rather irreverent—and yet entirely fitting—title of Chapter 5, "Walking like an Egyptian," considers what made Egyptian art culturally appropriate to the Egyptians themselves, and examines how

nineteenth century visitors (Napoleon included) saw the material culture of ancient Egypt.

Chapter 6, "Vipers, Vixens, and the Vengeful Dead," begins with Cleopatra VII's legend, focusing on the fantasy surrounding the final Ptolemaic queen, before moving to ancient Egyptian funerary customs (and, of course, mummies), ending with the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the inevitable "vengeful" curse.

Chapter 7, "Out of Africa," is perhaps the most significant in light of recent scholarship on colonialism and racism; Riggs points out that not only can the identity of Egypt, both ancient and modern, be appropriated, but that it can also often be lost within the "politics of recognition" (160). Chapter 8, "Counting the years," examines some of the ways in which modern Egyptians have engaged with their own ancient culture, and considers some of the figures from Egyptian archaeology and history that have become nationalist icons: Tutankhamun, Nefertiti, and Mahmoud Mukhtar's sculpture *Nahdat Misr*. The final chapter, "Still looking," concludes the volume and suggests that there is no definitive ancient Egypt; material remains are inevitably interpreted though cultural memory and present-day concerns.

While Riggs' work is, in part, a piece on reception considering the place of Egypt in Western cultures since the enlightenment, there are subtle nods towards ancient Egyptian culture too. Two of the most significant themes are death and renewal; there is, of course, no mistake that these two themes are also central tenets of ancient Egyptian society. Moreover, Riggs focuses the discussion throughout on well-known figures (typically those, as she notes, that are central to the Western perception of Egypt) of Egyptian history, so Cleopatra, Imhotep, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamun play leading roles. This approach is particularly effective in the case of both Tutankhamun and Cleopatra, likely because of their place in the modern Western consciousness.

Riggs is also quick—and certainly correct—to consider the rather difficult aspects of colonialism that are rife in the West's

treatment of Egypt and why these figures are so important to modern Egypt; no longer should a modern-day Carnarvon be able to arrogate the memory of a famous Egyptian pharaoh, for instance. This leads to one of the most important aspects that Riggs deals with: the ethics of the study of Egyptian history. It is in this sense that this book is particularly timely. Material culture from Egypt, ranging from Pharaonic burial goods through to Graeco-Roman papyri, are still "discovered" and traded through illegal means despite attempts to curb such practices.

The pictures included are excellent and reveal the breadth of influence that Egypt has had on the Western world. There could perhaps have been more, and there are some surprisingly notable omissions: for instance, while we are treated to Fred Wilson's *Grey Area (Black Version)* (159–60), we are not given an image of the original sculpture that Wilson's work is based on: the famous bust of Nefertiti by the royal sculptor, Thutmose, currently residing in the Neues Museum in Berlin.

While the text is light on notes, one wonders if this should necessarily be a surprise at all; the assumption is that this is not technically an academic monograph and is meant for a more general audience. This may be the case (at no point is this made clear), but the truth is that, as noted in passing above, Riggs makes several deft insights that would certainly be at home in the more traditional academic monograph.

Very minor quibbles aside, Riggs' erudite and illuminating work will be particularly useful for those working on Egypt in terms of ethnicity and reception. It is essential reading for those interested in considering ancient Egypt's importance not only in modern Egyptian culture, but also in the rest of the world.

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