

EGYPTOLOGY: THE MISSING MILLENNIUM

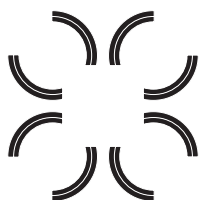
ANCIENT EGYPT IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC WRITINGS



OKASHA EL-DALY



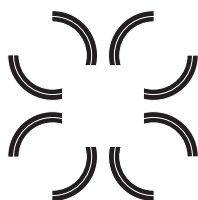
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Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings



Okasha El Daly

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وجعل الله حاجتنا الى معرفة أخبار من كان قبلنا، كحاجة من كان قبلنا
الى أخبار من كان قبلهم، وحاجة من يكون بعدنا الى أخبارنا.

God made inherent in us the need for knowledge of the history of our
predecessors, just as was the need of our predecessors for history of their
predecessors, and just as will be the need of those who shall come after us for
our history.

Al-Jahīz (d 771 CE) *Al-Haywan* 1: 42

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Preface

In the late eighteenth century almost nothing was known about the ancient civilization of Egypt and the Near East except what had been recorded in the Bible and by the ancient Greeks and Romans. (Trigger 1989: 39)

This is but one of many quotations that express a particular attitude to the discovery of Ancient Egypt. It is such attitudes that caused me to embark on a study of medieval Arabic texts which describe and discuss the culture and civilisation of Ancient Egypt. This book sheds some light on a neglected period of a thousand years in the history of Egyptology, from the Moslem annexation of Egypt in the 7th century CE until the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century. Part of the impetus came from my own training in Egyptology, during which almost no mention was ever made of any medieval Arab contribution. But my upbringing as an Egyptian had made me aware of some of the sources that could fill the gap between the classical sources and those of the late European Renaissance.

My objectives in this book are threefold: first, to demonstrate that medieval Arabs were interested in, had knowledge of and attempted to interpret the culture of Ancient Egypt. Secondly, to show the relevance of these materials to the study of Ancient Egypt by bridging the gap between the works of the classical writers and those of later Europeans. Thirdly, to encourage further study of the medieval Arabic material available, some of which could help archaeologists with descriptions and with the excavation and interpretation of sites, and perhaps even to reconstruct monuments which have long since disappeared.

My method of study has been to collect as many Arabic sources as possible, mainly from the 7th to 16th centuries. Some of these sources have already been published, but many are manuscripts from various Arabic collections around the world. I have searched library catalogues to identify manuscripts that seemed most relevant, and obtained copies of many of these. It is a serious obstacle to research that Arabic manuscripts are scattered around the world, many of them difficult to access, time-consuming to find, and expensive to copy. Worse still is what Khalidi (1994: xi) calls 'the daunting obstacle of the size of the historiographic corpus . . . which amounts to several hundred thousand volumes' for the period under study.

In these Arabic sources I have searched for references to Ancient Egypt to establish the interest of the writer in issues relating to Ancient Egypt, and the level of understanding of these issues. This corpus on Ancient Egypt was then analysed for evidence of a reliable understanding of ancient Egyptian themes and materials in the light of our current knowledge in Egyptology. From these I have identified and sometimes attempted to reconstruct medieval Arabic concepts of pre-Islamic Egypt.

A different problem facing research in this area lies in the Arabic sources themselves. Of those which have been published, few have been translated,

edited or commented on in any meaningful way. Medieval Arabic manuscripts on natural sciences, for example medicine, chemistry and mechanics, have been better acknowledged by scholars, but the medieval treatment of the chronicles and antiquities of ancient nations have, on the whole, been deemed fantastic and exotic stories devoid of historical value (Saleh 1980: 39–46; James 1997: 30).

In selecting source material and deciding on its relevance to my objectives I have been guided by my training in Egyptology. I am conscious that my views as a native on what is relevant may often differ from those of an outsider. This problem has been expressed much more ably and fully both by Abdul Latif Tibawi (1979) and by Edward Said (1995) in their analyses of *Orientalism*. I have generally selected writers who are recognised scholars in their fields, and who show a profound interest in Ancient Egypt. I have also used some reliable narratives of epics and stories which reveal perceptions of Egypt's past.

