

**Title: Remembering Egypt:  
Historical Perspectives on the  
Social Construction of the Image  
of Egypt**

By

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## **Introduction**

The complex development of the study of ancient Egypt by the West has been varied and not altogether synchronous with the contemporary Arabic investigations down through the ages. The modern discipline of Egyptology draws upon a wide range of expertise and sources: living traditions, archaeological excavations, museology, and religious, Classical and Biblical texts.

The Hellenistic and Coptic texts led to the rise of Antiquarianism and Hermeticism in particular. Hermeticism is prevalent in the Arabic texts surviving from Medieval Egypt, and it also resulted in an investigative approach that influenced the first European scientific scholars of ancient Egypt. Inherent flaws, such as the almost exclusory focus upon king lists and religious texts to the neglect of cultural and landscape theory and practice, exist within Egyptology. Although addressed to a degree from the 1980s onwards, these flaws are fixed within the public perception of the discipline. This has kept open the avenues for alternative explanations to be exploited in terms of the occult and esoteric.

Egyptology must advance beyond its Eurocentric core to have a significant impact upon the above alternative movements. Even Barry Kemp's Marxist-inspired model (Kemp 1989) utilises a theoretical paradigm originating in Europe and transplanted into an Egyptian setting, running the risk of imposing Eurocentric principles on a non-European society. It is through the understanding of the intellectual origins of Egyptology, and the reasons and motives behind the prominent alternative interpretations, which continue to be put forward, that Egyptologists can better, engage the archaeological and textual materials, and articulate with the public who ultimately fund such endeavours.

These are the mechanisms of trans-cultural transmissions and the resultant models of the bodies of knowledge with diverse intellectual roots.

## Background

The development of Egyptology today as a scientific discipline has not blunted the popularity and spread of Hermeticism; it survives and thrives particularly in the works of alternative authors (Bauval 1999, Bauval and Gilbert 1995, Bauval and Hancock 1996, Hancock 1995, West 1993). Of these authors, John Anthony West is the most vocal supporter today of the esoteric Schwaller de Lubicz who undertook years of study at the Luxor Temple.

These concerns over the biases within the discipline have been particularly highlighted by African and Africanist scholars on “how to liberate historical knowledge in Africa from the paradigmatic constraints of European historiography and the colonial library” (Schmidt 1995, 119). It has resulted in the development of “new avenues of inquiry, new sources of historical evidence, and new theoretical perspectives” (Schmidt 1995, 119). However, unintended consequences have arisen for alternative models of ancient Egypt. The ancient Greeks praised ancient Egypt and consistently stated it was the source of their knowledge; this is termed the “Ancient Model” by Martin Bernal (1991, 2003). Bernal claims that, by the middle of the nineteenth century A.D., this model was replaced by the “Aryan Model” which downplayed the achievements of the ancient Egyptians, introduced racist hyper-diffusion migrations of people and cultures into the Nile Valley from the north (Emery 1991), and laid Classical Greece as the forerunner of later Western civilisation. Bernal revives the “Ancient Model” in terms of his “Revised Ancient Model” and goes as far as to postulate Hyksos rulers in Crete and Mycenaean Greece.

Bernal’s model is placed within the broader spectrum of Afrocentrism, whose modern founder was Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986), a Senegal archaeologist and physicist (MacDonald 2003). These politically inspired, hyper-diffusionist versions of a “Black Africa” have been challenged in the West through two contrasting and yet complimentary strategies. The first, as embodied by *Black Athena Revisited* (Leftowitz and Rogers 1996), attacks its intellectual foundations. The second strategy is more reconciliatory in outlook, emphasising the requirement for basic solid scientific teachings and practices in African countries and amongst the Black

communities in America especially. This latter approach is particularly exemplified in the proposals placed before her Egyptological colleagues by Ann Macy Roth (1995), in a paper entitled “Building Bridges to Afrocentrism”.

