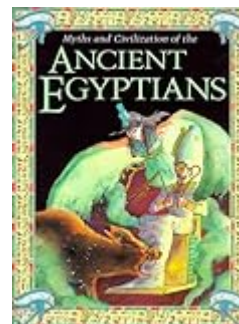




Sarah Quie. *Myths and Civilization of the Ancient Egyptians.* New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1999. 44 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87226-282-9.



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Myths are wondrous stories, filled with heroes and heroines, epic battles, and fantastic places. As tales, they can stand on their own and be recounted with great success. However, myths also function on a deeper level. From accounts of the creation of the world and natural phenomena to the inception of such institutions as kingship, these sacred stories have always told universal truths about the world in which we live, and thus reflect a people's history and beliefs. This additional layer of meaning is a more difficult concept to communicate to younger folk.

We therefore welcome this book, which links mythological tales from ancient Egypt to the everyday world in which the ancient Egyptians lived. The retelling of the myths endeavors to "explain why the Egyptians believed what they did, or behaved as they did," as the author explains in the Introduction (p. 5). Wonderfully illustrated and laid out in a clear and concise format, the book offers information that is easy to find in a flowing narrative.

The book begins with an introduction that explains its layout: each of its nine sections begins with the telling of a myth, which is then followed by an account of a particular facet of Egyptian civilization that relates to the myth just told. Here, the reviewer objects to the author's own description of the latter part (p. 5) as "a non-fiction spread of Egyptian society." Since the members of

a given society always hold a myth to be a true account, the teachers and students are immediately shortchanged since they are led to believe that the myths are simply "tall tales," recounted to entertain the population. However, it is a teacher's role to get the students to put themselves into the shoes of the people they are exploring—here, in effect getting the students to accept that the ancient Egyptians were real people. By implying that myths are not true stories, the author somehow distances her readers from her subject matter. Only when we accept that ancient Egyptians were actual people, who lived on the continent of Africa thousand of years ago and accomplished many wonderful deeds, can we begin to properly understand their civilization. The sort of detachment implied by the author's remark may foster the kind of attitude that accepts all those silly accounts of extraterrestrials having built the pyramids.

The first section opens with an account of the creation of the world by the sun god, which is then followed by a spread on geography and history. A chart nicely illustrates the cycle of the Nile flood. Here, teachers could constructively contrast this older state of affairs with contemporary Egypt's controlled flow of water through the use of the Aswan dam. While it is true that the dam has changed the ecology of Egypt forever, and not always for the better, it is also true that Egypt

did not suffer from the horrible drought of the 1980s, as the countries to the south of Egypt did.

The second section tells the story of the murder of the good king Osiris by his evil brother Seth, and of the role of Isis, Osiris' wife and sister (the book—perhaps wisely—skips the sister part), in bringing him back to life long enough to foster a son, the god Horus. For teachers who wish to impart a more inclusive look at ancient Egyptian religion to their students, it might be good to point out that Isis is really the glue that keeps the whole story together. From the introductory episode of the murder of Osiris to the second part of the story, where Isis hides in the swamps and raises Horus, to the third part, where Horus avenges his father, Isis is the only character that continually appears throughout the myth of Osiris. Following the mythical episode is a section on Egyptian religion. An illustration of a temple in cut-away fashion nicely points out its major architectural features. There are also remarks on priests, religious festivals, the after-life, and mummification. The comments on the Ka and the Ba are less successful. While the function of the Ka as the entity that will spiritually partake of the food left in the tomb is properly explained, the function of the Ba is basically omitted. The Ba is what made one person different from another, essentially what we today would refer to as the personality.

The third section tells the story of the sun god's nightly journey through the Underworld, which is connected to burial customs. This might seem like a bit of a stretch, but the mention of the Underworld is the obvious link here. Following the myth are remarks on embalming and canopic jars, the weighing of the heart ceremony (a theme that is repeated in a later section), and the development and the meaning of the pyramids.

Next comes the last portion of the Osirian myth, where a now-grown Horus avenges his father by fighting his uncle Seth over the inheritance of Osiris. Entitled "The Battle for Kingship," it tells of the titanic battles between the two gods and the role of Isis in them. Juxtaposed to this is a segment on the role of the pharaoh, the gods who protected him, the royal iconography, the position of the queen, and some comments on a few famous kings.

