
Rosetta

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Gianluca Miniaci, Juan Carlos Moreno Garcia, Stephen Quirke, and Andrés Stauder (eds.), 2018. *The Arts of Making in Ancient Egypt: Voices, images, and objects of material producers 2000-1550 BC*. Leiden: Sidestone Press. Pp 275. €95.00. Hardback. €34.95 Paperback. ISBN 97890-8890-5247 / ISBN 97890-8890-5230.

Reviewed by Jennifer Turner.

This collection of fifteen papers stems from a conference of the *Seeing and Hearing the Ancient Producers of Egypt* (SHAPE) research project, funded by the European Research Council and led by Gianluca Miniaci. The project, and this volume, contributes to ongoing discussions within Egyptology relating to ancient material production, acknowledging that despite our modern fascination with ancient Egyptian artefacts we are often unable to identify the craftsmen and scribes responsible for the finished products. In part, this stems from the collaborative nature of production, which typically obscured individual identities, as well as the function of many ancient Egyptian monuments which did not require artist recognition. This contrasts with our modern celebration of artists and similarly raises questions about how confidently we can apply contemporary terms such as ‘art’ and ‘artist’ to ancient Egyptian settings.¹ Complex evidence for workshops and their personnel also typically covered large-scale royal, temple and rural contexts, each of which may differ in practices, materials, and quality. This volume therefore attempts to re-evaluate the varied ancient Egyptian evidence (in some instances, through cross-comparison with other ancient cultures) and simultaneously challenge modern presumptions within the discipline.

The introduction emphasises the multi-faceted approaches utilised in each paper. While these cover a diverse range of physical evidence, much of the discussion and analysis is interrelated and thus brings the volume together as a whole. One observation may be the prospective value in organising the volume thematically as opposed to alphabetically by author, in order to further reinforce these overlaps and provide a more coherent structure, or perhaps where relevant in a chronological

¹ For more discussion of the terms ‘art’ and ‘artist’, see for instance: Baines (2007) and Russmann (1989); for aspects of experience and agency relating to monuments, see Kjølby (2007, 2009).

sequence to better aid the reader in understanding the fluctuating social, economic and political contexts in which the evidence is being considered. The confining of the majority of the book's content to the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BC)² is logical given that this is a complex period of Egyptian history in which the stability and shape of the country continually shifted. Yet material production is a topic that spans the entirety of ancient Egyptian history and therefore there is potential for future volumes to progress into the later phases of pharaonic Egypt and beyond.

Various papers discuss individual artist's identities, models of ancient production and potential locations and processes of ancient workshops. Both Connor's paper on stone sculpture and Ilin-Tomich's contribution on the production of twelfth Dynasty offering tables consider stylistic trends and 'groupings' of monuments to explore methods of production. While Connor determines that artistic variations demonstrate two different registers of sculpture between royal and elite subjects, and both 'court' and local productions are identifiable in the Late Middle Kingdom (p.27-28), Ilin-Tomich concludes that the iconographic and textual patterns of private offering tables also suggest a similar 'mixed mode' of centralised and local production (p.93). Quirke's contribution discusses select written evidence from the Middle Kingdom to illustrate the potential access to and use of language by craftsmen, and through critical sources considers associated complications including understanding the ancient contexts, motivations and biases of the ancient writers. Identification of the artist in signatures, reported speech and self-presentation through various media are explored as aspects of ancient communication; related discussions also include Stauder's paper on the unique stela of the sculptor Irtysen. Through in-depth analysis of the language and 'voice' within the inscription, the stela's insight into self-presentation further elaborates on ideas of knowledge (see mention of El Hawary's paper below) and communication directly from an ancient craftsman, pertaining to his artistic, 'ritual' and 'transformative' abilities (p.251-253). Zabrana's contribution on building techniques with Nubian mudbrick in the early twentieth century and comparisons to earlier pharaonic structures further adds to

² This equates to the early Middle Kingdom period through to the end of the Second Intermediate Period, from the reign of Mentuhotep II in the 11th Dynasty down to the end of the 17th Dynasty with the ruler Kamose, following the proposed chronology of Shaw (2000: 483-484).

ideas about the transmission of knowledge and traditions between ancient and modern craftsmen.