### **Origins of Hermeticism**

Whitehouse (1995, 20) summarises the principle lines of inquiry taken into the origins and development of the esoteric and hermetic doctrines: that they drew upon aspects of ancient Egyptian religion prior to the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C and developed into a distinctive stream of thought which has heavily influenced subsequent generations of Arabic and European scholars via the effect on the religious systems of the Greco-Roman periods.

The texts from the Middle Kingdom display isolated occurrences of cryptography and these blossomed later on in the New Kingdom and filtered down to have an impact upon the Greco-Roman periods (Hornung 2001). The word “lord” is *neb* and animals such as crocodiles, lions, sphinxes and bulls, which had connections with royalty, could be utilised in place of the literal word. Thus there was a progression away from the earlier systems of writing which aimed at clarity of meaning to a system which promoted and espoused polyvalence (Hornung 2001). This is epitomised in Horapollo’s work *Hieroglypka*, dating from the fifth century A.D., wherein he translates individual signs correctly but places a symbolic interpretation upon the resulting renderings.

The Greek name of the ancient Egyptian god of writing Thoth, Hermes Trismegistus, makes its first appearance in the third century A.D., as dated by the Genevan scholar Isaac Casaubon in 1614 (Haycock 2003). The antecedents of hermetic belief expressed in *Corpus Hermeticum* have been traced back to the formulations of the concept of the divine from the post-Amarna Period of the New Kingdom (Assmann 1989). The intellectual climate of the period, with particular reference to Akhenaten’s monotheism, stressed a changing relationship between mankind and the gods. There is a unity of the cosmos, where sub-ordination is transferred from individual-society to humankind-god and the protector of humanity is not a man but an omniscient deity

who distributes favours and disgrace in reciprocity for the actions of individuals (Assmann 1989). Therefore, god dispenses justice according his own want and virtue is embodied within himself, protecting the weak and innocent as stated on the Stela Louvre, C 256 (Assmann 1989, 76-77):

His *b3w* (punishing power) is vehement,  
 He is more powerful than Sakhmet,  
 Like fire in a storm;  
 His mercy is high, he takes care of him who adores him,  
 He turns to heal his suffering.  
 For he looks upon men, there is no one whom he does not know,  
 And he listens to millions of them.  
 Who could resist thy wrath who avert the fury of thy power ?

The Amarna Period exerted additional influence on the religious strains of thought which came afterwards through the compilation of the Book of the Heavenly Cow. It is a forerunner of later Gnostic teachings about redemption (Hornung 2001). It regards the world as imperfect and changing from an original primordial state where humans were undetached from the gods. The views are also evident in the el-Arish noas texts, dating from the fourth century B.C., and the Book of the Faiyum and the Esna temples texts from the Roman Period. Reflections are found in Gnostic writings about the “fall of humankind” and the requirement for redemption.

Combined with magical texts written in Greek which aimed at triumphing over destined fate, these laid the foundation for the supposition of initiation rituals. The Isis Mysteries, also dating from the Greek rule, had three levels of initiation and these are reported by Apuleius in Book 11 of *Metamorphoses* (Hornung 2001). However, contrary to the beliefs of esoteric movements, initiations, which focused upon the concept of a symbolic death, were not “mysteries” in the sense of secrecy. For example, the “Osiris Mysteries” were a drama whose principle focused upon a procession viewed by the public and conducted in an orderly manner (Hornung 2001). The populace prior to the Greco-Roman periods had no access to the religions which were preached and practiced in the confines of the temples. Therefore the New Kingdom rituals had a restrictive nature (Hornung 2001). It is only with the Greco-

Roman periods that these boundaries disappear and the texts are revamped to become the possession of “initiates”.

### **Medieval Arabic scholarship**

For most Western Egyptologists, the study of ancient Egypt begins at the end of the eighteenth century A.D. However, this Eurocentric viewpoint has had a more serious impact, namely that of denying continuity between ancient Egypt, Christian Egypt, Medieval Islamic Egypt and the present day Egyptians. Only recently have scholars begun to pay serious attention to the Medieval Arabic manuscripts.

