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T.G. James. *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*

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ANCIENT EGYPT IN MODERN BRITAIN

James, T.G., *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*. Harper and Row Publishers: London, 1979.

Anyone who has spent time touring the Egyptian Collection in the British Museum will feel at home with this book. When it was first published in 1964 under the title *A General Introductory Guide to the Egyptian Collection in the British Museum*, it was similar to other guides published by the Museum in 1909 and 1930, but it was never intended to be a catalog of the sixty-five thousand objects in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities. As originally conceived by Egyptologists I.E.S. Edwards, A.F. Stone and T.G.H. James, the text was to be an outline of the physical, historical and cultural background of the massive collection.

In 1979 T.G.H. James, former Keeper of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, decided a revision was needed to bring the volume up to date in light of recent scholarship. In his revision the author retained the spelling of royal names in the form most commonly used in Classical histories; place names followed the style found in the Survey of Egypt; and dates, down to the end of the New Kingdom, he based on the chronology set forth in the third edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vols. I and II (Cambridge, 1970-75). From the end of the New Kingdom down to the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (a very controversial period) he followed the system set forth by K.A. Kitchen in his *Third Intermediate Period in Egypt*. With his revision in 1979 James modified the title by dropping the word "Guide" and calling it, *An Introduction to the Culture of Egypt*. Although the intent was to eliminate the "Guide" status, the author retained 21 color plates, 101 black and white illustrations, and included numerous references to the Egyptian holdings in the British Museum. The copy which is presently being reviewed is, in essence, the 1979 edition with a few minor revisions by the current staff of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum. The re-issuing of the text was a joint venture between Harper and Row Publishers and the British Museum Publications.

With the author's stated purpose being to provide an introduction to the culture of ancient Egypt, the text is organized along topical lines with special emphasis being given to religion, literature and art. The opening chapter is an assessment of the geographical and natural resources of ancient Egypt, in which the author concludes, in the true spirit of Herodotus, that Egypt was the "gift of the Nile." The rich Egyptian culture was the product of a land that was equally rich in natural resources. The land, the river and the climate combined to produce a cornucopia of all that was needed, materially, for a great civilization. Precious commodities were available in such quantities that even in her infancy, Egypt enjoyed a life of surplus. The Nile Valley with its flanking deserts supplied virtually all that was needed by the highly skilled Egyptian craftsmen and where the needs were not fully satisfied by the homeland, as in the case of timber, trade routes developed early to fill the void. By 3100 B.C., and the coming of the Old Kingdom, the material base already existed for the development of an advanced culture.

The author devotes chapter two to an outline of ancient Egyptian history, with the operative word here being "outline." This, the weakest section of the book, attempts to consolidate over three millennia of predynastic and dynastic development into forty-three pages of text. The result is confusion rather than simplification. As the author moves from the unification of Egypt in 3100 B.C. to the period of Roman domination in 30 B.C., emphasis is placed on the changing religious patterns, which he identifies as the common element linking the thirty-one dynasties together. The changing religious patterns are reflected, he maintains, in the corresponding changes in the construction of temples and tombs.

In this brief overview, the two Intermediate Periods that fall between the collapse of the Old Kingdom in 2181 B.C. and the beginning of the New Kingdom in 1567 B.C. are filled with shadowy rulers whose powers were usurped by ambitious monarchs and marauders who took control of the rich, delta region. The Middle Kingdom (c. 2050-c.1786), which stands between the two intermediate periods, is described as a return to peace and prosperity as is evidenced by the restoration of the high artistic standards of the Old Kingdom. For the era of the New Kingdom (1567-1085 B.C.) James provides a brief sketch of Egyptian imperialism but reserves his primary discussion for the rise of the deity, Aton, and the impact this new religion had on art and architecture. His history of ancient Egypt becomes increasingly sketchy for the period beginning with the Late Dynastic Age (c. 1085 B.C.) and ending with the Roman conquest in 30 B.C. The historical coverage here is little more than a collage of political intrigue, both at home and abroad, in which Egypt fell victim to the Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, Greeks and Romans in succession. In keeping with the religious theme that runs throughout this chapter, James argues that while many new and strange gods came with the victors, the principal deities of the Egyptian pantheon were sedulously cultivated, as is reflected in the construction of great new temples. While the author's attempt to provide a brief historical overview will create as much confusion as insight for the beginning student, he does demonstrate successfully that temples and tombs, along with other artifacts, can be used as a window on life in ancient Egypt.