Medieval Arabic can be difficult to translate because of the variety of meanings derived from the same root, and I have come across many serious errors in previous English translations, which have been widely used without awareness of their pitfalls. The task of translating such Arabic texts into English, for someone whose mother tongue is not English, is even more daunting; this was commented upon long ago by no less an authority than Edward Sachau, the translator of Al-Biruni, who called this task 'an act of temerity' (Sachau 1888 1: xlviii). With all this in mind, I have relied on my own translations of the Arabic sources unless otherwise stated. The sources used were all written in Arabic, with a few exceptions of material written in Persian and translated into Arabic (eg Naṣir-e Khisraw *Sefernama*).

I concentrate on Moslem writers, again with a few exceptions, regardless of their ethnic background, as it is usually Islam that incurs blame for cutting Egyptians off from their ancient heritage and pharaonic past. With the spread of Islam, Arabic became for some centuries the *lingua franca* of science and knowledge, used by Moslems and non-Moslems and Arabs and non-Arabs alike. These sources may be classified as:

- accounts of travellers and geographers;
- historical and hagiographic writings;
- books on deciphering ancient scripts;
- accounts and manuals of treasure hunters;
- books on alchemy.

Chapter 1 is an introduction discussing the circumstances that led to the neglect of these Arabic sources in Egyptology and the importance of studying this missing link. Chapter 2 presents some of the sources available to medieval Arabs for their knowledge of Ancient Egypt, and explains the various elements that contributed to the making of an *interpretatio Arabica* of Ancient Egypt. Chapter 3 is devoted to treasure hunters. Egyptian monuments have always been perceived as places of concealment of great treasures. The chapter describes treasure hunters, their manuals, state regulation, and the economics of the profession. Examples are

given of these manuals and their relevance to current archaeological work. Chapter 4 demonstrates how medieval Arab archaeological methods, and descriptions of ancient sites and objects, are in many ways as clear and scientific as those of present day archaeologists. Chapter 5 shows that the interest in ancient Egyptian scripts continued beyond classical writers, and describes attempts by some medieval Arab scholars, mainly alchemists, to decipher the hieroglyphic script, having realised that it has an alphabet. I give examples of Egyptian signs correctly deciphered. Chapter 6 shows the great interest of ancient Egyptian religion for medieval Arabs and illustrates their understanding of its multi-faceted nature and their interpretation of the many intact temples. It discusses the role of magic, the nature of royal cults, animal cults and holy sites as seen through their eyes. Chapter 7 is devoted to discussing Egyptian *mummiya*, mummification and burial practices of both humans and animals as well as the medicinal use of *mummiya* in Arabic medicine. Chapter 8 relates how Egypt was thought of by medieval Arabs as the land of science *par excellence* and gives examples of different scientific *mirabilia* attributed to scientists of pre-Islamic Egypt. Chapter 9 discusses the Arab concept of Egyptian kingship and state administration, and shows the survival of some ancient Egyptian institutions such as *Hrdw n k3p* – ‘Children of the Room’ – into the medieval period. I include a case study of Queen Cleopatra to show how the Arabic romance of this queen differs significantly from its Western counterparts. In my conclusions I make recommendations for further work that I hope others may be inspired to pursue.

As many of the medieval Arabic writers may not be known to readers, I include an appendix of biographies of those whose works have formed the basis of my study.

This book straddles two seemingly different disciplines – Egyptology and medieval Arabic studies. However, it is addressed mainly to an audience with *Egyptological* interests and, though most of the sources used here belong to the field of medieval Arabic studies, I do not follow all the conventions of scholars working in that discipline. I have adapted as much as I could of the conventions of Arabic studies in order to create links between these two artificially separated disciplines, which have for too long been surrounded with insurmountable barriers meant to keep outsiders away. These barriers need no longer remain an obstacle now that researchers can draw on the resources for the benefit of both Egyptology and Arabic studies.