The effect of seeing ancient Egypt through this Eurocentric perspective has been to deny the appreciation of the Medieval Egyptians of their pagan past, and indeed their investigations thereof into it. The failure is one of distinguishing between what El Daly (2003, 40) terms “chauvinistic nationalism” and “their interest in ancient matters in general and in Ancient Egypt in particular”. The Islamic teachers held the ancient monuments in Egypt in esteem and they encouraged their students both to visit and study them. Attempts were made by Arabs to decipher and interpret the ancient Egyptian religious texts and reliefs (Figure 1).

The major incentive for studying the ancient monuments and texts came from the Quran. Quran 29: 20 commands Muslims to “travel through the earth and see how creation started” (El Daly 2003, 41). There was also an allure of gold. Ibn Tulun found 4000 kg of pharaonic gold and subsequently declared that any such exploitation of tombs would have to be sanctioned by the state. The genuine interest in protecting and investigating the monuments is vividly portrayed in two accounts (El Daly 2003). In the first, situated in the sixteenth century A.D., an arrest was made of a man accused of selling mummia to Europeans stolen from tombs. The second is the number of travel accounts and the wide variety of sources available with information as to the respect in which the monuments’ legacy was held.



Figure 1. 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Arabic recording of a 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty stela bearing Amenemhet II's name. From (El Daly 2003)

El Daly (2003) provides an account of a thirteenth century A.D. historian who utilised various methods to describe the pyramids. The historian, Aby Ja'far Al-Idrisi, detailed where they were situated, described their exteriors and interiors, analysed their construction in line with contrasting his findings with those of other scholars, studied the mineral content of the binding substances to determine their sources of origin, and repeated visits to clarify and re-examine his previous observations under different conditions.

Medieval Arabs were familiar with the ancient Egyptian temples through visitations as well as occasionally being utilised as residences. The tenth century A.D. alchemist Ibn Umail interpreted the hieroglyphs in the temples through his worldview as alchemical signs, such as a crowned male representing the sun and therefore the alloy gold (El Daly 2003). Aside from the extreme alchemist interpretations, other Arab writers drew correlations between the temples and what they believed was the ancient Egyptian practice of magic. Indeed, the belief in ancient Egyptian magic was a fundamental cornerstone of the Medieval Egyptian view of their ancestors (El Daly 2003).

The contribution of Medieval Arab scholars to the decipherment of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs is generally not well known and appreciated (El Daly 2003). The Classical scholars in Europe viewed each hieroglyph as a symbol representative of a concept, which changed in the seventeenth century A.D. through the efforts of Kircher. Kircher, in proposing that the hieroglyphs also represented ideas and sounds, claims to have drawn upon a minimum of 40 Arabic scholars and this was likely due to the arrival of twelfth century A.D. manuscripts from Egypt into Europe in his era (El Daly 2003).

### **Current hermetic models of cultural transmission**

The nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of an intellectual change in the approach to ancient Egypt, the ripples of which affect the discipline of Egyptology today. There was a shift in the patterns of mummy consumption in the first half of the nineteenth century, away from the example outlined earlier whereby mummia were sold to Europeans during the late Middle Ages. The commodity-rooted practice of

mummiæ exploitation for medicinal practices was replaced by what has been termed “emerging aesthetic and scientific-historicist discourses” (Colla 2000). The construct of Egypt moved beyond a consumption of particular items towards an image introducing a cultivating of its history, shaped in the emergence of a new discipline, Egyptology, and the continuing opening of its borders to European explorers. The directionality and formulation in Western thought was further reinforced by Carter’s discovery of the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings in 1922 (Curl 1994).

A Western manifestation of this fascination in all things Egyptian has resulted in interesting phenomenon such as the construction of the glass pyramid outside the Louvre Museum in Paris and the pyramid in Las Vegas. Furthermore, Meyer and Holler begun the Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood in 1922, which drew its inspiration from the artifacts in Pharaoh Tutankhamun’s final resting place (Curl 1994). There was even a plan to build a stepped block of flats at Saqqara, to resemble the Step Pyramid of Djoser, by Henri Sauvage; it never came to fruition.