With the author's stated purpose being to provide an introduction to ancient Egyptian culture, chapters three through six contain the material of greatest value to the beginning student or novice. In Chapter three the author uses the Rosetta Stone to introduce the reader to hieroglyphics. This very informative little primer includes not only a brief history of the origins and development of hieroglyphics, but also an illustrated explanation of how the ancient script was first translated. There is also an illuminating section on the development of writing materials in antiquity and the problems encountered by Egyptian schoolboys desirous of becoming scribes. This is followed by a chapter on the various topics covered in Egyptian literature. The examples provided range from the hymns of praise and other types of religious writings, to philosophy, magic, business ledgers, legal records, adventure stories, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and even instructions dealing with the brewer's art. Even a novice will be impressed with the diversity and complexity of Egyptian intellectual concerns.

Chapters four and five provide an excellent introduction to the multifarious religious practices in ancient Egypt. Included in this section is a very helpful list of the principal deities and an informed analysis of Egyptian funerary practices. While on the one hand Egyptian religion appears complex and confused, as the author explains, this was due in part to the proliferation of deities for political reasons and the reluctance of the "tradition-bound" Egyptians to discard outmoded or contradictory beliefs that evolved over two thousand years. Of particular interest in this section is the distinction drawn between official religion and private religion. The official religions, as the author explains, were organized around temple rituals and were designed to enhance the relationship between the king and the god. The ordinary citizens participated in these rituals only to the extent that their destiny was linked to that of the king. It is unlikely that the great cults were ever a vital influence on the religious beliefs of the ordinary people. For the common Egyptian, religion consisted largely of magical practices and the invocation of those deities designed to protect society from the dangers of daily life. There were, however, certain myths and legends that were basic to the religious system such as the central creation myth, the legend of Horus and Seth, and the Osiris cycle. In his corresponding discussion of funerary practices in ancient Egypt, James maintains that Egyptian burial customs were inspired in large measure by the belief that in death, just as in life, they would belong to an hierarchic society in which the best was reserved for nobles and kings. The author's description of such practices as mummification and pyramid building will appeal to the beginning student and curiosity seeker alike.

As the present text was inspired by the rich collection of Egyptian artifacts in the British Museum, it is hardly surprising that it contains an excellent summary of Egyptian arts and crafts. In a highly illustrated chapter the author provides an very informative discussion of ancient Egyptian stone-work, metallurgy, painting, brick-making, ceramics, stone glazing, glassware, ivory-work, weaving and other crafts. The author concludes that because of the ideal climatic conditions and unique funerary practices Egypt is unrivalled when it comes to the quantity and state of preservation of historical relics.

The final chapter deals with the impact of Hellenism on ancient Egypt and traces the eventual triumph of Rome and Christianity. Like chapter two, which is also a chronological overview, the content of the final chapter is too sketchy to be of great value to the beginning student although it might serve as a good summation for the already well informed reader. The author does establish successfully the importance of Rome's conquest as a deterrent to dynastic feuds among the warring Ptolemaics and the ensuing reign of peace and prosperity. However, there is only a hint of the complexities created by the mixing and mingling of diverse cultures in Rome's expansion.

While it can be argued that much is to be gained from a careful reading of the present text, it cannot be commended as an introductory work on ancient Egypt for the beginning student or the informed layman. Parts of the current text require prior knowledge of the subject for maximum value. For an introductory text the student may be better advised to try one of the two volumes by J.M. White, (*Ancient*

Egypt or Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt). The greatest value of T.G.M. James' *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt* remains as a guide to the Egyptian holding in the British Museum, and for anyone planning a trip to England it is highly recommended.

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