Okasha El Daly
January 2005

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The inspiration behind this research was ignited by a brief meeting with the eminent scholar and historian of Islamic sciences, Fuat Sezgin, at his office in Frankfurt in the summer of 1979. He and his wife Ursula Sezgin are behind the current Renaissance in the field of studies of Islamic Sciences: to them I humbly dedicate this contribution.

My inspiration was sustained by Edward Said's unwavering struggle against the onslaught of cultural imperialism and distorted interpretation of the *other*. From its inception I felt his spirit hovering above my research. May his luminous soul be pleased with this work.

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Abbreviations and Notes

d	died
db	died before
da	died after
d ca	died circa
EI ²	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2nd edn, 1960, Leiden: Brill
PM	B Porter and R Moss, <i>Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings</i> , 1st edn 1927–51, 7 vols, Oxford; 2nd edn 1960, ed J Malek, Oxford: Griffith Institute
WB	A Erman and H Grapow, <i>Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache</i> , 1926–63, 7 vols, Berlin: Akademie (reprint 1971)

Notes

- 1 Primary Arabic sources are referred to as follows: the surname of the author is followed by the first word of the title of the book inside brackets, eg Al-Baghdadi (*Al-Ifadah*: 26). Titles of many Arabic books start with the word *Kitab*, meaning 'Book', so this is disregarded. In cases where a book is widely known under a word other than the first word in its title, I use the generally accepted title: for example, Al-Maqrizi's book *Al-Mawa'iz wa Al-I'tibar* is cited here as *Khiṭaṭ* as it is most commonly known.
- 2 In citing manuscripts, the folio number is followed by the letter *a* for recto and *b* for verso.
- 3 All dates for Arabic materials are given as CE (Common Era). Occasionally I have included the Moslem Hegira dates, in which case they are followed by AH.

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Conventions of Transliteration

ء	‘	ض	d
ا	a	ط	t
ا	a	ظ	z
ب	b	ع	c
ت	t	غ	gh
ث	th	ف	f
ج	j, g	ق	q
ح	h	ك	k
خ	kh	ل	l
د	d	م	m
ذ	dh	ن	n
ر	r	ه	h
ز	z	و	o, u, w
س	s	ى	i, e, ee, iy
ش	sh	ة	ah, t
ص	ṣ		

NB: For Ancient Egyptian letter *alef* = ʾ is used.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE MISSING LINK IN EGYPTOLOGY

The discipline we call Egyptology, the study of Egyptian archaeology, is held to be a product of modern Western scholarship. It is also claimed that it was only when Jean-François Champollion and his European successors succeeded in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs and reading texts that Egyptology was born. Those concerned with the sources for the study of Ancient Egypt usually list them in this order:

- 1 ancient Egyptian sources, basically the remains of the material culture;
- 2 contemporary Near Eastern sources and later classical sources;
- 3 Renaissance sources from the 15th century onwards;
- 4 modern Egyptology, excavation and studies.

Standard studies of sources normally include accounts of European travellers to Egypt, but nowhere do we find any kind of reference to the medieval Egyptian/Arab scholarly contribution to these studies (see for example Baines and Malek 1980: 22–29). Even when one single reference is made in all these studies to one medieval Arabic traveller to Egypt, Al-Baghdadi, it comes after the author has already reached the conclusion that there was ‘little interest in Egypt’s ancient past’ (David 2000: 51–61). So we have a gap in our sources of more than a thousand years, between those of the Classical period and those of the European Enlightenment. This book attempts to narrow that gap and show the value of the contributions during this millennium, in particular those of medieval Egyptian writers.

The book is also an inquiry into the image and interpretation of the culture of Ancient Egypt in medieval Arab sources, from the Moslem annexation of Egypt in the 7th century CE until the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century.