These developments occurred within a framework of cultural superiority whereby the civilisations of the east were inherently inferior to those of Europe and also to those of their ancient predecessors who were the possessors of the lost wisdom expressed in *Corpus Hermeticum* (Jeffreys 2003). This vision of a synthesis of ancient wisdom from even more ancient sources is the inspiration of a number of hermetic and Gnostic models in the twentieth century A.D.

Beginning in 1937, Rene Schwaller de Lubicz undertook a study of the Temple of Luxor which he later termed the “Temple of Man” (West 1993). He was a follower of the esoteric, believing in what was termed “functional consciousness”. In this viewpoint, the temple recreated the relationship between man and the universe in stone through its meticulous proportions and the harmony from its sculpture and art. However, the temple “is not a scale model of creation; it is not a stone equivalent of a the laboratory skeleton. Rather it is a symbolic model which conforms to scale. In one sense it is a library containing the totality of knowledge pertaining to universal creative powers. This knowledge if not set down in books but is embodied in the building itself. In another sense the Temple is in the nature of a magic rite, extending

over two millennia, designed to evoke in the beholder an understanding of creation and creative power [Figure 2]. The proportions of the Temple are those of Adamic man, man before the fall, and of perfected man, man who has regained his cosmic consciousness through his own efforts.” (West 1993, 158-159)

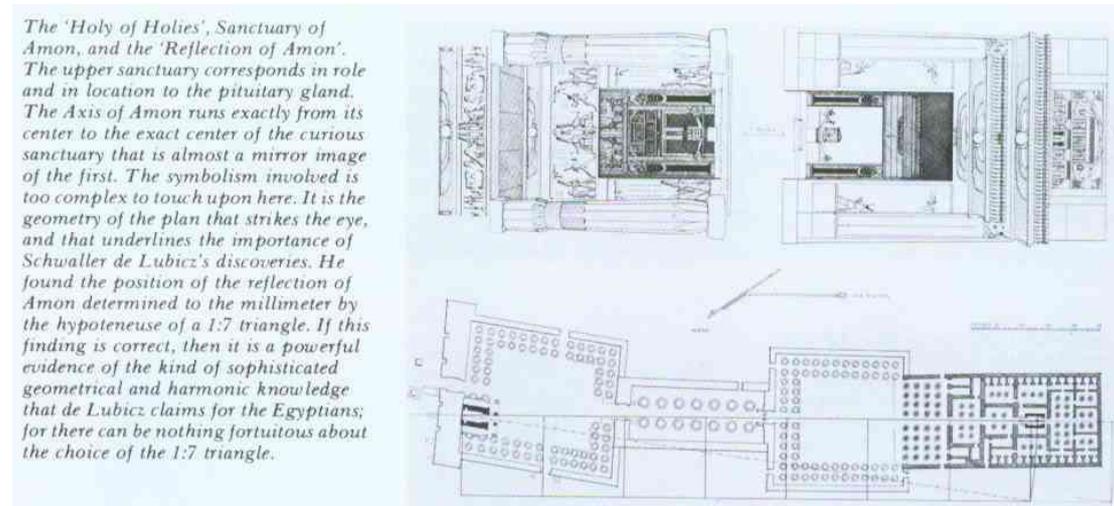


Figure 2. Claimed symbolism in the Holy of Holies within the Temple of Luxor. *From (West 1993)*

