

Egypt: a short history
Robert Tignor
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This book is essentially a history of Egypt from the pharaonic period through to the modern day. The author is a Professor of Modern and Contemporary history, which becomes apparent in his writing where he deals with the later chapters in a much more sensitive way than the early history. For example when writing about the ancient Egyptians, he refers to one of the Pyramid texts as “words carved on a pyramid”, a somewhat belittling way of describing highly important religious texts. He unfortunately discusses the “invasion of the Hyksos” which has, since the 1970s been disproved, states the introduction of the *Shaduf* after the Amarna period made it possible for them to grow winter crops of cotton. However cotton was not introduced until the rule of Mohammed Ali in the nineteenth century. All of these small inconsistencies can be found before page 14, which left me a little concerned for the accuracy of the remainder of the book.

The first chapter is an introduction which discusses the need for a general history of Egypt, as well as details regarding the geography of Egypt, and a brief, yet inconclusive, section on the origins of the Egyptian people. He also discusses the early history of Egypt, dismissing the entire pre-dynastic period in a couple of paragraphs with the statement “little is known about these centuries”. He ends the chapter with a discussion on museums where Egyptian artefacts can be seen worldwide, and he claims the latest museum to open in Egypt was the Nubian museum in 1997. He seems to be unaware of the rather beautiful Imhotep Museum at Saqqara which opened in 2006.

The following three chapters discuss the history of the pharaonic period, with the chapter on the Old Kingdom discussing very general political divisions, kingship, and art, although not specifically about the Old Kingdom. The only aspect of this chapter to deal with the Old Kingdom in particular is the discussion on the pyramids, which seems to stop at the Giza pyramids. He discusses the religion of the ancient Egyptians albeit from a modern Christian, Monotheistic point of view, comparing everything to this approach rather than from the ancient point of view. The Middle and the New Kingdoms are discussed in the same chapter, and therefore is brief and unenlightening. The Second Intermediate Period section is dominated by the long-debunked idea of the Invasion of the Hyksos, and their introduction of the chariot and horse, before introducing Ahmose and their expulsion. He then has separate sections on individual kings and their achievements including Thutmose III, Hatshepsut, Akhenaten (7 pages), and Ramses II (6 pages), rather than a general discussion of New Kingdom achievements. He ends the chapter with a section entitled “Peasants and Women in Ancient Egypt” which is peppered with mistakes popular in the 1950s. He claims most marriages were arranged, and ends with the erroneous statement that “while in the Old Kingdom female priestesses existed, they had disappeared by the time of the New Kingdom”, completely overlooking the extremely powerful God’s Wives of Amun, the most powerful priestesses from the reign of Ahmose onwards.

Chapter four covers the declining nature of Egyptian culture which led to the invasions initially by the Libyans and Nubians until Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE. Tignor discusses the politics at the time of Alexander’s death and the impact this had on Egypt. The Ptolemaic period has a focus on technological advances and the development of Alexandria and the myth of the library and its destruction. The Roman section was surprising as I expected the author to recount

Cleopatra's life but instead used some of the documentation from Oxyrhynchus to build an image of Roman Egypt. He discussed at length the irrigation systems used in Roman Egypt which was essential to the economy and is something that he is clearly interested and knowledgeable in.

The arrival of Christianity in Egypt is divided into sections on Monasticism, Gnosticism and the separation of the Egyptian church from the rest of Christendom. The politics of the Church of Alexandria is discussed at length as well as the doctrine that was being debated at the time. The Islamic Period followed the Christian period and this has two chapters dedicated to it, separating the period into sections covering 639-969, Fatimids, Ayyubids and Mamluks. He starts with a discussion of Islam, Mohammed and his successors as well as some of the separate factions of the Muslim faith. After the conquest of Egypt was discussed the chapters are then dedicated to the different dynastic factions who ruled Egypt, and their achievements. He ends the first chapter with a discussion of the role of women in Islam which he compares to the role of women in ancient Egypt. An interesting approach, if he had the information about ancient Egyptian women correct. He states they were subordinate to men, whereas they were in fact equal to men of their own class.

