improvement based on exposure to facts for their own sake.

As planners work to improve upon the early foundational models of urban studies, these plates can help to answer questions framed today by drawing upon comparisons and similarities observed within complex city systems, perhaps avoiding previous mistakes that might have been made through over-simplification. Any practical application as a planning tool aside, this atlas nourishes the imagination with lovely detail from a time just out of reach yet still clearly influencing the way we live now.

THE BOOK OF THE PHARAOHS

by Pascal Vernus and Jean Yoyotte


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The universe rests on the pharaoh, who is mandated on earth by the creator god to repel evil and chaos.

—Christiane Ziegler (Louvre Research Unit Director)

The term “pharaoh,” handed down through the Bible, comes from the Egyptian “per-â,” which originally designated the royal palace but later referred to its ruler, emblem of the rich and complex Egyptian civilization. The pharaohs, all mighty kings of many forms, dominated the whole Egyptian perspective on human life and ruled over a huge, unified territory spanning 4,000 kilometers along the banks of the Nile.

Egyptian society could not have functioned properly without the pharaoh’s presence. The importance and the role of the pharaoh as an intermediary between the natural and supernatural realms can be appreciated through the quantity of his effigies, multiplied everywhere in ancient Egypt to grant that divine forces take care of human affairs.

The most eminent pharaohs amount to no more than 50; among them the names of kings such as Cheops, Akhenaten, Ramses, Tutankhamon and Alexander the Great have become part of popular culture. Their profiles are well known, extensively sketched in portraits, busts, decorated heads and bas-reliefs now distributed worldwide. However, the images of the pharaoh we have inherited are always stereotyped, as imposed by ancient Egyptian ideology to respect and testify to the continuity of its culture and art. For all the toms, statutory and other relics that have survived, little of them deal with the daily work of the government, the court or the private life of the royal family. Although historians can scrutinize the policy and warfare during each period and each reign, they can scarcely uncover the individuality of kings.

Thus, the effort made by the French Egyptologists Vernus and Yoyotte to write down The Book of the Pharaohs is appreciable. Their volume examines what lies behind the formalism and monumental majesty of the pharaohs, offering critical and practical information not only for an objective characterization of the reigns and personalities of the “great” pharaohs, but also to make account of the greatest possible number of less-celebrated sovereigns.

As suggested by the original title of the French edition, Dictionnaire des pharaons (1996), the book resembles an encyclopedia with alphabetically ordered short essays on the places, dynasties, subjects and themes relating to the kings and their rule in ancient Egypt. Each entry contains information on the etymologic origin of the name, along with genealogical and historical data. Most paragraphs conclude with an essential bibliography for further reading of the major sources of Egyptian history. Entries on specific cultures such as the Hyksos, Hurrians and Hittites have been integrated, and, to broaden the cultural “landscape,” brief chapters deal also with non-royal personalities, institutions, practices and concepts.

It is difficult to recognize plain chronological connections in the history of ancient Egypt. For the Egyptians, time was a cyclic progression; the accession to the throne of a pharaoh marked the first year of a new era, one that would be ended with his death. Everything written or materially reproduced became eternal or, more properly, outside of time: Artistic expressions, whether utilized in a tomb or a temple, mainly served a functional, rather than an artistic, end. Thus, the sequences of dynasties, the classification of reigns and periods with coeval sovereigns are not easy to reconcile with the continuity apparent in the artistic tradition.

Vernus and Yoyotte recognize this limitation: The dates in this table, as well as those in the entries . . . cannot pretend to fix in time precisely and irrevocably the important moments and the major events. The textual and archaeological realities condemn us to this humility . . . or rather, to this humiliation (p. viii).

Even so, the authors offer information to place, at least approximately, the monarchs in the historical context of their respective periods, and the volume contains entries devoted to the “Kingdoms” and the “Intermediate Periods” and to each of the dynasties as they succeeded one another.

Queens are considered as well, from Hatshepsut, the first one, to Cleopatra VII Philopator, last representative of the Ptolemaic dynasty and chronologically, after Teye and Nefertiti, the fourth female pharaoh of Egypt. The last entry is the “Zero Dynasty,” new in the revised English edition. This is a strange but appropriate indication of the pre-dynastic period that was recognized as having existed before the foundation of Memphis and the unification of the Low and High Reigns.

The Egypt of the pharaohs still attracts scholarly attention, and highly publicized exhibits continue to inspire popular fascination. The Book of the Pharaohs is intended for a wide audience. It resolves efficaciously, although concisely, 3,000 years of history of the Egyptian kings, offering a reference to the human reality of royal Egypt. The volume includes a bibliography of recent books for general readers and a chronological table that organizes the major periods of Egyptian history along with the most illustrious royal names.

A THING IN DISGUISE:
THE VISIONARY LIFE OF JOSEPH PAXTON


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When he is remembered, Joseph Paxton is known for his design and supervision of the Crystal Palace, the 1851 cast-iron and glass structure that transcended its garden heritage (evolving from greenhouses) to become the world’s most advanced technological structure. Enclosing 21 acres and