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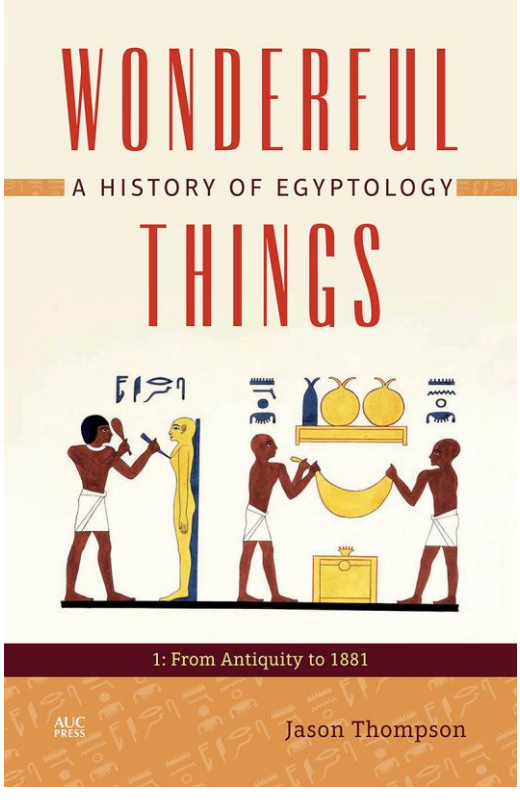
Review

WONDERFUL THINGS: A HISTORY OF EGYPTOLOGY 1: FROM ANTIQUITY TO 1881

By Jason Thompson
AUC Press, 2015

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This volume explores the study of ancient Egypt and is the first in a planned series of three monographs on the history of Egyptology. Jason Thompson can be credited with the laudable effort of bringing together all the extensive sources on well-known personalities that shaped the history of the discipline such as Napoleon, Champollion, Belzoni, Lepsius, and Mariette, but also on many of the supposedly minor characters that influenced the study of Egypt's culture and history to an often-significant extent. The book covers the very beginnings of scientific interest into Egypt's past and ends in 1881, at the threshold to the first large-scale excavations that would change the face of Egypt and Egyptology forever. The subsequent events and involved players will be covered in volumes two and three of the series.



"Wonderful things"— the first words Howard Carter said while peeking through a hole in the sealed entrance of Tutankhamun's tomb, barely lit by a candle—set the tone for Thompson's narrative, marked by incredible discoveries that have not lost any of their appeal and fascination today. Following Thompson's run-through of the early history of the discipline it becomes clear, at the same time, how our understanding and even more so visual perception of ancient Egypt is shaped by those early days of exploration. Graffiti on every single monument in Egypt and in all different languages, the removal of obelisks already during Roman times, the vanishing of the beautiful coloring that was removed by plaster casts and molds, and the clearance of temples and tombs from sand and superstructures or built-in features of later times by the first excavators are all marked expressions of the discovery of ancient Egypt and clearly influence how we experience the Egyptian landscape and monuments today.

When can we actually speak of Egyptology as a discipline? Was it Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 or Champollion's *Lettre à M. Dacier* on the decipherment of the hieroglyphs in 1822? Thompson explores this question beginning with the first textually and

archaeologically attested ventures into the past in antiquity—the ancient Egyptians' own interest into their culture and history—followed by the first outside look by the Greeks and Romans. He then continues the journey from medieval times, through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, to the end of the 19th century, thus covering less well-known periods of endeavor into the discovery of ancient Egypt. Thompson's insight into the medieval period in Egypt fills a gap in the literature on the history of Egyptology since this era is often only cursorily treated for its lack of information on travelers and a general interest in Egyptian antiquity. Contacts between Europe and Egypt were few after the rise of Islam and the knowledge of hieroglyphs had been lost.