Chapter eight discusses the Ottomans, who took over from the Mamluks in 1517. The conquest was a bloody battle, which saw Egypt become a province of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of a governor. There is a detailed section on who the Ottomans were as well as a detailed run-down of three phases of their rule in Egypt. During this period Egypt began to flourish culturally, politically and commercially with the introduction of coffee as an export. This period of stability was brought to a close with the invasion of the French, led by Napoleon which was to last a total of three years. The French were hoping to create a French colony and to "civilise" this part of the world, and whilst there, over 150 savants, recorded all the monuments, flora and fauna created the many volume *Description de l'Egypte* which was to start the Egyptomania craze in Europe. They were also responsible for discovering the Rosetta Stone, the key to the decipherment of hieroglyphs, although this was to be handed over to the British when the French left Egypt. Tignor is obviously more in his comfort zone here as the chapter is more coherent, with more actual information than those of the earlier history. He discusses with enthusiasm the reforms of Pasha Mohammed Ali as well as documenting the economic decline under Pasha Ismail which led to the French and British having financial control over Egypt, resulting in the British occupation in 1882.

The final chapters of the book look at the modern history, and the governance of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. In 1952 a group of Free Officers, overthrew the throne and took over the governance of Egypt in order to eliminate a corrupt leader, and return Egypt to the Egyptians. So starts this chapter on the Nasser and Sadat, leading to a discussion on the events that led to this military coup to take control of Egypt. Nasser's section covers independence of Egypt from the British, the construction the High Dam at Aswan, plus the Suez crisis which resulted in all foreign nationals and Jews being expelled from Egypt. Nasser died in 1970, after political troubles with Israel and was succeeded by his vice-president Anwar al-Sadat. Following an attack on the Israeli border in 1973, the Egyptians were forced to retreat when the US joined forces with the Israelis and Sadat travelled to Israel to discuss a peace settlement. Egypt was the first Arab state to reach a peace treaty with Israel. Sadat was assassinated on 6th October 1981. His Vice president was Husni Mubarak and he succeeded Sadat to the presidency. Although the economy of Egypt has slowly improved under Mubarak, the distribution is less even, with the poorer being poorer and the rich becoming wealthier. Mubarak has

not appointed a vice president and as he is in his 80s there is speculation as to who will follow him to the presidency.

In the conclusion Tignor summarises the history of Egypt as one dominated by the Nile and the geography as well as invasion, yet there is always the continuity of the Egyptian people which has ensured the survival of the nation. He ends with a short discussion on the religious history of Egypt, with the ancient Egyptian pantheon standing as a foundation for Judaism and Christianity which led to Islam. Throughout Egyptian history the people have always been religious albeit changing beliefs, and he asserts the latest development in Egyptian religion is Muslim fundamentalism, which on the whole is not favoured in Egypt.

I was greatly disappointed in this book as it is presented beautifully, with an attractive cover, made of a very tactile paper, which made me want to read it. The author himself is highly accredited, being a Professor at Princeton University. However, he either has not done his research properly on some counts or has not put the effort into a "trade" book that he no doubt would have done for an "academic" or "peer reviewed" piece of writing.

As I was reading I found myself thinking "that's not right" on many occasions and having to go and look things up, just for my own peace of mind. I think the author has aimed this book at total novices in Egyptian history, and in this capacity it is an acceptable addition to a bookshelf. The notes system is a strange one, favoured by some publishers where there are no reference numbers, just a page number in the note section. There were not many illustrations, only 25 plates, and six black and white images, all very lovely, clear images. However, they are not referenced very well, and are misleading. For example fig 1, of the Narmer Palette is a copy from the Toronto Museum and not the original in Cairo, but is simply captioned, "Narmer Palette". These are however small details which would only be picked up by someone with some knowledge of the subject.

On the plus side, the book is extremely well-written, easy to read, and quite down-to-earth in the approach although sometimes there are echoes of 1940s middle-class Christian historian. Some of the book has almost "travelogue" elements where we get little insights into living in modern Egypt. If I could work out who the book is aimed at, audience wise, it would be easier to say whether it achieved what it set out to do. For a complete novice on the history of Egypt this is a great book, but only if the reader was not going to take their studies much further, as it is peppered with errors. As a history of Egypt before travelling there for the first time, then yes it gives the overview in the amount of depth and accuracy you would require, although for this market more illustrations would have been appropriate. In all, a strange book, with no clear intended audience. Not a great addition to the history books of Egypt but an acceptable one.