THE CURRENT VIEW

Until the late 18th century, little was known in the West about Ancient Egypt, as is illustrated by quotations such as the following:

The long period of ignorance, during which scholars floundered in a morass of esoteric theories, came to an end with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. (James 1997: 30)

It has also been asserted that continuity from Ancient Egypt to the present was totally absent:

Si la confrontation entre l'Égypte traditionnelle et les cultures grecque et romaine qui s'y sont développées est à la fois un tournant dans l'histoire de l'Égypte et l'occasion d'un renouveau culturel authentique, l'ère chrétienne et, plus tard, l'ère islamique éloignent irrémédiablement l'Égypte de son passé pharaonique. (Valbelle 1994: 38)

In spite of this assertion of discontinuity, Dominique Valbelle follows this alleged fact immediately by recognising that many ancient Egyptian popular practices are still alive today, apparently without seeing any contradiction.

The same can be said of a similar assertion made by Ulrich Haarmann:

Any continuity from ancient to Islamic Egypt was irretrievably and doubly cut off, first by the adoption of Christianity in Egypt in the 4th century and then, three centuries later, by the Islamic conquest. Memories of the world of the pharaohs had long since been forgotten by Egyptians who had been incorporated into the Greek, the Roman, the Byzantine, and, by the 7th century CE, the expanding Islamic world. (Haarmann 2001: 191)

These recent views echo an earlier one by no less an authority than Idris Bell:

With good reason did Mommsen call Islam 'der Henker des Hellenismus' 'the executioner of Hellenism'. In this new world of dogmatism and religious bigotry, Christian or Mahomedan, there was no room left for the clear-eyed sanity of Hellas. Egypt had become once more a part of that Oriental world from which the fiery genius of Alexander had separated her for a thousand years. (Bell 1922: 155; cf his later version: Bell 1948: 134)

These quotations reflect views that were widely held by scholars involved in Egyptology, namely that there was no knowledge of Ancient Egypt, outside the context of European literature, from the Classical to the Enlightenment periods. The quotation from Haarmann is particularly surprising from a scholar of medieval Islamic/Arabic studies. It illustrates a general Eurocentric view that sees the culture of Ancient Egypt through a Western prism. However, such views are not limited to scholars in the West. Even among modern Egyptian scholars we encounter a similar view: for example, El-Shayyal concluded that before the writings on the history of Ancient Egypt by the 19th century Egyptian scholar Rifa'a Al-Ṭaḥṭawi:

Ancient Egyptian history was never given its due appreciation by Muslim historians. First because they knew very little about it, and secondly because that period represented, in their opinion, a period of idolatry which stood in direct contradiction to the monotheism of Islam. (El-Shayyal 1962: 32)

Another eminent Egyptologist, 'Abd Al-ʿAziz Saleh (1980: 39–46), made no mention of any medieval Arab contribution in his massive work on the history of Egypt and Iraq. While citing his sources for the study of Ancient Egypt, he referred to classical sources and then passed directly to the French Expedition at the end of the 18th century. In an earlier book, Saleh (1962: 244) dismissed medieval Arab writers in one single phrase, referring to post-classical writers on

Egyptian civilisation as being 'only associated with myths, magic and fantasies of which they had a greater share than their predecessors'.

This was echoed by Crone and Cook (1977: 114) and Cook (1983), who suggested that medieval Egyptians were not as interested in their ancient heritage as were their counterparts in Iran. It is true that medieval Egyptians do not seem to have displayed a chauvinist nationalism, but they seem no less proud of their past, as can be seen from the list of Egyptian historians who wrote almost exclusively on the history of Egypt from as early as the first century of Islam (Enan 1969, 1991; Donner 1998: 225). They wrote national histories without chauvinist nationalism. This attitude was deeply rooted in the Egyptian mind, which has, as Donald Redford (1986: xvii) put it, 'a strong sense of its own past'. This can be seen, for example, in a relief from the east wall of the second court of the Ramesseum, West Thebes, where attendants at the annual festival of the god Min are shown carrying statues of kings Menes, Nebhepetre Mentuhotep, Ahmose, Amenhotep I and Thutmose I (Murnane 1995: 694). This Egyptian consciousness of national longevity was displayed to Herodotus by the priests of the temple of Ptah at Memphis, who read a long king-list to their visitor from a papyrus, which listed pharaohs from the first human king Menes onwards (Herodotus II: 100; Moyer 2002: 70). This list was perhaps similar to the famous King-List of Abydos. This interest in the past continued into medieval Egypt.