What distinguishes Thompson's *Wonderful Things* from other accounts of the history of Egyptology is his comprehensive treatment of all the lesser-known characters alongside the major figures that shaped the discipline of Egyptology. One such group came together in the first decades of the 19th century, after Napoleon's expedition and the beginning of the major sell-off of Egyptian artifacts by treasure hunters working on behalf of the European consuls. Thompson vividly describes the scene of "a remarkable group of Egyptologist and orientalists (…) [who] assembled in Egypt during the 1820s" (149). In contrast to the well-known rivals Salt, Belzoni, and Drovetti and their chase for Egyptian artifacts, this group of individuals often acted on their own supported by private funds, mostly respected each other, and exchanged knowledge about their discoveries. A fascinating story revolves around a location in Western Thebes known as the *Qasr Wilkinson* or "Wilkinson's house." John Gardner Wilkinson, later Sir Gardner Wilkinson, who can rightfully be called the father of British Egyptology, took up residence in one of the tombs in Sheikh Abd al-Qurna and thus started a trend that many later Egyptologists and archaeologists followed. Halfway up in the cliffs, Theban Tomb 83 of a vizier and mayor of Thebes, ᶜAmechu, commanded the best view over the Tombs of the Nobles and the mortuary temples along the edge of the floodplain. Wilkinson not only repurposed the long terrace with its eight pillars, building additional walls and using wood and cartonnage from sarcophagi and coffins found in the tomb for cooking and heating, but also studied the wall paintings of this and other neighboring tombs in many sketches which eventually resulted in his publication *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians.* The house remained in use over many generations of travelers, explorers and scholars such as Robert Hay, Karl Lepsius, and Alexander Rhind who lived, studied and entertained in this unusual abode. A guestbook established by Lepsius yields a remarkable collection of signatures by Egyptologists, but also important personages of cultural and political life. It is now kept at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. This fruitful cooperation of scholars stands out among an ever-increasing decay of Egyptian monuments accelerated not only by European treasure hunters but also by the Egyptian authority itself. Monuments were torn down for new building projects and Thompson quotes a figure of "thirteen entire temples [that] were lost in Egypt between 1810 and 1828" (217). Many of those riches only exist in the note- and sketchbooks of those early scholars.

Thompson challenges the often-encountered view of the heroes of Egyptology such as Jean-Francois Champollion and Auguste Mariette, who are mostly seen in a very positive light for their accomplishments concerning the language, material culture, and protection of ancient Egypt. He, however, also reveals their arrogance and insensitivity vis-à-vis colleagues, competitors or archaeology in general. Champollion's unwillingness to recognize the achievements of Thomas Young in the decipherment of the hieroglyphs runs in the same vein as Mariette's "change of mind" regarding the sale of Egyptian antiquities. This only came about after he himself had illegitimately uncovered thousands of artifacts from his Serapeum excavations and sent them in a cloak-and-dagger operation to France to enhance his reputation and gain him a better position at the Louvre.

A very interesting chapter, "Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Art, Photography, and Literature," describes recording methods and techniques from Renaissance times onward. The use of watercolor in the field and its reproduction for print publications of the travelogues, and studies of those early scholars in woodcut, steel engraving, and lithography, paved the way for a medium that was about to revolutionize the recording and preservation of the ancient Egyptian monuments—photography. "Egypt, with its richly varied subject matter and beautifully clear light, played a leading role in the development of photography from the beginning" (243). Photography as a method of documentation for excavation was first used and reproduced in 1855. But it also served to visually transmit Egypt's riches to an audience far away, in the same way as Napoleon's expedition and the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* had triggered the first wave of Egyptomania in Europe. With the introduction of the steamship in the mid-19th century, the first railway from Cairo to Alexandria and Luxor by the end of the century, tourist packages offered by Thomas Cook & Son that combined travel, lodging and guided tours to popular sites, and the publication of a new literary genre—the travel guide—a fascinating insight is given into the development of early tourism in Egypt.

The novel style of the book with endnotes and references in the back and without illustrations makes it an easy read, captivating, and hard to put down. Many quotations throughout the text paint a picture of Egypt, its landscape and monuments at the time and take the reader on a journey that, even without actual figures, is colored by the vivid images evoked from the travelers' and explorers' accounts. Thompson plans to publish a future volume and video series that will illustrate the visual aspect of the history of Egyptology. Quotations at the beginning of each chapter furthermore set the tone for subsequent developments and thus make it easy to follow the narrative. Thompson excels at a light writing style that lacks nothing of a critical and thoroughly academic evaluation of the different characters and their contributions to Egyptology. He can be congratulated for this fine publication. This volume and the following editions will certainly become a standard read in Egyptology and for an interested audience from neighboring disciplines and the public. Volumes two and three in this series will be eagerly awaited.