Schwaller de Lubicz and John Anthony West are not alone in being amongst the most prominent twentieth century proponents of hermeticism and the esoteric, and claiming the principles and wisdom are embodied in specific monuments from ancient Egypt. Like the claims that the Temple of Luxor was designed to convey a message through the generations, so Robert Bauval (Bauval and Gilbert 1995) and Graham Hancock (Hancock 1995) have proposed that the Giza necropolis was constructed to transmit knowledge and messages cross-culturally and temporally. They have proposed that the necropolis served as the outcome of attempts by an initiation academy, the Followers of Horus (thus usurping its mainstream attribution to refer to the predynastic kings), to fix the epochs of c. 10 500 and 2450 B.C. in stone respectively. This was achieved, so they claim, through locking the Kings and Queens Chamber shafts to the stars and the layout of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure's pyramids to the belt stars of Orion as they were in 10 500 B.C. (Bauval and Hancock 1996) In *Keeper of Genesis* (1996), they cite the *Kore Kosmu* hermetic text, written in Alexandria 2000 years ago, whereby initiates “would learn esoteric wisdom through acts of concentrated intelligence and will. Here they would be prepared, through practice and experience, for the moment of

physical death and for the nightmares that would follow it.” (Bauval and Hancock 1996, 269) Thus, Giza is regarded as a centre of initiation for the pharaoh and his entourage, and which embody the knowledge of Hermes (Bauval 1999).

### **Afrocentrism**

Embodied within Hancock and Bauval’s mode is the unspoken assumption of ancient Egyptian superiority over the present, of a control which is being exercised even today and which influenced the other civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. A variant of this strain of investigation takes a more radical approach by not only postulating influence down the ages, but direct physical impact upon ancient Egypt’s neighbours. Afrocentrism is therefore an ethnocentric approach to understanding the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean (Blakey 1995), and it is also intended to be a corrective to the aforementioned tendency of the nineteenth century A.D. scholars to place western civilisation as the pinnacle of cultural evolution.

The founder of Afrocentrism was Cheikh Anta Diop, who is regarded as one of the founders of Ghanaian independence in 1957 (MacDonald 2003). His is also the most extreme version in which the pharaohs were Black-skinned and this “supremacy” is in evidence back with the Faiyum Neolithic. The superiority continued until the Assyrian invasion (663 B.C.), after which whites began populating the Nile Valley and altered the genetic make-up of the inhabitants. With this beginning of the myth of a “White Egypt”, the Blacks continued migrating in the direction of West Africa, a migration which they had begun during early Dynastic times, and thereby formed the cultural groupings seen today in the region (MacDonald 2003).

Martin Bernal (1991, 2001) has resuscitated Afrocentrism in a less extreme version which he terms the “Revised Ancient Model”. As the intellectual heir of not only Diop but also Elliot Smith, who postulated the diffusion of civilization from Egypt in his 1923 compilation *The Ancient Egyptians and the Origins of Civilization*, Bernal revises his predecessors’ models and states that he disagrees with images of racial purity and of a central place of diffusion of all knowledge (Bernal 2001). In their place, he outlines a scenario in which the “Ancient Model” of the Greeks, where the

Greeks are claimed to have attributed the source of all their knowledge to ancient Egypt, is replaced by the inherently racist “Aryan Model” by nineteenth century A.D. European White scholars (Bernal 1991, 2003, North 2003). He criticizes the Aryan Model for supposedly ignoring the ancient sources and taking them literally at face value. His solution is moderate diffusion and migration from Egypt in the framework of the “Revised Ancient Model”.

The Revised Ancient Model postulates that the Hyksos were rulers not only of the Nile Valley but also conquered Greece and Crete (Bernal 1991). Whilst Bernal accepts that the Greek language is of Indo-European descent, he postulates that Classical Greek philosophy, science and culture had its origins in the cultures of the Levant and ancient Egypt. He attempts to back up his model with examples such as linking the Cretan ruler Minos with Menes, the mythical first ruler of a united Egypt, and Minos’ brother Rhadamythys with the ancient Egyptian god Montu (Bernal 1991). However, “it is impossible to find in the surviving corpus of ancient Egyptian writings evidence of the divergent basic postulates, skepticism, materialism, and human-centeredness that characterizes post-Ionian Greek philosophy” (Trigger 1992).