While Haarmann (1980) suggested that medieval Egyptians had indeed some interest in Ancient Egypt, he summarised their general attitude towards Egyptian antiquities as destroyers, treasure hunters and curious tourists (Haarmann 1996: 622). This is not the case with all medieval Egyptians, as many displayed great pride in the country and its antiquities. This can be seen, for example, in the writings of Ibn Al-Kindi (*Faḍail*), Al-Idrisi (*Anwar*), and Al-Qalqashandi (*Ṣubḥ* 3: 304ff and especially 310).

In medieval Arab sources for the history of Egypt it was the norm to start with a chapter on the virtues and excellences of Egypt, as indeed was the case with their treatment of other countries (Gottheil 1907: 258). Indeed, books were dedicated entirely to these virtues of Egypt, as reflected in their titles (eg Al-Kindi *Faḍail*; Ibn Zulaq *Faḍail*).

This same attitude of pride in Egypt and its past can even be seen in accounts of the most religiously pious Arab writers. One example is that of the 10th century geographer/traveller, Al-Muqadasi, who starts his account of Egypt with this sentence:

This is the region of which the pharaoh took pride above all humankind and at the hand of Joseph, maintained the entire world ... It is one of the [two] wings of the world and its glories are countless. (Al-Muqadasi *Aḥsan*: 193)

This was not a romantic conception of Egypt, since on the same page, and also later, Al-Muqadasi is aware of the country's shortcomings:

When this region is fortunate, then you need not ask about its richness and low prices; but when it [suffers] drought, then Allah is the [only] refuge from its famine, which lasts seven years, so that they (the people) eat dogs and are afflicted with most terrible epidemics. (Al-Muqadasi *Aḥsan*: 202)

This is a more accurate reflection of the attitude among medieval Arab writers with regard to the past and present glories of Egypt, as well as to its disadvantages.

OBSTACLES THAT FACED THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS EGYPTOLOGY

It is perhaps as a result of the views quoted above that the study of Egyptology, which since Napoleonic times has been led by European and American scholars and institutions, has almost totally ignored the vast number of medieval Arabic sources and other contributions in Arabic written between the 7th and 16th centuries. In 1942 the eminent British Egyptologist HW Fairman wrote that, although Egyptology was an international science, the Egyptian contribution to it was 'Nil' (Reid 1985: 244).

It is quite clear that the study by medieval Egyptians and Arabs of Ancient Egypt, its language, religion, monuments and general history, flourished long before the earliest European Renaissance contact. Contrary to the prevailing view that Moslems/Arabs/Egyptians had no interest in Ancient Egypt, the sources show not only a keen interest, but also serious scholarship that seeks to understand and benefit from the study of Ancient Egypt.

However, this process of study was discontinued and obstacles were placed in the way of the development of a later indigenous school of Egyptology, for reasons which have been discussed by Mokhtar (1965), Reid (1985, 1990, 2002) and Wood (1998). The main reason was the desire of early Western Egyptologists and others to keep Egyptians out of Egyptology by discouraging them from participation and study, thus leading to their marginalisation and to inevitable Western dominance of the subject. Yet Reid (2002) was able to show in his painstakingly researched recent work that many modern Egyptians are proud of their pharaonic as well as their post-pharaonic heritage.

It must be recognised that there was a trend among some Westerners to object to the teaching or promotion of native Egyptians, and this was not limited to Egyptology, as sciences such as medicine suffered a similar fate (Sonbol 2000: 58). Even today, Arab scholars complain bitterly about the lack of indigenous schools dedicated to writing history from a native viewpoint rather than merely reproducing Western texts (Saidan 1988: 184ff). The same complaint is made by young Egyptian scholars, who complain bitterly about the Western dominance of Egyptology (Saied 1999).