The fifth section begins with the story of the god Thoth—god of wisdom and learning, and patron of scribes—coaxing the fierce lioness-goddess Hathor back from Nubia, where she had gone in a fit of anger. This is paired with remarks on the role of the scribe in ancient Egyptian society. The various scripts used to write the

ancient Egyptian language are well explained, as are the tools and writing surfaces employed by scribes. A sidebar on funerary texts is included (here, perhaps the fact that the Pyramid Texts were written on the *inside* walls of the pyramids might have been added). Remarks on the literacy rate among women are welcome.

This is followed by the story of King Snefru and the Boating Party, where the king is entertained by young women rowing him in a boat. When one of the rowers loses a piece of jewelry, a magician is called upon to retrieve it. He does this by parting the waters of the lake, evoking the episode in the Book of Exodus when Moses parts the waters of the Sea of Reeds to allow the Israelites to escape Pharaoh's army. The link here is the women and the jewelry, for the next page tells us about Women and Family Life. The point is well made that ancient Egyptian women—who could inherit, own, manage, and dispose of their own property at will—were in a better legal position than other women in the ancient Near East and the eastern Mediterranean.

Although the story of the Boating Party can hardly be called a myth—it falls in the category of folk tales—it illustrates an interesting point that Egyptian kings did not always fare well in the collective memory of their people. This story was written in the Middle Kingdom period (Dynasties Eleven to Thirteen, twenty-first to eighteenth centuries B.C.E.) but is set in the time of King Snefru (twenty-seventh century B.C.E.), the first king of the Fourth Dynasty and the father of King Khufu (Cheops). Here, Snefru is depicted as a bored old man who can only be amused by the sight of scantily-clad young women (they're made to change into see-through fishnet dresses) and he gets fairly petulant when the women stop rowing and can't be persuaded to go on. On the same papyrus is another tale—the next story told in the book—this time featuring King Khufu. The latter wishes to be entertained by a magician renowned for his ability to rejoin heads severed from their bodies. When the king asks for a prisoner to be brought in to have him decapitated, the magician is horrified and suggests instead that this be done to animals! Thus, we see one of Egypt's greatest monarchs, the builder of the Great Pyramid, portrayed as a callous and cruel ruler.[1]

The book "cleans up" the story for us by not mentioning this sordid detail. Instead, the author concentrates on the magician's ability to eat huge quantities of food (he is said to daily consume five hundred loaves of bread, half an ox, and one hundred jugs of beer [the beer is not mentioned in the book]) to segue into her next segment, on

Food and Daily Life. The various kinds of food are nicely detailed for us, as are the manners of preparation and preserving food. Remarks on furniture and houses are also included.

Regarding magicians, teachers might be interested to pursue this aspect of ancient Egypt. Not only can the obvious be mentioned about the use of magic in ancient Egypt,[2] but also the fact that the country was renowned in antiquity for its magicians. Most of us are familiar with the contests between Moses and his brother Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7-8), but also relevant is the little known story of an Egyptian magician named Pancrates who was able to make broomsticks walk and draw water for him. The tale was first written by Lucian in the second century A.D.[3] and was subsequently retold by various authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western Europe. One of these tales inspired the French composer Paul Dukas to write the symphonic scherzo "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (1897); the latter is better known to most North Americans today through Walt Disney's interpretation in *Fantasia* (1940), where Mickey Mouse struggles with unruly brooms.

Another tale follows, that of "The Shipwrecked Sailor." This tells of a sailor marooned on a Red Sea island inhabited by a magic snake (a metaphor for the sun god Atum-Re), who ends up saving the seafarer and in the process gives him a boat full of products from the area. This tale is juxtaposed with a segment on Trade and Expansion. The latter considers the products brought into Egypt by trade, as well as the materials exported by Egyptians, gold, papyrus, and grain being the most obvious. The point is well made that the lapis lazuli found in Egypt came from as far away as modern-day Afghanistan. These remarks on trade are accompanied by allusions to war and accounts of a few famous battles.

The last section deals with the mythical episode of the final judgment undergone by every deceased person in the Underworld. There, the deceased's thoughts and actions—symbolized by their heart—were weighed against the feather of Truth before they could be granted a blissful eternal life. The theme here is the importance of having lived a good life while on earth, and this entails comments on everyday life, from grain harvest and irrigation, to livestock, fishing, and wine making. An additional segment on animals and their importance in ancient Egyptian civilization closes the book.