### **Discussion**

The principle problem at the heart of Egyptology is shared by numerous other African studies and is encapsulated in the following quote: “At present, Western scholars are very much in control of African archaeology, as they control all other fields of African studies, largely as an outcome of Africa’s recent colonial experience. For about 200 years, the West has controlled both African affairs and African studies. The “experts” in African affairs and the various fields of history, anthropology, and other social sciences are Europeans. The sources students are expected to consult – museum collections, libraries, archives, and so forth – are also overwhelmingly European. In sum, the documented history of Africa is found in sources that are European, not African.” (Andah 1995)

It is only recently, through the efforts of scholars such as Okasha El Daly, that the medieval contribution of Arabic studies is starting to receive the type of in-depth and

prolonged examination required. For too long accounts of ancient Egypt have ended with the Greek conquest in 332 B.C. or, at best, with the start of the Arab invasion in 642 A.D. (Bowman 1996).

This paralysis has enabled esoterism, which has its origins in the New Kingdom and later was formulated as hermeticism, to exist with widespread appeal in the modern Western world. Through the works of Hancock and Bauval, and Afrocentrists, such modern esoteric writers have drawn upon the existing hermetic undercurrent in the formulation of their models. Afrocentrism has become politicised, particularly in America where it has become a rallying cornerstone of Black communities and leaders. Whilst it is an inherently political movement, it serves to highlight potential theoretically and scholarly deficiencies in past and current Egyptological models and means of approaching the investigation of the ancient Egyptian archaeological record. Solid mainstream Egyptological studies and models (Hoffman 1993, Kemp 1989, Midant-Reynes 2000, Trigger 1983) have failed to make a significant impact on these potent socio-political currents.

### **Conclusion**

The study of ancient Egypt straddles the boundary between prehistoric and historical archaeology, supplemented and informed by written texts. These texts were written, in the totality of time both in the native hieroglyphic systems and also in Greek corpuses. With the advent of the Greco-Roman periods, control of ancient Egypt passed to Europeans for the first time.

Infused with the new incoming beliefs, and drawing upon religious elements originating from the New Kingdom, esoteric beliefs arose and flourished, particularly in the form of hermeticism. Hermeticism imbued the religious rites and hieroglyphs with mysticism, initiatory practices and, in time, alchemy (Hornung 2001).

With the Arab conquest of Egypt, Egypt was isolated from the intellectual environment present in Europe. The knowledge of ancient Egypt thus existed in Europe only in the forms of the hermetic texts. Meanwhile, contrary to popular

Eurocentric views, the Medieval Arab scholars not only took pride in the monuments of ancient Egypt but, together with the clerics, actively encouraged studies of them. The purpose was to follow the Quran's explicit instruction of gaining knowledge about the world, as knowledge is empowerment. The interpretations occurred within a symbolic framework, as the understanding of the hieroglyphs had faded. Nevertheless, Arabic efforts at decipherment reached Kircher in Europe and thereby assisted in laying the intellectual foundations for Champollion's later decipherment of the Rosetta Stone.

The esoteric movements in Europe developed in tandem with mainstream thought on ancient Egypt. Indeed, the two were sometimes inseparable until the birth of scientific Egyptology in the nineteenth century A.D. Thereupon esoterism continued on its own developmental pathway, initiating alternative models of the cultural and temporal transmission of ancient Egypt. These are most prominent in the hermetic-inspired models of ancient Egyptian initiation centres and cosmological manifestations, as well as in the Afrocentrist viewpoints of the intellectual and cultural supremacy of ancient Egypt over other civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. Modern Egyptology is suffering from the hits generated by the proponents of these models, due to the deficiencies in the fundamental Eurocentric workings of the discipline.

The way forward is to develop genuine Egyptian institutions of archaeological learning which cultivate and advance not only new archaeological theories from a theoretical perspective but also from a practical African foundation. Whilst not seeking to superimpose Eurocentric theories on ancient Egypt or to replace the theories with inappropriate Afrocentric theories, there is a need to recognise the internal cultural dynamics of the existing inhabitants via greater funding generated for the education of native Egyptologists. Lastly, there needs to be a synthesis of the existing knowledge databases within an emerging, encompassing framework recognising the diverse means of transmission of information.

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