The situation was made worse by the colonial educational authorities, who excluded Egyptian history from the curriculum. For example, in 1905, secondary school history courses almost exclusively concerned European history, with textbooks bearing the following titles (Salamah 1966: 288):

- *Outlines of General History* by Renouf.
- *Landmarks of European History* by MacDougal.
- *General Sketch of European History* by Freeman.

Unfortunately, the effect of this focus on European history lasted long after the end of colonialism, as noted by the Egyptian scholar of the history of science ʿAbd Al-Ḥalīm Muntāṣer, who could not recall ever hearing the name of any Arab scholar in any science during his primary, secondary or university education, but only the names of European scholars (Muntāṣer 1973: 80). Sadly, this has also been my own experience whilst studying Egyptology. The eminent Egyptian scientist Rushdi Said complained in his recently published memoirs that his history lessons on the pharaonic period were very few and did not include ‘any ties between us and these ancient [Egyptians]’ (Said 2003: 16). One of the serious implications for Egyptology courses in Egypt is that our ancient history is taught from a Eurocentric viewpoint. Thus, for example, the Persian kings who conquered Egypt in the 5th century BCE are portrayed as being full of hatred towards the Egyptians and their religion, exactly what their contemporary Greek/*European* enemies wanted to believe (Tuplin 1991: 259f). In fact there is no evidence in our archaeological record of any Persian atrocities (cf Vasunia 2001: 21 n 34). It is true that Egyptians did rebel against Persian rule, but they did this with equal vigour against all foreign rulers and occasionally also against some of their own monarchs.

An additional problem during the British Mandate was that teaching took place mainly in English under the instruction of a leading missionary, Mr Dunlop, who was in charge of Egyptian education, and who excluded native Arabic-speaking teachers (Marlowe 1970: 290–92). Indeed, Arabic was treated as a dead language and was taught in the same way that Latin was taught in the West. In addition to all this, the British High Commissioner, Lord Cromer, insisted that Egyptians would have to be christianised if they were to have any hope of being civilised (Cromer 1908 2: 535ff). Under Lord Cromer and his colleagues, the sole aim of education policy was to produce Egyptians who would be suitable only for the lower echelons of government bureaucracy (Lloyd 1933 1: 162).

Another reason for the exclusion of Egyptians may have been the desire to claim ancient Egyptians as proto-Europeans (Fletcher and Montserrat 1998: 402) by showing that only Europeans were interested in the study of their history (cf Dittmann 1936). Such a view was not limited to Europeans. Ismael Pasha, the ruler of Egypt between 1863 and 1879, aspired to make Egypt ‘*European*’, styling himself as a ‘*European ruler*’, at least in appearance (Vatikiotis 1980: 73; Reid 2002: 96). Prominent native Egyptian scholars such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn and Ahmad Lutfy Al-Sayyid voiced similar views, and attempted to set out the foundations for closer cultural and historical links with Europe by teaching Egyptian history with an emphasis on the Greco-Roman period at the expense of its pharaonic past (Reid 2002: 211). Indeed, in 1938, Ḥusayn wrote a still widely respected book entitled *The Future of Culture in Egypt* in which he said it was ‘utter nonsense to consider Egypt as part of the East’ (Ḥusayn 1938: 24), though he was in fact referring to the Far East (China, Japan and India), which he suggested had nothing in common with Egypt. This may have been a result of his French education with its Hellenistic influence (Barbulesco 2002: 297). But Ḥusayn was wrong. Take the example of India. Sir Flinders Petrie excavated evidence of an Indian presence in Egypt in what he called the ‘Foreign Quarter’ in the southern part of Memphis (Petrie 1909a: 3 (7); 1909b: 13; Harle 1992). Some fascinating insights into cultural