Artistic schemes in tombs are also examined in numerous papers considering craftsmen and their practices. Jurman's paper considers funerary iconography and labelling within the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan to explore ideas of decorum, the relationship between text and image and visual arrangements in tomb contexts. Devillers' related paper uses artistic reliefs from New Kingdom³ tombs to consider the formal copying of iconographic patterns as an established convention amongst craftsmen. In discussing artistic parallels, variations, and contrasts between conventional scenes and instances of 'creativity', Devillers poses some interesting questions surrounding the decision-making process behind the reliefs, reminding the reader that ultimately tomb walls were opportunities to reinforce the tomb owners' prestige and status (p.46). More generalised papers such as El Hawary analyse associated concepts of the ancient Egyptian view of knowledge relating to funerary rituals and literature (p.69), while Rigault and Thomas explore contemporary approaches such as archeometry and archaeodendrometry for further insight into production techniques of various funerary objects, which also leads to questions about the 'decision-making' of the craftsmen (p.215-216).

Not only artists but the specific materials used, traded and exploited in Egypt are also considered. Mazé's paper discusses both the skills of the craftsman and the quality and rarity of the materials used as derivative of the object's value, particularly emphasising the changing value of prestige items through dissemination, inheritance, 'recycling' or tomb robbing (p.126-129). Yet Miniaci's discussion of faience suggests this particular material 'lacks' prestige, as it was widespread, inexpensive and used by both upper and lower social strata (p.140). Considering the 'social profile', manufacturing techniques and ultimately the intended user of the products, Miniaci suggests that faience is therefore an 'ambiguous media'.

³ The period covering the 18th Dynasty through to the end of the 20th Dynasty, c. 1550 – 1069 B.C respectively (Shaw 2000: 484-485). While the examples considered lie outside the main chronology of the volume, Devillers notes precedents from Middle Kingdom tombs (p.31-32).

Seigneur's paper further considers the models, imitations and decorative patterns within funerary objects and reproductions of basketry as circulated knowledge within the New Kingdom, concluding that using skeuomorphism to analyse such objects will in turn also further our understanding of the relationship between ancient craftsmen and their material and technical practices (p.235). The consideration of the leather trade and use of castor oil by Moreno García provides insights into Nubian trade and wider influences on Egyptian crafts and practices, exploring 'invisible' trading networks and processes that unfortunately leave little trace in the archaeological record.

Several papers also deal more closely with challenging modern preconceptions and wider aspects of Egyptology as a discipline. Georg's paper on the 'silence' of and about modern Egyptian workers in Egyptology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a particularly important discussion. While reinforcing the need to depart from the traditional segregation of ancient and modern Egypt, and in comparing the anonymity of ancient craftsmen with modern workers involved in excavations, Georg emphasises the value of their contribution and voice as an 'indispensable part' of Egyptian archaeology (p.60). Ratnager's comparative paper on redistribution in South Asia during the Bronze Age is both informative and encouraging as a contribution to a highly specialised set of papers within a discipline that is typically insular.

Overall, this collection of papers offers a diverse insight into material production and physical evidence across the Egyptian landscape and beyond from multiple perspectives and challenges past and current (mis)perceptions about 'ancient art', often supplemented with excellent images and illustrations. The volume as a whole contributes to the understanding of individuality in ancient Egyptian production and the nature of visual representation. It offers a welcome and varied commentary on ancient crafts, as well as projecting forward into later dynastic history and even modern society. While the general reader will need to consult other publications to grasp the key chronological points of this timeframe and its complexities more fully, the questions raised by these papers pave the way for further contributions to this topic. Perhaps most importantly, these questions will hopefully continue to involve

and promote comparative approaches and wider perspectives. There is clearly more to be said, not only for Middle Kingdom evidence but for the remainder of Egyptian dynastic history and the later phases of Egypt. While the volume may have benefitted from a conclusion reinforcing the vital message conveyed in the introduction, we can hope that further information about SHAPE and possible future volumes are forthcoming.

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