As can be seen, the links between the mythical episodes and those on the life of the ancient Egyptians are often clever but sometimes somewhat strained. One

cannot blame the author for this. The assignment was a difficult one, and she has largely carried it off successfully, and for this we must thank her. Unfortunately, the publication is marred by a number of factual errors which diminish its value as a teaching tool and which keep me from recommending it without reservation. Herewith a few comments and corrections, which will hopefully be of use to the teachers using the book in their classrooms:

On pp. 6 and 8, the creator god is not Amun-Re, but Atum-Re

P. 8: Egyptian civilization is much older than 5000 years, as the text itself goes on to describe. This is the sort of error an editor should have caught. The oft-repeated quote that Egypt is "the gift of the Nile" is as inaccurate as thinking Humphrey Bogart said "Play it again, Sam" in the movie *Casablanca*. Herodotus (Book 2: 5) actually wrote that Egypt was the gift "of the river" (*tou potamou* in Greek). The Nile was of course the intended river, but we should always be careful with quotes from original texts.

P. 9: The identification of the plump blue figure in the illustration (a vignette accompanying Chapter Seventeen of the Book of the Dead) as the Nile is inaccurate. The hieroglyphic caption clearly labels the figure as Heh, an aquatic fecundity figure connected with protection.

P. 13: The main figure in the boat being towed is not Khnum, but the god Re as he is represented in the Underworld. The text goes on to describe the figure properly on the next page, in the account of the sun god's nightly journey, although the heading there should be changed from "Amun-Ra's Nightly Journey" to "Atum-Ra's."

P. 16: The assertion that "hundreds of huge pyramids" were built for pharaohs is somewhat of an overstatement. The number built during the classic period of pyramid building in Egypt—the Old and Middle Kingdoms, from the early twenty-seventh to the late eighteenth centuries B.C.E.—is under forty and the pyramids erected for the Sudanese kings at el-Kurru, Nurri, and Meroe from the early eighth century B.C.E. to the mid-fourth century A.D. number around 180.

P. 17: Cheops' pyramid is not "built of granite," but of limestone; only the burial chamber is made of granite. On the same page, the sphinx is not the guardian of all the pyramids of Giza, but is simply part of the temple complex belonging to Chephren's pyramid.

P. 18: In the discussion on the contest between Horus and Seth and their "boats of stone," the author missed

the point of the joke in the story. Horus built a wooden boat but covered it with gypsum, not limestone, to make it look like a stone boat. If the boat had been covered with limestone, as the author states, it would have sunk to the bottom of the river, just as Seth's boat—made entirely of stone—did.

P. 20: The representation of Osiris shows not a royal but a divine beard, as the curl at the end of the beard indicates.

P. 26: The name of the magician is Djadja-em-anekh, not Djada-em-anekh. Additionally, I am not sure why the author chose to make up part of the dialogue in the Story of the Boating Party. The magician does not say “for their beauty will combine with the loveliness of Egypt's green fields and shores, to lift your spirits,” but “As you will see the eautiful fish pools of your lake, so will you also see its [the lake's] beautiful fields and shores. Thus will your heart be refreshed by it.” This may be a small point, but ancient Egyptian literature is so careful with language—especially in its use of couplets, as we find in the first sentence here—that it seems a shame to alter the original text for the sake of brevity.

P. 28: The representation of the woman sowing grain in the Underworld is not from a tomb painting, as the caption implies, but from a twenty-first dynasty papyrus now in the Cairo Museum, belonging to a woman named Cheritwebeshet.

P. 36: It is not quite accurate to say that “Egypt's natural boundaries kept it safe from foreign invasions for 3000 years,” especially when one considers that ancient Egypt's history per se (as opposed to its prehistoric period, which goes back as far as 5000 B.C.E. when agriculture is first introduced) is three thousand years long. While the geography of the country did indeed keep it

safe for long periods of time, Egypt was invaded from the east in the seventeenth century B.C.E. (“the Hyksos period”), from the west in the tenth century B.C.E. (“the Libyan period”), from the south in the eighth century B.C.E. (“the Napatan [Sudanese] period”), then by the Assyrians in the early seventh, the Persians in the late sixth, the Macedonians in the late fourth, and finally the Romans in the late first century B.C.E. On the same page, it would have been more precise to say that King Thutmose III fought fourteen campaigns rather than “battles,” as it is difficult to ascertain how many battles would have occurred in a given campaign.

P. 38: the shaduf was not “invented” in the eighteenth dynasty, but imported at that time from south-west Asia, where it had been in use as far back as the third millennium B.C.E.

Notes:

[1]. In this respect, it is interesting to see Herodotus, two thousand years later, being told of Cheops' cruelty by the local Egyptians (Book 2: 124-7).

[2]. A useful and accessible book on this topic is Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

[3]. For a full account of the transmission of the story, see Hans D. Schneider, *Shabtis. An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 1977), Vol. I, pp. 349-52. For the story itself, see Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 64-65.

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